Title: To Win or to Die: A Tale of the Klondike Gold Craze

Author: George Manville Fenn
Illustrator: Paul Hardy

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George Manville Fenn

"To Win or to Die"

Chapter One.

A break-down.

"It's a lie! I don't and I won't believe it."

The speaker half whispered that, and then he shouted, "Do you hear?"

There was a pause, and then from the face of a huge white snow-cliff there came back the word "hear."

"Well done, echo!" cried the speaker.

"Echo," came back.

"Thankye; that's quite cheering; anything's better than that horrible silence. What do they say? When a man gets in the habit of talking to himself it's a sign that he is going mad? Once more, it's a lie! A man would go mad in this awful solitude if he didn't hear some one speaking. Snow, snow, snow, and rock and mountain; and ugh! how cold! Pull up, donkey! jackass! idiot! or you'll freeze to death."

The speaker was harnessed by a looped rope to a small, well-packed sledge, after the fashion of one who tracks about along the Thames; but how different here! No sunny river, no verdant flowing mead or hanging summer wood, but winter, stern winter in its wildest, and the heavy sledge, in answer to the tugging at the rope, now sticking fast amongst the heaped-up stones frozen together in a mass, now suddenly gliding down sharp slopes and tripping its owner up, so that again and again, during an awful day's tramp, he had fallen heavily. But only to struggle up, shake the snow from his fur-lined coat, and continue his journey onward towards the golden land where the nuggets lay in wondrous profusion waiting the bold adventurer's coming—heaped-up, almost fabulous riches that had lain undiscovered since the beginning of the world.

He, the toiler, dragging that sledge, in which were carefully packed his gun, ammunition, spare clothes, blankets, stores, and sleeping-bag of fur, had started at daylight that morning from the last outpost of civilisation—a miserable shanty at the top of the tremendous pass he had surmounted with the help of the men who occupied the shanty and called themselves guides; and then, after repacking his sledge and trusting to the landmarks ahead and a pocket compass, he had boldly set off, ready to dare every peril, for he was young, sanguine, well-armed, strong, and nerved by hope and the determination to succeed.

It was only a brave struggle over the mountains, and then down into the river valley beyond, to leave the winter behind with its pain and misery, and meet the welcome of the summer sunshine and—the gold.

That morning it was winter indeed; but the adventurer's heart was warm, and the way through the mountains was plain, while the exertion sent the blood tingling through his veins till he glowed as the rugged miles were mastered.

Then there was the halt and a seat on the sledge for a hasty meal upon the tough provisions; but how delicious every mouthful was!

Then forward again, refreshed for the journey onward, to some snugly sheltered spot where he could camp for the night and sleep in his fur bag, regardless of any number of degrees of frost.

But as the afternoon wore on, the sledge seemed to grow more heavy, the way wilder and more stern, and the stoppages frequent.

He unpacked and rested and refreshed himself. Then he grew cheery once more.

“Lightens the load and me too,” he said with a laugh, as he thrust his head through the loop and tugged at the sledge; but it did not seem lighter. It grew more heavy, and the obstacles were terrible to surmount.

But he knew he was in the right track through the pathless waste of heaped-up snow. There was no mistaking that awful gorge, with the rocks piled up like Titanic walls on either side. He knew that he could not go wrong. All he had to do was to persevere, and he plodded on.

“Never mind if it’s only yards instead of miles surmounted,” he muttered. “They are so many yards nearer the winning post.”

At last, as he fought his way on, with his unwonted exertions beginning to tell mentally and bodily, he broke out talking wildly to fight back the horrible sensation of depression, and was brought to a standstill, the sledge having jammed between two blocks of ice-covered rock; and he stood for some minutes gazing round hopelessly at the fast-dimming scene, which had looked picturesque in the morning, but appeared awful now.

“I ought to have had a companion,” he muttered, “if it had only been a dog.”

He stood still, staring at the precipices on either side, whose chasms were beginning to look black; then at his jammed-in sledge; and he felt that he must drag it out and go on again, for night was coming on, and he could not camp where he was.

Then as he was wearily and slowly stooping down to drag the sledge back, he made a sudden bound as if electrified, tried to run, tripped, and fell heavily.

For all at once there was a roar like thunder, a terrible rushing sound, the echoes of the mountains seemed to have been let loose, and his hair began to bristle, while a cold perspiration gathered on his face as he listened to the sounds dying away in rumbling whispers.

“Away up to the right,” he said to himself as he gazed in that direction, realising that it was a snow-fall. Thousands of tons had gone down somewhere out of sight; but he was safe, and giving the sledge a jerk, he set it free, guided it over the snow, and prepared for another start.

But that avalanche had somewhat unnerved him, for he had been looking out for a place to camp, and it now seemed madness to think of coming to a halt there.

“Must find a safer place,” he thought; and now fresh dangers began to suggest themselves. Would there be wolves in these mountains? Certainly there must be bears; and dragging off one of his big fur gloves, he took out and examined his revolver, before replacing it in its leather holster. He glanced, too, at his rifle in its woollen case, bound on the top of the loaded sledge.

“Bah! how cowardly one can turn!” he muttered. “Of course, there will be all those troubles to face. I’m fagged—that’s what it is. Now, then, old fellow, gee up! I’ll camp in the first sheltered nook I see; I’m sure to find one soon. Then supper in the warm bag and a good night’s rest. Sleep? I could lie down and sleep here in the snow. Pull up! That’s the way. I wonder how much gold I could drag on a sledge like this?”

For quite another hour he toiled on, and perhaps got over a quarter of a mile, always gazing anxiously ahead for a suitable shelter, but looking in vain.

Then he utterly broke down, catching his foot against a block which the darkness hid from his fast-dimming eyes; and with a sob of misery as he saved himself from striking his face, at the expense of a heavy wrench to one wrist, he lay perfectly still, feeling a strange drowsy sensation creeping over him.

“This will not do,” he cried aloud in alarm, for he knew that giving way to such a feeling in the snow meant resigning himself to death; and he painfully rose to his knees, and then remained, staring wildly before him, wondering whether he was already dreaming. For not far away, flashing and quivering in reflections from the precipice wall on his left, there was a light which kept rising and falling.

No dream, but the reflected light of a camp fire. Others, bound upon the same mission as himself, must be close at hand; and staggering now to his feet, he placed his gloved hands to his lips and gave forth a loud echoing “Ahoy!”

The next moment his heart beat high with joy, and the horrible perils of frost and darkness in that unsheltered place faded away into nothingness, for his hail was answered from close at hand.

“Ahoy! Who is it?” came echoing back.

“Help!” shouted the adventurer; and then he sank upon his sledge with heart throbbing and a strange giddiness attacking him.

Chapter Two.

Fallen among thieves.

“Hullo, there!” cried a rough voice. “Why don’t you come on?” and the next minute a couple of figures seemed to start out of the darkness.

“I’m fagged out. Can you lend me a hand?”

“Lend you a hand? Yes,” said another voice. “Where’s your mate?”

“I’m alone.”

“Alone? No pal with you?”

“No, and my sledge has stuck fast. Will you help me as far as your fire?”

“Got a sled, hev you? All right, mate. Where’s the line? Lay hold, Leggy, while I give it a hyste. That’s your sort. Come on.” It seemed like a dream, and as if all the peril and horror had passed away, as the two men dragged the sledge along and the adventurer staggered on beside them, till they halted in the ruddy light of a great fire, lit at the foot of a stupendous wall of glistening ice-covered rock. The fire of pine-boughs crackled and flashed, and lit up the face of a third man, a big red-bearded fellow, who was kneeling down tending the embers and watching a camp kettle slung from three sticks, the contents of which were beginning to steam.

“Here we are, Beardy,” said one of the rescue party. “Comp’ny gent on his travels.”

The kneeling man scowled at the speaker, and then put his hand behind him as if from instinct, but dropped it as the other said:

“It’s all right, Beardy. Number four’s empty, isn’t it? Because if it aren’t, you’ll have to give up your room.”

The big red-bearded man showed some prominent yellow teeth in a grin, nodded, and pushed a blazing brand under the kettle.

“Sit down, youngster,” said the first speaker. “Maybe you’ll jyne us at supper?”

“I shall be very glad.”

“Right you are, and welcome! ’Aven’t brought anything with you, I suppose?”

“Yes, I have some cake and bacon.”

“Well done, young un. Get it out,” said the red-bearded man, and, recovered somewhat by his warm reception, the young adventurer began to unlash the load upon the sledge, the two men who had come to his aid eagerly joining in, their eyes glistening as they examined the various objects that were set free.

“Going yonder after the yaller stuff?” said the owner of the red beard, as they squatted round the fire.

“Yes.”

“And all alone, too?”

The traveller nodded, and held his half-numbed hands in the warm glow, as he furtively glanced round at his companions, whose aspect was by no means reassuring.

“Well,” continued the last speaker, “I dunno what Yankee Leggat thinks, and I dunno what Joey Bredge has got to say, but what I says is this. You’re a-going to do what’s about as silly a thing as a young man can do.”

“Why?”

“Why?” said the man fiercely; “because you’re going to try and do what no chap can do all alone. You’ve got a good kit and some money, I s’pose; but you don’t think you’re going to get to the gold stuff, do you?”

“Of course I do.”

The man showed his yellow teeth in an unpleasant grin, and winked at his companions.

“And all alone, eh? ’Tain’t to be done, lad. You’ll be stuck up before you yet half-way there by Injuns, or some o’ they Yankee shacks yonder, stripped o’ everything you’ve got, and set adrift, eh, Joey?”

The man addressed nodded and grunted.

“What should you say he ought to do, Leggy?”

“Make his hay while the sun shines,” said the other. “He’s tumbled into a bit o’ luck, and if he knows what he’s about he’ll just stop along with us. We don’t want him, seeing as our party’s made up, but we don’t want to be hard on a lad as is a bit hign’rant o’ what he’s got to go through.”

“That’s so,” put in the man addressed as Joey. “You can’t do it, mate. Why, if it hadn’t been for us you’d ha’ been a hicicle afore morning, if the bears and wolves hadn’t tucked you up warm inside. You’ve got to take a good offer. Now, Beardy, bring out the tins; that soup’s done by this time.”

The traveller made no reply, but leaned a little more over the fire, wishing that he had braved the dangers of the bitter frost and snow, and feeling that he had been too ready to break down at the first encounter with trouble. For the more he saw of his new companions the less he, liked them, and he was not long in making up his mind what to do.

By this time three big tin cups, which fitted one into the other, had been produced, and filled from the steaming contents of the kettle.

“We didn’t expect company,” said the cook, “so two of us’ll have to do with one tin, and have it filled twice. You and me’ll join, Joey, and let squire have my tin.”

“No, thank you,” was the reply, made quietly and firmly. “I will not intrude on your good nature farther. I was a bit done up, but the fire has set me right again, and I’m quite ready to take the risks of the journey alone.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said the man gruffly.

“I’ll get you to let me rest here by the fire for an hour to eat my bit of bread and meat, and then I’ll camp near you and go on again as I came. I shall manage, I daresay.”

“Are we going to stand this, mates?” cried the red-bearded man fiercely.

“No!” came in answer, as all sprang up as if by a preconcerted signal.

“You misunderstand me, gentlemen,” said the adventurer quietly, though his heart beat fast with the knowledge that the suspicions which had haunted him were correct. “I am much obliged for your kindness, and I want to save you trouble, that is all.”

“Hear that, lads? We aren’t good enough for the likes of him. All right, then, off he goes.”

“Our company aren’t good enough, eh? Then off you goes.”

“Very well,” said the young man, rising quickly; “but there is no need for a quarrel. I will go at once, and I thank you for what you have done.”

“But we haven’t done yet,” cried the man addressed as Leggy. “Now, boys.”

There was a sudden rush, and in an instant the young fellow was seized and thrown upon his face; then, in spite of his desperate struggles, he was turned over, his weapon seized, and everything of value dragged from his pockets.

“Quiet!” snarled the leader in the attack, “or I’ll soon quiet you.”

“You dogs! You scoundrels! Help! Thieves!”

“Louder, my lad, louder. Call police: there’s some over yonder in Canady. Haul off that fur coat, lads. It’ll just fit me, and I’ll have his cap and gloves. That’s right. Now then, my whippersnapper, off you go!”

Set free, the young man, in spite of his bubbling rage, felt the madness of further resistance, and the uselessness of wasting breath; so he sprang to his sledge, to begin lashing it fast with the rope.

“Hands off there!” roared the chief scoundrel, taking aim at him. “Now then, run for it, and get yourself warm before we begin to shoot.”

“I’m going,” panted the victim, “but I must fasten up my traps.”

“You ain’t got no traps. They’re ourn,” cried the man. “We give you a chance for your life, so cut at once.”

“What! Send me away like this?” cried the young man, aghast. “It’s murder! Let me have my blankets, man.”

“Run!” shouted the scoundrel, and he shook his pistol.

“You coward!” cried the victim.

“Run!” was roared again.

Feeling that the gang into whose hands he had fallen probably meant to hide their crime by silencing him for ever, the victim turned and ran for his life, and as he ran he felt a sharp pang in the arm.

A heavy fall checked the victim’s panic flight, and as he lay panting and wet with the perspiration which had started from every pore, he realised that one of the bullets had taken effect, ploughing his left arm, which throbbed as if being seared with a red-hot iron.

But the bodily agony was as nothing to the mental anguish which he suffered. Death was before him if he lay there—death in a painless, insidious form, no doubt; but still, death in all its horror to one so young and strong.

He knew that he must rise and keep moving if he wished to prolong his existence, and he rose to his feet, raging now against the cowardly gang, and more against himself.

“I was a fool and a coward,” he groaned. “Why didn’t I fight for my life? Great heaven! What shall I do?”

He paused for a moment, meaning to turn back and make an attack upon his enemies.

But, unarmed as he was, he knew it was madness, and he tramped on through the darkness in the faint hope of finding help, but with his heart sinking as he grasped the fact that fate or the management of the gang had driven him onward farther into the defile, and away from the aid he might have found if he had made his way back to his

morning’s starting-place.

Fully satisfied that death would be his portion, he struggled on aimlessly till utterly exhausted; and then he paused, breathless, to go over once more the scene by the glowing fire, and ask himself whether he had not been to blame for displaying his distrust after the way in which he had been rescued. But he could only come back to his old way of thinking—that he had fallen among thieves of the worst type, and that he owed his life to the prompt way in which he had escaped.

Recovering his breath somewhat, he stood listening as he gazed back through the darkness; but all was still. There were no signs of pursuit, so, taking out his handkerchief, he folded it into a bandage, and with one hand and his teeth contrived to bind and tie it tightly round his wound so as to stop the bleeding, which was beginning to cause a strange sensation of faintness.

He had been hot with exertion when he stopped, but now the feeling of exhilaration caused by his escape died out as rapidly as the heat. A deadly chill attacked mind and body, for his position seemed crushing. It was horrible beyond bearing, and for the moment he was ready to throw himself down in his despair. The intense cold would, he knew, soon bring on a sensation of drowsiness, which would result in sleep, and there would be no pain—nothing but rest from which there would be no awakening; and then—

Then the coward feeling was driven back in a brave effort—a last struggle for life.

The cold was intense, the darkness thicker than ever, for the sides of the ravine had been closing in till only a narrow strip of faintly marked sky was visible, while at every few steps taken slowly the poor fellow stumbled over some inequality and nearly fell.

At times he struck himself heavily, but he was beyond feeling pain, and in his desperation these hindrances acted merely as spurs to fresh effort, for he was on the way to safety. At any minute he felt that he might catch sight of another gleam of light, the camp fire of some other adventurer, and he knew that some of those on the way to the great Eldorado must be men who would help and even protect a fellow-creature in his dire state of peril.

But he knew that this intense feeling of energy could not last, that he was rapidly growing weaker, and that ere many minutes had elapsed he would once more stumble and fall, and this time the power to rise again would have passed away.

Was it too late to return to his enemies and make an appeal for his life? he asked himself at last. They might show him mercy, and life was so sweet.

But as these thoughts flickered through his brain in the half delirium fast deadening his power of thinking coherently, he once more saw the scene by the fire, and the faces of the three scoundrels stood out clearly with that relentless look, that cruel bestial glare of the eye, which told him that an appeal would but hasten his end.

“Better fall into the hands of God than men like them,” he groaned, and setting his teeth hard he tottered on a few yards farther, with the snow growing less deep, the ground more stony.

Then the end came sooner than he expected, for his feet caught against something stretched across his way, and he fell heavily, uttering a cry of horror as he struggled to his knees.

For it was no block of stone, no tree-trunk torn from some shelf in the precipice above; he grasped the fact in an instant that he had tripped over a sledge similar to his own, to fall headlong upon the ghastly evidence of what was to be his own fate; for stiff and cold in the shallow snow, his fingers had come upon the body of some unfortunate treasure-seeker, and as, half-wild with horror, he forced himself to search with his hands to discover whether some spark of life might yet be burning, it was to find that whoever it was must have laid calmly down in his exhaustion, clasping his companion to his breast to give and receive the warmth that might save both their lives.

Vain effort. The man’s breast was still for ever, and the faithful dog that had nestled closely with his muzzle in his master’s neck was stiff and stark.

“God help me!” groaned the adventurer, clasping his hands and letting them fall softly on the dead; “is this the ending of my golden dream?”

Chapter Three.

In the dark.

The horrible chill of impending death, the bright light of reason, and the intense desire to live, roused the half-stunned adventurer to action.

Die? Like that? No!—when salvation was offered to him in this way.

It was horrible, but it was for life. There, close by him, slightly powdered with snow, was the unfortunate’s sledge, and in an instant he was tearing at the rope which bound its load to the framework.

He could hardly believe his good fortune, for as the rope fell from the packages the first thing he set free was a fur-lined coat, possibly one which the dead man was too much exhausted to assume.

Suffering keenly from the cold, this was put on at once; and then, continuing the search, it was to find that a rifle was

bound along one side, balanced by tools on the other. Then there were blankets and stores similar, as far as he could judge, to those with which his own sledge had been laden.

The warmth afforded by the thick garment and the exertion increased the thrill of returning energy. For he was no longer helpless to continue his journey. It could be no act of injustice to the dead to take possession of the means of saving his own life; and now all thought of giving up without making a desperate struggle was completely gone.

Soon after a fresh thrill of returning energy swept through him, and, turning quickly back to where the dead were lying, he knelt there, hesitating for a few moments before, with his determination increasing, he softly thrust the dog aside, and felt about the dead man's waist.

He shuddered as his hands came in contact with the icy feeling of cold, but it was for life, and a feeling of joy shot through him, for it was as he had hoped. In a few minutes he had unfastened a buckle, turned the body over slightly, and that which he sought to obtain yielded to the steady pull he gave.

He had drawn free the dead man's belt, bringing with it his revolver in its little holster and the pouchful of cartridges.

That seemed to give new life to him as he buckled the belt about his waist. Then, taking out the pistol, he felt it in the dark, to find that it was loaded in every chamber, and that the lock worked easily and well.

The pistol replaced in the belt, the young man remained thinking, with all his energy seeming to have returned. What was he to do next? There was food of some kind on the sledge, and he must eat. There were blankets, and with them and the sledge for shelter he must rest and sleep.

There was the dead man and his faithful dog, but their near presence brought no feeling of horror. He felt that he could kneel down by the poor fellow and offer up a prayer for His mercies, and then lie down to sleep in perfect trust of awakening at daybreak, for he was no longer suffering from exhaustion, and hardly felt the cold.

"But not yet—not yet," he muttered, and a faint sound broke the silence as he stood there, his teeth grinding softly together, while his next words, uttered half aloud, told the direction his thoughts had taken.

"The cowardly dogs!" he exclaimed. "Three to one, and him unarmed. But not now—not now."

A brief search brought his hands in contact with a canvas satchel-bag, in which were ship's biscuits, and one of these he took. It would suffice.

Breaking it and beginning to eat, he set off at once on the back track to execute his daring project, one which made him glow to his finger-tips.

"Better go on," he said with a mocking laugh. "Yes, but not yet. They're cowards—such scoundrels always are—and the darkness will magnify the number of the attack.

"Bah! talking to myself again; but I'm not going mad. I can't go on without letting them taste something of what they have given me."

He tramped on slowly, but the return journey seemed less difficult, and he wondered now that he should feel so fresh and glowing with a spreading warmth. It was as dark as ever, but he had no fear of not finding his way; and sooner than he expected, and just as he was finishing the last scrap of hard biscuit, he caught sight of the faint light of the fire from which he had been driven.

The sight of it sent fresh vigour through his limbs, and his plan was soon made. He would keep on till there was the risk of being heard, and then creep closer till well within shot, and his sleeping enemies thrown up by the fire, which they had evidently made up well before settling themselves down for the night.

He felt sure that at the first report they would spring up and run for their lives, and he meant to fire at each if he had time, and scare them, for he felt disposed to show as much mercy as he would to a pack of savage wolves.

But matters were not to fall out exactly as he had calculated. He tramped steadily on, with the fire growing brighter, and at last he took out the revolver to examine it by touch once more, as he walked on more swiftly now, meaning to go forward a hundred yards or so and then proceed more cautiously, so as to make sure the enemy was asleep.

All at once he stopped short, startled.

The enemy was not asleep, for he saw a dark shadow pass before the glowing light.

The adventurer stopped short for a few moments, but not in hesitation. It was merely to alter his plan of attack; but the next minute all planning was cast to the winds, for there rang out on the night air a wild cry for help—such an appeal as he had himself uttered so short a time before.

The cry was repeated, sending a thrill of excitement through the listener, and telling its own tale. To the hearer it was as plain as if he had been told that the gang of ruffians had waylaid another unfortunate, who was about to share his own fate.

He rushed forward at once, and as he ran and stumbled he could see that a desperate struggle was going on, figures in fierce contention passing in front of and once trampling through the fire, whose embers were kicked and scattered in all directions.

Suddenly two figures stepped aside into the full light, leaving two others wrestling together; and this was the

opportunity needed. Their first victim could see plainly that the former were enemies, and stopping short when about twenty yards away, he fired. Both turned to gaze in the direction from which the flash and report had come.

They were in time to see another flash. Another report raised the echoes, and they turned and fled.

Then the struggle ceased, and the adventurer saw another figure disappearing into the darkness after his two companions.

As he dashed off the young fellow rushed up in time to seize the victim, who staggered helplessly, trampling among the burning embers, among which he would have fallen but for the willing hands which dragged him aside, and lowered him down, before their owner began to kick about and scatter the fire, which hissed and smoked and steamed, as snow was heaped over, and raised a veil to hide the pair from their enemies while the bright light was dying out.

The next act was to find out whether the enemy were yet in the vicinity. The adventurer advanced for some distance into the darkness, but all was still.

Satisfied that he could not be seen, the young man went on for some little distance; but it was evident that the sudden attack had done its work, and the party had fled for their lives.

“The question is, will they recover themselves and come back?” he muttered. “Well, we must be on our guard. Two in the right against three in the wrong. Those are fair odds. *Two* in the right! Suppose it is only one.”

He hurried back towards the scene of the encounter, guided by the faintly glowing embers lying here and there, and the dark, blinding wood-smoke which was borne towards him by the light icy wind which came down the defile.

“Suppose they have killed him!”

“Who are you? But whoever you are,” came in a hoarse whisper, “if it hadn’t been for you those ruffians would have settled me.”

“Thank heaven, then, I was in time. Can you help me trample out the rest or this fire?”

“Hadn’t we better escape? You might help me drag my sled into a place of safety.”

“There is no place of safety near,” was the reply; “and it’s cold enough to freeze us to death. We had better stay here.”

“But we dare not light a fire; they would see us, and come and pick us off.”

“I don’t think the cowardly hounds will dare to come back.”

“But they might, and I dare not risk it.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Not seriously, but wrenched and strained in the struggle. Can you understand what I say? I don’t know my own voice.”

“Yes, I can hear you. What is it—a cold?”

“No; I was right enough an hour ago. That red-bearded dog caught me by the throat. He was trying to strangle me. I fired at random, and then my senses were going, but I heard your shots. He has quite taken away my voice. Where is your hand, sir?”

“Here: what do you want?”

“Just to make mine speak to it in a friendly grip. God bless you, sir! you’ve saved my life. I can’t say more now.”

“Don’t. There: we have no light to betray us now.”

Chapter Four.

Nature’s mistake.

“But hadn’t we better go on?”

“No: warmth is everything here. The ground is hot where the fire was, and we’ll camp there till morning. I saw you had a sledge. We’ll drag that to one side for shelter.”

“And there is theirs, too,” was said huskily.

“Mine!” was the reply. “The scoundrels inveigled me into staying with them, and I had a narrow escape.”

“Hah! Just as they served me. I saw their light and came up, and they professed to be friends. I didn’t like the look of them, but one can’t pick one’s company out here, and a good fire was very tempting.”

“Hist!”

The warning was followed by the clicking of pistol locks, after which the pair listened patiently for some minutes.

“Nothing. Here, let’s get the two sledges one on either side of the hot ground. One will be a shelter, the other a breastwork to fire over if the scoundrels come back. Besides, the breastwork will keep in the heat. We are bound to protect ourselves.”

“All right,” was the reply, in an answering whisper, and the pair dragged the two sledges into position, and then, allowing for the dank odour of the quenched wood, found that they had provided themselves with a snugly warm shelter, adding to their comfort by means of blankets and a waterproof sheet, which they spread beneath them.

This took time, for every now and then they paused to listen or make a reconnaissance in search of danger; but at last all was done, and the question was who should keep the first watch.

“I’ll do that,” said the last comer. “I couldn’t lie down to sleep if I tried; my throat gives me so much pain. It feels swollen right up. I’ll take the first watch—listen, one ought to say. Why, I can’t even see my hand.”

“It is terribly dark here in this gulch,” was the whispered reply. “The mountains run up perpendicularly on either side. But I couldn’t sleep after all I’ve gone through to-night. My nerves are all on the jar. I’ll watch with you.”

“Listen.”

“Well, listen, then. Watch with our ears. Can you hear me when I whisper?”

“Oh, yes.”

“But they will not come back, I’m sure.”

“So much the better for them; but I hope that the miserable, treacherous hounds will meet their reward. So they attacked you just in the same way?”

“Not till I told them I would not stay; and I was sorry afterwards, feeling that perhaps I had insulted them by my suspicions. Of course, I did not know their character then.”

“No. Well, we know it now. It is a specimen, I suppose, of the scum we shall find yonder.”

“I am afraid so.”

“You are going after gold, of course?”

“Who would be here if he were not?”

“Exactly. I hope the game is going to be worth the candle. Suppose we two stick together. You won’t try to choke me the first time you see me nodding off to sleep for the sake of my sledge and stores?”

“Oh, I’ll promise you that.”

“It was a startler. I was dog tired.”

“Eh?”

“I was dog tired, and dropping off in the warmth of the fire into a golden dream of being where the nuggets were piled up all around me; and I was just going to pick up one, when a great snake darted at me and coiled itself round my throat. Then I was awake, to find it was a real devil snake in the shape of that red-bearded ruffian.”

“That was the one the others called Beardy. But don’t you talk so much: your voice is growing worse.”

“Can’t help it, old fellow. I must talk. I’m so excited. Feel the cold?”

“Oh, no. I’m quite warm with the glow which comes up through the sheet. A good idea, that was, of bringing it on your sledge.”

“Yes, but it’s heavy. I say, though, what an experience this is, here in the pitchy darkness. Ah! Look out!”

The pistols clicked again, for from somewhere close at hand there was a faint rustling sound, followed by a heavy thud, as if some one had stumbled and fallen in the snow.

The pair listened breathlessly in the black darkness, straining their eyes in the direction from whence the sound had come; but all was perfectly still.

They listened again minute after minute, and there was a dull throbbing sound which vibrated through them; but it was only the heavy beating of their own hearts.

Then they both started violently, for there was another dull heavy thud, and some one hissed as if drawing in his breath to suppress the strong desire to utter a cry of pain.

It was horrible in that intense blackness to crouch there with pistols held ready directed towards the spot where whoever it was had fallen, for there could be no doubt whatever. There had been the fall, not many yards from where

they knelt, and they listened vainly for the rustling that must accompany the attempt to get up again.

At last the faint rustling came, and the temptation to fire was almost too strong to be resisted. But they mastered it, and waited, both determined and strung up with the desire to mete out punishment to the cowardly miscreants who sought for their own gain to destroy their fellow-creatures.

“Don’t fire till you are sure it is they,” each of the two young men thought. “It is impossible to take aim in this darkness.”

And they waited till the rustling ended in a sort of whisper.

Once more all was silent, and the suspense grew maddening, as they waited minutes which seemed like hours.

But the enemy was evidently astir, for there was another whisper, and another—strange warning secretive whispers—and a sigh as of one in pain.

At this one of the listeners thrust out a hand, and the other joined in an earnest grip, which told of mutual trust and determination to stand by each other to the death, making them feel that the terrible emergency had made them, not acquaintances of an hour’s length, but staunch friends, both strong and tried. Then they loosened the warm, manly grip, and were ready for the worst.

For there was no longer any doubt: the enemy was close at hand, waiting the moment for the deadly rush. The only question was whether they should fire at once—not with the thought of hitting, but to teach the scoundrels how thoroughly they were on the alert, and in the hope of driving them into taking to flight once more.

But they doubted. A few shots had done this once, but now that the miscreants had had time to recover from their panic, would it answer again?

Thud! thud! in front, and then a far heavier one behind them. They could not hold out much longer. The enemy was creeping towards them.

At this moment there was a tremendous crack, a hissing roar, and a terrific concussion, the defenders of the tiny fort being struck down behind their little breastwork.

But this onslaught was not from the enemy they awaited. The ever-gathering snow from far above, loosened by the hot current of air ascending from the fire, had come down in one awful charge, and the marauders’ camp was buried in an instant beneath thousands of tons of snow.

Chapter Five.

Hand in hand.

There was the sense of a terrible weight pressing the sufferers down, with their chests against the soft load bound upon the sledge in front; and utterly stunned, they lay for a time motionless, and almost breathless.

Then one began to struggle violently, striving to draw himself back, and after a tremendous effort succeeding, to find that beneath him the snow was loose, there being a narrow space along by the side of the sledge, and that though his breath came short he could still breathe.

He had hardly grasped this fact when the movement on his right told of a similar action going on, and he began to help his companion in misfortune, who directly after crouched down beside him, panting heavily, in the narrow space, which their efforts had, however, made wider.

“Horrible!” panted the second at last. “An avalanche. Surely this does not mean death.”

There was no reply, and in the awful darkness a hand was stretched out and an arm grasped.

“Why don’t you say something?” whispered the speaker hoarsely.

“What can I say, man? God only knows.”

“But it is only snow. We must burrow our way out. Wait a moment. This way is towards the open valley.”

“No, no; this. Beyond you is the wall of rock. Let me try.”

For the next ten minutes there was the sound of one struggling to get through the snow, and then it ended with the hoarse panting of a man lying exhausted with his efforts.

“Let me come and try now,” came in smothered accents.

“It is of no use. The snow was loose at first, but farther on it is pressed together hard like ice. Try your way.”

The scuffling and tearing commenced now to the right.

“Yes; it’s quite loose now, and falls down. Ah! *no good*; here is the solid rock running up as far as I can reach.”

“I can hardly breathe. It is growing hotter every moment.”

“No; it is cooler here. I can reach right up and stand against the rock.”

The speaker’s companion in the terrible peril crept over the snow to his side and rose to his feet, to find the air purer; and, like a drowning man who had raised his head for the moment above water, he drank in deep draughts of the cold, sweet air.

“Hah!” he gasped at last hoarsely, after reaching up as high as he could, “the rock has saved us for the moment. The snow slopes away from it like the roof of a shed.”

“Yes; if we had been a few feet farther from it we should have been crushed to death. Let’s try and tear a way along by the foot of the rock.”

They tried hard in turn till they were utterly exhausted and lay panting; but the only result was that the loose snow beneath them became trampled down. No, not the only result; they increased the space within what was fast becoming a snow cavern, one of whose walls was the solid rocky side of the ravine.

“Are we to die like this?”

“Is this to be the end of all our golden hopes? Oh, heaven help us! What shall we do? The air is growing hotter; we have nearly exhausted it all, and suffocation is coming on fast. I can’t, I won’t die yet. Help! help! help!”

Those three last words came in a hoarse faint wail that sounded smothered and strange.

“Hush!” cried the other; “be a man. You are killing yourself. The air is not worse. I can breathe freely still.”

There was a horrible pause, and then, in pitiful tones: “I am fighting down this fearful feeling of cowardice, but it is so hard—so hard to die so soon. Not twenty yet, and the bright world and all its hopeful promise before one. How can you keep like that? Are you not afraid to die?”

“Yes,” came in a low, sad whisper; “but we must not die like this. Tell me you can breathe yet?”

“Yes,” came in the husky, grating tones; “better and better now I am still.”

“Then there is hope. We are on the track; others will come after a time, and we may be dug out.”

“Hah! I dare not think it. I say.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think those wretches have been caught by the fall as well?”

“If they were near they must have been.”

“Yes, and we heard them.”

“No, no,” sighed the other; “those were patches of snow falling that we heard.”

There was silence then, save that twice over a soft whisper was heard, and then a low, deep sigh.

“I say.”

“Yes?”

“I feel sure that air must come to us. I can breathe quite easily still.”

“Yes.”

“Then we must try and bear it for a time. I’m going to believe that we may be dug out. Shall we try to sleep, and forget our horrible position?”

“Impossible, my lad. For me, that is. You try.”

“No; you are right. I couldn’t sleep. But, yes, I can breathe better still. There must be air coming in from up above. Well, why don’t you speak? Say something, man.”

“I cannot talk.”

“You must—you shall, so as to keep from thinking of our being—oh, help! help! help!”

“Man, man! don’t cry out in that horrible way;” and one shook the other fiercely, till he sobbed out, “Yes; go on. I am a coward; but the thought came upon me, and seemed to crush me.”

“What thought? That we must die?”

“No, no,” groaned the other in his husky voice; “that we are buried alive.”

Once more there was silence, during which the elder and firmer grasped the hand of his brother in adversity. “Yes, yes,” he whispered, “it is horrible to think of; but for our manhood’s sake keep up, lad. We are not children, to be frightened of being in the dark.”

“No; you are right.”

“Here, help me sweep away the snow from under us. No, no. Here is the waterproof sheet. We can drag it out—yes, I can feel the sledges. Let’s drag out those blankets.”

“No, no, don’t stir; you may bring down the snow roof upon our heads. I mean, yes. I’ll try and help you.”

They worked busily for a few minutes, and then knelt together upon what felt like a soft couch.

“There’s food, and the snow for water; it would be long before we should starve. Why are you so silent now? Come, we must rest, and then try to cut our way out when the daylight comes.”

“The daylight!” said the other, with a mocking laugh.

“Yes; we may see a dim dawn to show us which way to tunnel.”

“Ah, of course!”

“Could you sleep now?”

“No, no; we must talk, or I shall go off my head. That brute hurt me so, it has made me rather strange. Yes, I must talk. I say: God bless you, old fellow! You saved my life from those wretches, and now you’re keeping me from going mad. I say! The air is all right.”

“Yes; I can breathe freely, and I am not cold.”

“I am hot. I say, let’s talk. Tell me how you came to be here.”

“Afterwards; the words would not come now. You tell me how you came.”

“Yes; it will keep off the horrors; it’s like a romance, and now it does not seem to be true. And yet it is, and it happened just as if it were only yesterday. I never thought of coming out here. I was going to be a soldier.”

He spoke in a hurried, excited way, and the listener heard him draw his breath sharply through his teeth from time to time, as if he shivered from nervous dread.

“I was not fit for a soldier. Fate knows best. See what a coward I am.”

“I thought you brave.”

“What!”

“For the way in which you have fought and mastered the natural dread; but go on.”

“Oh, no; it seems nonsense to talk about my troubles at a time like this.”

“It is not. Go on, if you can without hurting yourself more.”

“I’ll go on because it will hurt me more. It will give me something else to think of. Can you understand my croaking whisper?”

“Oh, yes.”

“An uncle of mine brought me up after father and mother died.”

“Indeed?”

“Dear old fellow! He and aunt quite took my old people’s place; and their boy, my cousin, always seemed like my brother.”

The listener made a quick movement.

“What is it? Hear anything?”

“No; go on.”

“They were such happy times. I never knew what trouble was, till one day poor uncle was brought home on a gate. His horse had thrown him.”

There was a pause, and then the speaker continued in an almost inaudible whisper:

“He was dead.”

The listener uttered a strange ejaculation.

“Yes, it was horrible, wasn’t it? And there was worse to come. It nearly killed poor dear old aunt, and when she recovered a bit it was to hear the news from the lawyers. I don’t quite understand how it was even now—something about a great commercial smash—but all uncle’s money was gone, and aunt was left penniless.”

“Great heavens!” came in a strange whisper.

“You may well say that. Bless her! She had been accustomed to every luxury, and we boys had had everything we wished. My word! it was a knockdown for poor old Dal.”

“Who was poor old Dal?” said the listener, almost inaudibly.

“Cousin Dallas—Dallas Adams. I thought the poor chap would have gone mad. He was just getting ready for Cambridge. But after a bit he pulled himself together, and ‘Never mind, Bel,’ he said—I’m Bel, you know; Abel Wray—‘Never mind,’ he said, ‘now’s the time for a couple of strong fellows like we are to show that we’ve got some stuff in us. Bel,’ he said, ‘the dear old mother must never know what it is to want.’”

It was the other’s turn to draw in his breath with a low hissing sound, and the narrator’s voice sounded still more husky and strange, as if he were touched by the sympathy of his companion, as he went on:

“I said nothing to Dal, but I thought a deal about how easy it was to talk, but how hard for fellows like us to get suitable and paying work. But if I said nothing, I lay awake at nights trying to hit on some plan, till the idea came—ah! is that the snow coming down?”

“No, no! It was only I who moved.”

“But what—what are you doing? Why, you’ve turned over on your face.”

“Yes, yes; to rest a bit.”

“I’m trying you with all this rigmarole about a poor, unfortunate beggar.”

