Title: To The West

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George Manville Fenn

"To The West"

Chapter One.

Mr John Dempster.

"What would I do, sir? Why, if I were as poor as you say you are, and couldn't get on here, I'd go abroad."

"But where, sir? where to?"

"Anywhere. Don't ask me. The world's big enough and round enough for you, isn't it?"

"But without means, Mr Dempster?"

"Yes, sir, without means. Work, sir—work. The same as I have done. I pay my poor rate, and I can't afford to help other people. Good morning."

I heard every word uttered as I sat on my stool in the outer office, and I felt as if I could see my employer, short, stout, fierce-looking and grey, frowning at the thin, pale, middle-aged man whom I had ushered in—Mr John Dempster he told me his name was—and who had come to ask for the loan of a little money, as he was in sore distress.

Every word of his appeal hurt me, and I felt, when the words came through the open door, as if I should have liked to take my hat and go away. But I dared not, for I had been set to copy some letters, and I knew from old experience that if Mr Dempster—Mr Isaac Dempster that is—came out or called for me, and I was not there, I should have a repetition of many a painful scene.

I tried not to listen, but every word came, and I heard how unfortunate Mr John Dempster had been; that his wife had been seriously ill, and now needed nourishing food and wine; and as all that was said became mixed up with what I was writing, and the tears would come into my eyes and make them dim, I found myself making mistakes, and left off in despair.

I looked cautiously over the double desk, peeping between some books to see if Esau Dean, my fellow boy-clerk, was watching me; but as usual he was asleep with his head hanging down over his blotting-paper, and the sun shining through his pale-coloured knotty curls, which gave his head the appearance of a black man's bleached to a whitey brown; and as I looked through the loop-hole between the books, my fellow-clerk's head faded away, and I was looking back at my pleasant old school-days at Wiltboro', from which place I was suddenly summoned home two years before to bid good-bye to my mother before we had to part for ever.

And then all the old home-life floated before me like a bright sunny picture, and the holidays at the rambling red-brick house with its great walled garden, where fruit was so abundant that it seemed of no value at all. There was my pony, and Don and Skurry, the dogs, and the river and my boat, and the fellows who used to come and spend weeks with me—school-fellows who always told me what a lucky chap I was; and perhaps it was as well, for I did not understand it then, not till the news came of my father's death, and my second summons home. I did not seem to understand it then—that I was alone in the world, and that almost the last words my mother said to me would have to be thought out and put to the test. I had a dim recollection of her holding my hand, and telling me that whatever came I was to be a man, and patient, and never to give up; but it was not till months after that I fully realised that in place of going back to school I was to go at once out into the world and fight for myself, for I was quite alone.

I can't go into all this now—how I used to sit in my bed-room at night with my head aching from thinking and trying to see impossibilities. Let it be sufficient if I tell you that after several trials at various things, for all of which I was soon told I was inefficient, I found myself, a big, sturdy, country-looking lad, seated on an old leather-covered stool at a

double desk, facing Esau Dean, writing and copying letters, while my fellow-clerk wrote out catalogues for the printer to put in type, both of us in the service of Mr Isaac Dempster, an auctioneer in Baring Lane, in the City of London, and also both of us, according to Mr Dempster, the most stupid idiots that ever dipped pen in ink.

I supposed then that Mr Dempster was right—that I was stupid and not worth my salt, and that he had only to hold up his little finger and he could get a thousand better lads than we were; but at the same time I felt puzzled that he should keep us on, and that Saturday after Saturday he should pay our wages and never say a word about discharging us—Esau for going to sleep over his work, and me for making so many mistakes.

I had had scores of opportunities for judging that Mr Dempster was a hard unfeeling man, who was never harder than when he had been out to his lunch, and came back nibbling a toothpick, and smelling very strongly of sherry; but it had never come so thoroughly home to me as on that bright day, just at the time when for nearly an hour the sun shone down into the narrow court-like lane, and bathed our desk, and made me think of the country, the garden, the bright river, and above all, of those who were dead and gone.

As I told you, my eyes were very dim when I saw Mr John Dempster come out of the office slowly and close the door, to stand on the mat shaking his head sadly.

“He who goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing,” he said to himself, softly. “I might have known—I might have known.”

He turned then and glanced at Esau, smiling faintly to see him asleep, and then his eyes met mine gazing at him fixedly, for somehow he seemed just then to have a something in his face that recalled my father, as he looked one day when he had had some very bad news—something about money. And as I gazed at our visitor that day the likeness seemed to grow wonderful, not in features, but in his aspect, and the lines about his eyes and the corner of his mouth.

“Ah, my lad,” he said, with a pleasant smile full of sadness, “you ought to pray that you might be always young and free from care. Good-day.”

He nodded and passed out of the office, and I heard his steps in the narrow lane.

I glanced at Esau, who was asleep still, then at the door of the inner office, and started as I heard a cough and the rustling of a newspaper. Then, gliding off my stool, I caught my cap from the peg where it hung, slipped out at the swing-door, and saw our late visitor just turning the corner at the bottom of the lane into Thames Street.

The next minute I had overtaken him, and he turned sharply with a joyful look in his eyes.

“Ah!” he said, “my cousin has sent you to call me back?”

“No, sir,” I stammered, with my cheeks burning; and there I stopped, for the words would not come.

How well I remember it! We were close to the open door of a warehouse, with the scent of oranges coming out strongly, and great muscular men with knots on their shoulders, bare-armed, and with drab breeches and white stockings, were coming up a narrow court leading to a wharf, bearing boxes of fruit from a schooner, and going back wiping their foreheads with their bare arms.

“You came after me?” said our visitor, with the old pained look in his eyes, as he half turned from me, and I stood turning over something in my hand.

“You came after me?” he said again; and as he once more looked in my eyes, they seemed to make me speak.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, what is it? Speak out.”

“I—I couldn’t help hearing all you said to Mr Dempster, sir,” I faltered.

“Eh!” he cried, with a start. Then with a smile full of bitterness, “Let it be a lesson to you, boy. Work—strive—do anything sooner than humble yourself as I have done this day. But—but,” he said, as if to himself, “Heaven knows I was driven.”

“Mr Dempster never will lend any one money, sir,” I said hastily; “but if you wouldn’t mind—I don’t want this for a bit. I’ve been saving it up—for a long time—and—by and by—you can pay me again, and—”

I had stammered out all this and then stopped short, drawing my breath hard, for he had seized my hand, and was gripping it so hard that the coin I held was pressed into my fingers, as I gazed up into his face, while he slowly relaxed his hold and looked down into my palm.

“A sovereign!” he said slowly; and then fiercely, “Did your employer send you with that? And,” he cried hastily, “you heard?”

“Yes, sir. I was not listening.”

“How—how long has it taken you to save up this?”

“I don’t know, sir—months.”

“Ah!” Then as he held my hand tightly, he said in a half-mocking way, “Do you know when I came into the office I envied you, my boy, for I said, Here is one who has begun on the stool, and he’ll grow up to be a rich City man.”

“I don’t think I shall, sir,” I said, with a laugh.

“No,” he said, “you are of the wrong stuff, boy. Do you know that you are a weak young idiot to come and offer me, a perfect stranger, all that money—a man you have never seen before, and may never see again? How do you know I am not an impostor?”

“I don’t know how, sir,” I said, “but I can see you are not.”

He pressed my hand more firmly, and I saw his lips move for a few moments, but no sound came. Then softly—

“Thank you, my lad,” he said. “You have given me a lesson. I was saying that it was a hard and a bitter and cruel world, when you came up to show me that it is full of hope and sunshine and joy after all if we only seek it. I don’t know who you are, but your father, boy, must have been a gentleman at heart, and your mother as true a lady as ever breathed. Ah!”

He bent towards me as he still held my hand, for he must have read the change in my face, for his words sent a curious pang through me.

“Your mother is—?” He finished his question with a look.

I nodded, and set my teeth hard.

“Now, sir, *please*!” cried a rough voice, as a heavily-laden man came up, and my companion drew me into the road.

“Tell me your name.”

“Gordon, sir,” I said. “Mayne Gordon.”

“Come and see me—and my wife,” he said, taking a card from a shabby pocket-book. “Come on Sunday evening and have tea with us—Kentish Town. Will you come?”

“Yes,” I said, eagerly.

“That’s right. There, I can’t talk now. Shake hands. Good-bye.”

He wrung my hand hard, and turned hurriedly away, but I was by his side again.

“Stop,” I said. “You have not taken the—the—”

“No,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder, “I can’t do that. You’ve given me something worth a thousand such coins as that, boy as you are—renewed faith in my fellow-man—better still, patience and hope. Good-bye, my lad,” he said, brightly. “On Sunday, mind. Don’t lose that card.”

Before I could speak again he had hurried away, and just then a cold chill ran through me, and I set off at a run.

Suppose Mr Isaac Dempster should have come out into the office and found I had gone out!

Chapter Two.

Mr Isaac Dempster.

I was in the act of opening the swing-door stealthily, and was half through when I saw that Mr Dempster was acting precisely in the same way, stealing through the inner doorway, and making me a sign to stop.

I obeyed, shivering a little at what was to come, and wishing that I had the courage to utter a word of warning. For there was Esau with his head hanging down over the catalogue he was copying out, fast asleep, the sun playing amongst his fair curls, and a curious guttural noise coming from his nose.

It was that sound, I felt, which had brought Mr Dempster out with his lips drawn back in an ugly grin, and a malicious look in his eyes as he stepped forward on tiptoe, placed both his hands together on my fellow-clerk’s curly head, and pressed it down with a sudden heavy bang on the desk.

Something sounded very hollow. Perhaps it was the desk. Then there was a sudden bound, and Esau was standing on the floor, gazing wildly at our employer.

“You lazy idiotic lump of opium,” roared the latter. “That’s the way my work’s done, is it?”

As our employer uttered these words he made at Esau, following up and cuffing him first on one side of the head and then on the other, while the lad, who seemed utterly confused with sleep, and the stunning contact of his brow against the desk, backed away round the office, beginning then to put up his arms to defend himself.

“Here,” he cried, “don’t you hit me—don’t you hit me.”

“Hit you!—you stupid, thick-headed, drowsy oaf! I’ll knock some sense into you. Nice pair, upon my word! And you—you scoundrel,” he cried, turning on me, “where have you been?”

“Only—only just outside, sir,” I stammered, as I felt my cheeks flush.

“I’ll only just outside you,” he roared, catching me by the collar and shaking me. “This is the way my work is done, is it? You’re always late of a morning—”

“No, sir,” I cried, indignantly.

“Silence!—And always the first to rush off before your work’s done; and as soon as my back’s turned, you’re off to play with the boys in the street. Where have you been?”

I was silent, I felt that I could not tell him.

“Sulky, eh? Here, you,” he roared, turning upon Esau, “where has he been? How long has he been gone?”

“Don’t you hit me! Don’t you hit me!” cried the boy, sulkily; “I shan’t stand this.”

“I say, how long has he been gone?”

“I was only gone a few minutes, sir,” I said.

“Gone a few minutes, you scoundrel! How dare you be gone a few minutes, leaving my office open? You’re no more use than a boy out of the streets, and if I did my duty by you, I should thrash you till you could not stand. Back to your desk, you dog, and the next time I catch you at any of these tricks off you go, and no character.”

As I climbed back to my place at the desk, hot, flushed, and indignant, feeling more and more unable to explain the reason for my absence, and guilty at the same time—knowing as I did that I had no business to steal off—Mr Dempster turned once more upon Esau, who backed away from him round the office, sparring away with his arms to ward off the blows aimed at him, though I don’t think they were intended to strike, but only as a malicious kind of torture.

“Here, don’t you hit me! don’t you hit me!” Esau kept on saying, as if this was the only form of words he could call up in his excitement.

“I’ll half break your neck for you, you scoundrel! Is that catalogue done?”

“How can I get it done when you keep on chivvying me about the place?” cried Esau.

“How can you get it done if you go to sleep, you scoundrel, you mean. Now then, up on to that stool, and if it isn’t done you stop after hours till it is done. Here, what are you staring at? Get on with those letters.”

Mr Dempster had turned upon me furiously as I sat looking, and with a sigh I went on with my writing, while red-faced and wet-eyed, for he could not keep the tears back, Esau climbed slowly on to his stool, and gave a tremendous sniff.

“I shall tell mother as soon as I get home,” he cried.

“Tell your mother, you great calf! You had better not,” roared Mr Dempster. “She has troubles enough. It was only out of charity to her that I took you on. For you are useless—perfectly useless. I lose pounds through your blunders. There, that will do. Get on with your work.”

He went back into the inner office, and banged the door so heavily that all the auction bills which papered the walls of our office began to flap and swing about. Then for a few minutes there was only the scratching of our pens to be heard.

Then Esau gave a tremendous sniff, began wiping his eyes on the cuffs of his jacket, and held the blotting-paper against each in turn as he looked across at me.

“’Tain’t crying,” he said. “Only water. Ketch him making me cry!”

“You were crying,” I said, quietly.

“No, I wasn’t. Don’t you get turning again’ me too. Take a better man than him to make me cry.”

I laughed.

“Ah, you may grin,” grumbled my companion; “but just you have your head knocked again’ the desk, and just you see if it wouldn’t make your eyes water.”

At that moment the door was opened with a snatch.

“Silence there! You, Gordon, will you go on with your work?”

The door was banged before I could have answered. Not that I should have said anything. But as soon as the door clicked Esau went on again without subduing his voice—

“I ain’t afraid of him—cheating old knocktioneer! Thinks he’s a right to knock everybody down ’cause he’s got a licence.”

“Go on with your work,” I whispered, “or he’ll come back.”

“Let him; I don’t care. I ain’t afraid. It was all your fault for going out.”

“And yours for being asleep.”

“I can’t help my head being heavy. Mother says it’s because I’ve got so much brains. But I’ll serve him out. I’ll make all the mistakes I can, and he’ll have to pay for them being corrected.”

“What good will that do?”

“I dunno; but I’ll serve him out. He shan’t hit me. I say, what did you go out to buy?”

“Nothing. I went out to speak to that gentleman who came.”

“What gentleman who came?”

“While you were asleep.”

“There you go! You’re as bad as old Knock-’em-down. Fellow’s only got to shut his eyes, and you say he’s asleep. But I don’t care. Everybody’s again’ me, but I’ll serve ’em out.”

“You’d better go on with your writing.”

“Shan’t. Go on with yours. I know. I’ll ’list—that’s what I’ll do. Like to see old Going-going touch me then!”

There was a busy interval of writing, during which something seemed to ask me why I let Mr Dempster behave so brutally to me, and I began wondering whether I was a coward. I felt that I could not be as brave as Esau, or I should have resisted.

“Not half a chap, you ain’t!” said my companion, suddenly.

“Why?”

“You’d say you’d come with me. Deal better to be soldiers than always scrawling down Lot 104 on paper.”

“I don’t want to be a soldier,” I said.

“No; you’re not half a chap. Only wait a bit. I’d ha’ gone long ago if it hadn’t been for mother.”

“Yes; she wouldn’t like you to go.”

“How do you know?”

“Mrs Dean told me so. She said you were mad about red-coats.”

“That’s just like mother,” said Esau, with a grin, “allus wrong. I don’t want to wear a red coat. Blue’s my colour.”

“What—a sailor?” I said quickly.

“Get out! Sailor! all tar and taller. I’m not going to pull ropes. I mean blue uniform—’Tillery—Horse Artillery. They do look fine. I’ve seen ’em lots o’ times.”

“Here, you two, I’m going out. I shall be back in five minutes,” said Mr Dempster, so suddenly that he made us both start. “Look sharp and get that work done.”

He stood drawing a yellow silk handkerchief round and round his hat, which was already as bright as it could be made, and then setting it on very much on one side, he gave his silk umbrella a flourish, touched his diamond pin with the tip of his well-gloved finger, and strutted out.

“Back in five minutes! Yah!” cried Esau. “It’s all gammon about being honest and getting on.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said, as I carefully dotted a few i’s.

“Yes, it is. Look at him—makes lots o’ money, and he cheats people and tells more lies in a day than I’ve told in all my life.”

“Nonsense!”

“Tain’t. He’s a regular bad ’un. Back in five minutes! Why he won’t come till it’s time to go, and then he’ll keep us waiting so as to get all the work he can out of us.”

But that time Esau was wrong, for in about five minutes the outer door was opened, and our employer thrust in his head.

“There’s a letter on my table to post, Gordon,” he said. “Be sure it goes.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and as the door closed again I looked at Esau and laughed.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” he said. “That wasn’t coming back. He only looked in to see if we were at work. I shan’t stop here; I shall ’list.”

“No, you will not,” I said, as I went on writing quietly.

“Oh, yes, I shall. You can go on lodging with the old woman, for you won’t be the chap to come with me.”

“You won’t go,” I said.

“Ah, you’ll see. You don’t mean to stop here, do you, and be bullied and knocked about?”

I went on writing and thinking of how dearly I should have liked to go somewhere else, for my life was very miserable with Mr Dempster; but I always felt as if it would be cowardly to give up, and I had stayed on, though that day’s experience was very like those which had gone before.

We had both finished our tasks an hour before Mr Dempster returned, nearly an hour after closing time, and even then he spent a long time in criticising the writing and finding fault, concluding by ordering Esau to go round with the catalogue he had made out to the printer’s.

“There’s a master for you!” cried my fellow-clerk, as we went up into the main street. “I shan’t stand it. I’m going for a soldier.”

I laughed.

“Ah, you may grin at what I say, but wait a bit. Going home?”

“No,” I said, “I shall walk round with you to the printer’s.”

He gave me a quick bright look, and his manner changed as if, once free of the office, he felt boy-like and happy. He whistled, hummed over bits of songs, and chatted about the various things we passed, till we had been at the printer’s, and then had to retrace our steps so as to cross Blackfriars Bridge, and reach Camberwell, where in a narrow street off the Albany Road Esau’s mother rented a little house, working hard with her needle to produce not many shillings a week, which were supplemented by her boy’s earnings, and the amount I paid for my bed, breakfast, and tea.

It was my fellow-clerk’s proposal that I should join them, and I had good cause to be grateful, the place being delightfully clean, and little, quaint, homely Mrs Dean looking upon me as a lodger who was to be treated with the greatest of respect.

“Shan’t go for a soldier to-night!” said Esau, throwing himself back in his chair, after we had finished our tea.

“I should think not indeed,” cried his mother. “Esau, I’m ashamed of you for talking like that. Has he been saying anything about it to you, Master Gordon?”

“Oh, yes, but he don’t mean it,” I replied. “It’s only when he’s cross.”

“Has master been scolding him then again?”

“Scolding?” cried Esau scornfully, “why he never does nothing else.”

“Then you must have given him cause, Esau dear. Master Gordon, what had he done?”

“Mr Dempster caught him asleep.”

“Well, I couldn’t help it. My head was so heavy.”

“Yes,” sighed Mrs Dean, “his head always was very heavy, poor boy. He goes to sleep at such strange times too, sir.”

“Well, don’t tell him that, mother,” cried Esau. “You tell everybody.”

“Well, dear, there’s no harm in it. I never said it was your fault. Lots of times, Master Gordon, I’ve known him go to sleep when at play, and once I found him quite fast with his mouth full of bread and butter.”

“Such stuff!” grumbled Esau, angrily.

“It is quite true, Master Gordon. He always was a drowsy boy.”

“Make anybody drowsy to keep on writing lots and figures,” grumbled Esau. “Heigho—ha—hum!” he yawned. “I shan’t be very long before I go to bed.”

He kept his word, and I took a book and sat down by the little fire to read; but though I kept on turning over the pages, I did not follow the text; for I was either thinking about Mrs Dean’s needle as it darted in and out of the stuff she was sewing, or else about Mr John Dempster and our meeting that day—of how I had promised to go up and see him on Sunday, and how different he was to his cousin.

The time must have gone fast, for when the clock began to strike, it went on up to ten; and I was thinking it was impossible that it could be so late, when I happened to glance across at little Mrs Dean, whose work had dropped into her lap, and she was as fast asleep then as her son had been at the office hours before.

Chapter Three.

My New Friends.

Poor Esau and I had had a hard time at the office, for it seemed that my patient forbearing way of receiving all the fault-finding made Mr Dempster go home at night to invent unpleasant things to say, till, as I had listened, it had seemed as if my blood boiled, and a hot sensation came into my throat.

All this had greatly increased by the Saturday afternoon, and had set me thinking that there was something in what Esau said, and that I should be better anywhere than where I was.

But on the Sunday afternoon, as I walked up the sunny road to Kentish Town, and turned down a side street of small old-looking houses, each with its bit of garden and flowers, everything looked so bright and pleasant, even there, that my spirits began to rise; and all the more from the fact that at one of the cottage-like places with its porch and flowers, there were three cages outside, two of whose inmates, a lark and a canary, were singing loudly and making the place ring.

It is curious how a musical sound takes one back to the past. In an instant as I walked on, I was seeing the bright river down at home, with the boat gliding along, the roach and dace flashing away to right and left, the chub scurrying from under the willows, the water-weeds and white buttercups brushing against the sides, and the lark singing high overhead in the blue sky.

London and its smoke were gone, and the houses to right and left had no existence for me then, till I was suddenly brought back to the present by a hand being laid on my shoulder, and a familiar voice saying—

“Mr Gordon! Had you forgotten the address? You have passed the house!”

As these words were uttered a hand grasped mine very warmly, and I was looking in the thin, worn, pleasant features of Mr John Dempster, which seemed far brighter than when I saw him at the office.

“Very, very glad to see you, my dear young friend,” he cried, taking my arm. “My wife and I have been looking forward to this day; she is very eager to make your acquaintance.”

To my surprise he led me back to the little house where the birds were singing, and I could not help glancing at him wonderingly, for I had fully expected to find him living in a state of poverty, whereas everything looked neat and good and plain.

“Give me your hat,” he said, as we stood in the passage. “That’s right. Now in here. Alexes, my dear, this is my young friend, Mr Gordon.”

“I am very glad you have come,” said a sweet, musical voice; and my hand was taken by a graceful-looking lady, who must once have been very beautiful. “You are hot and tired. Come and sit down here.”

I felt hot and uncomfortable, everything was so different from what I had expected; for the room was not in the least shabby, and the tea-things placed ready added to the pleasant home-like aspect of the place.

“You have not walked?” said Mr John Dempster.

“Oh, yes,” I replied.

“From—where?”

I told him.

“Camberwell? And I was so unreasonable as to ask you to come all this way.”

I did not know how it was, but I somehow felt as if I had come to visit some very old friends, and in quite a short time we were chatting confidentially about our affairs. They soon knew all about my own home, and my life since I left school so suddenly; and on my side I learned that Mrs John Dempster had had a very serious illness, but was recovering slowly, and that they were contemplating going abroad, the doctors having said that she must not stay in our damp climate for another winter.

I learned, too, that, as Mr John Dempster said, when things came to the worst they improved. It had been so here, for the night after his visit to his cousin in the city, a letter had come from Mrs John Dempster’s brother, who was in the North-west—wherever that might be—and their temporary troubles were at an end.

That would have been a delightfully pleasant meal but for one thing. No allusion was made to the visit to the city, and though I sat trembling, for fear they should both begin to thank me for my offer, not a word was said. The tea was simple. The flowers on the table and in the window smelled sweetly, and the birds sang, while there was something about Mrs John that fascinated me, and set me thinking about the happy old days at home.

The one unpleasantly was the conduct of the little maid they kept. She was a round rosy-faced girl of about fifteen, I suppose, but dressed in every respect, cap and apron and all, like a woman of five-and-twenty. In fact she looked like a small-sized woman with very hard-looking shiny dark eyes.

Upon her first entrance into the room bearing a bright tin kettle, for the moment I thought that as she looked so fierce, it was she who uttered little snorts, hisses, and sputtering noises. But of course it was only the kettle, for she merely looked at me angrily and gave a defiant sniff. As the evening went on, I found that this was Maria, and it soon became evident that Maria did not like me, but looked upon me as a kind of intruder, of whom she was as jealous as a girl of her class could be.

Pleasant evenings always pass too rapidly, and it was so here; I could not believe it when the hands of the little clock on the chimney-piece pointed to nine, and I rose to go.

“How soon it seems!” sighed Mrs John. “Well, Mayne,”—it had soon come to that—“you must call and see us again very soon—while we are here,” she added, slowly.

“Ah, and who knows but what he may come when we are far away!” said Mr John. “The world is only a small place after all.”

“Where should you go?” I said, earnestly. “I would come if I could.”

“Possibly to Canada,” said Mr John. “But there, we are not gone yet. You will not feel lonely, dear, if I walk a little way with our visitor?”

She gave him a very gentle smile, and as I held out my hand, she drew me to her and kissed me.

I could not say “Good-bye” then, for there was a strange choking feeling in my throat which made me hurry away, and the last thing I heard as I went out was the sharp banging and locking of the little gate, followed by another defiant sniff.

“Come and see us as often as you can, Mayne,” said my new friend at parting. “We never had any children, and it is a pleasure to us to have young people about us, for since my misfortunes we have lived very much to ourselves. In fact, my dear wife’s health has made it necessary that she should be much alone.”

“But she is getting better, sir?”

“Oh, rapidly now; and if I can get her abroad—Ah, we must talk about this another time. Goodnight.”

“Good-night.”

It was like the opening out of a new life to me, and I walked back to Camberwell as if the distance was nothing, thinking as I was all the time about the conversation, of Mrs John’s sweet, patient face, and the constantly attentive manner of Mr John, every action of his being repaid by a grateful smile. “I wonder,” I thought, “how it is possible that Mr Dempster and Mr John could be cousins;” and then I went on thinking about the interview at the office when Mr Dempster was so harsh.

This kept my attention till I reached the Deans’, and then I walked straight in to find Mrs Dean making believe to read, while Esau was bending his head slowly in a swaying motion nearer and nearer to the candle every moment. In fact I believe if I had not arrived as I did, Esau’s hair would have been singed so as to need no cutting for some time. As it was, he leaped up at a touch.

“Oh, here you are!” he said. “If you hadn’t come I believe I should soon have dropped asleep.”

Chapter Four.

How Mr Dempster used his Cane.

My life at the office grew more miserable every day, and Mr Isaac Dempster more tyrannical.

That’s a big word to use, and seems more appropriate to a Roman emperor than to a London auctioneer; but, on quietly thinking it over, it is quite correct, for I honestly believe that that man took delight in abusing Esau and me.

Let me see; what did some one say about the employment of boys? “A boy is a boy; two boys are half a boy; and three boys are no boy at all.”

Of course, as to the amount of work they do. But it is not true, for I know—one of the auction-room porters told me—that Mr Dempster used to keep two men-clerks in his office, till they both discharged themselves because they would not put up with what the porter called “his nastiness.” Then we were both engaged.

That was one day when Dingle came down in his green baize apron and carpet-cap, and had to wait till our employer returned from his lunch.

“Ah!” he said, “the guv’nor used to lead them two a pretty life, and keep ’em ever so late sometimes.”

“But he had more business then, I suppose?” I said.

“Not he. Busier now, and makes more money. Nobody won’t stop with him.”

“Yes, they will,” said Esau. “You said you’d been with him fourteen years.”

“Yes,” said Dingle, showing his yellow teeth, “but I’m an auctioneer’s fixtur’, and going ain’t in my way.”

“Why not?” asked Esau.

“Got a wife and twelve children, squire, and they nails a man down.”

Just then Mr Dempster came in, ordered Dingle to go into his room, and we could hear him being well bullied about

something, while as he came out he laughed at us both, and gave his head a peculiar shake.

“Off!” he whispered. “Flea in each ear.”

I mention this because it set me thinking that if we two lads of sixteen or seventeen did all the work for which two men were formerly kept, we could not be quite so useless and stupid as Mr Dempster said.

I know that my handwriting was not so very good, and I was not quite so quick with my pen as Esau, but his writing was almost like copper-plate, and I used to feel envious; though I had one consolation—I never made Esau’s mistakes in spelling.

But nothing we ever did was right, and as the weeks went on, made bright to me now by my visits up in North London, Esau would throw down his pen three or four times a day, rub his hands all over his curly head, and look over the top of the desk at me.

“Now then,” he used to say; “ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“To go and ’list. We’re big enough now.”

“Nonsense!”

“’Tain’t nonsense,” he said one morning, after Mr Dempster had been a little more disagreeable than usual about some copying not being finished, and then gone out, leaving me thinking what I could do to give him a little more satisfaction, so as to induce him to raise the very paltry salary he paid me. “’Tain’t nonsense. Mother says that if I stop I shall some day rise and get to be Lord Mayor, but I don’t think Demp would like it, so when you’re ready we’ll go.—Ready?”

“No.”

“You are a fellow!” said Esau, taking up his pen again. “I say, though, I wish we could get places somewhere else.”

“Why not try?”

“Because it would only be to do writing again, and it’s what makes me so sleepy. I’m getting worse—keep making figures and writing out catalogues till my head gets full of ’em.”

“It is tiring,” I said, with a sigh. “But do go on; he’ll be so cross if that list isn’t finished.”

“Can’t help it. I’m ever so much more sleepy this morning, and the words get running one atop of another. Look here,” he cried, holding up a sheet of ruled paper. “This ought to have been ‘chest of drawers,’ and it’s run into one word, ‘chawers’; and up higher there’s another blunder, ‘loo-table,’—it’s gone wrong too—do you see?—‘lable.’ My head’s all a buzz.”

“Tear it up quickly and write it again.”

“Shan’t; I shall correct it. No, I know. I shall cut the paper up, and stick it on another sheet, and write these lines in again. Pass the gum. Oh!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Here’s ‘mogany’ lower down, and ‘Tarpet’ for ‘Turkey carpet.’”

“Write it again, do,” I said, for I dreaded the scene that I knew there would be.

“Ah, well, all right, but I know I shall muddle it again, and—”

“As usual,” cried Mr Dempster, and we both started back on to our stools, for we had been standing up on the rails leaning towards each other over the double desk, so intent on the errors that we had not heard him open the door softly—I believe, on purpose to surprise us.

We began writing hard, and I felt my heart beating fast, as our employer banged the door heavily and strode up to the desk.

I gave one quick glance at him as he turned to Esau’s side, and snatched up the sheet of paper the boy tried to hide under the blotting-pad; and as I looked I saw that his face was flushed and fierce-looking as I had never seen it before.

“Hah!” he ejaculated, as he took off his glossy hat and stood it on a chair, with his ivory-handled Malacca cane across it. “Pretty stuff this, upon my word. Here, let me look at that letter.”

He reached over and snatched the missive I was writing from the desk, and held it up before him.

“Do you call that writing?” he roared. “Disgraceful! Abominable! The first boy I met in the street would do better. There—and there—and there!”

He tore the letter to fragments and threw the paper in my face.

“Now then; write another directly,” he cried; “and if you dare to—Here, what are you going to do?” he roared, as Esau took hold of the sheet of paper containing the errors.

“Going to write it over again, sir.”

“Write it over again, you miserable impostor!” he cried, as he snatched the paper back and laid a leaden weight upon it. “I’ll teach you to waste my time and paper gossiping—that’s what it means.”

“Here, what are you going to do?” cried Esau, as Mr Dempster seized him by the collar.

“I’ll show you what I’m going to do, you idle young scoundrel,” cried Mr Dempster, and he reached out his hand to take his stout cane from where it lay across his hat.

“Here, don’t you hit me,” cried Esau; and he tried to get away, as I sat breathless, watching all that was going on, and thinking that Mr Dempster dared not use the walking-cane in the way he seemed to threaten. Esau evidently thought he would, for he struggled hard now, but in vain, and he was dragged towards the chair. Then, as pulling seemed no use, the lad changed his tactics, and he darted forward to make for the door, just as Mr Dempster’s hand was touching the stick, which he did not secure, for the jerk he received sent cane and hat off the chair on to the floor.

“You dog!” roared Dempster, as the hat went on to the oilcloth with a hollow bang.

“Don’t you hit me!” cried Esau, struggling wildly to escape; and the next moment, as they swayed to and fro, I heard a strange crushing sound, and on looking to see the cause, there lay Mr Dempster’s beautiful guinea-and-a-half hat crushed into a shapeless, battered mass.

“Ah!” roared Mr Dempster, “you dog; you did that on purpose.”

“I didn’t,” cried Esau; “it was your foot did it.”

“Was it? was it?” snarled Mr Dempster, and the struggle recommenced, until I, with the perspiration standing on my forehead, caught tightly hold of the desk.

Esau was pretty strong, but he was almost helpless in the bands of the angry man who held him, and the struggle ended, after the high stool and the chair had both been knocked over with a crash, by Mr Dempster’s getting Esau down and holding him there with one knee upon his chest.

“Hah!” he ejaculated, panting. “Here you, Gordon, get down and pick up my cane,” and he gave his head a jerk in the direction of where the stick lay, just as it had been knocked close to the door.

Months of rigid obedience to the tyrant had their effect, and I got down from my stool trembling with excitement.

“Oh, don’t, don’t, Gordon!” cried Esau; “don’t give it him.”

But my employer’s eyes were fixed upon me with such a look that I was fascinated, and as if moved against my own will, I crossed the office and picked up the thick cane.

“Give it here, quick!”

For I stood there hesitating, but the imperative voice mastered me, and I moved towards the speaker.

“Don’t—don’t give it him,” cried Esau.

“Quick—this instant!” roared Mr Dempster, and I handed the cane.

“You sneak!” cried Esau angrily; “I’d ha’ died first.”

His words sent a sting through me, and I would have given anything to have been able to say, “I couldn’t help it, Esau.” But I was speechless, and felt the next instant as if a blow had fallen upon me, as I saw with starting eyes Mr Dempster shift his position, keeping a tight hold of Esau by the collar as he rose into a stooping position, and then, *whizz! thud*! he brought the cane down with all his force across the lad’s shoulders.

Esau uttered a yell as he tried to spring up, but he was held fast, and the blows were falling thick and fast upon the struggling lad, when I could bear it no longer, and with one bound I was at the auctioneer, and had fast hold of the cane.

“Stop!” I shouted, half hysterically; “you shan’t beat him. You have no right to do it, sir. Esau, get up. Run!”

“Let go!” cried Mr Dempster, turning a face black with passion at me. “Do you hear, beggar? Let go!”

“I will not,” I cried, for my blood was up now, and I did not feel in the least afraid. “You have no right to beat him.”

“Let go!”

“Don’t, don’t, Gordon! Yah! you great coward!”

“Once more, will you let go?” cried Mr Dempster, as he stood with one hand in Esau’s collar, bent down, and tugging at the cane, to which I clung.

“No,” I cried. “You shall not strike him again.”

I had hardly spoken when Mr Dempster rose up, loosening his hold of Esau, and dashing his free hand full in my face, while, as I fell back, he jerked the cane away and struck at me a cruel stinging blow from the left shoulder, as a cavalry-man would use a sabre, the cane striking me full across the right ear, while the pain was as acute as if the blow had been delivered by a keen-edged sword.

For a few moments I staggered back, half stunned and confused, while blow succeeded blow, now delivered on my back and arms with all his might.

As I said, the first cruel, cowardly blow half stunned me; those which followed stung me back into a wild state of rage and pain which made me reckless and blind, as, regardless of pain and the fact that he was a well-knit, strong man, I made a dash at the cane, got hold of it with both hands, and in spite of his efforts kept my grip of the stout elastic stick.

I knew that I was swung here and there, and the cane was tugged at till the ivory handle fell on the floor, and then he changed his attack, letting go of the cane with one hand and catching me by the throat.

“Now then,” he cried, and I felt that I was mastered.

Then I knew I was wrong, for at that moment Mr Dempster was driven forward, his forehead striking mine, and as I fell back my assailant fell on his knees, and I stood panting, the master of the cane.

The explanation was simple. Esau had watched his opportunity, and leaped upon our tyrant’s back, pinning his arms to his sides, and making him in his surprise loosen his hold of the cane.

It is hard work to recall it now, so wild and confused it all seems; but I remember well that I must have struck Mr Dempster, and that as he came at me Esau seized and overturned the great desk right in his way, sending him down again, while the next moment my fellow-clerk was holding open the door, shouting to me to come.

I caught down my hat and Esau’s, and made for the door, which Esau dragged to in our employer’s face, and the next minute we were tearing up the lane.

“Stop them! stop thief!” was shouted hoarsely, and in our excitement we looked back to see our enemy in pursuit, while, as we turned again to run, we found ourselves face to face with a burly City policeman, who caught each of us by an arm.

Chapter Five.

A Miserable Night.

“Hah! The scoundrels!” panted Dempster, as he came up, flushed, bareheaded, his glossy coat covered with dust, and a great dark weal growing darker moment by moment on his forehead, while for the first time I became aware of the fact that my right ear was cut and bleeding freely.

“What is it, sir?” said the policeman; and I shivered slightly as I felt his grip tighten on my arm.

“Take them. I give them in charge,” panted Mr Dempster, hoarse with rage—“robbery and assault.”

“What?” shouted Esau, furiously.

“It is not true!” I cried wildly.

“Take them,” shouted Mr Dempster. “I’ll follow in a cab. Take them.”

“You’ll have to charge them, sir,” said the constable.

“Yes. I know. I must make myself decent first.”

“You can do that afterwards, sir. Better all get in a cab at once before there’s a crowd.”

The cool matter-of-fact policeman was master of the situation, and, summoning a cab, he seemed to pack us all in, and followed to unpack us again a few minutes later, both Esau and I with the spirit evaporating fast, and feeling soft and limp, full of pain too, as we were ushered into the presence of a big, stern-looking inspector, who prepared to fill up a form.

All that passed is very misty now; but I remember Mr Dempster, as he glared at us, telling the inspector that he had had cause to complain about our conduct, and that we had, evidently after planning it, made a sudden attack upon him, and beaten him savagely with a stick.

“But you said robbery, sir,” the policeman suggested.

“Ah!—I will not press that,” cried Mr Dempster. “I don’t want to quite ruin the boys. I proceed against them for assault.”

I looked wildly at Esau for him to speak out, and he was looking at me as if half stupefied. The next I recollect is that the big policeman signed to us to follow him, and we were marched away.

Then we were in a whitewashed cell, a door was banged to, and we heard the bolts shot.

For a few minutes I stood there as if stunned, but was brought back to myself by Esau.

“Well,” he said loudly, “this is a nice game.”

“Oh, Esau!” I said weakly.

“Yes, it is ‘Oh!’” he cried. “What will my mother say?”

I could not answer—only look at him in the dim light hopelessly, and feeling in my mental and bodily pain as if everything was over for me in this world.

To my horror Esau burst into a heavy fit of laughter, and sitting down he rocked himself to and fro.

“What a game!” he cried; “but, I say, you didn’t half give it to him.”

“Oh, Esau!” I cried, “it’s horrible.”

“For him,” he replied. “I say, I’m precious stiff and sore though; did he hurt you very much?”

“Yes; my arms ache, and my ear bleeds. Esau, we shall never be able to go back.”

“Hooray!” cried my companion defiantly. “Who wants to? But that isn’t the worst of it; he will not pay us our wages.”

“No,” I said; “and we shall be punished.”

“Then it’s a jolly shame; for he ought to be punished for hitting us. I say, can’t we have a summons against him for assaulting us?”

“I don’t know,” I said, wondering. “How my head does ache!”

“Some one coming,” whispered Esau.

For there were heavy footsteps, and the bolts were drawn. Then the door opened, to show the inspector and the big policeman.

“Here, boy,” said the former roughly, “let me look at your ear.”

I was holding my handkerchief to the place, which was bleeding a good deal.

“Better have the doctor,” he said.

“What, for that! Only wants bathing and some sticking-plaster.”

He smiled.

“Well, we shall see,” he said, looking at me curiously. “What did you do with the money?”

“What money?”

“That Mr Dempster said you took.”

“He didn’t take any!” cried Esau indignantly. “He knocked us about, and we hit him again, and he got the worst of it.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it? Come, my lad, that’s not true.”

“It is, sir, indeed,” I said earnestly.

“But look at your handkerchief. Seems to me you got the worst of it.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” I said.

“You had a regular scrimmage, then?”

“Yes, sir,” I said; and I told him exactly how it happened.

“Humph!” ejaculated the inspector, when I had finished, “I dare say you will not get more than seven years.”

“Seven years, sir!” cried Esau. “What for? Old Demp ought to get it, not us.”

“You must tell the Lord Mayor that, or the alderman, to-morrow.”

“But are we going to be kept in prison, sir?” I asked, with my courage sinking.

“You are going to be locked up here till tomorrow, of course. Like to have a good wash?”

Of course we said “Yes,” and before long we looked fairly respectable again, with the exception of scratches, bruises, and the ugly cut I had on my ear.

The thing that encouraged me most was the way in which I saw the inspector and constable exchange a smile, while

later on they and the other constables about gave us a good tea with bread and butter and meat, and we had to tell all our adventures again before we were locked up for the night, after refusing an offer that was made.

“Think we ought to have sent?” said Esau, as we sat together alone.

“I have no one I could send to but Mr John, and I shouldn’t like to do that,” I said, as I wondered the while whether he would be very angry.

“And I’ve got nobody but mother,” said Esau, “and that’s what made it so queer.”

“What do you mean? Queer?”

“Yes, if I sent to her and she knew I was locked up at the station, she’d come running down here in a dreadful fright and be having fits or something.”

“But she’ll be horribly frightened now!”

“Not so much frightened. She’ll think we’ve gone to see something, or been asked out to supper.”

“But she’ll sit up.”

“That won’t matter, because she’s sure to go to sleep.”

So no message was sent—no opportunity afforded of our having bail; but after a time this did not trouble us much. In fact, as we were discussing our future in a low tone, wondering what punishment would be meted out to us, and what we could do afterwards, Esau burst into a fit of laughter.

“It was fine,” he said, as he sat afterwards wiping his eyes. “And you such a quiet, patient fellow!”

“What was fine?”

“To see you go on as you did. I say, I wonder what he’ll say to the judge?”

“We shall not go before a judge,” I told him.

“Well, madjistrit then. He’ll say anything, and you’ll see if we don’t get sent to prison.”

I said I hoped not, but I felt pretty sure that we should be punished very severely, and the outlook seemed so bad that I began to think my only chance would be to follow Esau’s fortune, and go for a soldier.

All at once, just after he had been wondering how long “mother” would be before she dropped off to sleep, and what she would say when she found that we had not been home, I became aware of a low dull guttural sound, which told me that Esau had dropped off, and was sleeping soundly.

But I could not follow his example for thinking. What would Mr John say? What would Mrs John think? They would set me down as a reckless lad with a savage temper, and if we were punished they would never know the truth. Then another idea, one which made me shiver, occurred to me; the whole account would be in the newspapers, given as Police Intelligence, and that completely baffled all my attempts to sleep.

It was a very quiet night at the station. I heard doors opened and closed twice over, with a good deal of talking; and once while I was thinking most deeply, I started and stared curiously at a bright blaze of light, beyond which I could not see; but I felt that a constable had that light in his hand, and that he had come to see if we were asleep.

I had not heard the door open, I suppose I was thinking too deeply; but I heard it shut again, and heavy steps in the long stone passage outside. Then I began thinking again intently, full of remorse for what I had done, and how soon it would be morning; and then I began to envy Esau, who could sleep so soundly in spite of our position.

I remember it all—the trampling of feet outside, the dull muttering of voices, and the curious guttural sound Esau made as he slept, one that I was often to hear in years to come; and I sat there with my head resting in a corner, envying him, and wishing that I too could forget. And over and over again came the events of the past day—the struggle in the office, and the savage, malicious look of Mr Dempster as he struck me.

Weary, aching, and with my head throbbing, I sat and wondered now at my daring; and then came all kinds of mental questions as to the amount of punishment I, a poor boy, would receive.

All at once, as these miserable thoughts kept on repeating themselves in a strange, feverish way, that was somehow connected with a throbbing, smarting sensation in one ear, Mr Dempster seemed to have raised me by the arm once more, and to begin shaking me roughly—so vigorously that I made a desperate effort to escape, when he cried—

“Steady, steady! You’re all right. Come, rouse up and have a wash, my lad. It’s nearly eight. Ready for some coffee and bread and butter?”

I looked up in the dim light to see the big, burly policeman leaning over me, while Esau was giving vent to a noisy yawn. It was morning, indeed, and though not aware of the fact, I must have slept about seven hours.

Chapter Six.

An Escape, and a Suggestion.

I don't know whether I was any more cowardly than most boys of my age; but I certainly felt a curiously nervous sensation that morning, and I was not alone in it; for Esau had a strange scared look, and his fair hair did not curl nearly so tightly as usual.

"Eh?" he said, "feel frightened?" in answer to a question. "No, I don't think I do; but I wish they'd leave the door open so that a fellow could run."

But there were no doors open for us to escape, and at last, after a weary time of waiting, the big policeman who had us in his charge bent down to us in the place where we were waiting, and said—

"Your case comes on next. There, hold up, my lads. Speak out, both of you, like men, and tell the whole truth. It's Sir Thomas Browning to-day."

I listened to him, but I felt as if I was growing hopelessly confused, and that I should never be able to say a word in my defence, while when I looked at Esau, I found that he was looking at me with his forehead full of wrinkles.

"It's all very well for him to say 'hold up.' He haven't got to be tried," he whispered. "I'm 'fraid it's all up with us, Gordon. Wish we could be together when they sends us off."

"Now then!" said the policeman, clapping me on the shoulder; "it's us. Don't you be scared. Sir Thomas is a good 'un."

The next minute Esau and I were standing somewhere with our constable close by, and somewhere before us, in places that looked like pews, sat a number of gentlemen, some of whom wore wigs. Some were writing, and, seen as it were through a mist, a number of people looking on. Next, in a confused way, I saw a red-faced, white-headed gentleman, who took off his spectacles to have a good look at us, and put them on again to read a paper before him.

It was all dim and strange, and there was quite a singing in my ears, as I looked vacantly about while some talking went on, ending by a voice saying—

"Kiss the book."

Then the white-headed old gentleman said—

"Well, Mr Dempster, what have you to say?"

At the name Dempster, I started and looked sharply about me, to see that my employer was a little way off, very carefully dressed, and with a glossy hat in his hand.

"That can't be *the* hat," I remember thinking, as I stared at him wildly.

The mist had cleared away now, and I stood listening to him as he went on speaking, in a very quiet subdued way, about the troubles he had had with the two defendants—boys whom he had taken into his service out of kindness.

"Yes, yes, yes, Mr Dempster," said the old gentleman testily; "but this isn't a sale of house property. There's a very long charge-sheet. You have given these two lads into custody on a charge of assault. Now, shortly, please, how did it happen?"

"The fact is, your worship," said Mr Dempster, "I have had much trouble with both of them. The boy Dean is idle in the extreme, while Gordon is a lad of vile and passionate temper."

"Well, sir—well, sir?"

"I had occasion to speak to them yesterday about idling in my absence, the consequence being that a great many mistakes were made."

"Allus careful as I could be," said Esau, in an ill-used tone.

"Silence, sir! How dare you?" cried the old gentleman. "You shall be heard presently. Now, Mr Dempster, please go on."

"I was angry, Sir Thomas, and I scolded them both severely, when to my utter surprise—stop, I will be perfectly accurate—things had come to such a pass that I had threatened them with dismissal—when in a fit of passion Dean struck my new hat from a chair on which it was laid, jumped upon it, and crushed it."

"Oh, what a whopper!" cried Esau, excitedly. "Will you be silent, sir?" cried the old gentleman, tapping the desk in front of him with his knuckles.

"Here is the hat, Sir Thomas," said Mr Dempster, and stooping down he held up his crushed and beaten head-covering in corroboration of his words, when a perfect roar of laughter ran round the court, and I saw the old gentleman lift his glasses and smile.

"Well, Mr Dempster, well?" he said.

"Then, Sir Thomas, then, to my utter astonishment, evidently by collusion, Gordon seized my Malacca cane, and the boy Dean shouted to him to come on now, and they made a combined attack upon me, breaking off the handle of my

cane, inflicting the injuries you see, and but for my energetic defence I believe they would have robbed me and gone off. Fortunately I was able to call for the police, and give them into custody."

"Well, of all—" began Esau; but the old alderman turned upon him sharply.

"I shall commit you, sir, for contempt of court," he cried.

"But he is telling such—"

"Silence, sir!"

"Quiet, you young donkey," whispered the policeman. "Hsh!"

"Hm! Mr Dempster, Mr Dempster," said the old gentleman, "this is a police court, not an auctioneer's rostrum."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Thomas," said Mr Dempster, with dignity.

"You are sworn, sir, and I wished to remind you that this is not a rostrum. You auctioneers are licenced gentlemen, and you do exaggerate a little sometimes. Are you not doing so now?"

"Look at my face, Sir Thomas. My arm is terribly strained."

"Um—yes, but it does not sound reasonable to me, as an old man of the world who has had much to do with boys."

"I have stated my case, Sir Thomas," said Mr Dempster in an ill-used tone.

"Are you sure that you did not use the cane first yourself?"

"I—I will not swear I did not, Sir Thomas. I was very angry."

"Hah! yes," said the old gentleman, nodding his head. "Now, boy, speak the truth. This is a very serious business; what have you to say?"

"Got hold of me, sir, and was going to hit me, and we wrestled, and the hat was knocked over, and the stick, and he trod on his 'at, sir, and I sings out to Mayne Gordon—this is him, sir—to take the stick away, but he got it, sir, and I calls out to Gordon not to let him thrash me."

"Gently, gently," cried the old gentleman, holding up his hands, for Esau's words came pouring out in a breathless way, and every one was laughing.

"No, sir, not a bit gently; 'ard, sir, awful! and I can show the marks, and Gordon—that's him, sir—says he'd no business to 'it his mate, and he 'it him, and then Gordon got hold of the cane and held on, and Mr Dempster, he got it away again, and cut him across the ear, sir, and it bled pints, and 'it him again, and then I went at him and held him, and Gordon got the cane away and 'it 'im, sir, and then we ran away, and the police took us and locked us up, and that's all."

"And enough too," said Sir Thomas good-humouredly. "There, hold your tongue.—Now, you, sir, what have you to say?—the same as your companion?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," I said huskily; and then a feeling of indignation seemed to give me strength, and I continued, "What Esau Dean says is all true. Mr Dempster has behaved cruelly to us, and I could not stand still and see him beat Esau. I only tried to hold the stick so that he should not strike him, and then he hit me here, and here, and then I think I got hold of it, and—I don't remember any more, sir. I'm very sorry now."

"I ain't," said Esau defiantly.

"Do you want me to send you to prison, sir?" cried the old gentleman.

"No, sir."

"Then hold your tongue. Any witnesses, constable?"

"No, Sir Thomas."

"Humph! Well, really, Mr Dempster, from what I know of human nature, it seems to me that these lads have both spoken the truth."

"Incorrigible young scoundrels, Sir Thomas."

"No, no, no! Excuse me, I think not. A boy is only a very young man, and there is a great responsibility in properly managing them. The marks upon these lads show that they have had a very cruel attack made upon them by somebody. You confessed that you struck one of them. Well, I am not surprised, sir, that one took the other's part. I say this, not as a magistrate, but as a man. You have to my mind, sir, certainly been in the wrong—so have they, for they had their remedy if they were ill-used by applying to a magistrate. So understand this, boys—I do not consider you have done right, though I must own that you had great provocation."

"Then am I to understand, sir," began Mr Dempster, in a very different tone of voice to that which he had before used, "that you are not going to punish these young scoundrels?"

“Have the goodness to recollect where you are, sir,” said the old alderman sternly. “Yes, sir, I dismiss the case.”

“Then a more contemptible mockery of justice,” roared Mr Dempster, “I never saw.”

“Exactly,” said the old alderman, quietly; “your words, Mr Dempster, quite endorse my opinion. You are a man of ungovernable temper, and not fit to have charge of boys.”

“Then—”

“That will do, sir.—The next case.”

“I should like to shake hands with that old chap,” whispered Esau; and then aloud, as he tossed his cap in the air, “Hooray!”

There was a roar of laughter in the court, and the old alderman turned very fiercely upon Esau, and shook his head at him, but I half fancy I saw him smile, as he turned to a gentleman at his side.

Then in the midst of a good deal of bustle in the court, and the calling of people’s names, the policeman hurried us both away, and soon after stood shaking hands with us both.

“You’ve both come off splendid, my lads,” he said, “and I’m glad of it. Old Sir Thomas saw through Master Dempster at once. I know him; he’s a bad ’un—regular bully. One of his men—Dingle, isn’t his name?—has often told me about him.”

“Ah, you don’t know half,” said Esau.

“Quite enough, anyhow,” said the constable, clapping Esau on the shoulder; “and you take my advice, don’t you go back to him.”

“No,” said Esau; “he wouldn’t have us if we wanted.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

“Join the Royal Artillery,” said Esau, importantly.

“Join the Royal Nonsense, boy!” said the big, bluff constable. “Better be a p.c. than that. Plenty of gents in the city want clerks.”

“Then,” said Esau, “they shan’t have me.”

But he did not say it loud enough for the constable to hear, the words being meant for me, and after once more shaking hands with us the man said, “Good-bye,” and we were out in the busy streets once more—as it seemed to me, the only two lads in London with nothing to do.

I was walking along by Esau’s side, low-spirited in spite of our acquittal, for everything seemed so novel and strange, when Esau, who had been whistling, looked round at me.

“Now then,” he said, “will you come with me?”

“Where?”

“Woolwich. ’Tillery.”

“No. And you are not going.”

“Oh, ain’t I?”

“No,” I said. “You are going home. Your mother must be very anxious about us.”

“I’d forgotten all about her,” cried Esau. “I say, look: here’s old Demp.”

If I had obeyed my first inclination I should have turned down the first street to avoid our late employer; but I kept on boldly, as he came towards us, and I expected that he would go by, but he stopped short, and looked from one to the other.

“Oh, here you are,” he said; “look out, my lads, I have not done yet. If you think I am going to be beaten like this, you are—”

“Come on, Esau,” I whispered, and we did not hear the end of his threat.

“There!” cried Esau. “Now what do you say? He’ll be giving us into custody again. ’Tillery’s our only chance. He daren’t touch us there. But I say, he isn’t going back to the office. Let’s run and get what’s in our desks. There’s my old flute.”

“I thought you did not want to be given into custody again?” I cried. “Why, if we go and try to touch anything there, and he catches us, he is sure to call in the police.”

“Never thought o’ that,” said Esau, rubbing one ear. “I say, don’t be a coward. Come on down to Woolwich.”

“You go on directly to your mother and tell her all about it.”

“I say, don’t order a fellow about like that. You ain’t master.”

“You do as I tell you,” I said, firmly.

“Oh, very well,” he replied, in an ill-used tone. “If you say I am to, I suppose I must. Won’t you come too?”

“No; I’m going up to see Mr John Dempster to tell him all about it, and ask him to give me his advice.”

“Ah, it’s all very fine,” grumbled Esau; “it’s always Mr John Dempster now. You used to make me a friend and ask my advice: now I’m nobody at all. You always was such a gentleman, and too fine for me.”

“Don’t talk like that, Esau,” I said; “you hurt me.”

He turned and caught hold of my hand directly. “I didn’t mean it,” he said, huskily. “On’y don’t chuck me over. I won’t go for a soldier if you don’t want, but let’s stick together.”

“I should like to, Esau,” I said, “for I’ve no friends but you and Mr John.”

“Oh, I don’t know ’bout friends,” he said. “I don’t want to be friends, ’cause I’m not like you, but let’s keep together. I’ll do anything you want, and I’ll always stick up for you, same as you did for me.”

“I should be an ungrateful brute if I did part from you, Esau, for I shall never forget how kind you and your mother have always—”

“Don’t! don’t! don’t!” he cried, putting his fingers in his ears. “Now you’re beginning to preach at me, and you know I hate that. I say, let’s call at the auction-rooms and say good-bye to old Dingle. Dempster won’t be there.”

I hesitated, and then hurried down the next street with Esau, for I thought I should like to say a friendly word to the porter, who had always been pleasant and kind, little thinking how it would influence my future career.

He was just inside the long sale-room, and he came out to us directly to shake hands gleefully.

“All right, lads,” he cried. “I know all about it. I was there, and heard every word. Serve him precious well right! Ah, you’re lucky ones. Wish I was out of his service. What are you both going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said sadly. “Esau here wants to be a soldier.”

“Yes, he always was mad that way. Don’t you listen to him.”

“Better be a soldier than old Demp’s clerk.”

“Don’t you be too sure, my lad,” said Dingle. “There are such things as drill-sergeants in the army, and they tell me they’re a kind of Double Dempsters. It’s awkward for you, Master Gordon. You see, you’ll have to send to the guv’nor for a reference when you try for another place, and he won’t give you one, see if he does.”

“No,” I said sadly, “there is no chance there. What would you do?”

“Well,” he said, taking off his carpet cap, and stroking his thin grey hair, “it’s easy to advise anybody, but it ain’t easy to advise right.”

“Never mind,” I said, “try.”

“Well, sir, speaking as a poor man, if I was like you, out of a ’gagement, and no character ’cept for being able to thrash your own master—”

“Oh, Dingle!” I cried.

“Well, sir, it’s true enough,” he said; and he bent down to indulge in a long silent fit of laughter.

“Don’t do that,” I said uneasily, “it’s nothing to laugh at.”

“Well, ’tis, and it ’tisn’t, sir,” said Dingle, wiping his eyes on the corner of his apron.

“What would you do if you were out of an engagement?”

“Me? I should do what my brother did—hemigrate.”

“Your brother did, Ding? To a nice place?” cried Esau.

“Yes, my lad, and he’s getting on fine.”

“Then why didn’t you go too, and get on fine?”

“’Cause I’ve got a houseful o’ children, and nearly all gals. That’s why, Clevershakes.”

“But what does your brother do?” I said eagerly. “Is he an auctioneer’s porter?”

“Love and bless your heart, Mr Gordon, sir, no,” he cried. “I don’t believe there’s such a thing over there. He went out

in the woods, and got a bit o' land give him, and built hisself a log-house, and made a garden, and got cows, and shoots in the woods."

"Here, hold hard, Ding," cried Esau, excitedly; "that'll do. Goes shooting in the woods?"

"Yes, and gets a deer sometimes, and one winter he killed a bear and two wolves, my lad."

"That's the place," cried Esau. "Hooroar! Come on, Master Gordon, let's go there."

Dingle laughed.

"Hark at him, sir. What a one he is! Why, you don't know even where it is."

"I don't care where it is," cried Esau. "You say you can go there, and get some land, and live in the woods, and make your own house, and shoot bears and wolves—that's just the thing I should like to do."

"Why, you said you wanted to jyne the Ryle Artilleree."

"Yes, but I didn't know of this place then. Where is it? How do you go? You'll come too, won't you?"

"I don't know," I said, slowly, for my imagination was also fired by the idea of living in such a land of liberty as that. In fact, as I spoke, bright pictures of green forests and foaming rivers and boats began to form in my mind. "Yes," I cried, "I think I should like to go."

"Hooroar! Where is it, Ding?"

"Oh, my brother's in Bri'ish Columbia, but it's a long, long way."

"Oh, we don't mind that," cried Esau. "How do you get there?"

"Him and his wife and their boy went eight or nine year ago. Sailed in a ship from the docks, and it took 'em five months."

"Oh!" said Esau, in a disappointed tone. "Five months! Why, I didn't think there was anywhere so far off as that."

"Ah! but there is, and in one letter he told me that a man he knew was once a year going, but he went in a waggon instead of a ship."

"Get out! He's gammoning us," cried Esau. "You can't drive a waggon over the sea."

"Who said you could, Clevershakes?" said Dingle—then turning to me, "He went over to Canady by ship, and then all acrost the prayerees in a waggon—lots o' waggons all together, because o' the Injins."

"Fire-injins?" said Esau, eagerly. "No. Dunno though," said Dingle, grinning; "they did fire at 'em a deal."

"Red Injins!" cried Esau. "Oh, I say, I think I'd rather go that way, because there'd be some fighting."

"What, ain't you had fightin' enough, boy? Want to get at it again? What yer thinking about, Mr Gordon?"

I started, for my thoughts were far away. "I was thinking about your brother," I said, hastily.

"Ah! but such a life wouldn't do for you, my lad. There's no clean hands out there—leastwise I dessay they're clean sometimes. What I mean is, it's always hard, rough work, and no setting on a stuffed seat and writing on bloo paper. Why, what do you think my brother had for chairs in his house?"

"Boxes," I said.

"No, boxes made tables. Stumps of wood—logs cut off a fir tree—no castors on them, my lad."

"British Columbia?" I said, thoughtfully, as I tried to remember where that country was on the map, and I am afraid getting a very hazy notion as to its position.

"Yes, my lad, Bri'ish Columbia; and if you go out there and mention my name, my brother will be glad enough to see you, I know. There—I must get to work 'fore the guv'nor catches me, or p'r'aps there'll be another fight, and me wanting a fresh place too." So we shook hands, promising to go and see him again, and directly after Esau and I parted, he going south for home, I going north, and feeling a curious sensation of shrinking as I neared Mr John Dempster's home.

Chapter Seven.

My Friends' Plans.

They were both in the little sitting-room, when Maria, who had given me a very indignant look for dragging her down to the gate, announced the visitor and went away, closing the door more loudly than was necessary, and the reception I had was very warm as they both rose from where they had been turning over some letters together.

"Why, Mayne," cried Mr John, "this is an unexpected pleasure," and he made way for Mrs John, who took my hand,

smiling in her gentle way, and then turning serious and eager as she exclaimed—

“There is something the matter?”

I nodded, for I could not speak.

“Some trouble with—my cousin?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, hoarsely; and for a few minutes the words would not come, the incidents of the past twenty-four hours having upset me more than I was aware.

“Don’t hurry, my boy, don’t hurry; and don’t question him, Alexes. Did you walk up?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ah, a nice day for walking. We two ought to have had ours, but some letters—a little business—kept us in. We have had a very long communication from my wife’s brother, and it necessitates a great deal of thinking at our time of life.”

“I—I have left Mr Dempster, sir,” I said.

“Indeed! I am not surprised, Mayne, and—bless me! what is the matter with your ear?”

The words came now, and I told him everything, while before I had half got through my narrative, Mr John was upon his legs tramping excitedly up and down the little room, and uttering angry ejaculations from time to time.

“You—you are not very angry with me?”

“Angry?” he cried. “I am more than angry that such a thing could have happened, and the principal actor in it have been one who bears the same name as myself. It is cruel—scandalous—disgraceful; and above all, to have exposed you to such an indignity—in custody like a common thief! But there, you shall not continue in his office.”

I could not help giving him rather a droll look.

“Of course, sir,” I said, “I am discharged.”

“Yes, yes, I had forgotten that,” he said, hurriedly. “You must have a better post—one more suited to your abilities. Now, let me see—let me see—what steps ought I to take first? Something in the city, perhaps, or I would rather see you in one of the Government offices.”

I looked at him wonderingly, as he sat down at the table now, and taking up a letter, used it to tap on the polished wood.

“Yes, I think in one of the Government offices,” he continued, while I glanced now at Mrs John, whose face was full of the lines caused by her thoughts.

As she met my eyes, she gave me a piteous look, and shook her head sadly, as if saying something by way of warning.

“Yes, I think decidedly one of the Government offices, my dear, but which?”

As he spoke he raised his eyes and looked at Mrs John, who met his gaze with one so full of loving tenderness that it impressed me, and the more that I saw what a change took place directly in Mr John’s countenance, ending by his looking down at the letter he held in his hand.

“Ah,” he exclaimed, “what a miserable dreamer I am! Always the same! Mayne, my boy,” he added, piteously, “you must not listen to me. I cannot even help myself, and here am I talking to you in this vain, foolish way.”

He let his head drop into his hands, and sat bent down till Mrs John went to his side.

“Don’t give way,” I heard her whisper; “it was your good heart that spoke.”

“My good heart,” he said piteously—“no, my weak, foolish, dreaming brain. It was always so, and I have brought you down to poverty like this.”

She bent lower, and whispered a few words which seemed quite to transform him.

“Yes,” he cried, with his face flushing, “I am always ungrateful, and letting present troubles set benefits aside. Mayne, my boy, I wanted you to come and see us. I told you that we were going abroad—for my wife’s health—I might say for my own,” he added, with a smile, “for I am no use here in England.”

“And you are going, sir?” I said, glad to find that the conversation was changing.

“Yes; to join my dear wife’s brother. He has sent us an invitation. He thinks I might like the life out there, and he is sure that it will give renewed health to his sister.”

“I am very glad, sir,” I said, holding out my hands to both, “and—very sorry.”

“To lose *us*,” said Mr John. “Yes; now we are getting to know each other so well, it will be painful.”

“Are you going to Canada, sir?” I said, hastily, for the idea of losing almost my only friends chilled me.

“To Canada first, then on by slow degrees to the great North-West. My brother-in-law—did I not tell you?”

I shook my head.

“He is in the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company, chief at one of their stations in British Columbia.”

“British Columbia!” I exclaimed.

“Yes. What do you know of the country?”

“Nothing, sir, only that one of Mr Dempster’s men has a brother there. But it is a rough place, wild, and there are forests. Mrs John could not go there.”

“No place could be rough or wild to me, Mayne,” she said, smiling, “if I could find health and strength.”

“And you will there, dear,” cried Mr John excitedly. “Your brother says the country is lovely, and that the slow waggon journey across, though rough, will be invigorating. It will take many months, Mayne,” he continued, speaking as eagerly and joyfully as a boy preparing for a holiday, “but my brother-in-law has sent us ample for our expenses, and he tells us to take our time, and once there I shall easily be able to repay him, either by assisting him, or by means of a farm. Alexes, my darling, I feel now that nature meant me for a farmer, and at last I am going to succeed.”

“Nature meant you, John,” she replied, with a look of pride at him, “for what you are, what you always have been, and will be.”

“A poor dreamer?”

“No, my dear husband—a gentleman.”

“I thought I was sorry as well as glad,” I said, after a pause. “I am now very glad. When do you go?”

“As soon as we can make all the arrangements,” said Mr John.

“But you cannot journey in a waggon by yourselves.”

“We cannot?”

“No, sir; you must join a party—quite a caravan.”

“That is what Dan said in the letter, dear,” said Mrs John.

“Of course. My head is in such a whirl. I had forgotten—but you, Mayne, you talk as if you understand all this.”

“I have beard, sir,” I said, colouring a little; “that is all.”

“But you, my boy?—we can’t go and leave you in distress, and without an engagement.”

He whispered something to her.

“I had thought the same,” she said, gently; “but I did not think it right to propose it.”

“Not if he could do better here,” cried Mr John, excitedly. “Mayne, my boy, we have only known each other a few months, but it has been enough to make me understand you. My wife will vouch for me. It seems to me that you are alone, an orphan without a chance of raising yourself here: will you come with us to try your fortune in the new land?”

“Would you take me with you?” I cried, excitedly.

“Take you, my boy?” he cried, “gladly; but, Alexes, speak for me, dear. I am so prone to let heart master judgment. Should I be doing right? Should I be doing right?”

There was a silence in the little room which lasted for some minutes, and during that time the shouts of a party of lads engaged in some sport came ringing through the window.

“Yes,” cried Mr John, “you hear that—boys at play! It seems to me that our young friend here should be engaged as they are, and not be called upon to enter into the struggle for life away in some wild country.”

“But I have been at work now for years, Mr John,” I said.

“Yes, my lad, I know, and I want to help you; but misfortune has so marked me for her own that I seem now to have lost all faith in myself.”

“Have you no relatives, Mayne?” said Mrs John, gravely. “There are people who could help you to some engagement?”

I shook my head.

“None that I know of,” I said.

“And when we are gone what will you do?”

“Obtain some situation, I hope.”

“You hope, my boy. It is a poor prospect, that. I do not like to say, come with us to this new land, though I believe any enterprising lad would be sure to make his way.”

“Then why shouldn’t I come?”

“Because prosperity will have to be fought for, and obtained at so great a cost. Civilisation has to be left behind. It will be a rough life.”

“But if a delicate lady could bear it, why should not I?”

“I have told you why I could bear it,” she said, smiling. “You must not judge hastily, Mayne. I am afraid to say come.”

“Would you both like me to come?” I said, looking from one to the other.

“For our own sakes, yes. For yours we are afraid to speak,” said Mrs John, and her husband nodded his acquiescence in her words.

“Then I shall come,” I said, firmly. “Not with you. I shall go by sea.”

“You will go?” cried Mr John, looking at me wonderingly.

“Yes, sir; and perhaps I shall get there first.”

“But, my dear boy, how?”

“I don’t know, sir,” I said, laughing; “I am going to talk to a man I know, and—Oh, I had forgotten!”

“Forgotten what?”

“Esau,” I said, “the lad who worked with me in the office.”

Mr John looked at his wife in a perplexed way.

“Let us think about it all,” said Mrs John. “This companion of yours—Esau—do you like him?”

“Oh, yes,” I cried; “he has always been most kind, and he wants to go with me—for us to be together.”

I did not grasp it so well then as I did afterwards, though I had an undefined feeling that my fellow clerk’s company would not be agreeable to them; and when I left them that night, it was with the feeling that it was quite certain that my new friends would start, possibly before the month was out; while as far as I was concerned, my prospects were very much as they were.

Chapter Eight.

A Startling Announcement.

That night when I got back to Camberwell, I found that not only had supper been ready above an hour, but Mrs Dean and Esau were both waiting for me to join them.

“I thought we’d make a sort of a party of it,” said Esau, “only not ask anybody, so that we could enjoy ourselves, though if that policeman was anywhere near, and old Dingle wasn’t so far off, I should like to have had them in.”

“Oh, I am glad you’ve come,” cried Mrs Dean, “for Esau has been going on so.”

“Only,” continued Esau, ignoring his mother’s words, “you couldn’t ask old Dingle without asking his wife and twelve children, and that would take such a lot of plates, without counting the pie mother’s made, and that’s only just enough for three.”

“But why have you got such a grand hot supper?” I said.

“Because of its being a holiday, and because we’re going to make a fresh start in life over there in the woods.”

“Esau, my dear, don’t, pray don’t,” whimpered his mother. “It was bad enough sitting up for you all night, and you not coming, but it’s far worse when you will go on like that.”

“Come, sit down, Mr Gordon. I’m as hungry as can be. Why you know you went to sleep, mother.”

“I didn’t, my dear. I never had a wink all night for expecting you.”

“Well, how could I help it, mother? We should have been home safe enough if we hadn’t been locked up in a dun John.”

“Yes, and my boy in custody—in prison. Oh dear me! oh dear me!”

“Ah!” shouted Esau, striking the table hard with a spoon. “You dare to cry again, and I won’t eat a bit of supper.”

“But I can’t help it, Esau,” sobbed the poor little woman; “I declare I’ve been seeing nothing but policemen and prison vans ever since you told me where you had been.”

“All comes o’ getting into bad company, mother,” said Esau, cutting the steaming steak pie. “There; that’s an extra spoonful o’ gravy for you if you promise not to cry.”

He passed a plate to where his mother sat, and began to help me.

“Bad company’s the ruin of all boys,” continued Esau, laughing at me. “Look at Mr Gordon’s ear, and that mark on his face.”

“Oh, my dear,” cried Mrs Dean, “my eyes were so dim, I didn’t see. Is it very bad?”

“’Course you couldn’t see,” cried Esau, “if you keep on crying. Why you ought to laugh for joy to think Mr Gordon and me’s got out of bad company, and left old Dempster for good.”

“I am glad, my dear, if it’s for your good, I’m sure. Let me give you a hot baked potato, Mr Gordon, my dear. But Esau has been going on in the wildest way—says he shall start across the sea to some dreadful place.”

“That I didn’t, mother; I said it was a lovely place. There you are, master. Mr Esau Dean, may I have the pleasure of helping you to some poy?”

“He says he shall be an emigrant, my dear, and shall go and build himself a house in the woods.”

“Well,” said Esau, helping himself quickly, “there’s no room here in London to build one, and if there was the people wouldn’t let me have the ground.”

“And it’s all madness, and wild as wild.”

“Well, you might give your poor son, who has just escaped outer prison, a hot potato,” said Esau, grinning at me again.

“Oh, my dear, I beg your pardon. There, let me help you. That’s a beauty.”

“Then why didn’t you give it to Mr Gordon?”

“Do be quiet, my dear. How you do talk. I really think you’re half crazy.”

“I was, mother, to stop with old ‘going, going, gone’ so long. Never mind; I’m going to have land of my own, and a house in the woods, where I can go and shoot bears and wolves.”

“There, Mr Gordon, my dear, that’s how he has been going on ever since he came home.”

“Hold your plate for some more gravy,” said Esau to me. “That’s the worst part of it. I shan’t have mother to make hot steak pies and lovely crusts.”

“It isn’t half so good as I should like to make it, Esau,” said the poor little woman sadly; “but do be a good boy, and leave off all that dreadful talk. Mr Gordon don’t go on like that.”

“No, but he thinks all the more, mother.”

“He don’t, I’m sure. Now do you, Mr Gordon?”

“I’m afraid I’ve quite made up my mind to go, Mrs Dean,” I said sadly.

“Oh, my dear, don’t,” she cried. “It’s too dreadful. Right on the other side of the world, where there’s bears and wolves, and for all we know perhaps savage Red Indians.”

“Oh, there are, mother, lots of ’em; and they scallop people and roast ’em.”

“Esau!” half shrieked the poor little woman wildly.

“Don’t eat ’em afterwards, do they, Mr Gordon?”

“Don’t listen to him, Mrs Dean,” I cried. “He is saying all this to tease you.”

“I thought so,” she cried triumphantly. “Then he doesn’t mean to go?”

I was silent, and Mrs Dean’s knife and fork dropped on the table.

“Tell me—the truth,” she cried, rising and laying her hand on my shoulder.

“The truth is, Mrs Dean, that we have both lost our situations, and that I’m afraid Mr Dempster will be so malicious that he will keep us from getting others.”

“Yes, I’m afraid of that,” she said sadly.

“So as we have heard that any one who likes to try can get on out there, we did think of going.”

“And we do think of going, mother dear,” said Esau gently. “Come, try and look at it sensibly. I know you will not like me to go, and when it comes to the time, I shan’t like to leave you; but I’m such a sleepy-headed chap, I shall never get on here, and if I go over there it will wake me up.”

“But I couldn’t part with you, my boy,” cried Mrs Dean. “I should be all alone. What would become of me?”

“Why you’d go on just as you are, and I should send you home some money sometimes; and when I’ve made my fortune I shall come back and make a lady of you.”

“No, no, no,” she said, with the tears running down her cheeks; “I’d rather stop as we are, Esau.”

“Yes, but we can’t.”

“Yes, we can, dear. I’ve saved a few pounds now, and it only means working a little harder. I can keep you, and I’m sure—”

“Stop!” roared Esau huskily. “I’m ashamed of you, mother. Do you think I’m going to be such a sop of a fellow as to sit down here and let you keep me? I suppose you’ll want to keep Mr Gordon next.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of, I’m sure, sir,” said the little woman tartly. “What’s enough for two’s enough for three, and I was going to say, when you went on like that, that if Mr Gordon wouldn’t mind, and not be too proud at things not being quite so plentiful, which everything should be clean as clean, it’s very, very welcome you’d be, my dear, for you never could have been nicer if you had been my own boy.”

“Mrs Dean,” I cried, with a curious feeling in my throat, while Esau looked at me searchingly, as if he thought I was going to accept the offer, “that is quite impossible. Neither Esau nor I could do that. Why, I should be ashamed even to think of it.”

“Oh no,” said Esau, sarcastically, “it’s all right. Let mother do the work, and we two will play at tops and marbles all day.”

“Be quiet, Esau. I know you’re only teasing. But why not, my dear? I know I’m a very little woman, but I’m very strong.”

“It’s be quiet, mother, I think,” cried Esau angrily. “What do you mean by talking like that to Mr Gordon? I often calls him Gordon, ’cause he’s always been such a good chap to me; but I don’t forget he’s a gentleman’s son, and his mother was a born lady. I’m ashamed of you, mother, that I am.”

“But it’s so dreadful, my boy—worse than your being a soldier. I could come down to Woolwich to see you sometimes.”

“No, no, Mrs Dean,” I said; “don’t say that. It really would be wise for us to go. People do get on out there, and those friends of mine, Mr John Dempster and Mrs John, are going.”

“That’s it then,” cried the little lady angrily. “It’s their doing, and it’s a shame.”

“Here, hold hard, mother!” cried Esau. “I say, is that true?”

“Quite.”

“And now you’re trying to blind me, Esau,” cried Mrs Dean; “but you can’t cheat me.”

“Who’s trying to blind you?”

“You, sir. Just as if you didn’t know all the time.”

“He did not know, neither did I know till I went up there to-day,” I said.

“Ah, I never liked those people. They’re only Dempsters, and not content with weaning you away from me, they’ve done the same now with my boy.”

“Did you ever hear such an unbelieving old creature,” cried Esau excitedly. “Mr and Mrs John D. going! Why you’ve coaxed ’em into it.”

“You don’t deceive me; you don’t deceive me,” said Mrs Dean, sobbing.

“Be quiet, mother!—But how is it they’re going?”

“For Mrs John’s health. I told you before they said they might go to Canada.”

“So you did.”

“Of course you did,” said Mrs Dean, scornfully.

“They are going to join Mrs John’s brother, who is manager out at a Hudson’s Bay Company’s station.”

“Hudson’s Bay,” said Esau, making a grimace; “that’s up at the North Pole. I don’t want to go there.”

“Nonsense!” I said; “it’s somewhere in British Columbia.”

“Hudson’s Bay, Baffin’s Bay, Davis’ Straits—all up at the North Pole. Think nobody never learnt jography but you?”

“Ah, well, never mind where it is,” I said impatiently; “they’re going out there.”

“And they’ve coaxed you two boys away from a poor lone widow woman to go with them,” cried Mrs Dean; “and it’s a sin and a shame.”

“I assure you, Mrs Dean—”

“No, sir, you can’t.”

“Will you be quiet, mother!” cried Esau angrily, “and go on with your supper, and let us. You’re crying right into the salt.”

“I’m not, sir! and I will not be put down by a boy like you. I say you shan’t go.”

“And I say I shall,” replied Esau surlily. “If you don’t know what’s for the best, I do.”

“It isn’t for the best, and it’s cruel of you, Esau.”

“Well,” said Esau, turning to me, “I’ve made up my mind, Gordon; she won’t care when it’s all over, and then she’ll see it’s for the best for all of us. So once for all, will you stick to it?”

“Yes,” I said, “I am quite determined now.”

“Hear that, mother?”

“Oh yes, I hear, sir.”

“Then don’t say sir; and let’s finish supper comfortably, for I haven’t had half enough. But let’s have it all over, and then settle down to it. So once for all, I’m going out to British Columbia to make my fortune.”

Mrs Dean had been sitting down for some little time now, and as Esau said these last words she started up, gave the table a sharp slap with her hand, looked defiantly at us both, and exclaimed—

“Then I shall come too.”

We two lads sank back in our chairs astonished. Then we looked at each other, and we ended by bursting out laughing.

“Oh, all right,” said Esau at last. “That’s right, mother.—She’s coming to do the shooting for us while we build up the house.”

“Ah, you may laugh, sir. But if that’s a place that is good for two lads like you to get on in, it’s a good place for a respectable hard-working woman who can wash, and cook, and bake bread, whether it’s loaves or cakes.”

“Well, mother can make cakes,” said Esau, “and good ones.”

“Of course I can, sir; and very glad you’ll be of ’em too when you’re thousands of miles from a baker’s shop.”

“Yes; but the idee of your coming!” cried Esau. “Haw, haw, haw!”

Somehow it did not seem to me such a very preposterous “idee,” as Esau called it, for just then I too had an idea. Mrs John was going that long waggon journey; what could be better for her than to have a clever little managing, hard-working woman like Mrs Dean with her?

But I did not say anything about it then, for I had to think the matter over. Only a few hours ago it had seemed as if my connection with Esau was likely to be in the way of my accompanying the Dempsters; now matters were taking a form that looked as if my friendliness with him was to be the reason, not only for my being their companion, but of helping them admirably as well.

But matters were not quite in shape yet, and we all went to bed that night feeling as if Esau’s opinion was correct—that the little supper had not been a success.

Chapter Nine.

Difficulties.

Mrs Dean was in waiting for me next morning, and attacked me directly.

“Do, do, pray try and help me, my dear,” she whispered, so that her voice might not rise to the little bed-room where we could hear Esau stamping about, knocking the jug against the basin, and snorting like a hippopotamus over his ablutions. “You have such a way with you, and Esau looks up to you so as being a gentleman, and I know he’ll do what you tell him.”

“Nonsense, Mrs Dean!” I said; “surely he’ll mind his mother more than he does me.”

“No, my dear, no,” she said sadly. “He has always been the dearest and best of boys, and I used to make him think just as I liked; but of late, since he has been grown big and strong, he generally ends by making me think as he likes, and he is so obstinate.”

“Oh no; he’s a very good fellow.”

“Yes, my dear. Hush! don’t talk so loud. You see he has got it into his head that it is the best thing for us, and I want you to get it out.”

“But how can I, when I think the same?”

“Now, Mr Gordon, my dear, you don’t—you can’t think it’s best for you two boys to go trapesing hundreds of thousands of miles, and going living among wild beasts in forests.”

“I’m afraid I do, without the wild beasts,” I said.

“But suppose you were both taken ill, my dear, there’s no hospitals, or dispensaries, or doctors out there.”

“But you said you would come with us, and if we were taken ill, where could we get a better nurse?”

“It’s very kind of you to say so, my dear, and of course I shouldn’t think of going without some camomiles, and poppy-heads, and a little castor-oil, and salts and senny, and jollop. Yes, and a roll of sticking-plaster. And that reminds me, how is your poor ear?”

“Oh, not very bad,” I said laughing. “But there, I’m afraid I cannot do what you wish, Mrs Dean, for if Esau does not come, I shall certainly go myself.”

“And he’d be sure to, then, my dear. He’d have been a soldier by this time, only you kind of held him back. He does think such a deal of—”

“Hallo, you two! Ketched you, have I, making plots and plans?”

“No, no, my dear.”

“Why, you’ve been coaxing him to get me not to go.”

“Well, my dear, it was something of that sort.”

“Yes, I know, mother. That’s just like you, trying to stop me when I’m going to make a big fortune.”

“But you don’t know that you are, my dear. Such lots of people go abroad to make fortunes, and I never knew one yet who brought a fortune back.”

“Then you’re going to know two now—him and me. Breakfast ready?”

“Yes, my dears; and I thought you’d like some hot rolls, so I went and got ’em.”

“I say, mother, you’re going it. Hot rolls! Are they buttered?”

“Yes, my dear, and in the oven.”

“Did you cut ’em in three?”

“Yes, dear, and put plenty of butter in, as you like them.”

“Hooray! Come on then, and let’s begin.”

“But, Esau dear, if you’ll only promise to stop, you shall have hot rolls for breakfast every morning. You shall, if I work night and day.”

“Then Esau and I would rather have hard biscuit and dry bread out yonder, Mrs Dean,” I said warmly; and Esau shouted—

“Hear, hear!”

Two days passed, then a third, and we had been out, and, to please Esau’s mother, tried in several places to get engagements. But we soon found that it was hopeless, and after tramping about for hours went back to the cottage.

“Such waste of time, and such a lot of trouble,” grumbled Esau. “Why, we might have done a lot of good work hunting, or shooting, or gardening, out in Merriky yonder.”

But Mrs Dean only shook her head, and told us to try again; and we tried.

I think it was on the fourth evening that we were sitting in the little kitchen, tired, discontented, and miserable, with Mrs Dean stitching away more quickly than ever, when we all started, for there was a double knock at the door, “Hullo!” cried Esau.

“Hush! my dear,” said his mother, mysteriously; “I know. It’s either Mr Dempster to beg you to go back, or news about a new place.”

She smoothed her apron and went to the door, picking off threads and ravelings from her dress so as to look neat, though that she always looked; and the next moment I ran to the door too, for I heard a familiar voice, and to my surprise found both Mr and Mrs John.

“Ah, my dear boy,” he cried eagerly, “we were getting uneasy about you, and thought you must be ill. My wife could not rest till we came.”

I led them into the little parlour, and placed chairs; while Mrs Dean, after a humble courtesy, went away into the kitchen.

“Is that your landlady?” continued Mrs John, as she glanced quickly round; and, before I could answer, “How beautifully neat and clean.”

“Yes, beautifully,” assented Mr John, hurriedly. “Have you heard of an engagement, Mayne?”

“No, sir,” I said sadly.

“Then you have not tried?”

“Indeed, sir, both Esau and I have tried very hard, as his mother is so averse to his going abroad.”

“Then you have given up all thought of going abroad, my dear boy?”

I shook my head.

“But you should, Mayne,” said Mrs John, in rather a low voice. “We are forced to go for my health’s sake, but you are young and strong, and with energy you ought to succeed here.”

“I should like to do what you think right, ma’am,” I said sadly.

“And we both think it right, my boy,” said Mr John. “We should dearly like to have you with us; but it would be unjust to you to encourage you to take a step which you might afterwards bitterly repent, and we should feel ourselves to blame.”

I looked at Mrs John, and she took my hand, and said sadly—

“Yes, we have had many talks about it, Mayne, and we can only come to that conclusion.”

“Then you are both going away, and I shall never see you again?” I said bitterly.

“Who can say?” said Mrs John, smiling. “You know why I am going. I may come back in a few years strong and well, to find you a prosperous and—Ah!”

“Alexes! my child!” cried Mr John in agony, for Mrs John, who had been speaking in a low voice, suddenly changed colour, raised her hands to her throat, as she uttered a low sigh, and would have fallen from her chair if I had not caught and supported her.

We were lifting her to the little horse-hair couch, when there was a tap at the door, and Mrs Dean appeared.

“Is anything the—”

“Matter,” she would have said, but as she caught sight of Mrs John’s white face, she came forward quickly, and with all the clever management of a practised nurse, assisted in laying the fainting woman back on the couch.

“She’s weak, and been trying to do too much, sir.”

“Yes, yes, I was afraid,” cried Mr John. “But she would come—to see you, Mayne. Tell me where—I’ll run for a doctor.”

“Oh no, sir,” said Mrs Dean, quietly; “I’ll bathe her temples a bit. She’ll soon come round.”

Mrs Dean hurried out of the room, and was back directly with basin, sponge, towels, and a tiny little silver box.

“You hold that to her nose, Mr Gordon, while I sponge her face. Mind—it’s very strong.”

“But a doctor,” panted Mr John in agony. “She has been so terribly ill. This was too much for her.”

“If you fetched a doctor, sir, he’d tell us to do just what we’re a-doing. Bathe her face and keep her head low. There, poor dear! she’s coming round. Oh, how thin and white she is!”

Mrs Dean was quite right, for under her ministrations the patient soon opened her eyes, to look vacantly about for a few moments, and murmur—

“So weak—so weak.”

“Are you better, dearest?” whispered her husband.

She smiled feebly, and closed her eyes for a time. Then with a deep sigh she looked up again, and made an effort to rise.

“Ah, that’s right,” said Mr John; “you feel better.”

“No, no,” said Mrs Dean, firmly, “not yet. She must lie still till the faintness has gone off, or she’ll bring it back,” and, with a sigh, Mrs John resigned herself to the stronger will, Mr John nodding at me, and saying in a whisper—

“Yes, Mayne; she knows best.”

A few minutes later Mrs Dean went towards the door.

“I’ll be back again directly,” she whispered. “I want to speak to Esau.”

She was back directly, and Mrs John held out her hand to her.

“Thank you, thank you so very much,” she whispered. “I am so sorry to have given you all this trouble.”

Mrs Dean laughed.

“Trouble!” she said, merrily; “as if it was trouble for one woman to help another. I mean a lady,” she said, colouring.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Mrs John said—

“I thought I must come down to see Mayne. Has he told you of his wish to go with us to the West?”

“Told me?” cried Mrs Dean, excitedly. “Ah, now you are talking about trouble indeed.”

“We came down to tell him that it is impossible—foolish of him to think of such a thing.”

“Oh, thank you kindly, ma’am,” cried Mrs Dean; “and me thinking all kinds of evil of you, and that you had been persuading him to go.”

“No, no, my good woman, no,” said Mr John.

“And thank you too, sir. And I hope Mr Gordon will take it to heart, for if he had gone my Esau would have been sure to go too, and I should have seemed to be quite alone in the world.”

“Yes, it would be hard for you,” said Mrs John, looking at her searchingly. “Mayne, my dear, you will not try and influence her son?”

I shook my head.

“Oh, but he don’t, ma’am, never,” said Mrs Dean, eagerly; “he crosses him; but my Esau always sets Mr Gordon here up for a hidle, and thinks whatever he does must be right.”

“Why, Mayne,” said Mr John, smiling, “I did not know you were such a model boy.”

“Oh, but he is, sir,” cried Mrs Dean; “and my Esau is ever so much better since—”

“I’m going for a walk,” I said, with my face scarlet.

But just then there was a tap at the door, to which Mrs Dean responded, and came back directly with a little tray, on which was her favourite black teapot and its companions.

“I’m afraid, ma’am, it isn’t such tea as you’re used to, but I thought a cup—and my boy Esau got it ready.”

Mrs John gave her a grateful look, and soon after, very much refreshed, she quite sat up, Mrs Dean helping her to a chair.

“But oh, my dear,” she said, “you’re so weak and thin; you’re not fit to take a long voyage and a journey such as Mr Gordon talked about.”

“If I stay in England I shall die,” said Mrs John, sadly.

“Oh, don’t say that, my— ma’am. But are you going alone?”

“No; with my husband.”

“And soon?”

“The vessel sails in a fortnight.”

“A fortnight? There, Mr Gordon, you see you could not go. It is too soon.”

“And you will give up all thought of going, Mayne?” said Mrs John, “for our sake.”

I was silent for a few moments, and then my voice was very husky as I said—

“For some years now I have had no friends except Mrs Dean and her son. Then I met Mr John Dempster, and since then it has been like having old times. Now you are going away, and you say don’t go too.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mrs John; “I am speaking for your good.”

“I know you think you are, Mrs John; but if Mr John here had at my age been placed in my position, I’m sure he would

not have done as you advise.”

“I’m afraid I should, my boy,” he faltered. “I never did have your energy.”

“Then I can’t help it,” I cried. “I shall not say good-bye to you, for go I must.”

“Oh, Mr Gordon,” cried Mrs Dean, “if you go Esau is sure to go too.”

“Then we will try the harder either to make you a home out there, or to come back here prosperous men.”

“Then I say it again,” cried Mrs Dean, just as if she were putting my hopes into shape, “you two couldn’t make a home comfortable; so if it is to be, why there’s an end of it. And look here, sir and ma’am, this poor dear is not fit to go all that long journey alone, and as I’m going too, I shall come along with you and tend to her, and do the best I can.”

“Oh no, no,” cried Mrs John.

“It is impossible,” said Mr John.

“Do you want to wake up some day, sir,” cried the little woman firmly, “and find this poor, weak, suffering thing dying for want of help? Of course you don’t. Here, Esau,” she cried, throwing open the door.

“Yes, mother; more hot water?” came from the kitchen.

“No; you may begin to pack up. We’re going across the sea.”

Before Mr and Mrs John left us that night it was all settled; and when I returned from going part of the way with them, I found Esau and his mother hard at work, planning as to what was to be taken and what sold, Mrs Dean rousing her son’s anger as I entered the kitchen, and making him stamp.

“Why, what is the matter?”

“Mother is so obstinate,” he cried.

“Why, what about? Does she say now she will not go?”

“No, Mr Gordon, I only told him I must take my four flat-irons with me. They don’t take up much room, and take ’em I will. Why, bless the boys! do you think you won’t want clean shirts?”

Chapter Ten.

Off to the West.

That was really the prime difficulty in our leaving England—to keep Mrs Dean’s ideas of necessaries within bounds. Poor little woman! She could not, try how her son and I would to make her, understand what was the meaning of simple necessaries.

“Now it’s of no use for you to fly in a passion with your poor mother, Esau,” she used to say. “I’ve consented to go with you to this wild savage land, but I must have a few things to make the house comfortable when we get there.”

“But don’t I tell you you can’t take ’em, because they won’t have ’em aboard ship; and you can’t stuff ’em in a waggon and carry ’em millions of miles when you get across.”

“If you wouldn’t be so unreasonable, Esau. There, I appeal to Mr Gordon.”

“So do I,” roared Esau. “Does mother want a great ironing-board?”

“No,” I said; “we can make you hundreds out there.”

“Oh dear me. You’ll say next I mustn’t take my blankets and sheets.”

“You must only take what you can pack in one big chest,” I said.

“But no chest would hold what I want to take,” whimpered the poor little woman. “I declare if I’d known that I was to give up everything I have scraped together all these years I wouldn’t have consented to go. Here, Esau, what are you going to do with those ornaments?”

“Set ’em aside for the broker.”

“Esau, I must take them.”

“All right, mother. We’ll have a ship on purpose for you, and you shall take the kitchen fender, the coal-scuttle, the big door-mat, and the old four-post bedstead.”

“Oh, thank you, my dear; that is good of— Esau! you’re laughing at me, and you too, Mr Gordon. I declare it’s too bad.”

“So it is, mother—of you. Once for all, I tell you that you must pack things that will be useful in one big chest, and you

can take a few things that you'll want on the voyage and in the waggon in a carpet bag."

"But it's ruinous, my dear—all my beautiful things I've taken such pride in to be sacrificed."

"Oh, do hark at her!" cried Esau, sticking two fingers in his ears, and stamping about. "I wish to goodness I'd never had no mother."

"Then you're a cruel, ungrateful boy, and you'll break my heart before you've done. Mr Gordon, what am I to do?"

"To try and think that we are going to start a new life, and that when Esau makes a new home for you, all these household things can be got together by degrees."

"But it's ruin, my dear. All these things will go for nothing."

"They won't, I tell you," roared Esau. "How many more times am I to tell you that Dingle will give us fifty pounds for 'em? Him and another man's joining, and they're going to put 'em in sales; and if they don't make so much, we've got to pay them, and if they make more, Dingle's going to pay us. What more do you want?"

"Nothing, my dear; I've done," said Mrs Dean in a resigned tone, such as would have made a bystander think that the whole business was settled. It was not, however, for the next day most likely the whole argument would be gone through again about some trifle.

Meanwhile I had been helping Mr John, and here Mr Dingle's knowledge came in very helpful, and he devoted every spare minute he had, working so well, that he arranged with one of our well-known auctioneers to take the furniture of the cottage, and triumphantly brought Mr John a cheque for far more than he expected to receive.

One way and another, Mr John was well provided with funds, laughingly telling me he had never been so rich before, as I went with him to his landlord's to give up the key of the pleasant little house.

For during the rapidly passing days of that fortnight everything had been settled, a passage had been secured for Mrs Dean in the same vessel by which Mr and Mrs John were going, and it had been finally decided that Esau and I were to go by quite a different route. For while they were to go by swift steamer across to Quebec, and from there through Canada with one or other of the waggon-trains right to Fort Elk, on the upper waters of the Fraser, we lads were, after seeing the little party off to Liverpool, to go on board the *Albatross*, a clipper ship bound from London to the River Plate, and round by Cape Horn to San Francisco, from which port we were to find our way north the best way we could.

There would be no difficulty, we were told, for vessels often sailed from the Golden Gate to the mouth of the Fraser, but our voyage would be slow.

It would be rapid though compared to the land journey across the prairies. Our trip would probably last five months, more if our stay at San Francisco were long; but allowing for halts at the settlements, and the deliberate way in which, for Mrs John's benefit, the journey was to be made, their trip would extend to a year—probably more.

Mr John had gone through it all with me again and again, reading long extracts from his brother-in-law's letter written expressly for their guidance, till I knew them pretty well by heart. In these he was told to hasten on to the high and mountainous lands, for it was there the advantage to Mrs John would be. They would find it cold as the autumn passed into winter during their journey, intensely cold, perhaps; but it would be bright and sunshiny as a rule, and the clear pure air of the elevated regions gave health and strength.

I thought a great deal about it, and felt puzzled sometimes, wondering whether it could be wise to take a delicate woman all that tremendous distance. But I was too young, I thought, to have opinions worth consideration, and I always came to the conclusion that my elders must know best.

Then came the day for parting, so quickly that I could hardly believe it. The luggage had gone on some days before to Liverpool, and there were Esau and I seeing after the few things that were to accompany the travellers in their cabins, as we stood on the platform at Euston.

Mrs John looked terribly thin and worn, more suited, I thought, for going at once to her bed than to venture on such a terrible journey; but there was a bright, hopeful look in her eyes as I helped her to her seat, and she spoke quite cheerily as she held my hand, Mr John holding the other, and we occupied ourselves with our final good-byes, so as not to notice Mrs Dean and her son. But I could not help hearing Esau's words—

"Oh, I say, mother, don't—don't! You must get to your seat now. There, good-bye, dear. It isn't so very far after all, and we'll be there waiting for you, and ready to welcome you when you come."

"But is it right, dear?" she said; "is it right?"

"'Course it is. Don't turn coward. You must go now all the things are sold."

There was a final embrace; Mrs Dean was hurried into her seat, the door closed; Mr John pressed my hand hard without a word, and Mrs John put her arms about my neck and kissed me.

"God bless you! *au revoir*!" she said.

"Stand back, sir, please," some one shouted; the engine gave a piercing shriek, and Esau and I stood on the stone platform watching the train glide away with many a head out of the window, and hand and kerchief waving growing more and more confused, while a sense of desolation and loneliness oppressed me till I quite started at my

companion’s words.

“Oh, won’t poor mother have a big cry up in a corner all the way down. It’s very rum, but I suppose she is fond of me.”

“Fond of you?” I said; “of course.”

“Well,” he said, “here we are, passages paid, and all that money in our pockets, and nothing to do for two days. What shall us do—go and have a bit of fun, or get on board at the docks?”

“Get on board the *Albatross*,” I said. “There don’t seem to me as if there is any more fun in the world.”

“Well now, that is a strange thing,” said Esau; “that’s just how I feel. Look here.”

“What at?”

“I feel just in the humour for it—as cross and nasty as can be. Let’s go and say good-bye to old Demp.”

But we did not; we went sadly to the docks, where our boxes already were, and that night took possession of our berths.

Chapter Eleven.

Seventeen Weeks at Sea.

“Much better have let me had it my way, sir,” said Esau, who, ever since he had seen the John Dempsters and their treatment of me, had grown to behave as if I was his superior.

He spoke those words one day when we had been at sea about a week, the weather having been terribly rough, and the passengers suffering severely.

“Oh, I don’t know, Esau,” I said, rather dolefully.

“I do, sir. If you’d done as I wanted you we should ha’ been walking about Woolwich now in uniform, with swords under our arms; and I don’t know how you get on, but I can’t walk at all.”

“You should catch hold of something.”

“Catch hold o’ something? What’s the good when the ship chucks you about just as if you were a ball. See that chap over there?”

“What, that one-eyed man?”

“Yes; he was going to hit me just now.”

“What for?”

“’Cause I run my head into his chest. I couldn’t help it. I’d got my legs precious wide apart, and was going steadily, when the ship gave a regular jump and then seemed to wag her tail, and sent me flying, and when I pollergized to him he said I was always doing it, and ought to sit down.”

“Well, it is safest, Esau,” I said; “I’ve got several nasty bruises.”

“Bruises! Why, I’m bruised all over, and haven’t got a place left clear for another, so I’ve begun again making fresh bruises top of the old ’uns.”

I laughed.

“Ah, I don’t see nothing to grin at. If you was as sore as I am you wouldn’t laugh. Wouldn’t have ketched me coming to sea if I’d known how bad it was. Why, it’s like being knocked about by old Demp, only worse, for you’ve got no one to hit back at.”

“It’s only a storm, Esau, and you’ll like it when the weather’s fine again.”

“Not me. Like it! Look here; I’ve read books about your yo-ho sailors and jolly tars, and your bright blue seas, but them as wrote ’em ought to be flogged. Why, it’s horrid. Oh, how ill I have been. I wouldn’t ha’ cared if mother had been here. She would ha’ been sorry for me; ’stead o’ everybody laughing, as if it was good fun.”

“Well, you can laugh at them.”

“Yes, and I just will too. Oh, hark at that. Here, hold tight, sir! we’re going.”

For a tremendous wave struck the ship, making it quiver as tons of water washed over her, seeming to beat her down; but she rose as if shaking herself, and then made a pitch.

“I say,” cried Esau, “I didn’t know ships went like fishes sometimes.”

“What do you mean?” I said, as I listened to the rush and roar, and noticed that it seemed to be getting dark.

“Why, swim right under water. Shall we ever come up again. Hah! that’s better,” for the light streamed in again through the thick round glass at the side by our heads. “I’ve had about enough of this, sir. What do you say to getting out at the next pier and walking back?”

“Oh, Esau,” I cried, “don’t be such a Cockney. What pier? This is not a river steamer.”

“I only wish it was. But I say, I can’t eat, and I can’t sleep, and I’m sore outside and in. Let’s go back and follow mother and them two in a waggon.”

“But don’t you know that we should have a rough voyage across first?”

“Couldn’t be so rough as this. Oh, there it goes again. I know we’re going to dive down right to the bottom. Wish we could, and then we might get out and walk. Here, let’s go on deck.”

“We can’t,” I said.

“No,” said the one-eyed man, a big, broad, Saxon-looking fellow, “we’re battened down.”

“Oh, are we?” said Esau.

“Yes; you can’t go up till this weather’s better. Want to be washed overboard?”

“I should like to be washed somewhere,” said Esau, “for I feel very dirty and miserable.”

“Sit down and wait patiently, my lad,” said the man; “and don’t you come butting that curly head of yours into me again, like an old Southdown ram coming at a man. I don’t want my ribs broke.”

“Have you been at sea before?” I said to him, as he sat back smoking a short pipe.

“Often. Been to ’Stralia, and New Zealand, and the Cape.”

“Was it ever as rough as this?”

“Worse,” he said, laconically.

“But not so dangerous?” said Esau, in a questioning tone.

“Worse,” said the man gruffly.

“But we keep seeming as if we should go to the bottom,” said Esau, fretfully.

“Well, if we do, we do, boy. We’re in for it, so what’s the good o’ making a fuss?”

“I don’t see no good in being drowned without saying a word,” grumbled Esau. “We two paid ever so much for the passage, and a pretty passage it is.”

“Oh, it’ll be all right if you keep quiet; but if you get wandering about as you do, we shall have you going right through the bulk-head, and have to get the carpenter to cut you out with a saw.”

“Wish he was as ill as I am,” whispered Esau.

“Thank ye,” said the man, nodding at him. “My eyes are a bit queer, but my ears are sharp.”

“Where do you suppose we are?” I said.

“Off Spain somewhere, and I dare say we shall be in smooth water before long. Shan’t be sorry for a little fresh air myself.”

I was longing for it, our experience being not very pleasant down in the crowded steerage; and I must confess to feeling sorry a good many times that I had come.

But after a couple more days of misery, I woke one morning to find that the ship was gliding along easily, and in the sweet, fresh air and warm sunshine we soon forgot the troubles of the storm.

The weather grew from pleasantly warm to terribly hot, with calms and faint breezes; and then as we sailed slowly on we began to find the weather cooler again, till by slow degrees we began to pass into wintry weather, with high winds and showers of snow. And this all puzzled Esau, whose knowledge of the shape of the earth and a ship’s course were rather hazy.

“Yes; it puzzles me,” he said. “We got from coolish weather into hotter; then into hot, and then it grew cooler again, and now it’s cold; and that Mr Gunson says as soon as we’re round the Horn we shall get into wet weather, and then it will be warmer every day once more.”

And so it of course proved, for as we rounded the Cape, and got into the Pacific, we gradually left behind mountains with snow in the hollows and dark-looking pine trees, to go sailing on slowly day after day through dreary, foggy wet days. Then once more into sunshine, with distant peaks of mountain points on our right, as we sailed on within sight of the Andes; and then on for weeks till we entered the Golden Gates, and were soon after at anchor off San Francisco.

Seventeen weeks after we had come out of the West India Docks, and every one said we had had a capital passage, and I suppose it was; but we passed through a very dreary time, and it is impossible to describe the feeling of delight that took possession of us as we looked from the deck at the bright, busy-looking city, with its forest of masts, tall houses, and dry, bare country round.

Esau and I were leaning against the bulwarks, gazing at the shore, upon which we were longing to set foot, when Gunson, who had all through the voyage been distant and rather surly, came up behind us.

“Well, youngsters,” he said, “going ashore?”

“Yes,” I said, “as soon as we can get our chests.”

“Well, good-bye, and good luck to you. Got any money?”

“A little,” I replied, rather distantly, for I did not like the man’s manner.

He saw it, and laughed.

“Oh, I’m not going to beg or borrow,” he said roughly. “I was only going to say put it away safe, and only keep a little out for use.”

“Oh, we’re not fools,” said Esau, shortly.

“Don’t tell lies, boy,” said the man, giving him an angry look. “Don’t you be too clever, because you’ll always find some one cleverer. Look here,” he continued, turning to me, “perhaps you’re not quite so clever as he is. I thought I’d just say a word before I go about the people here. There’s plenty of a good sort, but there’s a set hanging about the wharfs and places that will be on the look-out to treat you two lads like oranges—suck you dry, and then throw away the skins. Going to stop here?”

“No,” I said; “we are going up country to join some friends.”

“Then you get up country and join your friends as soon as you can. That’s all. Good-bye.”

He nodded shortly at me, but did not offer to shake hands.

“Good-bye, sharp ’un,” he growled at Esau.

“Good-bye,” said Esau, defiantly, and then the man turned away.

“Never did like chaps with one eye,” said Esau. “Strikes me that he’s pretending to be so innocent, and all the while he’s just the sort of fellow to try and cheat you.”

“Oh no,” I said; “he’s not a pleasant fellow, but I think he’s honest.”

“I don’t,” cried Esau. “He took a fancy to that four-bladed knife of mine on the voyage, and he has been waiting till he was going to leave the ship. I’m not going to make a row about it, ’cause I might be wrong; but I had that knife last night, and this morning it’s gone.”

“And you think he stole it?”

“I shan’t say one thing nor I shan’t say another. All I know is, that my knife’s gone.”

“But hadn’t you better have him stopped and searched?”

“What, and if the knife ain’t found, have him glaring at me with that eye of his as if he would eat me? Not I. We’re in a strange country, with ’Mericans, and Indians, and Chinese all about, and we’ve got to be careful. All I say is, my knife’s gone.”

“There, put it in your pocket,” I said, handing him the knife, “and don’t be so prejudiced against a man who wanted to give us a bit of friendly advice.”

“Why! eh? How? You took the knife then.”

“Nonsense; you lent it to me last night when I was packing up our things.”

Esau doubled his fist, and gave himself a good punch on the head.

“Of course I did,” he cried. “Well of all! Why how! I say, my head must be thick after all.”

Chapter Twelve.

We get into hot Water.

We were on shore next day, and, by the captain’s advice, went to a kind of hotel, where they undertook, not very willingly, to accommodate us, the captain having promised to help us in getting a ship for the Fraser River. But though day after day passed, and we went to him again and again, he was always too busy about his cargo being discharged, or seeing other people, to attend to us, and at last we sat one day on some timber on a wharf, talking

about our affairs rather despondently.

“We seem to be regularly stuck fast, Esau,” I said; “and one feels so helpless out in a strange place like this.”

“Yes,” he said; “and the money goes so fast.”

“Yes,” I said, “the money goes so fast. We must get away from here soon.”

“Couldn’t walk up to what-its-name, could we?”

“Walk? Nonsense! Many, many hundreds of miles through a wild country, and over mountains and rivers.”

“Well, I shouldn’t mind that, lad. It would all be new.”

“We shall have plenty of that when we get to British Columbia.”

“What’s all this then?” he said.

“Part of the United States—California.”

“Oh, ah! of course. Seems to me I spent so much time learning to write a good hand, that I don’t know half so much of other things as I should.”

“Plenty of time for learning more, Esau.”

“Yes, plenty of time. Seem to have more time than we want, and I don’t enjoy going about much, though there’s plenty to see. One’s so unsettled like.”

“Yes; we want to get to our journey’s end.”

“So this is California, is it? That’s where they got so much gold. I say, let’s stop here.”

“Nonsense! We must get to Fort Elk, and see what is to be done there till Mr John comes.”

“All right, I’m ready for anything. Here’s one of the chaps coming who wanted us to let him get us a ship yesterday.”

For just then a yellow-looking fellow, one of the many idlers who hung about the docks, came slouching along towards us; and as soon as I saw him I whispered a word or two to Esau, and we got up and walked away, with the man still following us at a little distance.

“Those chaps smell money is my belief,” said Esau.

“Yes, and Mr Gunson was right. We mustn’t trust any one, but wait till the Captain tells us of some respectable skipper who’s going up North and will take us.”

“That’s it. I say, what rum-looking chaps these Chinees are,” continued Esau, as a man in blue, with a long pig-tail, passed us and smiled. “Why, he don’t know us, does he?”

“We don’t know him,” I replied.

We went on past the crowded wharves, where ships were loading and unloading, and then by the grey-tinted wooden buildings, all bright and fresh-looking in the sunshine. Everybody nearly seemed busy and in a hurry except us, and the idle-looking scoundrels who hung about the drinking and gambling saloons, into one or two of which Esau peered curiously as we went by; and then, as if attracted by the shipping, we made our way again down by the wharves in hopes of hearing of a vessel that would take us on.

I have known well enough since, that had we been better instructed, all this would have been simple enough; but to us ignorant lads, fresh come from England, it was a terrible problem to solve, one which grew more difficult every day. In those days, when settlers were few, and Vancouver Island just coming into notice, there was no regular steamer, only a speculative trading-vessel now and then. Still there was communication, if we had only known where to apply.

We were watching one vessel just setting out on her voyage, and thinking that in an hour or two she would be outside the great opening to the harbour, and abreast of the bare, whitish-looking cliffs which form that part of the Californian coast, when Esau said—

“I wonder whether she’s going up to Fraser River. I say, why didn’t we find out she was going to sail, and ask?”

“You want to go up the Fraser River?” said a voice close behind us. “Guess I never see such chaps as you. Why didn’t you say so sooner?”

We both faced round at once, and found that the man who had been haunting us for days was close behind us, and had heard every word. “Look here,” said Esau, shortly. “There, don’t you got rusty, stranger. That’s the worst of you Englishers, you think everybody wants tew hurt you.”

“Come along,” I whispered.

“Yew just let him alone. He’s all right. Now here’s yew tew have landed here days, yew may say, outer the *Albytross*, and yew goes to spensife hotel, wasting yew’re money, when we’ve got quite a home for strangers like yew for half

what yew pay, and we'll get yew a ship to Fraser, Skimalt, or wheer yew like."

As he was speaking three more men sauntered slowly up and stood looking on—men whom I felt sure I had seen with him before, and it made me uneasy, especially as a couple more came out of a low-looking saloon close by, and we were some distance from the better part of the city.

"Look here," I said sharply, "do you know of a ship going to sail to the Fraser River, or to Esquimalt?"

"Why, of course I do. Here, where's your money? It's twenty-five dollars a-piece. Splendid berths, best of living. Like gentlemen aboard. Hand over, and I'll take you to where they give out the tickets."

"Thank you," I said. "I should like to see the ship, and an agent."

"But don't I tell yew everything's first chip, and I'll do it for yew as yew're strangers."

"Yes, it's very kind of you," I said; "but I won't trouble you."

"Trouble? Oh, come, we're not like that here to strangers. Nonsense, lad. Hand over."

"We're not going to give twenty-five dollars a piece, I can tell you," put in Esau.

"Why, it's next to nothing for a voyage like that. But there, never mind, you two are new-comers, and the skipper's a friend of mine. I'll put you right with him for twenty dollars each. Here, hi! Any of you know the *Pauliner*?"

"Know her? yes," said one of the men hard by; and they all came up and surrounded us. "What about her?"

"Sails for the Fraser, don't she, to-morrow?"

"Yes, of course."

"Splendid clipper, ain't she, with cabins and all chip chop?"

"Yes," came in chorus.

"There, what more do you want? Come along, lads; lucky I met you. Come and have a drink."

"No, thank you," I said. "Come, Esau."

"Get," said the man with a forced laugh. "What's the good of being strangers. Come and have a drink. I'll pay."

"Pay? Ah," said the second man; "and we'll all share in turn. Come on in here."

This fellow clapped his hand on my shoulder with a boisterous display of friendliness, while the firstcomer thrust his hand through Esau's arm, and began to lead him toward the saloon.

"That will do," I said, trying to be cool, for I began to fear that we were being dragged into some disturbance, and felt that the time had come to be firm. "We are much obliged to you for your friendliness, but we neither of us drink. Be good enough to tell me where the agent of the ship lives, and I'll give you half-a-dollar."

"Nonsense! come and have a drink, my lad."

"No, thank you," I said. "Come, Esau."

"Why, what a fellow you are. Very well, then, hand over the twenty dollars each, if you can't take a friendly drop. I'll get the tickets for you all the same."

"No, no," said the other man. "Let's do no business without a drink first; they think we want to make them pay, but I'll stand liquors for the lot."

"No, let 'em have their own way," said the first man; "they're not used to our customs. You let 'em alone. I'm going to get 'em passages in the *Paulina*, for twenty dollars each. Come, lads, where's your money?"

I glanced quickly to right and left, but we seemed to be away from help, and, strangers as we were, in the lower part of the port, quite at the mercy of these men. Then, having made up my mind what to do, I pressed up to Esau, pushing rather roughly by our first friend.

"Now, Esau," I said, "back to the hotel. Straight on," I whispered. "Run!"

"I bet you don't," said our first friend; "that trick won't do here, stranger;" and his smooth looks and tones gave place to a scowl and the air of a bully. "Come along, Esau," I said sharply. "No, nor you don't come along neither," said the man, as the others closed round us as if out of curiosity, but so as to effectually bar our retreat.

"What's matter?" said one who had not yet spoken.

"Matter?" cried our friend. "Why jest this. These here tew have been holding me off and on for three days, wanting me to get 'em a ship to take 'em to Esquimalt. First they wanted to go for ten, then they'd give fifteen."

"Fifteen dollars to Skimalt?" cried the new man. "Gammon."

"That's so," said our friend. "Last they said they'd give twenty dollars a-piece, and after a deal o' trouble we got 'em

berths, and paid half the money down; now they want to back out of it."

"Oh, yes," cried the second man; "that won't do here, mates."

"It's not true," I said, indignantly. "And now wants to bounce me out of it. Here, yew wouldn't hev that, mates, would yew?"

There was a regular excited chorus here, and the men closed in upon us, so that we were quite helpless, and for a moment I felt that we must buy ourselves out of our awkward position. But a glance at Esau showed that he was stubborn and angry as I, and that if called upon he would be ready to fight for it, and make a dash for liberty.

Those were only momentary thoughts, for we were two lads of sixteen or seventeen against a gang of strong men who were holding us now, and our position was hopeless.

Just then our first friend said in a carneying tone—

"There, don't be hard on 'em, mates. They're going to be reasonable. Now then, are you going to pay those twenty dollars each for your passages?"

"No," I said, choking with rage.

"Yew don't mean to go in the *Pauliner*?"

"No, we don't," cried Esau.

"Very well, then, yew must each on yew pay the smart. I paid for yew—ten dollars each, and tew fur my trouble. That's fair, ain't it, mates?"

"Ay, ay. Make 'em pay three dollars," was chorussed.

"There, yew hear 'em, so out with the spots, and no more nonsents."

"You won't get no money out o' me," cried Esau, fiercely.

"Nor from me," I cried.

"We'll soon see that. Now quick!"

It was broad daylight, but we seemed to be quite alone, and I was being forced back over a man's knee, when I was jerked up again, and the man who was holding me went backwards, while a familiar voice said—

"Hullo, boys; seem to be enjoying yourselves."

"Mr Gunson, help!" I cried, as I recognised our shipboard companion; "these men—"

"I see, my lad, steady. Ah, would you!" For a quick look had passed among the men, and they were about to make a rush, when Gimson stepped back and whipped out a revolver.

"Don't come too near, boys," he said. "I'm rather a good shot."

The men stopped short at the sight of the revolver barrel covering first one and then another. But the first man said "Come on!" with quite a snarl, drew a knife, and flung himself at Gunson.

I felt a horrible sensation run through me as I listened for the report; but instead of firing, Gunson struck up with his revolver, and the man went over sidewise, while our friend now fired over the heads of the others of the gang.

This stopped them for the moment, but as they saw that no one fell, they came on again, and one of them seized Gunson before he could fire, or before he attempted to fire, for, as he told me afterwards, he did not want to feel that he had killed a man.

In the struggle which followed I saw the pistol drop from our defender's hand, and one of the men stooped to pick it up, but Esau was too quick for him. Making quite a leap, as if playing leap-frog, he pitched with his hands right on the man's shoulders, sending him over and over, but falling himself, while I picked up the pistol and drew the trigger.

The sharp report made my ears ring, and I stood back now with the weapon presented, expecting some of the others to rush at me. But the two reports had spread the alarm, and a couple of the officials came running up, whilst our assailants took to flight, giving Gunson an opportunity to rise and shake himself.

"Hurt, my lads?" he said, as he took his pistol. "They were too many for me; I got the worst of it."

"I'm not hurt, sir; are you?" I said.

"Only a bit bruised."

"I am," grumbled Esau. "Feel as if my wrist's out of joint."

By this time a crowd had assembled, and we were very glad to get away with our protector, after a few words of explanation to the two policemen, who told us we had better mind what company we got into, nodded to one another and laughed, as if it was all a good joke, and then went their way.

“Here, come to my diggings,” said Gunson, rather gruffly. “I thought I told you two to mind what you were about, and what sort of customers you would meet with out here.”

“Yes,” I said; “but—”

“Wait till we get to my place, and we’ll sit down and talk there. Some one has been pretty foolish to let two boys like you come wandering round the world by yourselves.”

In about ten minutes he stopped at so shabby looking a hotel that I half shrank from entering.

Gunson noticed it.

“Needn’t be scared,” he said. “Decent people. Germans;” and throwing off my hesitation, I followed him with Esau to his room, where he pointed to a chair and a stool, and seated himself upon a very homely-looking bed, taking out his revolver, and putting in two fresh cartridges.

“Nasty thing to carry,” he said, “but it’s as good as a big dog. It can bark loudly as well as bite. Barking did this time. Now then,” he continued, as he replaced the pistol in his hip pocket, “I suppose you two know that those fellows were regular blackguards, who would have stripped you of every shilling you possessed—by fair means or foul. How was it you were with them?”

I told him all that Esau would let me say, for he was very anxious to relate the story himself.

“Oh, that was it, was it?” said Gunson. “Glad you were so sensible, but you see what this place is. It will be all right by and by, but at present it’s a regular sink for all the ruffians in the States to drain into. Why don’t you get out of it?”

“That’s what we are trying to do—hard,” I said eagerly.

“Why you can’t have tried much. There are plenty of ways out. Where do you want to go?”

“To the Fraser River,” I said, “and then away north to Fort Elk.”

“Ah,” he said, looking at us both curiously. “Fraser River, eh? That’s where I’m going.”

I looked at him distrustfully, and he saw it.

“Quite true, my lad,” he said, smiling good-humouredly; “and I sail by a vessel which starts the day after to-morrow. What did those rascals want twenty-five and then twenty dollars a-piece for your passage money? Humph! Well, I think I can do better for you than that.”

“If you would give us the name of the agent,” I said.

“I’ll do better—I’ll take you to him, and say you are friends of mine, if you are not ashamed of such a disreputable-looking character.”