“No, no!” cried the other fiercely. “Go on—go on.”

The narrator paused for a few moments.

“Thank you, old fellow,” he whispered softly, and he felt for and grasped the listener’s hand, to press it hard. “I misjudged you. It’s pleasant to find a bit of sympathy like this. I’ve often read how fellows in shipwrecks, and wounded men after battles, are drawn together and get to be like brothers, and it makes one feel how much good there is in the world, after all. I expect you and I will manage to keep alive for a few days, old chap, and then we shall have to make up our minds to die—like men. I won’t be so cowardly any more. I feel stronger, and till we do go to sleep once and for all we’ll make the best of it, like men.”

“Yes, yes, yes! Go on—go on!”

Chapter Six.

A strange madness.

It was some time, though, before the narrative was continued, and then it was with this preface.

“Don’t laugh at me, old chap. The shock of all this has made me as weak and hysterical as a girl. I say, I’m jolly glad it’s so dark.”

“Laugh at you!”

“I say, if you speak in that way I shall break down altogether. That fellow choked a lot of the man out of me, and then the excitement, and on the top of it this horrible burying alive—it has all been too much for me.”

“Go on—go on.”

“Yes, yes, I will. I told you the idea came, but I didn’t say a word to my cousin for fear he should think it mad; and as to hinting at such a thing to the dear old aunt, I felt that it would half kill her. I made up my mind that she should not know till I was gone.

“Well, I went straight to the ‘Hard Nut’—that’s Uncle Morgan. We always called him the nut that couldn’t be cracked—the roughest, gruffest old fellow that ever breathed, and he looked so hard and sour at me that I wished I hadn’t gone, and was silent. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose you two boys mean to think about something besides cricket and football now. You’ve got to work, sir, work!’”

“Hah!” sighed the listener.

“‘Yes, uncle,’ I said, ‘and I want to begin at once.’

“‘Humph!’ he said. ‘Well, that’s right. But what do you want with me?’

“‘I want you to write me a cheque for a hundred pounds.’

“‘Oh,’ he said, in the harsh, sneering way in which he always spoke to us boys; for he didn’t approve of us being educated so long. He began work early, and made quite a fortune. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘do you? Hadn’t I better make it five?’

“‘No,’ I said. ‘I’ve thought it all out. One hundred will do exactly.’

“‘What for?’ he said with a snap.

“‘I’m off to Klondike.’

“‘Off to Jericho!’ he snarled.

“‘No, to Klondike, to make a fortune for the poor old aunt.’

“‘Humph!’ he grunted, ‘and is Dallas going with you to make the second fool in the pair?’

“‘No, uncle,’ I said; ‘one fool’s enough for that job. Dal will stop with his mother, I suppose, and try to keep her. I’m nobody, and I’ll take all risks and go.’

“‘Yes, one fool’s enough, sir,’ he said, ‘for a job like that. But I don’t believe there is any gold there.’

“‘Oh, yes, there is, sir,’ I said.

“‘What does Dallas say?’

“‘Nothing. He doesn’t know, and he will not know till aunt gets my letter, and she tells him.’

“‘As if the poor old woman hadn’t enough to suffer without you going off, sir,’ he said.

“‘But I can’t stop and live upon her now, uncle.’

“‘Of course you can’t, sir. But what about the soldiering, and the scarlet and gold lace?’

“‘Good-bye to it all, sir,’ I said with a gulp, for it was an awful knockdown to a coxcomb of a chap like I was, who had reckoned on the fine feathers and spurs and the rest of it.

“‘Humph!’ he grunted, ‘and you think I am going to give—lend you a hundred pounds to go on such a wild goose chase?’

“‘I hope so, uncle,’ I said.

“‘Hope away, then; and fill yourself with the unsatisfactory stuff, if you like. No, sir; if you want to go gold-digging, shoulder your swag and shovel, pick and cradle, and tramp there.’

“‘How?’ I said, getting riled, for the old nut seemed harder than ever. ‘I can’t tramp across three thousand miles of ocean. I could hardly tramp over three thousand miles of land, and when I did reach the Pacific, if I could, there’s the long sea journey from Vancouver up to Alaska, and another tramp there. No, uncle,’ I said, ‘it isn’t to be done. I’ve gone into it all carefully, and cut it as fine as I might, it will take fifty pounds for outfit and carriage to get to Klondike.’

“‘Fifty! Why, you said a hundred,’ he growled. ‘That’s coming down. Want the other fifty to play billiards and poker?’

“‘No, I don’t,’ I said, speaking as sharply as he did; ‘I want that fifty pounds to leave with poor old aunt. I can’t and won’t go and leave her penniless.’”

“Ah!” sighed the listener—almost groaned.

“Well, wouldn’t you have done the same?”

“Yes, yes. Go on—go on.”

“There isn’t much more to tell. I’m pretty close to the end. What do you think the old boy said?”

“I know—I know,” came back in a whisper.

“That you don’t,” cried the narrator, who, in spite of their horrible position, burst out into a ringing laugh. “He just said ‘Bah!’ and came at me as if he were going to bundle me out of the door, for he clapped his hands on my shoulders and shook me fiercely. Then he banged me down into a chair, and went to one of those old, round-fronted secretary desks, rolled up the top with a rush, took a cheque-book out of a little drawer, dashed off a cheque, signed and blotted it, and thrust it into my hand.

“‘There, it’s open,’ he said. ‘You can get it cashed at the bank, and send your aunt the fifty as soon as you’re gone. Be off at once, and don’t say a word to a soul. Here; give me back that cheque.’

“I gave it back to him.

“‘Now, swear you won’t tell a soul I lent you that money, nor that you are going off!’

“‘I give you my word of honour, uncle.’

“‘That’ll do,’ he said. ‘Catch hold, and be off. It’s a loan, mind. You bring back a couple of sacks full of nuggets, and pay me again.’

“‘I will, uncle,’ I said, ‘if I live.’

“‘If you live!’ he said, staring at me. ‘Of course you’ll live. I’m seventy, and not near done. You’re not a score. Be off.’

“And I came away and never said a word.”

“But you sent the fifty pounds to your poor old aunt?”

“Why, of course I did; but I shall never pay old ‘Hard Nut with the Sweet Kernel’ his money back. God bless him, though, and I hope he’ll know the reason why before he dies.”

“God bless him! yes,” said the listener, in a deep, low voice that sounded very strange, and as if the speaker could hardly trust himself to speak.

Then they lay together in the darkness and silence for a time, till Abel Wray made an effort and said in his harsh, husky voice:

“There, that’s all. Makes a fellow feel soft. Think it’s midnight yet?”

“No, no,” was whispered.

“I’ll strike a match and see.”

“No. We want every mouthful of air to breathe, or I should have struck one long ago.”

“Of course. I never thought of it once. Sleepy?”

“No.”

“Then fair play. Tell me your story now.”

“There is no need. But tell me this; am I awake? Have you told me all this, or have I dreamed it?”

“I’ve told you it all, of course.”

“Am I sane, or wandering in my head? It can’t be true. I must be mad.”

“Then I am, too. Bah! as Uncle Morgan said. Come, play fair; tell me how you came here?”

“The same way as you did, and to get gold.”

“Well, so I supposed. There, just as you like. I will not press you to tell me.”

“I tell you there is no need. For your story is mine. We thought as brothers with one brain; we made the same plan; we travelled with the same means; we supplied the dear old aunt and mother from the same true-hearted source. Bel, old lad, don’t you know me? It is I, Dal, and we meet like this!”

“Great heaven!” gasped Abel, in his low, husky whisper. “It has turned his brain. Impossible! Yes, that is it; the air is turning hot and strange at last, and this has driven me mad. It is all a wandering dream.”

Chapter Seven.

Fevered dreams.

“It is *no* wandering dream, Bel. I tell you I seem to have been inspired to do exactly the same as you did, and I went to Uncle Morgan, who treated me just as he treated you.”

“Yes, a dream—off my head,” said Abel Wray, in his harsh whisper.

“No, no, old fellow,” cried Dallas; “it is all true. Uncle was never so strange to me before. It was because you had been to him first. It is wonderful. Your voice is so changed I did not know it, and in the darkness I never saw your face.”

“Yes—delirious,” croaked Abel. “They say it is so before death.”

“Nonsense, nonsense, lad! I came back just in time to save you, and now we have been saved, too, from a horrible death. After a bit we shall be stronger, and shall be able to see which way to begin tunnelling our way out to life again. Cheer up; we have got through the worst, and as soon as we are free we’ll join hands and work together, so that we can show them at home that we have not come out in vain. How are you now?”

A low rumbling utterance was the reply, and Dallas leaned towards him, feeling startled.

“Don’t you hear me?” he cried. “Why don’t you answer?”

“Dear old Dal—to begin dreaming of him now,” came in a low muttering.

“No, no; I tell you that it is all true.”

“All right, uncle,” croaked Abel. “Not an hour longer than it takes to scrape together enough. Ha, ha, ha! and I thought you so hard and brutal to me. Eh? But you’re not. It was a dreadful take in. I say!”

“Yes, yes, old fellow. What?”

“Don’t say a word to dear old Dal. Let him stop and take care of aunt, and let them think I’ve shuffled out of the trouble. I’ll show them when I come back.”

“Bel, old fellow,” cried Dallas, seizing his cousin’s hand, “what is it? Don’t talk in that wild way.”

“That’s right, uncle,” croaked Abel. “We two used to laugh about you and call you the Hard Nut. So you are; but there’s the sweet white kernel inside, and I swear I’ll never lie down to sleep again without saying a word first for you. I say, one word,” cried the poor fellow, grasping his cousin’s hand hard: “you’ll do something for old Dal, uncle? I’ll pay you again. I don’t want to see him roughing it as I shall out there for the gold—yes, for the gold—the rich red gold. Ah, that’s cool and nice.”

For in his horror and alarm Dallas had laid a hand upon his cousin’s temples, to find them burning: but the poor fellow yielded to the gentle pressure, and slowly subsided on to the rough couch they had made, and there he lay muttering for a time, but starting at intervals to cough, as if his injured throat troubled him with a choking sensation, till his ravings grew less frequent, and he sank into a deep sleep.

“This is worse than all!” groaned Dallas. “Had I not enough to bear? His head is as if it were on fire. Fever—fever from his injury and the shock of all he has gone through. I thought he was talking wildly towards the last.”

As he spoke he was conscious of a sharp throbbing pang in his shoulder, and he laid a hand upon the place that he had forgotten; while now he woke to the fact that when he tried to think what it would be best to do for his cousin, the effort was painful, and the sensation came back that all this must be a feverish dream.

He clapped his hands to his face. It and his brow were burning hot, and he knew that he was growing confused; so much so that he rose to his knees, then to his feet, and took a step or two, to stand wondering, for his senses left him for a moment or two, and then a strange thing befell him. A black veil seemed to have fallen in front of his eyes, and he was lost, utterly lost, and he had not the least idea where he was or what had been taking place during the past twenty-four hours.

He stretched out his hands and touched the compressed snow, which was dripping with moisture; but that gave him no clue, for his mind seemed to be a perfect blank, and with a horrible feeling of despair he leaned forward to try and escape from the black darkness, when his burning brow came in contact with the icy wall of his prison, and it was like an electric shock.

His position came back in a flash. Self was forgotten, and he sank upon his knees to feel for his cousin, horror-stricken now by the great dread that the poor fellow might die with him by his side quite unable to help.

He forgot that but a short time back he was advocating a brave meeting of their fate. For since he had awakened to the fact that his boyhood’s companion was with him, hope had arisen, and with it the determination to wait patiently till morning and then fight their way back to the light. Now all seemed over. Abel was terribly injured, fever had supervened, and he would die for want of help; while he, who would freely have given his life that Abel might live, was utterly helpless, and there was that terrible sensation of being lost coming on again.

He pressed his head against the snow, but there was no invigorating sense of revival again—nothing but a curious, worrying feeling. Then he was conscious for a few moments that Abel was muttering loudly, but the injury to his shoulder was graver than he had imagined, and the feverish symptoms which follow a wound were increasing, so that before long he too had sunk into a nightmare-like sleep, conscious of nothing but the strange, bewildering images which haunted his distempered brain; and these were divided between his vain efforts to flee from some terrible danger, and to drag the heavily laden hand-sledge between two ice-covered rocks too close together to allow it to pass.

Chapter Eight.

The fight for life.

“Yes! Yes! What is it?” Somebody had spoken in the black darkness, but it was some minutes before Dallas Adams could realise the fact that the words came from his own lips.

Then he heard a faint whisper from somewhere close by, and he was this time wide awake, and knew that he was answering that whisper.

“Where am I? What place is this?”

The question had come to him in his sleep, and for a few moments, so familiar were the sounds, he felt that he must have the tubes of a phonograph to his ears, and he listening to the thin, weird, wiry tones of his cousin’s voice.

Then, like a flash, all came back, and he knew not only that he had been asleep, but everything that had happened some time before.

“Bel, old lad,” he said huskily, and he winced with pain as he tried to stretch out his left hand.

“Ah!” came again in the faint whisper, “That you, Dal?”

“Yes, yes. How are you now?”

“Then it isn’t all a delirious dream?”

“No, no; we have been brought together almost miraculously.”

“Thank God—thank God!” came feebly. “I thought I had been off my head. Have I been asleep?”

“Yes, and I fell asleep too. My wound made me feverish, and we must have been lying here ever so long in the dark.”

“Your wound, Dal?”

“Yes; I had almost forgotten it in what we had to go through, but one of the scoundrels shot me. It is only a scratch, but my arm seems set fast.”

“Ah! Do you think they were buried alive too?” came in an eager whisper.

“Who can say, old fellow? But never mind that. How do you feel? Think you can help me?”

“Tie up your wound?”

“No, no. Help me try and dig our way out.”

“I think so. My head feels a bit light, but it’s my throat that is bad—all swollen up so that I can only whisper.”

“Never mind your throat so long as you can use your arms.”

“Think we can dig our way out?”

Dallas uttered a little laugh.

“Why not?” he said. “There is a pick and shovel on my sledge.”

“Ah, yes, and on mine too.”

“We were out of heart last night,” continued Dallas, encouragingly, “and in the scare thought we were done for. But we can breathe; we shall not suffer for want of food; the melted snow will give us drink; and once we can determine which way to dig, what is to prevent our finding our way to daylight again?”

“Our position,” said Abel, in his faint whisper. “Where are we to put the snow we dig out?”

Dallas was silent for a few moments.

“Yes,” he said at last; “that will be a difficulty, for we must not fill up this place. But never mind that for the present. We must eat and drink now, for we shall want all our strength. Pressed snow is almost like ice. Ah, here is the sledge—mine or yours. My head is too thick to tell which. Bel, lad, we are going to dig our way out, if it takes us a month.”

“Yes,” came rather more strongly; and the next minute Dallas Adams was feeling about the sledge for the tin which held the traveller’s food.

It was hard work fumbling there in the dark, for parts of the sledge were pressed and wedged down by snow that was nearly as hard as ice; but others were looser, and by degrees he managed to get part of the tin free, when he started, for something touched his arm.

“Can I help you, Dal?”

“How you made me jump, lad! I don’t know. Feel strong enough?”

“I think so; but I want to work. It’s horrible lying there fancying the top of this hole is going to crumble down every time you move some of the snow.”

“Lay hold here, then, and let’s try and drag this tin out.”

They took hold of it as well as their cramped position would allow, and tugged and tugged, feeling the tin case bend and grow more and more out of shape; but it would not come.

“No good,” said Dallas. “I’ll cut through the tin with my knife.”

“But it’s looser now. Let’s have one more try.”

“Very well.—Got hold?—Now then, both together.”

They gave a sudden jerk, and fell backward with the once square tin case upon them, lying still and horrified, for there was a dull creaking and crushing noise as if the snow was being pressed down to fill up the vacancy they had made, and then *crick, crack*, sharply; there was the sound of breaking, as portions of the sledge gave way from the weight above.

Abel caught his cousin’s hand to squeeze it hard, fully expecting that their last moments had come; but after a minute’s agony the sounds ceased, and the prisoners breathed more freely.

“It’s all right, Bel,” said Dallas; “but it did sound rather creepy.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Abel. “I thought—”

“Yes, so did I, old fellow; but it’s a mistake to think at a time like this. We only frighten ourselves. Now then, let’s see what we’ve got.”

“See?” said Abel bitterly.

“Yes, with the tips of our fingers. It’s all right, I tell you; rats and mice and rabbits don’t make a fuss about being in burrows.”

“They’re used to it, Dal; we’re not.”

“Then let’s get used to it, lad. I say, suppose we were getting gold here, instead of a biscuit-tin; we shouldn’t make a fuss about being buried. Why, it’s just what we should like.”

“I suppose so,” replied Abel.

“It’s what we shall have to do, perhaps, by-and-by. This is a sort of lesson, and it will make the rest easy.”

“If we get out.”

“Get out? Pish! We shall get out soon. The sun and the rain will thaw us out if we don’t dig a way. Hullo! The lid’s off the tin, and the biscuits are half of them in the snow. Never mind. Set to work and eat, while I pick up all I can find. I’m hungry. Peck away, lad, and think you’re a squirrel eating your winter store. I say, who would think one could be so warm and snug surrounded by snow?”

Abel made no reply, but tried to eat, as he heard the cracking and crunching going on at his side. It was hard work, though, and he went on slowly, for the effort to swallow was accompanied by a good deal of pain, and he ceased long before Dallas gave up.

“How are you getting on?” the latter said in an encouraging tone.

“Badly.”

“Yes, they are dry; but wait till we get our gold. We’ll have a banquet to make up for this. By Jove!”

“What is it?”

“I forgot about your throat. It hurts?”

“Horribly. But I can manage.”

Dallas said no more, but thought a great deal; and after placing the tin aside he turned to the sledge to try whether he could not get at the shovel bound to it somewhere, for the package was pressed all on one side by the snow.

After a long search he found one corner of the blade, and drawing his big sharp knife, he set to work chipping and digging with the point, with the result that in about an hour he dragged out the tool.

“Now,” he said, “we can get to work turn and turn. The thing is, where to begin, for I have not seen the slightest glimmer of light.”

“No; we must be buried very deep.”

“Say pretty deep. Which way shall we try?”

“Up by the rock, and slope upward where the air seems to come.”

“That’s right. Just what I thought. And, look here, Bel, there’s room for a couple of cartloads of snow or more about us here, and my plan is this: one will dig upward, and of course the snow will fall down of its own weight. As it comes down the other must keep filling that biscuit-tin and carrying it to the far end yonder and emptying it.”

“And bury the sledge and the food.”

“No: we can get a great deal disposed of before we come to that. Look here—I mean, feel here. We have plenty of room to stand up where we are. Well, that means that we can raise the floor. So long as we have room to lie down, that is all we want.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“After a while we must get out all the food we want and take it with us in the tunnel we make higher and higher as we go.”

“Yes, that sounds reasonable,” said Abel thoughtfully. “We shall be drawing the snow down and trampling it hard beneath our feet.”

“And, I believe, be making a bigger chamber about us as we work up towards the light.”

“Keeping close to the face of the rock, too,” said Abel, “will ensure our having one side of our sloping tunnel safe. That can never cave in.”

“Well done, engineer!” cried Dallas laughingly. “Here were we thinking last night of dying. Why, the very

remembrance of the way in which animals burrow has quite cheered me up."

"That and the thought that we may have to mine underground for our gold," replied Abel. "Shall I begin?"

"No; you're weak yet, and it will be easier to clear away my workings."

"DALLAS WORKED ON, HOUR AFTER HOUR."

Without another word the young man felt his way to the end of their little hole, tapped the rock with the shovel, and then stood perfectly still.

"What is it?" asked Abel.

"I was trying to make out where the air comes from, and I think I have hit it. I shall try and slope up here."

Striking out with the shovel and trying to cut a square passage for his ascent, he worked away for the next hour, the snow yielding to his efforts much more freely than he had anticipated; and as he worked Abel tried hard to keep up with him, filling the tin, bearing it to the other end beyond the sledges, and piling up the snow, trampling down the loads as he went on.

Twice over he offered to take his cousin's place; but Dallas worked on, hour after hour, till both were compelled to give up from utter exhaustion, and they lay down now in their greatly narrowed cave to eat.

This latter had its usual result, and almost simultaneously they fell asleep.

How long they had been plunged in deep slumber, naturally, they could not tell. Night and day were the same to them; and as Dallas said, from the hunger they felt they might have been hibernating in a torpid state for a week, for aught they knew.

They ate heartily of the biscuits, Abel's throat being far less painful, and once more the dull sound of the shovel began in a hollow, muffled way.

A couple of hours must have passed, at the end of which time so much snow had accumulated at the foot of the sloping shaft that Dallas was compelled to descend and help his fellow-prisoner.

"This will not do," he said. "We must get out some more provisions before we bury the sledges entirely."

"There is enough biscuit to keep us alive for a couple of days," replied Abel. "Let us chance getting out, and not stop to encumber ourselves with more provisions."

"It is risky, but I fancy that I am getting nearer the air. Go up and try yourself."

Abel went up the sloping tunnel to the top with ease, Dallas having clipped steps out of the ice, and after breathing hard for a few minutes the younger man came down.

"You must be getting nearer the top. I can breathe quite freely there."

"Yes, and the snow is not so hard."

"Chance it, then, and go on digging," said Abel eagerly. "I will get the snow away. I can manage so much more easily

if I may put it down anywhere. It gets trampled with my coming and going."

Dallas crept up to his task once more and toiled away, till, utterly worn out, both made another meal and again slept.

Twice over this was repeated, and all idea of time was lost; still they worked on, cheered by the feeling that they must be nearing liberty. However, the plan arranged proved impossible in its entirety, the rock bulging out in a way which drove the miner to entirely alter the direction of his sap. But the snow hour after hour grew softer, and the difficulty of cutting less, till all at once, as Dallas struck with his spade, it went through into a cavity, and a rush of cool air came into the sloping tunnel.

"Heavenly!" cried the worker, breathing freely now. "I'll slip down, Bel. You must come up and have a mouthful of this."

He descended to the bottom, and Abel took the spade and went to his place.

"The shovel goes through quite easily here," he said excitedly.

"Yes, and what is beyond?" shouted Dallas. "Can you see daylight?"

"No; all is black as ink. It must be a hole in the snow. We must get into it, for the air comes quite pure and fresh, and that means life and hope."

In his excitement he struck out with the shovel twice, and had drawn it back to strike again, when there was a dull heavy crack, and he felt himself borne sidewise and carried along, with the snow rising up and covering his face.

The next minute, as he vainly strove to get higher, the movement ceased, and he felt himself locked in the embrace of the snow, while his breathing stopped.

Only for a moment, before the hardening crystal which surrounded his head dropped away, and a rush of pure air swept over him and seemed to bring back life.

Then the sliding movement entirely ceased, and he wildly shouted his cousin's name.

His voice echoed from somewhere above, telling him that, though a prisoner, he was free down to the shoulders, though his arms were pinned.

But there was no other reply to the call, and he turned sick and faint with the knowledge that Dallas must be once more buried deep, and far below.

Around all was black darkness, and in his agony another desperate effort was made; but the snow had moulded itself around him nearly to the neck, and he could not stir a limb.

Chapter Nine.

Under pressure.

The fit of delirium which once more attacked Abel Wray was merciful, inasmuch as it darkened his intellect through the long hours of that terrible night, and he awoke at last with the level rays of the sun showing him his position in a hollow of a tremendous waste of snow, while fifty yards away the sides of the rocky valley towered up many hundred feet above his head.

But it was daylight, and instead of the ravine seeming a place of horror and darkness, the snow-covered mountains flashed gloriously in the bright sunshine, whose warm glow brought with it hope and determination, in spite of the terrible sense of imprisonment, and the inability to move from the icy bonds. The great suffering was not bodily, but mental, and not selfish, for the constantly recurring question was, how was it with Dallas?

But the sunshine was laden with hope. Dallas was shut in again, but he had the tools and provisions with him, and he would be toiling hard to tunnel a way out, *if*—

Yes, there was that terrible "if." But Abel kept it back; for it was quite possible that he might still be getting a sufficient supply of air to keep him alive.

How to lend him help?

There was the face of the vast cliff some fifty yards away, and it was close up to it that they had been first buried, the fresh collapse, when the snow had fallen away and borne him with it, having taken him the above distance. It was probable, then, that Dallas would not be now very far below the glittering surface of the snow.

How to get at him?

Abel's first thought was to free one arm. If he could do that he might possibly be able to get at his knife, dragging it from the sheath at his waist. Then the work would be comparatively easy, for he could dig away the partly consolidated snow in which he was cased, and throw it from him.

He set to, struggling hard, but without effect, for it seemed to him that he was only working with his will, his muscles refusing to help; and by degrees the full truth dawned upon him, that the absence of pain was due to the fact that his body was quite benumbed, and a horrible sensation of fear came over him, with the belief that all beneath the snow

must be frozen, and that he could do absolutely nothing to save his life.

Even as he thought this the benumbed sensation seemed to be rising slowly towards his brain.

“In a short time all will be over,” he groaned aloud, “and poor Dal will be left there, buried, thinking I have escaped and have left him to his fate. Is there no way to escape from this icy prison?”

He wrenched his head round as far as he could, first on one side, and then on the other; but it was always the same—the narrow valley with its stupendous walls, no longer black and horrible with its unseen horrors in the darkness of the night, but a wondrous way to a city of towers and palaces gorgeous to behold. His eyes ached with the flashing beauties of the scene. It was not the golden Klondike of his dreams, but a land of silver, whose turrets and spires and minarets were jewelled with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds; whose shadows were of sapphire blue or darker amethyst; and whose rays flashed and mingled till he was fain to close his eyes and ask himself whether what he saw was part of some dazzling dream.

He looked again, to see that it was no vision, but a scene of beauty growing more and more intense as the sun rose higher. The darkness had fled to display these wonders; there was not a chasm or gully that was not enlightened—everywhere save within the sufferer’s darkened soul. There all was the blackness of despair.

But black despair cannot stay for long in the breast of youth. Hope began to chase it away, and inanimate though the body was, the brain grew more active, offering suggestion after suggestion as to how he might escape.

The sun was growing hotter minute by minute, and the reflections from the pure white ice almost painful. Already, too, its effects were becoming visible.

Just where the warm rays played on the edge of a gap whose lower portions were of an exquisite turquoise blue, tiny crystal-like drops were forming, and as Abel Wray gazed at them with straining eyes he saw two run together into one, which kept gradually increasing in size till it grew too heavy for its adhesion to last, and it fell out of sight.

Only a drop of water, but it was the end of May; the snows would be melting, and before long millions of such drops would have formed and run together to make trickling rivulets coursing along the snow; these would soon grow into rushing torrents, and the snow would fall away, and he would be free.

“What madness!” he groaned. “It will thaw rapidly till the sun is off, and then freeze once more, and perhaps another avalanche will come. Yes, I shall be thawed out some day, and some one may come along in the future and find my bones.”

He shuddered, for it was getting black within once more, and a delirious feeling of horror began to master him, bringing with it thoughts of what might come.

Bears would be torpid in their snow-covered lairs; but wolves!

He felt as if he could shriek aloud, and he had to set his teeth hard as his eyes rolled round and up and down the gorge in search of some wandering pack that would scent him out at once, and in imagination he went through the brain-paralysing horror of seeing them approach, with their red, hungry, glaring eyes, their foam-slavered lips and glistening teeth.

There they were, five, seven, nine of them, gliding over the snow a hundred yards away, their shadows cast by the sun upon the dazzling white surface, and he uttered a hoarse cry and his head sank sideways as he closed his eyes in the reaction.

No wolves, only the few magnified shapes of a covey of snow grouse, the ryper of the Scandinavian land, which, after running for a while, rose and passed over him with whirring wings, seeking the lower part of the valley, where the snow was swept away.

Abel drew a long, deep breath, and then set his teeth once more as he upbraided himself for his cowardice.

For was he not on the highway—the main track to the golden land; and was it not a certainty that before long other adventurers would pass that way?

What was that?

The prisoner listened, with every nerve on the strain, and it was repeated.

So great was the tension, that as soon as the sound came for the second time the listener uttered a wild shriek of joy. It was hardly a cry. He had struggled to free himself from his icy bonds to go to his cousin’s help, and awakened to the fact that he was helpless, and he had dared to despair, when all the time Dallas was alive and toiling hard to come and free him. The sensation of joy and delight was almost maddening, and he listened again.

There it was—a dull, low, indescribable sound which appealed to him all through, for he felt it more with his chest than with his ears. It was a kind of a jar which came through the snow, communicated from particle to particle, telegraphed to him by the worker below, and it told that Dallas was strong and well, and striving hard to get free.

How long would it take him to dig his way through? Not long, for he could not be so deep down now.

He waited, counting every stroke of the shovel, and a fresh joy thrilled the listener, for those light jars sent fresh hope in waves, telling him as they did that though he was so benumbed, his body must be full of sensation. It could not be deadened by the cold.

“Bah! I must naturally be a coward at heart,” the poor fellow said to himself. “Dal’s worth a dozen of me. *I* think of helping him? Pooh! it is always he who takes that *rôle*.”

But his mind went back again to the one thought—How long would it take Dallas to dig his way out in spite of his wound? Not so very long—the strokes of the shovel came so regularly. But what an escape for both!

“Not free yet, though,” muttered the prisoner. “That’s right, work away, Dal. Your muscles were always stronger than mine. Get out and we’ll reach the gold yet, and win the prize we came for.—I wonder whether he could hear me if I shouted!”

He bowed his head as far as he could, nearly touching the snow with his lips.

“Dal, ahoy! ahoy!” he shouted; and a few moments after came the answer, “Ahoy—ahoy–oy–oy!” from the icy rocks up the valley.

“Only the echoes,” muttered Abel, as the sounds died away.

Then he started, for the hail came again, loud and clear, “Ahoy! Ahoy—ahoy–oy–oy!” and then once more the echoes.

But the hail was from down the narrow valley, and these echoes were from above.

“Hurrah! Help coming!” cried Abel wildly. “Ahoy, there! Help!”

He wrenched his head round to utter the cry, and was conscious of a heavy pang in his injured throat. But what of that at such a time, when the cry was answered by another? “Ahoy! ahoy!” No deceiving echo, for in addition came, “Where are yer?” and that was echoed too.

Abel’s lips parted to reply, but a chill of despair shot through every nerve once more, and he uttered a bitter groan.

There they were—there could be no doubt of it. The three cowardly, treacherous ruffians had escaped, and he was calling them to his help. Not four hundred yards down the valley, plainly to be seen in the broad sunshine, all three of them, two dragging a heavily laden sledge, the other, the big-bearded ruffian, a short distance in front, in the act of putting his hands to his mouth to shout again:

“Where away, O?”

“Will they see me with just my head out like this? Yes, they are certain to, for they must come by here. Oh, Dal, Dal, old man, don’t dig now. For heaven’s sake, keep still: they’re coming to finish their horrid work.”

Chapter Ten.

A human fossil.

“You be blowed!” cried a bluff cheery voice. “Eckers be jiggered! Think I don’t know the difference between a hecker an’ a nail?”

“No.”

“Don’t I? I heered some one holloa, and as I don’t believe in ghosts, I say some one must be here. Ahoy! where are you, mate?”

The speaker turned from his two companions, who were dragging the sledge up the slope of the snow-fall, and then smote one thigh heavily with the palm of his great hand.

“I’m blest!” he shouted, as he ran a few steps and dropped on one knee by Abel’s head. “No, no; don’t give in now, my lad. Hold up, and we’ll soon have you out o’ this pickle. Here, out with shovels and pecks, lads. Here’s a director of the frozen meat company caught in his own trap. Specimen o’ Horsestralian mutton froze hard and all alive O. Here, mate, take a sup o’ this.”

The speaker unscrewed the top of a large flask, and held it to Abel’s lips, trickling a few drops between them as the head fell back and the poor fellow nearly swooned away.

“That’s your sort. Never mind its being strong. I’d put some snow in it, but you’ve had enough of that. Coming round, you are. What’s it been—a heavy ’lanche?”

“Yes, yes,” gasped Abel; “but never mind me.”

“What! Want to be cut out carefully as a curiosity—fly-in-amber sort of a fellow?”

“No, no—my cousin! Buried alive, man. Hark! you can hear him digging underground.” The great sturdy fellow, who bore some resemblance to ruddy-haired Beardy, sufficient in the distance and under the circumstances of his excitement to warrant Abel’s misapprehension, stared at the snow prisoner for a few moments as if he believed him to be insane.

“He’s off his ’ead, mates, with fright,” he said in a low voice to his companions, who were freeing the shovels; but Abel heard him.

“No, no,” he cried wildly. “I know what I am saying. Listen.”

The great, frank-looking fellow laid his ear to the snow, and leaped up again.

“He’s right,” he roared excitedly. “There’s some one below—how many were with you, my lad?”

“Only my cousin—we were buried together—but don’t talk—dig, dig!”

“Yes, both of you, slip into it. Just here,” cried the big man, “while I get the pick and fetch this one out.”

“No, no, not there,” cried Abel frantically. “Dig yonder, there by the rock wall.”

“What, right over yonder? Sound’s here.”

“Go and listen there,” cried Abel.

“Can you hold out?”

“Yes, yes; hours now. Save my cousin; for heaven’s sake, quick!”

One of the men had gone quickly to the rocky wall, knelt down and listened, and shouted back.

“He’s right,” cried this latter. “You can hear some one moleing away quite plain.”

“HE BEGAN AT ONCE DRIVING THE PICK INTO THE COMPRESSED SNOW.”

“Dig, dig!” shouted Abel, and two of the new-comers began at once, while the leader of the party went to their sledge and dragged a sharp-pointed miner’s pick from where it was lashed on.

“No, no,” cried Abel imploringly, as the man returned to his side; “save him.”

“You keep quiet, my lad. I’m a-going to save you.”

“But I can breathe,” cried Abel.

“So can he, or he couldn’t go on working. Two heavy chaps is quite enough to be tramping over his head. Don’t want my sixteen stone to tread it hard. Have a drop more o’ this ’fore I begin?”

“No, no! It is burning my mouth still.”

“Good job too: put some life into you, just when you looked as if you was going to bye-bye for good. Now then, don’t you be skeart. I know how to use a pick; been used to it in the Corn’ll tin-mines. I could hit anywhere to half a shadow round you without taking the skin off. I’ll soon have you out.”

He began at once, driving the pick into the compressed snow; but after the first half-dozen strokes, seeing how the fragments flew, he took off his broad-brimmed felt hat and laid it against Abel’s head as a screen. Then commencing again he made the chips fly in showers which glittered in the sunshine, as he walked backward, cutting a narrow trench with the sharp-pointed implement, taking the prisoner’s head as a centre and keeping about thirty inches distant, and so on, round and round till the channel he cut was as deep as the arm of the pick, and quite clear.

“Feel bad?” he said, pausing for a few moments.

“No, no,” cried Abel. “How are they getting on?”

“Better’n me. If we don’t look sharp your mate—what did you say he was—cousin?—’ll be out first.”

“I hope so,” sighed Abel.

“Now then, shut your eyes, my son,” cried the miner. “I’m going to cut from you now. Lean your head away as much as you can. I’ve cut the tire and felloes of the wheel; your head’s the nave; now I’m going to cut the spokes.”

Click, click, click, went the pick.

“Don’t you flinch, my son,” cried the man. “I won’t hit you.”

Abel had winced several times over, for the bright steel tool had whizzed by him dangerously close; but he grew more confident now, and, as much as he could for the sheltering hat, he watched the wonderful progress made by his rescuer, who at the end of a few minutes had deeply cut two more channels after the fashion of the spokes running from the centre to the periphery of the imaginary wheel.

After this, a few well-directed blows brought out the intervening snow in great pieces, and upon these being cleared out another clever blow broke the gathered snow right up to the young man’s left arm, leaving seven or eight inches below the shoulder clear.

“That’s your sort, my son,” cried the miner cheerily, chatting away, but keeping the pick flying the while. “The best way to have got you out would have been with a tamping iron, making a nice hole, dropping in a dynamite cartridge, and popping it off. That would have sent this stuff flying, only it might have blowed you all to bits, which wouldn’t have been pleasant. This is the safest way. How are you gettin’ on, mates?”

“All right. He’s ’live enough, Bob.”

“Work away, then. Look here, my son, I did think of spoking you all round, but I’m beginning to think it’ll be better to keep on at you this side, and then take you out of your mould sidewise like. There won’t be so much cutting to do, and you’ll have one side clear sooner. What do you say?”

“I want you to go and help your companions,” replied Abel faintly.

“Then I’m sorry I can’t oblige you,” cried the man cheerily. “Look at that now! This fresh stuff hasn’t had time to get very hard. After a few thawings and freezings it would be like clear solid ice. It’s pretty firm, but—there’s another. Soon let daylight down by your ribs. I want to get that hand and arm clear first so as you can hold the hat to shade your face.”

And all the time he chatted away, coolly enough, the pick was wielded so dexterously, every blow being given to such purpose, that he cut out large pieces of the compressed snow and hooked them out of the rapidly growing hole.

It was the work of a man who had toiled for years amongst the granite deep down in the bowels of the earth, and experience had taught him the value of striking so as to save labour; but all the same the task was a long one, and it grew more difficult the deeper down he went.

“’Bliged to make the hole bigger, my son,” he said; “but you hold up; I sha’n’t be long now. I say, how deep down do you go? Are you a six-footer?”

“No, I’m only about five feet eight,” said Abel, whose face looked terribly pained and drawn.

“Aren’t you now?” said the man coolly. “I should ha’ thought by the look of your head and chest that you were taller. Been a longer job with me. I’m over six foot three, and good measure. There, now that arm’s clear, aren’t it? Can you lift it out?”

Abel shook his head sadly.

“There is no use in it,” he said faintly.

“Might ha’ knowed it. Bit numb like with the cold. But you keep a good heart, and I’ll have you out. It’s only a bit o’ work, and no fear of caving in on us. Just child’s play like. There’s one arm clear, and a bit of your side, and the rest’ll soon follow.”

The man paused in the act of getting the the top off the spirit-flask, and shouted to his companions, “Hoi! Here, quick, lads, and help me here. My one’s going out.”

For a ghastly look crossed Abel’s face, his eyes grew fixed, as they half-closed, and his head fell over on one side.

Chapter Eleven.

A coward blow.

The two men who had been fighting hard to reach Dallas, the sound of whose strokes seemed nearer than ever, rushed to their companion, who had begun chafing the buried man’s face and temples, with the result that Abel raised his head again and looked wildly round.

“I thought he was a goner, my sons,” whispered the big fellow. “Go on back to your chap; I’ll manage here.”

The two men, who were excited by their task, rushed back again, and their companion moistened Abel’s lips.

The man began to work his pick again with wonderful rapidity, enlarging the hole, and every now and then giving a furtive glance at the prisoner and another in the direction where his companions were tearing out the icy snow.

The great drops stood on the big Cornishman’s face as he toiled away, enlarging the hole down beside Abel Wray, and all the time he kept up a cheery rattle of talk about how useful a tool a pick was, and how the lad he was helping—and whom he kept on calling “my son”—ought to have brought one of the same kind for the gold working to come; but the look in his big grey eyes looked darker and more sombre as he saw a grey aspect darkening the countenance of the prisoner—the air he had seen before in the faces of men whom he had helped to rescue after a fall of roof in one of the home mines.

“He’ll be a goner before I get him out if I don’t mind,” he said to himself, and the pick rattled, and the icy snow flashed as he struck here and there, only ceasing now and then to stoop and throw out some big lump which he had detached.

“Better fun this, my son,” he said with a laugh, “if all this was rich ore to be powdered up. Fancy, you know—gold a hundredweight to the ton. Rather different to our quartz rock at home, with just a sprinkle of tin that don’t pay the labour.

“Hah!” he cried at last, from where he stood in the well-like shaft he had cut, and threw down his pick on the snow. “Now you ought to come.”

He rose, took hold of Abel as he spoke, and found that his calculations were right, for very little effort was required to draw him forward from out of the snowy mould in which he was belted; and the next minute the poor fellow lay insensible upon the snow, with his rescuer kneeling by him, once more trickling spirit between the blue lips.

“Can’t swallow,” muttered the man, and he screwed up the flask, and set to work rubbing his patient vigorously, regardless of what was going on beneath the rocky wall, till there was a loud cheer, and his two companions came towards him, each holding by and shaking hands heartily with Dallas Adams. For they had mined down to where they could meet him as he toiled upward to escape; and the first words of Dallas, when he was drawn out hot and exhausted, were a question about his cousin.

The pair set at liberty joined in now in the endeavour to resuscitate the poor fellow lying on the snow. Their sledge was unpacked, double blankets laid down, and the sufferer lifted upon them, friction liberally applied to the limbs, and at last they had the satisfaction of seeing him unclose his eyes, to stare blindly for a time. Then consciousness returned, there was a look of joy flashing out, and he uttered the words hoarsely:

“Dal! Saved!”

“Yes, yes, all right, old lad, thanks to these true fellows here. How are you?”

“Arms, hands, and legs burning and throbbing horribly. I can hardly bear the pain.”

The big Cornishman laughed.

“Only the hot-ache, my son,” he said merrily. “That’s a splendid sign. You’re not frost-bitten.”

“God bless you for all you have done,” cried Abel, catching at the big fellow’s hand. “I couldn’t hold out any longer.”

“Of course you couldn’t. Why, your pluck was splendid.”

“Thank him, Dal,” cried Abel. “He has saved my life.”

“Yah! Fudge! Gammon! Stuff! We don’t want no thanking. You two lads would have done the same. We don’t want to be preached at. Tommy Bruff, my son, what do you say to a fire, setting the billy to boil, and a bit o’ brax’uss?”

“Same as you do, laddie. Cup o’ tea’ll be about the right thing for these two.”

There was plenty of scrub pine at hand, swept down by the snow-fall, and sticking out here and there. Axes were got to work, and soon after the two sufferers were seated, covered with fur-lined coats, and revelling in the glow of the fire, over which a big tin was steaming, while their new friends were busy bringing out cake, bread, tea, and bacon from their store in the partly unpacked sledge.

The big, bearded Cornishman had started a black pipe, and while his companions replenished the fire and prepared for the meal, he sat on a doubled-up piece of tarpaulin, and wiped, dried, and polished picks, shovels, and axes ready for repacking. Every now and then he paused to smile a big, happy, innocent-looking smile at the two who had been rescued, just as if he thoroughly enjoyed what had been done, and then, suddenly dropping the axe he was finishing, caught up a little measure of dry tea, and shouting, “There, she boils!” tossed it into the tin over the fire, lifted it off, and set it aside, and then laid the freshly polished tools on the sledge.

Soon after, refreshed by the tins of hot tea, the rescued pair were able to give an account of their adventures, the new-comers listening eagerly and making their comments.

“Ho!” said the big Cornishman, frowning. “I expected we should come across some rough ’uns, but I didn’t think it was going to be so bad as that. Scared, mates?”

“No,” said one of his companions; “not yet.”

“Nor yet me,” said the other.

“Nor me neither,” said the big fellow. “If it’s going to be peace and work, man and man, so much the better; but if it’s war over the gold, we shall have to fight. What’s mine is mine, or ourn; and it’ll go awkward for them as meddles with me. I’m a nasty-tempered dog if any one tries to take my bone away; aren’t I, my sons?”

The two men addressed bent their heads back and burst into a roar of laughter.

“Hark at him,” said the man spoken to as Tommy. “Don’t you believe him, my lads. He’s a great big soft-roed pilchard; that’s what he is. Eh, Dick Humphreys?”

“Yes; like a great big gal,” assented the other.

“Oh, am I?” said the big fellow. “You don’t know, my sons. But I say, though,” he continued, tapping the snow with his knuckles, “then for aught we know them three blacks is buried alive just under where we’re sitting?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“’Fraid? What are you ’fraid on?”

“It is a horrible death,” said Abel, with a shudder.

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” said the Cornishman thoughtfully. “I say, we ought to get digging to find ’em, oughtn’t we?”

“We are not sure they are there,” said Dallas.

“Of course you are not,” continued the miner, “and I don’t believe they are. You see, your mate here took us for ’em. I believe Natur’ made a mistake and buried you two instead of them. If they are down below I haven’t heard no signs of them, and they must be dead. Why, it would take us a couple of years to clear all this stuff away, and we mightn’t find ’em then. I say, though, what about your tackle?”

“Our sledges? They’re buried deep down here.”

“We shall have to get them out, then. You two won’t be able to get along without your traps.”

Soon after an inspection of the position was made; one of the men descended into the hole they had dug close up to the rock wall, and he returned to give his opinion that by devoting a day to the task the shaft could be so enlarged that they could drive a branch down straight to the spot, and save the stores and tools, even if they could not get the sledges out whole.

It took two days, though, during which no fresh comers appeared, the report of the snow-fall having stopped further progress. At the end of the above time, pretty well everything was saved by the help of the miner and his companions, who gallantly stood by them.

“Oh, we’ve got plenty of time,” said their leader, “and if these sort o’ games are going to be played, it strikes me that you two gents would be stronger if you made a sort o’ co. along of us. Don’t if you don’t care to. What do you say to trying how it worked for a bit?”

This was gladly acceded to, and on the third day a move was made as far as the spot where the grim discovery had been made.

Here the party halted, and the corpse of the unfortunate was reverently covered by a cairn of stones, along with his faithful dog; after which a discussion arose as to what should be done with the poor fellow’s implements and stores.

“Pity to leave ’em here,” said one of the men. “Only spoil. Hadn’t we better share ’em out.”

“Perhaps so,” said Dallas. “You three can.”

“Oh, but there’s five on us, sir.”

“No, only three.”

“What do you say, Bob?” said the first speaker.

“I says bring the poor chap’s sled along with us. If we’re hard pushed we can use what’s there; if we’re not we sha’n’t want it; and—well, I don’t kind o’ feel as if I should like any one to nobble my things like that. Same time, I says it is no use to leave ’em to spoil.”

The next morning, with the young men little the worse for their adventure, they started onward, and for a couple of days made pretty good way, leaving the snow behind in their downward progress, till all further advance was stopped by the change for which they had been prepared before starting. The watershed had been crossed, and they had reached the head waters of one of the tributaries of the vast Yukon River of the three thousand miles flow.

The spot they had reached was a long, narrow lake, surrounded at the upper end by fir-woods. The rest of the route was to be by water, and here a suitable raft had to be made.

“Fine chance for a chap to set up boatbuilding,” said Big Bob. “What do you say? I believe we should make more money over the job than by going to dig it out.”

“Let’s try the gold-digging first,” said Dallas; and with a cheer the men set to work at the trees selected, the axes ringing and the pine-chips flying in the bright sunshine till trunk after trunk fell with a crash, to be lopped and trimmed and dragged down to the water’s edge ready for rough notching out to form the framework of such a raft as would easily bear the adventurers, their sledges and stores, down the lake and through the torrents and rapids of the river in its wild and turbulent course.

The sledges were drawn up together in a triangle to form a shelter to the fire they had lit for cooking, for the wind came down sharply from the mountains. Rifles and pistols lay with the sledges, for the little party of five had stripped to their work, so that, save for the axes they used, they were unarmed.

But no thought of danger occurred to any one present; that was postponed in imagination till they had finished the raft and embarked for a twenty-mile sail down to where the river, which entered as a shallow mountain torrent, rushed out, wonderfully augmented, to tear northward in a series of wild rapids, which would need all the strength and courage of the travellers to navigate them in safety.

A hearty laugh was ringing out, for the big Cornishman had rather boastingly announced that he could carry one of the fallen trees easily to the lake, put it to the proof, slipped, and gone head first into the water after the tree, when a sharp crack rang out from near at hand.

Abel uttered a loud cry, clapped his hands to his head, and fell backward.

For a moment or two the men stood as if paralysed, gazing at the fallen youth. Then Dallas looked sharply round, caught sight of a thin film of smoke curling up from the edge of the forest, and with a cry of rage ran toward the sledges, thrusting the handle of his axe through his belt, caught up his revolver from where it lay, and dashed towards the spot whence the firing must have come.

Chapter Twelve.

Wholesale robbery.

“Keep together—keep together!” shouted the big Cornishman; but no one heeded, and he followed their example of seizing the first weapon he could reach and following.

The pursuit was short, for it seemed madness to follow in amongst the dense pines which formed the forest, placing themselves at the mercy of an enemy who could bring them down as they struggled through the dense thicket of fallen trees and tangled branches: so, after a few rallying cries, they made their way back to the open space by the lake, to find Abel sitting up and resting his head upon his hand.

“Wounded!” panted Dallas.

“Yes—no! I can’t tell! Look!” said the injured man huskily.

A few minutes’ examination showed how narrow had been his escape, a bullet having struck the side of the poor fellow’s head, just abrading the scalp. Half an inch lower must have meant death.

“Injuns,” said the Cornishman laconically.

“No, no,” cried Dallas, with a fierce look round; “it must be our enemies.”

“Not they, my lad; they’re fast asleep under the snow, you may take your oath. It’s Injuns, by the way they hid themselves. Now, then, can you keep watch—sentry go?” he said, addressing Abel.

“Yes, it was only a graze from the bullet; I am better now.”

“Then you take a loaded rifle and keep watch while we go on knocking the raft together.”

“Yes,” cried Dallas, “the sooner we get away from here the better.”

All set to work with feverish energy at the raft-making. Enough wood was cut, and by clever notching together, the use of spikes, and a further strengthening with rope, the framework rapidly progressed, their intention being to launch, load up, and set off that evening, so as to get to a safer spot.

Abel carefully kept his watch, scanning the dark edge of the forest; but there was no further interruption, and the men worked away, with only a brief pause for refreshment.

Then the sun dipped below the pines, and as darkness approached Dallas let his axe rest on the young pine he had been trimming, and turned to his companions, with a look of despair in his eyes.

“Yes,” said the Cornishman good-humouredly, “we cut out more stuff than we can finish to-night, my son. It’s a bigger job than I thought. We shall have to knock off now. What’s to be done about the fire?”

It was risky work, but the watch was well kept while water was boiled and bacon fried. Then a hasty meal was made, and as the darkness fell the fire was quenched by throwing over it a bucket or two of water.

It was hard enough to do this, for though the ground was clear about them, snow lay on every rocky hill, and the night promised to be bitterly cold. But the exposure to an enemy would have been too great; so after selecting one of the huge spruces whose boughs hung down to the ground for a shelter, and dragging the sledges close in, the question arose of continuing the watch.

“Tchah! It’s as dark as pitch,” said the Cornishman. “Nobody could see. Let the enemy think we’re watching. They won’t come. We must chance it. Wrap up well, and have a good night’s rest.”

This advice was taken, and soon after all were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, and awoke at daylight without a fresh alarm.

The previous day’s tactics were resumed, and the toil over the raft went on, but there was still so much to do in the way of bracing and strengthening the rough craft so that it might withstand the fierce currents and concussions they were to expect at the lower part of the lake where the rapids began, that the hours glided by till late in the afternoon, and still the task was not done.

“Who could have thought it would take so long?” said Dallas at last. “You see, we have everything to cut.”

“No one, my son,” said their big friend, smiling; “but I bet we shouldn’t have got the job done for us in double the time.”

“It would be madness to start to-night.”

“Stark. Couldn’t get loaded up before dark, and then it’ll be like pitch. Let’s cut some poles for punting and a mast to make a bit of sail if we like, and then I think we may say that we have got our job well done, ready for loading up and starting in the morning.”

“Yes,” said Abel, who seemed little the worse for his last mishap; “it was better to make a good job of the raft.”

“And that we’ve done,” said the Cornishman.

The poles were cut, trimmed, and laid upon the deck, which had been finished after launching; and now, as they examined their work, all were satisfied that it could not have been done better in the time, for as it lay in the clear water, swinging by a rope secured to a pine-stump, all felt that it would easily bear the party, their sledges and stores; and the pity seemed to be that it could not be used for the whole of their journey.

“Who knows? Perhaps it may.”

There was an hour’s daylight yet, and this was utilised down on the sandy shore of the stream which ran into the lake hard by.

It was the first trial, and no little interest was felt as every man waded into the icy cold water, pannikin in hand, to scoop the sand aside and then get a tinful from as deep down as they could.

This was washed and watched beneath the water, the stones thrown out, and washed again, till only a little sand remained, and this was carefully examined.

“Gold!” cried Dallas excitedly; and this was eagerly responded to by the others, for in every pan there was some of the precious metal, but such tiny grains that it was decided that a halt would be useless there.

“Farther on,” said Dallas excitedly; “this is only the edge of the golden land, but here is proof that we are going right.”

“Yes,” said the big Cornishman; “but I don’t rest till we can shovel it up like gravel from a pit.”

Darkness put an end to their search, and once more the fire was quenched, and in silence they sought the shelter of the great tree, placed their arms ready, rolled themselves in their blankets, and were soon asleep.

It seemed as if they had only just lain down when one of the men shouted, “Morning!”

“Hooray!” cried the big Cornishman. “Who’s going to face the cold, and have a dip in the lake?”

Every one but Abel, who hung back.

“Don’t you feel well enough to come?” said Dallas anxiously.

“Yes, but some one ought to light the fire and set the billy to boil.”

“Here! Hi! All of you,” yelled the big Cornishman, who had gone on. “Quick!”

All ran at the alarm, and then stood aghast.

“The rope must have come undone,” cried Dallas.

“Don’t look like it, my son. It’s left part of itself behind.”

“Broken—snapped?” cried Abel.

“Sawed through with a knife,” said one of the men.

“Injuns. Come in the night; lucky they didn’t use their knives to us,” growled the Cornishman fiercely, as he looked searchingly round.

“Look,” cried Dallas, excited; “these are not Indian traces;” and he pointed down at the sandy shore.

“Indian? No,” cried Abel, going down on his knees; “the marks of navigators’ boots, with nails;” and he looked wildly across and down the lake.

But the raft, their two days’ hard work, had gone.

Chapter Thirteen.

Making the best of it.

“You’re quite right, my son,” said the Cornishman coolly, after lighting his pipe and carefully examining the ground. “I’m not much of a hand at this kind of thing, but it looks plain enough. Here’s all our footmarks quite fresh, and here’s a lot more that look as if they were made last night.”

“Last night?” cried Dallas.

“Ay, that they do.”

“But those may be ours.”

“Nay; not one of us has got a hoof like that,” cried the Cornishman, pointing with the stem of his pipe. “I’ve got a tidy one of my own, but I aren’t pigeon-toed. Look at that one, too, and that. Yonder’s our marks, and, hullo! what’s that lying in the water?”

The others gazed in the indicated direction, and Dallas leaped into the shallow water, to stoop down and pick out a knife.

“Some one must have dropped this,” he cried.

“Unless one of us has lost his,” said the big fellow. “Any one own it?”

There was a chorus of negatives.

“Well, I’m sorry,” cried the Cornishman. “Poor chap! How savage he’ll be to find he has lost his toothpick. Look here,” he continued grimly, “if you all don’t mind, I’ll take care o’ this bit of steel. We may meet the chap as lost it, and I should like to give it him back.”

“Oh,” cried Dallas passionately, “how can you laugh and make a joke of such a misfortune as this?”

“What’s the good o’ crying about it, my son?” said the man, smiling. “There’s worse disasters at sea. Who says light a fire and have a good breakfast?”

“Breakfast!” cried Abel; “nonsense! We must go in pursuit at once.”

“And leave our traps for some one else to grab? Why, dear boy, we couldn’t get through the forest empty-handed.”

“No,” said Abel, gazing along the bank of the lake disconsolately.

“He’s right, Bel,” said Dallas, after shading his eyes and looking down the lake. “They’ve got right away.”

“Hang ’em, yes,” said the Cornishman, smiling merrily. “I say, I wish we hadn’t taken quite so much pains with that there raft. If we’d known we’d ha’ saved all those six-inch spikes we put in it.”

“The scoundrels, whoever they are!” cried Dallas. “It’s beyond bearing.”

“Nay, not quite, my son,” said their new friend good-humouredly, “because we’ve got to bear it. Cheer up. Might have been worse. You see, it was a fresh lot come along while we were asleep and out of sight. ‘Hullo!’ says one of ’em, ‘now I do call this kind; some un’s made us a raft all ready for taking to the water. Come along, mates,’ and they all comed.”

“I wish I’d heard them,” cried Dallas.

“Well, if you come to that, so do I, my sons. But there, we’ve got our tackle, and they haven’t taken all the wood, so we must make another.”

“Yes, and waste two more days,” cried Abel angrily.

“Well, we’re none of us old yet,” said the Cornishman good-humouredly; “and I don’t suppose those who have gone before will have got all the gold.”

“But it is so annoying to think that we lay snoring yonder and let whoever they were steal the raft,” said one of the men.

“So it is, my son,” cried his companion; “and I can see that you two are chock full o’ swear words. Tell you what: you two go in yonder among the trees and let ’em off, while we three light the fire and cook the rashers. It’ll ease your minds, and you’ll feel better. I say, what’s about the value of that there raft?”

“I wouldn’t have taken twenty pounds for my share of it,” cried Abel.

“Humph! Twenty,” said the Cornishman musingly. “Well, seeing it’s here, we’ll say twenty pound. There’s five of us, and that makes a hundred. All right, my sons; we shall come upon those chaps one of these days, and they’ll have to pay us about a pound and a harf o’ gold for our work; and if they don’t there’s going to be a fight. Now then, gentlemen, fire—breakfast—and then work. We shall be a bit more handy in making another. Wish we’d had a bit o’ paint.”

“Paint! What for?” cried Dallas and Abel in a breath.

“Only to have touched it up, and made it look pretty for ’em.”

“Never mind!” said Dallas, through his teeth. “We’ll make it to look pretty for them when we find them.”

“So we will, my son,” cried the Cornishman, and as he gathered chips and branches together he kept on indulging in a hearty laugh at the prospect of the encounter; and as the two young adventurers glanced at the man’s tremendous arms, they had sundry thoughts about what would happen to the thieves.

The Cornishman was right; they were much more handy over making the second raft, and worked so hard that by the end of the following day a new and stronger one was made and loaded ready for the next morning’s start.

But this time a watch was kept, one of the party sitting on board until half the night had passed, when he was relieved by another; and as the sun rose, breakfast was over, and they cast off the rope from the pine-stump which had formed the mooring-post.

The morning was glorious, and the sun lit up the snow-covered mountains, making the scene that of a veritable land of gold. A light breeze, too, was blowing in their favour, so that their clumsy craft was wafted down the lake, which here and there assumed the aspect of a wide river of the bluest and purest water, the keen, elastic air sending a thrill of health and strength through them, and it seemed as if the tales they had heard of the perils they were to encounter were merely bugbears, for nothing could have been pleasanter than their passage.

“Let’s see,” said Dallas, who was well provided with map and plan; “when we get to the bottom of this lake there are some narrows and rapids to pass along.”

“So we heard,” said the Cornishman. “Well, so much the better. We shall go the faster. I suppose they’re not Falls of Ni-agger-ray.—I say, can you gents swim?”

“Pretty well,” was the reply. “Can you?”

The big fellow scratched his head and screwed up his face into a queer smile.

“You ask my two mates,” he said.

“No, I asked you,” said Dallas.

“Not a stroke, my son. If we get capsized I shall trust to being six foot three and a half and walk out. I don’t s’pose it’ll be deeper than that. If it is, I dessay my mates’ll lend me a hand.”

“Then we mustn’t capsize,” said Abel.

“Well, it would be as well not,” said one of the other party drily, “on account of the flour and sugar and tea. I always said you ought to swim, Bob, old man.”

“So you did, mate,” said the big fellow, with a chuckle. “And as soon as it gets warm enough I’m going to learn.”

That night they reached the foot of the lake where the rocky walls closed in, forming a narrow ravine, through which the great body of water seemed to be emptying itself with a roar, the aspect of the place being dangerous enough to make the party pole to the shore at the first likely landing-place and camp for the night.

The evening was well upon them by the time they had their fire alight, and after a hearty meal their couch of pine-boughs proved very welcome.

“Sounds ominous, Dal,” said Abel. “I hope we shall get safely through in the morning.”

“We must,” was the reply. “Don’t think about it; we ought to be hardened enough to do anything now. How’s your head?”

“A bit achey sometimes. And your shoulder?”

There was no reply, for, utterly wearied out with poling the raft, Dallas was asleep, leaving only one of the party to watch the expiring embers of the fire, and listen to the rapids’ deep humming roar.

Abel did not keep awake, though, long. For after getting up to satisfy himself that the raft was safe, he lay down again, meaning to watch till the fire was quite out, though there was not the slightest danger of their being attacked. The only way an enemy could have approached was by water, and it was with a calm, restful sense of satisfaction

that the young man stretched himself out on the soft boughs as he said to himself, “There isn’t a boat on the lake, and it would take any party two days to make a raft.”

Chapter Fourteen.

From the frying-pan into the wet fire.

“We could not have better weather, Bel,” said Dallas, as they finished the next morning’s breakfast. “Summer is coming.”

“Rather a snowy summer,” was the reply; “but never mind the cold: let’s try wherever we halt to see if there is any gold; those fellows are getting out their tins.”

A few minutes later all were gold-washing on the shore, their Cornish friend having cast loose a shovel, and given every person a charge of sand and stones from one of the shallows, taking his shovelfuls from places a dozen yards or so apart.

Then the washing began in the bright sunshine, with the same results—a few tiny specks of colour, as the men termed their glittering scales of gold-dust.

“That’s your sort, gentlemen,” cried the Cornishman, washing out his pan, after tossing the contents away; “plenty of gold, and if you worked hard you might get about half enough to starve on. Why, we could ha’ done better at home, down in Wales. You can get a hundred pounds’ worth of gold there if you spend a hundred and fifty in labour.”

“Yes; but even this dust shows that we are getting into the gold region,” said Dallas.

“That’s right, my son, so come along and let’s get there. I s’pose we’re going right?”

“We must be,” said Dallas. “I have studied the maps well, and we passed the watershed—”

“Eh? We haven’t passed no watershed. Not so much as a tent.”

Dallas had to explain that they had crossed the mountains which shed the water in different directions.

“Oh, that’s it, is it, my son? I thought you meant something built up.”

“So he did,” said Abel, smiling, “by nature. When we were on the other side of the mountains the streams ran towards the south.”

“That’s right, master.”

“Now you see the direction in which the water runs is towards the north. Here in the map is the great Yukon River, running right across from east to west, and these lakes form the little rivers which must run into the Yukon.”

“And that’s the great gold river, my sons.”

“Yes; but we shall find what we want in the rivers and creeks that run down from the mountains to form the Yukon.”

“That’s all right, my son; so if we keep to these waters we must come to the right place at last.”

“I hope so.”

“So do I, my son; so, as they said at the ’Merican railway stations, ‘All aboard, and let’s get as far down to-day as we can.’”

They stepped on to the raft, cast off the rope, and each man picked up one of the twelve-foot pine-sapling poles they had provided for their navigation down the rapids, of which they had been warned at starting; and the big Cornishman planted himself in front.

“Anybody else like to come here?” he said.

There was a chorus of “No’s,” and he nodded and smiled.

“Thought I was best here to fend the raft off the rocks when she begins to race. I say, we’re going to have it lower down. Hear it?”

All nodded assent.

“If we are capsized, my sons,” continued the big fellow drily, “one of you had better swim up to me and take me on his back. What do you say, little un?” he added to Abel. “It’ll be your turn to help me.”

“I’ll stand by you,” cried Abel; “never fear.”

“I know that, my lad. I say, the stream begins to show now as the place gets narrower. Looks as if it’ll be nearly closed in. Well, we must risk it. There’s no walking as I see on either side.”

“Ahoy!” came from the right bank, where the lake was fast becoming a river.

“Ahoy to you, and good morning, whoever you are,” cried the Cornishman.

Some unintelligible words followed, he who uttered them being plainly to be seen now

“‘GOING DOWN THE RAPIDS?’ HE SHOUTED.” [P. 145.

on a ledge some fifty feet above the surface of the water. But his signs were easy to be understood.

“Wants us to give him a lift,” said Dallas. “Can we stop?”

“Oh, yes, and it would only be civil,” said the Cornishman. “Just room for one first-class passenger. All right; lend a hand here. I can touch bottom. ’Bout seven foot.”

Poles were thrust down, and the raft was urged across the flowing water till the eddy on the far side was reached, and then, with the fierce roar coming out of a narrow gap in the rocks a few hundred yards lower, the raft was easily thrust into a little cove below the man on the shelf.

“Going down the rapids?” he shouted.

“We are, my lad,” cried their captain. “Why?”

“Will you give a poor fellow a lift down? I can’t get any farther for the rocks.”

“Far as the gold country?”

“Oh, no: I don’t ask that. Only to where I can tramp again.”

“Well, we’ve just room for a little un,” said the Cornishman. “Much luggage?”

“Only this pack,” was the reply.

“Jump in, then,” said the leader, with a grim smile. “P’r’aps, though, you’d better come lower.”

The man nodded, slung his pack over his shoulder, and then, turning, began to descend the almost perpendicular face of the rocks, twice over narrowly escaping a bad fall. But at last he reached the foot, waded out a little, and then stepped on board.

“Thankye,” he said; “you are good Christians. I’ve been here a fortnight, and couldn’t get any farther. I shouldn’t have been alive now if I hadn’t got a fish or two.”

“You are tramping to the gold region all alone, then?”

“Yes, and I’ve nearly tramped all the way from Chicago.”

The Cornishman turned and stared.

“I got a lift sometimes on the cattle and freight trains, though, when I could creep on unseen.”

“The gold has a magnetic attraction for you, then?” said Abel.

“I suppose so, but it’s my last chance. This is a solitary way, though, isn’t it? I’ve hardly seen a soul. I saw your fire, though, last night, across yonder.”

“Did you see anybody go by on a raft three or four days ago?” cried Dallas eagerly.

“I did. Party of three, and hailed them.”

“What were they like?” cried Abel.

“Roughs; shacks; loafers. One of them had a big red beard.”

Dallas started, and glanced at Abel.

“A brute!” cried the stranger fiercely. “I asked them to give me a lift, as I was going to starve here if they didn’t, and I warned them that I had heard it wanted a strong party to take a craft through the rapids. ‘All right, stranger,’ he said, pushing the craft a little nearer. ‘Mind lending me your knife to trim this rough pole with? I’ve lost mine.’”

It was Abel now who glanced at Dallas.

“‘Catch,’ I said, pitching mine, in its sheath.”

“Well?” said the Cornishman, fumbling in his belt.

“Well,” continued the man, with a sombre look in his eyes, “he caught it, and began to smooth his pole, letting the raft drift away; and though I begged and prayed of them to stop for me, they only laughed, and let her get right into the current. It was life or death to me, as I thought then,” continued the stranger, “and I climbed along that shelf and followed, shouting and telling them I was starving, and begging them to throw me my knife back if they wouldn’t take me aboard; but they only laughed, and told me to go and hang myself. But I followed on as fast as I could, right along to the opening yonder where it’s so narrow that I could speak to them close to; and though I knew they couldn’t stop the raft there, I thought they’d throw me my knife.”

“And did they?” said the Cornishman.

“No. I was there just before them, and I shouted; but you can’t hear yourself speak there, the roar echoes so from the rocks. The next minute they’d been swept by me so near I could almost have jumped on board; and there I stood, holding on and reaching out so that I could see them tear down through the rushing water. They’d took fright, dropped their poles, and were down on their knees holding on, with the raft twisting slowly round.”

“Capsized?” cried Dallas.

“Drowned?” cried Abel.

“I could not see,” continued the stranger. “I watched them till they went into a sort of fog with a rainbow over it, and then I felt ready to jump in and try to swim, or get drowned, for without my knife I felt that all was over.”

“Not drowned, then?” said Dallas.

“No, my son; them as is born to be hanged’ll never be drowned,” said the big Cornishman grimly. “Look ye here, old chap, you’d better take this toothpick; it’s the one that the boss of that party who stole our raft lost.”

“Ah!” cried the stranger; “they stole your raft?”

“They did, my son, and it seems to me things aren’t at all square, for these here fellows are ready to do anything—from committing murder down to stealing a knife. Why, they’ve even cheated death, or else they’d be lying comfortably buried in the snow.”

“Ha!” ejaculated Dallas, as he stood grasping his pole, and the raft began to glide along.

“Yes, it is ‘Hah!’ my son,” said the Cornishman; “but I shouldn’t wonder if we came across a tree some day bearing fruit at the end of a hempen stalk. I say, though, my son, is the river below there so dangerous as you say?”

“Yes; it is a horrible fall, as far as I could see.”

“Then hadn’t you better stop ashore?”

“And starve?” said the man bitterly.

“You’re ready to risk it, then?” said Dallas.

“I’d risk anything rather than stop alone in this horrible solitude,” said the stranger excitedly.

“All right, then, my son. There’s a spare pole. Set your pack down; take hold, and come on.”

The stranger did as he was told, and took the place pointed out.

“If it’s as noisy as he says,” continued the Cornishman, “there’ll be no shouting orders—it’ll all be signs. So what you see me do you’ve got to follow. Spit in your hands, all of you, and hold tight with your feet. Stick to it, and we’ll get through. We must; there’s no other way.”

No one spoke in reply, but their companion’s cheery way of meeting the perils ahead sent a thrill of confidence through the party, as they stood on the triangular raft, noting that the current was gradually growing swifter as the rocky walls on either side closed in from being hundreds of yards apart to as many feet, and the distance lessening

rapidly more and more.

It was horrible, but grand, and as the pace increased, a curious sensation of intoxicating excitement attacked the party, whose senses seemed to be quickened so that they could note the wondrous colours of the rocks, the vivid green of the ferns and herbs which clustered in the rifts and cracks, and the glorious clearness of the water.

So excited was the great fellow at the head of the raft that he raised his pole, turned to look at his companions, and then pointed onward, while moment by moment the great walls of rock seemed to close in upon them as if to crush all flat.

Up to now their progress had been a swift glide, but as they approached the narrow opening, which seemed not much more than wide enough to let them pass, the raft began to undulate and proceed by leaps, each longer than the last, while the water rippled over the side.

Then all at once the front portion—the apex of the elongated triangle—rose as if at a leap, dipped again, and they were off with a terrific rush in a narrow channel of rock, up whose sides the water rose as if to escape the turmoil. Wave rose above wave, struggling to get onward; there was the roar of many waters growing more deafening, and the raft was tossed about like a straw, its occupants being forced to kneel and try to fend her off from the sides. And now, to add to the horror, turmoil, and confusion, they plunged at a tremendous speed into a bank of churned up mist, dense as the darkest cloud, rushing onward in bounds and leaps which made the raft quiver, till all at once Dallas, who was near their captain, suddenly caught sight of a mass of rocks apparently rising out of the channel right in their way.

The next moment there was a terrific shock, a rush of water, black darkness, and everything seemed to be at an end.

Chapter Fifteen.

“Those born to be hanged.”

The preparations for fending the raft off the rocks that might be in their way, or keeping it from the wall-like sides which overhung them, were absurd; for as they were swept into the furious rapid, and whirled and tossed about, each man instinctively dropped his pole to crouch down and cling for dear life to the rough pieces of timber they had so laboriously notched, nailed, and bound together.

The course of the river was extremely erratic, zigzagging through the riven, rocky barrier which formed the ancient dam at the foot of the lake; and one minute they were swept to right, the next to left, while at every angle there was a whirlpool which threatened to suck them down.

Noise, darkness, the wild turmoil of tumbling waters, blinding mist, and choking spray, strangled and confused the little crew, so that they clung to the raft, feeling that all was over, and that they were about to be plunged deep down into the bowels of the earth. Dallas was conscious of wedging his toes between two of the timbers, clinging with his left hand, and reaching over the bound-down sledges to grasp Abel’s; and then all seemed to be blank for a length of time that he could not calculate. It might have been a minute—it might have been an hour; but he held on to his cousin’s hand, which clutched his in return in what seemed to be a death-grip, till all at once they were shot out into the bright sunshine, and were gliding at a tremendous rate down a water-slide, with the water hissing and surging about them where they knelt.

As soon as he could sweep the blinding spray from his eyes, Dallas looked round in wonder, to find that all his companions were upon the raft, and that the rocky walls on either side were receding fast as the river opened out, while the rapid down which they plunged seemed quite clear of rocks.

The deafening noise was dying out too, and as Dallas looked back at the fast growing distant gap in the rock through which they had been shot, he wondered that the raft should have held together with its freight, and that they should still be there.

His brain seemed still to be buzzing with the confusion, when he was conscious of some one beside him giving himself a shake like a great water-dog and shouting:

“What cheer, there! Not dead yet. Are any of you?”

There was no reply—every one looking strained and oppressed; then, without a word, the little party began to shake hands warmly, and the big Cornishman shook his head.

“It was a rum un!” he exclaimed; “it was a rum un! Well, we’re all alive O, and if we do get any gold, you may all do as you like, but I shall go back home some other way.”

The straightforward naïve way in which this was said seemed so absurd on the face of it that the cousins could not refrain from smiling: but the sight of a great mass of rock ahead dividing the swift stream into two, and toward which the raft seemed to be rushing fast, made all turn to seize their poles and fend it off from a certainty of wreck.

However, the poles were all probably being whirled round and round one of the pools they had passed, like scraps of straw, and the shattering of the raft seemed a certainty; but their big companion was a man of resource. Seating himself upon the edge of the raft as it glided evenly along, he waited with legs extended for the coming contact. His feet touched the rock, and a vigorous thrust eased their craft off, the brave fellow’s sturdy limbs acting like strong buffers, so that there was only a violent jerk, the raft swung round, and they went gliding on again.

The current was swift, but clear now from further obstacles, and hope grew strong.

“I say, I call it grand!” cried one of the men. “We shall soon get there if we keep on like this.”

“Yes, but the sooner one of us takes a rope and jumps ashore, the better. We must cut some fresh poles.”

This was done at the first opportunity, Abel leaping on to the rocky bank with a rope, as they glided by a spot where the forest of pines came down close to them; and then, seizing his opportunity, he gave the rope a turn round a small tree. There was a jerk, and the hemp threatened to part; but it held, and the raft swung round and became stationary as the rope was made fast.

The first proceeding was to wring out their garments, and the next to examine the sledges, which had been so well made fast when loaded up that they had not stirred; but some of the stores were damaged with water.

“Can’t help it,” said Dallas cheerily. “Our lives are saved.”

Something was done towards their drying by the warm sunshine, for this came down brightly, though the aspect round was growing almost as wintry as the country they had passed through higher up beyond the lake; and as they gazed at the mountains, which they felt must lie somewhere near the part for which they were aiming, it seemed as if they would, after all, be arriving too soon for successful work.

The raft proved useful for some days on their way north by river and lake, their journey being through a labyrinth of waterways, where again and again they made halts in likely places to try for the object of their search.

But the result was invariably the same; they found gold, but never in sufficient quantity to warrant a stay.

“Wouldn’t pay for bread and onions, my sons,” said the Cornishman, and they pushed on farther and farther into the northern solitudes, with their loads growing lighter, and a feeling of longing to reach the golden land where they knew something in the way of settlements and stores existed, and where people could at once take up claims and begin work. For a comparison of notes proved that they were all rapidly coming to the end of their means.

The subject of the passage of the raft down the cataract had been several times over discussed during their halts, and the possibility of their enemies having escaped. The Cornishman and his companions, including the man they had succoured, declared as one that the marauding trio must have perished.

“And so should we, my sons,” said the big fellow, “if we had gone down that water-slide on the first raft.”

“I do not see it,” said Dallas; “we made both.”

“Yes; but the first was when we were ’prentices, the second was when we had served our time.”

The speaker laughed as he said this; and as it happened, it was on the second day after that he pointed with something like triumph to some newly cut and trimmed young pieces of pine-trunk notched in a peculiar way, cast up among some rocks on the shores of the little lake they were crossing.

“That’s the end of ’em, my sons,” he said.

“Oh, no; any one may have cut down those trees.”

“For sartain, my son; but I nailed ’em together, for there’s one of my spikes still sticking in. Good nail, too; see how it’s twisted and bent.”