“I was not ashamed to take your help just now,” I said.

“No,” he replied drily; “but you had no time then to examine my appearance. Where are you staying, my lads?”

I told him, and he uttered a long low whistle. “Of course I don’t know what your friends are, but doesn’t the money run away very fast?”

“Fast?” cried Esau; “why, I could live ten times as long on the same money in London.”

“I dare say you could live twenty times as long, boy; I could. Look here; these people are decent, clean, and honest,—do as you like,—hadn’t you better come here? They’ll board you for half the money I’m paying—that is, they would you. I don’t know about him—he’s such a wolfish-looking fellow.”

“Why, I don’t eat any more than he does!” cried Esau.

“Don’t think you do, boy, you should say. Well, what do you think of it?”

“Dunno,” said Esau, rather surlily. “Seems to me as if everybody here wants to rob you. How do I know you don’t?”

“Ah, to be sure, boy, how do you know? Perhaps I do. Going to plan to get you somewhere all by yourselves, and then shoot you both. I am pretty good with a revolver.”

“Didn’t seem like it just now.”

“No, it didn’t,” said Gunson, coolly. “Ah, how like a boy that sounds. Do you know what shooting a man means?”

“Killing him if you fire straight,” said Esau.

“Right; and hurting him, eh?”

“Of course.”

“Well, look here, my lad; the man who shoots another hurts himself far more than he hurts his victim. You don’t understand that. Wait till you are as old as I am, and you will. I did not want to kill either of those ruffians. It was not a

question of aiming, I had only to hold the pistol down, and it would have hit one of them. Well," he continued, "shall I take you to the captain? and will you bring your things here? or will you go your own way?"

I looked at him fixedly, for everything in the man's appearance seemed to say, "Don't trust him," till his one eye lit up, and a smile began to curl his lip. Then my hand went out to him.

"Yes," I said, "you are an Englishman, and I'll trust you."

He gripped my hand hard, and then turned to Esau.

"Well," he said, "what do you say? Think I shall do you a mischief?"

"Yah! Not you," said Esau. "I'm not afraid of you. Here, let's get our things from that other place."

"Let's have the landlady in first," said Gunson, smiling; and he went to the door and called.

A pleasant-looking German woman came, and in the most broken up English I ever heard, said we could come at once, but got into a muddle over terms till Gunson joined in, and spoke to her in German, when the difficulty was at an end.

"Nice bright-looking place, and plenty of sunshine," said Gunson, as he led us down to a wharf where a schooner was being laden with barrels, while a red-nosed, copper-complexioned man looked on smoking a cigar.

"Here, skipper, two more passengers for you—friends of mine; will you have them?"

The captain looked us both over, and then nodded.

"How much?"

The captain looked at us again, and then said a certain number of dollars for the two—a price which astonished us.

"I'll say right for them," said Gunson. "They'll send their chests on board."

"There!" said our new friend, as we walked back. "That matter was soon settled. Now go and pay your bills, get your traps, and come on to me."

Chapter Thirteen.

In New Quarters.

Gunson nodded, and we parted, Esau keeping very quiet for a few minutes before speaking.

"I suppose it's all right," he said; "but if ever a chap looked like bad company, he do."

"But he seems as friendly to us as can be."

"Yes," said Esau. "But what does he want here with a pistol? Some of the people board ship was coming to keep shop, some to farm, and some to be servants. I want to know what he wants here?"

"Perhaps the same as he would in New Zealand, and at the Cape of Good Hope. I should say he's a traveller."

"What in? Yah! He don't look the sort of man people would trust with goods to sell. Traveller? Why, you see dozens of 'em in the streets off Cheapside—big, good-looking fellows, with great curly whiskers and beards. He isn't a traveller. Nobody would buy of him."

"I mean a man who goes through foreign countries."

"What for?"

"To see them."

Esau shook his head.

"I don't think he's a traveller of that sort. I say, look out."

"What is it?" I said, expecting to see a dray come along.

"That chap."

Sure enough, there was the dark, yellow-looking scoundrel watching us, and he followed at a distance till he had seen us enter the hotel where we had been staying.

We stated that we were going away, and went and packed up our few things at once, while from the corner of the window we had the satisfaction of seeing two more of our assailants come up, and remain in conversation with the first for a few minutes, after which they walked away.

"Now, if we could get off at once, Esau," I said, "they would not see us go, and when they return they might come and watch here as long as they liked."

Esau jumped at the idea, and went out to see if he could find a man to help us carry our boxes, while I paid our bill.

Before I had done he was back with Gunson, whom he had met, and told what he was after, with the result that they had returned together.

“I’m only a poor man,” said our friend, with a laugh, “so I thought I might as well come and earn half a dollar. I thought too,” he added, seriously, “that it would be better not to employ a stranger, who would be able to point out where you are staying, in case your acquaintances want to hunt you out to do you an ill turn.”

We were only too glad of his offer, and in less than an hour we were safely in the shelter of our new resting-place; while upon Esau’s going out to reconnoitre, taking a good round so as not to be seen, he returned shortly in high glee, to tell us that the three men were seated on a stack of timber, watching the hotel we had left.

“And ready for some mischief, I’ll be bound,” said Gunson. “These fellows work in clans, and I shall be very glad if we can get away without a crack on the head.”

As we sat chatting with Gunson the rest of that day and evening, he seemed to puzzle me, for sometimes he talked quite like a steerage passenger, just as the rough-looking man he seemed should talk, while at others, words and ideas kept slipping out which made me think he must be one who had had a good education. He had travelled a great deal, as we knew, but he seemed singularly reserved about his intentions. That he was going to the Fraser River he made no secret; but though he kept us in the dark, he somehow or another, now that he was more with us, contrived to possess himself of all our projects.

He seemed at times quite changed, and his manner set me wondering why it was that, though we had passed nearly five months together on board the *Albatross*, seeing us every day, he had rarely spoken to us then, and we parted almost as much strangers as on the first day when we encountered each other in the dark cabin of the ship.

First one and then the other would think he had found a clue to our companion’s intentions; but when we parted for the night we felt far from sure, but more curious than ever.

“So you are going hunting, are you?” he said, in the course of our conversation.

“No,” I said.

“What do you call it then, a chase—wild-goose chase?”

“I don’t see that it’s a wild-goose chase for two lads to come to a new country to try and get on,” I said.

“Not a bit, my lad, but a very worthy thing to do. I meant it was rather a wild-goose chase for this friend of yours to send you in the hope of his brother-in-law helping you. Isn’t he rather an inconsistent sort of a gentleman?”

“Mr John Dempster is one of the best of men,” I said warmly.

“Perhaps so; but the best of men make mistakes sometimes, and it looks like one to me for him to be taking a sick wife right across the country to this new home. Tried it before, perhaps?”

“No,” I said; “Mr John was never out of England. He told me so.”

“Then he will have rather a startling experience, and I wish him well through with it.”

“I say, don’t talk like that,” said Esau, suddenly, “because my mother’s there.”

“Then I wish her well out of it too.”

“Have you ever made the journey?” I said eagerly.

“Yes, once,” said Gunson, quietly. “Once was enough.”

“But Mrs John’s brother told them he thought it would do his sister good.”

“Well, it may. I’m not a doctor; but after what I went through I should hesitate about taking a delicate woman such a route. And you too. When you get to the Fraser, how do you mean to journey hundreds of miles up to Fort Elk?”

I was silent, for it seemed to me as if we were for the first time coming face to face with the difficulties of our task.

“Dunno,” said Esau, thoughtfully. “S’pose there ain’t no ’buses.”

“No, nor yet cabs,” said Gunson, laughing.

“Might be a stage-coach running now and then, p’r’aps.”

“My good lad, there isn’t even a road. Perhaps there is a trail. There is sure to be that, of course, for the Indians would go to the Fort with their pelting.”

“With their what?” said Esau.

“Pelts—skins, to sell to the company’s agent.”

“Oh,” said Esau.

“But the river,” I said suddenly. “We could go up that by a boat, couldn’t we?”

Gunson laughed.

“Yes, there is a river,” he said; “but, like all mountain streams, boats cannot go up very far for the torrents and falls and rocks. Have you any arms?”

“Of course,” said Esau.

“I mean weapons.”

“No,” I said.

“Humph! Perhaps better without them—at your age.”

“You have,” I said, as I glanced toward his hip-pocket.

Gunson nodded.

“Got a gun too?” said Esau.

“A rifle or two,” replied our companion, rather reluctantly; and he rose then and left the room, as if to avoid being questioned.

“Hunting and shooting, that’s what he’s after,” said Esau triumphantly, as soon as we were alone.

And at that moment I could not help thinking that he was right, and that we had hit upon a very satisfactory companion, for part of our journey at least, if it did not turn out that Gunson had some designs of his own.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Serious Trouble.

Esau took it all coolly enough. I believe he thought hard sometimes, but it was soon over; and to him the most serious things in life seemed to be making a big meal and having a good sleep.

Now for my part I could not help thinking a great deal, and worrying so much about the future that my thoughts would not let me sleep.

My thoughts generally took this form—“Suppose—” And then I used to be supposing: suppose Mrs John were taken much worse and died; suppose the party were attacked by Indians; suppose they never got across all that great stretch of country; suppose Esau and I were lost in the woods, to starve to death, or drowned in the river, and so on, and so on; till toward morning sleep would come, and I began dreaming about that long-haired dark Yankee loafer, who had got hold of me, and was banging my head against the ground, and trying to kill me, till I opened my eyes the next morning and found that it was Esau.

“I say,” he cried, grinning, “don’t you ever call me a sleepy-headed chap again. Why, I’ve been shaking you, and doing everything I could to rouse you up.”

“Oh,” I exclaimed, “I am so glad! I was dreaming.”

“As if I didn’t know. Why, you were on your back snorting, and puffing, and talking all sorts of nonsense. That’s eating ’Merican pie for supper.”

“I couldn’t go to sleep for hours.”

“Yah! that’s what mother always said when she was late of a morning, and I had to light the fire. I say, wonder how they are getting on?”

“So do I. I lay thinking about them last night, hoping they wouldn’t be attacked by Indians.”

“I don’t think an Indian would like to attack my mother again. She ain’t a big woman, but she has got a temper when it’s roused. Make haste; I want my breakfast.”

I was not long in dressing, and on going down we found Mr Gunson waiting for us, and looking more sour, fierce, and forbidding than ever.

“Come, young sirs,” he said, “you must learn to see the sun rise regularly out here in the West. Sit down, and let’s have breakfast. I’ve a lot to do ready for starting to-morrow.”

“I’m sorry I am so late,” I said. “I could not sleep last night.”

“Why? Let’s look at you. Not ill?”

“Oh, no,” I said, beginning on my breakfast to try and overtake Esau.

“No,” he said, “you’re not ill, or you couldn’t eat like that. Why couldn’t you sleep?”

“I was thinking so much of what you said about the difficulties before us. I never thought of them before.”

“Oh!” he said, looking at me curiously. “Well, I’m glad of it. But don’t worry yourself. The troubles will not come all at once. You can fight them one at a time, and get over them, I dare say.”

“Then you think we shall be able to get up to Fort Elk somehow?”

“If you make up your minds to it, and say you will do it. That’s the way. There, make a good breakfast, and then perhaps you can help me a bit. I want to finish buying a few things that one can’t get up the country. By the way, you will have to leave those chests of yours up at one of the settlements.”

“Leave our chests?” said Esau, staring.

“Why, you don’t expect to be able to carry a great box each on your head, do you, through such a country as you’ll have to travel. Never thought of that, I suppose?”

“I’m afraid I did not,” I said.

“Of course you did not. Look here, while I think of it. Have you both got blankets?”

“No,” I said. “I thought we need not buy them till we built a house.”

“And don’t you want to go to sleep till you’ve built a house? My good lads, a thoroughly well made thick blanket—a dark-coloured one—is a man’s best friend out here. It’s bed, greatcoat, seat, cushion, carpet-bag, everything. It’s even food sometimes.”

“Go on,” cried Esau, laughing. “You can’t eat your blanket.”

“There was a snake at the Zoo once thought differently,” said Gunson, laughing. “No, you can’t eat your blanket, but you can roll yourself up warm in it sometimes when there’s no food, and have a good sleep. *Qui dort dine*, the French folk say.”

“But do you mean to say that up there we shan’t get anything to eat sometimes?” cried Esau, who looked aghast.

“Yes, often. A man who wants to get on in a new country must not think of eating and drinking. Why, I went three days once with nothing but a drop of water now and then, and a bit of stick to chew, so as to keep my mouth moist.”

I burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and Gunson looked annoyed.

“It’s no joke, young fellow,” he said; “and I’m not romancing.”

“No, no, no,” I panted out; “not—laughing—at you. Look—look!”

I pointed at Esau, and Mr Gunson’s face relaxed into a smile, and then he too laughed heartily at the comical, horror-stricken countenance before us.

“What are you laughing at?” cried Esau. “I say, though, do you mean it? Shall we have to go without sometimes like that?”

“Of course you will.”

“I say, Mr Gordon,” said Esau, in despondent tones, “hadn’t we better go back?”

“Go back?—no!” I cried. “It will not be very pleasant, but we can eat all the more afterwards.”

Esau brightened up.

“Yes,” he said. “I didn’t think of that.”

“You neither of you seem to have thought anything about what’s before you, my lads.”

“Then you think we have done very foolishly in coming?” I said.

“Not I. You have done wisely; and if you make up your minds to take everything as it comes, I have no doubt that you will grow up into well-to-do hearty men. There, now, let’s talk business. I’ll go with you and see that you are not cheated while you buy yourselves a blanket apiece. Have you knives?”

“Yes,” I said; and we each produced one.

“Ah, well, you can keep those in your pockets to pick your teeth with when you do get anything to eat. You must buy yourselves each a good strong case-knife, big enough to chop wood or skin an animal, and to use for your food.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“There are other things you’ll want, but you can wait till you join your friend up at Fort Elk. I dare say he will be able to supply you out of his store.”

“But he does not keep a store,” I ventured to observe. “He is the head man over one of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s depôts.”

“Exactly. Then he keeps a store. You don’t suppose he gives the Indians dollars for the skins they bring in, do you? He keeps a store of blankets and cutlery, and all kinds of useful things for barter with the people. Blankets up yonder are like bank-notes. Well, what are you looking at?”

“I was wishing I knew as much about the place as you do.”

“Have patience,” he said, laughing, “and I dare say you’ll know a good deal more.”

We went out soon after breakfast, and I had my first lesson in frontier life in watching Gunson make his purchases after he had helped us make ours; and the rest of the day was occupied in overhauling our chests, and repacking them with things our new friend assured us that we should not want, while he pointed out to us those we did, and showed us how to make a light package of them that we could easily carry.

Twice over that day I caught sight of the man I wanted to avoid, but fortunately he did not see us, and at last night came, and we sat down to our supper with our chests on board the schooner, and nothing to do the next morning but walk on board.

I slept well that night, and we were down in good time, Mr Gunson nodding his approval, and after breakfast he said —

“Look here, my lads, I’ve seen those roughs hanging about as if they meant mischief. Of course we could get the protection of the law, but that might mean detaining us, and as the schooner sails at noon, we don’t want any complications of that sort.”

“Of course not,” I said.

“So my advice is, that you stop here quietly till nearly the time, and then we’ll go on board, though I dare say it will be evening before we really start.”

I agreed at once, but Esau looked disappointed.

“Well, what is it?” said Gunson.

“I did want to go back to that store and buy something else before we started.”

“Money burning your pocket?”

“No, it aren’t that,” said Esau, turning a little red.

“Well, you are your own master, my lad. Go and buy what you want, and make haste back.”

Esau brightened up, and I rose to go with him.

“No, no; I don’t want you to come,” said Esau. “You stop with Mr Gunson. I shan’t be long.”

It struck me that this was rather curious on my companion’s part, but I said nothing, only sat and looked out at the lovely bay, while Gunson busied himself with writing a letter.

“There,” he said, when he had done; “want to write too?”

I shook my head.

“Better,” he said. “Mayn’t have another chance to write home for mouths.”

“I have no home,” I said sadly, “and no one to whom I could write.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, and looked down at me searchingly as I thought.

“Never mind, lad; you are going to make a home and friends too. Some day you may have more friends to write to than you want.”

I walked away to the window, to stand looking out at the shipping, wondering how long Esau would be, and what the article was that had taken his fancy, till all of a sudden the idea came to me that it must be a revolver.

“Do you know what your young mate has gone to buy?” said Mr Gunson just then, but I avowed my ignorance. “I hope he will not be very long, because we may as well be getting on board and settling down. Our chests are all right. The captain told me that they were right down in the hold, and well above the chance of getting any bilge water upon them.”

He went to the window I had just left.

“Looks like fine weather,” he said, “with perhaps a little wind. You must try and be a better sailor this time.”

The last look round was given, the bill paid, and as we waited, I congratulated myself upon the fact that we were going to escape without another encounter with the loafers, for I felt sure they had been watching for us, so as to pick a quarrel. But the time glided on, and Esau did not return.

Gunson got up and went to the door twice, coming back each time with a very severe look on his countenance, as I saw at a glance, for I avoided his eyes, feeling, as I did, unwilling to meet some angry outburst, and hoping every

moment to have an end put to a very unpleasant state of affairs.

Over and over again I started at some impatient movement on the part of Gunson; but he did not speak, contenting himself with walking impatiently up and down like some animal in a cage.

“Have you no idea what Dean has gone to buy?” he said at last.

“Not the least, unless he has fancied that he would like a revolver.”

“Absurd!” cried Gunson; and there was another pause, during which I listened to every passing step, hoping against hope that it might be Esau.

My position was growing more and more painful, and at last I could bear it no longer.

“What is it? What are you going to do?” said Gunson, as I suddenly jumped up.

“Look for Esau,” I said.

“Sit still, boy. What do you know about the place, and which way will you go?”

I was obliged to say that I didn’t know, but I would hunt for him well.

“It is now close upon twelve o’clock,” said Gunson, angrily, “and he has been gone nearly three hours. If he is coming back it must be directly, and then, with you gone, we shall miss the boat, and all our belongings will go on up north without us. Hang him, he must be mad!”

“But I would not go far without coming back,” I said.

“I think, my lad, you may save yourself the trouble.”

“What do you mean? He will be back here directly?”

“No. I’m afraid,” said Gunson, bitterly, “that we have been talking too much for him lately.”

“Mr Gunson?”

“We have scared him with our account of the troubles, and he has backed out.”

“Backed out?” I faltered, quite horrified at the idea of being left alone.

“Yes, and gone into hiding until we have sailed.”

“Oh, impossible!”

“No, my lad, quite possible. You saw how startled he was at the idea of a journey through a wild country.”

“No, no, I think not,” I said.

“I feel nearly sure of it. He had no real reason for going out this morning, and his excuses to get away were as slippery as could be. Depend upon it we shall not see him again—at least, I shall not, for of course you will wait for him.”

“If I thought he could play such a mean, deceitful trick I should go without him,” I said hotly.

“Indeed? Well then, my lad, you had better come, for it is high time we were off.”

I stared at him wildly, for what he had said seemed terribly likely. Esau had been startled on hearing the real difficulties and dangers that we had to go through, and much as he seemed to like me, he might have been overcome by his thoughts, and at the last moment felt that he must turn tail.

“Well?” said Gunson, “what do you say? Will you come? I must be off almost directly.”

“Yes,” I said, “you must go, but I’m sure Esau is in some trouble. He could not be such a coward as that.”

“Then you will not go with me?”

“I would if I could think as you do,” I said; “but I’m sure he would not forsake me.”

“Human nature, boy.”

“It isn’t his human nature,” I said boldly. “If he had wanted to back out he would have confided in me, and wanted me to go with him till you had sailed.”

“I have no time to argue,” said Gunson sternly. “What are you going to do?”

“I must try and find my companion.”

“But your chests?—they will be taken on to Esquimalt.”

“We should have to go up and claim them afterwards.”

“You believe, then, that he is staunch?”

“I am sure of it, sir.”

“Well, then, good-bye, my lad. I’ll speak to the captain about your chests, and have them left with the agents of the ship, but you will have to give up your passage-money. There will be no getting that back.”

“I’m afraid not,” I said gloomily.

“Yes, they may sail at any time,” said Gunson, impatiently. “Better go with me, boy.”

“No,” I said.

“You are giving up your passage and your chances for the sake of a fellow not worth his salt.”

“You don’t know him as I do,” I replied. “I will not believe it of him.”

“Well, if he is not staunch you are, at all events, my lad. Good-bye. If he does come back run down to the wharf at once, the schooner may not have sailed.”

“He has got into some trouble, I’m sure,” I cried.

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” I said, holding out my hand; but my lips quivered, for I was horribly disappointed.

“Once more,” cried Mr Gunson, as he gripped my hand hard, “I tell you he is playing you false. You had better come.”

“No.”

“You are not afraid, are you?”

I flung his hand away.

“No,” he said, smiling, “not a bit. There, Mayne, my lad, he has thrown you over, but I can’t. If you stay, I’ll stay too.”

“Mr Gunson!” I cried.

“Yes, my lad, and we’ll see if he comes back.”

“He will if he can, I’m sure,” I cried. “Well, we shall see.”

“I am sure he has got into some trouble; I am certain of it. Ah, here he is!”

For the door opened at that moment, but it was not Esau, only the landlady, who in broken German-English, told us that a message had arrived from the captain to say we were to go on board.

“Thank you. *Gut*!” said Gunson, laconically. And then, as the woman left the room, he continued, “Well, I’ll take your view of it, my lad. We’ll say he has got into some trouble and cannot get back.”

“Yes; I’m sure of it,” I cried. “Very well, then, we must get him out of it. Of course it is no use for us to waste time by going from house to house. I’ll go and see the chief man in the police, and see if they can find him for us.”

“Yes,” I said, eagerly; “come on.”

“No, no, you stay. He may, as you say, return, and you must be here to meet him, or he may go off again, and matters be worse.”

“He’d go to the schooner then.”

“If the schooner had not sailed. You stop, and I hope he will turn up hero.”

Anxious as I was to go in search of Esau, I was obliged to obey, and I was directly after left to myself to pass quite a couple of hours before Gunson came back.

“No news yet,” he said; “the police are trying what they can do, but if he is in hiding they are not likely to succeed.”

“Then he is not in prison?”

“Oh, no; as far as I can hear, nothing has been seen of him.”

“I thought he might have got in some trouble, and been arrested. Then those men must be at the bottom of it, Mr Gunson.”

“Yes, I thought so, but what could I do? I told one of the chiefs of the police that I was afraid he had been attacked, and the man looked serious, and said ‘Very likely.’ Then he asked me to describe the men, and I did.”

“Well?” I said eagerly.

“He told me that my description was like that of hundreds of scoundrels about the place.”

“Let’s go and see if we can meet them anywhere about,” I said. “They were watching our hotel yesterday where we stayed.”

“Yes, I know,” said Gunson, thoughtfully. “It hardly seems likely. I don’t know, though, there are always men hanging about ports ready to do anything for the sake of a few shillings, all the world over.”

I felt a shiver run through me at his words, as my busy brain began to suggest endless horrors that might have befallen poor Esau; and as I followed Gunson out into the road, these thoughts grew and grew till I found myself telling poor little Mrs Dean about the loss of her son, and hearing her reproaches as she told me that it was all my fault, and that if it had not been for me Esau would have stayed at home.

We went along the road, and down to the wharves, and to and fro about the hotel where we had been staying, and there was no sign of either of the men who had assailed us. There were, as the police had said, plenty of a similar class, many of whom resembled them somewhat in appearance; but our search was entirely in vain, while towards evening, as we came out once more where we had a full view of the beautiful bay, I saw something which made me start, and, full of misery and self-reproach, I stopped and looked up at Gunson.

“Yes,” he said, frowning heavily, “I see. There she goes, and with a good wind too. Nice clean-sailing little vessel. We ought to have been on board.”

For there, a mile now from the shore, with her sails set, and looking half-transparent in the light of the setting sun, was the graceful-looking schooner, which I felt must be ours, heeling over gently, and taking with her our few belongings.

“Pretty good waste of time as well as money, Gordon, my lad,” said my strange-looking companion, harshly. “But there, it is of no use to cry over spilt milk. You could not go off and leave your mate in this way, and I, as an Englishman, could not leave a fellow-countryman—I mean boy—in trouble.”

I tried to thank him, but suitable words would not come, and he clapped me on the shoulder in a friendly way.

“There,” he said, “come back to our friend the Frau. You are faint and hungry, and so am I. She shall give us a good square meal, as they call it out here, and then we shall be rested, and better able to think.”

I was faint, certainly, but the idea of eating anything seemed to make me feel heart-sick; but I said nothing, only followed my companion back to the little hotel, feeling as if this was after all only some bad, confused dream.

Chapter Fifteen.

Where Esau Had Been.

“We are forgetting one thing,” said Gunson, as we drew near our resting-place; and I believe now he said it to try and cheer me on. “Perhaps while we have been away the truant may have returned.”

His words had the required effect, for I hurried on by Gunson’s side, and was the first to enter and ask the landlady if Esau had been back.

“Nein! nein! nein!” she cried. “Bood der Herr captain send doo dimes for you bode, and say he go doo sea mit dout you, and die schip ist gone. Ya.”

“Yes, gone,” said Gunson; “and we have come back. Give us some tea and dinner together.”

“*Zo*,” cried the landlady. “Ach you are sehr hungrig.”

She hurried away nodding her head, and we heard her shrill voice giving orders directly, while Gunson began to try and cheer me up.

“It’s very kind of you,” I said; “but what shall we do?”

“Wait patiently, my lad. There, don’t mind about me, perhaps it’s all for the best; the schooner may get into a bad storm, and we shall be better ashore, perhaps save our lives, who knows. There, lie down on that bench, and try and have a nap.”

But I couldn’t close my eyes for thinking of poor Esau. Perhaps he was dead; perhaps even then he was shut up somewhere by a gang of scoundrels who might be meaning to keep him till they could secure a ransom.

Ah, what a host of thoughts of that kind came rushing through my weary head, which now began to ache terribly.

In due time the landlady came in, bringing us our meal; and, signing me to take my place, Gunson seated himself and began to eat, not like a man who partakes of food for the pleasure of the meal, but as if it was a necessity to supply himself with the support required for doing a great deal of work. And I suppose it was in something like that spirit that, after he had first requested me to eat, and then ordered me sharply, I managed to force a little down.

It was getting quite dark, when Gunson said suddenly—

“Now is there anything else we could do—anything we have not thought of?”

“The hospital,” I said suddenly, as the idea came like a flash of light.

“I did not say anything to you, my lad,” replied Gunson, “but that was the first place I went to, thinking he might have been knocked down. No: try again.”

But no, I could think of nothing else, and my despondency was rapidly increasing, when all at once Gunson jumped up and said sharply—

“It’s too bad to destroy your belief, my lad, but I feel sure that mate of yours is playing you a dirty trick. He is a miserable coward, and hiding away. The lad has turned tail and—I’m a fool.”

For at that moment, panting and exhausted with running, Esau rushed into the room, with nothing on but his shirt and trousers, and the former torn halfway across his back.

“Esau!” I shouted, joyfully.

“Then—you’re—not gone,” he panted hoarsely; and turning from me, he threw himself into a chair at the table and began to eat ravenously.

“You young scoundrel! where have you been?” cried Gunson, angrily.

“Tell you presently,” said Esau, with his mouth full. “Go and fetch the police.”

“Police! no,” cried Gunson, excitedly. “Here, do as I do,” he continued; and taking out his handkerchief, he hastily made a bundle of the meat, butter, and bread we had left.

“No, no,” cried Esau, “I’m so hungry.”

“Eat as we go.”

“Where?” I cried.

“Boat. We may catch the schooner after all.”

“No, no,” cried Esau; “fetch the police. They’ve got my clothes, money, everything. I’ll show you where.”

“And I’ll show you where,” cried Gunson, “if you don’t come along.”

“But I can’t go like this,” cried Esau.

“Can’t you,” said Gunson, fiercely. “Here, hi! Frau!”

The landlady came running in, and began to exclaim on seeing Esau’s state; but she was silenced directly by Gunson, who thrust a couple of dollars into her hands, and between us we hurried Esau out into the road.

“But I can’t—my—”

“Come along!” cried Gunson, fiercely.

“And they’ll be after me directly,” panted Esau. “Said I shouldn’t go till I’d paid a hundred dollars.”

“They had better come for them,” muttered Gunson between his teeth; and after that Esau suffered himself to be hurried along, consoling himself with a few bites at the piece of bread he held, as we ran on to where in the soft moonlight we could see several good-sized fishing-boats lying, with men idling near them on the shore.

“Now then,” cried Gunson, quickly; “we want to be put aboard the schooner that sailed this evening. Three dollars. There she is, two miles out.”

No one answered.

“Four dollars!” shouted Gunson. “There’s a good light wind, and you can soon reach her.”

Still no one stirred, the men staring at us in a dull, apathetic way.

“Five dollars,” cried Gunson, angrily.

“Say, stranger,” said one of the men, “what’s your hurry? stole suthin’?”

“No,” I shouted; “but it’s as if they have. Our chests are aboard, and we’ve paid our passage.”

“Come on then,” said one of the men, rousing himself. “I’ll take you for five dollars. Jump in.”

He led the way to a little skiff, two more of his companions following him, and they rowed us out to one of the fishing-boats, made fast the one we had come in with the painter, cast off the buoy-rope, and began to hoist a sail, with the result that a soft pattering sound began under the boat’s bows, and she careened over and began to glide softly away, the man who had gone to the rudder guiding her safely through the vessels lying by the buoy near the shore.

“There,” cried Gunson, taking off the pea-jacket he wore, and throwing it to Esau. “Put that on, my lad; and here, eat away if you’re hungry. You shall tell us afterwards where you’ve been.”

“But they’ve got my money,” said Esau, in an ill-used tone.

“Then we must share with you, and set you up. Think we shall catch the schooner, skipper?”

“Guess we shall if this wind holds. If it changes she’ll be off out to sea, and we shall lose her. Guess you’ll pay your five dollars all the same?”

“Look here,” said Gunson, roughly. “You’ve got an Englishman to deal with.”

“Oh, yes; guess I see that; but you send some ugly customers out here sometimes, stranger. Not good enough for yew to keep at home.”

Gunson made no answer, but sat watching the vessel, which, as it lay far out in the soft moonlight, looked faint, shadowy, and unreal.

Every now and then a good puff of wind filled our sail, so that the boat rushed through the water, and our hopes rose high, far we felt that in less than an hour we should be alongside our goal; but soon after Gunson would utter an impatient ejaculation, for the wind that sent us surging through the beautiful waters of the bay, sent the schooner along rapidly too, so that she grew more faint.

Once or twice I glanced back at the shore, to see how beautiful the town looked with its lights rising above lights, and all softened and subdued in the clear moonlight; but I was soon looking ahead again, for our chase was too exciting for me to take much interest in a view.

Every now and then the boat tacked, and we went skimming along with her gunwale close down to the water, when we were all called upon to shift our position, the boatman evidently doing his best to overtake the schooner, which kept seeming nearer and then farther off in the most tantalising way.

“Guess I didn’t ask you enough, skipper,” said the boatman. “This is going to be a long job, and I don’t think we shall dew it now.”

“Do your best, man,” said Gunson quietly. “I must overtake the schooner if it is possible.”

All at once the wind dropped, the sail shivered and flapped, and we lay almost without motion, but to our annoyance we could just make out the schooner with her sails well filled, gliding steadily away.

The master of the boat laughed.

“Wait a bit,” he said. “She won’t go on like that long. P’r’aps we shall have the wind next and she be nowhere.”

Gunson glanced at the oars, but feeling that if we were to overtake the vessel it must be by means of the sails, he said nothing, but sat watching by me till we saw the schooner’s sails die away.

“Gone?” I whispered.

“No; she has changed her course a little and is stern on to us. There, you can see her again.”

To my great delight I saw that it was so, the schooner having now turned, and she grew plainer and plainer in our sight as the moon shone full now on the other side of her sails, and we saw that she too was becalmed. Then in a few minutes our own sails filled, and we went gliding on over the glistening sea, which flashed like silver as we looked back.

I uttered a sigh full of relief, for the schooner still lay becalmed, while we were now rushing through the water.

“Well, my lad,” said Gunson suddenly, “we thought we had lost you. How was it? One of us thought you had turned tail, and slipped away.”

“That wasn’t Mr Gordon, I know,” said Esau. “I ain’t the slipping away sort. Those chaps got hold of me again, and I don’t like going away like this without setting the police at them.”

“You are best away, my lad,” said Gunson.

“I don’t know so much about that,” cried Esau. “They’ve got all my money, and my knife and coat, and that new pipe.”

“What new pipe?” I said sharply. “You don’t smoke.”

“Nobody said I did,” replied Esau, gruffly. “Fellow isn’t obliged to smoke because he’s got a pipe in his pocket, is he?”

“No, but you had no pipe in your pockets this morning, because you turned them all out before me.”

“Well, then, I’d got one since if you must know.”

“Why, you did not go away to buy a pipe, did you?” I said.

“Why, there wouldn’t ha’ been any harm in it if I had, would there?” he said surlily, as he held one hand over the side to let the water foam through his fingers.

“Then you gave us all this trouble and anxiety,” I cried angrily, “and have made us perhaps ruin our passage, because you wanted to learn to smoke.”

“I didn’t know it was going to give all this trouble,” he said, in a grumbling tone.

“But you see it has.”

“Well, I’ve got it worse than you have, haven’t I? Lost everything I’ve got except what’s in my chest.”

“And it begins to look as if you’ve lost that too, my lad,” said Gunson bitterly. “You’d better have waited a bit before you began to learn to smoke. There goes your chest and your passage money.”

“Yes, and ours,” I said, as Gunson pointed to where the schooner’s sails were once more full, and she was gliding away. “Is it any use to shout and hail them?”

“Stretch your breathing tackle a bit, my lad,” said the master. “Do you good p’r’aps.”

“But wouldn’t they hear us?”

“No; and if they did they wouldn’t stop,” said the master; and we all sat silent and gloomy, till the injury Esau had inflicted upon us through that pipe came uppermost again.

“Serves you well right, Esau,” I said to him in a low voice. “You deserve to lose your things for sneaking off like that to buy a pipe. You—pish—want to learn to smoke!”

I said this with so much contempt in my tones that my words seemed to sting him.

“Didn’t want to learn to smoke,” he grumbled.

“Yes, you did. Don’t make worse of it by telling a lie.”

“Who’s telling a lie?” he cried aloud. “Tell you I wasn’t going to smoke it myself.”

“Then why did you go for it?”

“Never you mind,” he said sulkily, “Pipe’s gone—half-dollar pipe in a case—nobody won’t smoke it now, p’r’aps. Wish I hadn’t come.”

“So do I now,” I said hotly. “You did buy it to learn to smoke, and we’ve lost our passage through you.”

Esau was silent for a few moments, and then he came towards me and whispered—

“Don’t say that, sir. I saw what a shabby old clay pipe Mr Gunson had got, and I thought a good noo clean briar-root one would be a nice present for him, and I ran off to get it, and bought a big strong one as wouldn’t break. And then, as I was out, I thought I’d look in at some of the stores, and see if there wasn’t something that would do for you.”

“And you went off to buy me a pipe, my lad?” said Gunson, who had heard every word.

“Didn’t know you was listening,” said Esau, awkwardly.

“I could not help hearing. You were excited and spoke louder than you thought. Thank you, my lad, though I haven’t got the pipe. Well, how did you get on then?”

“That’s what I hardly know, sir. I s’pose those chaps we had the tussle with had seen me, and I was going stoopidly along after I’d bought your pipe—and it was such a good one—staring in at the windows thinking of what I could buy for him, for there don’t seem to be anything you can buy for a boy or a young fellow but a knife, and he’d got two already, when in one of the narrow streets, Shove! bang!”

“What?” I said.

“Shove! bang! Some one seemed to jump right on me, and drove me up against a door—bang, and I was knocked into a passage. ’Course I turned sharply to hit out, but five or six fellows had rushed in after me, and they shoved me along that passage and out into a yard, and then through another door, and before I knew where I was they’d got me down and were sitting on me.”

“But didn’t you holler out, or cry for help?”

“He says didn’t I holler out, or shout for help! I should just think I did; but before I’d opened my mouth more than twice they’d stuffed some dirty old rag in,—I believe it was some one’s pocket-hankychy,—and then they tied another over it and behind my head to keep it in, right over my nose too, and there I was.”

“But you saw the men,” said Gunson, who was deeply interested.

“Oh yes, I saw ’em. One of ’em was that long-haired chap; and it was him whose hands run so easy into my pockets, and who got off my coat and weskit, and slit up my shirt like this so as to get at the belt I had on with my money in it. He had that in a moment, the beggar! and then if he didn’t say my braces were good ’uns and he’d change. They were good ’uns too, real leather, as a saddler—”

“Well?” said Gunson. “What took place then?”

“Nothing; only that long-haired chap grinned at me and kicked me twice. ’Member that policeman as took us up, Mr Gordon?”

“Yes.”

“I only wish I could hand that long-haired chap over to him. Strikes me they’d cut his hair very short for him before they let him go.”

“But what happened next?”

“Nothing, sir; only they tied my hands behind me, and then put a rope round my ankles, and then one took hold of my head and another of my feet, and they give me a swing, and pitched me on to a heap of them dry leaves like we used to see put round the oranges down in Thames Street.”

“Indian corn,” said Gunson, shortly.

“Yes; and then they went out, and I heard ’em lock the door, leaving me in the half dark place nearly choked with that hankychy in my mouth.”

“Yes; go on, Esau,” I said eagerly. And just then the master of the boat spoke—

“Say, youngster, you was in for it. They meant to hit you over the head to-night, and chuck you into the harbour after dark.”

“Yes,” said Gunson.

“Well, I saved ’em the trouble,” said Esau. “Oh, I just was mad about that pipe; and I seemed to think more about them braces than I did about the money, because, you see, being sewed up like in a belt I never saw the money, and I used to see the braces, and think what good ones they was, every day.”

“Go on, Esau,” I said. “How did you get away?”

“Well, I lay there a bit frightened at first and listened, and all was still; and then I began to wonder what you and Mr Gunson would think about me, and last of all, as I couldn’t hardly breathe, and that great rag thing in my mouth half choked me, I turned over on my face, and began pushing and pushing like a pig, running my nose along till I got the hankychy that was tight round my face down over my nose, and then lower and lower over my mouth and chin, till it was loose round my neck.”

I glanced round and saw that the man who was forward had crept back, and that the other who held the sheet of the sail, and the master who was steering, were all listening attentively, while the boat rushed swiftly through the water.

“Next job,” said Esau, “was to get that choking rag out of my mouth; and hard work it was, for they’d rammed it in tight, and all the time I was trying I was listening too, so as to hear if they were coming. I say, ought one to feel so frightened as I did then?”

“Most people do,” said Gunson quietly.

“And ’nuff to make ’em,” said the master.

“Well, I kept on working away at it for what seemed to be hours,” continued Esau, “but all I could do was to get one end of the rag out between my teeth, and I couldn’t work it any further, but lay there with my jaws aching, and feeling as if I hadn’t got any hands or feet, because they’d tied ’em so tight.

“It was very horrid, for all the time as I lay there I was expecting them to come back, and I thought that if they did, and found me trying to get the things off, they’d half kill me. And didn’t I wish you’d been there to help me, and then was sorry I wished it, for I shouldn’t have liked anybody to have been in such a fix.

“I got so faint and dizzy at last that things began to go up and down, and round and round, and for ever so long I lay there thinking I was aboard ship again in the storm, just like when I was off my head at home with the fever I had when I was a little chap. But at last I came to again, and lay on my side wondering how I could get that horrible choking thing out of my mouth, for I couldn’t move it even now when I tried again, only hold a great piece between my teeth.

“The place was very dark, only light came in here and there through cracks and holes where the knots had been knocked out of some of the boards; and as I thought I said to myself, if I could get that thing out I might call for help; but directly after I felt that I dared not, for it would p’r’aps bring some of those chaps back.

“All at once, where the light came through a hole, I saw something that made my heart jump, and I wondered I had not seen it before. It was a hook fastened up against one of the joists, with some bits of rope hanging upon it. It was a sharp kind of thing, like the meat-hooks you see nailed up against the sides of a butcher’s shop; and I began rolling myself over the rustling leaves, over and over, till I was up against the side, and then it was a long time before I could get up on my knees and look up at the hook.

“But I couldn’t reach it, and I had to try and get on to my feet. It took a long time, and I went down twice before I was standing, and even then I went down again; for though I did stand up, I didn’t know I had any feet, for all the feeling was gone. Then all at once down I went sidewise, and lay there as miserable as could be, for I couldn’t hardly move. But at last I had another try, getting on to my knees, and taking tight hold of the edge of one of the side pieces of wood with my teeth; and somehow or other I got on my feet again and worked myself along, nearly falling over and over again, before I could touch the hook with my chin, and there I stood for fear I should fall, and the hook run into me and hold me.”

“What did you want the hook for, boy?” said the master, shifting his rudder a little, and leaning forward with his face full in the moonlight, and looking deeply interested.

“What did I want the hook for?” said Esau, with a little laugh. “I’ll tell you directly.”

The master nodded, and the others drew a little nearer.

“What I wanted was to hold that end of the great rag in my teeth, and see if I couldn’t fix it on the hook; and after a lot of tries I did, and then began to hang back from it gently, to see if I couldn’t draw the stuff out of my mouth.”

“And could you?” I said eagerly.

“Yes; it began to come slowly more and more, till it was about half out, and then the sick feeling that had come over me again got worse and worse, and the hook and the great dark warehouse place swam round, and I didn’t know any more till I opened my eyes as I lay on the leaves, staring at a great wet dirty rag hanging on that hook, and I was able to breathe freely now.

“I felt so much better that I could think more easily; but I was very miserable, for I got thinking about you two, and I knew I must have been there a very long time, and that the schooner was to sail at twelve o’clock, so I felt sure that you would go without me, and think I’d been frightened and wouldn’t come.”

“That’s what I did think,” said Gunson; “but Mayne Gordon here stuck up for you all through.”

“Thankye, Mr Gordon,” said Esau, who was gently chafing his wrists. “That’s being a good mate. No, I wouldn’t back out. I meant coming when I’d said I would. Well, next thing was to get my hands clear, and that done, of course I could easily do my legs. So I began to get up again, with my feet feeling nowhere; and as I tried, to wonder what I was going to do next, for I couldn’t see no way of getting out of a place with no windows in, not even a skylight at the top. But anyhow I meant to have that rope off my hands, and I was thinking then that if the hook could help me get rid of the rag, it might help me to get rid of the tie round my wrists.”

“O’ course,” said the master. “See, lads,” he said, turning round to his two companions; “he gets the hook in threw the last knot and hitches the end out. That’s easy enough;” and the two men uttered a low growl.

“Oh, is it?” said Esau. “Just you be tied up with your hands behind you for hours, and all pins-and-needles, and numb, and you try behind you to get that hook through the knot in the right place. You wouldn’t say it was easy.”

“But anyways that was hard, I reckon,” said the master.

“Yes, that was hard,” said Esau; “but I kep on seeming to tighten it, and the more I tried the worse it was; till all at once, as I strained and reached up behind me, I slipped a little, and the hook was fast somehow, and nearly jerked my arms out of my shoulders as I hung forward now, with my feet giving way, and I couldn’t get up again.”

“If a fellow had on’y ha’ been there with a knife,” said the master, shaking his head.

“Yes; but he wasn’t,” cried Esau; “and there I hung for ever so long, giving myself a bit of a wriggle now and then, but afraid to do much, it hurt so, dragging at my arms, while they were twisted up. I s’pose I must have been ’bout an hour like that, but it seemed a week, and I was beginning to get sick again, when all at once, after a good struggle, I fell forward on to my face in amongst the dry leaves. My wrists and hands were tingling dreadfully, but they did not feel so numb now; and after a bit, as I moved them gently up and down, one over the other, so as to get rid of the pain, I began to find I could move them a little more and a little more, till at last, as I worked away at them in a regular state of ’citement, I pulled one of ’em right out, and sat up comfortable with my hands in my lap.”

“Well done, well done,” cried the master; and I could not help joining in the murmur of satisfaction uttered by the men.

“And then yew began to look at the rope round your legs,” said one of the latter.

“That I just did,” said Esau; “but my fingers were so bad it took me hours, as it seemed, before I had those knots undone.”

“But yew got ’em off?” said the master. “Oh yes, I got ’em off at last, every knot undone; but when I’d unwound the rope, there I sat, feeling as if it was not a bit of use, for I could not move my feet, nor yet stand. They felt as if they were made of wood.”

“Yew should have chafed ’em, stranger,” said one of the men.

“Well, of course that’s what he did do, mate,” said the master, reprovingly; “and yew got ’em to work easy at last, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s what I did do, when they would work. I had to set to and see if I couldn’t get away out of that place.”

“’Fore them scallywags come back,” said the master, drawing a long breath. “That’s right.”

“There was the door locked fast,” continued Esau, “and I knew I couldn’t get out that way; so as there was no windows, and the boards were all nailed down tight, the only way seemed to be through the roof.”

“I know,” said the master, changing the course of the boat. “Yew meant to get up, knock off some shingles, and then let yewrself down with the two ropes tied together.”

“Look here,” said Esau, ill-humouredly, “you’d better tell the story.”

“No, no, stranger; go on, go on,” said the master, apologetically. “Go on, go on.”

“Well, that’s just what I was going to do,” said Esau, condescendingly, “only there wasn’t any shingles that I saw, but the place was covered over with wooden slates.”

“Those are what they call shingles, my lad,” said Gunson.

“Oh, very well, I don’t care,” said Esau, acidly. “All I know is, I joined those two pieces of rope together, tied one end round my waist, and I was just going to climb up the side to the rafters, when I thought to myself I might meet somebody outside, who’d try to stop me; and though I felt that you two would be gone, I didn’t want to have taken all my trouble for nothing, and be locked up there again. So I had a bit of a look round, and picked out from some wood in a corner a pretty tidy bit, with a good headache at the end.”

The master chuckled.

“And I’d no sooner done that than I heard some one coming.”

“Did yew get behind the door?” said the master hoarsely. “Yew said it was dark.”

“I do wish you’d let me go on my own way,” said Esau, in an ill-used tone.

“Yes, yes, yes; go on, my lad, go on,” said the master.

“Why can’t you let him bide!” growled the others; and I saw Gunson looking on in an amused way, as he turned from watching the distant schooner, far enough away now.

“My wrists and my ankles ache so I can’t hardly bear it,” continued Esau; “and when you keep on putting in your spoon it worries me.”

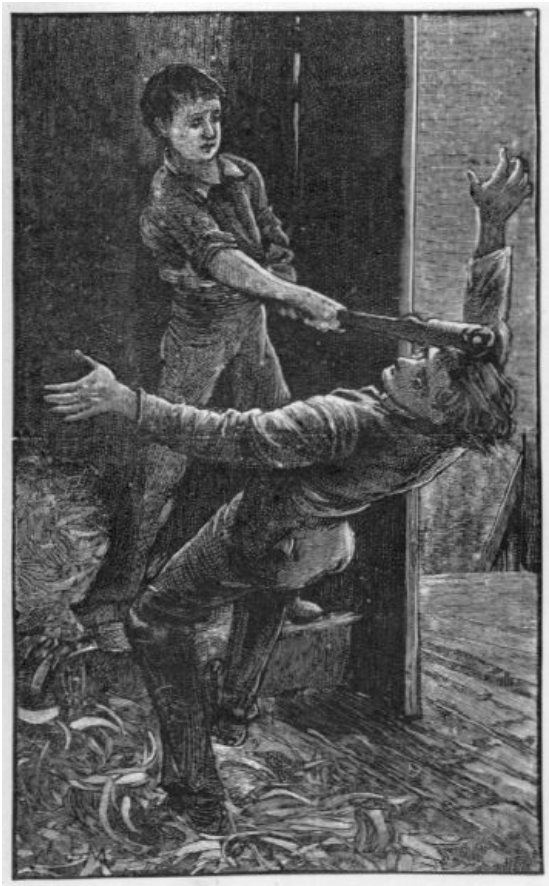
“Yes, yes, my lad; I won’t do so no more.”

“’Tain’t as if I was a reg’lar story-teller,” grumbled Esau. “I ain’t used to this sort o’ thing.”

“Go on telling us, Esau,” I said. “They were only eager to know.”

“Well,” he continued, “that’s what I did do, as it was dark. I got behind the door with that there stick in my hand, just as I heard the key rattling in the lock, and then the door was opened, and the leaves rustled, and I saw just dimly that there long-haired chap’s head come in slowly; and he seemed to me to look puzzled, as he stared at the heap of leaves as if he thought I’d crept under ’em and gone to sleep.”

At this moment I looked round, to see in the bright moonlight the faces of the master and the two fishermen watching Esau excitedly, as they waited for the end of the scene he described. Gunson’s face was in shadow now, but he too was leaning forward, while, in the interest of the recollection of what he had passed through, Esau began to act as well as speak. He raised one hand as if it was still grasping the head-aching stick, and leaned toward the listeners, looking from one to the other as he spoke, and as if the narrative was intended expressly for them and not for us.



"I'd got that well up with both hands, and down it came right on his head."—p. 154.

"All at once," continued Esau, "he took a step forward toward the heap of leaves, and then another, and then he turned sharply round as if he had heard me move or felt I was close behind him. But when a man tries to jump out of the way, he don't move so quickly as a big stick. I'd got that well up with both hands, and down it came right on his head, and there he was lying just about where him and the rest of 'em had pitched me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the master, and his two companions gave a shout and jumped up.

"Sit down, will yew!" he shouted. "Want to swamp the boat. He arn't done yet."

"Not quite," said Esau. "I felt horrid frightened as soon as I'd done it, for fear I'd given it him too hard, and I turned to run out of the place, but I could hear a lot of men talking, so I took out the key, put it inside, and shut and locked the door. Then I clambered up the side and soon had some of those wooden slates off, to find as I crawled on to the roof that it was quite evening, and whereabouts I was to get down I couldn't tell. I dare not stop though, for fear the others should come to look after their mate, so unfastening the rope from my waist I tied it to a rafter, slid down as far as it would reach, and hung swinging at the end, thinking that it was all no good, for you two would be gone; and then I dropped, and found myself in a yard.

"Some one saw me and shouted," continued Esau, "but I didn't stop to hear what he had to say, for I went over first one fence and then another till I got out into a lane, at the bottom of which was a street; and then I went into one after the other, looking like a fellow begging, till I knew where I was, and got down at last to the hotel."

"And well done too!" cried Gunson, clapping him on the shoulder. "All to get me a new pipe, eh?"

"Yes; and I'll get you another too some day."

"I knew you wouldn't leave me in the lurch, Esau," I whispered; and then I started, for the master brought down his hand with a heavy slap on his knee.

"That was a good 'un," he cried. "There's too many o' them sort in 'Frisco, and it gives the place a bad name. I don't wish that loafer any harm, but I hope you've killed him."

"I hope not," I said, fervently.

"Best thing as could happen to him, my lad," said the man. "You see he's a regular bad 'un now, and he'd go on getting worse and worse, so the kindest thing your mate could do was to finish him off. But he arn't done it. Them sort's as hard as lobsters. Take a deal o' licking to get through the rind."

"Hah!" ejaculated Gunson just then.

"What's matter?"

"She is leaving us behind," said Gunson, as he looked sadly out to sea.

"Now she arn't," said the master; "and I arn't going to let her. Her skipper and me's had many a argyment together 'bout his craft, and he's precious fond o' jeering and fleering at me about my bit of a cutter, and thinks he can sail

twiced as fast. I’m going tew show him he can’t.”

“Do you think you can overtake him then?” I cried eagerly.

“Dunno about overtake, my lad, but I’m going to overhaul him. Here, Zeke, come and lay hold of this here tiller. You keep her full. Elim, you and me’s going to get up that forsle. I’m going tew put yew chaps aboard o’ that schooner if I sail on for a week.”

“Without provisions?” said Gunson, sadly.

“Who says ’thout provisions,” retorted the man. “There’s a locker forrard and there’s a locker aft, for we never know how long we may be getting back when we’re out fishing. I say I’m going to put you aboard that there schooner for the dollars as we ’greed on first, and if I don’t, why I’m more of a Dutchman than lots o’ them as comes from the east to set up business in ’Frisco. There!”

Chapter Sixteen.

Emulating the Cornishmen.

Unwittingly we had made friends with the master of the little fishing craft and his men; and as we sat watching them in the moonlight, and looking away at the schooner, which always stood out in the distance faint and misty, as if some thing of shadow instead of real, a spar was got out from where it was lashed below the thwarts, and run out over the bows, a bolt or two holding it in its place, while the stays were made fast to the masthead and the sides of the boat. Then a large red sail was drawn out of the locker forward, bent on, run up, and the boat heeled over more and more.

“Don’t capsize us,” said Gunson. “Can she bear all that sail?”

“Ay, and more too. If we capsized yew we should capsize ourselves too, and what’s more, our missuses at home, and that wouldn’t do. We won’t capsize yew. Only sit well up to the side, and don’t mind a sprinkle of water now and then. I’m going to make the old girl fly.”

He chuckled as he saw the difference the fresh spread of canvas had made in the boat’s progress, and, taking the tiller now himself, he seemed to send the light craft skimming over the sea, and leaving an ever-widening path of foam glittering in the moonlight behind.

“That’s different, my lads, eh?” the master said, with a fresh chuckle. “Yew see yew were only kind o’ passengers before—so many dollar passengers; now yew’re kind o’ friends as we wants to oblige, while we’re cutting yonder skipper’s comb for him. Say, do yew know what they do in Cornwall in England? I’ll tell yew. When they want to make a skipper wild who’s precious proud of his craft, they hystes up a bit more sail, runs by him, and then goes aft and holds out a rope’s end, and asks him if they shall give him a tow. That’s what I’m going to do to the schooner’s skipper, so don’t you fret no more. You hold tight, and you shall be aboard some time.”

“I hope we shall,” said Gunson quietly; but I could feel that there was doubt in his tones, and as I looked at the shadowy image away there in the offing, the case seemed very hopeless indeed.

We had been sailing for some time now, but the distance from the city was not very great, the wind not having been favourable. Consequently our course had been a series of tacks to and fro, like the zigzags of a mountain road. Still we had this on our side—the schooner had to shape her course in the same way, and suffer from the constant little succession of calms as we did.

The confident tone of our skipper was encouraging, but we could not feel very sure when we saw from time to time that the schooner was evidently leaving us behind. But we had not calculated on our man’s nautical knowledge, for as we got further out he began to manoeuvre so as to make shorter tacks, and at last, when the moon was rising high in the heavens, and we were getting well out from under the influence of the land, the easy way in which the course of the boat could be changed gave us a great advantage, and towards midnight our hopes rose high.

“There,” said our skipper, “what do yew say now? That’s a little craft to move, ain’t she?”

“Move? she flies,” said Gunson; “but with this wind, arn’t you carrying too much sail?”

“Not enough,” said the skipper gruffly. “You let me alone. Only thing that can hurt us is a spar going, and they won’t do that. That there mast and bowsprit both came from up where you’re going—Vancouver Island. There’s some fine sticks of timber up there.”

We eased off the way of the boat a little, for water was lapping over the bows, and even he had tacitly agreed that we were heeling over more than was quite safe.

“Swab that drop o’ juice up,” he growled; and one of the men quietly mopped up the water, of which there was not enough to bale.

“She must see us now,” said Gunson, after another long interval, during which we all sat holding on by the gunwale.

“See us? Oh, she sees us plain enough.”

“Then why doesn’t she heave to?”

“Skipper’s too obstint. Perhaps he don’t think there’s any one aboard, for it’s misty to make anything out in the moonlight, even with a glass. P’r’aps he knows the boat again, and won’t take no heed because it’s me. But you wait a bit; we’re going through the water free now, eh, squire?”

“You’ll sink her directly,” said Esau, who had already grasped the fact that a vessel was always “she.”

“Not I. I say, you didn’t expect a ride like this t’night, did yew?”

“No,” said Esau, whose attention was all taken up with holding on to the side.

“No, not yew. Steady, my lass, steady,” he said softly, as the boat made a plunge or two. “Don’t kick. Say, youngster, any message for that there chap as you hit?”

“Yes; tell him I’ll set the police to work if ever I come back here.”

“Right. I’ll tell him. I know where to find him.”

“Where will that be?” I said, wondering whether he meant the very worst; and I breathed more freely as I heard his answer.

“In the hospital, lad, in the hospital. They’ll have to mend the crack in his head, for I dessay your mate here hit as hard as he could.”

“I did,” said Esau.

And now we sat in silence gazing at the moonlit water, with its wonderful flecks of silvery ripple, then at the misty schooner, and then across at the lights of the city; while I wondered at the fact that one could go on sailing so long, and that the distance looked so small, for a mile at sea seemed to be a mere sham.

“What do yew say now?” said the master an hour later. “Shall we overhaul her?”

“Yes, we must catch her now,” said Gunson, excitedly. “Don’t overdo it when we are so near success.”

“Yew let me alone; yew let me be,” he grumbled. “I’m going to putt yew aboard that craft, first, because I think yew all ought to be helped; and second, because I want to show the schooner’s skipper that he arn’t everybody on these shores.”

On we went through the silver water, with the path behind us looking like molten metal, and the wind seeming to hiss by us and rattle in the boat’s sails, we went so fast. Every now and then from where I sat I could look down and see that the lee bulwark almost dipped under water, but always when it was within apparently half an inch of the surface the master eased the boat and it rose a little.

The schooner was going on the opposite tack to ours, so that when at last we crossed her we seemed so near that one might have hailed; but in obedience to the master’s wish we passed on in silence, so as to let him enjoy the triumph of over-sailing the bigger vessel, and then hailing her after the Cornwall fashion of which he had boasted.

“Now,” he said, “we’re ahead.” And almost at that moment there was a loud crack, the mast went by the thwarts, and the sails lay like the wings of a wounded bird upon the silvery sea.

Chapter Seventeen.

“It’s them.”

“Wal,” said the master, “reckon that arn’t quite such a good stick as I thout it war.”

I sat looking despondently at the wreck, for the accident had happened just as I felt sure of our overtaking the schooner, which was rapidly gliding away from us again, when Esau caught hold of my arm.

“I say, arn’t going to the bottom, are we?”

“All our trouble for nothing, I’m afraid, my lads,” said Gunson.

“What are yew two looking at?” roared the master. “Going to let them two sails drag down under the boat? Haul ’em in, will yew!”

These words startled the two men into action, and they began to loosen the ropes and haul in the sails rapidly, prior to getting the broken mast on board.

“Wal, might ha’ been worse,” said the master, giving his head a scratch; “but there goes your dollars, mister, for a new stick.”

“I’ll pay for it,” said Gunson, quickly. “Could you rig up the broken spar afresh?”

“Guess I’m going to try.”

“Do you think they could hear us on the schooner if we all shouted together?”

“No, I don’t, my lad. If I had, I would have opened my mouth to onced. Here, let me come by; them two’s going to sleep. I want to fix that stick up again. I won’t be able to give the schooner a tow this time. He’s beat me, but I’ll do it yet.”

He set to work getting out the broken stump, which was standing jagged above the thwart, and looked at it thoughtfully.

“Make a nice bit o’ firewood for the old woman,” he said, as he laid it down forward before beginning to examine the broken end of the mast.

“Guess yew arn’t got such a thing as a saw in your pocket, hev you, either on yew?” he continued, with a grim smile. “Not yew! One never has got what one wants in one’s pocket. Lend a hand here, Elim, never mind about them stays. Don’t shove: them sharp ends ’ll go through the bottom. If they do, one of you youngsters ’ll hev to putt your leg through the hole to keep the water out. Now, Zeke, never mind the sail. Hyste away.”