This seemed unanswerable, but neither Abel nor Dallas was convinced.

“They may have swum ashore,” Abel said to his cousin, as they lay down to sleep that night.

“Yes,” said Dallas, “and I shall hold to Bob’s proverb about those born to be hanged.”

Chapter Sixteen.

A plunge into hot quarters.

“So this is the golden city,” said Dallas, as he and Abel sat, worn out and disconsolate, gazing at a confusion of tents, sheds, and shanties, for it could be called nothing else, on the hither side of a tumbled together waste of snow and ice spreading to right and left. “Is it all a swindle or a dream?”

“I hope it’s a dream,” replied his cousin, limping a step or two, and then seating himself on the sledge which, footsore and weary, he had been dragging for the last few days after they had finally abandoned their raft. “I hope it’s a dream, and that we shall soon wake.”

The big Cornishman took his short pipe out of his mouth, blew a big cloud, looked at his companions, who were asleep rolled up in their blankets, and then at the cousins.

“Oh, we’re wide awake enough, my sons,” he said, “and we’ve got here at last.”

“Yes,” said Dallas bitterly; “we’ve got here, and what next?”

“Make our piles, as the Yankees call it, my lads.”

“Where?” cried Abel. “Why, we had better have stayed and washed gold-dust out of the sand up one of those streams.”

“Oh, you mustn’t judge of a place first sight; but I must say it aren’t pretty. People seems to chuck everything they don’t want out o’ doors, like the fisher folk down at home in Cornwall. But it’s worse here, for they’ve got no sea to come up and wash the rubbish away.”

“Nor yet a river,” said Dallas. “I expected the Yukon to be a grand flowing stream.”

“Well, give it a chance, my son,” said the big fellow cheerily. “A river can’t flow till it begins to thaw a bit. Chap tells me it’s very late this year, but it’ll break up and clear itself in a few hours. Says it’s a sight worth seeing.”

“But we did not come to see sights,” said Abel peevishly. “Where’s that other man?”

“Gone. Told me to tell you both that he was very grateful for the help you had given him, and that now he’s going to shift for himself.”

“The way of the world!” said Dallas dismally.

“Oh, I don’t know, my son. He’s right enough. Said if he had the luck to find a good claim up one of the creeks he should peg out five more alongside of it and come and look us up, and made me promise I’d do the same to him. What do you think of that?”

“Nothing,” said Dallas. “I’m too tired out to think of anything but eating and sleeping, and there seems to be no chance of finding a place to do either.”

“No, my son; it’s a case of help yourself. I’ve been having a look round, and the only thing I can find anybody wants to sell is whisky.”

“Yes, that was all they had at the store I went to. That’s the place with the iron roof and the biscuit-tin sides—yonder, where those howling dogs are tied up.”

“Ah, I went there,” said the Cornishman, “and the Yankee chap it belongs to called it his hotel. But to go back to what we are to do next, my son. We mustn’t stay here, but go up to one of the little streams they’re talking about, and peg out claims as soon as we find good signs. Now, I’ve been thinking, like our chap who lost his knife, that we’d better separate here and go different ways. If we find a good place we’ll come to you, and if you find one you’ll share with us. What do you say?”

“Tired of our company?” asked Abel bitterly.

The big fellow turned to him and smiled.

“Look here, my son,” he said, “that foot of yours hurts you more than you owned to. You take my advice; after we’ve got a bit of a fire and made our camp and cooked our bit o’ supper, you make a tin o’ water hot and bathe it well, and don’t you use that foot much for a day or two. No, my sons, I’m not tired of you. If I had been I should ha’ said good-bye days ago. I’m sorry for us to break up our party, but I’ve been thinking that what I proposed was the best plan, even if it does sound rough.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” said Dallas, speaking in a more manly way. “I beg your pardon. So does my cousin here. We’re fagged out, and this does seem such a damper. I wish we were back somewhere in the pine-woods.”

“Tchah! I don’t want no pardons begged, my son. I know. When I saw this lovely spot first I felt as if I could sit down and swear; but what good would that ha’ done? It’ll be all right. Now it seems to me that we shall be more comfort’ble if we go just over yonder away from the hotels and places, make our bit o’ fire, get a pannikin of tea, and then two of us’ll stop and look after the traps in case any one should come and want to borrow things and we not know where they’re gone. T’others had better have a look round and drop in here and there at these places where the men meet. It won’t do to be proud out here. I want to see some of the gold.”

“Eh?” cried a big, hearty voice, and a man who was passing stopped short and looked at them. “Want to see some of the gold? Well, there you are!”

He unfastened a strap that went across his breast, and drew a heavy leather satchel from where it hung like a cartouche-box on his back.

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"Catch hold," he cried. "That's some of the stuff."

The three awake looked at the stranger sharply, and the Cornishman opened the bag, to lay bare scales, grains, and water-worn and rubbed scraps of rich yellow gold, at the sight of which the new-comers drew their breath hard.

"Did you get this here?" cried Dallas.

"Not here, my lad, but at Upper Creek. That lot and two more like it. You'd better go on there as soon as you can if you want to take up claims; but I must tell you that all the best are gone already."

"Which is the way?" cried Abel.

"I'll show you when I go back to-morrow, if you like. Where shall you be?"

"Camping just over there," said Dallas, pointing.

"All right. I'm going to sleep at the hotel to-night. Come on by-and-by and see me, and we'll have a chat."

"I say, my son," said their big companion, putting his hand in the bag, half filling it, and letting the gold run back again, before beginning to fasten the flap.

"My son! Why, you're a Cornishman."

"That's so."

"Glad to see a West-countryman out here. I'm from Devonport. But come on and have a chat by-and-by. What were you going to say, though?"

"Seeing what a set of rough pups there are about here, my son, I was going to say, is it safe for a man to carry about a lot of gold like that?"

The stranger took back his bag and slung it over his shoulder again, as he looked from one to the other, half-closed his eyes, and nodded.

"Yes, and no, my lads. You're right; we have got some rough pups about here—chaps who'd put a bullet into a man for a quarter of what I've got there. But they daren't. We've got neither law nor police, you see."

"No, I don't see," said Dallas. "You speak in riddles."

"You don't see, my lad, because you're a Johnny Newcome. I'll tell you. We've got some of the most blackguardly scum that could be took off the top of the big town sink-holes—men who've come to rob and gamble; but we've got, too, plenty of sturdy fellows like yourselves, who mean work and who trust one another—men who'll help each other at a pinch; and I've heard that there's a sort of lawyer fellow they call Judge Lynch has put in an appearance, and he stands no nonsense. He's all on the side of the honest workers, and one of them has only to denounce a man as a thief for the Vigilants to nail him at once. Then there's a short trial, a short shrift, and there's one rogue the less in the world."

“You mean if he’s proved to be a thief, or red-handed.”

“That’s it, my lads. There, I’ve got some friends to meet. Come on and see me to-night.”

The speaker nodded cheerily to all three, and went off at a swinging gait.

“Well, I wouldn’t have minded shaking hands with that chap,” said the big Cornishman. “The more of that sort there is out here the better.”

“Yes,” cried Dallas; “his words were quite cheering.”

“So was the sight of that little leather sack of his, my sons. Do your foot good, Mr Wray?”

“Yes, I forgot all about it,” said Abel, eagerly. “Here, let’s make our fire.”

This was done, and the billy soon began to bubble, when the tea was thrown in and declared to be delicious, in spite of a mouldy taste consequent upon getting wet in its travels and being dried again.

“Better if we hadn’t had all our sugar spoiled,” said Dallas, as he munched his biscuit along with a very fat rusty scrap of fried bacon.

“It don’t want any sugar, my son,” said the Cornishman. “I’ve just stirred a teaspoonful of that chap’s gold-dust into it, and it has given it a wonderful flavour.”

“Yes,” said Abel, “the sight of that gold seems to have quite changed everything.”

The meal was finished, with the whole party refreshed and in the best of spirits. Then the sledges were drawn together, a few small pine-saplings bound on to make a roof, over which a couple of waterproof sheets were drawn, and there was a rough tent for a temporary home.

By that time it was evening, and lanterns were being hung out here and there, lamps lit in the shanties, and the place began to look more lively. In two tents there was the sound of music—a fiddle in one, a badly played German concertina in the other; but the result was not cheerful, for whenever they were in hearing the great shaggy sledge-dogs, of which there were scores about, set up a dismal barking and howling.

The Cornishman’s two friends had cheerfully elected to keep the camp, at a word from their big companion, and the other three started to have a look at the place and end by calling at the hotel upon their new acquaintance.

As soon as they were a few yards away, the Cornishman laughed and winked. “I can trust you, and I can trust Bob Tregelly, and that’s me, my sons; but I can’t trust them two where there’s whisky about. They’ve sworn to me that they won’t go amongst it, and I’m not going to let ’em. Now then, I’m about to see if I can’t find something to eat at a reasonable price, and buy it. Have you lads got any money?”

“Yes, a little left,” replied both.

“Then you’d better ware a pound or so the same way; biscuit and bacon and meal, I should say. I’ll meet you yonder at the hotel in an hour, and we’ll pick up what we can about the whereabouts of the stuff; but we shan’t want to stay here long, I expect. Will that do?”

“Yes, in an hour,” said Dallas, and they separated.

There was not much to take the young men’s attention, but they heard a couple of men say that the ice was giving, and another was telling a group of a man having come to the hotel who had done wonders up some creek he and his mates had tried.

“Our friend, Bel,” said Dallas; and soon after, without making any purchases, from the inability to find what they wanted, they strolled back just at dark towards the hotel.

“What a hole!” said Abel, as they approached the place, to find from the lights, the noise, and clattering of drinking-vessels, that a tent which had been stretched over a wooden frame was crowded, and a couple of men in shirt-sleeves were busily going in and out from a side shed of corrugated iron, attending on the assembled guests.

“Evening, gentlemen,” said the elder of the two. “You’ll find room inside. Go right up the middle; there’s more seats there.”

Just then there was a shout of excitement, and the young men looked at one another.

“It’s all right, gents,” said the man, who was evidently the landlord. “We’re having a big night. There’s a man from Upper Creek with a fine sample of gold. I could show you if you like. Happy to bank for you too if you strike it rich, and supply you with stores and good advice. Any one will speak up for me.”

“But surely that means a row,” said Dallas, as a roar of voices came from the canvas building.

“No; that’s about a robbery on the track. Three men came in to-day, and they’re telling the lads how they were attacked and half killed. The Vigilants are strong here to-night, and there’ll be business if the fellows are caught. We don’t stand any nonsense here.”

“Shall we go in, Bel?” whispered Dallas.

“Yes; we needn’t stay long,” was the reply. “I want to talk to that man with the gold.”

“This way, gentlemen,” said the bar-keeper. “You follow me.”

The pair followed the man into the long low place, along each side of which were trestle tables crowded with men drinking and smoking, the tobacco fumes nearly filling the place like a fog. There was a gangway down the centre, and they followed their guide nearly to the end, when both started violently at the sight of a group of three men seated at a table beneath the largest swinging lamp, whose reflector threw a bright light down on the biggest of the party, who was on his legs, waving his pipe as he talked loudly.

“You’re making a mistake, mates,” he said. “It’s just as I telled you, and if it hadn’t been for the pluck of my pals here we should have been dead as well as robbed. But you mark my words; they’ll make for here, and if they do—ah, what did I say? Look, mates, look; this here’s the very pair.”

There was a wild shout of rage, as every man in the place seemed to leap to his feet; and before, utterly stunned by the sudden attack and denunciation, either of the new-comers could find words to utter in their defence, they were seized and dragged to their knees.

Chapter Seventeen.

A trial for life.

“It’s false! A cowardly lie!” cried Dallas at last, as he tried to shake himself free.

“Quiet!” cried one of his captors fiercely, “or you’ll git into trouble!”

“Yes, a lie—a lie!” cried Abel, finding his voice. “Don’t choke me, sir. Give a man fair play.”

“Oh, yes, you shall have fair play,” said another sternly.

“Those men attacked and tried to murder us both yonder in the snowy pass.”

“Well! I ham!” roared the red-bearded scoundrel, looking round protestingly at all present. “But there, I’ve done.”

He dropped heavily back in his seat, and held up his hands to his two companions.

“That’s a queer way of defending yourself, young fellow,” said a stern, square-looking man, who spoke roughly, but in a way that suggested education.

“Yes, but it’s the truth,” cried Dallas firmly. “Hands off, gentlemen. We shall not try to run away.”

“Now, then: these three gentlemen say they have been robbed on the road.”

“And I say it is false. That man is a liar and a thief—a would-be murderer.”

“Well,” cried the red-bearded man again. “Did you ever, mates?”

“No,” cried one of the others. “Why, he talks like a play actor.”

“Look here, gentlemen,” cried the third excitedly, and he rose, planted a foot on the bench, and bared his bound-up leg, “here’s that tall un’s shot as went through my calf here. I’m as lame as a broken-kneed un.”

A murmur of sympathy ran through the place, and Dallas spoke out again as Abel looked quietly round at the grim faces lowering through the smoke.

“Look here, gentlemen, I can prove my words,” cried Dallas.

“Very well, then,” said the dark, square-looking man, “prove them; you shall not be condemned unheard.”

A chill ran through the young man at the other’s judicial tone, and the name of Judge Lynch rose to his mind. But he spoke out firmly.

“A friend who has journeyed here with me is to meet me here to-night.—Ah, here is one gentleman who knows us;” and he made a step towards their bluff acquaintance of that evening, who had risen from his seat farther in, and was looking frowningly on. “Speak a word for us, sir.”

“Well, my lad, I never saw you till to-night,” was the reply. “I did have a chat with this man, gentlemen, and his mate there, and I found them well-spoken young fellows as ever I met.”

“But you never saw them before,” said the dark man.

“Well, I must tell the truth,” said the gold-finder.

“Of course.”

“No,” said the man sadly, “I never did but fair play, gentlemen, please.”

“They shall have fair play enough,” said the dark man. “What about your friend, prisoners, is this he?”

“Prisoners!” gasped Abel. “No, no; a friend who travelled with us.”

“Bah! Another lie, gentlemen,” cried Redbeard mockingly; “they were alone, and shot my mate, so that it was two to two; but they took us in ambush like, and by surprise. They hadn’t got no friend with ’em.”

“Yes, they had,” cried a loud voice which dominated the roar of anger which arose; “they had me; I was along with ’em—only a little un, my sons, but big enough for you all to see.”

There was a laugh at this, but it was silenced by the dark man’s voice.

“Silence, gentlemen, please,” he said, “and no laughter where two men’s lives are at stake.”

A chill ran through Dallas again, but he forced a smile at his cousin, as if to say, what he did not think, “It will be all right now.”

“Look here,” cried the Cornishman, drawing himself up to his full height, and looking round as if to address every one present; “these youngsters said what was quite right. They’ve been along with me and two more ever since we dug ’em out of the snow.”

“That’s right, as far as I know,” said their acquaintance with the gold; “there was a party of five when I came upon them to-night;” and a fresh murmur arose.

“It’s all right, mates,” said Redbeard to his two companions; “there’s a gang of ’em, but don’t you be skeared; these gents’ll see justice done.”

“Well, I don’t mind being called one of a gang, my sons,” said the Cornishman. “I worked on the railway once, and I was ganger, or, as you call it here, boss, over a dozen men; but if this chap, who looks as red as if he’d come out of a tin-mine, says I robbed him, I’ll crack him like I would a walnut in a door.”

There was a roar of laughter here, and cries of “Well done, little un!” But the dark man sternly called for silence once more.

“Now, sir, what do you say to this?” he said to Redbeard sharply.

“What I said before, boss. That big chap wasn’t with ’em then. I say these two young larrikins tried to rob and do for us. Look at his leg!”

“Robbed yer and tried to do for yer? Did they, now! Well, they do look a pair of bad uns, don’t they, my sons?—bad as these three looks good and innercent and milky.”

“Hear him!” growled Redbeard fiercely. “Talking like that, with my poor mate suffering from a wound like this, pardners,” and he pointed to his companion’s leg.

“Get out!” roared the Cornishman scornfully; “put that sore prop away; you’re talking to men, not a set of bairns. Think they’re going to be gammoned by a bit of play-acting?”

There was another loud murmur of excitement, the occupants of the canvas building crowding up closer, evidently thoroughly enjoying the genuine drama being enacted in their presence, and eager to see the *dénouement*, even if it only proved to be a fight between the two giants taking now the leading parts.

The man with the red beard felt that matters were growing critical for the accusers, while public opinion was veering round in favour of the prisoners; and resting one hand upon his hip, and flourishing his pipe with the other, he took a step forward, his eyes full of menace, and faced the Cornishman.

“Look ye here, old un,” he growled, “I’m a plain, straightforward, honest man, as has come up here to try and get a few scraps o’ red gold.”

“Same here, my lad.”

“And I want to know whether you mean all that ’ere nasty, or whether you mean it nice?”

“Just as you like, my son,” cried the Cornishman. “You’ve told the company here that my two young friends tried to rob and settle you. I tell the company that it’s as big a lie as was ever spoke.”

“Well!” growled the man again, and he looked round at his companions; “of all—”

“Yes,” said the Cornishman, “an out-and-out lie; and I could play the same cards as you, and show judge here and all of you the mark of your bullets in one of my young friends’ shoulder, and on the other’s skull. But I don’t.”

“Yes, you do,” said the dark man. “Let’s see them.”

“Hear, hear! Bravo, judge! Right, right!” came in chorus.

“Very good, gentlemen,” said the Cornishman, turning calmly to Dallas. “You show first.”

“It is nearly healed up now,” said Dallas.

“Hor, hor, hor!” laughed the man with the red beard, “hear him!”

Dallas gave him a fierce glance, and as his captors set him free he hastily slipped off jacket and waistcoat, before tearing open his shirt and laying bare an ugly red scar where a bullet had ploughed his shoulder; and a murmur once more arose.

“That will do,” said the dark man. “Now the other.”

“I have nothing to show,” said Abel. “The bullet struck my cap, and just glanced along the side of my head.”

“Come close under the lamp,” said the dark man sternly.

“Better mind your eye,” said Redbeard warningly.

The dark man gave him a sharp look, and then bade Abel kneel down and bend his head sideways.

As he did so a whitish line a few inches long was visible where the hair had been taken off, and at the sight of this there was a fresh murmur.

“That’s good proof in both cases, gentlemen,” said the dark man firmly. “Now, sir,” he continued, “what more have you to say in support of your evidence?”

“This here,” cried Redbeard. “I want to know first whether this bully countryman here means what he said nasty, or whether he means it nice?”

“Hear, hear!” shouted a voice behind.

“Just which you please, my fine fellow,” said the Cornishman; “you can take it hot with sugar, or cold with a red-hot cinder in it, if you like.”

“Then maybe I’ll take it hot,” cried Redbeard, fiercely.

He spoke with one hand behind him, and quick as thought he brought it round with a swing, but a man near him struck it up.

Chapter Eighteen.

Hanging by a thread.

“Stop that!” shouted the judge, springing to his feet. The Cornishman stood quite unmoved.

There was silence directly, and the dark man went on. “Gentlemen,” he cried, “we have made this a court of justice, and you chose me the other day, being an English barrister, to act as judge.”

“Yes, yes,” came in a fierce shout, which crushed down some murmurs of opposition. “Go on, judge—go on.”

“I will, gentlemen, till you bring forward another man to take my place. Once more, we are here on British ground.”

“No, no,” came from the minority; “American.”

“British, gentlemen; and as subjects of her Majesty the Empress-Queen we stand by law and order.”

“Hear, hear!” was shouted.

“We will have no rowdyism, no crimes against our little society, while we toil for our gold.”

“Hear, hear!”

“We have already bound ourselves to carry on our home-made laws here, so that every man can bring in his winnings and place them with the landlord, or leave them in his hut or tent, knowing that they are safe; and we are agreed that the man who robs one of us of his gold shall suffer for his crime, the same as if he had committed a murder.”

“That’s right, judge—that’s right!” was roared.

“Very well, then,” said the judge. “I have one word to say to those who have raised their voices several times to-night. Let me tell them that if they are not satisfied with our ideas of fair play, they had better pack their sledges and go right away.”

“Likely!” shouted a man at the back; “and what about our claims we have staked out?”

“Let them be valued by a jury of six a-side, and I’ll give the casting vote if it’s a tie. We’ll club together and buy, you shall have good honest value, and then you can go farther afield. There’s plenty for everybody, and the country’s open. If you don’t agree to that and elect to stay, you must side with us and keep the law. Now then, who says he’ll go?”

“None of us, jedge,” came in a slow drawl. “You’re right, and whether this is Murrican or Canady land, we all back you up.”

There was a deafening shout at this, and as soon as silence came again the dark man said firmly, “Now, gentlemen, to settle the business on hand. We’re not going to make the Yukon gold region a close borough.”

“That’s right, jedge,” said an American.

“Every honest man is welcome here, but we want it known that for the rowdy thief and law-breaker there will be a short shrift and the rope.”

There was another roar, and as it subsided the man with the red beard shouted, “That’s right, pardners, right as right; and what me and my mates here want is justice and protection from them as robbed us, and tried to shoot us down. There they are, three o’ the gang, and you’ve got ’em fast. Now what do you say?”

“THE TWO YOUNG MEN STOOD RIGID AND SILENT, EXPECTANT OF THE FATEFUL WORDS WHICH MIGHT BRING THEIR CAREERS TO A CLOSE.” [p. 189.

The two young men stood rigid and silent, expectant of the fateful words which might bring their careers to a close. They knew that wild appeals for mercy and loud protestation would be of no avail, but would be looked upon as arrant cowardice; and as the moments went on, heavy and leaden winged, a strange feeling of rebellion against the cruelty of fate raised a sense of anger, and stubborn determination began to grow.

It was too horrible to dwell upon, this prospect of the most ignominious death: an adverse judgment based on the vote of a crowd of rugged, determined men fighting for their own safety and the protection of the gold they were dragging from where it had lain since the creation of the world; but still it seemed to be their fate, and in both the growing feeling was the same—a sense of rage and hatred against the remorseless scoundrels who, to make their own position safe in the gold region, were ready to sacrifice the lives of their victims.

“If we could only be face to face with them alone,” they felt, “with the chance to fight against them for our lives! The cowards! The dogs!”

Their musings were brought to an end by the voice of the head man of the trio, who broke in upon the whispering together of the judge and several of the men who had closed round him. “Well, pardners,” he cried; “what’s it to be after all you’ve said? Are we to have fair play, or are we to go where we can get it?”

“Wait a bit, sir, and you and your friends shall have fair play; never fear.”

“Don’t be in a hurry,” shouted one of the Americans at the back. “Jedge don’t want to hang the wrong men.”

“No, sir,” said the dark gold-seeker sternly; “we don’t want to hang the wrong men, and there is a growing opinion here that you and your companions have not made out your charge.”

“What!” roared Redbeard, as the Cornishman gave his young companions a nod; “not made out our case? Hear that, mates? Well, I *am* blessed!”

“You charge them with robbery and attempted murder.”

“Yes; didn’t my mate show you his leg?” cried Redbeard indignantly.

“Oh, yes; and the prisoners, who defend themselves by charging you with attacking them, reply by displaying their wounds.”

“Well, wouldn’t you shoot if you was attacked? So where’s your justice?”

“I will show you that I want to give you fair play,” said the judge. “There is enough in this case to mean the sternest sentence, and it will be awarded to the guilty parties.”

There was a murmur of approval at this, and the judge said sternly, “Separate those three men, and separate the prisoners; keep them apart, so that they cannot communicate with one another.”

There was a quick movement, and a couple of armed men placed themselves right and left of Dallas and Abel.

“Hullo!” said the Cornishman, “am I a prisoner, too? All right; I’m in good company.”

But there was a little resistance on the part of the accusing party.

“Look here,” growled Redbeard fiercely, “I want to know what this means.”

“The rope and the tree for you and your friends if you fire, sir,” cried the judge sternly.

“But—”

“Stand where you are,” cried the judge. “Six of you take those other two outside, quite apart, and mind, you are answerable to your sheriff for bringing them back.”

Redbeard growled as he stood beneath the great lamp, the two others which had been burning having been turned out so that a better view could be had from behind of each stage of the proceedings.

“Look here,” cried Redbeard fiercely, as his companions were led out, “why aren’t the prisoners to be sent out too? Is this fair play, pardners?”

“Yes,” said the judge; “they are the prisoners. I only want your witnesses to be out of court.”

There was a dead silence while the two men were led away, and a ray of hope began to shed light through the darkness of despair in the young men’s brains, as they read in all this a strange desire on the part of their amateur judge to do justice between the parties.

They glanced round through the smoke of the gloomy place, to see fierce eyes fixed upon them on all sides, while in front there was the judge and his supporters, and their red-bearded, savage-looking accuser beneath the lamp, which shone full upon him. The smoke now hung above them in a dense cloud.

“Is it a dream?” said Dallas to himself; and then he started, for the judge said sharply to the man before him:

“Now, sir, you and your two friends have come here to dig gold.”

“That’s right, captain.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Washington territory.”

“That will do. Bring in the next witness.”

There was a suppressed buzz of excitement, while Redbeard stood glaring beneath the lamp, and the next man was led in.

“Now, sir, you are not sworn,” said the judge, “but consider that you are on your oath. It is a matter perhaps of life or death. Answer my questions. You and your friends came here to find gold?”

“That’s so, jedge.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Me and my mates? Noo York.”

“That will do. Silence!” cried the judge. “The next man. Keep those two well apart.”

The third man was led in, and the same questions asked him, when to the second he responded sharply:

“Chicago.”

There was a roar at this, but the judge held up his hand. “Silence, gentlemen, please, while I deliver judgment’” and a deep silence fell, while the three men glared meaningly one at the other. “I have given this a perfectly fair hearing, and I say—”

Crash!

The shivering of a lamp-glass, a burst of flame like a flash of lightning, as the lamp was dashed from where it hung; and then for a few moments intense darkness, while there was a sudden roar and rush for the entrance.

Chapter Nineteen.

To save a snarling cur.

The struggle was short, for the sides of the canvas building were frail; and as the flames ran swiftly up one side and the burning rags of the canvas roof began to fall upon the struggling crowd, a wave rushed against the opposite side, which gave way like so much paper, and the panting, half-stifled sufferers gained the cool fresh night air.

“Any one left within?” panted the judge; but the silence which followed was enough to indicate that all had escaped.

“Where are the other prisoners?”

“We are here—my cousin and I,” cried Abel, for they had made no attempt to escape.

“And the witnesses?” cried the judge. “I have the scoundrel who dashed down the lamp.”

“We have the other two here,” replied voices.

“Then, gentlemen,” said the judge, “I think we had better have another trial in the open air. What do you say to that as an attempt at wholesale murder? Come and help me here, some of you. I’ve got the big man down, but he’s as strong as a horse. I couldn’t have held him if I hadn’t thrown a biscuit-bag over his head.”

It was light for a few minutes while the canvas roof of the saloon burned; but as the woodwork was rapidly torn down and trampled out to save the so-called hotel, all was dark again, with a pungent smoke arising.

Two men were dragged into the circle which had formed round the judge, whose figure could be just made out as he kneeled between the shoulders of the man he had down; and Dallas and Abel stood close by, fascinated as it were, and feeling a thrill of horror as they thought of their enemies’ impending fate.

“It’s horrible, Dal,” whispered Abel. “I hate the brute, but I don’t want to see him hanged.”

“Then you’d better be off,” said a man who heard the remark, “for the beast will swing before many minutes are passed.”

“I don’t see why you two young fellows should care,” said another. “He was eager enough to get you hanged.”

“Have you made his wrists fast behind him?” said the judge out of the darkness.

“Yes; all right.”

“Let him get up, then. Here, landlord—squire—a lantern here.”

“Haven’t you had light enough, judge? What about my saloon?”

“All right, old fellow,” said a voice. “You hold plenty of our gold; we’ll club together to pay for a better one.”

“Thank ye, gentlemen. Hi! bring a lantern.”

At the same moment the prisoner rose to his feet, and the sack over his head was drawn off.

“I say, you know, I’ve come quietly,” he cried in a hoarse voice. “Here, put those pistols down. You haven’t served my two young chaps like that, have you?”

“Bob Tregelly?” cried Dallas and Abel in a breath.

“What’s left of him, my sons. They’ve ’most smothered me.”

“Hallo!” said the judge at the same moment. “I took you in the dark for that red-bearded fellow.”

“I was going for him when you pulled that bag over my head,” growled the Cornishman.

“Here, who has got that fellow?” roared the judge.

“We’ve got his mates,” came out of the darkness, and two men were dragged forward, struggling hard to get free.

“Here, what game do you call this?” snarled one of them, as soon as he could speak.

“Yes,” said the other. “You fools: you’ve got the wrong men.”

“I’m blessed! Ha, ha, ha!” roared the big Cornishman.

“You’ve never let those other two escape, have you?” roared the judge angrily.

“Well, you’ve let the big un go, judge, and caught me,” said the Cornishman merrily. “But I say, my son, who’s the guilty party now?”

“Not much doubt about that. There, my lads, it’s of no use to go after them; they’ve done us this time, and got away; but I think we may keep the ropes ready for them when they come again.”

“Hear, hear!” was roared, and an ovation followed for the trio who had been suspected, every man present seeming as if he could not make enough of them, till they managed to slip away to their tent.

“I think a quiet pipe’ll do me good after all that business,” said Tregelly. “We’ve done about enough for one day. Rum sort o’ life, my sons. I shall be glad to get steadily to work as soon as we know where to begin.”

The canvas was fastened down soon after, and the occupants of the rough tent prepared for a good night’s rest; but it was a long time in coming to the cousins, whose nerves had been too much jarred for them to follow the example of their three companions. And they lay listening to the many sounds about, principal among which was the barking and fighting of the sledge-dogs; but at last they dropped into a troubled slumber, one in which it seemed to Dallas that he was lying upon his hard waterproof sheet in a nightmare-like dream, watching his enemy, the red-bearded man, who was crawling on hands and knees to the rough tent, with a knife between his teeth, and trying to force his way under the end of one of the sledges to get to him and pin him to the earth.

There he was, coming nearer and nearer, right into the tent place now, while his hot breath fanned the dreamer’s cheek, and his hands were resting upon his chest as if feeling for a vital spot to strike. With a tremendous effort, Dallas sprang up and struck at him, when there was a loud snarling yelp, and Abel cried in alarm, “What is it, Dal?”

“Dog,” said Tregelly, “smelling after grub. The poor brutes seem half starved. Hasn’t taken a bit out of either of you, has he? Good-night, my sons; I was dreaming I’d hit upon heaps of gold.”

Dallas sank back with a sigh of relief, and dropped off into a restful sleep, which lasted till morning, when they were aroused by a terrific sound of cracking as of rifles, mingled with a peculiar roar, and a strange rushing sound.

“What is it?” cried Abel, who was one of the first to spring up; “an earthquake?”

“Like enough, my son,” said Tregelly. “I’m ready for anything here. Sounds like the mountains playing at skittles.”

“She’s going at last,” cried a voice outside. “By jingo! it’s fine. Come and look.”

“It’s the ice breaking up,” cried Dallas excitedly.

“Then we will go and look,” said Tregelly, “though that chap wasn’t speaking to us.” And, no dressing being necessary, all hurried out, to find that the fettered Yukon was completely changed, the ice being all in motion, splitting up, grinding, and crushing, and with blocks being forced up one over the other till they toppled down with a roar, to help in breaking up those around.

The previous evening it would have been possible for a regiment to cross the river by climbing over and among the great blocks which were still frozen together, but now it would have been certain death for the most active man to attempt the first fifty yards.

Every one was out in the bright sunny morning watching the breaking up; and among the first they encountered were the judge, of the last night’s episode, and their friend the gold-finder, both of whom shook hands heartily, but made no allusion to the trial. “Good job for every one,” said the judge; “we shall soon be having boats up after this. We shall be clear here in a couple of days.”

“So soon?” said Dallas.

“Oh, yes,” replied his informant. “There’s a tremendous body of water let loose up above, and it runs under the ice, lifts it, and makes the ice break up; and once it is set in motion it is always grinding smaller, till, long before it reaches the sea, it has become powder, and then water again.”

“I say,” cried the miner, “there’s some one’s dog out yonder. He’s nipped by the legs, and it’s about all over with him, I should say.”

“Here, stop! What are you going to do?” cried the judge.

But Dallas did not hear him. He had been one of the first to see the perilous position of a great wolfish-looking hound some twenty yards from the shore, where it was struggling vainly, prisoned as it was, uttering a faint yelp every now and then, and gazing piteously at the spectators on the bank.

“The lad’s mad,” cried the judge, going closer to the ice.

But, mad or no, Dallas had, in his ignorance of the great danger of the act, run down, boldly leaped on the moving ice, and stepped from block to block till he reached the dog, which began to whine and bark loudly, as it made frantic efforts to free its hindquarters. In another minute it would have been drawn down farther, but for the coming of the young man, who, heedless of the rocking and gliding motion of the ice, strode the narrow opening between the two masses which held the dog, stooping down at the same moment, and seizing the poor brute by the rough hair about its neck.

For a few moments his effort seemed vain, and a roar of voices reached him, as the spectators shouted to him to come back.

Then the two pieces swayed slightly, and gradually drew apart, and the dog was at liberty, but apparently with one leg crushed, for it lay down, howling dismally after an effort to limp back to the land.

There was a great strap round its neck, and this was joined to another just behind its shoulders, and, seizing this, Dallas flung the poor animal on its side and dragged it after him as he began to step cautiously back from block to

block, now sinking down, now rising, and now narrowly escaping being caught between the moving pieces; but he kept on, conscious, though, that the bank seemed rising upward; while the crushing and roar of the breaking ice prevented him from hearing the words of advice shouted by his friends.

He could not hear, but he could see Bel, who was forcing his way through the crowd to keep alongside, ready to help him when he came within reach, if ever he did, and it was from him that he afterwards learned that the advice shouted was to let the dog take his chance.

Twice over the set of the ice was off the shore, and matters looked bad for the young adventurer, but he stuck to the dog, and, just when the chance of reaching the shore seemed most hopeless, a couple of large flat floes rose up, and, making a dash, Dallas went boldly across them, reaching others that did not yield so much, and the next minute there was a cheer which he could hear, for he reached the shore with the dog, which looked up in his face and whined, and then limped off through the crowd.

“Life seems cheap your way, my fine fellow,” said the judge. “Five minutes ago I wouldn’t have given a grain of gold for yours. We don’t do that sort of thing out here for the sake of a vicious, thieving dog.”

“I could not stand by and see the poor brute die,” said Dallas quietly.

“So it seems,” said the judge. “Well, I congratulate you two young fellows on your escape last night. Those scoundrels have got away; and if they turn up again, lawyer though I am, I should advise you both to shoot on sight. If you are brought before me, I’ll promise you I will bring it in justifiable homicide.”

A couple of hours later they had parted from Tregelly and his companions, with a hearty shake of the hand and a promise to keep to their agreement about the gold.

“If we discover a good place.”

Chapter Twenty.

Norton’s idea of a good spot.

It was a long, weary tramp up by the higher waters of the huge Yukon River towards its sources in the neighbourhood of the Pelly Lakes, where sharp rapids and torrents were succeeded by small, shallow lakes; and wherever they halted, shovel and pan were set to work, and, as their guide Norton termed it, the granite and sand were tasted, and gold in exceedingly small quantities was found.

“It’s so ’most everywhere,” said Norton; “and I don’t say but what you might find a rich spot at any time; but if you take my advice you’ll come straight on with me to where a few of us are settled down. It’s regularly into the wilds. I don’t suppose even an Indian has been there before; but we chaps went up.”

“But there are Indians about, I suppose?” said Abel.

“Mebbe, but I haven’t seen any.”

The end of their journey was reached at last, high up the creek they had followed, and, save here and there in sheltered rifts, the snow was gone; the brief summer was at hand, and clothing the stones with flowers and verdure that were most refreshing after the wintry rigours through which they had forced their way.

“Nice and free and open, eh?” said Norton, smiling. “I may as well show you to the comrades up here, and then I’ll help you pick out a decent claim, and you can set to work. There’s only about a dozen of us here yet, and so you won’t be mobbed.”

“Very well,” said Dallas; “but we’ll try in that open space where the trees are so young.”

Norton nodded, and, armed with a shovel and pan, the young men stepped to a spot about fifty feet from the edge of the rushing stream, cleared away the green growth among the young pines, and Dallas tried to drive down his shovel through the loose, gravelly soil; but the tool did not penetrate four inches.

“Why, it’s stone underneath.”

“Ice,” said Norton, smiling. “It hasn’t had time to thaw down far yet; but you skin off some of the gravelly top, and try it.”

Dallas filled the pan, and they went together to a shallow place by the side of the creek, bent down, and, with the pan just beneath the surface, agitated and stirred it, the water washing away the thick muddy portion till nothing was left but sand and stones.

These latter were picked out and thrown away; more washing followed, more little stones were thrown out, and at last there was nothing but a deposit of sand at the bottom, in which gleamed brightly some specks and scales of bright yellow gold.

Norton finished his pipe, and then led the way farther up the stream, to stop at last by a rough pine-wood shed thatched with boughs.

“This is my mansion,” he said. “Leave the sledges here, and we’ll go and see the rest.”

The stream turned and twisted about here in a wonderful way, doubling back upon itself, and spreading about over a space of three or four miles along the winding valley where the tiny mining settlement had been pitched—only some six or seven huts among the dwarfed pine-trees in all, the places being marked by fallen trees and stumps protruding from the ground.

They were all made on the same pattern, of stout young pine-trees with ridge-pole and rafters to support a dense thatching of boughs, and mostly with a hole left in the centre of the roof for the smoke of the fire burned within to escape.

The two strangers were received in a friendly enough way, the rough settlers chatting freely about the new-comers' prospects, showing specimens of the gold they had found, and making suggestions about the likeliest spot for marking out a claim along the bank.

The result was that before the day ended, acting a good deal under Norton's advice, the young men had marked out a double claim and settled where their hut should be set up, so as to form a fresh addition to the camp.

"You ought to do well here," said Norton. "There's gold worth millions of money in this district for certain; but the question is, can you strike it rich or only poor? If I thought I could do better somewhere else I should go, but I'm going to try it fairly here."

"We'll do the same," said Dallas; and, the weather being brilliant and the air exhilarating to a degree, they set to work cutting pegs for driving down to make out their claim, Norton reminding them that they would have certain applications to make afterwards to the government agency, and then began to cut down small trees for building their shanty.

To their surprise and delight, four of the neighbours came, axe-armed, to help, so that the task was made comparatively easy.

At the end of a week a rough, strong, habitable home was made, door, window, shutter and bars included, two of their helpers having come provided with a pit-saw for cutting the bigger pine-trunks up into rough boards, which were to be paid for out of the first gold winnings the young men made.

Within another week they were out of debt, for, to their intense delight, the claim promised well, the shaft they had commenced and the banks of the little river yielding enough gold to set them working every minute they could see.

But the reality did not come up to the dazzling dream in which they had indulged, either in their case or that of the men they encountered. There was the gold, and they won it from the soil; but it was only by hard labour and in small quantities, which were stored up in a leathern bag and placed in the bank—this being a hole formed under Abel's bed, covered first with a few short pieces of plank, and then with dry earth.

The store increased as the time went on, but then it decreased when an expedition had to be made to the settlement below to fetch more provisions, the country around supplying them with plenty of fuel and clear drinking water, but little else. Now and then there was the rumour of a moose being seen, and a party would turn out and shoot it, when there was feasting while it lasted; but these days were few.

Occasionally, too, either Dallas or Abel would stroll round with his gun and get a few ptarmigan or willow grouse. On lucky days, too, a brace of wild ducks would fall to their shot; but these excursions were rare, for there was the one great thirst to satisfy—that for the gold; and for the most part their existence during the brief summer was filled up by hard toil, digging and cradling the gold-bearing gravel, while they lived upon coarse bacon, beans, and ill-made cakey bread, tormented horribly the while by the mosquitoes, which increased by myriads in the sunny time.

Then came the days when the wretched little insect pests began to grow rarer.

"We shall not be able to work as late as this much longer," said Dallas.

"No," replied Abel; "the days are getting horribly short, and the nights terribly long. The dark winter will be upon us directly, and we seem to get no farther."

"We may turn up trumps at any moment, old fellow," said Dallas cheerily.

"Yes, we may," said Abel gloomily.

"Don't take it like that," cried Dallas. "Here we are in the gold region, and every day we find nuggets."

"Weighing two or three grains apiece."

"Exactly; but at any moment we might at a turn of the shovel lay them bare weighing ounces or even pounds."

"Pigs might fly," said Abel.

"Bah! Where's your pluck? Work away."

"A BIG BURLY FIGURE HAD COME INTO SIGHT, AND STOOD SCANNING THE RETREATING PAIR." [p. 213.

"Oh, yes, I'll work," said Abel; "but with the dreary winter coming on one can't help feeling a bit depressed. I say, I'm very glad we never sent a message to old Tregelly and his mates to come and join us."

"Well, it would have turned out rather crusty," said Dallas, who was shovelling gravel into the cradle, while Abel stood over his ankle in the stream, rocking away and stopping from time to time to pick out some tiny speck of gold.

"We shall never make our fortunes at this," he said.

"Bah! Don't be in a hurry. At all events, we are in safety. No fear of dangerous visitors, and— Here, quick—the hut—your rifle, man! Run!"

Abel sprang to the shore, to be seized by the arm, and they ran for their weapons and shelter.

None too soon, for a big burly figure had come into sight from among the pines, stopped short, and brought down his rifle, as he stood shading his eyes and scanning the retreating pair.

Chapter Twenty One.

Tregelly seeks his sons.

"Ahoy, there! What cheer, O!" rang out in a big bluff voice familiar to both.

"Oh, I say, what curs we are!" cried Dallas. "It's old Tregelly."

"Yes; don't let him know we were scared."

Vain advice. The big Cornishman shouldered his rifle, bent forward, and dragged a sledge into sight, broke into a trot, and they met half-way.

"Hullo, my sons! Did you take me for an Injun?" cried Tregelly.

"We took you for that big, red-bearded ruffian," said Dallas huskily, as he shook hands.

"Thankye, my son; on'y don't do it again. I don't like the compliment. But how are you?—how are you?"

"Oh, middling. We were just thinking about you."

"Were you, my sons?" cried the big Cornishman, smiling all over his broad face. "That's right. Well, I was thinking about you, and wondering whether I should find you, and here you are first go."

"But how did you find us?" cried Dallas, after shaking hands warmly.

"Went back to Yukon Town a fortni't ago, and the chap there at the hotel told me you were still up here, for one of you came down now and then to buy stores."

"Did you see the judge?"

"Oh, yes, he's there still."

"Made his pile?"

"No-o-o! Done pretty tidy, I believe."

"And what about Redbeard and Company? Heard anything of that firm?"

"Yes; heard that they'd been seen by somebody, my son. There'd been a poor fellow done for up the country, and some gold carried off. They got the credit of it; but give a dog a bad name and—you know the rest. I should say

they're all dead by now."

"But why didn't you send for us?" said Abel.

"Why didn't you send for me?"

"Well," said Dallas drily, "it was out of good fellowship. We were afraid it would be more than you could bear to get so rich. But where are your comrades?"

"Gone home," said Tregelly, in a tone of voice that the two young men took to mean, "Don't ask questions!"

"But you've found a lot?" said Dallas.

"Well, yes, my sons; we managed to scrape a good deal together, some here and some there, for we changed about and travelled over a good deal of ground."

"And you have sent it home?"

"Nay–y–ay! I've got it here on the sledge."

"Oh!" said Abel, looking at the shabby kit their visitor had left close to the door of the hut.

"I've got a bit in a bag; but, you see, it costs all you can scrape together to live wherever I've been; so I thought I'd look you two up, as my mates had gone, so as to be company for a poor little lonely chap. Will you have me?"

"Of course."

"Any chance of picking up a decent claim here?"

"Plenty, such as we have," replied Dallas. "You'll be able to do as well as we've done, and the others about here."

"That means the lumps of gold are not too big to lift?"

"That's it," said Dallas. "I've been thinking that if we were here next summer, we ought to get a lot of ants and train them to carry the grains for us."

"Ah, I see, my sons. I say, one might almost have made as much by stopping at home, eh?"

"Here, don't you come here to begin croaking," cried Dallas. "Abel here can do that enough for a dozen."

"Can he?" cried Tregelly. "Oh, you mustn't do that, my son. There's plenty of gold if we can only find it. I saw a chap with a gashly lump as big as a baby's fist. We'll do it yet. So you haven't done much good, then?"

"If we had we should have sent word for you to come."

"And I should have sent or come for you, my sons. Look here, we'd better make a change, and explore higher up towards the mountains."

"Too late this year," said Dallas decisively.

"Oh, yes; too late this season, my sons. We mustn't get too far from the supplies. Means—you know what! famine and that sort o' thing."

"Yes, we know," said Abel bitterly.

"We'll do it when the days begin to lengthen again," continued Tregelly. "What we've got to do is to make as big a heap here as we can during the winter, wash it out in the spring, and if it's good enough, then stop here. If it aren't, go and find a better place."

"Yes, that's right," said Dallas. "But about rations. There's nothing to be got here. Have you brought plenty?"

"Much as ever I could pull, my sons, and I'll take it kindly if you'll let me camp with you to-night, so that I can leave my swag with you while I hunt out a claim."

"Of course," cried Dallas; "we'll help you all we can."

"There's that pitch down yonder, Dal," said Abel—"the one we said looked likely."

"Of course; the place we tried, and which seemed fairly rich."

"That sounds well," said Tregelly. What was more, it looked so well that the big fellow decided to stay there at once, and put in his pegs, the only drawback seeming to be its remoteness from the scattered claims of the others up the creek.

But this did not trouble the big Cornishman in the least. With the help freely given by his two friends, pines were cut down, a hut knocked together, and many days had not elapsed before he was working away, and looking as much at home as if he had been there all the season, declaring when they met after working hours that it was much better than anything he and his companions had come across during their travels.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A night alarm.

“There’s a deal in make-believe, Bel, old chap,” said Dallas one day, as they sat together in their rough hut of fir-trunks, brooding over the fire lit in the centre of the floor, the blinding smoke from which escaped slowly out of an opening in the roof, when the fierce wind did not drive it back in company with the fine sharp snow, which was coming down in a regular blizzard.

“Oh, yes, a deal, if you have any faith,” said Abel bitterly; “but mine’s all dead.”

“Gammon!” cried Dallas. “You’re out of sorts, and that makes you disposed to find fault. But I must confess that during this blizzardly storm the Castle hall is a little draughty. These antique structures generally are.”

“Months and months of wandering, slavery and misery, and to come to this!”

“Yes, you are not at your best, old man. How’s the foot?”

“Rotting off as a frozen member will.”

“My dear Bel, you want a tonic!” said Dallas cheerily.

“Think you will be able to live through this awful winter, Dal?”

“Live! I should think we will,” said the young man, carefully picking up and laying some of the half-burned brands on the centre of the crackling fire. “So will you.”

“No, I shall never see home again.”

“Bel, you’re a lazy beggar, with a natural dislike to cold,” said Dallas. “It always was so, and you always used to have the worst chilblains, and turn grumpy when they itched and burned. You don’t make the best of things, old chap.”

“No, Dal, I haven’t got your spirit. How many days longer will that meal last?”

“That depends, dear boy, on whether we are frugal, or go on banqueting and gorging.”

“It is dreadfully low, isn’t it?”

“Well, the supply is not great, but there is a morsel of bacon and a frozen leg-bone of our share of the moose, whose roasted marrow will be delicious. No; the larder is not well stocked, but the supply of fuel is unlimited, and we have our gigantic bag of gold in the bank cellar.”

“Curse the gold!”

“No, I will not do that, my dear boy, because, you see, I can take out a handful, tramp down to the store, and come back laden with corn and wine and delicacies in the shape of bacon and tinned meat.”

“Dal, it’s of no use; we must give up and go back.”

“No, we must not, old chap; and even if I said the same, we couldn’t get away this winter time.”

“You could. I’m doomed—I’m doomed!”

“Here, I say,” cried Dallas, “don’t begin making quotations.”

“Quotations?”

“Yes; that’s what the despairing old chap says in Byron’s comedy, ‘I’m doomed—I’m doomed!’ and the other fellow says, ‘Don’t go on like that; it sounds like swearing when it ain’t.’”

“Dal,” cried Abel passionately, “how can you be so full of folly when we are in such a desperate state?”

“Because I believe in ‘Never say die!’” cried the young man cheerily. “You are cold, man. Allow me, my lord, to spread this purple robe gracefully over your noble shoulders to keep off the draught. I say, Bel, these blankets are getting jolly black.”

“Thanks, Dal.”

“And with your lordship’s permission I will hang this piece of tapestry over the doorway to enhance the warmth of the glow within. Haven’t got a couple of tenpenny nails in your pocket, have you? Never mind; these pegs’ll hold it up. Whoo! it does blow. We shall be quite buried in the snow by morning.”

“Yes, once more,” said Abel gloomily.

“So much the warmer for it, Bel, and save the wood. I say, old chap, we ought to be thankful that we have such a snug den. It would be death to any one to be out to-night.”

“Yes; and they would have ceased hunting for that golden myth, and be at rest.”

“Well, you are a cheerful chap to-night! I say, I wonder what has become of old ‘My son,’—Tregelly, the Cornishman?”

“Dead or broken-hearted over this weary search.”

“Dead? Why, that fellow wouldn’t die a bit. Broken-hearted? His heart’s made of stuff much too tough. He’ll turn up some day to tell us he has made a big find.”

“Never. He’s dead by now.”

“Don’t you prophesy until after the event.”

“Dal,” said Abel, as he sat, gaunt of visage, darkened by exposure, and totally different from the bright, eager fellow of a few months earlier.

“Yes?”

“You will not go away and leave me?”

“I must, old fellow. The coals for the human grate are nearly out, and I must fetch some more.”

“If you go you will find me dead when you come back. To die alone! Horrible!”

“Nonsense! Old Norton will come in every day and have a look at you if I ask him. He’s a good old chap, Bel; I wish he had had better luck. I say, though, this is a rum game. You and I are now living in this rough dog-kennel, and bad as our luck has been, we have been turning out gold at the rate of, say, five hundred a year. Not bad that for beginners.”

“And it takes all we get to barter for the wretched food,” groaned Abel. “The prices are horrible.”

“Well, things are dear, and bad at that, as our American friends say. But we only have to double our turn-in and we shall grow rich.”

The wind was whistling and shrieking about the lonely cabin, the tattered blanket over the rough wood doorway was blown in, and the smoke eddied about the corners of the tent as a quantity of snow came through the opening, and made the fire hiss angrily.

“It won’t take me long, old fellow,” said Dallas; “and, by the way, I had better buy a tin of powder and some cartridges. Think you’ll be well enough to-morrow to clean and oil the guns while I’m down the shaft?”

“I’ll try; but the shaft will be full of drifted snow.”

“If it is, I’ll drift it out.”

“What’s that?” cried Abel, as a faintly heard howl came from the distance.

“Sounds like wolves. No dog would be out in a night like this.”

“Think they will come here and attack us?”

“Don’t know. I hope so.”

“What!” cried Abel, with a horrified look.

“Give me a chance to do a little shooting if they come in at the chimney hole. Glad of a bit of sport. Supply us with some fresh meat, too.”

“What, eat wolf?”

“My dear Bel, I get so hungry that I would eat anything now. But they may taste good. Wolf’s a kind of dog; they eat dog in China, and I’ve heard that the bargees do so on the Thames.”

“What?”

“Don’t you remember the chaff at Oxford—the fellows asking the bargees, ‘Who ate puppy pie under Marlow Bridge?’”

“There it is again.”

“Then I’ll take the guns out of the cases if they come nearer. They’ll be able to walk up the snow slope right on to the roof.”

But the sounds died away, and Dallas opened a tin and took out a couple of pieces of roughly made damper, whose crust was plentifully marked with wood ashes.

“I can’t eat,” said Abel.

“I can, and I’ll set you an example. Sorry there is no Strasburg pie or other delicacy to tempt you; and the cook is out, or she should grill you some grouse.”

Abel sat nursing his piece of unappetising bread, while Dallas rapidly disposed of his, the smaller piece.

They had been sitting in silence for some time, with Dallas gazing wistfully at his companion.

“Try and eat the damper, old fellow,” he said. “You must have food.”

“I can’t, Dal. I say, how much gold is there in the hole?”

“I daresay there’s five-and-twenty ounces.”

“You must take it, and contrive to get away from here, Dal,” said Abel suddenly.

“And you?”

“Get back home again. She’ll break her heart if she loses us both.”

Thud!

There was a heavy blow at the rough door, and then another.

“Norton come to look us up,” whispered Dallas.

“No; he would not knock like that,” whispered back Abel—needlessly, for the roar of the storm would have made the voices inaudible outside.

There was another blow on the door as if something had butted against it, and then a scratching on the rough wood.

“A bear?” whispered Dallas, rising softly. “Be quiet. Bear’s meat is good, but a bear would not be out on a night like this.”

There was another blow, and then a piteous, whining howl.

“A dog, by Jove!” cried Dallas. “Then his master must be in trouble in the snow.”

“Dal, it would be madness to go out in this storm. It means death.”

Dallas did not reply, but lifted the blanket, from which a quantity of fine snow dropped, and took down the great wooden bar which, hanging in two rough mortices, formed its fastening.

“DALLAS THRUST THE DOOR TO AND STARED AT THE OBJECT BEFORE THEM.” [p. 231.

As he drew the door inward a little, there was a rush of snow and wind, and the fire roared as the sparks and ashes were wafted about the place, threatening to fire the two rough bed-places; and with the drifting fine snow a great lump forced its way in through the narrow crack, rushing towards the blaze, uttering a dismal howl.

Dallas thrust the door to and stared at the object before them, one of the great Eskimo dogs, with its thick coat so matted and covered with ice and snow that the hairs seemed finished off with icicles, which rattled as the poor brute moved.

“Hullo, here!” cried Dallas. “Where’s your master?”

The dog looked at him intelligently, then opened its mouth and howled.

“Come along, then. Seek, seek.”

The young man made for the door as if to open it, but the dog crept closer to the fire, crouched down, and howled more dismally than before.

“Well, come and find him, then. Your master. Here, here! Come along.”

The dog lifted its head, looked at the glowing fire, and then at first one and then the other, howled again, and made an effort to raise itself, but fell over.

“What’s he mean by that, poor brute? He’s as weak as a rat. What is it, then, old fellow?” cried Dallas, bending down to pat him. “Why, the poor brute’s a mere skeleton.”

The dog howled once more, struggled up, and fell over sideways.

“He doesn’t act as if any one was with him,” said Abel.

The dog howled again, made a fresh effort, and this time managed to sit up on his hindquarters, and drooped his fore-paws, opening his great mouth and lolling out the curled-up tongue.

“Starving—poor wretch!” said Dallas. “No, no, Bel, don’t. It’s the last piece of the bread.”

“I can’t eat it,” replied Abel. “Let the poor brute have it. I can’t see it suffer like that.”

He broke up the cake and threw it piece after piece, each being snapped up with avidity, till there was no more, when the poor brute whined and licked Bel’s hand, and then turned, crawled nearer to the fire, laid his great rough head across Dallas’s foot, and lay blinking up at him, with the ice and snow which matted his dense coat melting fast.

“Poor beggar!” said Dallas. “He has been having a rough time.”

The dog whined softly, and the unpleasant odour of burning hair began to fill the place as his bushy tail was swept once into the glowing embers.

“Give him part of the moose bone, Dal,” said Abel.

“If this blizzard keeps on we have only that to depend on, old fellow. I want to help the dog, but I must think of you.”

“Give it up,” said Abel gloomily, as he laid a hand on his bandaged foot. “Give him what there is, and then let him lie down and die with us. The golden dream is all over now. Look! the poor brute just managed to struggle here. He’s dying.”

“No, settling down to sleep in the warm glow. Look how the water runs from his coat.”

“Dying,” said Abel positively. And the poor brute’s actions seemed to prove that the last speaker was right, for he lay whining more and more softly, blinking at the fire with his eyes half-closed, and a shiver kept on running through him, while once when he tried to rise he uttered a low moan and fell over on to his side.

“Is he dead, Dal?” said Abel hoarsely.

His cousin bent over the dog and laid his hand upon his throat, with the result that there was a low growling snarl and the eyes opened to look up, but only to close again, and the bushy tale tapped the floor a few times.

“Knows he is with friends, poor fellow!” said Dallas. “But he did not show much sense in coming to Starvation Hall.”

“It was the fire that attracted him.”

“Perhaps,” said Dallas. “But I have a sort of fancy that we have met before.”

“What!” cried Abel, brightening up, “you don’t think—”

“Yes, I do. Did you notice that the poor brute limped with one of his hind-legs?”

“Yes, but—oh, impossible. A dog would not know you again like that. You mean the one you saved from the ice.”

“Yes, I do; but we shall see by daylight, such as it is. I say, though, if we do get home again, you and I, after our experience of this Arctic place, ought to volunteer for the next North Pole expedition.”

Abel heaved a deep sigh.

“Look here, old fellow; you were brightening up, now you are going back again. Let’s go to bed and have a good long sleep in the warm. What about the dog?”

“Yes, what about him?”

“I suppose we mustn’t turn him out again on a night like this.”

“Impossible.”

“But you know what these brutes are. He’ll be rousing up and eating our candles and belts—anything he can get hold of; but I suppose we must risk it.”

The door now being rattled loudly by the tremendous wind, was once more made secure, the blanket replaced, and then, after well making up the fire with a couple of heavy logs, the weary pair were about to creep into their skin sleeping-bags when they were startled into full wakefulness again, for a fierce gust seemed to seize and shake the hut, and then, as the wind went roaring away, there was a wild moaning cry, and a sharp report from close at hand.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Begging your bread in golden days.

“It is the dog’s master, Bel,” whispered Dallas, springing to the door and beginning to unfasten it, just as the dog raised his head and whined dismally.

The disposition was there to help, and as soon as he could get the door open, Dallas dashed out into the whirling snow, which rushed in blinding eddies about the hut, while Abel, awestricken and panting, clung to the post and tried to pierce the black darkness.

“It is madness. It means death,” he groaned to himself.

Even as the thought crossed his mind Dallas staggered back, to stand panting and wiping the snow from his eyes.

Then he dashed out again, but was beaten back breathless and exhausted.

Again he tried, for Abel had not the heart to stay him, and a good ten minutes elapsed—minutes of anxiety to the watcher, which seemed like hours—before his companion was literally driven in again, to fall completely exhausted upon the floor.

“I can’t do it, Bel,” he said at last feebly. “I never thought the wind and snow could be like this. It’s death to go out there, and I felt that I should never get back again.”

He struggled to his feet once more and made for the door, but Abel seized him by the arm and tried to shut out the blinding snow, which had given the interior of the hut the appearance of winter, and after a hard struggle the door was closed.

“Bel, that biggest tree at the side is split right down, and half has fallen this way,” said Dallas breathlessly. “It must have been that we heard. I fell over it as I tried to find the door.”

“You shall not go again,” said Abel.

“I cannot,” replied Dallas sadly; “but I feel sure now that no one is asking for help.”

The hours passed and the fire was made up again and again, while towards morning the storm lulled.

The dog lay perfectly still; but he was not dead when Dallas roused himself up to examine him, for he feebly rapped the floor with his tail.

Abel had sunk into the sleep of utter weariness, and Dallas let him lie as he replenished the fire, opened the door softly, plunged through the snow, and, as well as the darkness would allow, satisfied himself that he was right about the riven tree. “It was very horrible to think, though,” he said to himself; “but no one could have been travelling on such a night.”

He returned to the hut, replenished the fire, and the billy was boiling ready for its pinch of tea, and the newly made cake baking, by the time Abel opened his eyes and sighed.

“What a useless log I am, Dal,” he said.

“Are you?”

“Yes, I lie here doing nothing. How is the dog?”

“Quite dry and fluffy.”

“But he is not dead?”

“No; but are we to give him house room?”

“Could we turn him out into the snow?”

Dallas began to whistle softly, and turned the cake on the round iron pan which answered for many purposes. “It’s the same dog, Bel,” he said at last.

“Then the intelligent beast has tracked us out.”

“Been a long time about it.”

“Dogs are very grateful creatures.”

“Rum way of showing his gratitude to come and sponge upon two poor fellows who are half starving. Meal bag’s

awfully low."

"You must try for something with the gun. What's the weather like this morning?"

"Dark and cold, but clear starlight, and a sprinkle of fresh snow on the ground."

"A sprinkle?"

"Yes; three feet deep outside the door."

"Have you been out?"

"Yes; and found I was right about the tree. There must have been lightning, I think. I'm glad it was that."

"Yes. I wonder how old Tregelly has got on. It's very lonely where he is."

"So it is here."

"How snug the fire looks, Dal!" said Abel, after a pause.

"Yes; cheery, isn't it? Cake smells good. How does the foot feel?"

"Not so painful this morning after the rest. But, Dal!"

"Well?"

"I lay thinking last night after you had gone to sleep, and you really must not go down to the town."

"Must, old chap."

"No, no; don't leave me."

"But you'll have company now—the dog."

"Go round when it's daylight, and try what stores you can get from the men round us."

"It isn't reasonable, Bel. Every one is as short as we are."

"Starving Englishmen are always ready to share with their brothers in distress."

"Yes; but their brothers in distress who are strong and well, and who have enough gold to buy food, have too much conscience to rob them."

"How much longer can we hold out?"

"I don't know," said Dallas, "and I don't want to know. Stores are getting terribly low, and that's near enough for me. But what do you say to the dog?"

"Poor brute! We must keep him."

"I meant killing and eating him."

"No, you didn't. Dal, I'm better this morning; the coming of that poor dog like a fellow-creature in distress seems to have cheered me up."

"That's right. Then, as a reward, I will wait a few days and go round cadging."

"No—buying."

"The fellows won't sell. They will only let us have some as a loan."

"Very well, then; get what you can as a loan, Dal."

"All right; but I know what it will be wherever I go: 'We can let you have some tobacco, old man; we've scarcely anything else.'"

"Never mind; try."

Dallas threw a few small pieces of wood on the fire to make a blaze and light up the rough place, and then the breakfast was partaken of. Not a very substantial meal: milkless tea, with very stodgy hot cake, made with musty meal; but to the great delight of Dallas, his companion in misfortune partook thereof with some show of appetite, and then sat looking on without a word while Dallas took one of their gold-washing pans, poured in some meal, took a piece of split firewood, and stirred with one hand while he poured hot water in from the billy with the other.

Neither spoke, but their thoughts were in common, and as soon as the hot mash had cooled a little, the cook turned to the dog.

"Now then, rough un," he cried, "as you have invited yourself to bed and breakfast, here is your mess, and you'd better eat it and go."

The dog opened his eyes, looked at him wistfully, and beat the floor again, but he made no effort to rise.

“Poor brute! He is weak, Bel. Here, let’s help you.”

Passing his arm under the dog’s neck, he raised him a little so that he could place the shallow tin of steaming food beneath his muzzle; but the only result was a low whine, and a repetition of the movement of the tail.

At last, though, the eyes opened, and the poor brute sniffed, and began to eat very slowly, pausing now and then to whine before beginning again, till at last the effect of the hot mess seemed magical, and the latter half was eaten with avidity, the tin being carefully licked clean.

A few minutes later the dog was asleep again, but in a different attitude, for he had, after a few efforts, curled himself up as close to the fire as he could get without burning, his muzzle covered over by his bushy tail.

“Dallas Adams, Esquire, gold medal from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Bow from Dallas Adams, Esquire, and loud cheers from the audience at the annual meeting.”

“And well deserved,” said Abel, smiling. “Oh, I wish I had your spirits.”

“Get your frozen foot well, and then you will,” was the reply. “Look here, I’ll take a sack and go begging at once, and then come back and get in some wood, for there will not be time to work in the shaft, only get out the snow.”

“Go on, then, and you will succeed.”

“Doubtful,” was the reply.

Soon after, Dallas, with a sack fastened across one shoulder like a scarf, and his gun over his shoulder, opened the door. “Cheer up, old chap!” he cried. “I shan’t be long,” and forcing his way out, he closed the door, plunged forward, and struggled waist deep through the snow which had drifted up against the hut.

Farther on it lay less heavy, and pausing for a few moments to take a look round beneath the starlit sky, he made his way along the border of the creek—carefully on the look-out for pine-stumps, the remains of the dense scrub which had been cut down by the gold-seekers—in the direction of one of the lights dotting the creek here and there, those nearest being lanterns, but farther on a couple of fires were burning.

“Morning, mate,” said a cheery voice, as he came upon two men busily shovelling snow from a pit beneath a rough shelter of poles, while a hut was close by. “You’ve got plenty of this, I s’pose?”

“Nearly buried. I say, we’re awfully short of meal and bacon. Can you sell us some?”

The two men leaned on their shovels.

“We’re so desp’rate low ourselves, mate,” said the one who had not spoken. “We don’t like to say no. But look here, go and try round the camp and see what you can do. Some of them’s a deal better off than we are. Get it of them. If you can’t, come back here and we’ll do what we can. Eh, mate?”

“Of course,” came in a growl; “but no humbug, Mr Adams.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, this. When it comes to eating we, as it says in the song, you must play fair and draw lots with the rest of us.”

“Never fear,” said Dallas merrily, joining in the laugh; “but we’ve got the dogs to eat first if we can’t get any moose. There ought to be some tracks seen after this.”

“So plaguy dark, mate, for hunting and shooting; but talk about dogs, did you hear that brute howling during the storm?”

“Oh, yes, I heard him,” said Dallas.

“He soon gave in, though. I believe some of the others hunted him down and didn’t stop to draw lots. What hungry beggars they are!”

Dallas trudged on slowly, calling at claim after claim on his way down the creek, but always with the same result—friendly willingness, but want of means.

Then he reached the spot where one of the fires had been burning, but which had died out, nothing being left but wood, smoke, and steam, while two men were scraping away the snow from a heap while they waited till a shaft about six feet deep beneath a roofed shed was cool enough to descend.

“Morning, mate,” was his salutation. “Nearly got our roof on fire. Were you coming to help?”

“No, to ask for help,” said Dallas, and he made his request.

One of the men went to the edge of the pit and descended a roughly made ladder, prior to beginning to fill a bucket with the gravelly bottom which had been thawed by the fire, ready for his companion to haul up and empty on the heap ready for washing when the spring time came.

“Tell him,” he said gruffly. “Well, mate,” said the man at the top, “it’s like this. We’ve got about a couple of pound of

strong shag and a few ounces o' gold we can loan you. If that's any good, you're welcome; but grub's awful short. Try further down, and if you can't get what you want, come back."

"All right, and thank you, mates," said Dallas. "Morning."

"I say, we'll show you the flour-tub and the bare bone if you like."

"No, no," cried Dallas; "I believe you." And then to himself, "I must fall back on Tregelly."

He had the burning wood fire for guide to where the big miner was thawing the shaft in his claim, to make the frozen gravel workable, and in addition there were faint signs coming of the short-lived day. "Morning, Tregelly."

"What, you, Mr Adams! Glad to see you, my son. Come inside and have a mouthful of something and a pipe."

"I don't want to hinder you," said Dallas to his cheery friend.

"You won't hinder me, my son. I like letting the fire have a good burn out, and then for it to cool down before I begin. Come along; but how's your cousin?"

"Better this morning, but very low-spirited last night, with his frost-bitten foot."

"Poor lad! It is hard on him."

"The fact is, we are terribly short of provisions."

"You are? Same here, my son; but why didn't you come down and tell me? I haven't got much, but you're welcome to what I can spare. There you are; sit down by the fire and I'll see what we can do. Bacon's horribly close, and I've only two of those mahogany salt solids they call 'Merican hams; but I can let you have a tin or two of meal and some flour."

"If you can," cried Dallas, "it will be a blessing to us now, and as soon as ever—"

"Yes, yes, all right, my son: I know. But how's the gold turning out?"

"The gravel seems fairly rich, but somehow I'm afraid we shall do no good."

"That's how it seems with me," said the miner. "One just gets enough to live upon and pay one's way; and one could do that anywhere, without leading such a life as this."

Dallas thought of his friend's words as he tramped back through the snow with his sack of provender on his back, for the life they were leading was that of the lowest type of labourer, the accommodation miserable, and the climate vile.

"It will not do—it will not do," he said sadly; but he returned, all the same, in better spirits with the results of his foraging, to find Abel waiting for him anxiously, and the dog curled-up by the fire sleeping heavily.

The stores obtained were carefully husbanded, and during the next few days, in spite of intense frost, Dallas worked hard in the shaft on their claim, heating it with the abundant wood till a certain amount of gravel was thawed, and then throwing it out ready for washing when the next summer came.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Abel's night alarm.

"It's no good, Bel," said Dallas one day; "I can't go begging round again. It's not fair to the men. I must go down to the town and bring back as much as I can."

"Very well," said Abel. "When do you start?"

"To-morrow morning."

"So soon? Well, if it has to be done, the sooner the better."

"I can get back within four or five days, I believe, and I'll ask Tregelly to come in once or twice to see you, so that you will not be so lonely."

"You need not do that, because I shall not be here," said Abel quietly.

"Not be here?"

"Of course not. I shall be with you."

"Impossible."

"TAKING HIS EMPTY SLEDGE, DALLAS STARTED." [p. 253.

“No, I shall manage to limp along somehow.”

“Impossible, I tell you!” cried Dallas. “You must stay to take care of the claim; and then there is the gold—and the dog.”

Abel was silenced; and the next morning, taking his empty sledge, and trusting to obtain enough food at the shanties which he would pass on the track, Dallas started.

Abel watched him pass away into the gloom of the dark morning, and then turned and limped back sadly to where the dog lay dozing by the fire, apparently still too weak to stir.

Abel’s bed had been drawn aside, and there was a hole in the ground, while upon the upturned barrel which formed their table stood a little leather bag half full of scales, scraps, and nuggets of gold—that which remained after Dallas had taken out a sufficiency to purchase stores at the town on the Yukon.

Abel’s first act was to stoop down, mend the fire, and pat the dog, which responded by rapping the earth with his tail. Then the leather bag was tied up, replaced in the bank hole, which was then filled up, the earth beaten down flat, and the sacks and skins which formed the bed drawn back into their places.

He stooped down and patted the dog.

“Pah! Why don’t you lie farther from the fire? You make the hut smell horribly with your burnt hair.”

The dog only whined, opened one eye, blinked at him, and went off to sleep again.

“Poor old chap!” mused Abel. “I didn’t think I could care so much for such a great, rough, ugly brute as you are; but adversity makes strange friends.”

Abel finished that day wondering how Dallas was getting on, and trying to picture his journey through the snow by the side of the ice-bound stream; grew more melancholy from his lonely position, and then tried to rouse himself by being practical and planning.

He made up his mind to content himself with one good, hearty meal a day, so as to make the provisions last out well, in case Dallas should not be back to time, and only to be extravagant with the fuel.

Lastly, he went to the door and looked out, to find that it was a clear, frosty night, with the brilliant stars peering down.

He knew it was night, for no fires were to be seen in any direction, and, after making all as snug as he could, he rolled himself in his blankets, drew the skin bag up about him, and followed his dumb companion’s example, sleeping till morning, when the logs were just smouldering and had to be coaxed into a good warm blaze again.

And so the days and nights glided by. He would awake again to find the fire burning low, the dog still sleeping, and the horror of another dreary day to pass. For his foot seemed no better, his spirits were lower than ever, and at last it was long past the time when Dallas should have returned.

How the days passed then he never afterwards could quite recall, for it was like a continuous nightmare. But in a

mechanical way he kept up the fire, with the wood piled in one corner by the door getting so low that he knew he must bestir himself soon, and get to the stack by the shaft, knock and brush off the snow, and bring in more to thaw in the warmth of the hut.

All in a strange, dreamy way he sat and watched, cooked a large pot of skilly, and shared it with the still drowsy dog, which took its portion and curled-up again, after whining softly and licking his hand.

One night all seemed over. No one had been near, and he had felt too weak and weary to limp to the nearest hut in search of human companionship. He was alone in his misery and despair. Dallas must be dead, he felt sure, and there was nothing for him to do now but make another good meal for himself and the dog, and then sleep.

“Sleep,” he said aloud, “and perhaps wake no more.”

He ate his hot meal once more and watched the dog take his portion before going to the door, to look out feebly and find all black, depressing darkness; not even a star to be seen.

“Night, night, black night!” he muttered as he carefully fastened up again, pegged the blankets across to keep out the cruel wind, carefully piled up the pieces of wood about the fire, as an afterthought carried out with a smile, with a big log that would smoulder far on into the next day for the sake of the dog.

“For I shall not want it,” he said sadly. “Poor brute! What will he do when I’m dead?”

The thought startled him, and he sat down and fixed his eyes upon the shaggy, hairy animal curled-up close to the fire, whose flames flickered and danced and played about, making the hair glisten and throwing the dog’s shadow back in a curious grotesque way.

Something like energy ran in a thrill through the watcher, and he shuddered and felt that he must do something to prevent *that*—it would be too horrible.

It was in a nightmare-like state he seemed to see people coming to the door at last. He could even hear them knocking and shouting, and at last using hatchets to crash a way in. For what? To find the dog there alive and stronger, ready to resent their coming, even to fighting and driving them away; but only to return, rifle or pistol armed, to destroy the brute for what it had done according to its nature, to keep itself alive.

And then, it seemed to Abel, in his waking dream, they shudderingly gathered together what they saw to cast into the ready-dug grave—the shaft in which he and Dallas had so laboriously but hopefully delved, in search of the magnet which had drawn them there—the gold.

He made a wild effort to drive away the horrible fancy, and at last with a weary sigh sank upon his bed, his last thought being:

“Would those at home ever know the whole truth?”

“How long have I been awake?”

It must have been one long stupor of many, many hours, for the fire was very low, shedding merely a soft warm glow through the place.

He was stupefied, and felt unable to move, but the fancy upon which he had fallen asleep was there still in a strange confused way, and he felt that the dog was not in the spot where he had left it.

He lay with his eyes half-closed, conscious now of some sound which had awakened him. For there beyond the glowing embers, where all was made indistinct and strange, the dog was hard at work tearing a way out of the hut. The wood snapped and grated as it was torn away; then there was silence, and he was half disposed as he lay there helpless to think it was all a dream.

But as this fancy came the noise began once more, and at last he caught sight of the great dog, strong and sturdy now, crawling through a hole it had made into the hut—what for he could not make out in his feverish state. Why should it have done this to get at him when already there?

He knew it was all wrong, and that his brain was touched; but one thing was plain reality: There was the great beast, magnified by the light of the fire, creeping forward while he lay paralysed and unable to stir.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Dal’s welcome back.

And yet it was strange, for just then the embers fell together, a soft, lambent, bluish flame flickered up, making the interior of the hut light, and he saw that the dog still lay in its old place, fast asleep. What was it then—bear, wolf—which had torn a way through or half under the wall of the place?

A bear, for it suddenly raised itself up on its hind-legs, and as he lay stupefied with horror, Abel could make out its shaggy hide.

Still, he could not move to reach for the rifle which stood ready loaded in the corner close by, but lay half paralysed in the strange dazed state into which he had fallen, till the object which reared up, looking huge, moved a little, and

seemed listening.

Just then there was a bright gleam.

Eyes—teeth? Impossible, for it was low down, and Abel shook off his lethargy and uttered a low, hoarse cry, as he made an effort to spring up and reach a weapon.

But he was tight in the skin-lined sleeping-bag, and this fettered him so that he fell back, and the next moment his nocturnal visitant sprang forward, coming down heavily upon him, at the same moment making a deadly blow at him.

The strange feeling of helplessness was gone. Something to call forth the young man's flagging energies had been needed, and it had come. He had lain down as one who had given up all hope, who had lost all that bound him to life; but that was but the dream of weakness, the stagnation of his nature, brought on by suffering, loneliness, and despair.