Between them they raised the broken mast, which was now about three feet shorter, tightened the ropes, and, just as the schooner was coming back on the next tack, to pass us about half a mile away, the master said—

“They ought to see as we’re in trouble, but I ’spect they’re nearly all asleep. Here, all on yew be ready, and when I cry, *hail*! open your shoulders, and all together give ’em a good *ahoy*! Not yet, mind—not till I speak. Lot o’ little footy squeaks arn’t no good; we must have a big shout. Guess we shan’t haul up the sail till we’ve tried whether they’ll lay to.”

The schooner came nearer and nearer, with her sails growing so plain that even the ropes that held them glistened white in the moonlight, and looking so beautiful as she glided smoothly onward, that for the moment I forgot our predicament; but I was roused up at last by the master’s voice.

“All together!” he said, quietly. “Hail!”

Our voices rose high in a discordant shout.

“Now again,” cried the master.

Our voices rose once more, and then another shout broke the stillness of the soft night air; but the schooner glided on, her sails hiding everything, so that we did not see a soul on board save the man at the wheel, whose white face gleamed for a few moments as it emerged from the black shadow cast by the great mainsail.

“They’re all asleep,” cried the master, fiercely. “Here, lay holt, Zeke. I say, squire, take holt o’ the tiller, and keep her straight. Hyste away, Elim, we’ll show ’em the rope’s end yet.”

“Look!” cried Gunson, quickly.

“Eh? Why, they did hear us,” cried the master, in a disappointed tone. “Why didn’t they hail back? Shan’t show him the rope’s end arter all.”

For the schooner glided slowly round till she was head to wind; and instead of her sails curving out in the moonlight, they were now dark, save where they shivered and flapped to and fro, so that a part of the canvas glistened now and then in the light.

“Ahoy!” came faintly from her decks, for she was a quarter of a mile away; and in a few minutes a boat dropped over the side with a splash, and four men began to row toward us.

“There you are,” said the master, grimly; “they’ll take you aboard now. Going up the Fraser, arn’t you?”

“Yes, I hope so,” said Gunson, as he thrust his hand into his pocket, and then handed some money to the old man, who took it with a dissatisfied grunt, and turned it over in his rough hand.

“What’s this?” he said roughly; “ten dollars. There, we said five. Take them back.” He held out half the money. “No, no: bargain’s a bargain. Lay holt.”

“But the broken spar?”

“Don’t you fret yewrself about that. I’m going to show it to him as sold it to me, and make him take it again. There, good luck to you all. Good-bye, youngsters; and if you find any gold up yonder, bring me back a little bit to make a brooch for my old missus.”

Gunson pressed him to keep the money, but he refused angrily.

“Shake hands, all on yew, and good-bye. I meant to put you all aboard, and I’ve done it, arn’t I?”

“Indeed you have,” I said; “and we are very grateful.”

“That’s right, lad,” he said, shaking hands warmly; after which the others held out their hands, and to my great satisfaction Gunson said—

“Will you let me give these two a dollar each?”

“Oh, very well,” grunted the master. “If yew’ve got so much money to throw away, yew can dew it.”

“Hillo!” came from the fast-nearing boat, “what’s the matter?—sinking?”

“No,” roared the master. “Sinking indeed! What yer going off and leaving all your passengers behind for?”

“Oh,” said a gruff voice, “it’s them.”

It was the skipper of the schooner who spoke, and a quarter of an hour later we were on board his vessel, waving our caps to the master and his two sturdy fisher-lads, as, with their shortened sails now filling, the boat began to glide rapidly back, while the schooner’s head was turned once more for the open sea.

“Thought you warn’t coming,” said the skipper, gruffly, after seeing that the little boat was swinging safely from the davits.

“Yes, it was a close shave,” replied Gunson, who hardly spoke again to us, but went below; and soon after we two were fast asleep, forgetful of all the past troubles of the day.

Chapter Eighteen.

British Columbia.

When I awoke next morning it was blowing hard, and the timbers of the schooner were groaning and creaking so dismally, that when every now and then a wave struck the bows, Esau turned to me and shook his head, “Next big one as comes ’ll knock her all to pieces.”

We did not care much for our breakfast, for more than one reason, and were glad to get on deck, where we found Gunson talking with the skipper, or I should say Gunson talking, and the old captain rolling an eye, or giving a short nod now and then. Away to our right lay the coast of California, with its pale-coloured bare-looking cliffs appearing anything but attractive; and as we tossed about in the little schooner, I could not help thinking how different it was to the great clipper-ship in which we had sailed round the Horn.

We were soon glad to go below again, and there, as Esau could not get at his chest, which was down in the hold, he was glad to accept the loan of a blue jersey from one of the sailors, so as to set Gunson’s jacket at liberty.

It was almost a repetition of our experience in the *Albatross* for some days, only in this case we could have gone on deck at any time; but there was no temptation to do so, for it meant holding on by the side, and being soaked by the spray which kept on flying aboard.

During those days Esau passed the greater part of his time lying down, and about once an hour he got into the habit of lifting his head, and looking at me fixedly.

“I say,” he would begin.

“Yes?”

“Don’t think I shall take to sailoring;” and I agreed with him that other lines would be pleasanter.

It was not that we were so very cowardly, for the sailors we spoke to all agreed that it was one of the worst trips they had ever had along the coast; and we afterwards heard that the skipper had been very anxious more than once. But there is always an end to bad weather; and the morning came when I went on deck to find sky and sea of a lovely blue, and away to my right a glorious green land, with swelling hills, forests of pines, and beyond them, dazzlingly white in the bright sunshine, the tops of two snow-capped mountains.

As I leaned aft, gazing at the beautiful land, my spirits began to grow brighter, and I was turning round to go down and fetch Esau to come and see the place, when I found that Gunson had come on deck too, and was looking at me in his peculiar manner which always repelled me.

“Is that British Columbia?” I said, to break an awkward silence, for he stood perfectly silent, fixing me with that one piercing eye.

“No, not yet—that’s Yankee-land still. We’ve got to get into the Straits yet before we can see our country.”

“Straits—Gibraltar?” I said thoughtlessly; and then I felt red in the face at my stupidity.

“Not exactly, my lad,” he said, laughing. “Why, my geography is better than yours. The straits we go through are those of Juan de Fuca, the old sailor who discovered them. But from what I know of it, the country is very much the same as this. Think it will do for you?”

“It is lovely,” I cried, enthusiastically.

“Yes,” he said, thoughtfully, and speaking in a quiet soft way that seemed to be very different from his appearance; “a lovely land—a land of promise. I hope your people will all get up yonder safe and sound. It is a long, weary task they have before them.”

“Can’t be worse than ours has been,” I said.

“Well, no, I suppose not; but very trying to those poor women. Look here, my lad,” he said, after a pause, “how are you going to manage when you get ashore at Victoria?”

“Start at once for Fort Elk.”

“How?”

“Get somebody who knows the way to tell us, and then walk on a few miles every day. It can’t be very difficult to find if we keep along the river bank.”

“Along the towing-path, eh?”

“Yes, if there is one,” I said, eagerly.

“Towing-path! Why, you young innocent,” he cried, angrily, “don’t you know that it’s a fierce wild mountain-torrent, running through canons, and in deep mountain valleys, with vast forests wherever trees can grow, all packed closely together—sometimes so close that you can hardly force your way through?”

“I did not know it was like that,” I said; “but we must make the best of it, I suppose. If we can’t go twenty miles a day we must go fifteen.”

“Or ten, or five, or one,” he cried, with a contemptuous laugh. “Why, Mayne, my lad, that last will often be the extent of your journey.”

I looked at him in dismay.

“You have no friends then at Victoria—no introductions?”

I shook my head.

“And you do not even seem to know that Victoria is on an island, from which you will have to cross to the mouth of the Fraser.”

“I’m afraid I am very ignorant,” I said, bitterly; “but I am going to try to learn. I suppose there are villages here and there up the country?”

“Perhaps a few, not many yet; but you will find some settler’s place now and then.”

“Well, they will be English people,” I said, “and they will help us.”

“Of course.”

“Where are you going?” I asked suddenly.

He gave a little start, and his face relaxed.

“I?” he said quickly, and he looked as if he were going to take me into his confidence; but just then Esau came on deck to stand looking shoreward, and Gunson turned cold and stern directly. “Don’t know for certain,” he replied. “Morning, my lad,” to Esau, and then walked forward to speak to the skipper.

“There, Esau,” I said eagerly; “that’s something like a country to come to,” for the fresh beauties which were unfolding in the morning sun made me forget all Gunson’s suggestions of difficulties.

“Yes, that’s something like,” said Esau. “What makes those big hills look so blue as that?”

“They are mountains, and I suppose it’s the morning mist.”

“Mountains!” said Esau, contemptuously, “not much o’ mountains. Why, that one over yonder don’t look much bigger than Primrose Hill.”

“Not much,” said Gunson, who was walking back with the skipper. “Very much like it too, especially the snow on the top. How far is that mountain off?” he added, turning to the skipper.

“Hunard miles,” grunted the person addressed.

“Look here,” whispered Esau, as soon as we were alone, for the skipper and Gunson went below, “I don’t say that he hasn’t been very civil to us, and he helped us nicely about getting on here, but I don’t like that chap. Do you?”

“I really don’t know,” I said with a laugh.

“Well, I do know. He looks at one with that eye of his, as if he was thinking about the money in your belt all the time.”

“He can’t be thinking about yours,” I said drily.

“Oh dear! I forgot that,” said Esau. “But all the same, I don’t like a man with one eye.”

“But it isn’t his fault, Esau.”

“No, not exactly his fault; but it sets you against him, and he’s got so much pump in him.”

“Pump?”

“Yes; always getting out of you everything you are going to do, and who you are, and where you come from.”

“Yes, he does question pretty well.”

“He just does. Very well, then; I want to know who he is, and where he comes from, and what he’s going to be up to. Do you know?”

“No, not in the least.”

“Same here. Well, I don’t like a man who’s so close, and the sooner we both shake hands with him, and say good-bye, the better I shall like it.”

“Well, Esau, I’m beginning to feel like that,” I said, “myself.”

“That’s right, then, and we shan’t quarrel over that bit o’ business. Soon be there now, I think, shan’t we?”

“To-morrow about this time,” said a familiar voice; and we both started, for Gunson was standing close behind us. “Didn’t you hear me come up?”

“No,” I said hurriedly; and he laughed a little, rather unpleasantly, I thought, and walked forward to stand with his elbows on the bulwark watching the distant shore.

“There!” whispered Esau. “Now would a fellow who was all right and square come and listen to all we said like that? Seems to be always creeping up behind you.”

“I don’t think he did that purposely.”

“Well then, I do. You always take his part, no matter what I say; and it sometimes seems to me as if you were pitching me over, so as to take up with him.”

“That’s right, Esau,” I replied. “That is why we sailed off together, and left you in the lurch.”

Esau pressed his lips together, gave his foot a stamp, and then pushed close up to me.

“Here,” he said, “punch my head, please. Do. I wish you would. My tongue’s always saying something I don’t mean.”

I did not punch Esau’s head, and the little incident was soon forgotten in the interest of the rest of our journey. For we sailed on now in bright sunshine, the uneasy motion of the schooner was at an end, and there was always something fresh to see. Now it was a whale, then a shoal of fish of some kind, and sea-birds floating here and there. Then some mountain peak came into view, with lovely valleys and vast forests of pines—scene after scene of beauty that kept us on deck till it was too dark to see anything, and tempted us on deck again the moment it was light.

By midday we were in the port of Victoria, where the skipper began at once to discharge his cargo, and hence we were not long before our chests were on the rough timber wharf, side by side with those of Gunson, who left us in charge of them while he went away.

“Wish he wouldn’t order us about like that,” cried Esau, angrily; “let’s go away, and let some one else look after his traps.”

“We can’t now,” I said.

“But we don’t want him with us any more. I say, I don’t think much of this place.”

“It’s very beautiful,” I said, looking away over the sea at beautiful islands, and up at the wooded hills in view.

“But it looks just like being at home in England. I expected all kinds of wonderful things in a foreign country, and not to be sitting down on one’s box, with sheds and stacks of timber and wooden houses all about you. We can get that at home.”

I was obliged to own that everything did look rather home-like, even to some names we could see over the stores.

“And do you know where the skipper’s going as soon as he has unloaded?”

“No,” I said.

“Up to some place with a rum name here in this island, to get a load of coals to take back. They only had to call it Newcastle to make it right. What are you looking at over yonder?”

“Those beautiful mountains across the sea, rising up and up in the sunshine. That’s British Columbia, I suppose, and it must be up among those mountains that our river runs, and where Fort Elk lies.”

“All right, I’m ready. How are we to go?”

“We shall have to find out when some boat sails across I suppose. Let’s go and find the captain, and ask him where we ought to go to get a night’s lodging.”

“Here he comes back,” said Esau.

“The skipper?”

“No, Gunson. Now let’s say good-bye to him, and part friends.”

“There’s a little steamer goes across to the settlement at the mouth of the river this afternoon,” said Gunson; “so we’ll have your chests carried down. Here, you two can get some kind of dinner in that place, where you see the red board up. You go on and get something ready; I’ll join you as soon as I’ve seen your chests on board. The boat starts from close by here.”

“No, no,” whispered Esau; “we mustn’t trust him, because—”

Esau stopped, for he had glanced at Gunson, and found his eye fixed upon him searchingly.

“I said I would see your chests safely on board, my lad,” he said sternly. “I suppose you’ll trust me, Gordon?”

“Of course I will,” I cried, eagerly; for I was ashamed of Esau’s suspicions.

“Go on then and order some dinner,” he said; and Esau accompanied me unwillingly to the rough kind of tavern.

“It’s like madness,” Esau kept on saying. “You see if he don’t go off with our chests, and then where shall we be?”

“Grumbling because I was so weak as to trust him. Never mind; I’m hungry. Let’s have something to eat.”

We ordered it, and partook of a thoroughly hearty, English-looking meal; but Gunson did not come, and as soon as Esau had finished, he suggested that we should go and look after him.

“But he said we were to wait for him here.”

“Yes, but I’m going to look for my chest,” cried Esau. “I don’t see any fun in losing that.”

“Nonsense! Don’t be so suspicious,” I said; and we waited on a full hour, with Esau growing more and more fidgety, and by degrees infecting me with his doubts.

All at once we heard from the distance the ringing of a bell, and the Englishman who, as he called it, “ran the place,” came up to us.

“Didn’t I hear you two say that you were going by the steamer ’s afternoon?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well then, look sharp, or you’ll lose the boat. She’s just off.”

I glanced at Esau, and as soon as he had paid we set off at a run, reaching the little steamer just as she was being cast off from the wharf.

“He ain’t here,” cried Esau, excitedly. “What shall we do—stop?”

“No,” I said; “let’s go on. We may find our chests on board.”

“Yes,” he said, sarcastically; “may. Well, we can come back again. Oh, what a set of thieves there are abroad.”

We were by this time on deck, and after a quick glance round, I pitched upon a man who seemed to be either skipper or mate.

“Were two chests sent on board here belonging to us?”

“One-eyed man with ’em?” he said, looking at us curiously.

“Yes,” I cried eagerly.

“All right. Down below.”

“There, Esau,” I cried, gripping him by the arm. “What do you deserve now?”

“Punch o’ the head, I suppose. Well, hooroar! and I’m glad we’ve got rid of him at last.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I should have liked to shake hands first.”

“Come, lads, what a while you’ve been,” said Gunson, coming up out of the cabin. “I told that boy to say you were to make haste.”

“What boy?” I said.

“The one I sent. Didn’t he tell you?”

I shook my head.

“Went to the wrong place, perhaps. Boxes are all right below yonder.”

“But how are you going to get ashore?” I said, wonderingly.

“Same as you do.”

“But—”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? I thought I’d come across with you, and see you well on your way. Esau there wouldn’t be comfortable without me. I don’t know when I became such friends with any one before as I have with him. Well, did you get a good dinner?”

He fixed Esau with his eye, and I saw the perspiration begin to stand in little drops on my companion’s forehead, as he stammered out something about “good-dinner.”

“But what about yours?” I said.

“Oh, I was afraid of some muddle being made with our luggage, so I stopped and got something to eat here.”

“Our luggage?” I said.

“Oh yes,” he replied with a curious laugh. “Mine is below too.”

Chapter Nineteen.

Gunson fights my Battle.

Gunson left us then, as if on purpose to give us an opportunity to talk about him; and as soon as he was out of hearing, Esau began by wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the back of first one hand, then with the other.

“It’s o’ no use,” he said in a low, hoarse voice; “we shan’t get rid o’ that chap till he has had his wicked way of us.”

I was puzzled by Gunson’s acts, but all the same, I could not help laughing at Esau’s comically dismal manner.

“Why, what idea have you got in your head now?” I cried.

“Him!” whispered Esau, in a tragic way. “I don’t quite see through it all, but I do through some of it. Look here, Mr Gordon, sir, you mark my words, he’s one of that gang we met at ’Frisco, only he plays the respectable game. He’d got me into their hands, and had me robbed, and then he was going to rob you, only I turned up just in time to save you.”

“Look here, Esau,” I said angrily; “if you talk any more nonsense like that I’ll kick you.”

“All right: kick away,” he said—“I won’t mind; but I’m not going to see you served as I was without saying a word.”

“What you said was ridiculous.”

“It was ridiklus for me to be served as I was, p’r’aps, but never mind; you’ll see.”

“I tell you what you say is absurd.”

“Very well, then, you have a say, and tell me what he means by hanging on to us as he does.”

“I cannot explain it, of course. How can I tell what Gunson means? All I know is, that it’s better to have a man with us who seems to know something about the country.”

“Ah, but does he?” said Esau, with a cunning look. “I don’t believe he knows anything about it. He’s been cramming us full of stories about dangers and stuff to frighten us. You’ll see it won’t be half so bad as you say. Hullo! what’s the matter?”

For at that moment there arose a curious yelling sound which sent a chill through me.

“We’ve run down a boat,” I said excitedly, “and the people are drowning.”

I ran toward the bows of the little panting and snorting steamer, where those on board were gathered in a knot, and just then the skipper shouted an order, the clank of the engine ceased, and I caught sight of a curious-looking canoe that had come out from one of the islands which dotted the channel, and had been paddled across our course.

“Is any one drowned?” I said to Gunson excitedly.

“Drowned? no. Only going to take a passenger on board.”

By this time I was looking over the side at the occupants of the canoe, which was formed of skins stretched over a framework, and was now being paddled up close alongside. Then one of the men in her caught the rope thrown to him, and held on while a little yellow-complexioned boy, as he seemed to me, dressed in a blue cotton pinafore and trousers, and wearing a flat, black skull-cap, made of rolls of some material joined together, suddenly stood up and threw a small bundle on board, after which he scrambled over the side himself, nodding and smiling to all around. The rope was loosened by the man in the boat, the paddle-wheels began to beat the water again, and I watched the canoe as it rapidly fell astern.

“Well, what do you think of the Indians?” said Gunson, coming to where I stood.

“Were those Indians?”

“Yes; three siwashes and a klootchman, as they call themselves—three men and a woman.”

I began to regret that I had not taken more notice of them, and seeing how I leaned over to get another glimpse, Gunson continued—

“Oh, you’ll meet plenty more. But you see how civilised they are getting, carrying passengers aboard. I did not expect to find him here.”

“Do you know that boy then in the blue blouse?” I said wonderingly.

“Oh yes, I know him. I used to see a good deal of him right away yonder in the south; and now I see that he is getting naturalised here. Come up from ’Frisco, I suppose.”

“But you don’t mean that you know that particular boy?”

“Oh no. I was speaking of him as a class. He must have an object in coming across here.”

Gunson said this in a thoughtful way that I did not understand then; and as he saw that I was watching him curiously, he drew my attention to the mainland, towards which we were gliding.

“There,” he said, “you’ll soon be able to say goodbye to the sea. It will be canoes and legs for the rest of your journey.”

“Legs,” I said laughing; “I don’t think we could manage a canoe.”

“No; but it would be wise to get your boxes as far up the country as you can, and that can only be by means of the Indians and one of their canoes.”

“But you would have to pay them.”

“Of course.”

“And would it be safe to trust them?”

“We shall see, my lad. But patience. They ought to have called this place New England. What a country and a climate for a man who could be content to settle down to a ranch and farm. There,” he continued, “I dare say you two want to have a chat. I shall be aft there if you wish to say anything to me.”

He was quite right. Esau was waiting to come up and talk, pointing out distant mountains, the islands we were passing, and the appearance of the land we were approaching, a place all mystery and interest to us now.

“I say,” he cried, “I’ve been talking to one of the men aboard here, and he says it will be easy enough to find Fort Elk; that we’ve only got to keep to the side of the river, and we shall be sure to get there some time.”

“Some time?” I said rather dismally. “When is that?”

“Oh, there’s no hurry,” cried Esau, enthusiastically. “It will be rare good fun going along by the river, and through the woods, with no one to interfere with you, and order you to copy this or write out that. But let’s get away from old Gunson as soon as we can.”

“You want boy?” said a mild, insinuating voice, and the little fellow in blue stood by us with his head on one side, and his black, currant-like eyes twinkling in his yellow face. The black close cap which he had seemed to wear had disappeared, for it had only been his curled-up pigtail, which now hung down his back nearly to his heels. “You want boy?” he said again.

He was so close to us now that I could see, in spite of his being only about the stature of a lad of thirteen, that he must be a man of thirty at least, and in spite of his quaint aspect, there was something pleasant and good-humoured about his countenance that was attractive.

“Want a boy?” said Esau, rather roughly. “He’s got one. Can’t you see him? Me!”

The Chinaman nodded and smiled at Esau, as if he admired his fresh-coloured smooth face and curly fair hair. Then showing his teeth a little, he went on—

“Me speak ploper Inglis allee same Melican man. Velly stlong. Washee. Cally big pack allee over countly. Cookee. Velly good cookee. Make nicee blead. Hot fire, plenty tea.”

“No,” I said, smiling at his earnestness. “We don’t want a servant.”

“Yes; want boy. Quong. Me Quong, talk ploper Inglis. No talkee pidgin.”

“Get out!” cried Esau. “Who ever heard of talking pigeon! You mean a parrot.”

“Hey? Pallot. Yes, talkee pallot—pletty polly what o’clock?”

“Yes, that’s right!” cried Esau.

“Quong talk ploper Inglis. Allee same Melican man. No talkee pidgin, no talkee pallot. Quong come along cally big pack. Cookee. Washee clean do.”

“But we don’t want you,” I said.

“No wantee Quong? Hey?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

He nodded as good-humouredly as if we had engaged him to cook and wash for us, and as we stood there leaning over the side of the puffing little steamer, we saw him go from one to another, and amongst them to Gunson. But he was everywhere received with a shake of the head, and at last, apparently in no wise discouraged, he sat down forward on the deck, took his little bundle on his knees, and curled up his tail again.

They were a curious lot of people on board, and I was dividing my time between watching the panorama of hills and mountains that seemed to rise up out of the sea, and trying to make out what the people might be by whom I was surrounded, thinking that one or two must be Englishmen, others Americans, and some people who had settled down in the country to which we were going, when a big, roughly-bearded fellow, who was very loud and noisy in his conversation, suddenly burst into a roar of laughter, and gave his leg a slap, while some of the men about him joined in his mirth.

For some minutes I could not make out what was the object which attracted them, but Esau was quicker, and gave me a nudge with his elbow.

“They’re going to play some games,” he said; and I grasped directly what it meant, for the big fellow went quietly up behind the little Chinaman, and with a clever twitch unfastened the pin, or whatever it was which held up the coil, and the long tail untwisted and rolled down on the deck amidst a roar of laughter—one which increased as the Chinaman turned to see who had played the trick, but only to find the man standing near with his back toward him, apparently talking thoughtfully.

“You pullee?” said the Chinaman good-humouredly.

“What?” came back in a voice of thunder.

“You pullee tail?”

The man gave him a furious scowl, and uttered a low growl like that of some savage beast, while the little Chinaman slunk toward the bulwark, and began to coil up his *queue* once more, after which he bent forward over his bundle, his eyes half closed, and evidently thinking so deeply, that he was quite ignorant of what was passing around. Perhaps he was wondering where he would be able to sleep that night, perhaps of how he was to obtain work. At any rate he was too much occupied with his thoughts to notice that the big fellow was slowly edging his way toward him.

“They are going to play some trick, Esau,” I said softly. “What a shame it seems.”

“Yes; look. That other chap’s going to help him.”

“But it’s too bad.”

“Yes; lots of things are too bad; but it ain’t our business, and if we interfere we shall get into trouble.”

I heard my companion’s words, but they did not make any impression on me, for I was too deeply intent upon what was taking place before me. There was the little Chinaman bent forward, blinking and apparently half asleep, and there on either side were the men, evidently about to disturb him in some way or another.

All at once, after exchanging glances with the others, I saw the big fellow place his foot just under the Chinaman, and give him a lift which sent him up against the other man, who roared out angrily.

“Where are you coming to, you yellow-eyed, waggle-headed mandarin?” he cried; and he gave the poor fellow two or three cuffs and a rude push, which sent him staggering against his first disturber, who turned upon him furiously in turn, and cuffed him back to the other.

“Why, it’s like playing shuttlecock and battledore,” said Esau grimly. “If they served me so I should kick.”

But the little Chinaman did not resist in the slightest degree; he only bore the buffeting patiently till such time as he could rescue his bundle, and escape to the other side of the deck, where, as if he were accustomed to such treatment, he shook himself, pulled down his blouse, and, amidst the roars of laughter that had arisen, he placed his bundle on the bulwark, and folding his arms upon it, leaned there gazing out to sea.

“I do hate to see big chaps bullying little ones,” said Esau in a whisper, as I stood hoping that the horse-play was at an end, for I shared Esau’s dislike to that kind of tyranny; and though the little Celestial was nothing to me whatever, I felt hot and angry at what had been going on, and wondered why Gunson, a strong, a powerful man, had stood there smoking without interfering in the least.

But my hope of the horse-play being at an end was not gratified, for a few minutes after I saw the two men whisper together, and the big fellow took out his knife and tried the edge.

“Hullo!” whispered Esau, “he ain’t going to cut his head off, is he?”

I did not answer, though I seemed to divine what was about to take place, and the blood flushed into my cheeks with the annoyance I felt.

My ideas were quite correct, for directly after the second of the two men lounged up quietly behind the Chinaman, and before he was aware of it, he too cleverly undid the tail, but kept hold of it and drew it away tight.

“Hallo!” he shouted, so as to be heard above the roars of laughter which arose, “why what’s all this ere?”

The little fellow put up his hands to his head, and bent down, calling out piteously, while the big passenger took a step or two forward with the open knife hidden in his hand. Then clapping his left on the Chinaman’s head, he thrust it forward, so that the tail was held out tightly, and in another moment it would have been cut off close to the head, if in my excitement I had not suddenly made a leap forward, planting my hands on the man’s chest, and with such good effect consequent upon my weight being entirely unexpected, that he staggered back some yards, and then came down heavily in a sitting position on the deck.

I was as much astonished at the result as he was, and as there was a roar of laughter from all on deck, he sat there staring at me and I at him, till I could find words to say indignantly—

“Let the poor fellow be. It’s a shame!”

The next minute the man sprang up, and Quong, as he called himself, cowered behind me, the other having in his astonishment loosened the poor fellow’s tail and set him free.

“Why, you young cockerel,” roared the big fellow, striding up to me, and bringing his left hand down heavily upon my shoulder. “Not to cut off that yallow scoundrel’s tail, arn’t I?”

“No,” I cried stoutly, though I felt anything but brave; “let him alone.”

“Will I? Look here, I’m going to have off that tail; and just to give you a lesson, I’m going to try the edge o’ my knife first on one of your ears.”

I wrested myself away, but he was as quick as I was, and had me again directly, holding the knife in a threatening way as if he really intended to fulfil his threat.

“Get hold of the knife, Esau,” I shouted; but it was not his hand and arm which interposed, for Gunson forced himself between us, thrusting me right away, as he said quietly—

“Let the boy alone.”

“Let the boy alone!” cried the big fellow, fiercely. “No, I shan’t let the boy alone. What do you mean by interfering? Who are you?”

“Like yourself, man—an Englishman.”

“And a precious ugly one too. Here, I don’t want to hurt you, so be off and lie down.”

He strode on one side, and then made at me, driving me to bay against the bulwark.

“Now then,” he cried, with an ugly laugh, which did not conceal his rage, “I’ve got you again, have I?”

“No,” said Gunson quietly, as he took him by the collar and swung him round, so that he staggered away; but he recovered himself and made at my protector. “Keep back! the boy is a friend of mine, and I will not have him touched.”

“Friend of yours, is he? Oh, then you want to fight, do you?”

“No,” said Gunson, standing firmly before him, “I don’t want to fight, neither do you, so go your way, and we’ll go ours.”

“After a bit, my lad,” cried the man, fiercely. “This isn’t England, but a country where a man can fight if he likes, so clear the course, some of you, and let’s see who’s best shot.”

He thrust his hand behind him, and pulled a revolver from his hip-pocket, cocking it as he spoke.

“Now then, out with your own,” he cried.

But Gunson seized the man’s wrist instead, gave it a wrench round, there was a sharp report, and the pistol fell heavily on the deck, and was secured by one of the sailors.

“Give him a hug, mate,” cried the man who had joined in the attack upon the Chinaman.

“That’s what I’m just going to do, my lad,” said the big fellow in hoarse, angry tones. “He’s got hold of the wrong pig by the ear this time;” and to my horror he drew back a little, and then suddenly darted his body forward and locked Gunson in his arms.

I had often heard tell of and read accounts about wrestling, but this was the first time I had ever witnessed an encounter in the old English sport, if sport it could be called, where two strong men, one far bigger and heavier than the other, swayed to and fro, heaving, straining, and doing all they could to throw one another.

There was a dead silence on the deck, and passengers, skipper, and sailors all bent forward, eagerly watching the encounter, but not one with such earnestness as I, who fully expected to see Gunson flung heavily. But no: he was raised again and again from the deck, but he always recovered his feet, and twined and swayed here and there in a

way that completely baffled his powerful adversary.

All this took a very short time, but as I watched I was able to see that Gunson seemed to grow cooler as the struggle went on, while his opponent became more enraged.

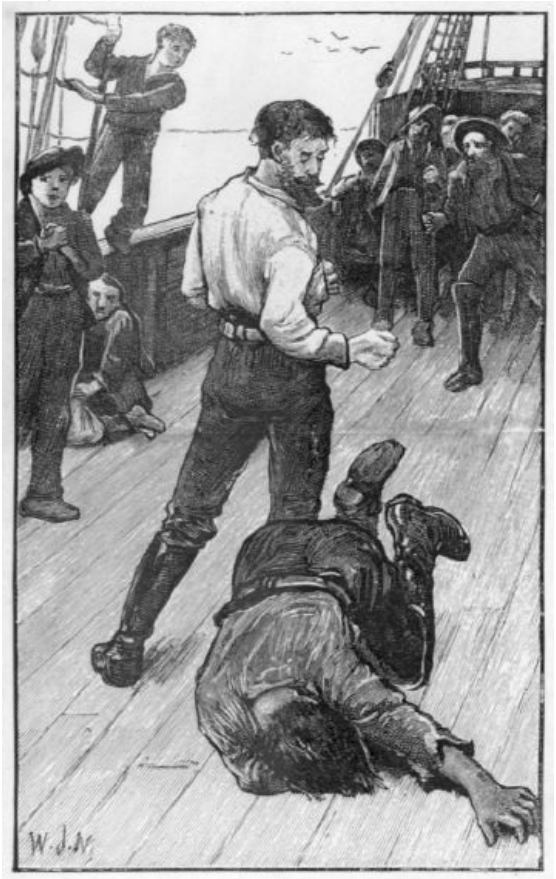
The excitement was now intense, and I felt my heart beat heavily as I momentarily expected to see my defender dashed down insensible, while a feeling of rage at my own helplessness made my position more painful. For it was this: I could do nothing, and no man present made the slightest movement either to help or separate the combatants. Then, too, I felt that it was my fault for behaving as I did, yet I could hardly feel regret for my interference.

And while thoughts like these coursed rapidly through my mind, I too was watching the struggling pair, who swayed here and there, and once struck so violently against the bulwark that I gave a sudden gasp as I expected that they would both go overboard together. But no; they struggled back again to the middle of the deck, Gunson seeming quite helpless, and offering scarcely any resistance, save when his opponent lifted or tried to throw him, when he suddenly became quick as light almost in his effort to recover himself. And all the while an excited murmur went on among those crowded together to see the weaker fall. There was no doubt as to which it would be, and one of my great dreads was lest Gunson should not only be beaten but seriously hurt.

At last the struggle seemed to be coming to an end. The big fellow swung my champion round and round, and lifted him again and again, just as he seemed to please, but could never unloosen the tight grip of Gunson's hands.

"Now, Gully lad," cried the second man, "down with him."

These words seemed to act as a spur to the wrestler, and I saw his face of a deep angry red as he put all his force



"Was that foul?" cried Gunson, as he stood over him.—p. 191.
Frontispiece.

now into a final effort to crush the active man who clung so tenaciously to him. They had struggled now so far aft that another step would have brought them in contact with the man at the wheel; but Gunson gave himself a wrench, swung round, and as he reversed his position the big Englishman forced him a little backward, bearing right over him as it seemed to me; while the next moment, to my intense astonishment, I saw Gunson now lift the great fellow from the deck and literally throw him over his shoulder, to come down on the planks with quite a crash. There was a curious cry of astonishment from the group of spectators, in the midst of which the second man stepped to his companion's side.

"Get up, my lad," he cried. "Did he play foul?"

But there was no reply. The great fellow lay on the deck as if dead, and when his companion raised his head it went heavily down again.

"Here, I can't stand this," roared the fallen man's companion. "You played foul—you played foul;" and he rushed at Gunson and seized him, the latter only just having time to secure a good grip of the attacking party.

There was a fresh murmur of excitement, followed by a roar, as, apparently without effort, Gunson threw his new opponent upon his back.

"Was that foul?" cried Gunson, as he stood over him; but the man made no answer. He only got up slowly.

“Here, I want to help my mate,” he said surlily; and there was a burst of laughter, for the first fall had taken all desire out of him to try another.

By this time the big fellow—Gully—gave signs of returning consciousness, and sat up slowly to look about him, gently stroking his head, and accepting the offer of a couple of hands as he rose to his legs, and suffered himself to be led forward, while I turned my eyes now to where Gunson was putting on his jacket.

“Are you hurt?” I said.

“No; only a bit strained, my lad. It was like wrestling with an elephant. I was obliged to let him have his own way till he grew tired, and then that old Cornish fall was too much for him.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said humbly. “It was all my fault.”

“Yes,” he said, laughing. “We ought to go different ways now. I can’t spend my time and strength in fighting your battles. There, I am going to see for a bucket of water and a wash.”

He went forward with one of the sailors, while as I turned, it was to see the Chinaman looking at me in a curious way. But just then Esau came between us.

“What did he say?” he whispered; “that we were going different ways now?”

“Yes,” I replied; “but I don’t think he meant it. I hope not. Why, Esau, what should we have done twice without him?”

“Well, he can fight and wrastle,” said Esau. “It was quite wonderful to see how he upset those two. And that’s what I don’t like, because if he’s so strong with those two big fellows, and can do just what he likes with them, what chance should we have?”

Chapter Twenty.

A strange Hotel.

We landed at a rough wharf at the mouth of the wide river, where a few shanties and a plank warehouse stood just in front of a forest of pine-trees, the stumps, five or six feet high, of many that had been cut down to make room for the tiny settlement, still standing up and forming a graceful curve all round from the ground to the place where the marks of the axe still looked white and yellowish red.

Our chests were carried out on to the shaky platform in front of the shanties, one of which was dignified by the title of hotel, and to Esau’s great disgust, Gunson’s two chests and a long wooden case were set down close to them. Then three men who had been passengers landed, and lastly the little Chinaman, who had hung back for some time, till the steamer was about to start again, sprang quickly on to the wharf, with his luggage hanging to one crooked finger. His movements were quickened by the big fellow Gully, who, as soon as he caught sight of him, made a rush and then leaned over the gangway, uttering a roar like that of some huge beast of prey. This done he shouted to us.

“Wait a bit,” he said. “We shall run again one another some day. Then we’ll all have another grip—”

“With all my heart,” said Gunson, in a loud voice; “but I should have thought you had had enough of my manners and custom’s.”

We stood waiting till the boat had gone some distance, and then, as the three men who had landed had disappeared, and the Chinaman was seated on a log at a short distance from where we stood, I turned to Gunson.

“Where does the town lie?” I asked.

“What town?” he said, smiling.

“The one at the mouth of the river.”

“Oh, there is one over yonder,” he said, “but it is not much better than this, and as this was the handiest for you, I thought you had better stop here.”

I had often felt low-spirited since leaving England, but that evening, with the last glow of the sun fast dying out over the ocean, the huge wall of enormous trees behind, and the gliding river in front, and nothing but a few roughly-built boarded houses in sight, my spirits seemed to sink far lower than they had ever been before.

I glanced at Esau, and he looked gloomy in the extreme. But I tried to put a good face on the matter, as I said to him —

“One of us had better go and see if these people will give us a night’s lodging.”

“You may take that for granted,” said Gunson. “Take hold of one end of my chest here, and let’s get it under cover.”

I saw Esau frown, and I knew that as soon as we were alone he would protest against our being ordered about. But I did not hesitate, helping Gunson to get his two chests and packing-case into the house, when he frankly enough came and helped in with ours.

The people did not seem disposed to be very friendly; but rough as the shed-like house was, everything seemed

clean, and they were ready to supply us with some cake-like, heavy bread, and a glowing fire composed of pine-roots and great wedge-like chips, evidently the result of cutting down trees.

“Rather rough, Squire Gordon,” said Gunson, with a laugh, as he saw me sitting disconsolate and tired on the end of my chest; “but you’ll have it worse than this. What do you say to camping out in the forest with no cover but a blanket, and the rain coming down in sheets? you’d think this a palace then.”

“I was not complaining,” I said, trying to be brisk.

“Not with your lips, my lad, but you looked as if you’d give anything to be back in London.”

“Oh, we ain’t such cowards as that,” said Esau shortly.

At that moment the wife of the settler, who called himself in red letters a hotel-keeper, came toward us with a large tin pot like a saucepan with a loose wire cross handle.

“Here’s a kettle,” she said, in rather an ill-used tone; “and there’s a tub o’ water for drinking outside. Got any tea?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Gunson, good-humouredly. “We shall do now.”

The woman left us, and Gunson turned to me.

“Well, squire,” he said, “what have you got in the commissariat department?”

“Some bread and cold ham,” I replied.

“Oh, but we must have some hot. I’ve done better than you,” he said, laughing, and taking out of a wallet a piece of raw bacon, which he laid upon the rough board table, and then a tin canister. “Now then, Esau, my lad, let’s see you cut that in slices, while I make some tea ready. Gordon, will you go and fill the kettle half full?”

He spoke so briskly and cheerily that I hardly knew the man again, and his words had so good an effect upon me, that I soon had the kettle filled and seated in the midst of the cheery blaze; while Esau was cutting up the bacon, and Gunson was heating and cleaning a bent gridiron, that had been made by binding some pieces of thick wire a little distance apart.

“Now then, Dean,” he said, “can you cook that bacon?”

Esau laughed scornfully.

“Do you hear that?” he said, turning to me. “Why, I’ve cooked bacon and bloaters at home hundreds of times.”

“Good!” cried Gunson. “Then you shall cook a bit here. There will not be any bloaters, but as much salmon as you like to grill.”

“Salmon?” said Esau, pausing in the act of paring off some bacon rind.

“Yes; salmon. The rivers are so full of them here sometimes, that they crowd one another out on to the shore.”

Esau gave him a look, and then went on preparing the bacon, afterwards setting it to frizzle over the clear fire.

“I must rout up some basins,” said Gunson, rising. “I don’t suppose we shall get any tea-cups and saucers here.”

He went out of the rough room, and left us together just as the kettle began to sing, and the bacon to send out an appetising odour.

“Well,” said Esau, “that don’t smell bad. Seems to make one feel not quite so mizzable to hear a kettle singing again. I did feel bad a bit back.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Yes: wretched,” I replied.

“And all the more,” continued Esau, “because old Gunson seems to have taken us into custody like, and orders us to do this and do that.”

“But—”

“Now do let *me* finish,” grumbled Esau. “I know what you’re going to say, and I’ll say it for you. You’re allus getting into scrapes, and he’s getting you out of ’em.”

“And you?” I said, laughing.

“Hah! that’s better,” cried Esau, pouncing on a piece of bacon and turning it over. “I do like to see you laugh a bit; seems to make things cheery. But I say, when is he going his way and going to let us go ours?”

“How’s the bacon getting on?” said Gunson, entering, and the rough board door swung to. “Ah, nice and brown, and the kettle close upon the boil. Know how to make tea, Gordon? Not our way in camp I know. Look here.”

He turned out nearly a handful out of the common tin canister, waited till the water in the open kettle was bubbling

all over, and then threw in the tea, lifted the kettle off, and stood it down.

“There,” he said, “that’s camp fashion. The old lady’s going to bring us something to drink it out of;” and as he spoke the settler’s wife brought in two tin pint mugs and a cracked and chipped basin, which she banged roughly on the table.

Gunson gave me a peculiar look as the sour woman turned away.

“I say, Mrs—I don’t know your name.”

“Well, what is it now?” said the woman, in a vinegary tone. “I can’t spend all my time waiting on you.”

“My dear madam, no,” said Gunson, in the most gentlemanly way; “I only wanted to say that a cup of good tea in this wilderness is a thing that one may offer a lady, and as that is thoroughly prime China tea that I have brought up from ’Frisco, will you do us the honour of trying a cup?”

The change in the woman’s countenance was wonderful. It softened; then there was a smile, and her face looked quite pleasant.

“Well, really, that’s very good of you,” she said. “I’ll go and get myself a cup. A drop of good tea is such a treat out here.”

She hurried out of the room, and Gunson laughed.

“Here, Gordon,” he said, “get out that sugar you’ll find in my bag. We must do it well with company.”

I brought forth a tin of sugar and placed it on the table, and Gunson having tidied it a little by throwing the bacon rind away, and spreading the mugs about, we sat listening to the sputtering of the bacon and watching the flickering of the flames, which in the increasing darkness began to gild and tinge the rough boarded walls with red.

Just then the woman came back, with two cups, a saucer, and another tin.

“I thought I’d bring you a cup to dip with,” she said, “and a drop of milk. A neighbour of ours ten miles up the river has got two cows, and he brings me a little milk when he comes down to buy stores. He was here this morning, so it’s quite fresh.”

A few minutes later, and our landlady had finished her cup of tea, which she declared to be “lovely,” while upon a second one being dipped she took it up and carried it off, saying she was too busy to stay.

Left alone, we proceeded to discuss our own meal, slices of the cake-like bread forming our plates, and our pocket-knives doing double duty. Great draughts of hot tea washed down the bacon, and scarcely a word was spoken till Esau sighed, and began to wipe and polish his big new knife.

“Feel better, my lad?” said Gunson, smiling.

“Yes,” said Esau, speaking rather reluctantly. “I am a bit better now.”

“A bit? Why, you are like a new lad. Nothing like a good tea meal out in the wilds, my lad, to put life into one. Why I’ve known days when we’ve been ready to break down, or give up, or go back; then we’ve formed camp, got a bit of fire on the way, boiled the kettle with a pinch of tea in it, and eaten our cold bacon and damper, and been fit to do anything after. So are you two. To-morrow morning you’ll be ready to make your start up the river, and this will be like your first lesson in camping out.”

“Which way are you going, sir?” said Esau, after a long silence, during which we had been sitting gazing at the fire, but not until there had been a general tidy up of our table.

“Nor’-east,” said Gunson, laconically. Then in a very abrupt way, “Now then, you’ve a hard day’s work before you to-morrow, so roll yourselves up in your blankets and go to sleep.”

“Where?” I said. “She has not showed us our bedroom.”

“No, because this is, as the old song says, ‘parlour and kitchen and hall,’ with sleeping accommodation included. There are plenty of fine spreading spruces outside, though, if you prefer a bed there.”

“Oh no,” I said, as I began to realise that our journey now was going to be very rough indeed; and thoroughly appreciating the value of the blanket I had brought, I rolled myself in it, and lay down to think wonderingly of where we should be to-morrow. I knew that I could not go to sleep, but thought it better to obey Gunson in every way while he was with us; and as I lay there, I saw him rise and stand thoughtfully before the fire, while almost directly a sound arose from close by me as if Esau was practising ventriloquism, and wanted to give a good imitation of wood-sawing.

This grew so exasperating at last, that I should have kicked him to wake him up if I had not been prevented by my blanket, which was twisted so tightly round my legs that they would not move.

“I suppose he must be lying on his back,” I remember thinking; and directly after, as it seemed to me, when I looked at Gunson, whose figure just before stood out big and black before the glowing fire, he was not there.

I think I considered it rather strange, but I was under the impression directly after that he had lain down too. Then there was a low, dull, humming sound, which I knew came from the river, and then I was looking up at Gunson, who was standing over me, with the fire lighting him on one side, and the broad, warm glow of the rising sun on the other.

Chapter Twenty One.

Our Morning Bath.

“Well, have you had a good night’s rest?” cried Gunson, smiling at me.

“Have—have I been asleep?” I said, sitting up.

“Asleep? Yes, for a good eight hours. There, tumble up. Your washhand-basin is waiting for you. Now, Dean,” he continued, touching him with his foot, “are you going to lie there all day?”

“Don’t—I say, be quiet. I’ve only just closed my eyes. Why! Eh? If it ain’t to-morrow morning!”

He got up and shook himself, and then followed my example of folding up my blanket.

“Can you lads swim?”

“I can,” I said; and the words recalled our river at home, and the green bank off which I used to plunge.

“I learned in Lambeth Baths,” said Esau.

“Then if I were you I’d go and have a dip; freshen you both up for the day. There’s a place under the trees about a hundred yards from the wharf. I’ve had a swim there this morning.”

“Already?” I said.

“Yes, and done some business beside. But look here; keep to the shallows there, and don’t venture into the stream, for the current is exceedingly swift.”

A swim in the bright morning sunshine sounded so delightful that I made for the door at once.

“Remember about the current, my lads,” said Gunson; “and you, Dean, if you keep your eyes open you’ll see plenty of salmon.”

“That’s his way of making fun of me,” said Esau, as soon as we were outside. “Somehow he don’t like me.”

“And you don’t like him, Esau?”

“That’s about true, Mr Gordon,” cried Esau. “But oh my!—only look!”

I needed no telling, for as we stood on the banks of that swift river, with the forest rising behind us, and the sun glorifying everything around, all thoughts of the last night’s low spirits, and the trouble we had gone through, were forgotten, and I felt ready to shout for joy.

The axe of the woodman had been at work, but so little that it was hardly noticeable, and, look which way we would, all was lovely, glorious, more beautiful than words can paint.

“Here, I want to shout. I want to lie down and roll. Here, lay hold of my ankles and hold me,” cried Esau, “Why? What are you going to do?”

“I feel as if I must stand on my head, or I shall go mad. I do indeed.”

“Don’t be so stupid.”

“But it ain’t stupid. It’s all so—so—Oh! I can’t tell you how beautiful it is.”

“Never mind now. We are here, and can go on liking it.”

“Yes, I know; but—I say, lookye here. What a tree to climb, with all its branches standing out like steps, and—Why, it must be a hundred feet high.”

“It’s more than two,” I said as I gazed up at the grand green spire of a Douglas pine, tapering gradually up, as if it intended to pierce the bright blue sky.

“Can’t be so high as that,” said Esau. “But I don’t know,” he cried. “Look at this stump; why, it must be twenty or thirty feet round. And look at ’em, hundreds and thousands of ’em, all standing as close together as they can. Oh, look! look! look! Can’t help it, I must shout. I don’t care about the trouble or the work, or the long voyage. I’d go through it all again to come to such a place as this. Oh, I do wish mother was here to see.”

I did not give vent to my feelings in the same way, but I felt as much; and all the time, as my heart seemed to swell with joy, there were tears rising to my eyes, and dimming the glorious view of river, mountain, and forest, while I kept on saying to myself, “Thank God for making such a lovely world.”

The first excitement over, and the feeling of wonder that we had not seen all this last night passed away, we went on along the clearing to the bank of the river, overlooking the shallows where we were to have our bathe.

The sun was shining down through the opening formed by the stream, and its waters were sparkling and flashing in

the light, as we reached the spot Gunson evidently meant, and just then I caught hold of Esau's arm, and stood pointing away toward the middle.

"I see 'em," cried Esau, "just over those shallows. Just like shoals of roach in the Lea or the New River. They must be gudgeon."

"Gudgeon!—nonsense! You forget how big everything is here. They're salmon."

"Go along with you," he cried. "Think I don't know better than that? Well, I am—"

This last was on seeing a bar of silver about three feet long shoot out of the water, describe a curve, and fall with a tremendous splash not half a stone's throw from where we stood.

"Why, it is!" cried Esau, excitedly. "That was a salmon, and I can see 'em now—they are big—hundreds of 'em, and oh! not a bit o' fishing-tackle of any sort, not so much as a line."

"Are you coming to bathe?" I cried, laughing.

"Who's to bathe when there's everything to look at like this? Here, don't let's go any further; let's write to mother and the others to come over here."

"There, I shan't wait for you, Esau," I cried, slipping off my clothes; while he began more slowly, gazing about him all the while.

"Can't help it," he said. "I never thought there could be such places as this. I say, ain't it too beautiful a'most?"

Splash!

That was my answer as I plunged in, only to shout as I rose to the top again, for the water was so cold it sent quite a thrill through me, and the next minute I was swimming about in the full enjoyment of the dip, after having to be content for months with a miserable allowance of water for washing purposes.

"Here I come: look out!" cried Esau; and the next moment he too sprang in, sending the water up sparkling in the morning sunshine. "Oh!" he cried; "oh! ice! Isn't it cold?"

"You'll soon feel warm," I shouted; and a minute later he was up close beside me, swimming easily, and every now and then dipping his head under water like a duck.

"I shan't go away from here," panted Esau. "It's too lovely to leave. I shall build a cottage down by the river side and live there, and then we can fish for salmon. What more does a fellow want?"

"Let's wait a bit, and see what the rest of the country is like. We may find a better place."

"Couldn't," cried Esau. "I say, one don't feel the water so cold now. I don't want a place to be any better than this. It's just right."

"Well, let's swim back now, and dress. I want my breakfast, and I dare say Gunson's ready."

"Bother old Gunson!" puffed Esau. "He's a regular nuisance. Is he going to-day?"

"I can't talk in—the water."

"What?"

"Come on back now."

I had turned, and begun swimming steadily back, for the water hardly flowed here close to the shore; and as I swam I kept on glancing up at the huge trees, which were four or five times the size of any I had ever seen before.

"Don't you want your breakfast, Esau?" I said, after a few minutes' swim, but he did not answer. "Esau, come along." But still there was no answer; and I turned round and looked back, to see that he was still swimming in the other direction, and a long way from me.

"Esau," I roared, "come back!" and I had the satisfaction of seeing him turn, and begin to swim in my direction.

Striking out strongly, I was making for the place where I had left my clothes, when I suddenly heard him hail me.

"Hallo!" I shouted.

"Can't seem to get along here."

I stopped to watch him, and then a cold shudder ran through me, for I could see that though he was swimming with his face toward me, he was slowly gliding away by the trees on the opposite bank.

"He has got into the current," I thought; and I was going to shout a warning, but I had the good sense not to do so, for I felt that it would alarm him, and beginning to swim back, I cried—

"Turn in for the shore."

“Eh?”

“Make for the shore.”

“Can’t, lad,” came back; and the cold chill I had before felt thrilled me; while feeling as if I dared not speak, I swam towards him, in agony all the time, for fear I should get into the current with which he was struggling.

“Don’t get much nearer,” he shouted, coolly enough, for he had not yet realised his clanger; and making an effort to speak as calmly, I raised my voice and shouted—

“Of course you don’t. Turn round and swim the other way, sloping for the bank.”

He did not answer, but he had evidently heard my words, for he rose in the water, turned with a bit of a splash, and began to swim in the other direction; while I followed, keeping close in where there was hardly any current.

Then I stopped and uttered a hoarse cry, for I saw him suddenly shoot right out toward the centre of the stream, and begin going down at a rate that was terrible. For I could see that any attempt to fight against the stream would be folly; all he could do was to keep himself afloat, and trust to being swept into some other cross current which might take him shoreward.

I felt willing enough to go to his help, but I could do nothing, and the feeling of impotence began to rob me of such little power as I possessed.

And now I saw that he realised his peril, for he raised one arm above the water and waved it to me, lowering it again directly, and swimming with the side-stroke, so that it seemed to me that he was drowning, for his head was nearly hidden by the water.

“Now, my lads, breakfast,” came from the bank, and I saw Gunson appear from among the pines. “Out with you. Where is Dean?”

I rose in the water, and pointed to where the poor fellow was rapidly passing out of eye-shot, being now quite three hundred yards away, and rapidly increasing the distance.

“What madness! He’ll be—”

I didn’t hear him finish the sentence, but I know what he meant to say; and in despair I swam to the shallows, waded out, and stood shading my eyes and watching Esau, who was still afloat, but rapidly being carried away.

As I reached the bank, I just caught a glimpse of Gunson running along the clearing beyond the little settlement, and my feeling of despair increased, for I knew that at the end of the opening the forest went down to the water’s edge, and that any one would have to struggle through the tangle of branches and fallen trees.

“No,” I thought; “he will get a boat.”

But I could not remember that there was a boat about the place. I had not seen one. As I thought all this in a wild, excitable way, I snatched up some of my clothes, slipped them on partly as I ran; and even then, incongruous as it may sound, I could not help thinking how the wet hindered me. Then running on, I came upon Gunson, with his face cut and bleeding, struggling back from among the trees.

“Boat! boat!” he shouted, hoarsely. “Is there no boat?”

His words brought out the settler’s wife, and a couple of men from one of the shanties.

“No boat here,” said one of the men. “Anything the matter?”

Gunson tried to speak, but no words came, and in a despairing way he pointed down the river in the direction poor Esau had been swept.

The man looked as he pointed, but nothing was visible, and just then the woman cried out—

“Why, where’s your mate?”

Neither could I say more than one word—“Bathing,” and I too pointed down the river.

“Bathing, and swep’ away,” said one of the men. “Ah, she runs stronger nor a man can swim. None on us here don’t bathe.”

“No,” said the other man quietly; and they stood looking at us heavily.

“But is there no boat to be had?” cried Gunson, hoarsely. “The Indians. A canoe!”

“Went down the river last night, after bringing the fish,” said the woman wildly, and then—“Oh, the poor boy—the poor boy!” and she covered her face with her apron and began to sob.

“And we stand here like this,” groaned Gunson, “shut in here by these interminable trees. Is there no way through—no path?”

“No,” said the man who had spoken first, “no path. Only the river. We came by the water and landed here.”

“Gordon,” said my companion bitterly, “I’d have plunged in and tried to save him, but I knew it was impossible. Poor lad! poor lad! I’d have given five years of my life to have saved him.”

“But will he not swim ashore somewhere lower down?” I cried, unwilling to give up all hope. “Where the stream isn’t so strong. Let’s try and find a way through the trees.”

“Yes; let’s try a way along by the river if we can,” he said, wearily. “Poor lad! I meant differently to this.”

He led the way back to the end of the clearing, and then hesitated.

“If we could contrive something in the shape of a raft, we might float down the river. Hark! What’s that?”

For there was a faint hail from somewhere down the river—in the part hidden from us by the trees. “Ahoy!” came quite distinctly this time. “He has swum to one of the overhanging branches, and is holding on,” I cried, excitedly. “Can’t we make a raft so as to get to him?”

Gunson turned, and was in the act of running toward our stopping-place, with some idea, as he afterwards told me, of tearing down two or three doors, when more plainly still came the hail. “Ahoy! Gordon. Ahoy!”

“Why, he is swimming back,” I cried. “Ah!” shouted Gunson, running back. “The Indians! It was about their time.”

Almost as he spoke, the end of a canoe propelled by four Indians came into sight slowly from behind the trees, and as it drew a little further into view, I could see Esau’s head just above the side right back in the stern, and this was followed by one bare arm, which was waved in the air, and he shouted—“Gordon. Ahoy! Got my clothes?” Gunson gave his foot an angry stamp, and walked back to the settler’s house.

Chapter Twenty Two.

We start up the River.

“Esau!” I cried, half hysterically, as the canoe was paddled up to the wharf; “you frightened us horribly.”

“You?” he said, coolly, “frightened you? Why, you should have been me.”

I said nothing then, but made signs to the Indians, who, partly from my motions, and partly from their understanding a few words of English, paddled the boat up to where we had undressed; and as Esau leaped ashore, and hurried on his clothes, he went on talking readily enough, though I could hardly say a word.

“Yes, I did begin to get a bit scared when I found I couldn’t do anything to paddle ashore,” said Esau quietly. “It does run fast. And as soon as I was in the full stream, away I went. Didn’t have no trouble about swimming, only a stroke now and then to keep one’s head right; river did all the rest. I could have gone on for an hour, I dare say, if I could have kept from being frightened, but—don’t tell old Gunson—I was scared, and no mistake.”

“Till you saw the Indians with the canoe,” I said huskily.

“What?” cried Esau, staring at me in astonishment. “Why that made me ever so much more frightened. How did I know but what they wanted to pull all the hair off my head? Why, I tried to swim away from them, and dived down when they were getting close, so as to let them paddle right by. I stopped under too as long as I could, and when I came up, if they hadn’t managed their boat just so as one of ’em could duck his hand down and catch hold of my curly hair.”

“Esau!”

“I shouted and struggled, but he held tight, and another came to help him, and they dragged me over the side into the boat, where I durstn’t kick for fear of poking my feet through the bottom, for it’s only skin stretched over a frame, just as you might make a boat as one would an umbrella, only I don’t think they could shut it up.”

“But they didn’t attempt to hurt you.”

“No; they were civil enough their way, and kept on jabbering at me, and saying something about Si wash, si wash. I’d had si wash enough, but they never offered to lend me a towel, and I had to get dry in the sun.”

“Esau,” I said, as he was finishing dressing, “you ought to be thankful that you have had such an escape.”

“Ought I? Well, I suppose I ought, lad; and I am thankful, though I take it so easy, for my poor mother would have broke her heart if I’d been drowned. She thinks a deal of me.”

“Of course,” I said.

“I say, what did old Gunson say?”

“Don’t ask me; don’t talk about it,” I said, for I felt half choking, I was so overset by the whole scene.

“Why, Mayne Gordon,” said Esau softly, as he laid his hand on my shoulder, “don’t go on like that. I ain’t nothing to you, and—”

“Esau,” I cried angrily, “will you hold your tongue? Hush! don’t say another word. Here’s Mr Gunson.”

“Yes,” said Esau, in rather an ill-used tone, “it always is ‘Here’s Mr Gunson!’”

“Breakfast’s waiting, my lads,” he said. “Make haste; I don’t want to keep the Indians long.”

“Keep the Indians?” I said. “Ah, you mean we ought to pay them something for saving him.”

“Yes, for one thing; but that is not all. They will easily be satisfied.”

“I sha’n’t give them anything,” said Esau sourly. “One of ’em tried to pull the hair off my head.”

“Nonsense! It must have been to get you into the boat. Here we are.”

He signed to us to go into our room in the shanty, and I felt puzzled at his quiet calm way of speaking now, just as if there had been nothing the matter that morning. But it was not so with Esau. The shock and its accompanying fright had had a peculiar effect upon his temper.

As we entered the room there was the bright fire with the boiling water; and the landlady had been busy for us, and broiled some bacon, the smell of which was very welcome at that time in the morning; but as Esau was about to take his place he looked sharply round.

“Where’s my box?” he said. And as he spoke I saw that mine and the others were gone.

“In the canoe,” said Gunson, quietly.