Face to face now with this danger, confronted by a cowardly ruffian, Nature made her call, and it was answered. The strong desire for life returned, and with another hoarse cry he flung himself aside, and thus avoided the blow aimed at him.

The next moment he had thrown himself upon his assailant. In an instant his hands were upon his throat. And now a terrible struggle ensued, in which a strange sense of strength came back to Abel; and he kept his hold, as, failing to extricate himself, his assailant retaliated by seizing him in the same way, and kept on raising and beating the fettered man's head against the floor.

For in their struggle they had writhed and twisted till they were approaching the fire; and as they strove on in their fight for the mastery, Abel was conscious of hearing a loud yelp. Then his breath grew shorter, there was a horrible sensation of the blood rushing to his eyes, as he gasped for breath—a terrible swimming of the brain—lights bright as flashes of lightning danced before his eyes, and then with his senses reeling he was conscious of a tremendous weight, and then all was black—all was silent as the grave.

"Two days late," said Dallas, as he paused for a few moments to rest and gain his breath, before shooting into collar again, when the trace tightened, the sledge creaked and ground over the blocks of ice, and glided over the obstruction which had checked him for the moment, and the runners of the heavily loaded frame rushed down the slope, nearly knocking him off his feet. The young man growled savagely, for the blow was a hard one.

"If you could only keep on like that I'd give you an open course," he said; "but you will not. Never mind; every foot's a foot gained. Wonder how old Abel is getting on?"

He shot into the collar once more, the trace tightened, and he went on for another hundred yards over the ice and snow.

The young man's collar was a band of leather, his trace a rope, but no horse ever worked harder or perspired more freely than he, who was self-harnessed to the loaded sledge.

"I don't mind," he had said over and over again. "I'd have brought twice as much if I could have moved it. As it is, there's enough to pay off one's debts and to keep up, with economy, till the thaw comes; and now we are not going to be so pressed I daresay I shall manage to shoot a moose."

That journey back from the settlement had been a terrible one, for he had loaded himself far more heavily than was wise, and this had necessitated his sleeping two nights in the snow instead of one. But snow can be warm as well as cold, and he found that a deep furrow with the bright crystals well banked up to keep off the wind, blankets, and a sleeping-bag, made no bad lair for a tired man who was not hungry. He took care of that, for, as he said to himself, "If it is only a donkey who draws he must be well fed."

With his sledge at his head, tilted on one side to make a sort of canopy, and a couple of blankets stretched over, tent fashion, upon some stout sticks close down to his face, the air was soon warmed by his breath, and thanks to the skin-lined bag he slept soundly each night, and by means of a little pot and a spirit-lamp contrived to obtain a cup of hot tea before starting on his journey in the morning. But it was the lamp of life, heated by the brave spirit within him, that helped him on with his load, so that after being disappointed in not covering the last eight miles over-night, he dragged the sledge up towards their hut just at dawn of the day which succeeded the attack made upon his companion.

By dawn must be understood about ten o'clock, and as he drew near, Dallas could see a fire blazing here, and another there, at different shafts; but there was no sign of glow or smoke from the fire in their own hut; and in the joy that was within him at the successful termination of his expedition, Dallas laughed.

"The lazy beggar!" he said. "Not stirring yet, and no fire. Why, I must have been tugging at this precious load over four hours. He ought to have been up and had a good fire, and the billy boiling. He's taking it out in sleep and no mistake. Wonder whether the dog's dead? Poor brute! I don't suppose he can have held out till now."

As he drew near he gave vent to a signal whistle familiar to his cousin. But there was no reply, and he tugged away till he was nearer, and then gave vent to a cheery "Ahoy!"

There was still no response, and he hailed again, without result.

"Well, he is sleeping," said Dallas, and he hailed again as he dragged away at the load. "At last!" he cried, as he reached the door and cast off the leathern loop from across his breast. "Here, Bel, ahoy! ahoy! ahoy! Hot rolls and

coffee! Breakfast, bacon, and tinned tongue! Banquets and tuck out! Wake up, you lazy beggar! you dog! you—”

He was going to say “bear,” but a horrible chill of dread attacked him, and he turned faint and staggered back, nearly falling over his loaded sledge.

“Bah! coward! fool!” he cried angrily, and he looked sharply round, to see shaft fires in the distance; but there was no hut within half a mile. “What nonsense!” he muttered. “There can’t be anything wrong. Got short of food, and gone to one of the neighbours.”

Nerving himself, he tried to open the door.

But it was fast, and, as he could see from a means contrived by themselves for fastening the door from outside when they went away hunting or shooting, it had not been secured by one who had left the place.

In an instant, realising this, he grew frantic, and without stopping to think more, he ran round to the side by the shaft, caught up a piece of fir-trunk some six or seven feet long, and ran back, poised it for a few moments over his head, and then dashed it, battering-ram fashion, with all his might against the rough fir-wood door, just where the bar went across, loosening it so that he was able to insert one end of the piece of timber, using it now as a lever; and with one wrench he forced the door right open.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Tregelly’s idea of a gold trap.

Dropping the piece of wood, he dashed into the dark hut, to find that the rush of wind from the suddenly opened door had started the embers in the middle of the floor flickering in a dim lambent flame, just enough to show him that the barrel table had been knocked over, the boxes used for seats driven here and there, the bed occupied by his cousin dragged away, the boards lifted, and the earth underneath it torn up, while Abel was lying face downward close up to the remains of their store of wood.

It was all in one comprehensive glance that he had seen this, and it seemed still to be passing panorama-like across the retina of his eyes, when the faint flame died out and he dropped upon his knees beside the prostrate man.

“Oh, Bel, lad,” he groaned; “what have I done? I oughtn’t to have left you. Bel, old man, speak to me. God help me! He can’t be dead!”

His hands were at his cousin’s breast to tear open the clothes, and feel if the heart was beating, but for the moment he shrank back in horror, half paralysed with the dread of learning the truth.

It was but momentary, and then he mastered the coward feeling, uttering a gasp of relief, for there was a faint throbbing against the hand he thrust into the poor fellow’s breast.

“Alive! I am in time,” he muttered, and he continued his examination in the dark, expecting to feel blood or some trace of a wound.

But, as far as he could make out, there was nothing of the kind, though he felt that his cousin must have been attacked; so, after laying the sufferer in a more comfortable position, he felt for the matches on the rough shelf, struck one, saw that the lamp stood there unused, and the next minute he had a light and went down upon one knee to continue his examination.

At the first glance he saw that Bel’s throat was discoloured, and there were ample signs of his having been engaged in some terrible struggle, but that was all. No, not all; the poor fellow was like ice, and quite insensible.

Dallas’s brain was in a whirl, but he was able to act sensibly under the circumstances. He caught up rugs and blankets, and covered the sufferer warmly. Then, going to the open door, he dragged in the sledge, and closed and secured the entrance after a fashion.

His next effort was to get a good fire blazing to alter the temperature of the hut; and when this was done he went to the spirit-flask kept on the shelf for emergencies, and trickled a few drops between the poor fellow’s lips.

As he worked at this he tried hard to puzzle out what had happened.

His first thoughts had been in the direction of attack and robbery. But there was the fastened door. It was not likely that Abel, after being half strangled and hurled down, could have fastened up the door again from the inside; he would sooner have left it open in the hope of one of their neighbours passing by and rendering help. And yet there was the bed dragged away, the board removed, and the earth torn up.

He crossed to the place.

There was no doubt about it; the object of the attack must have been robbery, for the bag of gold was gone.

He held his hand to his brow and stared about wildly.

Ah! A fresh thought. The dog! Hungry! Mad! It must have attacked and seized Abel by the throat. That would account for its lacerated state and the terrible struggle.

There was evidence, too, just across the hut—a hole had been half dug, half torn through the side, just big enough for

such a dog to get through, and it had, after nearly killing him who had saved the brute's life, torn a way out, partly beneath the side.

"Oh, Bel, lad, if you could only speak!" groaned Dallas, as he took up the lamp, felt how cold the poor fellow was, and, setting the lamp down again, stooped to pick up a skin rug tossed into the corner by the head of the bed.

But as he drew it towards him something dropped on the ground. Stooping down to see what it was, he discovered that it was a sharp, thick bowie-knife.

"It is robbery. He has been attacked," cried Dallas; and once more he devoted himself to trying to restore the sufferer—chafing his cold limbs, bathing his temples with spirits, drawing him nearer the fire, and at last waiting in despair for the result, while feeling perfectly unable to fit the pieces of the puzzle so as to get a solution satisfactory in all points.

"Poor old Bel!" he said to himself; "he seems always to get the worst of it; but when I told him so he only laughed, and said it was I."

He was in agony as to what he should do.

One moment he was for going to fetch help; the next he gave it up, dreading to leave his cousin again.

By degrees, though, the poor fellow began to come to as the warmth pervaded him; and at last, to Dallas's great delight, he opened his eyes, stared at him wildly, and then looked round wonderingly till his eyes lit upon the opening, over which his cousin had pegged a rug.

He started violently then, and the memory of all that had taken place came back.

Clapping his hand to his throat, he wrenched his head round so that he could look in the direction of the bed.

"The gold—the bag of gold!" he whispered.

"Gone, old fellow; but never mind that, so long as you are alive. Try and drink this."

"No, not now," said Abel feebly. "I want to lie still and think. Yes, I remember now; he broke in at the side there while I was asleep. He had a knife, but I seized him. Did you come back then?"

"No, I have not long been home. Shall I go and ask Norton to come?"

"No, don't leave me, Dal; I am so weak. But where is the dog?"

"He was not here when I broke in."

"You broke in?"

"Yes; I could not make you hear. I say, though, had I not better fetch help?"

"What for? There is no doctor; and he might come back."

Dallas had started, for as Abel spoke there was a loud thumping at the door. His hand went behind to his revolver, which he held ready, fully expecting from his cousin's manner that the marauder who had attacked him had returned; but to the delight of both, after a second blow on the door, the familiar voice of Tregelly was heard in a cheery hail.

"Hullo, there!" he cried. "Any one at home?"

Dallas darted to the door, threw it open, and there in the gloomy light of mid-day stood their friend with a load over his shoulder.

"Back again, then? I was coming to see. But I say, what's the meaning of this—is it a trap?"

"Is what a trap?" said Dallas.

"Putting this bag out yonder with the dog to watch it and snap at any one who touches it. Is the bag yours?"

"Yes, of course," exclaimed Dallas excitedly; "but where was it?"

"Outside, I tell you; but it's a failure if it's a trap, for the dog's dead."

Dallas rushed out, followed by his visitor, and there in the dim light lay the dog, stretched out upon the snow, perfectly stiff and motionless.

"I see how it was now," cried Dallas excitedly; and as their neighbour helped him carry the dog in, he told him in a few words of how he had found matters on his return.

"Poor brute! Was he in the place, then?"

"I suppose so, and he must have attacked the scoundrel, and made him drop the bag."

"And then lay down to watch it, dying at his post. If he had lived I'd have given something for that dog."

“Indeed you would not,” said Dallas warmly. “No gold would have bought him.”

The dog was laid down by the fire, but Tregelly shook his head.

“Might as well save his skin, youngsters; but you’ll have to thaw him first.”

“Is he dead?” asked Abel feebly.

“No doubt about that,” replied Tregelly. “It’s a pity, too, for he was a good dog. Those Eskimo, as a rule, are horrid brutes, eating up everything, even to their harness; but this one was something. I’d come up to bring Mr Wray here half one o’ my hams, but you won’t want it now.”

“No,” said Dallas; “and I can send you back loaded, and be out of debt.”

“Well, I can’t say what I lent you won’t be welcome. My word, though, you brought a good load.”

“Set to and play cook,” said Dallas, “while I tidy up. I’m sure you could eat some breakfast, and I’m starving.”

“So am I,” cried their visitor, laughing. “Beginning to feel better, master?” he added, turning to Abel.

“Yes; only I’m so stiff, and my throat is so painful.”

“Cheer up, my lad; that’ll soon get better. I only wish, though, I had come last night when that fellow was here. I don’t believe my conscience would ever have said anything if I had put a bullet through him.”

Abel lay silent near the fire, watching the dog thoughtfully while stores were unpacked and preparations made for a meal; but at last he spoke.

“Dal,” he said, “give me that knife that you found.”

“What for? You had better lie still, and don’t worry about anything now except trying to get well.”

“Give me the knife. I’ve been thinking. That man who attacked me last night was one of that gang.”

“What!” cried Tregelly, stopping in his task of frying bacon. “Nonsense! they daren’t show their noses here now.”

“I feel sure of it,” said Abel excitedly. “Let me look at that knife. I believe it’s the one that was stolen from the man on the lake.”

Dallas looked at him doubtingly, before picking up the knife and shaking his head. “It might be, or it might not,” he said dubiously, as he passed it to his cousin.

“Well, at any rate, Dal, they have tracked us down, and that accounts for the attack.”

“It looks like it,” said Dallas; “but don’t get excited, old fellow. I don’t want you to turn worse.”

“But they must be somewhere close at hand, Dal,” cried Abel; “and we may be attacked again at any moment.”

“All right, then, we’ll be ready for them,” said Dallas soothingly. “Forewarned is forearmed.”

“You are saying that just to calm me,” said Abel bitterly. “You do not believe me, but it is a fact. I felt something of the kind last night in those horrible moments when he held my throat in that peculiar way. It was out of revenge for the past. They have dogged us all the time, and been close at our heels. Ah, look out!” he cried wildly, as he tried to spring up—“Listen! I can hear them outside plainly.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The starting of a bodyguard.

“Nay, nay, lad,” said Tregelly soothingly; “there’s no one here now. That bag of gold was enough to bring one of the rowdies down upon you, but those three chaps wouldn’t risk a meeting with the judge again.”

“I don’t know,” said Dallas thoughtfully; “there is plenty of room hereabout for them to be in, hiding; and they must have gone somewhere.”

“Not much chance for a man to keep himself alive in this country, without tackle and stores, or a shanty of his own.”

“Unless he has attacked and murdered some one,” said Abel bitterly. “But you will see.”

The poor fellow was so exhausted by what he had gone through that, after painfully swallowing some of the tea that had been prepared, he dropped into a stupor-like sleep, whilst Dallas watched him anxiously.

“That was fancy of his, my lad,” said Tregelly, who was making a hearty breakfast. “Come, you don’t eat.”

“How can I, with the poor fellow like this?” cried Dallas. “He seems to come in for all the misfortune.”

“Yes, he is a bit unlucky,” replied Tregelly; “but you must eat if you want to help him. Look here, I don’t want to be unfeeling; but your mate isn’t dying of fever.”

“No, no; but look at him.”

“Yes, I have, and he has been a good deal knocked about, besides having a frozen foot; but that will all get well. You are set up with provisions again; you’ve got your gold back, and a good claim of your own.”

“Just good enough to keep us alive.”

“Well, it isn’t very lively work, my lad,” said Tregelly; “but we must make the best of it. We shall have the summer again soon, and do better, perhaps.”

“I hope so,” said Dallas bitterly, “for we could never get through another winter like this.”

“You don’t know till you try. And you take my advice: let your brother—”

“My cousin.”

“Well, it’s all the same out here. Let him sleep all he can, and when he’s awake feed him up and keep him warm.”

“I can’t get rid of the feeling that I ought to go back to Yukon Town and try to get a doctor.”

“Nonsense, my son; he wants no doctor. And now look here; if I say something to you, will you believe that it’s meant honest?”

“Of course. What do you mean?”

“Only this, my son; that I don’t want you to think that I want to come and sponge upon you because you’ve got plenty of prog.”

“Mr Tregelly!”

“Let me finish, my lad,” said the big Cornishman. “I was going to say, what do you think of me coming and pigging here with you for a bit, in case what the youngster here says might be right; and if it is, you and me could polish off that gang pretty well, better than you could alone, or I could alone. Not that I’m skeered; but if young Wray here is right they’ll be down upon me too. But I don’t want you to think—”

“But what about your gold?” said Dallas eagerly.

“If any one should go there, and can find it, I’ll give it him.”

“Is it so well hidden?”

“Yes; I’ve got it froze into the middle of a block of ice. They’ll never look there.”

“Will you come?” said Dallas excitedly.

“I’ll do better than that,” said the Cornishman: “I’ll stop now.”

“You will?”

“Of course; and glad of the chance to help you. Yah!”

The big fellow jumped up in horror, as a loud rap came from close by.

“What was that?” cried Dallas, who was equally startled.

“It was that there dog’s ghost got his tail thawed enough to give it a rap on the floor to say, ‘That’s right’; and I believe your cousin’s right too, now, and this is a message sent to us to say, ‘Look out, for those three beauties are coming here again.’”

“Nonsense!” cried Dallas, going down on his knees; “the dog’s alive.”

“I’m blessed!” said his big friend. “Well, some things can stand being froze hard and thawed out again better than we Christians. I s’pose it’s having such a thick coat. Look at him; he’s got one eye open, and he’s winking.”

In proof thereof came a low whine, as if in appeal for food.

“Look here, my sons,” said Tregelly one day, as he came in last from the dismal darkness without to the bright warmth of the hut, where the fire was burning cheerily and an appetising odour of tea, damper, and fried ham proclaimed how busy, weak as he still was, Abel had been; “I used to grumble a deal down in old Cornwall because we had a lot o’ wet days, and say it was a country not fit for anything better than a duck to live in; but I’m an altered man now, and I repent. It’s a regular heaven compared to this Klondike country. Hullo, Scruff, my son, how are you?” The dog gave an amiable growl, and seemed to enjoy the gentle caress the big miner gave him with his heavy boot, as he lay stretched out by the fire.

“Don’t grumble, Bob,” said Dallas. “This looks cheery enough, and we’ve done some good to-day.”

“Oh, I’m not grumbling, my son; only making comparisons as is ojus. That’s what I used to write at school. This is a reg’lar Lord Mayor’s banquet for a hungry man. But my word, how dirty I am!”

“So am I,” said Dallas. “What with the gravel and the wood-smoke, I feel like a charcoal burner. I should like a wash, though.”

“Wash, my son! I should like a bathe in our old Cornish sea, with the sun shining on my back. And I say, a bit of our old fish. A few pilchards or grilled mackerel, or a baked hake, with a pudding inside him—or oh! a conger pie.”

“Don’t, Bob,” said Dallas. “This is painful. And look here; either you or I must go down to Yukon City with the sledge again, for the stores are getting low.”

“Nay,” said the big Cornishman; “we’ll have up what I’ve got down yonder first. Clear out the place. There’s enough there to last us a fortnight longer; and I want to go there badly.”

“Very well,” said Dallas; “then we’ll go. Feel well enough to come as far as there to-morrow, Bel?”

“Yes; and I should like it,” was the reply.

“Then we’ll go. We’ll shut up the dog here to keep house till we come back, though no one is likely to come. I say, how much longer it has been light to-day.”

“Pretty sort of light!” growled Tregelly. “I could make better light out of a London fog and some wet flannel. We got a fine lot of gravel and washing stuff, though, out of the shaft to-day. Look here, I picked out this.”

He held out a tiny nugget of gold, about as big as a small pea; and it was duly examined, put in a small canister upon the shelf, and then the evening meal went on, and Tregelly refreshed himself with large draughts of tea.

“Look here,” he said: “we agreed that we’d tell one another if we found a good place, and we started working separate.”

“Yes,” said Bel, “and fate has ordered that we should come together again. We—bah! what mockery it seems to talk of ‘we’ when I’m such a helpless log.”

“Look here, Bel, I wish you were a bit stronger, and I’d kick you.”

“Don’t wait, my son; kick him now,” cried Tregelly. “He deserves it.”

“I’ll save it up,” said Dallas. “But look here, Big Bob, you needn’t make a long speech. You were going to say that you thought now that we had better stick together, share and share alike for the future.”

“Well, I dunno how you knew that,” said Tregelly; “but it was something of the kind.”

“That’s right, then we will; eh, Bel?”

“Of course; if Tregelly will consent to share with such a weak, helpless—”

“Here,” cried the big Cornishman, springing up, “shall I kick him?”

“No, no; let him off.”

“But he do deserve it,” said Tregelly, subsiding. “Now, I was going to say it don’t seem quite fair for me to stop, as those precious three—if there is three of ’em left unhung—not having shown up, there don’t seem any need.”

“More need than ever,” said Dallas. “Your being here scares them away.”

“Hope it do,” said Tregelly. “Then look here, we’ll go down to my pit to-morrow, and bring up the sledge load, including my bit of ice, for it can’t be so very long now before it’ll begin to thaw a bit every day, and I don’t want my block to melt and let out the gold. There’s more there than you’d think.”

“But that’s yours,” said Abel.

“Nay, nay, my son; we’ll put it all together. You’ve got some, and there’s a lot yonder outside when the soft weather comes and we can wash it out; so that’s settled. Wonder whether working in that hot damp shaft’ll give us rheumatiz by-and-by.”

“I hope not, Bob,” said Dallas, yawning. “I’ve often thought of something of the kind. One thing is certain, that if we don’t find much more gold than we have got so far we shall have earned our fortunes.”

“Fortunes!” cried Abel contemptuously; “why, at the rate we have been going on, if we get enough to pay for our journey home, as well as for our provisions, that will be about all.”

“And except for the pleasant trip, my sons, we might as well have stopped at home.”

Chapter Twenty Eight.

A strange discovery.

Dallas stared the next morning when he opened his eyes, for the fire was burning brightly and Abel was bustling about in the lit-up hut, with nothing but a slight limp to tell of the old frost-bite in his foot.

“Come,” he said cheerfully; “breakfast is nearly ready.”

“Where’s Bob Tregelly?” cried Dallas.

“Scraping the ice off the sledge to make it run easily. It’s a glorious morning.”

“Night,” said Dallas sourly, for he was half asleep. “I’m not going to call it morning till there’s daylight. Snowing?”

“No. Keen frost, and the stars are brilliant.”

“Bother the stars!” grumbled Dallas, rolling out of his warm couch of blankets and skins. “I want the sun to come back and take the raw edge off all this chilly place. But I say, you have given up going with us to-day—to-night, I mean?”

“Given up? No. I feel that it is time I made an effort, and I shall be better and stronger if I do.”

“But you can’t wear your boots, you know, and it will not be safe for you to trust to a bandaged sandal.”

“Can’t wear my boots?” said Abel. “Well, at any rate, I’ve got them on.”

“But they must hurt you horribly.”

“Not in the least,” said Abel, and his cousin was silent while he completed his exceedingly simple toilet—one that he would not have thought possible in the old days.

By the time he had finished, the door opened, and Tregelly stooped to pass under the lintel.

“Morning, my son,” he cried; “I’ve been greasing the runners of the sledge a bit, and rubbing up the chest-strap. The thing wants using. I’ve oiled the guns and six-shooters too. Beautiful morning. I say, how that dog has come round!”

For the great shaggy brute had walked to the door to meet him, with his bushy tail well curled-up, and a keen look of returning vigour in his eyes and movements.

“Yes,” said Dallas; “I never thought he’d live. But I say, Bel persists in going with us, and I’m sure he’ll break down.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter, my son. If he does we’ll make him sit astride of the load as we come back, and each take a rope, and give him a ride home.”

“I shall be able to walk,” said Abel stoutly.

“Very well,” said Dallas. “You always were the most obstinate animal that ever breathed.”

The breakfast was eaten, pistols and cartridges placed in their belts, rifles taken down from their hooks, and the fire banked up with big logs that would last to their return; and then Dallas took up one of the skin-lined sleeping-bags.

“What’s that for?” said Abel suspiciously.

“For you to ride back in.”

Abel made an angry gesture. “I tell you I’m better,” he said sharply.

“Well, never mind if you are, my son,” said Tregelly quietly. “You must get tired, and if you are you’ll be none the worse for a ride, but a good deal so if you get your toes frosted again.”

“Very well, make a child of me,” said Abel, and he gave way. “Have we got all we want?”

“Better take something for a bit of lunch before we start back,” suggested Dallas.

“Nay–y–ay!” cried the Cornishman, “there’s plenty yonder, and we may as well carry some of it back inside as out.”

“Come on, then,” said Dallas, and he strode to the door, when, to the surprise of all, the dog uttered a deep bark and sprang before them.

“Oh, come, that won’t do,” cried Dallas. “You’ve got to stop and mind the house.”

The dog barked fiercely, and rose at the door upon its hind-legs.

“Yes, he had better stay,” said Abel; “we mustn’t leave the place unprotected. Let’s slip out one by one.”

“I don’t know,” said Tregelly thoughtfully; “he has evidently made up his mind to go with us, and if we shut him in alone he’ll be wild and get springing about, and perhaps knock the fire all over the place. Don’t want to come back and find the shanty burned up.”

This remark settled the matter, and they started out into the keen dark morning, the dog, after bounding about a little and indulging in a roll in the snow, placing himself by the trace as if drawing, and walking in front of the empty sledge which Tregelly was dragging.

“Might as well have let you pull too,” said the latter; “but never mind—you may rest this time.”

No fires were burning yet, as they trudged on over the frozen snow, while the stars glittered brilliantly as if it were

midnight, giving quite enough light for them to make their way over the four miles which divided them from Tregelly's claim.

"Getting pretty close now," he said, breaking the silence; for the rugged state of the slippery snow had resulted in the latter part of the journey being made in silence, only broken by the crunching of the icy particles and the squeaking sound made from time to time by the sledge runners as they glided over the hard surface.

Suddenly Tregelly stopped short, and as they were in single file, the rest halted too.

"What's the matter?" said Dallas.

"Why, some one's took up a claim and made a shanty close up to mine. No, by thunder! They've got in my place and lit a fire! Oh, I'm not going to stand that!"

"What impudence!" said Dallas.

"Impudence! I call it real cheek! But come on; I'll soon have them out of that!"

"Hist!" whispered Abel; "let's go up carefully and see first. It may be some one we know."

"Whether we know them or whether we don't," said Tregelly angrily, "they're coming out, and at once. Do you hear? There's more than one of them. Come along."

But before he had taken a dozen of his huge strides towards the hut, from whose rough chimney the ruddy smoke and sparks were rising, there was a wild hoarse cry as of some one in agony, and the sound of a struggle going on, while fierce oaths arose, and a voice, horrible in its weird, strange tones, shrieked out so that the words reached their ears:

"The dog—the dog! Keep him from me, or he'll tear my heart right out!" while at the same moment Scruff barking fiercely, bounded forward towards the door, just as a cry of horror arose, so awful that it seemed to freeze the marrow in the young men's bones.

"Come on," shouted Tregelly; "they're killing some one."

The two young men needed no inciting. Following Tregelly closely, they ran towards the door, which was flung open as their leader reached it, and Tregelly was dashed back against them with such violence that he would have fallen but for their support.

At the same moment, after they had caught, by the light of the fire within, a glimpse of two rough-looking men, one of them apparently as big as their companion, the door swung to again and all was darkness, while added to the still continuing cries, yells, and appeals to keep back the dog, there came from the other direction the crunching of heavy boots in full retreat on the snow, the savage barking of the dog, and then flash after flash, followed by reports, as the late occupants of the hut evidently turned to fire at the pursuing dog.

The first idea of the trio was to rush after the men who had come in contact with them, but second thoughts suggested the impossibility of overtaking them in the darkness, while the appealing cries from within the cottage drew them in the other direction.

"Leave them to the dog," shouted Dallas excitedly.

"Yes, come on and see who's this one inside," growled Tregelly, as he thrust open the door and stepped into his hut.

The place was well illumined by the blazing wood fire, and they looked round in wonder for the assailant or dog which had elicited the hoarse wild appeals for help and protection which rose from the solitary occupant of the place—a wild, bloodshot-eyed, athletic man in torn and ragged half-open shirt and trousers, who cowered on the rough bed trying to force himself closer into the corner, his crooked fingers scratching at the wall, while all the time his head was wrenched round so that he stared wildly at imaginary dangers, evidently vividly seen, and kept on shrieking for help.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

One gets his deserts.

The little party paused and glanced excitedly round, their weapons ready to fire at the companions whom the man was addressing.

"Keep him off, mate—drag him back, Beardy! Can't you see he's tearing me to bits! Shoot! shoot! why don't you shoot? Never mind hitting me. Shoot!—can't you see the dog's mad?"

There was a moment or two's pause, during which the man was silent, panting and foaming at the mouth, as he glared wildly towards the door. Then he began again.

"There, there—you've missed him!" he shrieked. "He's at me again. He's mad—mad, I tell you! Shoot—shoot!—ah!"

The poor wretch darted out one hand, caught up something from between the bed and the wall, and the firelight glistened upon the side of a bottle, which he raised so violently to his lips that the neck rattled against his teeth; and the lookers-on heard the deep *glug—glug—glug* of the liquid within, as the man drank with avidity.

“Ah!” he yelled again, and, raising himself up, he threw the bottle with all his might across the hut, so that it struck the wooden wall heavily, and fell to the floor unbroken.

“Missed—missed!” shrieked the man; “and he’s springing at me again! Keep him back—keep him back! Ah!”

The shriek he uttered was horrible, as he went through all the movements of one struggling wildly against the attacks of a savage beast, and then suddenly dropped down cowering into the corner, panting loudly.

Meanwhile Tregelly had picked up the bottle and held it to his nostrils, before glancing at the side.

“That’s mine,” he growled. “They found that, then. I got it for spirits, case I was took ill in the night; but it was so bad I never used none, and put it on the corner of the shelf. It’s poison, that’s what it is; much like paraffin as can be. Nice stuff for a man like that!”

“The man’s mad,” said Dallas, with a shudder.

“Yes,” whispered Abel; “don’t you see, Dal? It’s one of three who attacked us up in the pass.”

“Yes; there’s no doubt about that,” said Dallas.

“He’s the man who attacked me the other night. I’m sure as can be.”

“Oh, that’s him, is it?” said Tregelly with a deep, angry growl. “Well, it’ll be a long time before he attacks you again, my son.”

“Is it fever?” said Dallas.

“’M! no, my son; I’ve seen a man took like that before. I should say it’s hydrophoby, from the bite of a dog; and he’s been doctoring himself with that paraffin stuff till he’s madder than ever.”

The sight before them had so taken up their attention that for the moment Scruff’s pursuit of the other two had been forgotten; but now it was brought vividly back to mind by a dull thump at the door, and the scratching of claws, and as the door yielded, the great dog forced its way in, with his red tongue lolling out, and panting loudly with his exertions.

The effect was magical. The man upon the couch could not have seen or heard the dog, but he seemed to divine the great animal’s presence, and springing up again from where he cowered, he began to shriek again horribly.

“The dog—the dog!” he yelled—“tearing me to pieces! Mad—mad! Shoot—shoot, I say!”

But attention was taken from him to the action of the dog.

As soon as the ghastly, distorted face in the corner rose, and the shrieks began to fill the hut, the dog paused by the door, with the thick hair about his neck bristling up till the animal looked double his former size, and a low, muttering, thunderous growl came from his grinning jaws.

The next moment he would have sprung at the wretched man, but Dallas grasped the position and was too quick for him. In an instant he had sprung across the dog’s back, nipped him between his knees, and buried his hands in the thick hair of his neck.

“Quick, Bel, or he will tear him to pieces!” cried Dallas. “The door—the door! Here, Bob, help; I can’t hold him. Strong as a horse.”

Abel flew to drag open the door, Tregelly seized the dog by his tail; there was a furious scratching and barking, a rush out, a swing round of two powerful arms, and the door was banged to again, and fastened; but only just in time, Scruff’s head coming at it with a loud thud, and his claws rattling and scratching on the wood, as he barked and growled savagely.

“Lie down, sir!” roared Dallas. “How dare you! Lie down.”

There was a loud barking at this, but there were sounds as if of protest mingled with it, and finally the dog subsided into a howl, and dropped down by the door to wait, a low, shuffling, panting sound coming through the crack at the bottom.

“He’d have killed him,” said Dallas, panting with the exertion.

“Not a doubt about it, my son,” replied Tregelly. “That’s the chap, sure enough—him as half killed you, Mr Abel.”

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

“Knew him again directly.”

“Think so?” said Dallas.

“Sure of it, my son. Dog wouldn’t have gone for a sick man in bed. Knew him directly, and went for him. Depend upon it, them two had a desprit fight that night when Scruff laid hold of him and made him drop the gold-bag.”

“That’s it, Bel,” said Dallas. “No doubt Scruff bit him pretty well, and he has scared himself into the belief that the dog was mad.”

“Yes, that and delirim trimins,” said the big Cornishman, looking down at the horrible wreck before him, the face seeming more ghastly and grotesque from the dancing shadows. “The brute has drunk himself mad. He’s a thief, and a murderer, or meant to be; and him and his gang have broke into my house. If the judge and his lot yonder could get at him they’d hang him to the first tree; he told us if we saw him and his lot we were to shoot at sight; and he’s no good to himself or anybody else, and the world would be all the better without him; and—I say, don’t you think we’d better let the dog come in and put him out of his misery?”

“No,” said Dallas angrily; “neither do you.”

“Well, put him outside in the snow. It’s a merciful sort of death, and very purifying to such a chap as this. Soon freeze hard. He wouldn’t come back to life like old Scruff. What do you say to that, Master Abel Wray?”

“Nothing,” said Abel shortly, “because if I said *Yes*! you wouldn’t do it.”

Tregelly stood and shook with the ebullition of chuckles which came bubbling out.

“Oh, dear me,” he said at last, as he wiped his eyes. “I can’t help being such a fool. It’s my nature to, my sons. No, I couldn’t set the dog at the beast, and I couldn’t put him out to freeze; but if it had come to a fight, and I’d been up, I could have shot him or knocked him on the head, and felt all the better for it.”

“Yes, I know,” said Dallas, who stood gazing down at the trembling wretch upon the couch.

“I s’pose I ought to be very glad him and his lot found my place empty; and I ought to sit down and nurse him and try to make him well again, and stop till his mates came and made an end of me—same as they’ve made an end of everything in the place. I say, just look here—quiet, Scruff, or I’ll come and talk to you with one of my boots!—I’m blessed if they haven’t finished up everything I left here—ham, bacon, meal, tea, sugar—every blessed thing,” continued Tregelly, as he opened canister and tin, peered into the meal-tub, and finished by staring down at the miserable wretch on the bed, and thoughtfully scratching his head.

“It’s horrible, Bob,” said Dallas. “The brutes! But I don’t know what we’re to do.”

Tregelly looked down again at the man, whose lips were moving fast; but his words were inaudible, save now and then, when he uttered a strange yelping cry, and they heard the word, “Dog!”

“Seems your turn now, Master Abel,” said Tregelly. “You’ve got your knife into him most. But he’s got his deserts.”

Chapter Thirty.

A staggering blow.

“Is he dying?” said Abel, as he looked down with commiseration on the man who tried to take his life.

“As sure as the sun’ll rise to-morrow morning somewhere if it don’t here, my son. He’s dying fast. Man can’t live long going through what he’s going through now. He’s dying as horrible a death as a man can die. Hanging would be a blessing to it.”

“Yes, he’s weaker already,” said Dallas, looking at the prostrate man.

“That’s so, my son. I don’t like his dying in my place; but we can’t help it. Let’s get together what we want to take, and go.”

“But there is nothing to load the sledge with,” said Dallas.

“There’s a nice lot of cartridges—pistol and rifle—in a tin in yon corner. We’ll take those and— Well, I’m blessed! They’ve got them, too!”

“How tiresome!”

“But they haven’t got my gold; I’ll warrant that.”

“Where is it buried?” asked Abel.

“Buried?” replied Tregelly, with a laugh. “’Tain’t buried at all. It’s just outside the door there—one of those big blocks of ice; but we shall have to wipe it round with a pick-axe to make it a more decent size for the sledge.”

“One of these blocks?”

“That’s right, my son. If you make a hiding-place some one’s sure to find it; but they’d never think of looking inside a block lying outside your door. You see, I picked a big hole in it, put in my stuff, then a big wedge of flannel, rammed some snow on the top, poured a drop of water over, and in half an hour it was a solid block.”

“Well, let’s get it and go, before those other scoundrels come back.”

“You needn’t fear them, my son. Scruff would let us know if they were near. I only wish they would come, so as we could have a fight. Taking my stores like that.”

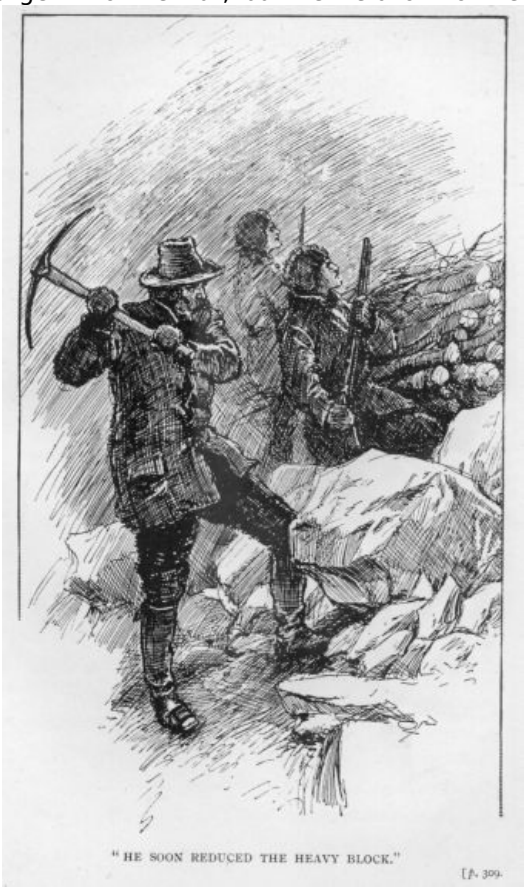
“But about this man?” said Abel.

“What about him, my son? We are doing all we can by letting him alone. I know enough of that sort of thing to be able to say that nothing can be done for him. No doctor could do him any good, if there was one to be had. Let’s get the gold and go back. Perhaps his mates will come back to him when we’re gone.”

“And if they do, what then?” said Dallas sharply.

“You mean, shall I lay wait for them and trap them, my son. No; I can’t do that now. Be best for them, though, to keep quite out o’ my way. Now then, open the door just a little way, so that you can squeeze out and get hold of the dog, Mr Dallas. If he gets in we shall have a scene.”

Dallas nodded, glanced at where the delirious man lay muttering to himself, and then slipped out, and was nearly thrown backward by the rush the dog made to get into the hut; but he held on to the animal’s thick coat till his companions had had time to slip out and the door was closed, the dog growling his disappointment the while.



“HE SOON REDUCED THE HEAVY BLOCK.” [P. 309.

“Now,” said Dallas merrily, “which is the block we ought to take?”

There was a heap of hardened snow on either side of the door—a heap composed of roughened blocks, and when the young men had declared their inability to say that one was more likely than another, Tregelly stooped down and rolled the very first one over and over.

“That’s the one,” he said; “but I may as well chip a hundredweight of ice off it. Wait while I get the pick from the side of the shaft, and you may as well keep a sharp look-out with cocked pieces. They might try to rush us.”

Dallas and Abel took the hint, and did better; they sheltered themselves behind the wood heap, ready for any attack that might come; while the dog, now pacified, walked here and there, snuffing about as if scenting danger.

Tregelly was back directly, and by dexterous usage of the pick-axe he soon reduced the heavy block to a more portable size, after which it was secured upon the sledge, and the return journey commenced.

A good look-out was kept, every man walking with his piece ready cocked, for there were plenty of places to be passed where they might well expect to meet with an ambush; but all went well, the ice-block forming but a light load, as the snow was hard beneath their feet.

To make matters easier, Abel kept up well, declaring again and again that he was not tired.

“Don’t overdo it,” Dallas said. “Even with you on the sledge it would be a light load for us two to draw.”

“You will not draw me, even if it would be,” replied Abel. “I feel stronger and brighter now than when I came out. It shows what a little energy will do.”

It was fairly light as they came within sight of the hut they had left that morning, and a faint curl of smoke rising from the roof showed that the fire was still alight; and all seemed to be perfectly right, till they were close up, when Dallas caught sight of a piece of timber lying across the front of the door, and began to run.

“Take care, my lad!” cried Tregelly; “There may be danger.”

Abel followed, but the dog out-speeded the little party, and rushing to the front, bounded in at the open door.

“Take care! take care!” cried Abel, as he saw that the door had been forced in their absence.

But he was too late, for his cousin had rushed up, rifle in hand, and sprung into the place.

Chapter Thirty One.

Scruff gives warning.

Abel was still weak and wanting in spirit from his long illnesses, but the courage displayed by his cousin roused him to action, and he followed the others into the hut.

But it was to face no enemies, only to find Scruff sniffing about—Tregelly stamping with rage.

“What is it?” cried Abel. “Somebody been in, of course.”

“Been in and carried off all they could lay hands on.”

“Took advantage of our absence, Bel, and loaded themselves with stores.”

“And all through not leaving the dog and risking the fire.”

“Poor Scruff!” said Abel. “Perhaps it’s as well, for they would probably have shot him.”

“They might as well shoot us,” cried Tregelly, “if this sort of thing is to go on.”

“Yes,” said Dallas. “Everybody round must be warned at once.”

Fortunately, further examination showed that the visitors to the hut must have been hurried in their movements, and had been either unable to carry away, or had overlooked, a portion of the remaining stores, so that starvation did not quite stare them in the face; but it was absolutely necessary that a journey to the settlement should be made at once.

“My job this time,” said Tregelly, as the matter was discussed by the fire, where, armed with an axe, he was busily chipping a way into the centre of the block of ice they had brought back. “Now, if those two mates of mine hadn’t grown sick of it, and gone back before the winter come on, they’d just have been useful now.”

“Did you quarrel?” asked Dallas.

“Quarrel? No, my son,” said Tregelly, as he chipped away at the ice. “They took the right notion one day that there was the long winter to face, and that they’d better share and be off while their shoes was good.”

“Well?” said Dallas.

“Well, we shared, and they went home.”

Then there was silence, save that the Cornishman went on chipping away at the ice, more and more carefully, for he was getting through the top of the shell, and the golden kernel was near, Scruff watching the proceedings in rather a cynical or dog-like way, as if sneering at the trouble these two-legged animals took to obtain something not good to eat.

“Yes; it’s terrible work in the dark,” said Abel. “Perhaps they were right.”

“But the long days are coming,” said Dallas cheerfully, “and then we’ll go farther north up one of the other creeks, towards the mountains. There is abundance of gold if we could find it. And we must—we will find it before we’ve done.”

“That’s right, my son,” cried Tregelly. “We three won’t give up till we’ve had a reg’lar good try. Now then, here we are: all mixed up and froze into a lump. Just hand me that iron bucket, Mr Wray, and I’ll chip it out into that, and throw it down by the fire. Wonder,” he added, as he began to break out the gilded ice, “whether there’s much of my share left.”

The pieces of ice and gold went on rattling down till the last scrap was emptied out, and the hollowed block of ice tossed out of the door.

“Let’s see,” said Tregelly, “my two mates said that at the end of the winter there’d only be about two hundred shillings’ worth. But they were wrong,” he continued, with a merry laugh, “for all my share’s here, and I’ve added a bit more to it—enough to pay for what we want from down the river; so I haven’t done so badly, after all.”

“You have done wonders,” cried Dallas.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve worked pretty hard, though,” said Tregelly, giving the contents of the bucket a twist round and pouring off some of the melted ice into another bucket. “Looks pretty, don’t it, my sons? but hardly worth all the trouble one takes to get it.”

He pushed the bucket right in among the embers, and the contents began to steam, till all the ice was melted, when the dirty water was drained away and the gold then turned carefully out on the iron cake griddle, baked to dryness on the wood ashes, and then examined.

“That would make Mr Redbeard’s ugly mouth water if he could see it, my sons, eh?”

“Yes, it looks tempting,” said Dallas. “Put it away.”

“Nay; we’ve agreed to share now, my sons. Let’s take out enough for me to spend down the river. Let the other go into your leather bag.”

“No, that would not be fair,” said Dallas quickly.

“I say it would, my sons; and I ought to know best. Look here: you’re going to help me take care of what I’ve got, and I’m going to help you. Sometimes you’ll get more; sometimes I shall; so you see it will come all square in the end. There,” he said, in conclusion, as he roughly scraped a portion of the glittering heap aside, “what do you say to that being enough?”

“I’d take more,” said Abel; “provisions will be dearer than ever.”

“Right; so they will. Well, that must be plenty. Now then, where’s your bag?”

This was produced, rather unwillingly, from the hiding-place.

“That’s right,” he continued, as the glittering treasure was poured into the leather bag. “Now then, we’ll just see what we can do in the way of prog for me to take. I can hold out pretty well on some cake and plenty of tobacco. Then I’ll be off.”

“When do you mean to go?” said Abel.

“Go, my son? Why, now, directly. Sooner the better. Those chaps won’t come back till they want some more prog. I tell you what you might do, though; go to the first shanty and tell the neighbour about those two being out on the rampage, and ask him to pass the word all along the line.”

An hour later Tregelly was ready to start, and shook hands. Then he hesitated.

“What is it?” said Dallas.

“I was thinking whether I ought to go round by my claim and see how that fellow’s getting on. Sometimes I’m pulled one way, sometimes I’m pulled another. But going perhaps means a bullet in my jacket, so I won’t go.”

He threw the leather band over his shoulder, and the next minute the sledge runners were creaking and crackling as they glided over the hardened snow, while Dallas stood listening with his companion till the last sound died out, and then hurriedly fetched load after load of fire-logs, with the dog busily at work exploring the neighbourhood in all directions, coming back at five-minute intervals panting and sending up his visible breath, till Dallas bade him go in.

“Dal,” said Abel, after a few minutes’ pause, during which they had been stacking the wood neatly in one corner, “don’t you feel glad that you saved Scruff’s life?”

“I should think I do. He’s going to prove a regular policeman on the beat.”

A low, deep growl came from the dog.

“Hullo! Does he object to being called a bobby?”

“Hist! No,” whispered Abel, darting to the hooks upon which the rifles were hung. For the dog had trotted softly to the door, and stood looking down at the narrow opening at the bottom, and was growling more deeply than before.

“There’s some one coming,” whispered Dallas, “and that fire makes it as light within here as day.”

The two young men darted close to the side, and drew the curtain-like rugs over the door and the little shuttered window.

Just as this was completed the dog growled again, and then burst into a deep-toned bay.

Chapter Thirty Two.

The enemy in the dark.

“Ahoy there! Keep that dog quiet,” cried a familiar voice from some distance off.

“It’s all right,” cried Dallas with a sigh of relief. “Norton.”

“Here, Scruff, lie down, old man,” cried Abel. “Friends, friends.”

The dog whined, and waved his bushy tail as the door was opened, and their bluff friend came into the glow shed by the fire.

“How are you, my lads? Haven’t seen you for ages. Didn’t know you had started a dog.”

“He’s a visitor,” said Dallas. “Come in.”

The man entered and looked sideways at the dog, who had begun to smell his legs.

“Not treacherous, is he? Some of these Eskimo are brutes to snap.”

“No, he understands you are friends,” said Abel. “Lie down, Scruff.”

The dog crouched, and watched the visitor as he sat down on a box, took out his pipe, and lit it.

“Thought I’d give you a look in as I didn’t feel worky. How’s things going?”

“We were coming to warn you,” said Dallas; and he related what had passed.

“Them?” said Norton, springing up and putting out his pipe; “I was in hopes they were hanged. Well, I’ll be off; this means a serious matter for them. We shall have to get up a hunt and stop this. Will you join?”

“Of course,” said the young men in a breath.

“Then good-bye; only mind this—if you hear firing come and help.”

“Yes; and you’ll do the same?”

“Trust me,” said the man shortly, and he shook hands and hurried away.

The next four days passed anxiously enough, and they heard no more of Norton and his friends. The first two nights watch was kept, the occupants of the hut taking turn and turn of three hours. But this duty, somewhat in accordance with the proverb of familiarity breeding contempt, was deputed to Scruff, who, however, was more contemptuous than either of his masters; for he kept the watch carefully curled-up with his tail across his eyes, in the spot where the warmest glow from the fire struck.

The fifth day passed without any news being heard from the other scattered claim-holders, and it was thought possible, though hardly likely, that Tregelly might return.

The night came on intensely black, with intervals of perfect stillness, followed by puffs of icy wind, which were charged with tiny sharp spicules of ice, which made the face tingle at the slightest exposure to its influence.

“He will not be here to-night,” said Dallas, after looking out; “there’s a storm brewing, and it is too dark to travel, so we may as well give him up.”

“We had better sit up a few hours. He may come.”

So, instead of creeping into their sleeping-bags after they had banked up the fire and made all snug, they sat talking, till warmth and weariness combined to make them drowsy, and they lay down, to fall asleep directly.

In an hour or two the blazing fire had given place to a heap of wood ashes, over which, as the rising wind swept round the place, what seemed to be a faint phosphorescent light played for a few moments and then died out.

Scruff was curled-up so tightly that he looked fixed, and he seemed blind and deaf to everything, till towards the middle of the night a watcher, had there been one, would have seen that there were two bright points visible through the thick brush so closely curled round, while directly after the dog’s ears seemed to prick up.

If there had been a watcher he would in all probability have attributed this to fancy, consequent upon the faint glow which came and went about the embers, as the wind sighed round the lonely hut; for shadows darkened, and various objects grew more or less defined.

Then all idea of want of reality would have passed away, for the dog suddenly and silently sprang to his feet, took a step or two towards the door, and then stood with his head turned on one side, listening.

He remained perfectly motionless for quite a minute, as the glow from the fire grew less and less till he was almost invisible. Then suddenly throwing up his head, he uttered a low, deep-toned bark, which brought the cousins from their beds, each seizing upon the rifle laid ready.

“What is it, Scruff?” cried Dallas. “Some one there?”

There was another deep-toned bark, and the dog sprang to the door and rose up on its hind-legs, tearing at the rug which covered it until it fell.

Scruff stood there with his head on one side, listening for some minutes, during which the silence was painful in the extreme. Dallas had sprung to one side of the door, Abel to the other, and they stood close up to the rough walls, the only place where they could be in safety, for there they were beyond the vision of any one who peered through the shuttered window or the apertures of the door left exposed by the tearing down of the rough hanging.

The simplest thing, and an act which would have left them more freedom, would have been to have quenched the fire at once. But there was no water at hand, and there was sufficient light from the glowing embers to expose every movement to an enemy without.

They stood there with every nerve on the strain, listening, while the dog whined uneasily, took a trot round the fire, and returned to the door, to stand with his head on one side again.

“There must be some one out there,” whispered Abel.

Dallas nodded, and made a sign to his cousin to be silent, for the dog whined uneasily again, turning to the young man, thrusting his muzzle against his hand, and looking up at him as if waiting for orders. The next moment he was at the door again, and reared up with his paws against the bar, at which he tore as if to get it down, so that he might go out into the night.

“Here, I know,” cried Abel excitedly, “he must hear or feel in some way that Tregelly is close here.”

“He would not come on at this time of night.”

“Why not? It’s as dark most of the day as it is now. Let’s open the door and give a hail.”

“No; listen,” whispered Dallas. “He would do that.”

“If he were within reach.”

“He must be within reach for the dog to know,” whispered Dallas. But as he spoke he doubted his own opinion, for it seemed possible that a half-wild dog’s sensibilities might be sufficiently keen to feel the coming of a friend.

“Here, what is it, old fellow?” he said softly. “Some one there?”

The dog whined and tore at the bar.

“It is as I say, Dal,” said Abel excitedly. “Look at him. Here, Scruff, old lad, what is it?”

The dog growled.

“That doesn’t sound as if he scented a friend, Bel.”

“He does, I tell you,” cried Abel angrily; for he was prone to be irritable as a result of his many sufferings. “Here, let’s have the door open at once.”

It was as if the dog understood his words, for he dropped on all fours and uttered a deep-toned bay.

“IT WAS AS IF THE DOG UNDERSTOOD HIS WORDS, FOR HE DROPPED ON ALL FOURS AND UTTERED A DEEP-TONED BAY.” [p. 326.

“All right, Scruff, we’ll let you go,” cried Abel, and seizing the rough bar, he was in the act of raising it from the notch in which it rested, when *bang—bang*, two shots were fired just outside, and simultaneously the door shook violently, there was a peculiar rending, splintering sound in the rough boards, and Dallas’s heart gave a spasmodic leap, for he saw his cousin fall to the ground.

“Bel, lad! Hurt?” panted Dallas, stepping forward and dropping on one knee by his cousin’s side.

As he spoke there were two more shots, the bullets striking the door, and one passing clean through with a whirring, humming sound, to strike the wall on the other side, Dallas’s position in all probability saving his life, for the sound seemed to pass just over his head.

“Dal, old man! Hurt?” was Abel’s answer.

“No, not touched. Why don’t you answer? Were you hit?”

“No; I only ducked down, it seemed so near.”

“Save your shot,” said Dallas hoarsely. “When we fire it must be as a last resource.”

Abel nodded.

“Right,” he said.

“Crawl to your own side. I’ll take this. The bullets will not come through the logs of the wall.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Abel softly; but he obeyed his cousin’s order, just as a couple more shots were fired through.

The next moment Dallas was stamping and kicking out the fire, with the result that the interior of the hut grew lighter.

“Don’t, don’t do that, Dal,” whispered Abel. “You’re right in the line of fire, too.”

As a proof that their position was being made more precarious a couple more shots were fired, the bullets buzzing across the interior.

“Must,” was the reply. “There, the ashes will soon grow faint;” and in a few minutes the place was nearly black; but at the same time it was full of strangling wood-smoke which rose slowly towards the opening in the roof which formed their chimney.

Meanwhile shot after shot was fired through the door, and at every dull thud or tearing of the stout woodwork, the dog dashed about, snarling and barking furiously.

“Dal! Dal!” cried Abel passionately; “are we to stop here doing nothing?”

“Yes; we are not going to shoot at random. Wait a bit, and our time will come. Have you plenty of cartridges handy?”

“Yes; a pocketful.”

“Don’t waste them, then. One will be sufficient to silence an enemy. We must wing him—that will be sufficient. I say!”

“Yes, what?”

“Bob Tregelly would not knock at the door like this, would he?”

“Don’t. I made sure it was he.”

The firing went on through the door, and in the darkness, which now grew profound, the besieged made out that the direction of the bullets was varied, for those which came through struck the wall in different places—high, low, and to right and left; and the result of this was that suddenly, in spite of Dallas’s endeavours to keep the dog close to him in shelter, he escaped from him to bound about, barking savagely, and the next minute, as a couple of shots came through the door, he uttered a peculiar snarling snap, and threw himself with a heavy thud against the door.

“He has got it, Bel,” whispered Dallas. “Here, Scruff! Scruff!”

The dog came to him, whining, and then uttered a dismal howl.

“Poor old chap! you must lick the place,” said Dallas. “I’ll see to it when I can get a light.”

“Badly wounded, Dal?” said Abel.

“Can’t tell. No; not very bad, or he would have lain still. Has he come to you?”

“Yes,” said Abel, from the other side of the door; “he has shoved his head against me.”

There was a pause then, and an ejaculation full of horror.

“What is it?” anxiously.

“Ugh! The poor fellow’s bleeding!”

Chapter Thirty Three.

A death shriek.

“Wait a bit—wait a bit!” said Dallas through his teeth; “we’ll pay the cowardly brutes yet. Bel, it makes me feel like a savage. I could enjoy pulling the rope that was to hang them!”

“I couldn’t; but I wish it was daylight and I could get a good aim at one of them. I say, they’ll riddle that door.”

“Wait a bit,” whispered Dallas, with a curious little laugh, “and we’ll answer their riddle.”

The firing went on persistently, but the dog barked no more—only gave vent from time to time to a low growl, while the listeners could tell from the sound that he was applying an animal’s natural remedy to his wound by licking it diligently.

And the firing went on as if the enemy were searching every part of the hut with their bullets.

“Dal,” whispered Abel suddenly, “don’t be startled.”

“You’re not going to be such an idiot as to open the door to the fire, are you?”

“No; but it would not be idiotic,” said Abel quietly; “for I feel as if I could hit one of them by seeing the flash of his piece.”

“What are you going to do, then?—let the dog out?”

“No, not now he is wounded. I wish we had set him free, though, at the first—he’d have startled the wretches!”

“They’d have done for him with their bowies,” said Dallas. “What am I not to be startled at? Ah–h–ah! You brutes! Lie right down, Bel! They’re firing at the wall now.”

“Then it’s time for it. Look here, I’m going to humbug them.”

Two more reports came, and, as the sound died out, Abel uttered so unearthly a shriek that Dallas felt it go through him in a shudder that chilled him to the bone.

“Bel!” he panted wildly.

“All right; did it sound natural?” was whispered back.

“Oh, you wretch!” whispered Dallas; and Abel laughed.

“They’ll think they’ve done for the dog and one of us,” said Abel softly. “Let them go on firing now for a bit, and then it will be your turn; only don’t squeak like I did.”

“I see,” said Dallas.

“You feel for something big, and when they’ve fired a bit more hurl it hard at the door, and then give a big groan.”

“All right!”

“They’ll feel sure then, and come up and begin to force open the door or the shutters. Then we must let them have it.”

“Yes; four barrels at once,” said Dallas.

“And some seasoning directly after from our pepper-boxes.”

The dog was so quiet now that Abel trembled for his fate; but he and his companion, as they lay there in the darkness, had something else to think about, for the firing went on steadily, and they wondered it did not bring up some of the miners from their claims here and there.

“Surely they’re not too cowardly to come to our help,” thought Dallas.

Four shots were fired now in quick succession, as if the enemy were anxious to bring matters to an end, and Abel whispered, “Try it directly they fire again.”

“Yes,” said Dallas; and directly after Abel heard the handle of the galvanised iron bucket chink softly.

Then came two more shots, and in an instant Dallas dashed the bucket against the door with all his might, uttered a heavy groan, and was silent.

The firing outside ceased now, showing that the ruse had been successful; and the two young men held their breath as they listened for the nearer approach of the enemy, which they felt sure must now be imminent; but they listened a long time in vain.

At last, though, the crackling of the snow outside, as from the pressure of a heavy foot, warned them that their time was coming, and they lay ready with the muzzles of their pieces ready to direct at door or window, as the necessity might arise, and their revolvers on the floor by their knees.

Which was it to be—door or window? They would have given years of their lives to know at which to aim, and they felt now what guesswork it must be.

“They’ll come to the window, I hope,” thought Dallas; “and if they do I won’t fire till I am sure of winging one of them.”

But though they waited, no such opportunity seemed likely to come, for there was not a sound at the front after they heard the soft crackling of the snow.

All at once, when the horrible suspense seemed greater than they could bear, and Dallas felt that he must spring to his feet, rush to the door, and begin firing at random, it seemed to both that an icy hand had grasped each of them by the throat.

It was another exemplification of the aphorism that it is the unexpected which always happens. For all at once, after a long period of perfect silence, there was a peculiar grating sound at the back of the hut instead of at the front, and for a few moments both the defenders of the place were puzzled.

Then, as the sound was repeated, they realised what it was. There were several pieces of thickish pine-trunk lying outside in the snow, pieces that had been cut to form uprights for the rough shedding over their shaft. These pieces were very rough and jagged with the remains of the boughs which had been lopped off, so that they would be as easy to climb—almost—as a ladder. Two of these had been softly placed so that they lay along the slope of the roof, and up them one of the enemy was cautiously climbing, while his companion was holding them at the foot.

“Bel must grasp this,” thought Dallas, who dared not whisper, for fear of giving the alarm to the enemy and putting them on their guard. For, cunning enough in the plans that had been devised, the enemy were about to ignore door

and window, and make their approach by the opening in the roof through which the smoke passed.

There was a sort of lid of boards nailed a foot above to prevent the snow from falling straight through, but there was ample room for an active man to lower himself down through the hole; and, drawing a deep breath full of satisfaction, Dallas changed the direction of the muzzle of his gun, feeling quite sure that the one who was to attack would lower himself down feet first, so that the task of performing vengeance would be easy as far as one of the men was concerned, and at any rate they could make sure of him.

Dallas's teeth gritted softly together as he waited, and Abel's heart beat with heavy throbs, for he had been as quick to grasp the way of attack as his cousin. But they had not fully fathomed the enemy's plans, and were completely taken by surprise.

It was only a matter of a few minutes, but it seemed like an hour as the young men strained their eyes in the black darkness, and mentally saw one of their foes climb slowly up till he reached the sloping roof, up which he progressed steadily, the two pieces of tree rasping and crunching the thick, icy snow which clung to the roof; and then fingers trembled about triggers as the defenders tried to guess at the opening exactly in the centre of where the ridge-pole ran.

And now the sounds came more plainly; a hand was evidently feeling about for the opening, for a bit or two of snow from the edge of the hole—pieces which had not melted away—fell down amongst the embers with a soft pat, and a low, hissing sound of steam arose from the hot fire-hole.

"Now he knows exactly," thought Dallas, "and I shall hear him turn and begin to lower himself down. We ought to wait till he is more than half through before we fire. Will Bel think of this?"

He drew a long breath, for there was a heavy, rustling sound above, as if the man on the roof was altering his position. Then there came a sharp scratch, for the greater part of a box of matches had been struck all at once. Then there was a brilliant flash of light, the momentary glimpse of a big hairy hand, from which the burning matches began to fall, while the interior of the dark hut was lit up, showing the dog, with eyes glistening and bared teeth, crouched to spring, and the two young men kneeling, each with his weapon raised.

But they did not fire, feeling that it would be madness to trust to hitting the unseen, for the hand was too small a target; and before they could make up their minds what to do next, two shots were fired from outside, and a cry rang out on the midnight air.

Chapter Thirty Four.

The striking of another match.

The long-silent dog burst out into a hoarse bark once more, as the two young men knelt there as if paralysed, and the tiny splints died out one by one where they had fallen amongst the wood ashes, while from the roof there was a horrible scrambling, struggling sound, hoarse cries, the crunching of the frozen snow, followed by the scraping sound as of some one sliding down the slope of the roof, and then a dull, heavy thud, a groan or two, and finally complete silence.

"He has it," said Dallas hoarsely.

"Hush! Hark!" cried Abel.

For there was another shot, then another, and another, till quite a dozen had rung out, each growing more and more distant; and as the young men dashed to the door now and threw it open, they saw flashes of light as other shots were fired. Then came shouting, voices calling to one another.

"Some of the lads heard the firing at last, and come to our help," said Dallas.

"Look out; there's some one coming back," whispered Abel.

"I hear him. Be ready, and if he's an enemy let him have it. Hah! Bravo! Good dog! You're not so very bad, then."

For at the sound of the heavy footsteps coming at a trot over the creaking snow Scruff uttered a fierce growl, began to bay and dashed out into the darkness.

"He'll have him," said Dallas. "But come on; we mustn't leave it all to him."

"Hullo there!" came in a cheery, familiar voice. "Good old dog!" and Scruff's fierce bay changed to a whining yelp of pleasure, while Tregelly's hearty cry of "Ahoy!" came.

"Ahoy! Ahoy!" was sent out joyfully in answer, and directly after the big Cornishman came trotting up.

"Thank God, my sons," he cried. "But what about that chap on the roof? Did I bring him down with those two shots?"

"Was it you that fired?" cried the young men in a breath.

"Of course. Who did you think it was?"

"The enemy—we did not know—some of the others come to our help," was the confused answer, given in a duet.

“Nay, it was me, my sons; he gave me such a chance—lighting up a whole box of lucifers. I could see him splendid. Going to burn you out, wasn’t he?”

“No; to see if we were dead, and, if not, to fire again.”

“I’m afraid the other beggar has got away.”

“But you had some one with you?” said Dallas eagerly.

“Yes, I suppose so, but it is so plaguy dark. I was so long away that I made up my mind—or something I can’t explain made it up for me—to come straight on and get to you early in the night; but that blessed sledge got heavier and heavier, so that I had to stop and rest and have a pipe now and then. Last time I was going to stop I was so near my shanty that I thought I’d go round by it, and see how things were there. So I did; left the sledge and crept up to it, to find a bit of fire smouldering, showing some one lived there; but nobody was at home. No, that isn’t right, for when I got inside I struck a match, and somebody was at home; but he didn’t live there. Understand?”

“That scoundrel who was bitten by the dog?” cried Dallas excitedly.

“Was he there?” cried Abel.

“His mummy was,” said Tregelly. “I dunno how they could do it—I couldn’t. I didn’t want to live in such company as that. I stayed just as long as the match burned, and then I came away as fast as I could. Ugh! it wasn’t nice. Those fellows can’t be men.”

“And then you came on?”

“Yes, my son. I came along at a horrible crawl, which was getting slower and slower; for it’s no use to deny it—us big chaps have so much to carry on one pair of legs that we’re downright lazy ones. There I was, getting slower and slower, and smoking my pipe, and in a rare nasty temper, cussing away at that old sledge for being so heavy, and that sleepy that I kept dropping off fast as a top, and waking up again to find myself going on like a bit o’ machinery. ‘This won’t do,’ I says to myself; and I roused up again, knowing that I couldn’t have been asleep long, because my pipe wasn’t out; but all the same I dreamed a lot, all about dragging a truck on a tram-line down in Botallack mine, right away under the sea. Then I’m blessed if I wasn’t asleep again, fast as a top—chap told me once that didn’t mean a spinning top, but a *taupe*, which he said was French for dormouse. But that don’t matter, do it?”

“No, no,” said Abel impatiently. “Go on.”

“All right, my son. Where had I got to?”

“You were fast asleep again,” said Dallas.

“So it was, my son; and then something woke me, and what do you think it was?”

“You heard the firing?”

“Nay; I must have yawned or sneezed, for I’d dropped my pipe; and I s’pose I’d slept longer that time, and it must have been out, for I couldn’t see a spark in the dark, and although I went down on my hands and knees, and crawled in all directions with my nose close to the ground, I couldn’t smell it.”

“What did you do then?” said Abel.

“Swore, my son, till I was ashamed of myself, and very thankful I was that you gents couldn’t hear me. ‘They’d drop your acquaintance, my son,’ I said to myself, ‘if they heard you.’ Then I got up again, and was feeling for the trace, to start off again, thinking a deal of my poor old pipe, when ‘Hullo!’ I says to myself, ‘firing!’ There it was, plain enough, two shots together, and after a bit two more.

“That was enough for me, so I slips my rifle out from where it was tied on to the sledge. Next minute, as two more shots were fired, I came, leaving the sledge to take care of itself—coming on as fast as I could, feeling sure that the enemy was at you chaps, but wondering why the firing should be so one-sided. Couldn’t make it out a bit.”

“But it went on, and I was wide awake enough now, and hadn’t come much farther when I was brought up short by the clicking of guns being cocked, and some one says in a low voice, ‘Stand,’ he says, ‘or we’ll blow you out of your skin.’ ‘Two can play at that,’ I says: ‘who are you?’ ‘Norton, and six more,’ says the voice; ‘who are you?’ ‘Bob Tregelly o’ Trevallack, Cornwall, mates,’ I says. ‘Good man and true,’ says another voice. ‘Look here, mate, there’s firing going on up at your place; we’ve heard it ever so long, and couldn’t quite make out where it was, but it’s there for certain.’ ‘Yes,’ I says, ‘come on; but let’s spread out and take or make an end of those who are firing.’”

“Hah!” ejaculated Abel. “Go on.”

“They did just as I told ’em, and spread out, while I crept nigher and nigher, reglarly puzzled, for the firing had stopped. Last of all I saw that chap’s face as he lit up a whole box of matches. That was enough for me. I knew him again.”

“Was it Redbeard?” said Dallas excitedly.

“No, my son; I’m sorry to say it wasn’t the moose with the finest pair of horns; but I had to take what I could get, and I fired. But I’ve left the sledge out yonder to take care of itself. I hope none o’ them ruffians o’ street-boys’ll find it and get helping themselves.”

“Then Redbeard has got away again,” said Abel.

“Don’t know yet, my son, till the others come back. They may have had better luck than I did.”

At that moment Scruff burst out in a deep-toned bark from the back of the hut.

“Look out,” said Tregelly sharply, as they halted, having reached the front. “We may get a shot if he’s only wounded.”

“Spread out, and let’s take both sides together.”

They separated in the darkness, and advanced with finger on trigger, ready to fire. “Stand!”

“Stand!”

“Oh, it’s you!”

“Oh, it’s you!”

“Yes, my son; it’s me. Where’s the game I shot?”

“We have not seen him,” said Dallas. “He must have crawled away.”

“Wounded beasts are dangerous,” said Tregelly, “so look out.”

“But where’s the dog?” said Abel, in a hoarse whisper. “Hi! Scruff! Scruff!”

A sharp bark came from close at hand in the darkness.

“Look here,” whispered the big Cornishman; “you two get your pieces to your shoulders and be ready. I’m going to chance it and light a match. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then come on!”

Chapter Thirty Five.

The help that came late.

There was a momentary pause, and then—

Scratch went the match, and the tiny flame feebly lit up the place, to show them the great dog sitting at the edge of the shaft, looking down.

Then the light went out.

“All right, my sons,” said Tregelly coolly. “Let’s go in and get the lantern. The beggar has rolled about, and dropped down the pit. Sorry we can’t cover him up. But we can’t, on account of the gold.”

Just then there came a hail, and another, and another, while when the lantern was lit and held up it served as a beacon to bring six men up to the hut door.

“Got the other one?” cried Tregelly.

“No; he got away in the darkness,” said Norton. “But what about the one you shot at?”

“He’s yonder,” said Tregelly. “Rolled down into the shaft.”

So it proved, for by the light of the lantern the body of one of the marauders was hauled up.

“Stone dead,” said Tregelly.

“Well, it has saved him from being hanged.”

“And others from having to do it,” said another.

“But no one will be safe till his mate’s in the same state,” said Tregelly.

“And he soon will be,” said another. “Glad we all came in time to help you two.”

“We are most grateful, gentlemen,” said Dallas. “Leave the unhappy wretch where he is. Come inside, and rest and refresh.”

It was about an hour later, when their fellow gold-seekers who had come to their help had gone, promising to return next day and help over the interment of the dead man, that Dallas turned to Tregelly, who was seated with his big arms resting upon his knees, gazing down into the cheery fire that had been lit.

“Sleepy, Bob?”

“Nay, my son. Never felt so wide awake in my life. I’m thinking.”

“What about?” asked Abel.

“About having killed a man,” said the big fellow gravely.

“It was in self-defence,” said Dallas.

“I dunno, my son. You see, I never give him a chance. Seems rather cowardly.”

“The wretch was trying to destroy our lives,” cried Abel hotly.

“Eh?”

“Yes; he and his companion had been firing at us for long enough,” said Abel.

“Ah,” cried Dallas, “and they did wound the dog. Here, old fellow, let’s look at you.”

In effect, the dog was just then licking at one particular part of his back, and examination proved that a bullet had ploughed off a little strip of skin.

“Only make him sore for a bit,” said Tregelly, after he had examined the dog in turn. “Poor old chap! I wish I’d a bit o’ pitch to touch it over for you. But I hadn’t thought of that, my sons.”

“Thought of what?”

“’Bout him trying to kill you. That didn’t make it quite so bad o’ me, did it?”

“Bad? It was stern justice, meted out to a murderer,” said Dallas firmly.

Tregelly looked at him for some moments thoughtfully. “Think so?” he said.

“Of course!” cried Abel, “and so do I. You didn’t want us to be killed, did you?”

“Lor’ a mussy me, my son! of course not. That’s why I took aim at him.”

“And saved our lives, Bob,” cried Dallas, clapping him hard on the shoulder.

“You think, then, that they’d have settled you if I hadn’t come and stopped their little game?”

“I feel sure of it,” cried Dallas.

“Hah! Yes, of course. Thank ye, my sons. I was feeling a bit uncomfortable, and beginning to think that I should be having the chap coming to bed to me every night and telling me how I’d shot him in a cowardly way; but I shan’t now. That’s done me a lot o’ good. Hah! I feel now as if I should like a pipe.”

The big, amiable, honest face lit up, and was lightened by a smile as he began searching his pockets for his tobacco-pouch and pipe.

“You see, I never killed a man before,” he said. “But you can hardly call a chap like that a man. More like a wild beast—sort o’ tiger.”

“It’s insulting a wild beast to say so, Bob,” cried Dallas warmly. “A wild beast kills for the sake of food. What’s the matter?”

“Pipe,” said Tregelly, rising slowly and reaching out for the lantern. “I told you I dropped it out yonder, and it’s somewhere by the sledge.”

“Leave that till daylight, and we’ll go with you.”

“Won’t be any daylight for hours and hours to come,” said Tregelly, putting out the light and feeling for his matches. “I can’t wait all that time for a pipe. ’Sides, the sledge ought to be brought in.”

“You mean to go now,” said Dallas.

“Oh, yes, my son, I mean to go now. ’Tarn’t so very far.”

“All right; we’ll go with him, Bel. There’s no fear of the other scoundrel being about.”

“I don’t know, my sons,” said Tregelly gravely. “He can’t be very far away, and he’s got his knife into us very deep now. P’r’aps it would be as well if you stopped here and got the breakfast ready.”

“If we did,” replied Dallas, “we should feel that you would never come back to eat it. Eh, Bel?”

“Yes; I’m going. We must leave Scruff to keep house for us this time.”

But the dog did not seem to see matters in the same light. One minute he was giving a finishing lick to his wound; the next he had shot out through the open door, barking excitedly, and looking ready to scent out and run down the

last of the savage gang.

Chapter Thirty Six.

By the skin of his teeth.

Aided by Scruff, a fairly correct line was made for the forsaken sledge, the dog seeming to know exactly what was wanted, and preventing them from over-running the spot where it had been left.

This was the only thing they dreaded, for the track was—through not being beaten—almost obliterated again and again by falls of snow; but it was tolerably familiar now, the winding creek and the edge of the scrubby forest forming pretty good guides.

It was still very dark when they reached the place, Scruff uttering a low snuffling whine; but it was not easy to find a small object like a briar wood pipe.

“Must have been somewhere here I dropped it,” said Tregelly. “If it was daylight I should see it directly on the white snow. Better light the lantern, I suppose.”

“It would be like inviting a shot from Redbeard if he is near.”

“Think so, my son?” said Tregelly thoughtfully.

“He would be almost sure to make for his old lair.”

“My old lair, you mean, my son.”

“Well, your old lair, then.”

“Yes, it do seem likely,” said the big fellow, rubbing his ear. “Giving him such a chance to aim at us. Yes, it won’t do; but I must find that pipe. Look here, s’pose I go up to my hut and see if he’s there.”

“Do,” said Dallas, “and we’ll go with you and trap him if he is there.”

“Hoomph!” grunted Tregelly. “I’m feared there won’t be any trapping, my sons. If he’s there he won’t be took without a hard fight. Hadn’t you two better let that be till the other fellows come back? Then we could lay siege to him and finish him off for it must come to that.”

“We are three to one,” said Dallas quietly. “It seems cowardly to wait for more.”

“Dunno,” said their companion. “He don’t fight fair, or I’d tackle him myself. You see, he aren’t a man; he’s a savage beast. Look here, we’ve got the sledge; let’s take it on. I’ll go without my pipe.”

“No; you shall not,” said Dallas. “Let’s go to the hut. He may not be there. Perhaps fled far enough.”

“I dunno, my son. He’d run when he was beat for his old shelter, and I don’t like making you two run bad risks just because I want a pipe o’ bacca.”

“We do not look at it in that light, Bob,” said Dallas firmly. “This man is our mortal enemy, who seems determined to have our lives out of revenge, and it is our duty to save those lives at his expense. After what has passed I look upon him as a sort of human tiger whose claws must be drawn. Let’s take this opportunity of capturing the brute. We’ll go together and draw his fire; or perhaps we shall be able to see and disable him without his being able to do us any mischief.”

Tregelly shook his head solemnly.

“Chaps like that, with their lives in their hands, are all eyes, and when they aren’t all eyes they’re all ears. I don’t like this business, my sons; but what you say’s quite right, and I can’t help feeling that we’ve got a chance at him now, and the dark may help us; while if he’s gone back there and roused up the fire I can make sure of him. There, it’s got to be done, and if we leave it the job may be worse.”