“What’s it in the canoe for?” cried Esau. “Those Indian chaps will run away with it.”

“If they do,” said Gunson, who was busy making the tea, “they’ll take your companion’s and mine too.”

“What’s the good o’ that to me?” cried Esau angrily. “That won’t bring mine back. Here, I want my box.”

“Sit down, and don’t be stupid, my lad. You’ve given us quite enough trouble this morning.”

“But I want my box,” cried Esau. “There’s lots o’ things in that I wouldn’t lose on no account.”

He moved toward the door, but Gunson set down the kettle and stepped before him.

“Go and sit down,” he said sternly.

“But I want—”

“Sit down!” roared Gunson. “Your companion here does not make an idiot of himself because his box is in the canoe. Do you think I want to run away with it?”

“No; but those Indians—”

“Are more honest than you are, my lad, or as honest.”

“But who told them to take the boxes?”

“I did. For if you go and nearly drown yourself there is no opportunity for consulting you about matters. You want to go up the river, do you not?”

“Well, I don’t know,” cried Esau, whose anger was now comical.

“Then we know for you. As it happens, my first halting-place is at a settlement twelve miles up the river. I wanted my chests taken up there, and I ventured to think it would be doing you lads a good turn to take you and your boxes as well. So I engaged these Indians with their canoe. They will paddle us up there and land us.”

“Oh,” said Esau discontentedly. And I burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry you do not like it, Mr Dean; but if you wish it, I will apologise for the liberties my Indians have taken in saving your life as they came, as well as in taking your chest.”

“Well, I—that is—if I’d—”

“Will you hold your mug this way for some tea, Mr Dean?” said Gunson, with mock politeness.

“Oh!” exclaimed Esau.

“There, help yourself to sugar and milk. Gordon, my lad, help the bacon, and give our much-injured friend the best piece.”

“Look here,” cried Esau fiercely, “you may hit me, or you may kick me, but I can’t stand being made fun of. Say another word like that, and I won’t eat a bit.”

“I have said my say,” cried Gunson, with a look at me. And after gulping down his tin mug of tea, Esau seemed to get better, and the meal was hastily finished in peace.

“Now, Gordon,” said Gunson, “our landlady has been very civil to us, what shall we give her beside the pay for what we have had?”

“If I did what I liked, I should give her a little paper of tea.”

“Well done, Solomon of wisdom,” said Gunson, taking something from his pocket; “here it is, done up all ready. Now then, the sooner we start the better.”

Our arrangements with the settler’s wife were soon concluded, and it was still early morning when we took our places in the big skin canoe with all our personal belongings under our eyes now; and the Indians having been well fed, pushed off rather sluggishly. But they kept time with their paddles, and soon set up a low, sad, crooning kind of chorus as they carefully avoided the powerful stream by keeping well inshore, where I gazed up in wonder at the magnificent trees which appeared in masses and clumps at every turn.

It was a wonderful experience that first ride on the fierce river, whose snow-charged waters gave quite a sting to the fingers whenever they were immersed. And there was always something fresh to see. Now it was a vast shoal of salmon gliding up over the shallows, or collecting about the edges of one of the many falls we passed, where some stream or another came down from the high grounds to swell the already full bed of the river. Then some bird flew up within tempting distance for one who handled a gun, and then there would be a little bit of excitement as we neared some fierce part of the river where the bed was dotted with rocks, a touch upon any of which must mean a hole through the bottom of our canoe, and her freight sent whirling helplessly down the stream.

It was at one of these rapids that Esau, who had been very quiet and rather ashamed of himself, suddenly half rose in his place, exclaiming—

“Don’t let them go there; it isn’t safe.”

“They know best how to manage the canoe,” said Gunson quietly.

“But you won’t let them go up that bit of water? It’s like a mill-race.”

“Yes; only fiercer,” said Gunson coolly. “Feel startled, Gordon?”

“I do feel a bit nervous,” I said.

“And not ashamed to say so,” he replied, laughing. “Well, you are a strange lad. Of course you are not frightened, Dean?”

“Why it’s enough to scare any one,” cried Esau. “We shall all have to swim for it directly, and nice chance we shall have. Get stunned with stones before we know where we are. Here, look! what are they going to do?”

“Sit still, and you’ll see,” said Gunson; and he joined me in looking eagerly at the men, who ran the boat as far as they could go toward the shallow rapids by energetic use of their paddles, and then, at a grunt from the one who seemed to take the lead, they dropped their paddles in the canoe, and, as if by one movement, swung themselves over into the rapids, and began to wade and drag the vessel against the surging stream.

“Look here,” said Gunson, with his lips close to my ear, for the noise of the rushing water was deafening, “if we do go over, make for that big piece of rock below there, and try to climb up.”

“Yes,” I said rather breathlessly; “but tell Esau too.”

“Oh no; there is no need,” he said sarcastically. “Your companion is too clever to want help.”

Meanwhile we were being dragged slowly up and up against the fierce current, and in and out among rocks, any one of which would have overset the canoe; and as I looked forward and to right and left, where the sides of the river were formed by precipices which ran up so high that the trees growing here and there on the ledges looked quite small, I felt a kind of shrinking sensation at my own insignificance, and turned at last to see what effect all this had upon Esau.

He was seated holding on to the bottom of the canoe with all his might, and staring at the threatening rocks with eyes and mouth wide open.

“Afraid?” I shouted in his ear.

“Not a bit,” he replied; “but be ready for a swim if some of those rocks up above don’t tumble down and sink us.”

And all the time the Indians dragged hard at the canoe, and with so much success that they proceeded over some three hundred yards of rapid, and then stopped where the water looked deep and glassy, and where it was evident that they could wade no further.

Here, as they held the canoe fast to keep it from being swept back down the rapids, one of the foremost swung himself in, took his paddle, and began to use it with all his might. Then another sprang in on the other side, and paddled hard to keep the canoe stationary, two still holding tightly. Then the third leaped in, and the one still holding uttered a hoarse cry, which made the others ply their paddles with all their might, for it seemed as if the stream would be too strong for them. Finally the fourth gave another cry, and his muscles stood out in the sunshine on his forehead and neck, as he gave the boat a tremendous thrust, swung himself in, and began to paddle rapidly.

The thrust he gave the boat sent it on a couple of yards, and then it became stationary, with the water, which looked white and glassy, now rushing by us, and threatening to drive the canoe on to the rocks just behind, or else to capsize us, and sweep the party headlong down the long water slope up which we had been so toilsomely drawn. And I believe we should have been mastered, for what with three passengers and the chests, the canoe was heavily

laden; but Gunson suddenly pressed himself close to the last Indian, reached out one strong arm, and grasped his paddle, swaying with him, and bringing the full force of his powerful muscles to bear.

The hint was sufficient. I gave Esau a look, and crawled right forward to the first paddler, and did precisely the same, and Esau acted likewise, so that there was the addition of our arms on the port side of the boat to balance Gunson's on the starboard.

For the moment my Indian, the first, seemed ready to start up, leap overboard, and swim for his life, evidently thinking I was attacking him; but he saw what it meant directly, and as soon as we boys were in regular swing with them, the chief man gave a shout, and the paddles were plied with such effect that the canoe began to move from where it had been stationary, as if one end were fixed on a rock, which allowed the hows to sway a little. Then we gained a foot or two, the feet became yards, and the Indians set up a triumphant chorus, as we glided on and on, more into smoother water, and at last right in, under the lowering precipice on our left, where we got along more rapidly, till the vessel was steered in behind a huge projecting mass of rock, where one paddle was sufficient to hold her in the eddy that was caused by the stone, and here all paused to rest.

"Well done, Bri'ish muscles!" said Esau, looking round, and smiling as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "I say, I thought it was all over once."

"Yes," said Gunson, "they had all they could do to hold their own, and of course they would soon have given way."

"Is there much more like this?" I asked.

"You know the river as well as I do, my lad," said Gunson. "As far as I can make out, it is nearly all like this, and runs through canons and wild places, where at times the sides are so high that it is quite gloomy below."

"Well, I like it," said Esau. "There's something in it. I've been on the river at home in the steamers, but there's nothing to see."

"You'll see enough here," said Gunson, dryly. "What do you think of your journey up the river now? Didn't I hear one of you speak about walking on the bank?"

I looked to right and left, and felt my forehead pucker up as I saw the difficulties we should have to contend with.

"But will the banks be always like this?" I said.

"Of course not. I should say that we shall find everything, from piled-up masses of rock to pleasant patches of meadow, and no two miles alike."

"But no steamers could ever come up here," said Esau.

"Oh yes, out there in the broad channel in the middle, but they will need very powerful engines and careful pilots. Ah, they are getting ready for a fresh start."

"But it will take us a long time to get up to where we are to stop for to-night," I said.

"Twelve miles at the outside," replied Gunson. "Yes, I am beginning to be in doubt as to whether we shall get there to-night."

The leader of the Indians shouted, they plunged in their paddles, and the next minute we were again struggling with a rapid bit of the river between two rocks; but they soon got into smooth water again, and, evidently quite at home in the intricacies of the navigation, they took advantage of every sheltering clump of rocks, and cut across swift rapids to get into eddies here, there, and everywhere. Now we were right in the middle of the stream, now crossing under the left bank, now making for the right, but always advancing slowly, with the sides of the river growing grander every hour, and Gunson smiling at our ecstasies, as we kept getting glimpses of ravines down which tumbled silvery streams, whose spray moistened the gigantic pines which shot up like spires.

"Wouldn't have ketched me sitting on the stool in old Dempster's office all that mizzable time," cried Esau, "if I'd known there were places like this to come and live at."

"It is a grand valley," said Gunson thoughtfully, and looking at me as he spoke; "but as it is, what is it? Only something beautiful to be admired. You couldn't live on waterfalls and pine-trees here. Suppose I landed you two lads in that lovely gorge, where the water comes down like a veil of silver, and—yes, look, there's a rainbow floating in that mist just above the big fall. Look at the ferns, and perfect shape of that great fir-tree, with its branches drooping right to the ground. You could sleep under its spreading boughs, and find a soft bed of pine-needles; but I don't think it would be possible to climb up the sides of the gorge, and in a short time you would starve."

"Oh would we?" cried Esau. "We'd soon build a hut, and we could catch the salmon."

"Yes, you might catch some salmon in the season; but there is nothing else you could eat. It is very beautiful too, and those pine-trees that stand there are as they stand worth nothing, but if you had them cut into square timbers, and lying in one of the London docks, they would be worth from ten to forty pounds each."

"But it is glorious to see all this," I said eagerly.

"Yes; glorious. In all my travels I have seen nothing more beautiful," said Gunson; and he added laughing, "I never went up a river that was so rugged and so swift."

It was just in such a nook as that which we had admired so much that the Indians ran the boat ashore about midday, and after making her fast in a glassy little pool, they signed to us to get out, after which they all sat down among the ferns, and under the shelter of the spreading boughs of a pine, and brought out some food. We imitated their example, and made a hearty meal, washing it down with a tin of water from a little fountain which gushed from a moss-covered rock.

By this time the Indians were lying down apparently asleep, and it set me thinking about what our position would be if we followed their example and they decamped with our boxes and stores. Suppose there was no way out of this neck, for the sides looked as if it would be impossible to climb them, and it was evidently a rare thing for any boat to go up or down.

However, these were only fancies, for after about an hour's rest the Indians suddenly jumped up and pointed to the boat. We got in, and the struggle with the river began again, to be kept up till the sun had descended behind the mountains, and it was beginning to look gloomy where the river ran. Places that would have been glorious to the eye in the bright sunshine now seemed weird and terrible, impressing even our hard, stern friend, so that he suddenly said—

"We had better land at the first suitable place, and make camp for the night. We can easily get a good fire."

I was glad to hear him say this, for with the advancing evening the waters looked cold, and the echoing roar of torrent and fall had an awful sound that began to affect my spirits, and Esau's as well, for he suddenly said to me—

"I say, this part ain't half so beautiful as some of the others."

Gunson set himself the task of explaining to the Indians that we wanted to land, a want that they grasped directly; the leader nodding and pointing forward beyond a sudden bend of the river, where it made a sweep to our right round a towering buttress of rock, which projected so far that it seemed to block up the channel, and turn the place into a lake. Then bending once more to their paddles, they set up their monotonous chant, and in about an hour we were round the great rocky buttress, and making for a meadow-like patch surrounded by magnificent trees, and upon which dotted here and there were rough shanties.

"Why this is the settlement!" cried Gunson. "They have done as they promised after all. Now, my lads," he said, "what do you say?—shall we try and get shelter at one of those places, or camp out for the first time, and you can try what it's like?"

"Camp out," I said eagerly, for there was an attraction about the idea. "What do you say, Esau?"

"Same as you do, sir, same as you."

"Then we will camp out," said Gunson; and directing the Indians to a nook away from the tents, they landed us there by a spring of cold water, and then began to take out the chests.

"No, no. To-morrow," said Gunson. "Now then; first thing is a fire when we have chosen our tent."

Just then Esau cried sharply—"I say, lookye there!" and burst into a fit of laughter.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Esau has a Dream.

I laughed too as I saw the little yellow-faced figure of our Chinese companion of the boat, as he came up with his small bundle swinging from one finger.

"Why how did you get up here?" I said.

"Indian—chinook come along, walkee, walkee," he said; and he pointed toward the west. "Wantee fire—make blead?" he said laconically; and then without losing a moment, he selected a sheltered spot, collected a quantity of pine-needles and fir-cones, produced a box of matches from somewhere,—I think it was from up his sleeve,—started the fire, nursed it carefully, and as soon as it began to burn freely, ran here and there to collect dry wood, and after building this up round, dragged up bigger pieces, and then added these, making a famous fire in a very short time.

Gunson laughed at the Chinaman's busy, officious way, and with us to help him, brought our stores ashore, while the Indians prepared their own camping-place some little distance off.

"We may as well make ourselves comfortable for the night," he said. "We shall work all the better to-morrow."

"Where floul—make blead?" said the Chinaman, looking up suddenly.

"Don't want any. Got plenty of bread."

"Don'tee want any. Plenty blead?" said the Chinaman. "Want pot makum boil tea; want bacon—good fi' cook bacon."

I was just unpacking the latter, which had been tucked in the kettle safe receptacle, and our new acquaintance's fingers were soon busy. He seized the kettle, went to the spring, rinsed it out, and brought it full to the fire. Then, before I could interfere, he had seized upon the bacon, taken out a long ugly knife, whetted it upon his boot, and began to cut off thin slices, which he laid upon a thin square of iron, whose purpose I had not divined when Gunson

unpacked it, bore them to the fire, and stood there ready for a clear place where one side was all aglow with embers.

This done, the Chinaman placed one or two branches in more favourable positions for burning, and turned to Gunson again.

“Kettle nealy leady. Want tea?”

Gunson handed the tin to him, and the little yellow face lightened up as the cover was taken off.

“Melican tea? No. Good tea. Ah!”

There was a long, eager sniff taken, and then a look was given round.

“One, two, thlee,” said the little fellow, raising finger after finger as he counted. “One, two, thlee,” and he gave the tea a shake in the canister.

“Not enough,” said Gunson; “we like a good cup.”

“Hey? like good cup? Yes, plenty tea fo’ good cup,” and he took off the lid of the tin, and went and squatted down by the kettle, set the tea aside, ready for the boiling of the water, and so brought the bacon over the glowing embers slowly and carefully, using the point of his knife in place of a fork. That tea proved to be excellent, and the bacon so delicious that we felt kindly disposed toward the Chinaman as we ate it; and the more so that as soon as he saw us well started, in place of hanging about to be asked to join, he whetted his knife again, trotted off, and began to collect pine-needles, and cut down boughs of fir and spruce to pack together under the biggest tree for our bed.

“Here, what are you doing?” said Gunson. “Hey?” cried the little fellow, trotting up. “Doing! Want mo’ bacon—make blead. Blead gone high.”

“No, no. Sit down and have some tea.”

“By and by!” said the little fellow. “Cut much bed. Velly black dleckly; no see.”

He went off, and we heard his knife hacking away again, and the rustling of the boughs, as he laid them neatly together in the big, pine natural tent that was to be our home that night.

“Well,” said Gunson, “what do you think of real camping out?”

“Lovely,” said Esau. “Oh! I say!”

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Gnat sort of thing bit me on the side of the neck. Why, if there ain’t another.”

He gave his face a sharp smack, and I was engaged too, and directly after Gunson was smacking his hands and legs, for a cloud of mosquitoes had found us out, and were increasing in number every moment.

“This is intolerable,” cried Gunson. “Old friends. Haven’t been bitten for years. We shall have to shift our quarters.”

Just then the Chinaman came up, and took in the situation at a glance.

“Skittum,” he said, sharply. “I mudjums.”

Running to the fire, he took hold of the end of a branch, drew it out, gave it a wave to put out the flame, and then held it smoking low down by us on the side where the wind blew, with the result that a thick cloud of aromatic vapour was wafted by us, stinging our eyes a little, but making the vicious little insects turn their attention to the Indians, who started a burning branch as well, after which we could hear our enemies making their sharp, threatening hum all about us, but they rarely ventured to attack us through the smoke.

“I say,” cried Esau, “I hope there ain’t many of these things about. My! how the bites itch.”

As he spoke he moved out from under the protecting smoke, but a sharp trumpeting hum sent him back directly with his head in the cloud.

“Wants a good sharp wind to blow ’em away,” he muttered, as he began to rub at the bites viciously, while Gunson turned to the Chinaman and nodded toward the remains of our food.

“Have some tea,” he said, “and something to eat?”

The little fellow nodded and smiled.

“All a done?” he said. “Tea velly good?” and filling himself a tin mug from the supply in the kettle, he sat sipping it with his eyes closed. Then helping himself moderately to the remains of the bread and bacon, he rinsed out the kettle and mugs, and set all aside under a big fern.

“All leady fo’ bleakfass,” he said, nodding. “Keep a fi’. Quong mind. Leady fo’ bleakfass, mollow. You want?”

He looked at Gunson, who shook his head.

“You want?” he said again, looking at Esau.

“No, I don’t want you,” replied Esau; and the same question was addressed to me, of course with the same result.

“Velly ti’e. Go sleep,” said the little fellow; and, selecting a tree about half way between us and the Indians’ camp, I saw him, in the fast-fading light, put his bundle down for a pillow, and curl up directly.

“Good example,” said Gunson. “Let’s follow it, and be off in good time.”

We took his advice; but this time I lay awake for long enough, listening to the murmur of the wind in the pines, and the low, deep bass roar of the river. It had rapidly grown dark, and the fire flickered and flashed, and sent up curls of golden smoke; while on one side there was a bough of a pine-tree with every needle standing out clear and bright against the intense blackness beyond. And as I lay there listening to the heavy breathing of my two companions, I began to think how easy it would be for the little Chinaman to crawl silently up and rob us of our money and valuables; then that there was nothing to prevent the Indians from making their way round among the trees and killing us all. I had read of Indian massacres, and a curious, hot sensation of dread came over me as I looked nervously round, half expecting that my fancies might not be without cause, and that my wakefulness was due to a sense of coming danger.

But the various objects dimly seen by the firelight by degrees took their proper form; and I saw that one which I had believed to be an Indian’s head was only a tuft of some low growth; that it was a fern and not a crouching enemy just beyond the fire; and the group to my left, a curious shadowy group, consisted of young pines which the falling in and following blaze of the fire made quite plain.

I told myself that it was foolish to feel so nervous, and that I was as safe out there in the forest as in some room at home; but myself would not believe it, and kept on conjuring up dangers surrounding us till I felt irritable with my two companions for sleeping so peaceably.

The time went on, and I began wondering how Mr John Dempster and those with him were getting on; how long it would be before we should meet—if we ever did meet; and then the end of my journey here became a great trouble to me, as the question rose in a very portentous fashion—what would Uncle Dan, as they familiarly called him, say when I presented myself and said I had come?

Those hours—perhaps they only seemed to be hours—passed on very wearily, and I turned and turned again, troubled as I was by a painful, burning itching where I had been bitten, and never once thinking of attributing my wakefulness to the real cause—the mosquitoes.

At last, just when I was most miserable, nervous, and low-spirited, I suddenly saw a bright, flashing eye appear over the edge of the black ridge on the other side of the river, and begin peering at me through the pine boughs, so full of peace and beauty that I lay gazing at it, feeling more and more calm as I recalled the times when I had seen that same planet shining so brightly in the dear old home; till at last my leaden eyelids closed, and I slept profoundly, but only to start into wakefulness as some one trampled upon me heavily; and as I leaped up, there close to me came the sounds of heavy blows, of the pine twigs being broken, and loud gaspings and pantings, mingled with heavy trampling, a low hoarse cry, and a heavy fall.

My heart stood still, and I was paralysed for a few moments as I stood there in the dark; then the instinct of self-preservation rose strong in me, and I took out and drew the great knife I had bought, and stood there ready to sell my life as dearly as I could, but unwilling to move lest I should indicate to the Indians where they might make their next attack.

For I felt convinced that my imaginations had been realised; that the Indians had stolen upon us, and murdered my two companions in their sleep, while I alone was left helpless in that wild place, and not daring to call for help.

I suppose all this could not have taken a minute, long as in my agony it seemed to me before a voice close by me said—

“Dean—Gordon! Wake up, lads. A light—a light!”

A thrill of joy shot through me as I recognised Gunson’s voice, although it was changed by excitement, and panting, just as it sounded to me after his encounter with the big settler; while before I could speak there came an answer to his appeal in the shrill tones of the Chinaman.

“Wantee lightee? Yes.”

Then there was a blaze, and directly after I saw the little fellow bearing a great pine branch which he had dragged out of the fire.

“What is it?” I said, eagerly.

“I don’t know yet, boy. One of the Indians, I think. He struck me with a club, but fortunately it was only on the shoulder, and when I leaped up and struck out he went down. I’ve got him here. Don’t come till we can see. He may sting.”

The light flashed in under the pine boughs then, and I could see Gunson’s back as he knelt down, evidently holding his enemy there by the throat.

“Why, hang it!” he cried, drawing back sharply; “it’s Dean.”

“Dean!” I cried. “There must be some one else.”

“No; only him. He was striking about with—yes, here it is,” he continued, picking up a stout piece of pine, one of the branches that had been in the fire till the small twigs were burned off, leaving it as a strong cudgel about two feet

long. “He struck me with this, and he was dashing it about among the branches.”

“He trampled on me too. I thought it was the Indians,” I said.

“Then it’s a false alarm, and I’m afraid I’ve hurt the poor lad a good deal.”

But just then Esau sat up, and began rubbing the side of his head.

“Where’s my stick?” he said. “Oh, you’ve got it. Have you driven ’em away?”

“Driven whom away?” I said.

“Injuns. I thought they would. They came at us, and I’d got that stick ready.”

“Injun allee seepee,” said the Chinaman, waving the pine branch to make it blaze.

“No; they came and attacked us, and I fought ’em till one of ’em knocked me down and held me on the ground.”

“Did you see them come?” said Gunson.

“Couldn’t see ’em because it was so dark; but I sprang up at them, and did the best I could.”

“Quong fuss wake. No Injun came all ’long. Quong been make fire all light fo’ bleakfass.”

“I tell you they came,” cried Esau, angrily. “Look here at my cheek. It’s cut, and bleeds. That was one of their knives.”

“That was my knuckles, my lad,” said Gunson, “after you had hit me with this cudgel.”

“What?” cried Esau.

“Why, Esau, you were dreaming of Indians, and got up. You stamped on me.”

“Oh, come, if you won’t believe it’s of no use for me to talk,” cried Esau, angrily.

“Not a bit, so lie down again and go to sleep.”

“Yes; allee go seep,” said the little Chinaman. “No Injun. Allee seep.”

“Take away that branch, or you’ll set this tree on fire,” said Gunson. “Then it’s a false alarm. Too much supper, I suppose.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” said Esau, surlily.

“Don’t be stubborn,” I cried, angrily. “Lie down.”

“Here, I ain’t your dog, Mr Gordon,” said Esau, sourly. “I did all I could to fight for you both.”

“Yes, and jumped on your companion, and nearly broke my collar-bone.”

“Well, you’ve cut my cheek. Why, I shall have a black eye to-morrow.”

“I think you and I may as well shake hands about that,” said Gunson. “There, good-night.”

As he lay down once more, and the fire flashed up consequent upon the little Chinaman throwing back the branch, Esau turned to me.

“I say,” he whispered, “was I really dreaming?”

“No doubt about it.”

“And walked in my sleep?”

“Yes, and fought in your sleep.”

“But it was so real. I could see their grinning teeth and rolling eyes, and every one had got a knife in one hand and a chopper in the other as they sprang at me.”

“That proves it, Esau,” I said. “How could you see their knives, and eyes, and teeth here in this darkness! Why, you can’t see my face, not even your own hands, and yet the fire’s brighter than it was before.”

“Well, that is rum,” cried Esau, as if to himself. “I saw ’em all as plain as could be, and they shouted their war-cry.”

“War!—gammon!” said Gunson, crossly. “Lie down, you two fellows, and go to sleep. He was dreaming, Gordon. Don’t listen to his cock-and-bull nonsense.”

“All right,” I said. “Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

“Good-night, Esau.”

“Good-night. But dreaming! Well, of all! And they were as plain as could be, and had got feathers in their heads.”

“Yes, blue ones,” I said, grumpily. “And look here, Esau, if you’re going to dance a war-dance on my chest again, please to take off your boots.”

Esau chuckled, and the last thing I heard as I dropped asleep again was Esau muttering to himself—

“Asleep!—dreaming! Well, of all!”

Chapter Twenty Four.

I see Footprints.

Esau was quite right; he had a terribly discoloured eye next morning, and it was the first thing I saw as we both sat up together in the soft light under the great pine, though I was half asleep still. But I had started up on hearing a shrill voice close to me say—

“Bleakfass all ready.”

“Come and bathe your face, Esau,” I said; and I led the way down to the water’s edge to have a good wash, Gunson and Esau following my example, while when we got back to the fire it was to find that Quong had been making himself quite at home with our stores. For not only had he cut up and cooked some bacon, and made the tea, but he had found the flour-bag; and there, upon a piece of sheet-iron, was a large bread-cake freshly baked in the embers.

Gunson laughed as he saw these preparations, but he said no more till we had partaken of a hearty meal. Then the four Indians came up to be paid, readily taking the dollars promised for the trip, and going back directly to the boat to land the boxes; but Gunson followed them, and they agreed to take them to the front of the biggest shanty about half a mile higher up, waiting till we were ready.

Quong was busy now making his breakfast, and Gunson turned to him.

“Now, my Celestial friend,” he said; “we’re going to say good-bye to you. Where are you bound for?”

“Up libber, washee gole.”

Gunson started.

“What?” he cried.

“Up libber, washee gole.”

“Who told you that there was gold there?”

“Melican man come down, show bit gold to Melican man. Big man you chuckee chuckee down in boat.”

Gunson looked disturbed, but he made no remark then, and at last I said to him—

“I suppose we shall part company to-day, Mr Gunson?”

“What for? Like your friend there, Esau—tired of me?”

“No,” I said; “but we are going on tramp now up to Fort Elk.”

“Yes,” said Esau, “that’s what we’re going to do; but I don’t quite see what we’re to do with our boxes.”

“Leave them in charge, as I shall mine, at this settlement,” said Gunson. “You’ll have just to make a bundle in your blanket that you can carry easily. I shall do the same, and we may as well go on together, and protect one another as we did last night.”

He laughed and looked at Esau, who coloured up. “But we are going to Fort Elk,” I said.

“So am *I*,” said Gunson, coolly; and I saw Esau give quite a start, and look at me with a countenance full of dismay.

Gunson saw it, and went on quietly—

“I did not mean to go on there, only up this river for some distance, and then off here or there toward the sources of one or other of the streams that run into it from the mountains; but as I have run up against you two, why we may as well go on together; it will give me a chance to knock you both on the head, and then come back here, and get your chests, as well as the money you have in your belts under your clothes.”

I stared at him in a horrified way for a moment, and then, as I seemed to understand him, I burst out laughing.

“Nonsense!” I said.

“Oh no. That’s the idea of me your companion here has taken.”

“Never said nothing of the sort,” cried Esau, defiantly, and with his face scarlet.

“Your face says you thought so, my lad.”

“Well, a chap can think what he likes, can’t he?”

“No, boy,” said Gunson, and his one eye seemed to blaze; “not of a man who has done nothing but kindness for you ever since we met, even if it was in a rough way.”

“How was I to know you didn’t mean artful, and it was all a trick?” said Esau sourly.

“Ah, how indeed?”

“Everybody out here’s been trying to get the better of us, and rob us. I couldn’t tell you wasn’t one of ’em.”

“Why, you ill-conditioned cub!” cried Gunson, angrily, “you make me feel as if I should like to thrash you till you could not stand.”

“Better not try it,” grumbled Esau; “you go your way, and let us go ours. We told you all about ourselves, and where we were going; but you’ve done nothing but shut yourself up, and look as if you were after no good.”

“Esau!” I cried angrily; “it isn’t fair. Mr Gunson has always been the best of friends to us, and given us good advice.”

“Ah, you always did take his part. I ain’t going to make friends with strangers.”

“Mr Gunson isn’t a stranger. We’ve known him nearly six months. If you don’t trust him, I do.”

I held out my hand to him as I spoke, and he brought his down in it heavily, giving me such a grip that I had hard work not to wince. “Thank you, my lad,” he said, cheerily. “Then you’re going to pitch me over?” said Esau, surlily.

“I’m going to kick you if you go on in this stupid, suspicious way. Don’t take any notice of him, Mr Gunson.”

“I do not intend to.”

“Oh, come, we can’t go on like that,” cried Esau quickly. “I don’t want to be bad friends. I don’t want to think you mean to rob us. I don’t think— I don’t—”

Esau stopped short, shuffled about from one leg to the other, faltered again in his speech as he tried to say something which would not come, and then in a sharp, short, decisive manner, cried—

“Beg your pardon, Mr Gunson. Couldn’t help thinking what I did.”

“That will do,” said Gunson, holding out his hand, which was eagerly seized by Esau. “I know you couldn’t help it, my lad. Mine is not a face to invite confidence. I’m an ill-looking dog, and I bite hard sometimes; but I never bite my friends, and they are very few. Look here, Mayne Gordon,” he continued, after glancing in Quong’s direction to see if he was within hearing, “I am going up this river on such a mission as needs silence, and you have to keep silence too. First of all, what do you suppose I am?”

I shook my head.

“Emigrant,” said Esau.

“No; I am a prospector.”

“I know,” cried Esau, eagerly. “I’ve copied lots of ’em for prospectors—prospectuses. You get up companies?”

“No,” said Gunson, smiling. “The companies follow sometimes. I am a prospector—a searcher for mineral veins and deposits in the mountains. I was convinced that there was gold up here, and we have just had proof that I am right. That Chinaman you see is bound on a similar mission, for those fellows have a wonderful scent for gold. And you see that those big roughs that he calls Melican men, but who were undoubtedly English, have been up here, and found gold. That is a surprise and an encouragement, and a damping, all in one, for it may mean a regular rush of people up the river. Now do you see why I have kept my counsel so long?”

“Yes,” I cried.

“Of course,” said Esau; “but why didn’t you say so before? You might have trusted us.”

“Why didn’t you become friendly before, my lad? you might have trusted me.”

Esau looked at him comically, and gave one ear a rub.

“Now then,” said Gunson, “shall we travel on together in company?”

“Of course,” I cried.

“Then the sooner the better. Your way will suit me as well as any, so let’s make up our packs, leave the boxes in some one’s charge here, and then the word is forward.”

Two hours later, under Gunson’s directions, we had made a pack each, consisting principally of provisions, and

Gunson in addition had brought out of his case a rifle and ammunition.

“There, Dean,” he said, “you may as well shoulder that, and you may as well carry this, Gordon,” he continued, taking a small revolver with holster, strap, and cartridge-box. “You are not to use it except in a case of the most extreme urgency. Strap it on, my lad. It looks formidable, and the possession of such a weapon will often keep off danger.”

“What Quong cally?” said that gentleman when we were ready.

“Nothing,” said Gunson, shortly; “you don’t go our way.”

“Yes, go allee same way ’long libber. No other way. Quong cally pack.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Gunson; “if we don’t employ him, he’ll follow us, so one may as well make him useful. We can easily pay him; it will not mean much. Here, make yourself up a pack.”

Quong smiled with pleasure, and taking the blanket Gunson threw him out of his chest, he had it soon full of stores and necessaries, a bag of flour being added to his load.

“Want um fizzlum?” said Quong, suddenly.

“Want what?” I said.

“Fizzlum. Bakum powdum make blead.”

“Ah, I had forgotten,” said Gunson; and he took a small tin from his box.

An hour later the Indians were paddling slowly back along the river, and after a friendly good-bye from the settler who had taken charge of our boxes, we shouldered our packs, and began to trudge up the river-side, finding it easy going, for we were in quite an open part here, with a grassy margin for a short distance at the foot of the mountains on one side. But higher up the rocks began to close in the prospect, there was the faint roar of tumbling water, and dense black pine forests clothed the sides of the valley as far as we could see.

Before we had gone very far along the forest track, the perspiration was oozing out fast on my forehead; and lightly as I was loaded, I began to think regretfully of the boat, and of how much easier it was to sit or kneel there, and watch the Indians paddle, while over and over again I had come to the conclusion that it was a very fortunate thing that we were not alone, but backed up by such a tower of strength as Gunson, whose counsels were called in question every few minutes to decide which way we were to go next.

The direction was undoubted, for, so long as we kept to the valley in which the river ran, we could not be wrong, but the task was to keep along it by a way that was passable to people carrying loads.

For a mile or so beyond the tiny settlement we had left behind, we found, as we had been told, some traces of a track; but it was wanting more often than present, and several times over we thought we had come to the end of it, only for it to begin again some fifty yards further on.

At last though we had passed the final vestige of a trail, and there was the valley before us with the mountains rising up steeply on either side, and our way to make along the steep slope crowded with trees or covered with the *débris* of great masses of rock which had broken from their hold hundreds upon hundreds of yards above us to come thundering down scattering smaller fragments, and forming a chaos of moss-covered pieces, over and in and out among which we had to make our way.

“Rather rough,” Gunson said, “but keep up your spirits: it will soon be much better, or much worse.”

“It’s always like that—worse,” Esau grumbled to me at last, as our companion went forward, while the patient little Chinaman plodded on with his load as steadily as if he had been a machine.

“Never mind, Esau,” I said.

“I don’t,” he replied, sturdily; and he drew himself up, and tramped on with the rifle over his shoulder, evidently very proud of being trusted with it; but he had an unpleasant way of turning sharply round every now and then to look at something, with the result that, after being struck smartly by the barrel of the piece, I had to jump out of his way.

“Beg your pardon,” he would say, and a few minutes after forget all about it, and turn the barrel upon me again.

“I say, Esau,” I cried, at last, “do be careful with that gun.”

“’Tain’t a gun—it’s a rifle.”

“Call it what you like, but don’t shoot me.”

“Ain’t going to,” he said, drily. “What’s the good? We ain’t cannibals. But I say, I wish something nice would come along. I know I could hit it. What would you like—a deer? Deer’s very good to eat, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“Wonder which is the best place to aim at. His head, I suppose. I should like to bring one down.”

“I don’t think you’ll have a chance, Esau. Besides, we couldn’t carry it. We’ve got as much as we can manage now.”

“Ah, but there’s another way of carrying meat,” said Esau, with a curious cock of the eye. “I mean after it’s roasted.”

“But we are not hungry yet.”

“Not hungry!” cried Esau. “Not hungry! Why, what a fellow you are!” and we trudged on in silence.

After a time Gunson turned round and let us overtake him, laughing the while at our tired and weary looks.

“Loads feel heavy, eh?” he said. “You are not used to them yet. I’ve been talking to Mr Quong, and he tells me that he is going to hunt about till he finds gold. Then I suppose he’ll leave us to ourselves.”

We were both too hot and tired to trouble about the Chinaman, and were very glad when, about midday, Gunson called a halt under the shade of a great tree, that grew beside a little brawling stream which came hurrying down from above.

Here we dropped our burdens with a sigh of relief, and partook of some cold bacon and bread, which seemed about the most delicious thing I had ever tasted.

Quong was given a lunch for himself, and he took it aside, ate it quickly, and then, in place of lying down as we did for a good two hours’ rest during the heat of the day, he produced a little tin plate and picked his way down to the stream’s edge, and then amongst the rocks, till he came upon a patch of gravelly sand over which a few inches of water danced merrily.

Gunson watched him curiously; I did the same, Esau having dropped off to sleep as soon as he had eaten his midday meal.

For it was interesting to see the busy little fellow. His first step was to roll up his sleeves to the elbow, stoop down, and scoop up as much gravel and sand as the tin plate would hold. This he shook about a little under water, brought it all up again, and picked out the stones. Then he held it down low again and worked it about, and picked out a second batch of much smaller stones. Again he placed the tin beneath the water, where it ran pretty swiftly, and kept up a regular circular motion, which caused the fine dirt and sand to be washed out and pass over the side, till only a small patch of sand of a coarse grain remained on the tin; and at last, as if satisfied with his task, he stepped out on to the dry bank, and held the plate sidewise for the water to drain off. This took some few minutes, the hot sun drying the sand as he turned it about with one finger.

Every movement was performed with the most patient deliberation, and in utter unconsciousness of the fact that we were watching him, both eager to learn the result of his search.

It was a long time before we knew, for Quong turned the sand about over and over again, and then inspected it with a peculiarly magpieish air, before he shook his head, tossed the sand away, and selected another spot in the stream, where he went through the same process, while we lay and watched him till the final examination. This time, just as I fully expected to see him toss out the sand, he rose up with a triumphant look on his yellow face, and caught sight of us. His jaw dropped, and he appeared frightened, but the dread seemed to pass away, and he came towards us with his tin.

“Me washee gole,” he said, excitedly. “Fine gole.”

“Where?” said Gunson, abruptly. “Let’s look.”

He stretched out his hand for the tin, which was placed in it hesitatingly, Quong’s face betokening that he did not expect to see it again.

Gunson gave the half-dry sand a shake which spread part of it over the bottom of the tin, then another and another, while I looked on eagerly, and at last he uttered a contemptuous “pish!”

“I thought you said you had found gold.”

“Yes. Quong fine gole. Washee gole.”

“Washee gole! Where is it then?”

The Chinaman took back the tin, shook it, peered in among the grains of sand; shook it again and again; then shook his head instead, and looked up at Gunson.

“Yes; washee gole,” he said, in a tone of voice which seemed to mean, “but it’s gone away now.”

“Fancy, my lad, fancy. There, lie down and rest. I’ll have a try when we come to a likely place. We must work in the river.”

“No; too muchee water,” said Quong.

“Yes; here. We must go up higher.”

“Quong washee gole,” said the little fellow again.

“Well then, where is it?”

Quong shook his head despondently once more.

“Washee gole,” he whined, and again his tone of voice seemed to say to me, “and there was some in that plate, but where it’s gone to now I haven’t the least idea.”

“Come along and have a rest.”

“Ah! ah! ah!” cried Quong, excitedly, after giving the pinch of sand a final shake. “Gole—gole!”

He held out the tin once more to Gunson, pointing now with one thin yellow finger, and looking triumphantly at both in turn.

“Where?” said Gunson, laughing, as he followed the direction of the pointing finger, and took the plate in his hand to hold it in different directions in the sun. “Ah, I see it. Here, Gordon, come and have a look. He has found the contents of Aladdin’s cave all at once.”

“I don’t see any gold,” I said. “Not see it? Oh, there it is plain enough. My word, what patience these Chinese have! There it is, lad, just in the very centre of the plate. See it?”

“No.”

“Now try,” he cried, as he tilted the plate sidewise, and this time I saw a tiny glittering speck, about the twentieth part of a pin’s-head in size, but, small as it was, giving a suggestion of the peculiar yellow colour of gold.

“Is that all?” I cried, contemptuously. “Yes; that’s all. There you are, heathen. Take it, and—no, you can’t make much of it. That’s no use, my man. We must find better places than this, or you’ll never go back to China a rich man and become a Mandarin.”

“No good place?”

“No; not worth washing.”

“Not good to washum,” said Quong. “Wait till we get higher up.” Quong nodded, took a little phial bottle from somewhere under his garments, and after a great deal of trying, contrived to get the tiny scale on the end of the cork, which he carefully inserted in the bottle once more.

After this he settled himself down to rest till Gunson rose for us to continue our journey, which for the rest of that day was through pine forest, with the trees so closely packed that our progress was exceedingly slow; and evening was coming on fast as we reached a part where the trees opened out more like those in an English park, and there was soft grass beneath our feet.

I was in advance with my eyes fixed upon the ground, which had suddenly become soft and marshy, the reason being plain, for on my left I could hear the hum of falling water, when I suddenly stopped short, and drew back so quickly that I came in contact with Esau.

“What’s the matter?” he cried, sharply.

“Hush! Indians,” I whispered.

“Indians? Where?” cried Gunson, eagerly.

“They have gone along here,” I whispered. “Footmarks.”

“Well, don’t look so tragic, lad. They will be friendly ones no doubt; and perhaps there is a settlement near, and we can get some fish. Oh, those are their footprints, are they?” he said; and he turned and caught the rifle from Esau. “That fellow had a fine broad foot of his own.”

“Yes, he must have been a big man,” I said, as I gazed down at the plainly-marked sole and toes in the soft earth.

“Bigger than the one made by Robinson Crusoe’s savage,” whispered Gunson. “There, get out the revolvers, and mind how you handle them. Be ready to hand me one if I ask after I have fired.”

“But you said the Indians were friendly.”

“This tribe never is,” replied Gunson, cocking the rifle and looking sharply round. “They run away generally, but sometimes they show fight, and we must be ready.”

He looked carefully in every direction, and then signed to us to follow.

“He’s gone straight on, just in the track we want to follow.”

“Is there only one?” I whispered. “Only one, and it’s very awkward, for I was just thinking of making camp for the night.”

“But we needn’t be afraid of one Indian,” said Esau, boldly.

“No,” replied Gunson; “but we need be of one bear.”

“Bear?” I said. “Those are a man’s footsteps.”

“Those are the prints of a very large bear, my lad,” said Gunson; “and judging from their appearance, I should say it’s

not very long since he passed. Now then, what had we better do?”

I did not feel myself capable of advising, and I suppose Esau was no more of an expert in bear, for he too was silent.

“Don’t speak. Follow me; and as we go, hold your packs loosely so that you can drop them in a moment and take to a tree.”

“But bears climb trees,” I whispered. “Not they,” said Gunson. “Come along.” And with the shades of evening closing in fast in that wild valley, we followed our companion as he went cautiously on, scanning every bush and rock, not knowing how soon the savage beast, whose prints continued right in the direction we seemed compelled to take, might rush out and dispute the way.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Quong takes Refuge.

Our way was the same as the bear’s, for the simple reason that it was the only open level part we could find on that side of the valley. To our left, the rocks went up in huge, precipitous steps, and then went down to the right to where the river foamed along a couple of hundred feet below. And there, with the greatest regularity, were the great footprints which had deceived me, pretty close beside a little stream which trickled on along the level, till suddenly it turned to the right, and plunged down towards the river.

“Look!” said Gunson, pointing, and there were the footprints again, but turning off now to our right, while our way lay straight on.

“Then he’s gone!” cried Esau, eagerly.

Crash! Rush! There was the sound of breaking twigs, as if some monstrous creature was forcing its way through the undergrowth to the right, and I heard another rush behind me as I stood there behind Gunson, too much paralysed to run, as I saw him drop on one knee and raise the rifle to his shoulder.

The rushing noise continued, but it grew more faint, and Gunson rose to his feet.

“We’ve frightened him as much as he has frightened us. Here, hi! Hallo! where are you?” he cried, as he caught sight of two bundles lying on the ground where they had been dropped.

There was no answer.

“Here, Dean, come along,” shouted Gunson again; and I shouted too.

“Ahoy!” came back from some distance away, and a good ten minutes elapsed before Esau reappeared, looking hot and white.

“Did you shoot him?” he said.

“How could I, when you ran away with the ammunition. Seen the bear?”

“No.”

“Well, have you seen Quong?”

“No,” said Esau, rather dolefully, and looking as if extremely dissatisfied with the part he had played.

“The bear can’t have seized him?” I said, looking at Gunson.

“Impossible,” he said. “It went the other way.”

Just then I caught sight of something blue, and burst out laughing.

“What is it?” cried Gunson.

I pointed upward to where, about fifty feet from the ground, the little Chinaman was perched in a great spruce fir, clinging tightly to one of the horizontal boughs, with his feet on another, and as he peered anxiously down, looking like a human squirrel on the watch for foes.

“Here, come down,” I cried. “It’s all right now. Come down.”

“Yes, come down, you little coward,” shouted Esau, who brightened up directly he found that some one had cut a worse figure than he. “I say,” he continued, with a forced laugh, “doesn’t he look comic up there?”

“Yes,” said Gunson, grimly, as he gazed fixedly at Esau, who turned uncomfortable directly, and made no remarks about Quong, as he walked to the foot of the tree, which was about a hundred yards away, and losing sight of its occupant now he was hidden by the intervening boughs.

“Come, Quong,” I said, “get down, or we shall leave you behind.”

“Gone?” he said in a weak voice.

“Yes; come along.”

He descended slowly, and stood before us shaking the grey moss and dead fir-needles from his blue cotton garment.

“Big blown beace,” he said. “Quong see him. Velly frighten.”

He followed us to where the pack lay, slung it over his shoulder, and we once more tramped on, till a suitable spot was found for our camp—a regular niche in the side of the valley, with a small pine spreading its boughs overhead for shelter.

Here, in spite of the risk of bears, we decided to halt for the night, and a good fire was soon blazing; and as if regularly engaged as our servant, Quong set to work at once, and soon prepared our tea-supper, which was discussed as enjoyably as if we were in good quarters; and that night passed away as I lay rolled up in my blanket, just as if I closed my eyes in the darkness and opened them directly to see the warm glow of the sun lighting up the east, and Quong busy baking cakes in the embers, the tea-kettle steaming away close at hand.

The weariness and low spirits had passed away with the darkness, and after a splash in the stream close by, I felt ready for any amount of journeying.

As I came back from the stream I met Gunson coming towards me.

“Did you see anything?” he said, quietly.

“See anything? Only a squirrel.”

“Look down there.”

He gave his head a nod a little to the left, and I followed the direction of his eyes.

“Don’t start; don’t run,” he said, quietly. “If the Chinaman knows of it he will make a stampede into the forest, and we shall lose him.”

“But perhaps there is one close by,” I said, nervously.

“Very likely; for there have been two promenading backwards and forwards about us all night. Look at their marks. These prints are a little smaller than those.”

I had not noticed it till he pointed to the fact, and then I saw the foot-marks of two bears plainly enough.

“I’m beginning to think,” continued Gunson, “that we have selected their lair for our camp; but as they have not interfered with us, I don’t think they will if we leave them alone.”

“But I can’t eat my breakfast with those things about,” I said.

“You have never tried yet, my lad. Try now. I will have the rifle and revolver ready to hand; but take not the slightest notice, and behave as if nothing was wrong.”

“But—”

“Come, Gordon, I thought better of you,” he said, smiling. “Where is your courage?”

“Come along,” I said, making an effort to master the feeling of dread which had come over me; and I saw him smile as Esau came up with his arms full of dead wood for the fire, and directly after we were seated at our meal.

If I had been alone I should have left that spot, beautiful as it was, directly, and I have no hesitation in confessing that it was the most uncomfortable meal I ever ate. But I kept my fears to myself, and only once was caught by Gunson looking anxiously around at the slope clotted with tree, bush, and clump of mossy rock, when his smile made me turn to my tin mug of tea directly.

“I thought you would be the first ready,” said Gunson, about half an hour later, when the sun was shining over the shoulder of one of the eastern mountains. “But look at Dean, how slow he is about shouldering the pack, and—what’s the matter with Quong?”

For that little individual suddenly came up smiling, with his hand under his blouse.

As he came close up, he drew his tin plate from where it had been tucked up his breast.

“Stop velly little while. Quong washee—see gole.”

“Yes,” said Gunson, giving me a meaning look, and then taking a step or two nearer the stream; “it looks a likely place; but hallo, arn’t these bears’ footprints?”

He pointed to the moist earth close to the water’s edge, and both Esau and the little fellow ran to look.

Directly after Quong came trotting back in a quick, comical manner, tucking his plate up under his blouse, and seizing and shouldering his pack, an example followed by Esau, who was the quicker of the two, and he kept a sharp look out all the time.

“Now if you went behind that rock and roared, Gordon, or I was to fire my piece, there would be a stampede.”

I looked so ready to do what he first proposed, that Gunson said seriously—

“No, no; we have no time to waste;” and we went on up the valley, both Esau and Quong stepping out famously, while I was not at all sorry to leave our baiting-place behind, my liking for bears being decidedly in association with pits, and a pole up which they can climb for buns.

It was a wonderfully beautiful walk that morning, and we determined to try and arrange our halts better, for at the end of about half an hour we found that had we known we could have rested under a roof; two men, who gave us a very friendly welcome, having started a rough kind of ranch, in a level nook close down by the river. In fact they were disposed to be so hospitable that they were half offended because we went almost directly.

We learned from them though that we should find for days to come shanties here and there.

“Where we can rest for the night?” I said to one of the men.

“Of course,” he said, with a smile. “We see anybody so seldom, that we’re glad of a visitor who can speak of the old country.”

“You’ve got a beautiful place here.”

“Yes; tidy, tidy,” he said; “only we don’t feel quite sure about the river.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gunson.

“Why, you see, mate, it’s a lively sort of a stream. Quiet enough in winter, unless there’s been a power of rain; but in the hot weather, when the snow’s melting, it gets so full, that like as not some day t’ll wash all this place away.”

“But it’s fifty feet down there to the water,” I said, smiling.

“What’s fifty feet to a river like that, boy? Why, after what I’ve seen I shouldn’t jump out of my skin if I saw it rise up a hundred.”

“See many bears about?” said Esau, rather anxiously.

“Tidy few, my lad; tidy few; and pretty big uns sometimes,” said the man, with a twinkle of the eye. “But berries has been rather plentiful these last two years, and they haven’t eat us yet. I wouldn’t interfere with ’em, though, if you met any.”

“Dangerous?” said Gunson, giving me a merry look.

“Well, it’s just as it happens,” said the man, watching Esau’s mouth, which had slowly opened; “if they takes a fancy to you, they opens their arms, and just gives you a friendly hug; if they don’t, they are a bit given to scratching and clawing. Where may you be going, squire?” he added, turning to me.

“Fort Elk,” I said.

“Oh! Fort Elk, where they collects the skins. I know. Well, you won’t get there to-morrow, nor yet next week. Pleasant journey to you. Don’t want to buy a bit o’ bacon, I suppose?”

But Gunson said he did, and the transfer was made for a handful of tobacco, Quong grinning with delight at the sight of the red streaks of lean amongst the pinky-white fat, and apparently pleased with the prospect of carrying a few more pounds.

That night we slept at a shanty, and for the next two nights we had no need to camp out; while, what was of great import to us, we found that we need be under no apprehension about provisions, the people, who had settled down where they found open patches of grazing land, being willing enough to sell or barter away flour enough for our wants.

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Difficult Path.

One day seemed so much like another that we soon lost count of time, as we followed the windings and turns of the river, the beauty of the deep ravines that struck into the valley, each with its little fall or torrent, and the glimpses we kept getting of snow-tipped mountains, keeping off the weariness we might have felt in some open monotonous land.

Every now and then Quong settled down to wash the sands and gravel of the little streams that came tumbling down from the heights; and I saw that Gunson took a good deal of interest in his proceedings; but in spite of Quong’s patient endeavours his efforts were always barren, or resulted in the discovery of some tiny speck, which was added to the others in the phial so slowly that, as Gunson laughingly said, it seemed likely to take a year to build up enough gold to make a sovereign.

“The gold is nearer the mountains if there is any, Gordon,” he said to me, “and it is impossible to search down here. We must go higher up before I begin after Quong has left us, for I expect that as soon as we get to a spot where he can wash out a scale or two with every pan of sand, he will bid us good-bye.”

But as the days went on that time did not arrive. The Chinaman did not seem to think anything about pay for his

services, but was delighted to perform them for the sake of the protection of travelling with us, and a share of the food we provided.

So far our journey had been glorious. There had been plenty of hard work, forcing our way through bushes, climbing fallen trees, some so rotten that they crumbled to dust with our weight, and threading our way among rocks; but at every turn there was the grand river foaming and rushing down toward the sea, and masses of black-green forest with pines spiring up toward the sky. One morning as we toiled slowly on, it was very evident that the river was narrowing, and the sides growing steeper. We had often been at some height above it, but always on a slope, where, with a little scheming, we could have got down to the water; but now a sheer wall of rock rose up forty or fifty feet on either side, and below it, looking black and deep, the river swirled and eddied along.

There was hardly a vestige of a trail here, the ground being too stony to leave any traces; but the great stream was our guide, and we climbed and stumbled on, Quong in front bending down under his load, and always patient, calm, and smiling, as if it was quite natural to him to be doubled up under a big bundle which went along in front of us like some curious blanket-clothed creature with thin blue legs.

All at once the rough stony slope of the valley dived down, and Quong, who had just given his load a hitch up on his shoulders, disappeared. I was next, for Gunson had stepped back to take off one of his boots, with Esau holding his pack; and I had reached the spot where I had seen Quong last, prepared for a jump down on to a lower part or ledge of the valley slope, when I found myself face to face with the little fellow, and saw that he had dropped his bundle, and was hurrying back.

As soon as we met, he made a sign for me to be silent, and turned and pointed toward a clump of young firs. I could see no danger, and I whispered to him the one word “Bear?”

He shook his head, and pointed again, when, to my utter astonishment, the green boughs were parted, as there was a flash of silver, and a great salmon fell about a couple of yards away, to begin beating heavily with its tail, and flapping from side to side.

I knew that these fish leaped, and I had heard that some of their bounds up cascades were tremendous, but I had never known that a salmon could spring fifty feet up out of the water over the top of the rocky wall which formed the river-bank, and away through a screen of young firs. There, however, was the fact before me, and with delightful visions of broiled salmon before my eyes, I dropped my pack and ran forward to secure the prize before it should take it into its head to make another gymnastic leap into the water.

It was a splendid fellow, a full yard long, its scales silvery blue and pearly in the morning sunshine, and regardless of wet and slime, I dropped on my knees.

“Oh, you beauty!” I exclaimed, and I raised it by the gills, and—dropped it directly, and remained as if turned to stone, gazing in a hideous, painted red face, which had been thrust out between the boughs of the firs, and stared as wildly at me as I at its owner.

For a few moments I forgot that I had friends behind, and rested there quite still with what seemed to me a terrible silence all around, till it was broken by the salmon throwing itself over, and giving the stones upon which it lay a resounding flap.

I fully expected to see the arm belonging to the head thrust out with a knife in the fist; and when it was darted out from among the bushes, my own hand went involuntarily to the pistol I carried, but I dropped it again as I saw that it was only an open palm extended toward me, and I placed mine therein for a friendly shake, my heart beating less heavily.

Then the hand was withdrawn, the salmon pushed toward me, and the hand held out again.

“Hallo!” cried a voice, which made me glow with satisfaction. “Been fishing, Gordon?”

Gunson strode up to us, and seeing the situation at a glance, he took out his tobacco-pouch, opened it, pinched out a piece, and pointing to the salmon, offered the cut-up herb to the Indian, who now stood out in front of the young pines. I thought it ridiculous to offer what I considered a pinch of rubbish for the salmon; but the Indian laughed, darted back, and returned holding another quivering fish by the tail, threw it down, and held out his hand for the tobacco, evidently well pleased with his bargain.

“Fish is cheap out here,” said Gunson, laughing. “Here, Quong, one to cook and one to dry.”

Our Celestial friend literally pounced upon the two salmon as prizes as soon as he saw that there was no danger, and set to work cleaning and splitting the fish, lightening them by getting rid of head and tail, and then cutting some splints of wood to keep one well open for drying in the sun and for easy carriage.

“There is nothing to mind,” said Gunson. “It is only a fishing party;” and leading the way through the line of young firs, which acted as a screen, we came upon a group of Indians, two men and four women, all busy cleaning and splitting the fish which another man kept hauling up from the river in a rough net.

It seemed a very primitive way of fishing, and we stood looking on and examining some of the salmon hung to dry upon several roughly rigged up poles, before we went to the edge of the shelf upon which all this was going on, to find straight below us the other Indian standing upon a rough platform, made by driving a couple of stout poles into the wall of rock at a fissure, and throwing a few branches across. This man had a coarse net on a ring at the end of a long, stout pole, and watching his opportunity as the fish came rapidly up the rushing water, he plunged the net down, and brought it up with a gasping, struggling salmon. This was transferred to a hanging basket, and hauled up

by the Indian at the edge, and carried to the party who were preparing and drying them in the sun for their winter store.

It was all ridiculously easy. The Indian had only to keep on dipping out fish as fast as they could be prepared, and what I saw quite removed any ideas of our taking advantage of the man who had let the fish he carried slip out of his basket, so that it came with a dart to my side of the screen of firs.

“That’s an easy way of getting a living,” said Esau, as we parted in a friendly way from the Indians, who stared at us in a very heavy, stolid way. “I think I should like to try that.”

“For how long?” cried Gunson, with a laugh. “Why, my good fellow, you’d be tired of catching the fish in a week, and more tired of eating them in a fortnight.”

“Tired?—of eating salmon?” said Esau, laughing. “Oh, you don’t know me. I had some once, and it was lovely.”

“Well, we’ll try one of ours when we stop for dinner,” said Gunson; “but we must do a good morning’s tramp first.”

That good morning’s tramp did not seem to progress much, for the way grew more and more difficult, and it was once taken into consideration whether we had not better strike in away from the river; and we should have adopted this course but for the fear of losing ourselves in the labyrinth of mountains to the north and east, and not being able to strike the stream again.

“You see, hard as the way is, it is sure,” said Gunson; “and as your goal and mine too are on the upper waters of the river, we had better keep to it.”

It was getting toward midday, and the sun shone forth with such power that we felt the little air there was come down the valley like the breath of an oven, and we should have decided to stop at once, cook our dinner, and rest, but for the fact that there was neither wood nor shade. For we had quite left the patches of forest behind at this point, and were tramping slowly over a bare sterile region of the most forbidding character, low down by the river. Higher up where we could not climb the tall trees again appeared, and every ledge and slope was crowned with dwarf pine, fern, and moss.

“We had better keep on past that bare slope,” said Gunson. “I can see trees on beyond it. It looks green, too, as if there was water.”

Of course we agreed, for there was not a sign of water where we stood, and thirst was beginning to trouble us all.

So we tramped on, Gunson now leading, and the rushing sound of the river below the wall of rock sounding very tantalising as we grew hotter still, and the heat began to be reflected from the stones in a most unpleasant way. It would have been bad enough for the unladen, but for people burdened as we were it was hard work indeed.

At the end of half an hour the river, which had been hidden from us save when we went close to the edge and looked down, came into view again, for the character of the valley had suddenly changed. We found now that there was the steep slope from high up the mountain to the level of the water, which roared and surged along, and swept away the thin pieces of slaty stone which formed the slope—a clatter-slide, as west-country people would call it. These pieces were all loose and extremely unpleasant to walk upon, being shaley fragments of all sizes, from that of a child’s hand up to thin fragments a foot or two across.

The heat here was tremendous, and as we walked the stones gave way beneath our feet, and began setting in motion little stony avalanches, which kept on gliding down till the whole of the slope seemed to be running into the river. No one talked, but strode on, not planting his feet in the footsteps of him who had gone before, but avoiding them, for they formed the centres of so much loose stuff ready to give way at a touch.

We got along over about half a mile of this, and then paused on a bit of a shelf to rest, for about a quarter of a mile farther we saw our resting-place; the clatter ceasing, to give way to verdure with plenty of trees, and in their midst, temptingly beckoning us to fresh exertions, there was the water we needed—a beautiful filmy veil, floating down from hundreds of feet up, arched by a hopeful rainbow, and anon gliding softly like a shower of silver rockets down behind the tall green firs.

We knew that there would be a beautiful pool of water at the foot of that cascade, with green, mossy grass, and plenty of pine-boughs for our fire and to shade us from the scorching sun; and toward this enviable spot we pressed on, with the slope growing steeper and steeper, till at last we paused again for Gunson to investigate.

It was time. For the past five minutes the slide had kept running so much toward the perpendicular, that at every step we loosened stones which began to tear down toward the river, and necessitated leaps and quick plunges to keep us from being carried with them, while a slip would have meant a headlong fall, increasing in speed till the unfortunate was plunged into the foaming torrent which poured down, and would have swept him instantly away.

“Watch how I go,” said Gunson. “Keep cool, and don’t think of falling. I know it is a hard bit to get over, but it is not above a couple of hundred yards where it is so bad; after that it grows better and better, till you reach the trees. Now then, all stand still while I go first.”

He tightened his pack over his shoulder, took a good grip of the rifle, stood for a moment, and then strode forward, going diagonally, as if to reach the top of the slope.

This seemed for the moment unnecessary, and likely to make the journey longer, but I soon saw that it was properly calculated, for as the stones kept on sliding beneath his feet as he struggled upward, he was constantly being brought down to the level of where we stood, perspiring profusely, and fascinated by the peril of the task.

It was only now that I fully realised how steep the side of the valley was, and that a fall must end in the river among the black craggy rocks which stood up so threateningly amongst the white foam.

He went steadily on, and as I stood there I felt, to use the common saying, as if my heart was in my mouth. A dozen terrible thoughts flashed through my mind:—what should we do if he fell and was swept away? It would be impossible to save him; and as to his own powers, I did not believe that any man could battle with that terrible torrent-like river, which would sweep him down, dashing him from rock to rock, till he was carried from our sight, leaving us alone in our despair to try some other way.

The thoughts were paralysing as they came with lightning-like rapidity, for now it was dawning upon me, that shocking as it would be to see my fellow-creature hurled to death like that, somehow Gunson, that rough, stern, disfigured man, had made a kind of impression upon me—that there existed a tie between us. I don't think I liked him, but I felt at that moment as if I would have given anything to have been by his side, as I saw him totter, slip, recover himself, slip again, and begin gliding down fast, but always preserving his perpendicular.

"He's gone," I said aloud; but as the words left my lips he made two or three bounds, sending the stones rushing down heavily, as he regained his old level and went on rapidly. Onward still, but what a length that seemed!—and now I was learning from his progress that the only chance of getting across was to keep right on, exercising all the strength of nerve and muscle one possessed to go forward, for to have stood still meant to begin gliding rapidly downward, sinking more and more in a gathering avalanche of stones as others were loosened from above to fill up the vacancy that was made.

Two-thirds—three-quarters of the way across—and once more he began to slide, but with desperate energy he went on by leaps and bounds now, and we set up a hoarse cheer as we saw him reach firm ground—a cheer which did not reach him, for the whole side of the slide seemed to be in motion, and as I saw him throw himself down, there was a curious rushing, rattling roar, as if fragments of ice were formed on the surface of a torrent and were rushing down into the river.

It was very evident that Gunson was exhausted by his tremendous efforts, for he lay on the rocks, motioning to us with his hand not to come, and we stood looking from one to the other, mutely inquiring what was to be done next. At last he rose, unfastened his pack, threw it down behind him, and came close to the edge of the slide, to look up and about with his eyes sheltered, as if seeking for a better place for us to cross.

I did the same, gazing high up to where the stones grew smaller, and then right down to where the flat, thin fragments plunged into the running river, to be swept away; but, like Gunson, I could see no better place.

By degrees, though, the fluttering, rattling glide ceased, and the slope looked level once more, and then Gunson put his hands to his mouth and shouted—

"Can you hear what I say?"

"Yes."

"Take your packs on your heads, and when you start keep right on; never hesitate; I'll be ready to help."

We heard every word distinctly, and it sounded curiously like a whisper that ran along the surface of the stones; and when he had ended, Quong looked at me sharply with his little black eyes.

"Me go long nex'," he said; and as I nodded, he balanced his great pack deftly on his head, paused for a few moments to get it quite satisfactory, and then stretching out his arms like one who walks along a pole, he started off, while so steep was the slope that his extended fingers nearly touched the stones as he went along.

The little fellow was so light, so steady and clever, that he tripped forward without dislodging anything like the amount of stones that Gunson had set running. But I could see that the effort needed was terrible as he went on and on, increasing his speed now, slowing then, and getting more and more over with far less effort, and giving us no end of encouragement, as he at length reached the rocks, tumbled the load off his head—the load which had never seemed once to lose its poise—and finally we could see him seated facing us wiping his hot face with the front of his blouse.

"He's got over," said Esau, hoarsely.

"Yes," I said, in the same husky tones.

"One of us has got to go next."

"Yes," I said. "Who shall go?"

"Wish I'd got a good pole with a spike at the end," said Esau.

"So do I."

"Or I wouldn't mind if it was only a clothes-prop."

"But we have neither, Esau."

"Well, don't I know we haven't? What's the good o' being so aggravating, and keeping on saying we ain't—we ain't? Lots o' beautiful trees behind us to cut clothes-props to last all Camberwell for life, and there's lots over there in front, but they don't bring us one. It's always the way. There's lots o' money in the Bank o' England, but we couldn't

get it to come out here."

"Don't be unreasonable," I said, and I gave quite a start as a stone from above came rattling down.

"Who's unreasonable?" grumbled Esau; "I ain't: only a bit wild at having to go across that precious bit o' solid slide. What do you think my mother would say if she saw me coming here and going to start over that place? Why, it would kill her."

"It does look dangerous," I said, sadly.

"Look! Why, it is. It's horrid."

"But they've got over safely."

"That don't mean I shall. Oh dear, oh dear! This comes o' picking up strange friends, and letting 'em lead us into difficulties. And not so much as a walking-stick to help us."

I was in no humour to argue, with the perilous crossing before me, so I remained silent.

"I said—and not so much as a walking-stick to help us."

"Yes, Esau, I heard you."

"Then why don't you say something?"

"What can I say? Only be plucky and go."

"There you go again! Oh, it does aggravate me. Now you want me to go off first."

"No; I'll go first if you like; but I should like to see you safe over."

"That's just what I feel about you. I say—if I fall I shall go head over heels down, like a ball."

"No, no; you must drop into a sitting position, and slide down."

"If you can," grumbled Esau. "Oh dear, I wish I hadn't come. I'd give all I've got to be sitting down in old Dempster's office, with him bullying me about a mistake in the copying."

"Come along!" came like an echo over the stones, and even that sound sent a few stones sliding down as I looked across and saw Gunson with his hands to his mouth, while just then I saw something which quite cheered me. For there was a faint curl of smoke rising up from among the trees, and I knew that it was Quong making a fire to get us some tea.

"There, Esau," I said, "Quong's getting ready to cook something. Come, you go, and let's have a rest and a good meal."

"Ready to cook indeed! Why the sun's cooking one side of me now. There, look at that."

"Yes," I said, as I looked in the direction indicated; "some kind of eagle."

"Yes; flying away as easily as he likes. Don't it seem a shame that a stupid bird should be able to go along like that, and we have to climb and fall down?"

"Oh, I can't argue about that," I said, desperately, as, somewhat in doubt whether I could balance my pack on my head, I raised it there and stood perfectly still. "I'm going to take a long breath and then start."

"Here, what yer going to do?" he cried. "I ain't going to be left all alone here."

"Well, then, go first."

"But I can't go first and leave you. S'pose you can't get over after, or tumble down, what am I to say to that Mr John?"

"What an unreasonable fellow you are, Esau!" I cried angrily.

"There, you're getting nasty with me. That's right. Now I ask you, ain't a fix like this enough to make any fellow unreasonable?"

"But if we've got it to do, why not do it?"

"Come on!" Gunson shouted, and I took two steps forward, when, bringing up his pack, Esau made a desperate plunge and got before me, sending quite an avalanche of stones down as he shouted—

"Me first!—you wait."

I had no alternative but to step back to the easier slope, and regain my position, while Esau went on tramp, tramp, balancing himself steadily, but instead of striking up the slope he kept straight on for a time, and gradually sinking lower and lower as he went farther away.

"Work upward!" I shouted.

“Well, ain’t I?” came back, faintly heard amidst the rattling of the stones; and once more I stood there waiting, suffering agonies as I saw him struggle on, now going down, now fighting his way up, so that his course was like that of a snake across a dusty road, such as I had many a time seen down in the country. Every now and then he tottered, and I thought he was going to fall, but he recovered himself, and went on with his feet sinking in the loose stones, and every now and then descending so far that I thought he would never recover his lost ground.

I did not feel the heat so much now, the perspiration that stood upon my face was cold, and I gave a start now and then, as I shivered in my dread, making sure that he was gone.

When at last I saw him get right across, I closed my eyes, feeling so giddy that I was glad to sit down on my pack for the sensation to pass off, being quite unequal to the task of going in my turn.

“I wish I were not such a coward,” I said to myself, as I looked forward and saw Esau lying down and resting. Then I wished I had persevered and gone on, for I should have been out of my misery by that time. Lastly, as I saw Gunson wave his hand, I rose, balanced my pack, and changed the side till I made it fit well over my head. I was quite encouraged to find that it seemed to add to my steadiness, and after taking a last look round, and ending by fixing my eyes upon a point high above where Gunson stood, I took two steps and then stopped, saying to myself, “I shall never do it.”

I started again, and from that moment the nervous sensation of dread left me. I felt firm and strong, and that all I had to do was to step boldly, and think of nothing but my pack, taking care that it did not escape from its resting-place upon my head. And oddly enough, my anxiety lest I should let it fall to go bounding down the slope, kept me from thinking about myself as I tramped on, with stones rattling, my feet going down with them, and my breath coming shorter and shorter with the exertion. But I kept my load well balanced, and went on till I was about half way across, when the stones seemed to be much smaller and began to flow like sand. It appeared as if all the larger ones had been set in motion by my companions, and that they had gone down, sweeping the surface clear for me to grow more involved at every step, till I found that no matter how I struggled to get higher so as to keep near the horizontal line of the crossing, I kept sinking lower and lower till I felt that I should glide right into the river before I was across.

With a desperate feeling of determination I kept on bearing up toward the top, but it was always quite labour in vain, through my want of skill, as the smaller stones being more fluent, I found myself still sinking down more and more with every step, till, mingled with the peculiar rattle of the gliding stones, came the roar of the river foaming and dashing amongst the rocks, and into which I expected to be plunged.

Forward still, with a feeling of anger growing within me—a contempt for my own weakness that still kept back the feeling of dread. I had lost sight of Gunson and Esau, and thinking now of nothing but keeping on my legs, I dragged foot after foot out of the stones, and tried to plant one on firmer ground, but tried in vain, till at last I had been carried down so low that though my head was averted, and my eyes were directed toward the spot I ought to have reached, I knew, as I made my last desperate effort, that I was only a few yards above the water.

Then, crash!—crash!—crash!—crash!—my feet striking heavily and sending the stones flying, I fought blindly on. There was a singing in my ears, a sense of strangling in my throat, and above all, a dull, half-stunned sensation, mingled with which were thoughts of the others; and then as darkness came over me, and I fell forward, there was a sharp jerk, a few encouraging words were said by some one, and I found myself lying amongst stones and moss, too much exhausted to speak.

“Better?” said a well-known voice.

“Better?” I said, faintly; “have I been ill?”

“Ill? No, my lad; but you’ve had a narrow escape. You were nearly down to the edge of the river when I got hold of your hand.”

“And the pack?” I said, in a husky whisper.

“It lies out yonder on the slope, waiting till the next slide of stones sweeps it away.”

“Then I dropped it?” I said, wonderingly.

“Yes. Never mind the pack; you are safe. Why, you did not manage so well as we did, Gordon.”

“No,” I said, feeling very much exhausted and faint; “and yet I thought I could do it better. The stones gave way so.”

Gunson laughed.

“Yes; we ought to have tried another plan. The whole slope is quite rotten, and nothing holds the stones together.”

I looked round now, and found that we were at the very bottom of a steep bit of precipice, down which something blue was coming cautiously, which we recognised as Quong.

“What is it, my man?” said Gunson.

“Come ’long down get pack,” said Quong. “You velly bad?” he continued to me.

“No, no, we must leave it,” said Gunson; and I looked at where my pack lay, tightly done up in its blanket, about a score yards away.

“Leave pack?” cried Quong, looking at Gunson as if he thought him mad. “Leave fo’ Indian man come find? No.

Quong set him.” And going quickly and delicately over the stones with a step that was almost cat-like in its lightness, he had reached my bundle almost before Gunson could protest. Swinging it up on his head as he turned, he began to come back as quickly as he went, but now he began to get lower and lower.

“He’ll be swept away!” cried Gunson, excitedly; and, placing one foot at the extreme verge of the firm ground, he reached out towards the Chinaman.

“Give me your hand, my lad,” he cried, hoarsely; and as I lay there, I stretched out my hand to have it seized, while I watched Quong coming nearer, splashing up the water now and sending the spray flying as he strained forward to get hold of Gunson.

For a few moments we both thought he was gone, for he had glided down till the water was over his ankles, and still, as he reached out, he was a few inches from Gunson’s grasp, while for him to have moved would have been fatal; but he made one more effort, hooking his fingers over Gunson’s, and then there was another jerk, the bundle came over on to me, and as our friend made a violent muscular effort to throw himself back, the little Chinaman was dragged right over on to firm ground.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

How we found out a Puzzle.

“Ah!” said Quong, getting up and shaking his legs; “got velly wet.”

“You stupid fellow! you nearly lost your life,” said Gunson, angrily.

“Lose life?” said Quong, looking puzzled; “who lose life? Don’t know.”

“There, go on up and take the pack. Can you climb up, my lad?”

I replied that I could, and followed Gunson, who showed me the way he had descended by the help of the rocks, and projecting roots of the dwarf firs which began to grow freely as soon as the slaty shale ceased.

Esau was waiting at the top, ready to lend me a hand, smiling triumphantly as soon as we were alone.

“You should have tried to go up all of a slope as I did,” he said, “not down of a slope as you did.”

“I tried my best, Esau,” I said, sadly.

“Of course you would. Well, I hope there isn’t going to be much more like that for us to do. Once is enough.”

By this time Quong was back at his fire, and we soon after partook of our mid-day meal, with copious draughts of tea for washing it down, and after an hour’s good nap started off again to find no further difficulties that afternoon, for our journey was through pine forest once more, where the grey moss hung like strands from the older branches, and in the more open places the dark, bronze-leaved barberry grew plentifully, with its purple-bloomed fruit which hung in clusters, and had won for themselves the name of “Oregon Grapes.”

They did not prove to be grapes, though, that we cared to eat, for Esau’s testing of their flavour was quite enough for both. The report he gave me was “Horrid”; so I contented myself with the little bilberries and cranberries we came upon from time to time.

It was on the second day after our struggle across the slope, that we came to a complete change in the scenery. The valley had been contracting and opening out again and again; but now we seemed to come at once upon a portion of the river where the sides rose up almost perpendicularly, forming a wild, jagged, picturesque, but terrible gorge, down which the river came thundering, reduced to narrow limits, and roaring through at a terrible speed. The noise, multiplied as it was by echoes, was deafening, and as we stood gazing at the vast forbidding chasm, our journey in this direction seemed to have come suddenly to an end.

I looked up at Gunson, and found he was looking at me, while Esau had got his hat off scratching his head, and Quong had placed his bundle on the ground, seated himself, and was calmly resting as if there were no difficulties before him—nothing troublous in the least.

“Well,” said Gunson, looking at Esau, “what do you think of the canon?”

“Don’t see that it’ll bear thinking about,” replied Esau. “Going back now, ain’t we?”

“Going back? I thought you were making for Fort Elk.”

“Yes, but that ain’t the way,” said Esau. “Nobody couldn’t go along a place like that.”

“We shall have to climb up the side, and go round somehow, shall we not?” I said to Gunson.

“That seems to be the most sensible way, my lad,” he replied; “but how are we to get up the side? We might perhaps manage if we were across the river, but this wall of rock is so nearly perpendicular that it would puzzle an engineer. We could not scale that without ladders, ropes, and spikes.”

Both Esau and I stared up at the precipice which towered above our heads, and my companion took off his cap and rubbed his curly hair again.

“We couldn’t get up there?” he said, looking at me. “I’ll try if you do.”

“Oh, impossible,” I cried. “We shall have to go on along the side just above the river.”

“What? In there!” cried Esau.

“Yes.”

“Why, you must be mad,” he said. “Isn’t he? No man couldn’t get along there. It would want a cat.”

“I don’t know,” said Gunson, thoughtfully. “Here, let’s camp for a bit.”

At these words, Quong, who had been rocking himself quietly to and fro, jumped off his bundle, looked sharply about him, and then made a run for a niche in the side of the gorge right up in the entrance, where the sides literally overhung.

Here he placed his pack, and began to collect wood, descending toward the river to where a large tree, which had been swept down the gorge when the river was much higher, now lay beached and stripped, and thoroughly dry. He attacked it at once with the axe, and had soon lopped off enough of the bare branches to make a fire, and these he piled up in the niche he had selected, and started with a match, the inflammable wood catching at once; while I took the axe and went on cutting, as Quong unfastened the kettle and looked around for water.

There was plenty rushing along thirty or forty feet below us, but it was milky-looking with the stone ground by the glaciers far up somewhere in the mountain. That, of course, had to be rejected.

“Make mouth bad,” Quong said, and he climbed up to where a tiny spring trickled down over a moss-grown rock so slowly that it took ten minutes to fill our kettle.

“This is a bit of a puzzle,” said Gunson, as he sat calmly smoking his pipe and gazing up the terrible gorge; and I was returning from the fire, where I had been with a fresh armful of wood, leaving Esau patiently chopping in my place.

“Puzzles can be made out,” I said.

“Yes, and we are going to make this one out, Gordon, somehow or another. What an echo!”

He held up his hand, and we listened as at every stroke of Esau’s axe the sound flow across the river, struck the rock there and was thrown back to our side, and then over again, so that we counted five distinct echoes growing fainter as they ran up the terribly dark, jugged rift, till they died away.

“Can’t we find some other way?” I said, for I felt awe-stricken by the rushing water, the forbidding nature of the rocks as they towered up, and the gloom of the place, in which quite a mist arose, but there was no sun to penetrate the fearful rift, and tint the thin cloud with rainbow hues.

“I’m afraid not, Gordon,” he replied. “I fancy that there is a track along there that has been used, and that we might use in turn. If I can convince myself that it is so, we English folk must not turn our backs upon it. Such a ravine as that cannot be very long. Will you try?”

I wanted to say *no*, but something within me made me say *yes*, and I saw Gunson smile.

“Why are you laughing?” I said, with my cheeks feeling warm.

“Because I was pleased. I like to see a lad like you master himself.”

“Ahoy! wood ho!” shouted Esau from below; and I gladly seized the opportunity to end a conversation which troubled me.

Half an hour later, we were seated together enjoying a hearty meal, which had the peculiarity of making the canon seem less terrible to us, while as to Quong, everything was the same to him, and he was ready to go anywhere that Gunson indicated as the way.

“Now,” said the latter, as we finished, and Quong took our place as a matter of course, “what do you say? It must be midday, when we always have a nap till it grows cooler. Shall we have one now or start at once?”

“It will be cool enough in there,” I said.

“Have a nap,” said Esau; “we’re all tired.”

“But it may take us a long time to get through, and we don’t want to be caught in a place like that at night.”

“Right, Gordon,” said Gunson. “Dean, you are in the minority. We must either start as soon as we can or wait till morning.”

“That is the best,” said Esau, uneasily. “I don’t want to show no white feathers, but I ask any one—Is that a nice place to tackle after being walking all the morning with a load?”

“No; I grant that,” said Gunson. “But come along, Gordon, and lot’s explore it a little way.”

He led off and I willingly followed him, to descend close to the rushing waters, and then climb up again, looking in every direction for something in the way of a track, but without avail. On every hand were piled-up rocks, and though

we climbed on one after another and stood looking into the gorge, there was nothing to be seen. As far as we could make out the place had never been trodden by the foot of man.

We had penetrated about a hundred yards, and stood upon a flat-topped rock, looking down at the roaring, swishing water, while before us everything appeared of a dark forbidding grey, in strange contrast to the bright slit of mossy green we could see when we looked back, in the midst of which rose up a column of smoke, and beside it the dark figure of Esau with his hand over his eyes, evidently peering in after us.

“The puzzle is difficult to make out, my lad,” said Gunson. “It’s hard work making your way through a country that has not been thoroughly mapped. Can’t get along here, eh?”

“No,” I said, rather despondently, and then I started, for Esau hailed us to come back, and we could see him shouting with his hands to his mouth, evidently in a great state of excitement.

We waited till the echoes of his voice had died away, and then I shouted back, and a curious creeping sensation ran through me at the sound of my voice.

It was impossible to hurry back, for there were too many impediments in the way, but we made all the haste we could, for there was evidently something wrong, though what that might be was invisible to us, as we descended and climbed, and wound our way in and out in places that Gunson confessed were “ticklish,” as he called it, and where he always paused in his firm, quiet way to offer me his help.

At last we were close to Esau, who was waiting anxiously with the rifle in his hand, ready to thrust it into Gunson’s.

“Indians, eh?” said the latter, as we now saw what had been hidden from us by the shape of the valley—a group of half a dozen spear-armed Indians, who drew back a little and stood watching us on seeing the accession made by our crossing to the group by the fire.

Gunson did not hesitate. He took the rifle, and felt whether his revolver was ready to his hand before walking straight up to the group, making signs intended to be friendly. They had their effect, for the men came forward, one of them holding out a freshly-opened salmon as a token of good-will.

That was enough for Quong, who ran forward smiling, whilst Gunson tried the men with such Indian words as he could remember. But it was all in vain. They gave up the great fish to the Chinaman quietly enough, and stood staring at us in a stolid way, till our leader took out his tobacco-pouch and gave each a good pinch. They were friends directly; and now by signs Gunson tried to make them understand that he wanted to go through the canon, and that he would give them a present if they would guide us.

“I can’t make them understand, my lad,” he said at last.

“But I think they do understand,” I said. “Let’s shoulder our packs, and see if they will lead the way.”

“Must be going our way,” said Esau, “because they overtook us.”

“Well, let’s try,” said Gunson; and in a couple of minutes we were standing loaded, Gunson pointing up the gorge.

One of the Indians showed his teeth, said a few words to his companions, and they all faced round, and began to lead the way back.

“No, no,” I shouted, and I pointed up the gorge, when the leading Indian smiled and went on again.

“This will not do,” I said to Gunson. “Stop a few minutes,” he said, thoughtfully.—“Let’s see. I think they understand us.”

So we followed them back for a couple of hundred yards or so, when they stopped short, pointed upwards, and began to ascend the side of the valley at a spot where it was too stony for any trace of a track to be seen, but where it was possible to climb up and up, with the way growing more giddy moment by moment, and the exertion so great that we were soon glad to shift our packs.

This brought the Indians to a stand, and their leader said something which was responded to by four of the men taking our packs and bearing them for us, the chief going first, and the other man taking the spears of those who carried the loads, and walking last.

In a few minutes we were where the smoke of our fire rose up in faint blue wreaths right above our heads, and all doubts of there being a way was at an end, for without the slightest hesitation the Indians went on, their leader evidently quite at home, though as I looked down I could only see rugged stones, without a trace of their having been worn by feet, while above us was the vast wall of rock along whose side we crept like so many ants, and below there was the river foaming and roaring along toward the mouth.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Esau in Difficulties.

“Oh dear! oh dear!” whispered Esau, as he came up close behind me.

“What’s the matter?”

“’Spose they pitch us head over-heels down here and go off with our loads, what then?”

“We shouldn’t be tired to-night, Esau.”

“Oh, I say, don’t laugh,” he whispered; “it’s too dreadful. What a place to come along! Feel giddy?”

“No; don’t talk about it,” I replied quickly, for the idea was too horrible. But I took heart as I glanced at the loaded men, who walked on as calmly as if there were no danger whatever, while Quong came behind Esau, quite as coolly.

I am afraid to say at what angle the rocky wall went up above us. Esau declared it was quite straight, which was absurd; but I believe I am right in saying that the part along which the principal Indian led us was as steep as it was possible for a man to make his way along, while over and over again the rock curved right above our heads.

It was evident that we were going along a regular track, for the Indian never hesitated. Sometimes he led the way down and down till we were nearly close to the water, then up and up till it looked as if we were to be led right to the top of the mighty rock wall, and out among the mountains. But the track always led down again; and at last in the dim twilight we found that we were close to a sheer precipice which rose out of the water, and along which, not six feet above the torrent, the leader began to make his way sidewise, his face to the rock, his arms extended, and his feet supported by a ledge formed by the bottom part of the vast rock projecting a little beyond the upper.

The ledge at its widest was not five inches across, and as I saw first one Indian and then another hang our packs away from them and begin creeping along that ledge, clinging by their outstretched hands, I fully expected to see them fall headlong into the boiling torrent and be swept away. My palms grew moist, my eyes dilated, so that there was a painful aching sensation as if they were strained, and I felt as though I should like to run away, and at the same time so fascinated that I was obliged to watch them.

At last I turned shudderingly away, and then caught sight of my companions, to see that Gunson was holding on to a piece of rock with one hand, while he reached forward to watch the men, every feature intent, and his shaggy brows knit, and his upper teeth displayed as he pressed them on his lower lip. Esau had his eyes close shut and his face wrinkled up into a grin, as if he were in pain. And there just behind him was Quong, seated on a projecting stone, looking straight away before him, as if he were gazing at his home in China, blinking, dreamy, and paying not the least heed to the danger of the men or to that which was to come for us all.

There was another present—the last Indian, who stood like a bronze statue, resting upon the sheaf of spears he held, and watching us all curiously, as if noting our manner, and trying to read our thoughts.

Not a slip, not a moment’s hesitation. The Indians went on, with our packs threatening to drag them off the ledge into the river; but these were only threats, and we watched till they had nearly reached the end of the ledge, where I saw the leader pass round a projection and disappear.

“I say,” whispered Esau, “tell me when they are all safe.”

I did not answer, and he opened his eyes and looked round at me.

“I say—look, look! There are only two there,” he cried excitedly. “Have the others gone in?”

“No, no. They are safe. Look!” For the last two gradually passed on out of our sight, and Gunson drew a long breath full of relief.

“Hah!” he ejaculated. “All right. Well, lads, if those fellows can do it with the loads hanging from them, it ought to be easy for us. Who goes first?”

There was no reply, and Gunson said quickly—

“Now, Quong, on with you.”

“Me go ’long nex? All light.”

He stepped down on the ledge, carefully catching hold of the rock, and edged his way along without a moment’s hesitation.

“There, Gordon,” said Gunson, “that’s the advantage of having a very small brain. On with you next, Dean. I want to see you lads over safe.”

“But I ain’t got a small brain,” said Esau. “Won’t you go first?”

“No. I went over the clatter slide first, and regretted it directly I had started. I felt as if I ought to have been last. Now then, don’t hesitate.”

“But—”

“Shall I go over, Esau?” I said. “Yes, please. One of my legs is a bit stiff, and I think I’ll take off my boots first.”

By this time Quong had nearly reached the part where there was the projection to go round, and I stepped down with something else to think about, for I saw Gunson laughing rather contemptuously at Esau, who sat down at once to remove his boots, his face scarlet with shame and annoyance, for Gunson said mockingly—

“Don’t take off the stiff leg too, my lad; you’ll want it.”

I glanced back, and caught Esau's eye, and fancied that I heard his teeth click together as he gave a kind of snap, looking as if he would like now to take my place for very shame.

But it was too late. I was already on the ledge, feeling for places to get a hold, and finding that the rock was so full of cracks that I could insert my fingers easily enough, and steady myself as I shifted my leg along. Gunson had followed down close behind me.

"Well done!" he shouted, so as to be heard above the roar of the water. "Don't look down at the river, my lad, but keep your eyes on the rock, and you'll soon be over."

I made no attempt to reply, but kept sidling my way along slowly and cautiously, and finding the task much easier than I thought it would prove; in fact, if it had been solid ground below me instead of that awful torrent, I felt that the task would have been nothing. It was the thought that a slip would be fatal which made all the difference, and I had hard work to resist the magnetic attraction of that writhing water, which seemed to be trying to make me look at it, so that I might turn giddy and fall.

Step by step, with a careful hold taken, and making myself determined as I mastered my feelings of cowardice, I kept on in a fixed stolid way, till I thought that I must be half-way along the ledge, and that now every step would bring me nearer to safety, when, to my utter astonishment, I found myself within a yard of Quong, who was again seated on a block of stone, blinking thoughtfully, and ready to look up at me and nod and smile.

A curious feeling of satisfaction came over me—that glow of pleasure one feels at having conquered a difficulty, and instead of going on I edged back a little, till I could stand and watch for the others coming.

To my surprise I found that Gunson was half-way across, and he hastened his pace as he saw me there.

"Here, what is it?" he shouted, so as to make his voice heard. "Afraid to go any further?"

"No, no; I stepped back to see Esau come along."

"Oh! He had not got both his boots off when I started."

There stood Esau plainly enough beside the Indian. His boots were tied together by the strings, and hung about his neck, and he was watching us.

I should have shouted at him, but my words would not have been heard, and even if I had felt disposed to wave my hand, leaving part of my hold, Esau could not have seen me, as Gunson was between. And still the lad did not move.

We saw the Indian look at him and walk down toward the ledge, and it seemed to us as if he tried to make him go by saying something, which of course Esau could not understand in words, but he comprehended his movements, and we saw him turn upon him angrily.

"Oh," shouted Gunson, "I wish that savage would spur him on with one of his spears, the miserable coward!"

"He'll come directly," I shouted back. "He isn't a coward, only it takes him a long time to make up his mind."

"He and I will have a desperate quarrel one of these days, I know. Hah! at last," cried Gunson, for, as if desperate, Esau now stepped on to the ledge and began to sidle along, the Indian coming close behind him.

But he made very slow progress, stopping every now and then to look down at the water; and at such times we saw him clinging fast to the rock, as if afraid to move afterwards. Then on again for two or three steps, with the Indian calmly following him up and waiting his pleasure.

This went on till Esau was about half-way, when we saw him look down again, and then make quite a convulsive clutch at the rock, against which he now rested motionless, and without making an effort to move.

"Is he resting?" I shouted.

"No; lost his nerve entirely," said Gunson. "Stop where you are and hold my rifle."

He thrust it into my hand, and then went quickly along the ledge back to where Esau stood motionless, and I saw him go to the poor fellow and speak to him.

Esau raised his head and looked at him as I thought piteously, and then once more he began to edge his way along, step by step, with Gunson close by him, and, as it seemed to me, through the mist which rose from the water, holding one arm behind him to help him along.

Very soon, though, I saw what had been done. The Indian had stretched out one of the spears he carried behind Esau, and Gunson had hold of the other end, so that as they held it the shaft formed a rail behind Esau's back, giving him more moral than real support, but sufficient to encourage him to try, with the result that they soon came so near that I had to creep back along round the corner; and a few minutes later we were on better ground, where the Indians raised the packs once more, and again led the way onward, with Esau and me last.

We trudged on in silence for nearly an hour before Esau spoke. I had tried to draw him into conversation several times, but he had preserved a sulky silence, which annoyed me, and I went on just in front, for of course we were in single line. All at once he said loudly—

"'Tain't my fault."

“What is not?”

“That. I was born and brought up to walk on flag-stones. I was never meant to do this sort of thing; if I had been, mother would have paid for me to learn to walk on tight-ropes.”

“There,” I said, “you got over it. Never mind now.”

“But I ain’t got over it, and I do mind now,” he cried angrily. “How would you like to be laughed at because you were thought to be a coward? And I ain’t one, I’m sure.”

“Of course you are not.”

“But of course I am, and you know I am. I never expected British Columbia was made like this. Here’s a pretty place! Why, it’s just as if the world had been split open ever so far, and we was obliged to walk along the bottom of the crack.”

“Yes,” I said, as I looked up the side of the canon to where the sky seemed to be a mere strip above our heads; “but then see how awfully grand it is.”

“Oh, yes, I know it’s awfully enough, but I don’t see no grand. I wish I hadn’t come.”

“What, because we’ve had a bit of difficulty?”

“Bit? Why it’s all difficulty. I couldn’t help it. I wanted to come along pluckily like you did, but something inside wouldn’t let me. It was just as if it kept whispering, ‘Don’t go; you’ll be sure to fall, and then what’ll your mother say?’”

“But it was a horrible bit to go along.”

“You didn’t seem to think so,” he said, in an ill-used tone.

“But I did feel so, and I was frightened.”

“Couldn’t ha’ been, or you’d have stuck fast same as I did.”

“But I was frightened, I tell you, and so was Gunson.”

“Then he needn’t have been so nasty with me.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. That was the worst of it. Only wish he had, ’stead o’ looking at me as he did. For I couldn’t help it a bit.”

“Well, never mind; it’s all past now.”

“It ain’t, I tell you, and never will be past. Everybody will know that I am a horrible coward, and it will stick to me as long as I live.”

I tried to laugh, at him and pass it off, but it was of no use. He took it regularly to heart, harping constantly upon Gunson’s manner to him.

“But you are making mountains of mole-hills,” I cried at last, angrily.

“Well, that’s what they are made out of, isn’t it, only plenty of it.”

“But you say he looked at you.”

“Yes; he looked at me.”

“Well, what of that? There’s no harm in his looking at you.”

“Oh, ain’t there? You don’t know. He just can look. It was just as if he was calling me a miserable cowardly cur, and it cut me horrid. S’pose I did stick fast in the middle of that path— Bah! it isn’t a path at all—wasn’t it likely? If I hadn’t stopped and held on tight, I should ha’ been half-way back to the sea by this time, with my nose knocked off at the least, and the salmon making a meal of what was left of me. ’Course I held on as tight as I could, and enough to make me.”

“Well, never mind,” I said. “There: I won’t hear a word more about it. Perhaps I shall be a horrible coward next time, and then Gunson will look at me.”

“If he does, I shall hit him, so there.”

Esau looked ill-used at me because I laughed, and kept on muttering all the time we were in that terrible gorge, just as if the gloom of the place oppressed him. As for me, I seemed to have enough to do to watch where I placed my feet as we slowly climbed on for hour after hour, thinking all the time of the valley I had read of years before in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and feeling half ready to see some horrible giant or monster rise up to stop our way.

It was rapidly growing so dark down between those terrible jagged walls that I began to think we should have to make camp soon and sleep there in some one or other of the black hollows, and without fire, for there was nothing

visible but scraps of moss, when, all at once, on turning a corner which had appeared to block the way, it began to grow lighter, for the sides of the gorge were not so perpendicular.

Then another corner was turned, and it was lighter still with the warm soft light of evening, and there in the distance was a glowing spot which I took at first for the sun, but which I knew directly after to be the ice-capped top of a mountain glowing in the sun. Below it was the pine forest again, looking almost black, while away on high a cascade came gliding down like golden spray, touched as it was by the setting sun.

Half an hour's more weary tramp, and the chief of the Indian party stopped short, and we found that we had suddenly come upon an opening by the river where about a couple of dozen Indians were standing by the rows of salmon they had hung up to dry in the sun.

They all stood gazing at us in a stolid way, till the man who had guided us went up to them, and then one of the party turned back to their cluster of teepees and came up to us directly after with a friendly offering in the shape of a couple of freshly-caught still living salmon, which Quong bore off eagerly to a spot above the camp.

"But the Indians," I said to Gunson. "Shall we be safe?"

"Safe or in danger, my lad," he replied, "I want food and rest. This is the worst day's work we have had. Ah, I am beginning to believe in Quong. Here, let's help the little fellow. You get some water while I cut some wood."

As we separated I had to go by Esau, who looked at me suspiciously.

"I say," he whispered, "what has old Gunson been saying about me?"

Chapter Twenty Nine.

"Look!"

I can't describe my feelings towards Gunson. One hour he seemed to me coarse, brutal, and common; at another he was the very reverse, and spoke in conversation as we tramped along together about books and languages in a way which made me think that at one time he must have been a gentleman. At these moments his voice sounded soft and pleasant, and he quite won me to him.

On the morning after our perilous passage through the gorge, he quite took me into his confidence, talking to me and consulting with me as if I were a man of his own age, while Esau hung aloof looking jealous and answering in a surly way whenever he was addressed.

"You see," Gunson said, "the matter stands like this: along by the river, which is getting more and more to assume the character of a mountain torrent, the way must be difficult. It winds, too, terribly, so that we have to travel perhaps twice as far as we should if we made a straight cut for the Fort."

"That sounds the easiest way," I said.

"Yes; but we do not know the country; we have not the least idea where Fort Elk lies; we shall be met now and then by other rivers, which may be very hard to cross, perhaps impossible without making long journeys to right or left; lastly, we shall get into a wild country where probably there will be no Indians, or if there are, they may be a fierce hunting race, who will object to our going through their district. So you see that though we may save a good deal of walking if we can get an idea from some settler where the Fort lies, we may meet with a great many difficulties such as I have named. On the other hand, if we keep tramping on here, we are certain to hit the Fort if we can master the troubles of the way, while we are among a people who seem to live by fishing, and are as friendly as can be."

"Yes," I said, thoughtfully, as I glanced at where the Indians were peaceably catching and drying the fish they speared.

"Well, what do you say? I am ready to do either—perhaps to break away from the river would suit me best, for I should be coming across smaller streams such as I could examine for metals. You must not forget that I'm a prospector," he added, laughingly.

"I do not," I said, "and I should like for you to go the way best suited for yourself. But surely you could find that way, and reach Fort Elk."

"I am disposed to risk it, and yet we should be turning away from our supplies."

"Yes," I said, for he looked at me questioningly; "I feel quite in despair sometimes about getting along this terrible way, but I think we ought to keep to it, for those people said we should find little settlements all the way along."

"Yes; and we might find ourselves in a queer position without food unless we could get a guide, so forward's the word."

He nodded to me and went off to the Indian camp to make the people a present before we started, and as soon as I was alone, Esau hurried up.

"Has he been saying anything against me?"

"No, of course not, you suspicious fellow," I cried. "There, come along and pack up. We start directly. I say, Esau, you

don’t want to go back now?”

He turned sharply, and glanced at the beginning of the dark canon, and then said angrily—

“Needn’t jump on a fellow because he didn’t get along so well as you did. Here you, Quong, we’re going on.”

“Velly nea leady,” came back cheerily.

“Don’t seem to mind a bit,” grumbled Esau. “I believe he’d go anywhere. He don’t understand what danger is.”

“Ready?” said Gunson, coming back. “I can’t make anything out of the Indians, but I suppose there is a way all along here.”

“Those settlers said there was.”

“Then let’s try it if we can find our way. We can’t come upon a worse bit to go along than that yesterday, and if we can’t get along we must come back.”

We were on our way again directly after, Quong’s load made more heavy by the addition of two goodly fish, an addition which did not trouble him in the least, for he showed them to me smiling and patting their rounded silvery sides as if he had an affection for them.

Our way was very difficult, the traces of a trail being very few, and faintly marked. But in spite of the difficulties, we kept on steadily all through that day, and with no worse adventures than a few falls, with the accompaniments of bruises and scratches, we reached the patch of wood we selected for our resting-place that night.

It was Quong, when in advance, who suggested it, by stopping suddenly, lowering his patiently borne load, and pointing out its advantages of shelter, fire-wood and water, and here we stayed for the night.

The next day passed in a similar way, and the effect on me of our journey seemed precisely the same as on Esau and the others—for we reached our resting-place fagged, hungry, faint and low-spirited, with Esau grumbling horribly and wishing he was back on “old Dempster’s” stool. Then Quong would prepare his fire, make cakes, boil the kettle, cook bacon or salmon, make a good cup of tea, and we all ate a tremendous meal, after which the beds were made in shelter, probably under the tree which produced what Esau called the feathers, that is the soft boughs. Then our blankets were spread ready, and we lay about watching the last rays of the sunlight on the snowy peaks of the mountains, or the bright stars, and listened to Gunson while he smoked his pipe and told us tales about his adventures in the Malay Archipelago, where he went up the country in search of gold, or in Australia; and as we sat listening, the weary low-spirited feeling passed away, we grew deeply interested, and soon after lay down to sleep, to wake at sunrise full of high spirits, life, and vigour, eager to continue our journey up the river.

Then came days when we halted at settlers’ huts, where we were made very welcome for the sake of the news we brought; then at Indian camps to be regaled with fish, and finding these people so friendly that we soon forgot to feel any fear of them. Then again we went up a side stream here and there for a few miles, to enable Gunson to try and discover metals, and though he was always disappointed, Quong was in ecstasies.

“Why, he must have got enough gold in that bottle of his to make a wedding-ring as big as mother’s old thin one,” said Esau, with a chuckle. “I say, don’t take much to make him happy.”

And all this time the weather had been lovely. We had had a few showers, after which the sun shone out more brightly than ever, and one night we had a tremendous thunderstorm, when, from our shelter under a ledge of rock, we could see the flashes of lightning darting in every direction, while the thunder rolled echoing along the valley. But that soon passed away, the stars came out as the clouds rolled off the sky, and the next day all was as beautiful as ever.

Three nights after we came to a halt at the mouth of a shallow cave, and the day having been very hot and wearying we soon dropped off to sleep, from which I was aroused in the darkness by feeling a touch, and as I opened my eyes, I heard a curious shuffling noise, and felt hot breath fan my cheek.

This was so momentary that I thought I must have been dreaming, and turned softly over to go to sleep again, for the rest after the heavy day’s work was delicious.

I suppose I must have dropped off once more, and must have been dreaming as I was touched again; then the touch was repeated, and in a drowsy way I sighed with satisfaction at not having to move myself, but having some one to move me, for a great hand readied over me, and drew me along a little way, and I dreamed that I was tumbling out of bed and Esau drew me back in my place.

I lay perfectly still for a time, and then I was moved a little more, the big hand drawing me along very gently as if I was not quite in the right position; finally, after getting me straight, giving me a gentle thrust before leaving me quite at peace. All at once I was thoroughly aroused by a terrific yell, and I started up, but only to be knocked over. There was a rush of feet, followed by a rustling, and crackling of bushes, and this sound grew fainter and fainter till it died away.

“What is it? Who shouted?” cried Gunson, jumping up.

“It was me,” cried Esau.

“What for? Who was it ran away? Here; where is Gordon?”

“I’m here,” I said. “What’s the matter?”

“That’s what I want to know,” said Gunson. “Was it an Indian, Dean?”

“No; it was a great pig as big as a bullock; he’d got one hoof on my chest, and was smelling me with his wet snout touching my face when I woke up and shouted, and he ran off.”

“Pig, eh?” said Gunson. “It must have been a bear.”

“A bear! What, touching me like that?” cried Esau, excitedly.

“No doubt about it. But it does not matter. You frightened it more than it frightened you, and it has gone.”

“Ugh!” cried Esau, with a shudder. “Was it going to eat me?”

“Probably,” replied Gunson.

“What!”

“Well, it might have been. You are not bitten?”

“I dunno,” cried Esau, excitedly. “P’r’aps I am.”

“Are you scratched or clawed?”

“Can’t say, sir; very likely. Oh dear, oh dear, what a place to come to! I can’t go to sleep again after this. But do you really think it was a pig, sir—I mean a bear?”

“It must have been. The only other creature possible would be a bison or a deer, and it is not likely to have been one of them.”

Gunson took his rifle, and I heard the click of the lock as he cocked it, to step out of the shelter, and look round, but he stopped directly.

“Where is Quong?” he cried.

“Me velly safe up here,” came in a high-pitched voice from somewhere over our heads in the darkness.

“Did you see anything?” cried Gunson. “Was it a bear?”

“Too dalk see anything,” he replied. “Only hear velly much wood bleaking.”

All was quite still now, save Gunson’s footsteps as he walked about our camp, and the roar of the falling waters down toward the river where the stream near us dropped in a cascade; and he was soon back.

“I shall break my neck in the darkness,” he said, as he joined us. “I can hear nothing, and I have nearly gone headlong twice.”

“Do you think it will come back?” I said, feeling no little trepidation.

“No; Dean’s yell was enough to scare a whole zoological garden. But lie down, lads, and finish your night’s rest. I’ll light my pipe and play sentry for the remainder of the night.”

“And I’ll sit up with you,” I said.

“No; go to sleep,” he replied, firmly. “I am used to this sort of thing.”

“But I want to get used to it,” I said.

“Afraid?”

This came with a slightly sarcastic tone, which made me turn away from him, and go back into the shelter without a word.

“Come, Esau,” I said; and I wrapped my blanket round me, and lay down at once.

“It’s all very well to say ‘Come, Esau,’” grumbled that gentleman. “You ain’t been half torn to pieces by a bear.”

“But you are not hurt, are you?”

“How do I know when it’s so dark?” he said, petulantly.

“But you could feel.”

“No, I couldn’t. I’ve heard that people who have been half killed don’t feel any pain at first; and there ain’t a doctor nowhere.”

“But, Esau,” I whispered, seriously, “has the brute hurt you?”

“I keep on telling you I don’t know. He pawed me about and turned me over, and smelt me and stood on me once. I

say: how dark it is!”

“Lie down,” I said, “and try and go to sleep. I don’t think you can be hurt, or you would feel some pain. I felt the bear touch me too, but I am not scratched.”

“Must I lie down?”

“Yes; you would be better.”

“But suppose he came again?”

“Gunson is watching. There is no fear.”

“But I’m sure I can’t sleep. It’s too horrid to be woke up and find wild beasts swarming all over you.”

“Yes, it was startling,” I said, as I listened to the noise he made rolling himself in his blanket, and making the fir-boughs crackle as he turned about. “I was horribly scared at first, but I don’t think I mind now.”

“I do,” said Esau, with a groan, “and I never pretended to be as brave as you. It’s of no use, I can’t go to sleep.”

“Why, you haven’t tried yet,” I said, as I began to feel satisfied that his injuries were all fancy.

“No use to try,” he said, gloomily. “Fellow can’t go to sleep expecting every moment to be seized by some savage thing and torn to bits.”

“Nonsense!” I said. “Don’t make so much fuss.”

“That’s right; jump on me. You don’t behave half so well to me as I do to you, Mayne Gordon.”

I made no reply to this reproach, but lay gazing out into the gloom, where after a few minutes I heard a faint scratch, saw a line of light, and then the blaze of a match sheltered in Gunson’s hands, and a flash made as he lit his pipe and threw the match away, after which at regular intervals I saw the dull glow of the tobacco in the bowl as our sentry kept patient watch over us.

“Esau,” I said at last, “do you feel any pain?”

There was no reply.

“Esau, can you feel anything now?” I said.

Still no reply, and I began to be startled there in that intense darkness where it took so little to excite one’s imagination. Had he after all been seriously hurt by the bear, and now sunk into a state of insensibility?

“Esau!” I whispered again, but still there was no reply; so half rising I reached over to touch his face, which was comfortably warm, and I heard now his regular hard breathing. For a few minutes I could not feel satisfied, but by degrees I grew convinced Esau was sleeping heavily, and at last I lay down too, and dropped off soundly asleep as he. How long I had been in the land of dreams I did not know till next day, when I found from Gunson that it must have been about a couple of hours, and then I awoke with a start, and the idea that the bear had come back and seized me, till the voice of our companion bidding me get up relieved me of that dread.

“What is the matter?”

“Look,” he cried.

I was already looking at a blaze of light, and listening to a fierce crackling noise. There before me was one of the great pine-trees with the lower part burning, and clouds of smoke rolling up. “But how—what was it set it on fire?”

“Ask Quong,” said Gunson gruffly, as he stood by me with the glow from the fire lighting him up from top to toe, and bringing the trees and rocks about us into view.

“Me only put fire light when bear go, leady for make water velly hot,” said the little Chinaman, dolefully; “fire lun along and set alight.”

“Yes, you couldn’t help it,” said Gunson. “The dry fir-needles must have caught, and gone on smouldering till they reached a branch which touched the ground, and then the fire ran along it like a flash.”

“But can’t we put it out?” I cried, excitedly, as the boughs of the huge green pyramid began to catch one after the other.

“Put it out!” he said, with a half laugh. “Yes; send Dean there for the nearest fire-engine. There’s plenty of water. I did try at first while you were asleep, and burned myself.”

“But—”

“Oh, let it burn,” he said, carelessly. “It stands alone, and a tree more or less does not signify in these regions. A hundred more will spring up from the ashes.”

I stood silently gazing at the wondrous sight, as the huge fire began more and more to resemble a cone of flame. High up above the smoke which rolled like clouds of gold, and the tongues of fire which kept leaping up and up to the

high branches, there was still a green spire dark and dimly seen as it rose to some two hundred and fifty feet above where we stood. But that upper portion was catching alight fast now, and the hissing crackle of the burning was accompanied by sharp reports and flashes, the heat growing so intense that one had to back away, while quite a sharp current of cold air began to rush past our ears to sweep out and fan the flames.

“What a pity!” I said at last, as I turned to Esau, who stood there with his eyes glowing in the light, Quong being seated on a stone holding his knees, as he crouched together, his yellow forehead wrinkled, and little black eyes sparkling the while.

“Yes, I s’pose it’s a pity,” said Esau, thoughtfully. “My! how it burns. I s’pose there’s tar and turpentine and rosin in that big tree?”

“Why, Esau,” I said suddenly, as a thought struck me, “how about the bear?”

“Bear? Where?” he cried, grasping my arm. “Not here,” I said with a laugh. “No wild beast would come near that fire. I mean how about your hurts?”

“My hurts?” he said, beginning to feel his arms. “Oh, I’d forgotten all about them.”

“No fear of its catching any other tree,” said Gunson, returning to where we stood after being away, though I had not missed him. “I’ve been all round it, and there isn’t another for twenty yards.”

“But it will set light to them when it falls,” I said.

“No, my lad. That tree’s enormous at the bottom, but the boughs grow smaller and smaller till the top is like a point. Look, the fire is reaching it now, and it will go on burning till the trunk stands up half burned down, and then gradually go out, leaving a great pointed stick of charred wood. No fear of its falling either upon us. I should have been sorry for us to have started a forest fire, that might have burned for weeks.”

He ceased speaking, and we all stood gazing in awe at the magnificent spectacle as the flames rushed higher and higher, till from top to bottom there before us was a magnificent cone of roaring fire, which fluttered and scintillated, and sent up golden clouds of tiny sparks far away into the air, while a thin canopy of smoke spread over us, and reflected back the glow till the valley far around looked almost as light as day, and the green pines stood out gilded, though sombre in their shades, and the water flashed and sparkled where it rushed along.

It was a wonderful sight, impressing even Quong, and for a long time no one spoke.

It was Gunson who broke the silence.

“Well, Quong,” he cried, “what do you think of your work?”

“Velly solly,” said the little fellow, dolefully.

“Ah,” said Gunson, “it is a bad job. All the King of China’s horses and men could not build that up again—eh, Gordon?”

“No,” I said, sadly; for there seemed to me to be something pitiful in that grand forest monarch, at whose feet we had supped the past night, being destroyed.

“But one of the seeds out of a cone hidden under the ground will produce another,” he said, “in a hundred or two years. And we shan’t wait to see it, Gordon.”

I looked at him wonderingly.

“And that’s how the world goes on, boy; fresh growth makes up for the destruction, and perhaps, after all, we have done some future settler a good turn by helping to clear the ground for him, ready for his home. Now then, will you lie down and have another nap?”

“What, with that tree burning?” I cried; and Esau uttered a grumbling sound expressing dissent, in which I fancied I detected words which sounded like fire and bears.

“Well, it is hardly worth while,” said Gunson. “Look sharp, Quong—tea. We’ll get breakfast over, and make a fresh start.”

“What, so soon?” I cried.

“Soon? Yes—look!”

He pointed upward, and to my astonishment I saw what seemed to be another huge pine-tree on fire far away in the distance; but realised directly after that it was the icy point of a mountain touched by the first rays of the rising sun, long before it illumined the lower earth. For morning was close at hand, and Quong began piling up sticks on our little fire, from which soon after we could trace the black path of burnt needles away to where, as Gunson said, some branch must have touched the ground, as was the case in many directions near.

Chapter Thirty.

We meet a Stranger.

The pine-tree was still burning as we set off just after sunrise that morning, but a turn in the valley soon hid it from our sight. The weather was glorious again, and we made good progress, stopping that night at the snuggest settler's house we had yet come upon; but we could hear very little about Fort Elk. The man, who was living with his wife and son in that solitary place, had heard of the Fort that it was "somewheres up to the norrard." That was all he knew, but he gave us a good supper of roast deer flesh, and told us that if we looked out we could easily get more on our way, and when we were higher up we might perhaps get a mountain sheep. He was curious to know our object in making so long a journey, but saved Gunson from any difficulty in explanations by supposing that we meant to do something in skins, saying that he had heard that the company up there did a big trade with the Indians in furs.

We left him and his son the next morning many miles from his ranch, for he had insisted upon shouldering a rusty piece and showing us part of our way by a short cut which saved us from a journey through a canon, where the path, he said, was "powerful bad," and it did seem a change when he left us with instructions to keep due north till we struck the river again, where we should find another ranch. For in place of being low down in a gorge, made gloomy by the mighty rock-sides and the everlasting pines, we were out on open mountain sides, where the wind blew, and the sun beat down pretty fiercely.

We reached the ranch in due time, obtained shelter for the night, and went on the next day, finding the country more open. I was trudging along side by side with Esau, Quong was behind us, and Gunson out of sight among the rocks in front, when we were startled by a sharp crash, followed by an echoing roar.

"What's that?" said Esau, turning pale. "Here, stop!" he cried.

But I was already running forward, to come up to Gunson, reloading his rifle, and in answer to my inquiry—

"Don't know yet," he said; "I fired at a sheep up on that rocky slope. There was one standing alone, and half a dozen behind him, but I only caught sight of their tails as they disappeared up that little valley. The smoke kept me from seeing whether I hit one. Let's leave the packs here, and go up and see."

It was a hot and difficult climb, for the valley was again steep and contracted here, and when we reached the shelf where Gunson said the sheep had stood, there was nothing to be seen but a wild chaos of rocks and the narrow rift down which a stream bounded, and up by whose bed the sheep had rushed.

"Bad job," said Gunson, after a full half-hour's weary search. "That meat would have tided us on for days, and made us independent when we reached the next ranch, where the people would have been glad of the skin."

"Shall we climb up higher?" I said, in a disappointed tone.

"No; let's get back, and go on. Those two are having a comfortable rest," he added, as he pointed to where, far below, Esau and Quong were lying down by the packs.

"Hurrah!" I shouted just then, for right away down in a pool of the rushing stream I had caught sight of something sticking out just above the water.

"What is it?" cried Gunson, eagerly.

"The sheep under water. That's a leg sticking out."

"A piece of wood," he said, contemptuously. "No: you are right. It is the sheep."

We had a difficult climb down to the place, but did not heed that, for in a few minutes we had dragged out the prize, which Gunson soon lightened in a very business-like way, while I signalled to the others to come up.

Half an hour after we toiled down again, each bearing a quarter of the sheep, the beautiful head and skin being left as too heavy.

Our load was lightened at mid-day, and again at night, when we camped, and the rapid disappearance of that sheep during the next days was startling, for the fresh pure air and exercise created a tremendous appetite which it was not always easy to satisfy.

But somehow in our most hungry times we generally managed to get hold of provisions, either from the Indians or some settler. Twice over Gunson shot a deer, but the scarcity of bird and quadruped was very striking. There were plenty of berries, but they were not very satisfying food to hungry lads.

Esau proved a great help, though, twice during the many toilsome days which followed, by his discoveries in two streams, and I helped him to drive some delicious little trout into shallow water, where they were captured, to Quong's great delight.

How many days and weeks had passed before we were busy by one of the small streams which ran down into the river I cannot now remember, for I have lost count. It seemed that we had been tramping on for a great while, and that it might have been last year when we left the sea.

It was long past midday, and the appearance of this little stream had attracted Gunson so that he determined to camp by it for the night; and leaving Quong and Esau to get a fire and make cakes with the last of our flour, he took the gun, and I a light pine pole, to see if we could not get something in the way of fish or game. I did not say anything, but I knew that Gunson meant to try the sands of the stream as well for gold.

After about an hour's walking, and stopping from time to time to wash a little of the gravel, and pause in likely places, I suddenly drew my companion's attention to something moving in an open glade dotted with small pines and

bushes, where the stream ran slowly by through quite a lawn-like stretch.

He threw himself down and I followed his example, watching him as he crawled forward, taking advantage of every bush and rock, till he suddenly stopped, aimed, there was a puff of white smoke, and we both sprang up.

“No miss this time, Mayne,” he said, as I reached him. “Look!”

Not above eighty yards away lay a beautiful little deer, quite motionless, and I forgot the destruction of the graceful little animal in the longing for a good supper that night.

“Too much to carry back, eh?” he said, as he finished reloading.

“Oh, no,” I cried; “we must carry it somehow.” And after the meat was dressed, we divided the load, making two packs of it in the halved skin, and then began to return, when a part of the stream tempted Gunson to make a fresh trial.

“Disappointing work,” he said, as he waded in. “Sit down and rest, my lad, for a few minutes. I’ll soon see.”

But he found nothing, and I sat down in the little gully watching him, and thinking that the prize he sought to find ought to be very big to recompense him for the tremendous labour he went through. It was very still and peaceful; and, hot and tired as I was with walking, I was turning drowsy, when I heard a voice say loudly—

“I saw the smoke rise quite plainly somewhere here;” and, as I started up, a tall, grey-haired, severe-looking, elderly man, in leather hunting-shirt and leggings, and wearing a fur cap, stood before me, rifle in hand, while another man was coming up not a dozen yards away.

“Hallo!” the first exclaimed, as he glanced from me to my companion, saw the cut-up deer, and took in Gunson’s occupation as it seemed to me in a sharp glance of his clear grey eyes. “I thought I was right. You fired half an hour ago?”

“Yes,” said Gunson, quietly, “and hit.”

“Who are you, stranger, and where are you for?” said the grey-haired man, in a firm, stern tone of voice, while his companion stood back leaning on a rifle too, as if waiting to be told to come up.

“English. Travelling and shooting,” said Gunson, a little distantly.

“And prospecting,” said the new-comer sharply. “Well, have you struck gold?”

“No,” said Gunson. “Have you?”

“No; nor deer either. Not your luck to-day.”

“Sorry for you, brother sportsman,” said Gunson, rather sneeringly, I thought. “Well, where’s your shanty? We shall be glad to share our game.”

“Where are you making for?” said the stranger, looking at me.

“Fort Elk,” I said; and I saw him raise his eyebrows. “Is it very much farther?”

“Not five English miles,” he said, looking at me fixedly.

“Do you hear that, Gunson?” I cried. “Here, let’s get back and tell Esau.”

“Not alone then?” said the stranger.

“No, sir. I have a companion down by the river, and there is a Chinaman with us.”

“Any more questions?” said Gunson, rather gruffly; “because if not, perhaps you’ll put us on the trail for the nearest cut to the Fort.”

“You can’t do better than go back to the river,” said the stranger. “I’ll set you on your way. Mike, help him carry the deer-meat.”

The man took one of the packages, thrust the barrel of his rifle through the deerskin thongs, and placed it on his shoulder, while the new-comer asked me for my pole, thrust it through the other, and Gunson and I took an end each, for I would not let our guide carry it.

“Where are you from last?” said the stranger.

I waited for Gunson to speak, but as he did not, I said that we had tramped up by the river.

“All the way from the sea, eh?” said the stranger, looking me over as I examined him and thought what a strong, keen, clever-looking man he seemed.