“Yes, perhaps much.”

“That’s so, my son. We shall have to go about with the knowledge that that fellow’s always close at hand, marking us down for a shot.”

“Better seize this opportunity,” said Abel hoarsely. “I feel as if we may master him now.”

“What do you say, Mr Dallas?” asked Tregelly.

“I say as my cousin does. Let’s try.”

“Good, then, we’ll go; on’y mind this, my sons: we’re going because it’s our dooty.”

“Of course.”

“Not because I want a pipe.”

“No; you have already proved that you do not wish to be selfish,” said Dallas, “so come on.”

“Nay, I’ll lead, my sons,” cried the big fellow. “It’s my shanty, and I know every step of the way. You’d go right up to the door, and he’d have first chance of a shot. That won’t do for me. We must get first chance, and make him shoot at random, which means at nothing at all. Now then, follow me. Don’t fire unless you get a good chance.”

“But what is your plan, Bob?” said Dallas eagerly.

“Get him to fire, my son, and then go at him before he has time to load again.”

The lantern was left with the sledge, and with every nerve now upon the strain the two young men followed their sturdy companion, who gave them but few words as to their proceedings.

“Don’t be in a hurry to fire,” he said, “but when you get your chance, let him have it. Now, tread softly, and come on.”

The distance was comparatively short, and Abel’s heart beat fast and loud, as, upon passing through a thick clump of pines, there in front of them shone the light of a wood fire through the open door of Tregelly’s hut.

The owner stopped short and whispered.

“He’s there,” he said; “the fire has been made up.”

“But he must have been and gone,” said Dallas. “The door is wide open.”

“His artfulness,” said the Cornishman. “It’s so as he can hear our coming, and to throw dust in our eyes. He’s there, or else outside waiting for us, so look out.”

They crept cautiously on, abreast now and hand on trigger, ready to fire at a moment’s notice, front, right, or left, from wherever the danger appeared; but the icy snow crackled beneath their heavy boots, in spite of every care, and when they were about thirty yards from the open door they stopped short, feeling that the better way would be to step boldly forward, for their approach must have been heard.

But still Tregelly hesitated, feeling, as he did, that the peril was very great for them to advance into the light thrown from the open door, when the result would probably be a repetition of his own shot a few hours before.

“Open out,” he whispered suddenly, “and keep away from the light. I’ll take the right side; you two take the left, and when I whistle we’ll all rush in together.”

It was no time for disputation. Tregelly was leader, and Dallas and Abel felt it to be their duty to obey. Striking off, then, to the left into the shadow, which looked intensely black by contrast, they had one glimpse of Tregelly’s huge form, and then the broad band of ruddy light from the door cut off everything, while well upon their guard they approached nearer and nearer, feeling that Tregelly must be nearing the building at about the same rate.

It was a task which, in spite of the extremely short distance, made Dallas breathe hard, and feel as if he were going through some great exertion, before he was so close that he could nearly touch the rough trunks which formed the wall, the thick thatching of pine-boughs stretching out like the roof of a verandah, so that the darkness seemed more intense where they stood waiting for the signal which seemed as if it would never come.

And as Dallas stood in the deep silence the popping and crackling of the burning wood came out of the open doorway sharp and clear, while it seemed to him that Abel’s breath sounded as hoarse and loud as that of one in a deep sleep.

At last! a clear, sharp, chirruping trill, and Abel and Tregelly darted into the light as if urged forward by the same spring, while Dallas stood for the moment petrified—unable to stir. For from the upright logs close to which he stood a great hand seemed to dart out, holding him fast, while simultaneously another hand struck him a tremendous blow upon the shoulder.

He closed with his assailant, but the next moment he was hurled to the ground.

As, half-stunned by his fall, Dallas struggled to his feet, there was a heavy trampling heard as of one escaping in the darkness over the snowy ground, and at the same moment Tregelly and Abel appeared at the door in the full light of the fire.

“Where are you, lad?” shouted the former.

“Here, here!” panted Dallas.

“Hah!” cried Tregelly. “Fire, my lad, fire!”

Two more shots rang out in the direction of the retiring steps, with the result that there was a sudden cessation of the sounds; but directly after two more shots were fired out of the darkness, and a couple of bullets whistled through the open doorway.

In an instant Tregelly and Abel sprang to right and left, and fired again in the direction of the flashes they had seen.

“Missed him!” growled Tregelly, as the faint sound of retreating steps was again heard. “He’s too many for us. Don’t fire, my lads. Waste of powder and shot. How was it, Mr Dallas?”

There was no reply, Dallas standing close by breathing hard, with his hand pressed upon his shoulder.

“Are you there, Dal?” cried Abel anxiously, for his cousin was invisible in the darkness.

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” said Dallas, in a strange tone of voice.

“What is it, my son?” cried Tregelly anxiously.

“I’m afraid I’m hurt,” said Dallas, stooping to recover his rifle. “He struck me on the shoulder with his right hand, and the place is numbed. I can feel nothing there but a smarting pain; but it bleeds, and the cloth is cut.”

Tregelly caught him up in his arms as if he were a child, bore him into the hut, threw him on the bed, and tore off his jacket so as to expose the place to the light.

“Yes, he has knifed you, my son,” said Tregelly hoarsely; “but it’s a mere scratch. He meant it, though, but reached over a bit too far.”

“You are saying this to calm me,” said Dallas excitedly. “He struck me a tremendous blow.”

“Yes, my son; but it must have been with his wrist. I’m not cheating you. It’s the simple truth. It isn’t worth tying up.”

“Thank God!” sighed Dallas. “I suppose I’m a bit of a coward, but the horror of it made me feel sick as a dog.”

“Such a crack as he must have given you would have made me feel sick, my son. Did it knock you down?”

“No; I closed with him, but he tripped and threw me heavily.”

“Well, that would make you feel sick, my son, without anything else. Here, on with your jacket again, and let’s get out into the darkness. It’s like asking the beggar to come and pot us, standing here.”

They hurried out directly after, to stand listening; but all was still.

“Now then,” said Tregelly, “we’d best get the sledge and make our way home; but what do you think of my gentleman now? Oughtn’t we to scrunch him like one would a black beetle?”

“Yes,” said Abel fiercely, “and the first time we can. But where’s the dog? Can that be he in the distance?”

A faint baying sound, followed by what sounded like revolver shots, several in succession, was heard. Then once more all was still for a few moments, when the firing began again.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

When sleep is Master.

“Hear that?” cried Abel excitedly. “The scoundrel! The ruffian! He’s firing at the dog.”

“Yes, my son,” said Tregelly quietly; “and I’m not surprised, for old Scruff can be pretty nasty when he likes.”

“But you don’t stir. Are we going to stand here and listen to that poor brute being murdered?”

“It would be about madness to go after him, my son,” said Tregelly, coolly; “and after all, he isn’t likely to hit the dog in the dark.”

A few minutes later they found the sledge, and as they were about to start, Dallas kicked against something hard, which went spinning along the ice-covered snow.

“What’s that?” he said. “Why, Tregelly, it must be your pipe.”

“Yes. It struck against me,” cried Abel. “Here it is,” he added in triumph.

“Hooroar!” cried Tregelly. “Now, I call that fine, my sons. Why, if old Scruff comes back and says he’s killed Master Redbeard, this’ll be about as pleasant a time as I ever spent. But how’s your arm, Master Dallas?”

“Smarts, and feels wretched and numb, that’s all. I can help pull the sledge.”

“All right, my son,” cried Tregelly, giving the line a jerk; but in vain, for the sledge was immovable, the runners being frozen to the surface of the snow. “I say; think o’ that.”

Dallas and Abel gave the sledge a wrench, set it at liberty, and it glided smoothly on, Tregelly insisting on dragging it all the way back to the hut, where they shut themselves in, and then prepared an early breakfast; but before it was ready there was a familiar thump on the rough door, and Scruff was admitted, apparently free from fresh injuries, for he gave all an intelligent look, and then seated himself by the fire to lick his wound, before curling up and going to sleep.

“I wish I could do that,” said Dallas.

“Do it without the curl,” said Tregelly, smiling. “It’s the best thing for a man who has had such a shake as you have.”

“No, no. The ruffian may come back.”

“He won’t come yet, my son,” said Tregelly; “but if he should think it best to give us another call, don’t you be uneasy; we’ll wake you up.”

A quarter of an hour later Dallas was fast asleep, and Abel looked up at Tregelly inquiringly.

“Is the sleep natural?” he whispered.

“Yes; why shouldn’t it be?” was the reply.

“It seems so strange, after the excitement we have been through during the last twenty-four hours.”

“Done up, my son; regular exhausted, and wants rest.”

“But I could not sleep, knowing as I do that the enemy might attack us at any time. Think of the danger.”

“I wonder you ever went to sea, then, my son,” said Tregelly, good-humouredly. “There’s always danger of the ship sinking; and yet you went to your berth, I suppose, every night, and slept soundly enough, didn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“And I’ll be bound to say you go to sleep this morning before long.”

“Not I. Impossible,” said Abel, with a touch of contempt in his tone.

But Tregelly was the better judge of human nature, and before an hour had passed away, weariness, the darkness, and the warmth of the fire had combined to conquer, and Abel sank sidewise on the rough packing-case which formed his easy chair, and slept soundly till the short daylight had passed, and they were well on towards the evening of another day.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

The red glow.

Weary month after month passed by, with the indefatigable adventurers leading the life of labourers working in a terrible climate to win just a bare existence from the soil.

“I would not care so much if we could feel safe,” said Dallas; “but big as the country is, that scoundrel seems to be always on our track.”

“He do, he do, my son,” said Tregelly. “He means paying us off.”

“Well, we are doing no more now than when we started, while others are making fortunes. Let’s strike right up into the mountains, make a bold stroke for fortune, and give that scoundrel the slip.”

The start was made, the little party striking right away into one or other of the lonely valleys running northward; but it was always the same—the gold was no more plentiful, and again and again they had ample proof that their enemy, who seemed to have a charmed life, was still following them.

Constant disappointment had been their portion, and a general feeling of being utterly worn out was dulling their efforts, when toward the close of a dreary day Tregelly exclaimed:

“Look here, my sons; I think we’ve seen the end of that red-headed ruffian at last.”

“I wish I could think so,” said Dallas.

“No,” said Abel; “we shall see him again. I feel that he’ll be the death of us all.”

“Bah! you’re in the dumps again,” said Tregelly. “I feel that we must have completely given the scoundrel the slip by our last move. I’m not one of your grumbling sort, am I?”

“No, Bob, no,” said Dallas sadly. “I envy you the calm patience and perseverance you possess.”

The Cornishman laughed.

“Did possess, my son. I did have a lot, but it’s all used up to the last scrap, and I’m regularly done.”

Abel looked at him in surprise, but Dallas seemed too dejected to notice anything, and sat forward, haggard and staring, with his eyes fixed upon their struggling fire.

“Well, don’t you believe me?” said Tregelly.

“I always believe what you say, Bob; but I don’t understand what you mean now.”

“You don’t? Well, then, I’ll soon make you, my son. It’s like this: I feel just like a squirrel in a cage, galloping on over miles of wire and never getting a bit farther, or like one of those chaps on the old-fashioned treadmill, who were always going upstairs, but never got to the top.”

“Look here,” said Dallas, springing up suddenly from his seat in the rough shelter made with pine-boughs, where they

had been now for some days, while they tried the banks of a tiny creek, one of many which they had followed to their sources in their daring quest. “This is no time for idle talk; which is it to be? Shall we retreat at once, and try to get back to the main river, where we may find help, and perhaps save our lives, or go on?”

There was a dead silence, and then a gust of wind swept down the narrow valley, laden with fine, dusty snow, evidently a forerunner of a wintry storm.

“If we start back now,” said Abel at last, “we are not sure of reaching the settlement before the winter sets in.”

“And if we do we’ve nothing left to live upon, my sons. You see, those last supplies emptied the bag, and we’ve never settled down since. You both said, ‘Let it be a man or a mouse.’”

“And you said ‘All right,’” cried Dallas angrily.

“So I did, my son; but I hoped we should turn out men instead of mice.”

“Well,” said Dallas bitterly, “we must not find fault with one another. We did our best.”

“That’s true,” said Tregelly. “Hear, hear. Go on. What were you going to say?”

“That I have had it my own way for long enough, but now I’ll give up to you two. There’s no gold worth getting here, so if you both say, ‘Let’s make a dash back for life before we are shut in by the winter that seems to be coming on early,’ I’m ready, and we’ll make a brave fight for it.”

“And if we say, ‘No! Let’s go on and fight for the stuff to the last’—what then?”

“We will not look back,” cried Dallas, stepping outside, to stand gazing, with a far-off look in his eyes, straight along the narrow ravine running up into the savage-looking snow-covered mountains.

“Go on,” said Abel, who seemed to catch his cousin’s enthusiasm as he stood there, gradually growing whitened by the fine drifting snow.

“Go on?” said Dallas, without turning his head; “well, let’s go on. The gold must be up yonder, where it crumbles or is ground out of the rocky mountains, to be washed, in the course of ages, down the streams into the gravel and sand.”

“Ay, there must be plenty of it up yonder, my son,” said Tregelly, stepping out to shade his eyes and gaze upward towards the wilderness of mountains to the north, probably never yet trodden by the foot of man.

“Then I say, as we have come so far, let’s go on and find it,” cried Dallas; “and if we fail—well, it is only lying down at last to sleep! No one will know, for our bones will never be found. I feel as if I can’t go back—and you, Bel?”

For answer Abel laid his hand upon his cousin’s shoulder, and stood gazing with him into the dimly seen, mysterious land, just as, high up, one of the snowy summits suddenly grew bright and flashed in the feeble sunshine which played upon it for a few minutes before the snow-clouds closed in again.

And as if the one bright gleam had inspired him, Tregelly began to whistle softly.

“Look here!” he cried, “never say pitch a thing up when there’s a bit of hope left. ‘To win or to die’ is my motto!”

“And mine,” cried Dallas, enthusiastically.

“And mine,” said Abel, in a soft, low, dreamy voice.

“Then look here,” said Tregelly; “we’ve got enough to give us all a small ration for seven days, so let’s load up one sledge and leave the others. Then we can take it in turns and push right on up into the mountains with nothing to hinder us. Snow don’t make a bad shelter when you’ve plenty of blankets, and there’s nothing to fear now. Old Redbeard never could have come up here; he must have gone off by one of the side gulches, and got round and back to where he can rob some one else.”

“Yes; we must have passed him days ago,” said Dallas.

“Very well, then, we can all sleep o’ nights without keeping watch.”

“And we can push on and on, just trying the rocks with the hammer here and there wherever we find a place clear of ice.”

“That’s the way, my son, and who knows but what we may shoot a bear or something else to keep us going for another week, eh?”

Abel nodded—he could not trust himself to speak; and then, with determination plainly marked in their haggard faces, they set to work in the shelter of the dwarfed pines around them, and packed one sledge with all they felt to be necessary to take on this forlorn hope expedition, and with it the last of their dwindling store of food.

“There,” cried Dallas, pointing up the narrow gully, as they finished their preparations, “how could we despair with such a sign as that before us?”

His companions stood and looked up in the direction indicated, where the transformation that had taken place was wonderful.

An hour before they had gazed through drifting, dusty snow at forbidding crags and wintry desolation. For a few minutes that one peak had flashed out hopefully, but only to fade away again, while now their eyes literally ached with the dazzling splendour of what seemed to be a grotto-like palace of precious stones, set in frosted silver and burnished gold; for the mountains blazed in the last rays of the setting sun with the hues of the iris magnified into one gorgeous sheen.

“Yes, that looks as if we’d got to the golden land at last, my sons,” said Tregelly. “It’s something like what one has dreamed of after reading the ‘Arabian Nights’; only you see they aren’t fast colours, and they won’t wash.”

“Never mind,” said Dallas; “we know that the gold must be there, and we’ll find it yet. Ready?”

For answer Tregelly picked up the trace, and was about to pass it over his head, but he paused and looked round.

“Here,” he cried; “where’s that there dog?”

Abel went into the rough shelter they had made, to find Scruff curled-up fast asleep beneath one of the skins they were going to leave behind; but he sprang up at a touch, and trotted out to take his place by Tregelly, who slipped his slight harness over the sturdy animal’s head.

“No shuffling now, my son,” he said merrily. “You’re stores, you know, and we shall want you to eat when the rest of the prog is done. Forward! we’re going to do it now.”

Chapter Thirty Nine.

The last bivouac.

Shortening days and shortening distances in and out of the wild ravine, where the water ran trickling merrily along in the brief sunny hours, but froze hard again at night. Every halting-place was more difficult to reach than the last, and climbing up the slippery sides of the stream bed was as often the means of progression as the simple tramp.

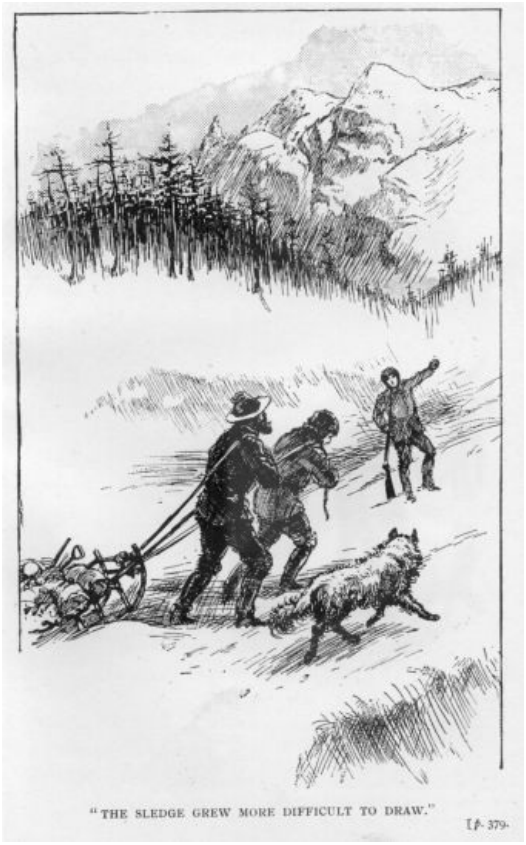
The sledge grew more difficult to draw, though its weight was really less and less: but in a mechanical way all joined hands in getting it over masses of rock, or through cracks where at times it became wedged in fast. For it could not be left behind, loaded as it was with the links which held them to life.

And at last the brief day came to an end, when the shortest journey of all had been made, little more than a mile along the narrow rift with its often perpendicular sides, where the greater part of the way had been one constant climb over the rock-burdened bed of the stream, whose sources were somewhere in the icy region, apparently as far away as when they started on their journey.

They had halted in a narrow amphitheatre of rocks, on one side of which lay a shelf dotted with dwarf pines, thick, sturdy, and old, many having shed their last needles years before, and displaying nothing now but thin bare trunks and a few jagged, weather-worn boughs. Snow had fallen heavily in the mountains during the previous night, and the side of the amphitheatre at the back of the shelf to which they had dragged the sledge was glazed with ice, where the snow above had melted in the warm mid-day rays, and *frozen* again and again.

It was bitter winter all around as the short day began to close in; but there was plenty of wood, and they felt if they climbed higher next day it would be into the region of wiry heaths and moss.

Quite instinctively, axe in hand, each of the weary three made for the dead wood and began to cut and break down the brittle boughs.



"THE SLEDGE GREW MORE DIFFICULT TO DRAW." [p. 379.

"Ay, that's right, my sons," said Tregelly, with the ghost of a smile; "let's have a good fire if it is to be the last."

The smile was reflected in Dallas's face, and he nodded; but he did not speak—only went on hacking away in a mechanical fashion, and the small wood was heaped-up against the icy wall at the back of the broad shelf. Then a match was struck and sheltered till the smallest twigs caught; these communicated with the larger, and in a very short time there was a roaring fire, whose heat was reflected from the glazed surface of the rock, making the snow melt all around and run off till there was dry bare rock, on one piece of which, full in the warm glow, Scruff curled-up and went to sleep.

Outside the snow lay deep and high, as it had been drifted in the heavy fall, forming a good shelter from the wind; and by a liberal use of their axes the dwarf firs that they cut down proved a good shelter when laid in a curve on the other side, while when no longer wanted for that purpose they would be free from the clinging snow and more fit to burn.

Roof there was none save the frosty sky, spangled with myriads of stars; but the weary party paid no heed to that want. There was the fire, and in due time the tin of hot tea to pass round, and the roughly made bread. They seemed to want no more, only to lie down and rest in the warmth shed by the crackling wood—to take a long, long rest, and wake—where?

The question was silently asked by each of his inner self again and again, but never answered, for no answer seemed to be needed. The weary, weary day two years long was at an end. They had worked well and failed; they could do no more; all they wanted was rest and forgetfulness—peace, the true gold after all.

Sleep was long coming to Dallas, weary though he was; and he lay there with his head slightly raised, gazing at the weird scene, distorted and full of strange shadows, as the fire rose and fell.

There lay, big and heavy, the sturdy friend and companion in so many adventures, just as he had lain down; and close by, poor Abel, the most unfortunate of the party, so near that he could rest his hand upon the rough coat of the dog.

"Poor Bel!" mused Dallas; "how unfortunate he has been!"

But the next minute he was thinking of how trivial the troubles of the past seemed to be in comparison with this—the greatest trouble of them all. For though they had all lain down to sleep so calmly, and with the simple friendly good-night, they had all felt that it was for the last time, and that their weary labours were at an end.

"All a mistake—a vain empty dream of a golden fortune," Dallas said to himself. "The idea was brave and strong, but it was the romance of a boy. Fortunes are not to be made by one stroke, but by patient, hard work, long thought as to how that work shall bring forth fruit, and then by constant application. Ah, well, we are not the first to make such mistakes—not the first to turn our backs upon the simple substance to grasp at the great shadow."

He lay gazing sadly at the crackling fire, whose flames danced, and whose sparks eddied into spirals and flew upwards on the heated air; and then with eyes half-closed he watched the glowing embers as the great pieces of wood became incandescent. He was still gazing into the fire with a dull feeling of pitying contempt for himself, seeing imaginary caverns and ravines of burnished gold, when with a sigh upon his lip as he thought of the simple-hearted, loving mother watching and waiting at home for those who would never cross the threshold again, sleep came to

press heavily upon the half-closed eyelids, and all was blank.

Chapter Forty.

The solid reality.

A strange feeling of stiffness and cold so painful that for some moments Dallas could not move, but lay gazing straight before him at the heap of ashes, which gave forth a dull glow, just sufficient at times to show the curled-up form of the great dog, and beyond him, rolled up like a mummy and perfectly still, Abel, just as he had last seen him before he closed his eyes. It was so dark that he could not see Tregelly, and he lay trying in vain to make him out.

His head was dull and confused, as if he had slept for a great length of time, and his thoughts would not run straight; but every train of thought he started darted off into some side track which he could not follow, and he always had to come back to where he had made his start.

There it was—some time ago, when they had piled up the fire to a great height so that it might burn long and well while they all sank painlessly and without more trouble into the sleep of death.

And now by slow degrees he began to grasp what seemed to be the fact, that while his companions, even the dog, had passed away, he was once more unfortunate, and had come back, as it were, to life, to go alone through more misery, weariness, and despair.

He shivered, and strangely inconsistent worldly thoughts began to crawl in upon him. He felt he must thrust the unburned pieces of pine-wood closer together, so that they might catch fire and burn and radiate some more heat. It was so dark, too, that he shuddered, and then lay staring at the perpendicular wall beyond the fire—the wall that looked so icy and cruel over-night, but now dim, black, and heavy, as if about to lean over and crush them all out of sight.

Yes, he ought, he knew, to thrust the unburned embers together and put on more wood, so as to make a cheerful blaze; but he had not the energy to stir. He wanted another rug over him; but to get it he would have had to crawl to the sledge, and he was too much numbed to move. Besides, he shuddered at the idea of casting a bright light upon his surroundings, for he felt that it would only reveal the features of his poor comrades hardened into death.

And so it was that he lay for long enough in the darkness, till the numb sensation began to give way to acute pain, which made him moan with anguish and mentally ask what he had done that he should have been chosen to remain there and go through all that horror and despair again.

The natural self is stronger than the educated man in times of crisis. A despairing wretch tells himself that all is over, and plunges into a river or pool to end his weary life; but the next moment the nature within him begins to struggle hard to preserve the life the trained being has tried to throw away.

It was so here. Dallas made a quick movement at last, turned over, and picked up a half-burned, still smouldering piece of pine, painfully raked others together with it, and threw it on the top, glad to cower over the warm embers, for the heat thrown out was pleasant.

As he sat there after raking the ashes more together, and getting closer, it was to feel the warmth strike up into his chilled limbs, and fill the rug he had drawn round his shoulders with a gentle glow.

Soon after, the collected embers began to burn, and a faint tongue of flame flickered, danced, went out, and flickered up again, illuminating the darkness sufficiently to let him make out that the banked up snow had largely melted, and that Tregelly had crawled away from where he had lain, and come over to his, Dallas’s, side, apparently to place his heavy bulk as a shelter to keep off the bitter wind from his young companion.

There was something else, too, which he did not recognise as having seen before he lay down—something dark where the bank of snow had been, which had wonderfully melted away in the fierce glow of the fire; for that sheltering bank had been so big before.

What did it matter to one who was suffering now the agonising pangs of hunger to augment those of cold?

But the sight of the big motionless figure dimly seen by the bluish flickering light appealed strongly to the sufferer, and something like a sob rose to his throat as he thought of Tregelly’s brave, patient ways, and the honest truth of his nature.

These feelings were sufficient to urge him forward from where he crouched, to go and lean over the recumbent figure and lay a hand upon the big clenched fist drawn across the breast of the dead.

It was a hand of ice, and with a piteous sigh Dallas drew back and crept to where Abel lay rolled in his rugs. Just then the dancing flame died out, and it was in the pitchy darkness that Dallas felt for his cousin’s face.

The next moment he uttered a cry, and there was a quick rustling sound as of something leaping to its feet. Then the dog’s cold nose touched his cheek, and there was a low whine of satisfaction, followed by a panting and scuffling as the dog transferred his attentions to Abel.

“And we’re both left alive,” half groaned Dallas; but the dog uttered a joyous bark, and he sprang painfully to his feet, for a familiar gruff voice growled:

“Now, then, what’s the matter with you, my son?” And then: “Fire out? How gashly dark!”

“Bob!” faltered Dallas.

“You, Master Dallas? Wait a bit, my son, and I’ll get the fire going. How’s Mr Wray?”

There was a weary groan, and Abel said dreamily: “Don’t—don’t wake me. How cold! How cold!”

Tregelly sighed, but said nothing for the moment, exerting himself the while in trying to fan the flickering flame into a stronger glow, and with such success that the horrible feeling of unreality began to pass away, with its accompanying confusion, and Dallas began to realise the truth.

“I—I thought you were lying there dead,” he said at last.

“Oh, no, my son; I’m ’live enough,” said Tregelly, who still bent over the fire; “but I never thought to open my eyes again. Shall I melt some snow over the fire? There is a scrap or two more to eat, and when it’s light we might p’r’aps shoot something. But I say, we must have slept for an awful long time, for we made a tremendous fire, and the snow’s melted all about wonderful.”

“Yes, wonderfully,” said Dallas, who crouched there gazing at the figure where the bank of snow had been.

“It’s my belief that we’ve slept a good four-and-twenty hours, and that it’s night again.”

“Think so?”

“I do, my son, and it’s to-morrow night, I believe. I say, how the snow has melted away. Why, hullo!” he shouted, as the flames leapt up merrily now, “who’s that?”

“I don’t know,” faltered Dallas; “I thought at first it was you.”

“Not a dead ’un?” whispered Tregelly in an awestruck tone.

“Yes; and whoever it was must have been buried in that bank of snow, so that we did not see him last night.”

Tregelly drew a burning brand from the fire, gave it a wave in the air to make it blaze fiercely, and stepped towards the recumbent figure lying there.

“Hi! Look here, my son,” he cried. “No wonder we didn’t see him come back.”

Dallas grasped the fact now, and the next moment he too was gazing down at the fierce face, icily sealed in death, the light playing upon the huge red beard, while the eyes were fixed in a wild stare.

“Hah!” ejaculated Tregelly. “He’ll do no more mischief now, my son. But what was he doing here? Rather a chilly place for a man to choose for his lair. Thought he was safe, I suppose. Only look.”

For a few moments Dallas could not drag his eyes from the horrible features of their enemy, about which the dog was sniffing in a puzzled way. But at last he turned to where Tregelly was waving the great firebrand, which shed a bright light around.

“It was his den, Master Dallas,” growled Tregelly. “Look here, this was all covered with snow last night when we lit the fire, and it’s all melted away. Why, only look, my son; he spent all his time trying to do for us, and what’s he done?—he’s saved all our lives. Flour, bacon, coffee. What’s in that bag? Sugar. Why, this is all his plunder as he’s robbed from fellows’ huts. There’s his gun, too, and his pistol. But what a place to choose to live in all alone! You’d ha’ thought he’d have had a shelter. Here, I’m not *going* to die just yet.”

A wave of energy seemed to inspire the great fellow, who picked up the rug that had sheltered him during the night, and gave Dallas a nod.

“When a man dies,” he said solemnly, “he wipes out all his debts. We don’t owe him nothing neither now.”

As Tregelly spoke he drew the rug carefully over the figure lying there, and the next minute set to work to make the fire blaze higher, while Dallas, with half-numbed hands, tried to help him by filling the billy with pieces of ice, setting it in the glowing embers, and refilling it as the solid pieces rapidly melted down.

They were both too busy and eager to prepare a meal from the life-saving provender they had so strangely found, to pay any heed to Abel.

“Let him rest, my son, till breakfast’s ready; he’s terribly weak, poor lad. Mind, too, when we do rouse him up, not to say a word about what’s lying under that rug. I’ll pitch some wood across it so as he shan’t notice before we wake him up.”

Dallas nodded, and with a strange feeling of renewed hope for which he could not account, he worked away; for it seemed the while that the store of provisions they had found would do no more for them than prolong their weary existence in the wild for two or three weeks.

Tregelly brought forward more wood from the shelter they had formed; the fire burned more brightly; bacon was frying, and the fragrance of coffee and hot cake was being diffused, when, just as Dallas was thinking of awakening his cousin to the change in their state of affairs, a hoarse cry aroused him and made him look sharply at where, unnoticed, Abel had risen to his knees; and there, in the full light of the fire, he could be seen pointing.

“We’re too late, my son,” growled Tregelly; “he has seen it. Meant to have covered it before he woke.”

“No, no; he is not pointing there.”

“Look! Look!” cried Abel.

“Poor lad, he’s off his head,” whispered Tregelly.

“Do you hear me, you two?” cried Abel hoarsely. “Look! Can’t you see?”

“What is it, Bel?” said Dallas soothingly, as he stepped round to the other side of the

“ABEL HAD RISEN TO HIS KNEES, AND THERE IN THE FULL LIGHT OF THE FIRE HE COULD BE SEEN POINTING.” [P. 396.

fire; and then, following the direction of his cousin’s pointing finger, he too uttered a wild cry, which brought Tregelly to their side, to gaze in speechless astonishment at the sight before them.

For the thick glazing of ice had been melted from the perpendicular wall of rock at the back of their fire, and there, glistening and sparkling in the face of the cliff, were veins, nuggets, and time-worn fragments of rich red gold in such profusion, that, far up as they could see, the cliff seemed to be one mass of gold-bearing rock, richer than their wildest imagination had ever painted.

The effect upon the adventurers was as strange as it was marked.

Abel bowed down his face in his hands to hide its spasmodic contractions; while Dallas rose, stepped slowly towards it, and reached over the glowing flame to touch a projecting nugget—bright, glowing in hue, and quite warm from the reflection of the fire.

“Ah!” he sighed softly, as if convinced at last; “it is real, and not a dream.”

Tregelly turned his back, began to whistle softly an old tune in a minor key, and drew the coffee, the bacon pan, and the bread a little farther away.

“Ahoy there, my sons!” he cried cheerily; “breakfast! Fellows must eat even if they are millionaires.”

It was too much for Dallas, before whose eyes was rising, not the gold, for he seemed to be looking right through that, but the wistful, deeply-lined face of a grey-haired woman at a window, watching ever for the lost ones’ return.

At Tregelly’s words he burst into a strangely harsh, hysterical laugh, and then, too, he sank upon his knees and buried his face in his hands, remaining there motionless till a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he started to find it was Abel who was gazing in his eyes.

“Dal,” he cried, in a voice that did not sound like his own, “we shall pay the old uncle now.”

At that moment the dismal tune Tregelly was whistling came to an end, and they saw that he was sitting with his back to them, looking straight away.

They stepped quickly to his side, and he started up to hold a hand to each.

“To win or to die, didn’t you say, my sons?” he cried cheerily.

“Yes, something like that,” replied Dallas huskily.

“Well, it means winning, my sons,” cried Tregelly, “for we won’t die now.”

Chapter Forty One.

Showing how good came out of evil.

The store of provisions proved on examination to be far greater than had been anticipated, and it seemed plain enough that their enemy had, while seeking a place of refuge from which he might carry on his nefarious career, hit accidentally upon the greatest discovery of gold that had been made; and after decently disposing of his remains, the three adventurers began to examine with something approaching breathless awe the vast treasure that they could claim as theirs.

The first thing to be done, though, was to make use of their axes and contrive a shelter right in the centre of the patch of dwarf pine, their plan being to hack out the size of the hut they intended to make in the dense scrub, saving everything approaching to a straight pole to use for roofing.

They worked well, for the discovery of the gold and a fair supply of provisions seemed to send new life into them; and before many hours had passed they were provided with shelter for themselves and their stores.

Their next step was to mark out and peg what was legally allowed to each man as discoverer of a new field's claim. And now, in spite of the lateness of the season and their height up in the mountains, it seemed as if fate had ceased to persecute them and was ready to help them make the treasure they had found safely their own.

It was too late to expect to do much before the winter closed in with its inclement darkness, so the energies of all were devoted to making the most of the glorious spell of fine weather which now ensued, and preparing for the winter.

"We've found it; and after it has been lying here ever since the world began," said Tregelly, "it isn't likely to fly away now, and nobody's going to take it away from us. First thing is, have we got as much on our claim as ever we're likely to want?"

"More," said Dallas; "and I propose that one of us goes down to the old spot to give the news to Norton and our old friends, that they may come and be the first to take up claims."

"That is what I meant to propose," said Abel.

"Good nails driven in, and I clinch them," said Tregelly. "Only look here: I always like to do a good turn to a man who means well."

"Of course," said Dallas; "but what do you mean?"

"There's that judge. I think he ought to have a pull out of this, too. He nearly hung us up on a tree, but he meant well, and it was all for law and order. What I propose is this. We'll make our own claims sure, and get our friends up to secure theirs; and then let's tell the judge, and he'll come up with a picked lot to keep all right."

"Excellent," said Dallas. "But who goes down first to see about stores?"

"I will, my sons. I'm strongest, and as to bringing up plenty, I shall have plenty ready to help. But I say, play fair; you won't run away with my third while I'm gone?"

Tregelly started down the ravine in company with Scruff the very next day, and many more had not elapsed before he was back with the whole party from their old workings, eager to congratulate the fortunate discoverers and place ample stores at their service.

They had just time to get up another supply, enough for the coming winter, before it seemed to sweep down like a black veil from the northern mountains.

But building does not take long under such circumstances. Wood had been brought up from out of a valley a few miles lower down, and in the shelter of a dense patch of scrub pine in a side gully, where the new-comers found the gold promising to their hearts' content, they were ready to defy the keenest weather that might come.

Two years had elapsed, and winter was once more expected, for the days were shortening fast, when three men sat together in their humble hut, discussing the question of going home; and the thought of once more meeting one whose last letter had told of her longings to see her boys again, brought a flush to the young men's cheeks and a bright light to their eyes.

They had been talking long and loudly, those two, while Tregelly had sat smoking his pipe and saying nothing, till Dallas turned to him sharply.

"Say something, my son?" the big fellow cried. "Of course I will. Here it is. I've been thinking of all that gold we've sent safely home through the banks, and I've been thinking of what our claim's worth, and what that there company's willing to give."

"Well," said Abel, "go on."

"Give a man time, my son. I warn't brought up to the law. What I was thinking is this: we three working chaps in our shabby clothes are rich men as we stand now."

"Very," said Dallas.

"And if we were to sell our claim now we should be very, very rich."

"Very—very—very rich," said Abel, laughing as a man laughs who is in high spirits produced by vigorous health.

“Well, go on,” said Dallas.

“Here it is, then: what’s the good of our going grubbing on just to be able to say we’re richer still? ‘Enough’s as good as a feast,’ so what’s the good of being greedy? Why not let some one else have a turn, and let’s all go home?”

“What do you say, Bel?”

“Ay! And you, Dal?”

“Ay!”

“The ‘Ays’ have it, then,” cried Tregelly.

“Well done, my sons. Hooroar! We’re homeward bou-wou-wound!” he roared in his big bass voice. “Hooroar! We’re homeward bound!”

Business matters are settled quickly in a goldfield, and the next day it was known in the now crowded ravine, where every inch of ground was taken up, that the big company of which the judge was the head had bought the three adventurers’ claim, known far and near as Redbeard’s, for a tremendous sum. But all the same, heads were shaken by the wise ones of the settlement, who one and all agreed that the company had got it cheap, and they wished that they had had the chance.

“You’re one of the buyers, aren’t you, Norton, and your lot who came up first are the rest?”

“That’s right,” said Norton, smiling. “Hah!” said the man. “Kissing goes by favour.”

“Of course,” said Norton. “But then, you see, we were all old friends.”

“We said it was to win or to die, Bel,” said Dallas one day, when all business was satisfactorily settled and they were really, as Tregelly had sung, homeward bound.

“Yes,” said Abel quietly, “and it all seems like a dream.”

“But it’s a mighty, weighty, solid, golden sort o’ dream, my son,” said the big Cornishman, “and there’s no mistake about it, you’ve won. I say, though, I’m glad we’re taking the dog.”

The End.

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