“Yes; all the way from the sea.”

“And what are you going to do at Fort Elk, eh?”

Gunson looked round at him sharply.

“Well?” said the stranger, meeting Gunson’s look firmly.

“Only going to ask you if you were an American from down coast.”

“No, I am an Englishman like yourself. Why?”

“Because you ask questions like a Yankee commercial traveller—drummers don’t they call them?”

“Yes, I think so,” said the stranger, quietly. “I always do ask questions when I want to know anything.”

“Good way,” said Gunson, gruffly; and it was very plain that they two would not be very good friends.

“Do you know Mr Daniel Raydon at the Fort?” I asked, to change the conversation, which was growing ticklish.

“Oh yes, I know him.”

“He is the chief officer there, isn’t he?” I continued eagerly, as I seemed now to see the end of my journey.

“Yes; he’s head man, my lad.”

“What sort of a person is he?”

“Humph! Well, how am I to describe him? What do you mean? His looks?”

“Yes; and altogether what sort of a man is he?”

“As far as appearance goes, about such a man as I am. Stern, determined sort of fellow, my lad; accustomed to deal with the Indians. Bit of a hunter—naturally from living in these parts; bit of a gardener, and botanist, and naturalist; done a little in minerals and metals too,” he continued, turning to Gunson. “Sort of man to talk to you, sir, as I see you are prospecting—for gold, I suppose?”

“You can suppose what you like,” said Gunson, drily. “This is a free country, I believe. I never heard that Government interfered with people for looking up the place.”

“Oh no; it’s free to a certain extent, but we settlers who are fixed here like to know what perfect strangers are about.”

“Look here,” said Gunson, “I always make a point of keeping my business to myself. Do you want to quarrel with me?”

“By no means,” said the stranger, smiling. “I think the disposition to be quarrelsome is more on your side. I merely asked you a few plain questions, such as you would have asked me if our positions had been reversed. Suppose you had marked down a deer, being a resident here, and came out for it and found a stranger—”

“Poaching,” said Gunson, mockingly.

“No; we have no game laws here, sir—had bagged your deer, and when you came up to him, wishing to be civil, and offer him the hospitality one Englishman should offer to another in this out-of-the-way corner of the world, he cut up rough with you, as I think, on consideration, you must own you have done with me. What then?”

I glanced from one to the other, ready to appeal to Gunson, for he seemed to me to be horribly in the wrong.

There was a great difference in them, and it seemed to me to be very marked just then; the stranger so tall, commanding, and dignified, in spite of his rough hunting-dress, his eyes keen and flashing, and his well-cut features seeming noble by comparison with Gunson’s, whose care-lined and disfigured face, joined with his harsh, abrupt way, made him quite repellent.

But just as I was anticipating quite an explosion of anger, I saw his face change, and grow less lurid. He looked frankly in the stranger’s face, took off his hat, and I felt that it was a gentleman speaking, as, in quite an altered tone, he said simply—

“I beg your pardon. I was quite in the wrong.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the stranger, “that is enough;” and he held out his hand. “There’s a ring of dear old England and good society in that, sir. Welcome to these wilds. It is a treat to have a visitor who can talk about the old country. It’s many years since I have seen it. And you?”

“Oh, we were there seven or eight months ago,” said Gunson, quietly; and as we walked on, and our new friend plied him with questions about London, the Government, and the changes that had taken place, always carefully avoiding any allusions to the object of our visit to the north-west land, it seemed to me that I was listening to quite a different man to the rough prospector, and I fancied that the stranger was noticing that Gunson was not the sort of man he seemed.

It was so pleasant to listen to the converse of these two gentlemanly, well-informed speakers, that the distance seemed quite short back to where Esau was lying down idly throwing stones in the river, while Quong had the kettle boiling, and, as soon as he caught sight of us, came running up to seize upon one of the packs of deer-meat, and trot off with it.

“Useful sort of fellow, that,” said the stranger, nodding at Quong as he ran on before us. “Good cook, I suppose?”

“Excellent,” replied Gunson. “You had better stop and have a bit of dinner with us. He’ll have a steak ready in a few minutes.”

“With all my heart. Mike, you have some cake in your wallet.”

“Yes, sir,” said the man respectfully; and I saw Gunson’s one eye turn to him sharply.

“We can easily walk to the Fort in an hour afterwards,” said the stranger.

“And do you live near?” I said, eagerly.

“Yes, very near,” he replied, smiling.

“It’s very lucky we met you,” I said, “for we had no idea how far we were off. Here, hi! Esau!” I shouted, as soon as we were within earshot, for he was coming towards us now in a slow, hesitating way. “This is my companion who has come with me.”

“Friend or brother?”

“Friend,” I said; and I was going to say more, but I caught Gunson’s eye, and it seemed to suggest that I was talking too fast.

In less than half an hour we were partaking of the hot juicy steaks which Quong brought round to us on the point of his knife, and washing it down with hot tea, while the stranger and Gunson chatted away about the sport to be had in that part of the country, filling my head with eager hopes of partaking therein, as I heard of the different kinds of game and deer, some of which were of huge size—elk and moose as high as horses, which were shot in the winter.

It soon became evident that our new acquaintance was a keen sportsman, but he talked in quite an easy modest way of what he had done, and at last I felt obliged to join in, telling of our adventures with the bears, and asking if he had seen or shot any.

“Several,” he said. “Many, I may say, but of course spread over a long stay here. I can show you their heads and skins. I generally save them. That man Michael Grey is a clever hunter, and an admirable skin-dresser.”

“Are the bears very dangerous?”

“Only under certain circumstances, my lad. There are several kinds here, varying very little. I mean beginning with the smallest; he strongly resembles the next larger, and he again the one larger still, and so on, till we get up to the cinnamon, and from him to the great grizzly, who is a fierce beast best avoided. As for the others, they are stupid, inoffensive creatures, whose great aim in life is to get out of man’s way, and who will not interfere with him or fight if they are left alone. Now then, what do you say to going on?”

“By all means,” said Gunson; and we rose, to my regret, for I had enjoyed the meal and rest, and the hunting narratives were delightful.

We were all ready for starting, and I shouldered one pack, Quong loading himself up with the deer-meat, and our new friend and his follower insisting upon helping to share our burden, while I noticed that Mike, as he was called, kicked the burning embers about in all directions so as to extinguish the fire.

“What is that for?” said our new companion, interpreting my looks; “that is what every hunter or traveller should do. Never leave a fire. There is abundance of wood—huge forests all about, but none that ought to be destroyed. The pine-trees burn fiercely.”

I nodded, for I knew.

“And, once a forest is set on fire, we never know where it may end.”

We walked on, chatting about the beauty of the country, which every minute grew more open; and I was listening full of interest, when Esau gave my jacket a tug.

“I say, who is he?” came in a whisper.

“Don’t know. Going to show us the way to the Fort.”

“Is it much further?”

“Oh no,” I whispered back; “only a mile or two.”

“Thank goodness,” murmured Esau; “I am getting so tired.”

It proved to be only about a mile and a half, or, as I ought to call it in that country of no roads and many climbs and descents, about three-quarters of an hour’s walk, before we came upon a wide, open spot, dotted with trees like a park, through which the river ran, making a sharp elbow, at the corner of which there was what seemed to be a high fence, with square wooden buildings at two of the corners. These took my attention directly, for they looked like strong, square, wooden towers, trying to be like the sides of a man-of-war, inasmuch as they were fitted with portholes, out of which projected the muzzles of small cannon. I could see that there was a rough trail leading up to a grim gateway in the square fence, and that the nearer we got to the place, the bigger and stronger that fence looked,

and that inside was quite a large square with huts and other buildings, and what seemed to be a garden, beside which there were cultivated fields with corn growing and potatoes, outside.

“So that’s Fort Elk, is it?” said Gunson, thoughtfully. “Why, I suppose you could stand quite a siege there from the Indians.”

“We could, and have done so before now.”

“But what about fire?” continued Gunson.

“That is our worst enemy,” said the stranger, as he struck the rough beaten path.

“But where is your garrison?” said Gunson. “Oh, busy about in the stores and garden. We are not at war with any of the people about, so there is no occasion to play at soldiers now.”

“But where is your ranch?” I said, as we approached the gate.

“Oh, inside the fence, of course.”

“Then you live in the Fort?” I said, looking at him curiously, for a suspicion was beginning to rise in my breast, as we came right up to the great palisade, and I realised how much bigger it all was than it had seemed.

“Yes,” he replied, smiling, “I live in the Fort—the Hudson’s Bay Company’s trading store and station; and I bid you all a hearty welcome.”

“May I know whom we have to thank before you show my young friend Gordon here to the chief’s place. You ought to go to him first, Gordon, my lad.”

“Yes, that is quite right,” said our friend, smiling; “but you can do that without trouble, for my name is Raydon. I am the chief officer here.”

I stopped short and stared, and Esau’s jaw seemed to drop so as to show the whole interior of his mouth.

Chapter Thirty One.

An Awakening.

After the first fit of startling I don’t think I was much surprised, for something seemed to have suggested that this might be Mrs John’s brother.

He smiled at us, as if amused, and led the way to one of the wooden buildings, where wood was burning in a stone fire-place.

“This is our travellers’ hotel,” he said, as we entered the bare-looking room, which was beautifully clean. “Don’t trouble about cooking or preparing anything, for you are my guests. There is a sleeping-place here.”

He walked across to a door at one corner, and showed me another fair-sized place, bare as the first, but beautifully white and clean, and with some of the boards looking quite ornamental from the fine grain. There was a row of sleeping-bunks and plenty of water ready, and plain and rough as everything was, it seemed princely to the style of sleeping accommodation we had been accustomed to for so long.

He nodded and left us, and we had to explain to Quong that he was not to cook and prepare our evening meal, an explanation which for the first time made the little yellow-faced fellow look discontented.

“You all velly angly? What Quong been do?”

“Nothing at all. Mr Raydon’s people are going to send us our supper.”

“Don’t like—don’t like,” he said, shaking his head. “All angly. Quong no make good blead?”

“Yes; everything has been capital,” I said. “Don’t you understand?”

“No; can’t undlestan. Quong velly solly. Go now?”

“No, no. Stop.”

He shook his head and went and sat doleful-looking and unhappy in one corner; out of which he had to be almost dragged at last to partake of the evening meal Mr Raydon sent in for us, absolutely refusing to join us, and waiting patiently till we had done.

There was capital bread, plenty of tea with milk and sugar, cold ham, and hot slices of the deer-meat we had brought with us, and when we had finished and set Quong to his supper, Gunson went to the door to smoke his pipe, while Esau came to me smiling.

“Rather lonely sort of place,” he said, “but it will do, eh?”

“Oh yes, if Mr Raydon is willing for us to stay.”

“Eh? Why, of course he will be, won’t he? I say, though, what lovely ham!”

“What’s the matter with Quong?” I said, for the little fellow was muttering and grumbling as he sat on the wooden bench at the well-scrubbed table.

I went to him, and asked what was wrong.

“Allee dleadful,” he said. “No cookee meat plopelly. No makee tea plopelly. Blead bad.”

“Why, I’m sure it isn’t,” I said, crumbling off a piece to taste.

“Yes; allee bad. No bake blead to-day. Blead high.”

“High?” I said; “you mean stale?”

“Yes; stale high. Keep blead too long. Not good to eat.”

“Why, Quong,” I cried; “you’re grumbling because somebody else cooked and baked,” and I burst out laughing.

The little fellow jumped up with his yellow forehead all wrinkles and his eyes flashing and twinkling comically with resentment. But as I still laughed at him, the creases began to disappear from his face, and the angry look to depart, till he too smiled up at me.

“You velly funny,” he said. “Laugh at me.”

“Well, you made me by grumbling for nothing.”

“Quong cook well—better allee this? Cookee ploply.”

“Yes; everything you have done has been delicious. Here, go on with your supper.”

“Quong cook bleakfast?”

“Yes; I’ll ask Mr Raydon to let you. Here, go on.”

This pacified the little fellow, and he finished his meal quickly. He was busy clearing up when Mr Raydon came in, and I saw him glance sharply at the busy little fellow, whose tail was whisking about in all directions as he bobbed here and there, just as if he not been walking all day.

“Had a good supper?” said Mr Raydon. “That’s right. Now then come to my office, and let us have a talk.”

I followed him with some trepidation, Esau coming on nervously behind; and as we went outside, and then along to another building, catching sight of men and women at different places about the enclosure, our host went on to where I now saw that Gunson was waiting for us by a wooden house that had some show of comfort.

“Come in,” said our host, and he pointed to roughly-made, strong chairs, while he seated himself behind a deal desk.

The walls were covered with weapons, and heads and horns of the various animals that I presumed had fallen to his rifle were nailed up here and there, the white deal floor being nearly covered with skin rugs. These various objects of interest kept my eyes busy for a few moments, and then I was called back to my position by Mr Raydon’s voice, as he addressed Gunson.

“You are quite welcome,” he was saying, “and I dare say I could give you a little shooting if you were disposed to stay.”

“No,” said Gunson, “I thank you; but I have finished one part of my task here. I am not going of course to make any secret of my mission. I am a prospector.”

“Yes.”

“It was my fortune to come out with these lads, and when I heard that they were journeying up the river, I determined to get up to the higher waters by the same route as they did for the sake of helping them.”

“Then you would not have come this way, Mr Gunson?” I said.

“No, my lad,” he replied, smiling. “I should have struck up one of the side rivers sooner.”

“Oh!” I ejaculated.

“For it seemed to me that it was utter madness for two boys like these to attempt the journey alone in perfect ignorance of what they had undertaken.”

“And you made up your mind to see them through?”

“I did, for they would never have done it alone.”

“Indeed we should,” I said, quickly.

Gunson laughed, leaned forward, and patted me on the shoulder.

“No, no, Mayne, my lad,” he said kindly. “There’s all the pluck—the English spirit in you; but there was more than you could have done by yourselves. You would have struggled on, but Master Dean here would have broken down long enough ago, and wanted to go back home to his mother.”

“How could I have wanted to go back home to mother when she ain’t at home?” cried Esau, angrily.

“Well, to have gone back,” said Gunson. “There, I am in real earnest, my lads. It was more than you could have done.”

“But we should have persevered,” I said, warmly.

“And failed, as better men have done. Besides, there were the Indians, my lad. They always seemed very peaceable towards us, but you had a well-armed man with you; and it may have made some difference. There, I don’t want to rob you of any credit you deserve, and I tell Mr Raydon here before you that I have derived no little assistance from you both, and enjoyed my journey all the better for your company. What do you say, Mr Raydon—would they have found their way up here alone?”

“In time, perhaps,” he replied; “if they had met with other people making the trip they might have got here. Certainly not alone, and it would have been madness to have attempted it. It has been a mad project altogether.”

Gunson looked at me and smiled.

“But there, you have reached your goal safe and sound, and to-morrow morning we’ll shake hands and say good-bye.”

“Please understand, Mr Gunson,” said our host, quietly, “that you have no occasion to hurry.”

“I beg your pardon,” replied Gunson; “you are wrong. Time is gliding on, sir. I have spent years already in my quest and have no time to spare.”

“The quest of wealth?” said Mr Raydon, rather sarcastically.

“Yes, sir; the quest of wealth to redeem the past. You do not know my early life, and I’m not going to tell of it.”

“I only know enough to prove to me that Mr Gunson was educated as an English gentleman.”

“And is now the rough prospector you see,” replied Gunson. “There, sir, one lives for the future, not the past. To-morrow morning, thanking you warmly for your hospitality, I start; and I ask you to give my young friends here what you have offered so generously to me.”

“Your Chinese servant going with you, of course. You said ‘I start.’”

“My Chinese servant!” said Gunson, laughing. “I keep no servants. The poor fellow attached himself to us, and has worked for us patiently ever since. He is one of the poor patient Celestials, hunting for gold, and if ever he scrapes together fifty pounds’ worth he will account himself rich.”

“And you?”

“Ah, my desires are far higher,” said Gunson, laughing. “Now, if you will excuse me, I’ll go outside and enjoy a pipe in this delicious evening air.”

“Let me offer you a cigar, Mr Gunson,” said our host. “I have a few good ones for my visitors.”

“Thanks, no. I’ll keep to my pipe till better times come. Now, my lads, it is your turn to have your chat with our host.”

He rose.

“One moment, Mr Gunson,” said Mr Raydon. “There is a powder magazine in the enclosure.”

“Yes; I caught sight of it,” was the reply. “I shall not drop any matches near.”

I saw our host watch him very thoughtfully as he went out of the office. Then turning to us sharply he looked from one to the other, his clear eyes seeming to search us in a way that was far from encouraging.

“Now, young fellows,” he said, “I need not ask your names: Mayne Gordon and Esau Dean. I have been expecting you.”

“Expecting us, sir?” I said.

“Of course. Because you have been six months coming; a letter would not be all this while. I have known of your proposed visit for some time, though I tell you frankly that when I read my thoughtless, inconsistent brother-in-law’s letter, I never expected to see you here. You have been very lucky, that’s all.”

“If you mean Mr John Dempster is thoughtless and inconsistent, sir,” I said warmly, “I must speak. He is all that is kind, thoughtful, and gentlemanly, and he is the best—almost the only—friend I have in the world.”

“What, sir? Isn’t it thoughtless and inconsistent of a man to send two raw boys nearly all round the world on such a mad journey as this? A thoughtful man would say the person who planned it was a fool.”

“No thoughtful man who knew Mr John Dempster would speak of him like that, sir,” I said, angrily.

“Why you might just as well say so of some one who set him and poor Mrs John to travel thousands of miles the other way here,” cried Esau, coming to my help.

“Means that I am a fool!” said our host, sharply, as he turned on Esau. “Here, you hold your tongue, sir, till your turn comes.”

I saw Esau shrink, and Mr Raydon went on—

“I sent for my sister to come, because I believed the journey would be her salvation, as to her health, and because I wanted to end her sad life of penury. Your best friend, Mr Gordon, has not behaved well to her.”

“Why they are as happy and affectionate as can be,” I said. “You don’t know.”

“I knew that for twenty years he has been a dreamer, growing poorer, and wearing out her life with anxiety, my lad, and I wanted to get them here, where I can start them in a new life. He is a good fellow in his way, but weak and helpless as to getting on in the world. If I lead him, I believe it will be different. But enough of that. Here is my complaint. As soon as, after long and careful thought, I decided to bring them here, and send them the funds for the purpose, my thoughtful brother-in-law writes me word that they are coming, and that he has sent me two lads, friends of his, to take under my charge, and do the best I can for them. Why, sir, it came upon me like a thunderclap.”

All the high spirits and hopefulness at our journey being successfully ended, oozed away, and a despairing sensation came over me that was horrible. Then my pride came to my help, and I spoke out.

“I am very sorry, sir,” I cried, “and I will not impose on your kindness. To-morrow morning Esau Dean and I will make a fresh start.”

“What start?” he said, harshly.

“Perhaps go with Mr Gunson, prospecting.”

“Out of the question, sir. More madness.”

“Then we’ll go to work.”

“What at?”

“For some settler. We are both young, and willing.”

“I should just think we are,” cried Esau, sharply.

“Silence! Hold your tongue, please.”

Esau subsided.

“Where are you going to find your settler? Those here have only enough work for themselves.”

“But other people have got on.”

“Where you two could not, sir. You two boys think it all easy enough, but you are not beasts of the field, to be able to pick up a living in this wild solitary land. Do you think you can join some tribe, and become young Indian chiefs? Rubbish. Find gold? What’s the use of it hundreds of miles away from places where it can be sold. Play Robinson Crusoe in the woods? Bah! Where is your ship to go to for stores? Why, you pair of silly ignorant young donkeys, do you know what your projects would end in?”

“Success, sir; fighting our own way in life,” I cried, proudly.

“For the carrion birds,” he said, grimly; “good meals for them, and later on some hunter finding a couple of whitened skeletons, lying beneath a great sheltering pine.”

“Oh, I say!” cried Esau; “don’t, don’t talk like that.”

“I am compelled to, my lads, so as to get some common manly sense in your heads.”

“Here, I say, Mayne Gordon,” cried Esau, rising; “let’s go back at once.”

I rose too, slowly and thoughtfully, waiting to speak, but unable to find suitable words. I was cruelly hurt and surprised at the rough reception I had met with, for I had at least expected to be made welcome for Mrs John’s sake. At the same time though, much as it pained me to hear Mr John spoken of so harshly, I began to see dimly that what Mr Raydon said was right, and that it had been a wild idea for us two lads to make such a journey in so speculative a manner. But before I had made up my mind what to say, and while I was standing there hesitating, Mr Raydon began again, in a sharp authoritative tone.

“What have you lads been?” he said.

“Writers—clerks in an office,” said Esau, glumly.

“Hah! yes: about the most unsuitable avocation for any one coming out here. You did not expect to find a post at a desk, I suppose?”

“No,” said Esau, gloomily, “I meant to build myself a house, and start a farm.”

“How?” said Mr Raydon, with a contemptuous laugh.

“Dunno,” said Esau.

“Do you understand farming?”

“No, sir, but I’m going to learn.”

“Where? at what farm? What do you know about crops? Why, I don’t suppose you could grow a potato. Did you ever do any gardening?”

“Only grown mustard and cress, sir, in a box.”

Mr Raydon laughed aloud.

“And you, Mayne Gordon,” he said; “do you understand stock-raising and sheep?”

I shook my head sally.

“Can you ride?”

“Oh yes,” I cried, as I recalled the days when I had about as wild a little Welsh pony as ever boy sat.

“Come, that’s something; but you can’t ride without a horse.”

“No, sir.”

“And have you any capital to buy land, and stock it?”

“Only a few pounds left, sir.”

“Oh, you have a few pounds. Well, yours seems a lively position, and I suppose you both see that you have very little chance of getting on.”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir,” said Esau. “We’ve seen lots of places where we could build a hut to begin with, and get on by degrees.”

“Your eyes want opening a little wider, my lad. Suppose you took up one of the beautiful patches of land you saw near the river.”

“Yes, sir, quite close, where we could catch salmon same as the Indians do, and dry them. I don’t see if the Indians can live why we couldn’t.”

“For the simple reason that you are not Indians—savages, my lad. Do you know that if you did as you propose, some night you would have to climb for your life, and cling in the branches of a huge pine, while the flooded river swept away your hut.”

“Don’t sweep away your huts,” said Esau, sulkily.

“Because they are two hundred feet above the river. Well, what are you going to do?”

“Start back again, sir, at once,” I replied.

“And then?”

“Try to get work somewhere.”

“And what am I to say to my sister and her husband when they come?”

“That we found out we had made a mistake, sir, and had set to work at once to try and remedy it.”

“You will sleep here to-night though, of course?”

I looked at Esau, and his eyes flashed back my opinion.

“No sir,” I said. “We thank you for what you have done, but we shall start back directly, and sleep where we made our camp in the middle of the day.”

“Don’t be hasty, my lad,” said our host. “It’s wise sometimes to sleep on a determination.”

“It can’t be here, sir,” I said bitterly, “so goodbye, and thank you. Come, Esau, we can get on for a couple of hours before it is quite dark.”

“All right,” said Esau, sturdily; “and we can find our way back if we didn’t know it coming.”

“Well, perhaps you are right,” said Mr Raydon; “but of course you understand that you are going back alone. Mr Gunson will be on his way into the mountains, and I dare say that China boy will follow him.”

“I suppose he will, sir,” I said. “Better sleep on it, my lad.”

“No, sir,” I said, firmly. “I would rather not.”

“Too proud to accept the hospitality of the man who has told you such home-truths?”

“Yes, sir; but more so to stay where I feel that we are not welcome.”

“But you are welcome, my lads, as visitors. Is not your friend and leader very unreasonable, young man?” he continued, turning suddenly to Esau; and I listened eagerly in dread, lest he should be won over to ask for shelter for the night.

“Not a bit,” said Esau, with a scowl. “He’s all right, and knows what’s best, and always did. If it hadn’t been for him I should have been stupid enough to have gone for a soldier.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, indeed!” cried Esau; “and I tried all I could to get him to go too, only he knew better. Now then, Mr Gordon, I’m ’bout tired of talking. When you’re ready, I am.”

He moved toward the door and I followed him, having no words to say for the moment; but as I reached the door they came, and I faced around to see Mr Raydon’s clear eyes fixed upon me.

“Good-bye, sir,” I said, “and thank you. When Mr John and dear Mrs John come, don’t scold them and talk to them as you have to me. It would only upset her, and she is sure to be still very delicate. Tell them I have gone to make a start for myself, and as soon as I am doing well I shall try and write to her. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” said Esau, defiantly; and he put his hands in his pockets, began to whistle, and turned to me, to point to the head of a mountain sheep with enormous curled horns.

“Pretty good load for a thing to carry,” he said, as we reached the door.

“Stop!”

That word seemed to cut its way into our brains, it sounded so fierce and sharp, and its effect was to make us both face round wonderingly, and look inquiringly at the speaker.

“I should have thought, sir, that it would have been more decent if you had offered to shake hands with your host before you went.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” I said, holding out my hand. “Good-night—good-bye!”

His large firm long fingers closed tightly on mine, and held my hand prisoned so hardly that he gave me a good deal of pain.

“One minute, my lad,” he said. “Your father and mother were both English, were they not?”

The mention of them made me wince.

“Both dead, I think my sister said?”

“Yes,” I said huskily, and I tried to drag my hand away, but he held it fast.

“So you are true English?” he said; “and a pretty opinion you have of your fellow-countryman.”

“I—I don’t understand you, sir.”

“To think after you have struggled up here so pluckily, and in so manly a way, he would be such an inhuman brute as to let you go.”

“Mr Raydon!” I cried, huskily.

“And your friend, my lad, I hope, for my sister’s sake and your own too, if you justify the impression you have made. There, you came to me quite a stranger, and I wanted to see whether you had the manliness and courage to refuse to stay, and I know that you have both, and would have gone back. Come,” he said, pressing my hand warmly, “let what has passed during the past few minutes go. Sit here for a bit, both of you. To-morrow we’ll have a chat over what is to be done.”

He smiled at me, gave Esau a nod, and went out.

We neither of us spoke, but looked across at each other in the softening light, till suddenly Esau turned sharply round, and went and stood looking out of the window, while I sank down on a stool, turned my back to my companion, folded my arms on a desk, and laid my head thereon.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Quite an hour must have passed, and it had grown dark in that room, where the heads of moose, elk, bear, and mountain sheep looked down upon us from the walls, and the old clock had it all its own way, *tick-tack*. For neither of us spoke; I confess that I dared not. Perhaps it was childish to feel so upset; perhaps it was natural, for I had been over-wrought, and the pain I had suffered was more than I could bear.

Esau, too, was overcome, I was sure; but it always after remained a point of honour with us never to allude to the proceedings of that night when we remained there back to back without uttering a word, and, till we heard steps, without moving. Then we both started round as if guilty of something of which we were ashamed. But the steps passed the door, and they did not sound like those of Mr Raydon; and once more we waited for his return.

It grew darker and darker, and as I slowly let my eyes wander about the walls, there on one side was the long, melancholy-looking head of a moose, with its broad, far-spreading horns, seeming to gaze at me dolefully, and on the other I could see the open jaws and grinning white fangs of a grizzly bear, apparently coming out of the gloom to attack me, while the deer's heads about were looking on to see what would be the result. The place was all very strange, and the silence began to be painful, for only at intervals was there some distant step.

At last, though, there came a loud, fierce barking, and it was quite inspiriting to hear so familiar a sound. This made Esau take a long breath as if he felt relieved, and it unlocked his tongue at once.

"Hah!" he said; "seems quite natural-like to hear a dog bark. Wonder what he is? Bet sixpence he's a collie. Yes, hark at him. That's a collie's bark, I know."

We sat listening to the barking till it ceased, and then Esau said—

"Did seem too hard, didn't it? But somehow I couldn't help feeling all the time that he wouldn't serve us so bad as that. So different like to Mrs John, eh?"

"Hush! Here he comes back." For there was a firm heavy step that was like a march, and the door was thrown open.

"Ah, my lads, all in the dark? I had forgotten the light."

He struck a match, and lit a large oil-lamp, and sent a bright pleasant glow through the place, which, from looking weird and strange, now had a warm and home-like aspect.

"You'll like to get to bed soon. Pretty tired, I expect. I am too. We are early people here. Early to bed and early to rise; you know the rest of the proverb. You'll sleep in the strangers' place tonight; to-morrow we'll see what we can do. Mine is a bachelor home, but we have women here. Some of my men have wives, but they are Indian. Rather a wild place to bring my sister to—eh, Mayne?"

Then without giving me time to speak—

"Come along," he said. "I told Mr Gunson that I would fetch you."

We followed him out, and I wanted to thank him; but I could not then, and he seemed to know it, for he kept on chatting to us as we went along one side of the enclosed square, pointing out how clear the sky was, and how full of promise for the next day. Then, as we reached the long low building where we had had our meal, he threw open the door, and stood back for us to enter.

"Good-night, Mayne," he said.

"Good-night, sir," I replied, rather huskily, and I clung to his hand a little as he held it out.

"Good-night, Dean," he continued, and turning sharply off he sauntered away back towards his quarters.

"Might ha' shook hands with me too," said Esau, sullenly. "Didn't offend him too much, did I?"

"No, no, don't say any more about it," I whispered.

Then we entered, to find Gunson seated on a rough stool by the fire smoking his pipe, or pretending to, for I saw no smoke, and the red glow from the embers lit up his face strangely.

"Ah, boys," he said, starting up from his musings; "there you are. Well, you have dropped into snug quarters. Bed-time, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," I said sadly. "Hallo! Not cheery that!"

"Are you still thinking of going, Mr Gunson?" I said.

"Yes; at sunrise to-morrow morning, so if you want to see me off, you must take down your shutters early."

"I am sorry."

"I am glad," he cried—"that you are sorry. Been a pleasant trip up, my lad, and I dare say we shall meet again some day. We will, if I can manage it."

"I say, where's old Quong?" said Esau, suddenly. "Asleep this hour, in the corner there."

“You want Quong—flesh tea—make blead—now?”

“No, no; go to sleep,” said Gunson, laughing. “Allee light. I get up and makee fi’ keep bun; no let fi’ go out.”

He coiled up again under his blanket, and we sat some little time in silence before Gunson rose.

“Good-night, boys,” he said; and he went to the rough sleeping-place he had chosen.

“S’pose we had better go too,” said Esau, after we had sat looking at the fire a few minutes in silence.

“I’m ready,” I said quickly, and we went to our places, where I lay listening to the hard breathing of my companions, for sleep would not come. All was so new and strange. The fire had sunk down into a faint glow which brightened now and then as a light breeze swept by the house, and then sank down again, making the fireplace look ruddy, while all the rest of the place was intensely dark. Then all grew blacker still, and I was listening to Mr John Dempster’s hopeful words about meeting me at his brother-in-law’s home, and—

I was staring hard at the fire again, awake and fully aware that I had been fast asleep, and that something was wrong. The door was wide open. I was sure of it, for I could see the square opening lit up with brilliant stars, and to add to my certainty, the embers of the wood fire, which had sunk lower and lower, were glowing again, as the soft air from the door swept over them, in a curious phosphorescent way.

I listened, and heard that the others were sleeping heavily, and as I gazed at the door I saw some of the stars blotted out by something moving, while almost at the same instant a faint sound made me glance toward the fire, where for a moment I saw against the faint glow the shape of some animal. A panting sound; it was a wolf I was sure, and I lay there paralysed with dread, as I heard the soft pit-pat of the animal’s feet, and directly after a movement that did not seem to be that of an animal.

I was right in that; for the fire glowed up, and I could see that it was a man standing close by now, whose dress indicated that he must be an Indian, for I just made out the edge of a hunting shirt, and I saw that he wore leggings.

What ought I to do? I thought if I shouted to spread the alarm it might mean a sudden quick attack, perhaps death at once for me, while the others would be unable to defend themselves in the dark. The cold perspiration oozed from my face, and I felt a sensation as if something was moving the roots of my hair.

At last when the agony grew so intense that I felt I must shout for help, the soft pit-pat of the animal’s feet passed by me again, and was followed by the sound of the man moving his moccasined feet, hardly heard upon the boarded floor, and the stars were completely blotted out by the closing door.

I started again, for there was a quick rustling sound now from my left, and something passed me and made for the fire. Then came relief, for there was no doubt this time—it was Quong softly laying fresh pieces of wood on the embers to keep the fire going till morning.

I lay back thankfully, determined to speak to him as he came back, and ask him if he had heard a noise. But I did not; he was so long in coming; and when I did speak it was to Gunson, who was getting up, and the grey light of morning was now filling the room, battling with the glowing fire. For I had been asleep after all, and I began to ask myself whether I had dreamed about the Indian and the wolf.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Leave-taking.

A few minutes after I saw how darkness and fancy can combine to startle one who wakes suddenly from sleep, for the man who had been Mr Raydon’s companion on the previous day suddenly made his appearance silently at the door and walked in, his deerskin moccasins making no sound as he came towards us. He was followed by a great fierce-looking dog, about whose neck was a formidable ruff of loose hair, and as he trotted towards me I saw in them the Indian and the wolf of my scare.

“Morning,” said the man, quietly; “needn’t ask you how you slept. I came in late to see if the fire was all right, and you were all fast. Here, Rough—quiet! Better make friends with him at once,” he continued, turning to me.

For, after sniffing at Gunson, and Esau, who got out of his way as soon as possible, the dog turned his attentions to me, smelling me all round, as if to try whether I was good to eat, and then uttering a low deep growl, to indicate, I suppose, that he was satisfied that I was a stranger.

“Well,” I said, laying my hand upon his head, feeling nervous though not showing it, “are we to be friends?”

There was a deeper growl, and two fierce eyes glared up at me, while I fully expected that my hand would be seized. Then there was a slight agitation of the great fluffy tail, which began to swing slowly from side to side, and before I knew what was about to happen the great beast rose up, planted its paws upon my shoulders, threw up its muzzle, and uttered a deep-toned bay.

“That’s all right,” said the man; “you and he will be good friends now. Can I do anything for you? Start this morning, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Gunson, “I’m off directly.”

“Right; my wife will bring you some breakfast.—Come along.”

He went to the door, and the great dog followed him with his muzzle down; but as soon as he was outside he ran back to me, thrust his great head against my side, uttered a loud bark, and then trotted off.

A few minutes after an Indian woman, dressed partly in English fashion, came in with a kettle of tea and some cake and bacon, which she smilingly placed ready for us, while Quong stood over by the fire looking very serious and troubled.

Gunson smiled and gave me a cheery look, and we sat down to the early meal; but I did not feel hungry, and was playing with my breakfast when Mr Raydon came in, looking quiet and firm as he wished us good morning.

“Quite ready for your start then?” he said; “quite decided to go to-day?”

“Quite,” replied Gunson, shortly. “If you come back this way I shall be glad to see you,” continued our host.

“Thank you. I hope to come back safely some day, and,” he said, turning to me, “to see how you are getting on.”

“I shall be very glad to see you again,” I said warmly; for though I did not feel that I exactly liked the prospector, there was something beside gratitude which attracted me to him.

“The Chinaman goes with you, I suppose?” said Mr Raydon, glancing to where Quong stood, looking troubled and uneasy at being superseded.

“I don’t know. He is free, and not tied to me in any way.”

“What are you going to do?” said Mr Raydon, turning sharply on the little fellow.

“Light n’—make blead—plenty tea hot—stlong. Cookee, velly much cookee. Speak ploper English, allee same Melican man.”

“Yes; but are you going on with Mr Gunson here?”

Quong looked at the prospector and then at me and at Esau, his little black eyes twinkling, and his face as full of lines as a walnut-shell; but Gunson made no sign, only went on with his breakfast.

“No wantee me,” said Quong, shaking his head. “Go washee washee gole, no wantee Quong.”

“Then if I offered you work, would you like to stay here for a while?”

“Make blead, flesh blead? Yes, Quong going stop.”

He looked at us and laughed.

Then Gunson spoke.

“Yes,” he said, “he had better stay. I can carry my own pack and cook all I require. There,” he said, rising, “I’m ready for my start now. Will you lads walk a little way with me?”

“Yes,” I cried; and two minutes later we were outside, with Esau shouldering the pack, while its owner stood for a few minutes talking earnestly to Mr Raydon. I could not hear his words, but from his glancing two or three times in my direction, I guessed the subject of their conversation.

Gunson would not let us go far, but stopped short at the rise of a steep slope, at the foot of which the river ran.

“Good-bye, Mayne,” he said. “I shall come and look you up by and by if the Indians do not kill me, or I am starved to death somewhere up yonder. No, no: my nonsense,” he continued, as he saw my horrified look. “No fear; I shall come back safely. Good-bye.”

He shook hands with us both hurriedly, shouldered his pack, and we stood there watching him till he disappeared round a curve in the valley.

“He don’t like me,” said Esau, in a grumbling tone, as we began to walk back.

“And you never liked him,” I said.

“No. Perhaps it’s because he had only got one eye. Never mind, he’s gone now, and we’re going to stay. Will the old man set us to work?”

There seemed to be no sign of it at first, for when we returned to the Fort Mr Raydon was away, and when he returned we spent our time in what Esau called sight-seeing, for Mr Raydon took us round the place, and showed us the armoury with its array of loaded rifles; took us into the two corner block-houses, with their carefully-kept cannon, and showed us how thoroughly he was prepared for danger if the Indians should ever take it into their heads to attack him.

Then there were the stores, with the gay-coloured blankets and other goods which were dear to the Indian and his squaw, and for which a portion of a tribe came from time to time to barter the skins they had collected by trapping and shooting.

There they were, bales of them—seal, sea-otter, beaver, skunk, marten, and a few bear, the sight of all raising up in our hearts endless ideas of sport and adventure possibly never to be fulfilled.

“There,” said Mr Raydon, when we had seen all the stores, including that where an ample supply of provisions was laid up, and we had visited the homes of his men, all of whom had married Indian wives, “I have not settled anything about you two lads yet. I may set you to work perhaps, but at all events not for a few days, so you can wander about the place. Don’t go away from the streams. Why?” he added, as he saw my inquiring look; “because if you wander into the forest there is nothing to guide you back. One tree is so like another that you might never find your way out again. Easy enough to talk about, but very terrible if you think of the consequences. If you ascend one of the streams, you have only to follow it back to the river. It is always there as a guide.”

Nothing could have gratified us more, and for some days we spent our time exploring, always finding enough to attract, watching the inhabitants of the woods, fishing, bathing, climbing the trees, and going some distance up into the solitudes of one of the mountains.

It was a pleasant time, and neither of us was in a hurry to commence work, the attractions were so many.

“It’s so different to being in streets in London,” Esau was always saying. “There it’s all people, and you can hardly cross the roads for the ’busses and cabs. Here it’s all so still, and I suppose you might go on wandering in the woods for ever and never see a soul.”

It almost seemed as if that might be the case, and a curious feeling of awe used to come over me when we wandered up one of the little valleys, and were seated in the bright sunshine upon some moss-cushioned rock, listening to the murmur of the wind high up in the tall pines—a sound that was like the gentle rushing of the sea upon the shore.

Mr Raydon generally asked us where we had been, and laughed at our appetites.

“There, don’t be ashamed, Mayne,” he said, as he saw me look abashed; “it is quite natural at your age. Eat away, my lad, and grow muscular and strong. I shall want your help some day, for we are not always so quiet and sleepy as you see us now.”

I had good reason to remember his words, though I little thought then what a strange adventure was waiting to fall to my lot.

Chapter Thirty Four.

We make a Discovery.

We two lads wandered away one day along a valley down which a stream came gliding here, roaring in a torrent there, or tumbling over a mass of rock in a beautiful fall, whose spray formed quite a dew on the leaves of the ferns which clustered amongst the stones and masses of rock. To left and right the latter rose up higher and higher crowned with fir-trees, some of which were rooted wherever there was sufficient earth, while others seemed to have started as seeds in a crevice at the top of a block of rock, and not finding enough food had sent down their roots over the sides lower and lower to where they could plunge into the earth, where they had grown and strengthened till the mass of rock was shut in tightly in what looked like a huge basket, whose bars held the stone fast, while the great fir-tree ran straight up from the top.

These wild places had a constant attraction for us, the greater that we were always in expectation of hearing a deer rush away, or catching sight of some fresh bird, while there was always a shivering anticipation of our coming face to face with a bear.

The sun came down glowing and hot into the ravine, where the strong aromatic scent of the pines floated to us laden with health as we toiled on higher and higher, leaping from rock to rock, wading or climbing, and often making use of a great pine-trunk for a bridge.

“It’s so different to the city,” Esau used to say. “The roaring of the water puts you a bit in mind of Cheapside sometimes; but you can’t lie down there, and listen and think as you can here.”

“What do you generally think about, Esau?” I said.

“Dunno; mostly about getting higher up. Let’s get higher up now. I say, look at the trout. Shall we try and get a few for dinner; the old man likes them?”

“As we come back,” I said. “Let’s go up higher now.”

“How far would it be up to where this stream begins?”

“Not very far,” I said. “It cannot come from the ice up yonder.”

“Why not?” he said sharply. “I think it must.”

“It cannot, because it is so clear. We couldn’t see the trout if it was a glacier stream.”

“Humph, no, I s’pose not. Where does it come from then?”

“Oh, from scores of rills away perhaps in the mountains. How beautifully clear the water is!—you can see every stone

at the bottom—and, look, it's like a network of gold on the sand."

"What makes that?" said Esau.

"The ripple of the water as it runs. How beautiful it all is!"

"Yes; I should like to build mother a cottage up there when she comes."

"That's what you always say. Why don't you set to work and build one ready when she does come?"

"If you talk like that I will," said Esau, irritably. "Of course I always say so—shame if I didn't."

"Well then, select your place and let's begin."

"Shan't! not for you to make fun of me," cried Esau, throwing himself down. "Now then, if you want to quarrel again, go it. I shan't grumble."

We went on by the side of the little stream for quite half-an-hour almost in silence, not from Esau being out of temper, but from the intense satisfaction we felt in being in so beautiful a place, and at last sat down close by a gravelly-looking shallow, where the beautiful clear water tempted us to lie flat down, lean over till we could touch it, and drink.

"That's good water," said Esau, as he wiped his mouth. "I wish plenty of fruit grew here too. What are you doing? Why, you're not going to hunt for gold, are you?"

I did not answer, but went on with what I was doing; scooping up the gravel and sand, and agitating my hand till the light sand was washed away and only the stones remained. It was in imitation of what I had seen Gunson and Quong do scores of times, and in the idlest of moods that I did this, partly, I think, because the water felt cool and pleasant to my hands, and the sensation of the sand trickling between my fingers was agreeable.

"I wonder whether Gunson has found a good place for gold yet?"

"Dunno," replied Esau, with a yawn. "I wish those people would come here, so that we could set to work in real earnest, and be making a house. Shall you come and live with us, or with Mr and Mrs John?"

"Can't say at present. All that sort of thing must be left till they come, and—oh!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nearly slipped in; that's all," I said, selecting a fresh stone for my seat, the one I had been using at the edge of the stream having turned slowly over and pitched me forward.

"Only got wet; you would soon get dry again in the sunshine."

"Yes," I said, taking a fresh handful of gravel and beginning to shake it to and fro in the stream, pausing every now and then to pick out the big stones and throw them away, and the gravel after them, before taking another handful.

"Makes your hands nice and clean, doesn't it?" said Esau. "Nothing like sand for that. Found any gold yet?"

"Not yet," I said.

"No, nor you won't. There's no gold here, only a few little specks like Quong got."

"Oh, there might be," I said carelessly, as I thrust in my hand a little deeper, and brought out a good handful of sand from lower down. "Gunson said he was sure there was plenty if you could—"

"Well, could what?" said Esau, as he lay back with his hands beneath his head, his cap over his eyes, and his voice sounding hollow and strange from having to run round inside his hat.

I did not answer, for I was washing the contents of my hand with a sudden feeling of eagerness.

"Well?" he said again, "could what?"

"Esau, come and look down here," I whispered very huskily.

"Can't," he said, lazily. "Too comfortable to move."

"Come here!" I cried again.

"Shan't. I'm tired. I don't want to be roused up to look at a fly, or some stupid bird in a tree. You can look at it all to yourself."

"Come here, will you?" I said so fiercely that he sprang up.

"What's the matter?"

"Come and look here!"

He rose and came to me, looking wonderingly at my hands, which I held closely clasped together.

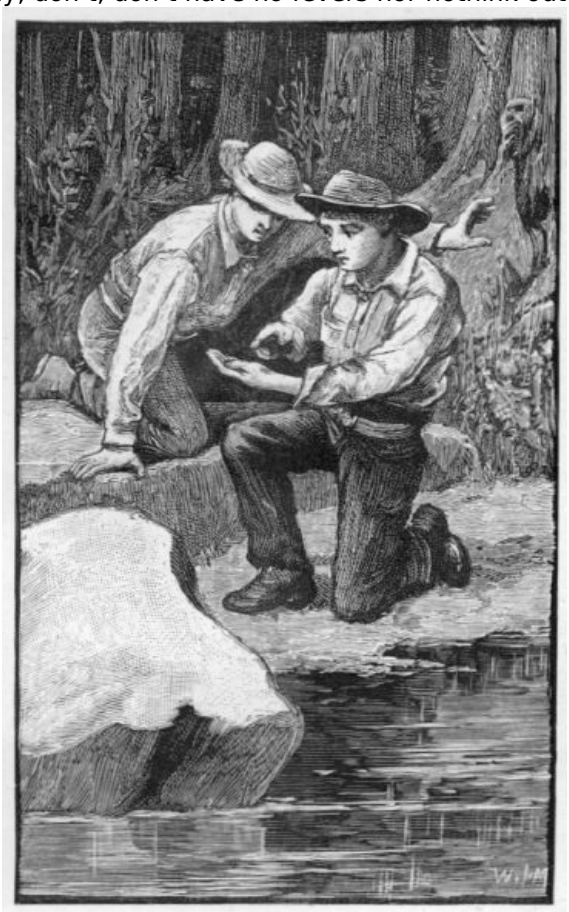
“What’s the matter?” he said; “cut yourself? Wait till I tear up my hank’chief.”

“No, no,” I panted, and the excitement I felt made me giddy.

“Well, I thought you hadn’t,” he cried. “Don’t bleed. Here, what is it? What’s the matter with you? You look as silly as a goose.”

I stared at him wildly, and no answer came.

“He’s going to be ill,” I heard Esau mutter, as he shook me angrily. “I say, don’t, don’t have no fevers nor nothink out here in this wild place where there’s no doctors nor chemists’ shops, to get so much as an ounce o’ salts. Oh, don’t, don’t!”



“Look—look here!”—p. 359

“I’m not ill,” I said at last. “There’s nothing the matter.”

“Then what do you mean by frightening a fellow like that? I say, I like a game sometimes, but that’s too bad.”

“I—I didn’t want to startle you, Esau,” I said, hurriedly, as the giddy sensation passed away. “Look—look here.”

I held my hands open before him, raising one from the other slowly, as I felt half afraid that it was partly fancy, and that when my hand was quite open, that which I believed I held would be gone.

“Well?” said Esau, “what of it? Wet stones? Think you’d caught a little trout?”

“No, no,” I cried impatiently. “Look—look!”

I raised one finger of my right hand, and began to separate the little water-worn stones with my palm raised in the sunshine, and for a few moments neither spoke. Then as Esau suddenly caught sight of some half-dozen smoothly-ground scales, and a tiny flattened bead with quite a tail to it, he uttered a shout.

“Hooray!” he cried. “Gold! That beats old Quong; he never got as much as that in his tin plate. Yah! ’tain’t gold. Don’t believe it! it’s what old Gunson called Pyrrymids.”

“Pyrites? No,” I said. “It’s gold; I’m sure of it. Look what a beautiful yellow colour it is.”

“So’s lots of things a beautiful yellow colour,” said Esau, sneeringly, as he curled up his lip and looked contemptuously at the contents of my hand. “Tell you what it is—it’s brass.”

“How can it be brass?” I said, examining the scales, which looked dead and frosted, but of a beautiful yellow.

“Very easy.”

“Don’t be absurd,” I cried, bringing my school knowledge to bear; “brass is an artificial product.”

“That it ain’t,” cried Esau, triumphantly; “why, it’s strong as strong, and they use it for all sorts of things.”

“I mean, it’s made by melting copper and tin or zinc together. It’s an alloy, not a natural metal.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Esau, excitedly; “think I don’t know? It’s brass, and it’s got melted up together somehow.”

“Nonsense,” I cried; “it’s gold; I’m sure of it.”

“’Tain’t. Yah! that isn’t gold.”

“It is; I’m sure.”

“It’s brass, I tell you.”

“Impossible.”

“Then it’s copper.”

“Copper isn’t this colour at all, Esau. It’s gold.”

“Not it; may be gold outside perhaps. It’s gilt, that’s what it is.”

“You stupid, obstinate donkey!” I cried in a pet.

“Oh, I am, am I? Look here, mister, donkeys kick, so look out.”

“You kick me if you dare!” I cried.

“Don’t want to kick you, but don’t you be so handy calling people donkeys.”

“Then don’t you be so absurd. How can a piece of metal out here be gilt?”

“By rubbing up against other pieces, of course, just the same as your boots get brazed by rubbing ’em on the fender.”

“I believe you think it’s gold all the time, only you will not own to it,” I cried.

“’Fraid to believe it, lad; too good to be true. Why, if you can find bits like that by just wiggling your hand about in the sand, there must be lots more.”

“Yes; enough to make us both rich.”

“I say, think it really is gold?” whispered Esau, hoarsely.

“Yes, I feel sure of it.”

“Look! there’s another bit,” he cried, dashing his hand down and sending the water flying, as he caught sight of a scrap, about as big as a flattened turnip-seed, in the sand, into which it sank, or was driven down by Esau’s energetic action.

“Gone!” he said, dismally.

“Never mind; we’ll come on here with a shovel, and wash for more.”

“But, I say, how do you know it’s gold? How can you tell?”

“One way is because it’s so soft, you can cut it almost like lead.”

“Who says so?”

“Gunson told me.”

“Then we’ll soon see about that,” cried Esau, pulling out and opening his knife. “Sit down here on this stone and give me that round bit.”

“What are you going to do?” I said.

“Try if it’ll cut. Split it like you do a shot when you go a-fishing.”

He picked the little pear-shaped piece from the sand, laid it on the stone beside us, and placing the edge of the knife upon it, pressed down hard, with the result that he cut a nick in the metal, which held on fast to the blade of the big knife.

“There!” I cried, triumphantly.

“I don’t believe it yet,” said Esau, hoarsely. “Are you sure it ain’t that pyrry stuff?”

“Certain!—that all splinters into dust if you try and cut it. I am sure that’s gold.”

“Ain’t much of it,” said Esau. “Take four times as much as that to make a half-sovereign.”

“Well, if we only got four times as much as that a day, it would mean three pounds a week. It is gold, and we’ve

made a discovery that Gunson would have given anything to see."

"And he's gone nobody knows where, and it's all our own," said Esau, looking cautiously round. "I say, think anybody has seen us?"

"What, up here?" I said, laughing.

"Ah, you don't know. I say, slip it into your pocket."

"Let's pick out the stones first."

"Never mind the stones," cried Esau; "slip it in. We may be watched all the time, and our finding it may turn out no good. I'll look round."

He looked up and ran back a little way, peering in amongst the tree-trunks and clumps of berries and fern. Then returning he went higher up the stream and searched about there before coming back.

"Don't see no one," he said, looking quite pale and excited at me. "I say, you're not playing any games are you?" he whispered, looking up.

"Games?"

"Yes; you didn't bring that and put it down there, and then pretend to find it?"

"Esau! As if I should!"

"No, of course you wouldn't. It is all real, ain't it?"

"Yes; all real."

"Then we shall have made our fortune just before they come out to us. Oh, I say! but—"

"What is it?"

"Shall we find this place again?"

"Yes; we only have to follow up the stream here, and it doesn't matter about this one place: there must be gold all the way up this little river right away into the mountains."

"But it will be ours, won't it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"But we found it—leastwise you did. All this land ought to be yours, or ours. I say, how is it going to be?"

"I don't understand you," I said.

"I mean about that. I s'pose you consider you found it?"

"Well, there isn't much doubt about that," I said.

"Oh, I don't see nothing to laugh at in it. All right, then. I don't grumble, only you can't say as all the country up here is to be yours."

"Of course not. What do you mean?"

"Oh, only that I don't see no fun in your making a fortune and me being left nowhere. I want a fortune too. I'm going to hunt now for myself."

"Nonsense!" I cried; "what is the use of your going away? Isn't there enough here for both of us?"

"Dunno," said Esau, scratching his head. "That is what I want to know; you ain't got much yet."

"Why, Esau," I said, struck by his surly way, "we were the best of friends when we came out."

"Yes; but we hadn't found gold then—leastwise you hadn't."

"But what difference does that make?"

"Ever so much. You're going to be rich, and I ain't. Every one ain't so lucky as you."

"But, Esau," I cried, "of course you will share with me. We found it together."

"Say that again."

"I say that we will share together."

"What, go halves?"

"Of course."

“You mean it?”

“Why, of course I mean it. You’ve as good a right to the gold we find as I have.”

“Here, shake hands on it.”

I laughingly held out my hand, which he seized and pumped up and down.

“I always thought your father was a gentleman,” he cried. “Now I feel sure as sure of it. Halves it is, and we won’t tell a soul.”

“But we must,” I cried.

“What, and let some one come and get it all?”

“I should only tell some one who has a right to know: Mr Raydon.”

“What right’s he got to know?” cried Esau. “I say, don’t go and throw it all away.”

“I consider that Mr Raydon, who has welcomed us here and treated us as friends, has a perfect right to know.”

“But it’s like giving him a share in it.”

“Well, why not?”

“But, don’t you see, it will be thirds instead of halves, and he’ll want to bring some one else in, and it ’ll make it fourths.”

“Well, and if he did? Sometimes a fourth is better than a half. I mean with the help of a clever man we should get more for our fourth than we should if we had half apiece.”

“Oh, all right. I s’pose you know,” he cried; “but I wouldn’t tell any one else.”

“Of course I’m right,” I said, sharply.

“And we couldn’t go on getting the gold here without his knowing it. So you’d better tell him.”

“That’s a nice selfish way of looking at it, Master Esau,” I said.

“Dessay it is,” he replied; “but gold makes you feel selfish. I dunno that I feel so glad now that we’ve found it.”

And I don’t think I felt quite so excited and pleased as I had a short time before.

“It ain’t my fault,” said Dean; “it’s your thinking I didn’t want to play fair.”

“Don’t talk like that,” I cried, angrily. “Who thinks you don’t want to play fair? No, no; don’t say any more about it. Now then: can we recollect this spot exactly?”

“Why, you said that there must be gold all along.”

“Yes, I know,” I cried; “but Mr Raydon may want to see the place, and we must bring him where we can find some and show him directly.”

“Well,” said Esau, “there’s a clump of fir-trees on this side, and a clump of fir-trees on that side.”

“Oh, you old stupid,” I cried, “when there are clumps of fir-trees everywhere. That won’t do.”

“Well then, let’s make a cross with our knives on those twisting ones.”

“What, to tell people this is the very place? That wouldn’t do.”

“Well then,” he cried, peevishly, “you find out a better way.”

I stood thinking a few minutes, but no better way came. Then I thought I had hit out the plan.

“Look here,” I said, “we’ll make the two crosses on the other side of the trees. No one would notice them then.”

Esau burst into a hoarse laugh.

“Of course they will not,” he said, “nor us neither. Why, you keep on coming to trees like these over and over all day long. We shan’t find ’em again.”

I felt that he was right, and thought of plan after plan—putting stones in a heap, cutting off a branch, sticking up a post, and the like, but they all seemed as if they would attract people to the spot, and then induce them to search about and at last try the sand as Quong did, and I said so.

“Yes,” said Esau, “that’s right enough. There ain’t many people likely to see ’em but Indians, and I s’pose they won’t go gold-washing, nor any other washing, for fear of taking off their paint.”

“Well, what shall we do?” I cried. “We mustn’t lose the place again now we have found it, and we shall be sure to if

we don’t mark it. I’ve seen hundreds of places just like this.”

“Well then, why not make a mark?” said Esau. “Because whoever sees it will be sure that it means something particular, for some one to stop and search.”

“Make a mark then on that big tree which will tell ’em to go on,” said Esau, grinning.

“But how?”

“I’ll show you,” he said; and he took out his big knife from its sheath. “Let’s look round again first.”

We looked round, but the silence was almost awful, not even a bird’s note fell upon our ears. Once a faint, whistling sound came from the far distance, that was all; and Esau went up to the biggest fir-tree whose trunk was clear of boughs, and he was about to use his knife, when we both jumped away from the tree. For from close at hand came a sharp, clear tap, as if somebody had touched the ground with a light cane.

“What’s that?” whispered Esau, with his eyes staring, and his mouth partly opened.

I shook my head.

“Some one a-watching us,” he whispered. “Here, let’s dive right in among the trees and see.”

But I held his arm, and we stood in that beautiful wild ravine, listening to the rippling of the water, and peering in among the tall pines, expecting to see the man who had made the sound.

“I say,” whispered Esau, “I can’t see or hear anything. Ain’t it rather rum?”

He said “rum,” but he looked at me as if he thought it very terrible, with the consequence that his fear was contagious, and I began to feel uncomfortable as we kept looking at each other.

“Shall we run?” whispered Esau.

At another time such an idea would not have occurred to him. The forest and the streams that run up the valleys were always solitary, but we felt no particular dread when going about, unless we saw the footmarks of bears. But now that we were in possession of the secret of the gold, the same idea of our being watched impressed us both, and we turned cold with fear, and all because we had heard that faint blow on the ground.

I don’t know whether I looked pale as I stood by Esau, when he asked me if we should run, but I do know that the next moment I felt utterly ashamed of myself, and in the reaction—I suppose to conceal my shame for my cowardice—I struck Esau heavily on the shoulder and made a false start.

“Run—run—the Fort!” I cried. Esau bounded off, and I hung back watching him till he turned to see me standing there laughing, when he stopped short, looking at me curiously, and then came slowly to where I was.

“What did you say run for?” he cried, angrily.

“You asked me if you should,” I replied.

“Then there ain’t no one coming?”

“No.”

“What a shame!” he cried. “It’s too bad.”

“Yes, for us to be frightened at nothing. Do you know what that noise was?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“It was a squirrel dropped a nut or a fir-cone. Why, it’s just the same noise as you hear in the country at home when they drop an acorn.”

“Then why didn’t you say so? I’ve never been in no countries where squirrels shies nuts and acorns at people. I’ve always seen ’em in cages spinning round and round.”

“That’s what it was, Esau. There’s nobody watching. Now then, how are you going to mark the tree?”

He looked at me rather sulkily, but began to smile directly, as he drew his keen-edged knife across the trunk of the great tree upon which he was going to operate before. Then, making a parallel incision close to the first, he produced a white streak where he removed the bark.

“Well,” I said, “that’s as bad as anything.”

“No, it ain’t: wait a bit,” he said; and carving away at the thick bark, he made four deep incisions at one end so as to form an arrow-head, and eight at the other end for the feathering of the arrow, so that when he had ended there was a rough white arrow on the red bark pointing down the river, and of course in the direction of the Fort.

“There!” he said, triumphantly. “No brave will think that means gold in the stream, will he?”

I confessed that it was most unlikely, and we started off home.

“Wouldn’t old Quong like to know of that?” I said.

“Yes; he’d give something—half of what he found I dare say,” cried Esau; “but he isn’t going to know, nor anybody else, from me.”

Chapter Thirty Five.

“On my Word of Honour.”

I felt rather startled when we left the valley, for we came suddenly upon a large party of Indians who seemed very different to the quiet, stolid-looking beings we had been accustomed to see with their skin canoes, or busy fishing along the side of the river. These were swarthy, fierce-looking fellows, mounted on sturdy, wiry-looking ponies—steeds which they sat admirably.

It might be thought that they would be as much surprised and startled as we were, but they did not make a sign to indicate that they even saw us, but rode slowly along, well armed, and with their long hair, feathers, and gaily-coloured blankets, giving them a brightly picturesque look.

“They don’t mean mischief, do they?” whispered Esau.

“No, they must be friendly Indians,” I said; “and look, they’ve got packs on those other horses. I know: they are taking skins up to the Fort.”

This proved to be the case, for the party kept right on in the same track as we were taking, halting a short distance from the gate of the Fort; but, though we were pretty close to them all the time, they never made the slightest sign of being aware of our presence; and when we entered, and I glanced back, I could see that they were already beginning to make their little camp, while others were seeing to the laden horses.

“What!” said Mr Raydon, when I told him of my discovery. “Gold?”

“Yes; and I think in large quantities.”

“Are you sure it is gold?” he said. I took out what I had found, and placed the little scales before him. He seized them, and examined them carefully, closing his hand over them afterward, and sitting gazing straight before him for some moments, while a chill of dread ran through me.

“It is not gold,” I thought; and as I gazed at him intently, he looked up. “Well?” he said.

“You think it is not gold, sir?” I said. “I am sure it is,” he replied, sadly. “Tell me whereabouts you found it;” and I described the place.

“Yes,” he said; “one of our most lovely valleys. Here, are you tired?”

“No.”

“Are you?” he said, turning to Esau, who replied that he was not the least so.

“Stop a moment—to whom have you spoken?”

“Spoken, sir?”

“How many people about the place have you told about the gold?”

“No one, sir.”

“Neither of you?” he said, with a sharp look at Esau.

“We came straight to you,” I said, “because I felt that you ought to know about it, and I thought you would give us your advice.”

He laid his hand on my shoulder, and gripped it fast, speaking very firmly, but in a kindlier tone than I had heard from him before.

“That’s right,” he said, “quite right. We’ll go up there at once, and see if this is an important discovery, or only one of the little patches that are found at times.”

“Then no one saw you there?” he said, after a few minutes’ thought.

“We did not see a soul, sir, till we came out of the little valley, and found that party of Indians coming here.”

He stood with his brows knit, thinking deeply, and then he nodded his head sharply.

“Yes,” he said, “we’ll go at once. Come along.”

He led us to his garden, and out of the shed took a shovel and a shallow wooden basket.

“You lads can carry these,” he said, “and I’ll take my rifle. It will look as if we are going on some pleasure trip. One

minute, though, while I give orders about those Indians."

He spoke to his second in command, giving him some instructions, whose import I did not understand then; and afterwards we strolled out through the gate slowly enough, and wandered away along the track and down by the lake, Mr Raydon stopping every now and then to pick up some flower or stone to which he drew my attention.

This went on till we were out of sight of the Fort, when his whole manner changed.

"Now, boys," he said, sharply, "on as fast as you can. How far is it from here?"

"About two hours' walk," I said.

"Then we shall not be back much before dusk; so best leg foremost."

It was quite the two hours before we got to the spot where the tree was blazed, and Mr Raydon's keen eyes detected the sign long before we were abreast of it.

"Your mark to show the spot, eh?" he said. "Very ingenious. It would have deceived me. Now wait a few minutes."

He walked forward for a few hundred yards, and then returned.

"No one has been along here," he said. "There is not a footmark. Now then; to work."

He stood his rifle against a tree, stripped off his boots and stockings, and signed to me to do the same.

"You, my lad," he said to Esau, "keep watch by my rifle, and at the slightest sign or sound give me warning. Now then, Gordon, in with you and use the shovel."

I stepped into the stream, where it was shallow, and in obedience to his instructions plied the tool, and threw three or four spadefuls into the shallow wooden basket, which he held down then in the running water, and rapidly agitated, giving it a curious circular motion, and letting the light sand run with the water over the side. Then he stopped from time to time to pick out stones.

"Another shovelful," he said, "from that place. Yes," he continued, as I obeyed him; "now another from as deep as you can. In with it."

Thus in the late afternoon, with the sun getting low, and throwing our shadows far over the stream, he worked the basket about in the water somewhat after the manner adopted by Quong, but of course on a large scale, for the basket was heavy with what I had thrown in, and it made the muscles stand out in knots upon his arms where he had rolled his sleeves up to his shoulders; and I remember thinking, as I gazed at his sun-browned face and grey hair, what a fine thing it must be to feel so big and strong and manly.

Esau stood resting on the rifle, for he could not resist the temptation of taking hold of it to stand like a sentry, while I, nearly up to my knees in water, raised one foot and rested it on the blade of the shovel, as intent as my companion, and, I am afraid, indulging in all kinds of golden dreams of wealth and position, and of how happy we should all be.

It did not take long to arrange what I should do for Mrs John Dempster. I know I had determined upon a carriage and pair, with a very careful coachman, expressly for her use; though how it was to be got out to that wilderness, or used there, I did not stop to think. I only meant her to grow well and strong, and have every luxury, while Mr John could be a perfect country gentleman, and study, and be my friend. That gold was to be regular Arabian Nights wealth, and I felt already quite a prince. These ideas floated rapidly through my brain, while Mr Raydon made a low washing noise with the tiny basket, and discoloured the flowing water as he let the fine sand pass away.

All at once he stopped, held the dripping basket—every drop which ran from it turned to ruddy gold by the sinking sun—tightly between his knees, and again rapidly picked out the larger stones, sending them flying about, to fall with a splash in the water.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"No, my boy, no," he said. "I have done this thing before. One can manage it best."

Just then I heard a sigh from Esau, who could not refrain in his anxiety from coming nearer the river.

This made Mr Raydon look up sharply, and he smiled.

"Hullo, sentry," he said, "you're not keeping a good look out. Mind what you are about with that rifle."

"Yes, sir, I'll be very careful," said Esau, "and I am looking out well."

"For the gold," said Mr Raydon, in an undertone, which words I caught, as he went on picking and throwing out smaller stones, then washing the basket round again and again, and the more he worked, the more his countenance seemed to change, till it looked older and more careworn than I had ever seen it before.

I knew that there were a few scales and beads of gold, for I had seen them glisten in the sunshine as he rapidly moved the basket but directly after I felt horribly disappointed, for he set it right down in the water, the weight of stones within it keeping it at the bottom, and splashed toward me.

"Here," he said roughly, "give me the shovel."

I gave it into his hand, and he waded half across to where there was an eddy behind a huge mass of rock, and bending down here, he scraped away the stones and sand, as if trying to make a hole, discolouring the water right along the stream. Then, forcing the shovel down as far as he could drive it, he brought up a dripping quantity of sand and small gravel, placed it in the basket, returned for another shovelful, and placed it with the other before handing the shovel to me.

“If there is much gold,” he said, “it would lie at the bottom of that eddy, where it would be swept when the stream is in flood. Now, then, we shall see.”

For another ten minutes he went on washing again, while I could see Esau, as he crept nearer and nearer, perspiring with impatience, and glancing up and down what in the setting sun now seemed to be a golden valley, for water, rocks, and the ferns seemed to be tinted of a ruddy yellow, and the tall fir-trees stood up like spires of gold.

At last I caught a glimpse of something bright again, but I could not be sure that there was more gold in the basket; it might only be the stones glistening in the wonderful ruddy light that filled the ravine.

“Hah!” ejaculated Mr Raydon, and he once more set down the basket beneath the water. “Hard work. What trouble men take to get gold!”

“There is some in the basket, isn’t there, sir?” I said anxiously, and in no wise prepared for the result.

“We’ll see directly,” he said. “Let’s get out of this. The water is bitterly cold.”

He waded out now with the basket, from which the golden water dripped as if the contents were melting.

“Why, there is some,” cried Dean, excitedly.

“Some?” cried Mr Raydon, bitterly. “Unfortunately, yes. Look!” and he held the basket sidewise in the full blaze of the glowing sun, giving it a shake, so that we could see scales, beads, and tiny nuggets dotted about among the flashing stones, and all looking of that beautiful pure yellow colour which is possessed alone by native gold.

“Why, there must be pounds,” cried Esau, excitedly.

“Pish!” ejaculated Mr Raydon, contemptuously. “How you boys let your imagination go wild! There must be, however, a full ounce—a wonderful washing for the trial.”

“Then you are not disappointed, sir?” I said, eagerly.

“Yes,” he cried, turning upon me fiercely; “horribly.”

“But there must be quantities more, sir.”

“Yes. I was in hopes that it was a mere patch, but everything points to the fact that the stream is rich, and it may be far better higher up.”

“But you said you were disappointed, sir?” I said, as he sat down, and began to replace his stockings and boots.

“I am boy, horribly.”

“With all that wealth before us?”

“Yes. Do you know what it means?”

“Riches for us all, sir,” I said, proudly.

“Hah! Look here, boy. I have been out in these glorious valleys many years now. The place is a perfect Eden, where nature smiles upon us, and wealth showers her golden gifts. You know my home, and that no troubles come, save some trifle with the Indians now and then. Do you know what would happen if it were known that this ravine teems with gold?”

“We should set to work and make fortunes of it, sir, and not let it be known.”

“Bah! Impossible, Gordon. In one month from now the news would have spread; and as long as the gold lasted, this place would be turned from a Paradise into a horror. The scum of the American population would float here, with all the lawlessness that was in California in its early days. Drinking-bars and gambling-saloons would rise like mushrooms; and where now all is beauty and peace, there would be robbery, violence, murder, drunkenness, and misery too horrible to contemplate.”

“What!” I cried, incredulously, “because a rich supply of gold is found?”

“Yes. I have seen it all, and I know,” he cried; “and I have often hoped and prayed that no gold might be found near here. Gold can be made a blessing, but too often it has proved a curse.”

I looked at Esau, and in spite of my trouble and disappointment as I saw my fortune fading away, and with it Mrs John’s carriage and my life of ease and plenty, I could not help smiling, for my companion’s face was comic in the extreme.

“There, let’s get back,” said Mr Raydon, stamping his feet in his heavy boots.

“But what—”

“Am I going to do with the gold?” he said, quickly. “Oh, we’ll take it home with us. Dig up a root or two of those ferns to put in the basket, and hide what we have found.”

“Then you will not work for the gold with us, sir?” I said, as Esau stood holding the rifle, listening eagerly.

“No,” said Mr Raydon, sternly. “And now listen. I am chief officer of this fort and station. I am, so to speak, almost a king here among these people; and amongst the tribes who come to trade I am their father and chief of chiefs, and my word is law.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” I said.

“You two lads were sent out to me by my thoughtless brother-in-law, who is always meaning well and doing ill. You were delighted by the prospect, and did not see what a mad scheme it was. As it happens, all has turned out well, though it is almost a miracle to me that you have both reached me in safety.”

I thought of Gunson, and how we could not have done it without his help; and as I thought of him, I recalled the object of his visit to this region—prospecting for gold and other metals—and of what he would say to our discovery.

“Well,” said Mr Raydon, “you reached me safe and sound, and though I was annoyed at your coming and being thrown on my hands as you were, I think I may say I have not treated you unkindly.”

“Indeed you have not,” I cried earnestly, as I held out my hand to him. “You have been very generous to us both, sir, and I am most grateful.”

“Then prove it,” he cried, gripping my hand.

“How, sir? What shall I do?”

“Hold your tongue. Do not say a word of your discovery to a soul. Above all, that friend of yours, Gunson, the prospector, must never know.”

“Not tell any one, sir? Not make use of our discovery?”

“No,” he said, firmly. “Promise.”

“Oh, I say!” cried Esau.

“And you too, sir!” said Mr Raydon.

I stood looking at him for a few minutes, thinking as he fixed his eyes on mine, and then I pressed his hand firmly.

“Yes, sir; I promise.”

“On your word of honour as a gentleman’s son?”

“On my word of honour as a gentleman’s son, sir,” I said, proudly.

“That will do,” he said, releasing my hand, and smiling at me warmly. “I like that, Mayne, better than any oaths. Now, Esau Dean, what have you to say?”

“Oh, I don’t like it at all, sir,” said Esau, bluntly; “but him and me’s been mates all through, and I won’t go back from anything he says. But it is disappointing, now ain’t it?”

“It seems so to you, my lad,” said Mr Raydon, kindly; “but give me your promise, and it may prove of more value to you than your share of the gold. You see I give up my claim, and mine would be a big one if I liked to exercise it, I dare say.”

“Am I to promise, Mr Gordon, sir?” said Esau.

“Yes, just as I have.”

“All right, I promise too.”

“I look to you both to keep your words.”

“I shan’t tell nobody unless he does,” said Esau, gruffly, as he stood the rifle against a stone.

“And he will not,” said Mr Raydon. “There, let’s get back. I never leave the place as a rule when Indians are about.”

“Are they dangerous?” I asked.

“No; and yet not to be trusted. What savages really are, Gordon? Thanks, my lad,” he said, as I dug up and placed a couple of fern-roots with their spreading fronds in the basket, so as to completely cover the fine gravel at the bottom, and the gold. “We must wash it again when we get back,” he continued, “and then divide it in two equal portions, for you lads to keep as a memento of to-day’s work. Now, Dean, give me my rifle.”

Esau ran back to where he had stood the rifle, and was coming back, when he tripped and fell.

At the same moment it seemed to me that some one struck me a violent blow beneath my left shoulder which drove me partly round, and made me drop the basket just as there was a sharp report, followed by a peculiar ringing in my ears, and then all was blank.

Chapter Thirty Six.

My Doctor and Nurse.

When I opened my eyes again it was with a horrible sensation of sickness at my heart, and my eyes swam, but I could dimly make out Mr Raydon's face, as he leaned over me, and I heard him say, as if he was speaking a very long way from me in a very small voice—

"That's right; go on. Keep bathing his face."

Then I heard Esau speak in a faint choking voice.

"Oh, sir! oh, sir! He won't die, will he? Tell me he won't die."

"I tell you to keep on bathing his face. There, take that basket and throw the wretched gold back into the stream. The basket will hold a little water at the bottom. No, no! squeeze what you have in your handkerchief first over his face."

There was a cool refreshing sensation on my face directly after, and all the time I could hear that Esau was in great trouble, for he kept on softer with a curious moaning voice—

"Oh—oh—oh—oh!"

It seemed very strange, and sounded to me as if it was all occurring some distance off, and I wanted to shout to him, and ask what was the matter. But Mr Raydon was still leaning over me, pulling me about it seemed, and a sharp pain suddenly shot through me, and made me wince.

"Don't—don't," I said, faintly; but he kept on burning me, so it seemed to me, with a red-hot iron in the chest; and after doing this for some time, while Esau kept on after a bit making his low moaning sound and splashing water over my face, Mr Raydon turned me over, and began burning me on the back.

I wanted to struggle, and tell him to leave off, but no words would come; and he kept on hurting me dreadfully, and pushing me about, for what seemed to be a terribly long time, before he turned me again upon my back.

"Oh, do tell me, sir, please do tell me, whether he'll die," I heard Esau say again, and I fancied that I caught sight of him through a thick cloud.

"I cannot tell you, my lad," I heard Mr Raydon say. "Please God! no."

"But I shot him, sir; I shot him. It was me, and I declare to goodness I'd sooner have shot myself."

"Yes, my lad, I believe you," said Mr Raydon, very faintly, from further away now.

"Is it—is it right through the heart?"

"No, no, no, not, so bad as that. The bullet has passed right through just below the shoulder."

"There—then he'll bleed to death," groaned Esau.

"No; I've stopped that. Quick! more water; he's going off again."

"He's dying! he's dying!" cried Esau, very close to me now, as it seemed to me; but his voice died out quickly, beginning as a shrill cry and ending in a faint whisper, and it all grew dark and silent for a time. Then once more I seemed to wake up with a shrill-toned bell ringing loudly in my ears; and I lay with a terrible sensation of deathly faintness till I heard Esau say, close to me—"I'll carry him, sir."

"No, no, my lad."

"But you don't know how strong I am, sir."

"We must not shake him more than we can help, and he must be in an easy position. Have you your knife? I left mine."

"Yes, sir, here," cried Esau; and then in a low voice, "Oh, poor chap! poor chap!—what have I done!"

I lay very still then, listening to a hacking noise as if some one were chopping with a knife, and I listened again for what seemed a long time to a good deal of rustling and panting, and what sounded like the tearing up of handkerchiefs.

"There," said Mr Raydon, "if we are careful that will bear him. Now then—no, wait a moment. I must tie the rifle to this pole. I want something else."

"Here's my other boot-string, sir," I heard Esau say.

“Yes, capital. That will do. Now, are you ready? Get hold of his legs quietly; don’t hesitate, and when I say *now*, both lift together.”

I had some faint, wondering thought as to whom they were talking about, when a terrible pang shot through me, and I felt myself lifted up and laid down again on what felt like a bed of fir-branches. The sickness did not increase, and I lay there listening to some one moaning as if in pain, while I became conscious of a curious, swinging motion as I was being gently borne up and down and carried through the air.

Then I seemed to fall into an uneasy sleep, and to lie and dream about Mr Raydon burning my chest with red-hot irons, and these changed to little nuggets of gold which burnt me every time they touched my chest or back. At times the pain ceased, and then it began again, always with the swaying motion, while now and then, when the movement ceased, I began to dream of cool fresh water moistening my brow, and being trickled between my burning lips.

That was a long, wearisome, painful dream, which lasted for what felt like an indefinite time, to be succeeded by other dreams in which the terrible bear’s head from Mr Raydon’s office was always pursuing me, and the great moose’s head looking on in a melancholy, pitiful way.

And it did not appear strange to me that as I tried to escape and started on up and up a ravine where the sun scorched my brains, that the heads should be following without, any bodies. There they always were, the bear’s head with the huge teeth waiting to seize me if I only halted for a minute, and the moose’s head hurrying on to be there and pity me when I was caught.

How I seemed to toil in terrible agony to get away, the sun burning, and the way up which I climbed growing more and more stony with precipices, down which I was always about to fall! Then great rows of the heads of the mountain sheep came in my way with their large curled horns threatening to drive me back into the jaws of the grizzly bear, which was always close behind. It seemed hidden sometimes behind heaps of skins, but I always knew it was there, and its great muzzle came out again.

I tried to run—to climb further, but something held me back, and the burning on my head grew terrible. I was thirsty too, and I thought that the moose pitied me, and would show me the way to water; but it only looked at me mournfully till I awoke in the darkness, and lay wondering for a few minutes before I stretched out my hand and felt that I was in my bed, and as I lay there, I suddenly saw in the darkness the shape of my door formed by four faint streaks of light which grew brighter, and directly after there was the sharp point of light where the keyhole was, near one side.

It seemed very strange, and more so that the door should open directly after, and Mr Raydon be standing there in his shirt and trousers carrying a candle.

“What does he want?” I thought to myself in a confused way, as I saw him come into our room, and the light fell on Esau, who was not undressed, but lying on his bed with his mouth wide open.

Suddenly he started up, and Mr Raydon raised his hand, and I heard him say, “*Sh*!” The next minute he was holding the candle over my bed, looking in on my face.

“What’s the matter?” I said; “I’m not asleep;” but it did not sound like my voice speaking.

It was Mr Raydon’s turn now, and he whispered to me—

“Lie quite still, Mayne. Are you in much pain?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know. My shoulder aches.”

“Don’t talk; try and go to sleep again.”

I looked up at him in a confused, puzzled way, and as I looked his face began to grow misty, and the candle to burn more dimly, till both faded slowly away, and all was dark once more.

I opened my eyes once more, and there was Mr Raydon standing by me with a candle, and it was so faint that I could not be sure; and so it was again and again as it seemed to me, and when I opened my eyes at last, the bedroom window was wide, the sun shining in, and bringing with it the sweet lemon-scented odour of the pines, and Esau was seated there watching me.

“Hush!” he said, as I was opening my lips to speak. “Mustn’t talk.”

“Nonsense,” I said; “I want to know.”

I stopped there, for my voice puzzled me, and I lay wondering for a few moments, till, like a flash of the sunshine coming into my darkened brain, I recollected the blow, the report of the rifle, and Esau’s cry, and knew that the rifle had gone off when he fell, and I was lying there badly wounded.

“Mr Raydon said you wasn’t to speak a word,” said Esau, softly; and he stole out of the room so quietly that I knew he must be without his boots.

A few minutes passed, and the door opened again, with Mr Raydon coming in on tiptoe to advance and take my right hand within his left, and place a couple of fingers on my wrist. I smiled as he played the part of doctor like this, and he smiled back.

“Don’t talk,” he said; “I’ll do that, my lad. Come, this is better. Not so feverish as I expected. Just whisper when I ask

a question. Feel in much pain?”

“My shoulder aches and burns,” I said.

“Yes; it will for a time; but that will soon go off. You remember now about the accident? Yes? That’s right. You were a little delirious last night, and made me anxious, for we have no doctor hereabouts.”

“Don’t want one,” said Esau, softly.

Mr Raydon asked me a few more questions, cautioned me not to speak much, and to lie quite still, and then left us together.

Esau sat looking at me for a few minutes with his arms rested upon his extended knees.

“I say, you’re not to talk, you know, but I may. I say, I am so sorry. Hush!—no! You mustn’t say you know that, or anything else. I only want to tell you it was an accident. You do know, don’t you?”

I nodded, and then lay back with my eyes closed; the pain caused even by that slight movement being agonising.

Dean saw it, and rose to moisten a sponge with cool water, and apply it to my temples, with the effect that the faint sensation coming on died away.

“Don’t—please don’t try to move again,” he whispered, piteously. “You don’t know how it hurts.”

The idea of its hurting Esau sounded so comical to me in my weak state that I could not help smiling. “That’s right,” he said; “laugh again, and then I shall know I needn’t go and fetch him. I say, do make haste and get better. Shall I tell you all about it? Don’t speak; only say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ with your eyes. Keep ’em open if you mean *yes*, and shut ’em for *no*. Now then, shall I tell you?”

I kept looking at him fixedly.

“That means yes. Well, I was bringing the gun, when I tripped and fell and it went off, and I wished it had shot me instead.”

Esau gave a gulp here, and got up and began to walk up and down the room, pressing first one hand and then the other under his arms as if in pain from a cut at school with the cane; and for some moments the poor fellow was suffering so from emotion that he could not continue. At last he went on in obedience to an eager look from my eyes.

“I run up just as he caught you, and tore off your things. Oh, it was horrid. I felt when I saw what I’d done, and him bandaging you up, as if I’d killed you. But you don’t feel so bad now. You ain’t going to die, are you? Say you ain’t.”

I kept my eyes fixed on his, forgetting in my excitement what I ought to have done, when a cry brought me to myself, and I closed my eyes sharply.

“Ah, that’s better,” cried Esau, and kneeling down by my bed he went on telling me how, as soon as I was bandaged, Mr Raydon cut two light poles and bound short pieces across them. Then on these he laid pine-boughs, and I was lifted up, for them to convey me slowly down the ravine, and back to the Fort.

“I say,” whispered Esau, “I thought last night he meant to cheat us, and get all the gold for himself; but I don’t think so now. Wish he liked me as much as he likes you. What? Do I think he does like you? Yes; I’m sure of it. He was in a taking last night. And I say—ain’t he quite a doctor too? He could do anything, I believe. There, I mustn’t talk to you any more, because you were to be kept quiet.”

It must not be imagined that Esau had kept on saying all the above to me rapidly, for one of these sentences was whispered very slowly now and then as I lay back feeling not much pain, but hot and feverish, and this change was noticed soon after by Mr Raydon when he came into the room.

“You have been letting him talk,” he said, angrily, as soon as he had taken my hand.

“That I ain’t, sir,” cried Esau, indignantly. “Never let him speak a word.”

“That’s right. He must be kept very still,” said our friend, and he hurriedly left the room.

“Rather hard on a chap when he has been so particular,” grumbled Esau. “Well, it was my doing, so I mustn’t mind.”

He was still grumbling when our host re-entered with something in a cup which he gave me a little at a time, so that I should not have to move, and soon after he had left me my eyelids grew heavy, and I fell into a deep sleep, which lasted till it was growing dark, and I could only just make out Esau’s head as he sat watching by my bed.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

In the Spring.

Ask anybody what is the most delicious thing in life, and see what he or she will say. I do not believe any one will tell you what I do now. It is to have been dangerously ill, to be brought down very weak, to be getting better, and then to be carried or led out to sit in the sunshine of some bright genial morning.

Ah! that long breath of sweet life-inspiring air—those trees—those flowers—the blue sky—the bark of that dog—those kindly words of inquiry—that all-round feeling of joy and delight at being out there once more; the sensation which will bring the weak tears in your eyes for the simple reason that you are so happy. Yes, it is a pleasant thing to have been very ill, if only for the sake of the thankful sensation that comes the first time you go out once more in the bright sunshine.

How delightful it was, and what a long weary dream of misery I had passed through! I hardly knew even then how bad I had been. When I spoke to Esau he used to screw his face up full of wrinkles, and shake his head, while Mr Raydon was as reticent.

“Never mind that,” he would say; “you are better now.”

I learned later though, that for several months he had been in great doubt of my recovery. My wound would not heal, consequent upon a ragged fragment of the rifle-bullet remaining beneath a bone, and when at last it did come away, I was weak in the extreme, and, as Esau said, “You couldn’t get a doctor when you liked out there.”

So there I lay all through the long dark days of the winter, listening sometimes to the howling of the winds from the mountains, then to the beat and rush of the rain, and then at my worst time wondering why everything was so quiet, and learning from Esau that we were snowed up deeply.

I remember that he used to talk rapturously about the beauty of the scene around, with the great pine-trees loaded down with snow, and the sun in the clear blue sky, making the crystals of ice glitter till his eyes ached.

“And you won’t get up and come and have a look,” he said. “You are a fellow.”

“Yes, I am a fellow,” I replied. “Don’t bother me, Esau. I want to go to sleep.”

“But you’re always going to sleep,” he cried; “and so much sleep can’t be good for you.”

All the same I passed through that long winter, and it seemed as if I never should be strong again.

But, as the old country folk say, “Never’s a long day”; and as the earth began to waken from its lone sleep, so did I, and at last I was dressed to sit by the bonny log fire Esau kept up as if he meant to roast me. There came a day when I sat with my window open, listening to the roar of the river, thinking and ready to ask myself whether it had all been a dream. Then another day, when the sun was shining, and the scent of the pines came to where I sat; and at last in the spring-time I was to go out for the first time. I had to lean on patient, constant Esau, and use a stick to get to where a chair had been set for me at the foot of a great Douglas pine, where the moss was golden green, and the barberry leaves bright with a purply bronze. The river ran foaming and splashing before me at the bottom of a slope, looking milky and dirty, but down the rocks close by tumbled and sparkled one of the many tiny streams, and this was clear as crystal, and the brook flashed like diamonds in the bright sunshine.

There was a great scarlet blanket thrown over the chair, ready to be drawn round me as soon as I had taken my seat; and as soon as Esau had safely piloted me there, looking serious as a judge all the time, he suddenly seemed to go mad, for he cut a curious caper, threw his cap high up in the air, and shouted “Hurrah.”

“There,” he cried, as I lay back smiling and content, “you just say you ain’t getting well, and I’ll pitch into you.”

“I’m not going to say it,” I said. “Oh, Esau, I do feel so weak, but so happy and well. I say though, don’t shoot me again.”

Esau’s countenance changed. All the pleasure faded out, and he turned his back, and began walking slowly away.

“Esau,” I said, “don’t go.”

“I must,” he said, stopping short, but without trying to face me. “Got to fetch your stoo. He said it was the best physic you could take.”

“But, Esau, I don’t want it now; I’m sorry I said that.”

“So am I; sooner ha’ shot myself hundreds o’ times. Wish I had shot myself dead instead, and then you wouldn’t be able to jump on me.”

“It was very unkind,” I said; “please forgive me.”

“All right, I’m going to fetch your stoo.”

He did not turn round, but walked away toward the gate of the palisade just as there was a fierce deep-toned barking, and Rough came bounding down toward my chair.

“He’ll knock me over,” I thought, as I saw his gleaming teeth, and the thick pile of hair about his neck, a natural armour which had protected him in many an encounter with wolf or bear. And for the moment it seemed as if the great animal would send me clean over as he charged wildly; but just as he was close to me he turned off, dashed away, came back, up and down, barking furiously, and ended by making a sudden stop, to stand there with his great muzzle laid in my lap, and his eyes looking earnestly up in mine.

I placed my hand upon his head, and as I did so I could not help thinking how thin and white it was; and this made me lie back recalling how bad I must have been, and how clever Mr Raydon had been to save my life, tending me as he had just like a doctor. That made me think too of every one else—the men’s wives, who had waited on me and

brought me flowers; Grey, who shot game; and above all of Quong and Esau, who had seemed to spend all their time in attending upon one who had been irritable, and as helpless as a baby.

As I thought, my fingers played about the great head in my lap, pulling the long ears, stroking the muzzle, and all the time the eyes blinked up at me, and once there was a long-drawn sigh as of satisfaction, which made me ready to fancy that even the dog was glad to see me out again after my long, weary illness.

All at once Rough raised his head and uttered a low, muttering growl, followed by a couple of short barks; and on looking round there were Esau and Quong coming, the latter bearing a basin and a plate of bread.

“Velly good soup,” said Quong, eagerly. “Velly stlong. Quite leady.”

He placed the basin on my knees, Rough drawing back a little, and looking as if it was hard work not to make a snatch at that cake and bear it off. But he had been well trained, and sat watching me patiently, content to catch the pieces thrown to him with a loud snap, while I partook of what Esau called my “stoo.”

It was very good, and “so stlong,” as Quong called it, that I felt as if I ought to feel the strength coming back into my weak arms and legs.

“Dlink um allee up,” said Quong; and I persevered and finished the contents of the basin, which he then took, nodded at me, and then turned to the dog, who stood now on all fours and barked at him fiercely.

“Hey?” cried Quong. “You say wantee allee bone left?”

There was a peal of furious barks here.

“Allee light. You come ’long. Velly good dog.”

Rough uttered another hoarse bay, and went off after the little Chinaman, looking so big by his side that I could not help thinking of what the consequences might have been if they had proved enemies instead of friends.

“Well, Esau,” I said, “I’m a long time growing well.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re getting on now fast. I say, do you ever think about that gold now?”

“Oh, yes,” I replied, with a shudder; “often.”

“Well,” he said, in an ill-used tone, “you needn’t think of the accident too. For it was an accident, you know.”

“Yes, we’ve talked about that times enough, all those weary months.”

“Yes, it was tiring, and it put a stop to all the hunting and shooting we might have had. But it’s been good as well as bad. You missed lots of bad weather, and cold, and snow.”

“What’s the day of the month?” I said.

“Day of the month? I dunno. End of March, they say, and it’s going to be fine weather now.”

“Has Mr Raydon ever said anything to you about the gold?”

“No, never a word. But I say, it do seem a pity not to get more of it, don’t it?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I want strength, not gold. How long will it be before Mr and Mrs John get here?”

“Ah, that’s what I want to know,” cried Esau. “I was thinking about that this morning; leastwise I wasn’t thinking about them, but about mother. Wonder what she’ll say to me when she knows?”

“Knows what?”

“’Bout me shooting you. She will be wild, for she was a deal fonder of you than she was of me.”

“Nonsense, Esau!” I cried. “Why, she used to talk to me about you for hours.”

“Dessay she did. But, I say, do make haste and get well before the Indians come again. Grey says they’ll be here soon with loads of skins that they’ve shot and trapped in the winter.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the coming of Mr Raydon.

“Ah, Mayne,” he said; “that’s better. You must keep that up every day when it’s fine. Fresh air and the scent of our pines form the finest strengthening medicine a sick man can have.”

He stopped chatting to me for some time, and at last I ventured upon the topic which interested both Esau and myself.

“How long do I think it will be before the travellers get across to us? Hah! that’s a poser, my lad. So much depends upon my sister’s health, and her ability to travel. Of course they have been resting during the worst time. However, I hope they will not be here till you are thoroughly on your legs again.”

Chapter Thirty Eight.

“Do I look fortunate?”

As the time glided on I used to be quite in despair.

“I don’t get any stronger, Esau,” I used to say, pettishly.

“What? Why, look at you!” he’d cry. “On’y t’other day you was walking with a stick and a crutch.”

“I was not,” I said, indignantly. “I never had a crutch.”

“That you did, sir,” he said, with a chuckle; “and now you’ve chucked ’em both away and goes alone.”

“But my legs feel so weak, and ache so directly.”

“Tchah! What o’ that! Why, only t’other day they used to double up like an old two-foot rule, or a knife with the spring broke. You’re coming all right enough. I say, I want to talk to you.”

He gave a sharp look round as we stood beside the stream where it entered the river—the stream up which we had found the gold, and to whose bank we had come to catch trout with rods and lines of our own manufacture, and grasshoppers for bait.

I had been fishing, but after taking three decent trout, I had lain down wearied out, and now Esau squatted down by me, with his rod across his knees.

“I say,” he whispered, “what about that gold up yonder?”

“Well, what about it?”

“Don’t you never think about it a deal?”

“Sometimes. Do you?”

“Always. I can’t get away from it. Seems as if something’s always tempting me to go and get it.”

“But you cannot,” I said, sharply. “We gave our word to Mr Raydon.”

“Yes, that’s the worst of it. I can’t think how a fellow can be so stupid.”

“Let it go, and don’t think about it.”

“That’s what I want to do, but I can’t help myself, and I’m always wanting to get lots of it, and be rich.”

“Rubbish!” I cried, testily.

“Gold ain’t rubbish,” said Esau, gruffly. “Of course I should give you half.”

“We promised Mr Raydon not to touch that gold any more,” I said; “so don’t talk or think about it. Promise me.”

“I’ll promise not to talk about it,” he replied; “but it’s no use to promise not to think about it, because it will come. Why, I dream about it every night.”

“Then you must not,” I said. “I was talking to Mr Raydon last night about what is to be done when Mr John comes.”

“Well, what does he say? Anything about the gold?”

“No,” I cried, fiercely. “Of course you think about it if you are always talking of it. He says that he thinks the best thing will be for Mr John to have some land lower down the river at a place we passed; that there are twenty or thirty acres of good rich soil, and that as he will have us with him, we must learn to use axes and help him to clear the land, and plant it with fruit-trees, and build a house on the clearing.”

“Yes; that’s all right enough, only the trees take so long to bear.”

“That he will help us with different things till we can manage alone; and that before many years are gone we can make ourselves quite a good home.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Esau. “But then that will take a long time, and you won’t be able to work much, and I don’t think Mr John Dempster will, not being strong, and all the time there’s enough gold up—”

“Will you hold your tongue?” I cried, angrily. “Do you want me to hit you?”

“If you like,” he said, grinning. “Don’t think you could hurt me much.”

“You coward!” I cried. “Wait till I get strong again.”

“I shall be precious glad,” said Esau, “for I’d a deal rather you gave me one or two cracks than kept on saying the things you do sometimes. My! how you have given it me ever since you have been ill! It has made you raspy.”

I winced a little at this, for I felt that I had been horribly irritable.

“I can’t help thinking about the gold, but I won’t say gold no more as long as I live.”

I could not help laughing at this earnest delivery, and Esau showed his teeth.

“There, I don’t care,” he said. “I’m happy enough here if you’ll get well. But I do wish old Gunson knew about it.”

I looked sharply at Esau, for these words of his impressed me. I had often wished that Gunson knew of what we had found, for I thought that perhaps he was struggling on without a bit of good fortune. The thoughts passed from my mind directly, as Esau began to make casts with his line here and there, as if fishing in the grass.

“Well, I don’t mind,” he said. “Turn farmer, eh?—and plant trees, and cut trees down, and build a house. All right. It will be good enough, and you and me will go and shoot and fish. I shall like it. Shall we have old Quong?”

“I suppose so, if he’ll stay. There, let’s go on fishing, and take back some trout for Mr Raydon’s tea. I do feel so idle and helpless. Do you think he ever feels that we are staying too long?”

“Dunno,” said Esau. “I should if I was him.”

These words made me feel very low-spirited, and that night I broached the subject to Mr Raydon, apologising for being there so helpless and weak, and ending by asking him if I had not better go down to the mouth of the river again.

He looked at me searchingly.

“Tired of this place?” he said.

“Oh no,” I replied. “I have been very happy here.”

“Then why do you talk of going?”

“Because I feel as if I must be a burden to you.”

“Indeed! Well, suppose I say go, and you make your way back along the river very slowly, for you are in a miserably weak state?”

“Yes, sir; but I am getting better now.”

“Yes, I know; but suppose, as soon as you are gone, my sister and her husband appear, what am I to say to them?”

“I had not thought of that,” I replied.

“But you see I had. But come, Mayne, be frank with me. You have some other reason for wanting to go.”

He looked at me so searchingly that I coloured, for I could feel my cheeks burning.

“No, sir,” I said; “no other reason.”

“Not gold-hunting?”

“No; indeed, no.”

“But you and Dean have been talking about your discovery a good deal.”

“I—I think not, sir,” I said, hesitatingly. “We have talked about it.”

“And what a pity it is for a fortune to be lying there untouched?”

“Dean thought something of the kind, sir. I did not.”

“Ha!” he said, as he again fixed me with his eyes. “No, Mayne, you must not think of going away. You have not exhausted my stock of hospitality yet.”

Perhaps it was fancy, I said to myself, but it certainly seemed to me during the next few days, whenever I went out for a good long stroll with Esau, some one seemed to be watching us.

One day it was Grey who encountered us somewhere on the mountain-side; another day it was one of the men; and again, on another, Mr Raydon himself, whose presence was announced by the great dog, who came bounding up, to be followed in a few minutes by his master.

He did not stay long, but as soon as he was gone I found that my feelings were shared by Esau himself.

“I say,” he growled, “are they afraid we are going to lose ourselves?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because whenever we come right away into the woods, they send that dog to scent us out.”

“Yes; they generally send somebody,” I said, thoughtfully.

“Do you know why?” whispered Esau.

I glanced at him, but did not answer.

“It’s because the chief’s afraid we shall go up yonder trying for gold.”

“And he does not trust us,” I said to myself, as I felt that Esau must be right; and the uncomfortable feeling of being suspected seemed to increase.

I was thinking about this a good deal, and had made up my mind to ask Mr Raydon if he thought I could be so dishonourable, when we neared the Fort, and I was startled back from my musings which were carrying me on through the interior, when Esau uttered a cheery hail.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

“Can’t you see? Look!” he cried.

“Gunson!” I exclaimed; and sure enough there he was, coming slowly towards us, looking very old and careworn, and as if he had gone through a great deal of trouble since we parted in the autumn.

“Why, my lad,” he cried, shaking hands with me warmly, “you look quite thin and white. Been ill?”

“Yes,” I said, as I grasped his hand warmly.

“Fever?”

“No,” I said, hesitatingly; “an accident.”

“Why don’t you tell him?” said Esau, sturdily. “I shot him.”

“You shot him?”

“Yes,” I said, quickly; “he let the rifle slip out of his hand somehow, and the ball hit me.”

“I’m not surprised,” cried Gunson, in a tone full of anger and contempt.

“Don’t say any more about it,” I cried. “It was an accident, and I’m getting better fast. Tell me about what you have been doing.”

Gunson laughed.

“Walking, wading in rivers, washing sand, climbing mountains, exposed to all sorts of weather, half-starved, half-frozen, and all to get the tempting gold.”

“No luck then?” said Esau, eagerly.

“Not a bit, my lad.”

“What, ain’t you found gold at all?”

“Oh, yes, in scores of places, but always where it would cost thirty shillings to earn a pound’s worth. Not profitable work, eh?”

Esau glanced at me, and I at Esau, the same thought in both our minds—that we could, in a couple of hours’ walk from where we were, show him—the wearied-out prospector—an ample supply.

“If I only could tell him,” I thought, as I recalled how generous and kind he had always been to us. But it was impossible, and I darted a look at Esau which he understood, for he nodded at me in a curious way, setting me thinking that I must speak to him seriously again about our duty to Mr Raydon. I had hardly thought this when I saw the latter coming towards us.

“Ah, Mr Gunson,” he said, with a sharp, keen glance, “you have kept your word, then, and come back.”

“Yes, I’ve come back, and shall be glad of a day or two’s rest.”

“You are welcome,” replied Mr Raydon. “Well, have you been very fortunate?”

“What a question to ask me!” said Gunson; “the most unlucky man that ever lived! Do I look fortunate?”

“No,” said Mr Raydon, smiling; “far from it. There, come up to my place, and let me hear what you have been doing.”

As we approached the strangers’ quarters, Quong made his appearance with his eyes twinkling.

“Plenty flesh tea,” he cried. “Plenty new blead.”

“Hullo, my Celestial friend,” said Gunson, smiling at the eager-looking little fellow. “Did you see me coming?”

“No. Not see. Gley tell me Mr Gunson come, and make tea dilectly, and cook bacon.”

“Ready to come on with me now, Quong?” said Gunson. “I’m going up the western part.”

Quong stared.

“What! Go away? No. Stop allee long here.”

“That’s right, my lad. Don’t leave good quarters. Been washing for gold lately?”

“Eh? Washee washee gole? Too much piecy make work. Cook along big meat. No go out at all. You likee likee flesh blead, not blead high.”

“Indeed, it will be a treat,” said Gunson, going into the place with Mr Raydon, while we kept back until he had finished his meal.

“I say,” said Esau, as we walked about the enclosure, “can’t little Quong tell fibseys.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I replied. “Why, I’ve met him twice up the river trying for gold.”

“Oh. I’ve seen him lots of times. He gets away when he has done his work, looking as innocent as you please, and all the time he’s hunting for gold. I say, you see if Mr Raydon don’t keep an eye on us for fear we should tell old Gunson. My! wouldn’t he like to know of our find. I can’t understand how it is that he who knows all about it should be so unlucky, and you—”

“We,” I said.

“Well, we, then—should be so lucky, and find so much. Dunno, though; it hasn’t brought us much luck as yet.”

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Quong is missing.

It was all done in a quiet, unobtrusive way, but it seemed plain to me that Mr Raydon did try to keep us apart, or under his eye, during Gunson’s stay.

This was not for long. The man seemed a good deal changed, and as if dissatisfied at being so very unsuccessful; and during his visit the temptation was very strong upon me to give him a hint as to where he might go and find all that he desired. And about this time I found that Esau looked strange, and avoided me a good deal, going about as if he had something on his mind, and I was afraid to ask him what.

“Going to-morrow morning?” said Mr Raydon, as Gunson made the announcement. “That is rather soon.”

“Well, yes, it is soon,” replied Gunson; “but I may be coming back.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mr Raydon, giving him a quick look. “You may be coming back.”

These seem trifling words, but they made an impression upon me at the time, and I thought about them a good deal afterwards. In fact, I thought of them that night.

It came on very dark, and I was standing just outside our place, when I heard a step, and directly after Gunson came up slowly and thoughtfully.

“Who’s that?” he cried sharply.

I spoke, and he took my arm.

“Come and have a stroll out here,” he said; and he led me out through the gateway and down toward the river.

It seemed to me as if he were waiting for me to talk to him, for he was very silent; and at last, as I suggested that it was growing late, he turned back toward the Fort, whose gates we had just reached, when I suddenly became aware of a figure standing there.

“Mr Raydon,” I said.

“Yes. Been having a walk?”

“Down as far as the river,” replied Gunson. “By the way,” he continued sharply, “what should you say to my trying your streams about here?”

I saw Mr Raydon start slightly, but his voice sounded quite calm as he replied—

“That you had better follow out your original plans.”

“You would not recommend me to try?”

“Decidedly not.”

We all went in, and after sitting for a time, Gunson rose to go to rest.

Quong had a famous breakfast ready next morning, of which I too partook; and an hour later we saw Gunson once more on his way, Mr Raydon accompanying us, till with a careless wave of the hand the prospector went off, and we

returned to the Fort.

That visit seemed to do me good. It was as if I had had a fillip, and during the next few days I felt a return of my old vigour—a feeling which made me restless and eager to be out in the sunshine all day long. I found myself eating, too, almost ravenously, and my sleep at nights, instead of being broken and feverish, grew to be long and restful. But somehow I did not feel happy, for Mr Raydon, though always pleasant and polite, was less warm, and he looked at me still in a suspicious way that made me feel uncomfortable.

In other respects everything went on as usual, till one day, about a fortnight after Gunson's departure, Mr Raydon said to me at breakfast—

"Do you feel strong enough to go for a week's journey?"

"Oh yes," I said eagerly, for I was beginning to long for something in the way of change.

"It means walking every step of the way," he said, smiling at my eagerness.

"Oh, I can walk again well now," I said. "Dean and I were climbing up the first west mountain yesterday—that one," I said, pointing out of the window. "I don't know how many hours we were, but it was dark when we came back."

"Well then, we'll try. I shall take Grey to try and lighten our loads a little, but we shall not go very far down the river."

"You are going down the river?" I said, as I saw Esau prick up his ears.

"Yes; I have two or three spots in my mind's eye that would be suitable for a home for my sister, and I want to see if they will do. Perhaps you noticed them as you came—places that you would naturally pick out for camping as evening came on."

"I can remember several at the mouths of little streams, or below falls," I said excitedly. "One or two were quite like bits of parks, with great sweeping branched pine-trees growing near."

"Good memory, Mayne," he said, smiling. "Well, I have made my arrangements. Your Chinaman shall go with us to cook, and we will select three or four spots; and afterwards, when these travellers come, we can take them to see the selection, and they can choose which they like."

"How soon shall you start, sir?" I said.

"This morning. It is a leisure period for me. No Indians are likely to come for some time; and I can leave my people to take care of the place till we return. You feel that you can manage the walking?"

"Oh yes," I cried. "I am getting stronger every day."

"That's right. Dean, my lad, fetch Quong, and let's see what sort of a load of flour, tea, and sugar we can pack up for him. I can easily supply our little camp with meat."

"Then there will be some hunting and shooting too?" I said, as Esau hurried out to find Quong.

"Oh yes, for the larder," replied Mr Raydon, speaking more in his old fashion now. "Come, you are beginning to look quite yourself, my boy. I was beginning to be afraid I should have nothing but a broken-down invalid to show my sister."

"I feel more like I did," I said, with my cheeks flushing.

"Be thankful then, my boy, for you had a very narrow escape. Let me see; we must not overload ourselves, but I must have powder and bullets, as well as my rifle. A blanket each, of course, and our knives. That will be nearly all we need take, unless you lads bring a line or two and try for some trout."

He began chatting then about Mr John and his sister, and of how great a change it would be for her from a London life.

"But health is the first consideration," he said, smiling. "A palace is little more than an infirmary to a sick person, and out here a snug cottage such as we can soon run up will become a palace to one who recovers health. Isn't Master Dean a long time gone? Oh, here he is. Well, where is Quong?"

"Can't find him anywhere, sir, nor his bundle neither."

"What? Absurd! He cannot have gone out. He cooked the breakfast. Did any one see him go?"

"I asked several of the men and women, sir, and they had not seen him."

"Asleep somewhere perhaps, as he feels that his work is done. Here, we must find him, or he will throw my arrangements all wrong, and we shall have to wait till another day. It's a pity I did not speak last night, but I was not sure then."

"I'll soon find him," I said.

"Yes, do, my lad, while I see to the rifle and ammunition."

"Come along, Esau," I said; and he followed me as I hurried out.

“Well, where are you going?” grumbled Esau. “I suppose you are very clever, but I should like to know how you are going to find him!”

“But you have not searched everywhere.”

“I’ve searched everywhere that he was likely to be,” replied Esau.

I stopped short, thinking as to which direction we had better take.

“Here, I know where he is,” cried Esau excitedly.

“Yes? Where?”

“Gone up one of the streams to try for gold on the sly. You see if he don’t find out our bit one of these days.”

“Perhaps he has gone for that,” I said thoughtfully.

“I feel sure of it. He has been away lots of times for a bit, and I shouldn’t wonder if he is getting that little physic-bottle of his pretty full.”

“He had better not let Mr Raydon know of it. He’d be in a towering rage,” I said. “Here, let’s hunt him out, and put a stop to it.”

“All right,” said Esau. “Here we are then. Which way shall we go?—east, west, north, or south, or half-way between any two of ’em. I’m willing; don’t make no difference to me.”

I stood and stared at him, for now I saw first how absurd my proposal was, and how unlikely we were to find Quong if we had really gone off on such a mission. Esau grinned.

“I say, ’tain’t so easy, is it?”

I made no reply, but stood thinking, and trying to find a solution to the difficulty.

“Seems to me,” said Esau, “that about the best way of finding this little gentleman is to go and sit down by his fire till he comes, for he goes off so quietly, and he may be anywhere now.”

“Let’s look round again,” I said, “and if we cannot find him we had better go and tell Mr Raydon.”

It was humiliating, but the only thing to do; and after asking at every cottage in the enclosure without effect, I turned to go back to Mr Raydon’s quarters, just as we saw the man Grey going in that direction.

“Why, he might know,” I said, hurrying my pace so that we entered almost at the same time, but too late to question him.

“Well,” said Mr Raydon, “have you found him?”

“No,” I replied; and then turning quickly to Grey, who had not yet spoken—“Have you seen anything of Quong?”

“Yes; he is at the west valley, I met him going there.”

“The west valley?” said Mr Raydon, starting and looking excitedly at the speaker. “What was he doing there?”

“Gone to join Mr Gunson and a party of men I suppose,” said Grey, slowly.

“Mr Gunson? Back?” I said wonderingly, but with a chill of dread spreading through me as I spoke. “What is he doing there?”

“Busy with the others. They have set up camp, and are washing for gold.”

I glanced at Mr Raydon, whose eyes were fixed on me, and I saw a furious look of anger gathering in his face, while Esau backed slowly toward the door.

“This is your doing, sir. Here, you—stop! don’t sneak away like that, and leave your companion in the lurch.”

“Wasn’t going to sneak away,” said Esau, surlily. “Go away then, you miserable coward. Well, Mayne Gordon, I hope you are satisfied. Is this your gratitude?”

I fully expected these words, but I was not prepared to answer him, and in the rush of his indignant accusation my defence was swept down, and I could only stammer out—

“You are mistaken, sir.”

“No,” he cried, “I am not mistaken. I told you when you made that unlucky discovery I wished to keep all the wild gold-seeking scoundrels away from my peaceful happy valley; and in spite of all I have done to welcome you for my sister’s sake, you give me evil for good.”

“Indeed you are wrong, sir; I have not told a soul,” I cried.

“Bah!” said Mr Raydon, furiously. “How can I think otherwise, when I see you holding half-secret meetings with that man Gunson, who returns in force to destroy this place? Well, my lad, I wish you joy of your share, but, mark my

words, this gold-seeking is miserable gambling, the work of men who will not see that the real way to find gold is in genuine honest work. Take the gold-seekers all round, and they would have made more of the precious metal by planting corn than by this digging and washing in the river-beds."

"Then you will not believe me, sir?"

"I cannot, my lad, after what I have seen," he said. "Your conduct has not seemed to me manly and frank."

"I have tried to be, sir," I cried.

"And failed, boy. The temptation of the gold has proved to be too much for you."

I stood silent now, for I could not speak. I wanted to say a great deal, but there was a swelling in my throat—a hot feeling of indignation and misery combined kept me tongue-tied, and above all there was a guilty feeling that he was just.

"As for you," Mr Raydon continued, turning to Esau, "I shall not waste words upon you. Of course you agreed with your companion, but you would both have done better for yourselves as lads, and earned better positions in life, by being faithful to me, than by letting yourselves be led away by this miserable temptation."

"I ain't done nothing," said Esau; "I only—"

"That will do," cried Mr Raydon, fiercely, cutting him short. "Now go."

"All right, sir," said Esau; and now I found my tongue again.

"Yes, Esau, we had better go," I said, bitterly. "Mr Raydon will some day find out how unjust he has been to us."

"That will do," cried Mr Raydon, sternly. "No hypocrisy, sir. Once for all, I know that you gave Gunson either full particulars or hints, such as enabled him to bring a gang to this peaceful place."

"Well, if you won't let a fellow speak," began Esau.

"Silence, sir!" cried Mr Raydon, as I moved towards the door. "And you, Gordon, where are you going?"

"I don't know, sir," I said.

"Then I do. You are going to join that wild crew up at the gold-washings."

"I was going to see and tell Mr Gunson of what had happened, sir."

"Exactly. Then I forbid it. You shall not go."

"You ain't got no right to keep us here if we want to go," said Esau, who was now losing: his temper fast.

"Indeed!" said Mr Raydon.

"You won't believe in a fellow—I mean this fellow," continued Esau; "and you don't believe Mr Gordon, so I'm going straight up to Mr Gunson to see if he will, and I'll trouble you to hand over that gold we found that day."

"Esau!" I cried, angrily.

"Well, you won't speak out, so I must. Come on. Much obliged for all you've done in keeping us, sir, and good-bye."

"Grey," said Mr Raydon, sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"See that those lads do not leave the Fort till I give them permission. When you go off duty Hanson is to take your post."

"What?" cried Esau, as I felt my cheeks burning with indignation, "ain't we to be allowed to go out?"

"Am I to put them in the block-house, sir?" said Grey.

"No; they can occupy the strangers' quarters, but they are not to pass the gates. That will do. Go!"

Chapter Forty.

Inopportune Arrivals.

I hardly remember how I left Mr Raydon's office, but I do recollect seeing the bear's head grinning at me, and that of the moose gazing at me in its weak, sorrowful way. My head felt hot, and I was bitterly angry; so that when Grey went from us without speaking, after leading us to the strangers' quarters, it only wanted a few words from Esau to make me turn upon him fiercely.

"Look here," he said, "this ain't England, and there's no police and madgistrits about, so I'm not going to stand it. He ain't everybody. I'm off."

“To the gold-washings?” I said. “Don’t you think you’ve done mischief enough by betraying it to Mr Gunson?”

“Oh, come, I like that,” cried Esau.

“That’s pleasant, that is. Say it was me, eh? Why, you know you told him.”

“I told him?”

“Well, he coaxed it out of you when he had you all by himself.”

“Esau!”

“There, don’t shout at me. I don’t wonder. I’ve been sometimes so that I couldn’t hardly bear myself for wanting to tell somebody; and it was a pity for all that gold to go begging, and us not get a share.”

“Then you believe I told Mr Gunson?”

“Course I do. I didn’t; and there was no one else knew where it was except the captain, and of course he wouldn’t.”

“You are saying that to aggravate me. Esau, once more, do you believe I told Mr Gunson?”

He looked at me and laughed.

“Why don’t you answer?” I cried, angrily. “Do you believe I told Mr Gunson?”

“Why, of course I do. What’s the good of making a fuss over it with me? Should ha’ thought you might ha’ trusted me by this time.”

I sank back on one of the benches staring at him, feeling weak and hopeless.

“Don’t look like that,” cried Esau; “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. It was quite natural. Mr Gunson was our friend before Mr Raydon was; and it was your duty to do him a good turn if you could. Who’s Mr Raydon that he’s to have everything his way? If he don’t want gold, other folks do. I do—lots; and I’m going up now to get my share.”

“Then you really believe I told?”

“Why, of course I do. Why, how could you help it? Seems queer to Mr Raydon, because he has been very kind; but it would have seemed queerer to poor Mr Gunson. Why, as mother used to say, my heart quite bled for him when he came back so tired-looking and shabby, after hunting for months and finding nothing. I’d ha’ told him directly if I hadn’t promised you I wouldn’t. There, don’t be in such a fidge about it; you couldn’t act square to both of them.”

“Then it’s of no use for me to keep on saying I did not tell,” I said, gloomily.

“Not a bit; and I’m precious glad you did tell the poor fellow. I don’t like him much, and he never liked me much; but he often helped me, and I’d help him. Now then, I want to talk about what we’re going to do. What do you say? Do speak. I hate to see you sit mumchance, saying nothing.”

“There’s nothing to do,” I said, sadly, “only wait.”

“What, like a prisoner? I’m going up to that place where the gold is, to get mine and mother’s share, and you’re coming too for yours.”

“I’m not,” I said, through my set teeth.

“What?”

“I wouldn’t stir from here now for all the gold in the world.”

“Why, you’re talking madness. We come out here to make our fortunes, and there’s our fortunes waiting to be made. The door’s open and the gate’s open; and though Mr Raydon talked big, he dare not try to stop us. Come on.”

“I tell you nothing should make me stir from here now, till Mr Raydon knows the truth.”

“Yah! What’s the good o’ keeping on with all that make-believe? He knows the truth now.”

I leaped up as if stung.

“That’s right. Come on.”

My voice was very husky as I said—

“I’ve told you what I meant to do, and you keep on insulting me.”

“Don’t talk stuff. What’s the good of making all that fuss? You couldn’t help telling Mr Gunson, I know that, and I’ve told you I know it. Of course Mr Raydon don’t like it, but he can’t help himself. Now then. You’re in disgrace here, but you won’t be up at the camp; and when his bit of temper’s past, Mr Raydon will be sorry for what he said, and ask us to come and look at the piece of land after all.”

While he kept on speaking, my temper, which had always remained irritable through my illness, kept on rising, and I stood there trying to fight it down, but in vain, for it was very rapidly getting the mastery. It was as if something hot

was rising within me, ready to boil over if it grew a little hotter, and it soon did.

“There, it’s all right,” cried Esau, catching me by the arm. “Never mind our things; we’ll fetch them another time. Let’s be off at once.”

“Let go of my arm,” I said, hoarsely.

“Shan’t. Don’t be stupid. You ain’t been yourself since you were hurt, and I’m going to think for you, and do what’s right. Come along.”

“Let go of my arm!” I said again, in a low menacing tone.

“No, nor I shan’t let go of your arm; and you ain’t going to frighten me, Mayne Gordon, because I’m ever so much the stronger now, so come along.”

“Let—go—of my arm!” I said, in quite a whisper, as Esau hauled me towards the door.

“S-h-a-r-n-’t!” cried Esau. “You’re going along with me up to those gold-washings. Come along. It’s of no use for you to struggle, I’m too much for you—Oh!”

In my rage at my inability to reason with him, I suddenly doubled my fist and struck him full in the face, and as he uttered a cry of pain, he started back; but it was only for a moment, and then he flew at me angrily, so that the next minute we two sworn friends, who had suffered so much together, were fighting hard, giving and taking blows, now down, now up, and each growing hotter and more vindictive as we fought—Esau with determination, I with despair, for I felt myself growing weaker and weaker, and knew that in a few minutes I should be hopelessly beaten. But still in my blind fury I kept on, and I was just in the act of delivering a furious blow when I heard voices, and some one uttered a cry of horror.

The struggle was over, for we two started back from our contest, Esau ashamed of his rage, and I feeling utterly crushed; for there before me, as far as I could see them in my half-blinded state, giddy as I was with weakness and blows, stood Mr Raydon, and with him the people I would have given the world then not to have met in such a state—the three travellers, who had ended their long weary journey that unfortunate morning.

Mrs Dean ran to Esau, and flung her arms about his neck, as Mr Raydon said angrily—

“What is the meaning of this?”

No one answered, and for a few moments the silence was to me terrible. Then Mr Raydon spoke again.

“Come back to the house,” he said; and I saw him take his sister’s hand, draw it through his arm, and lead her away.

But Mr John, who looked brown and wonderfully changed, hung back, and held out his hand.

“Oh, Mayne,” he said, sadly, “I did not expect to come and find you like this. What is the meaning of it all?”

“Don’t, mother; do be quiet,” cried Esau just then. “He hit me first.”

“Oh, but, Esau, my boy, my boy!”

“Well, what’s the good o’ crying? Don’t; you’re crying all down my neck. Be quiet. How are you? There. Now do leave off hanging on me. I want to go and have a wash.”

“Oh, Mr Gordon,” cried the poor little woman, as Esau ungraciously shook himself free, “how could you hit Esau first—and you such friends?”

“Because he was trying to make me out a blackguard,” I cried.

“Well, I couldn’t help it,” cried Esau; “I thought it was true.”

“But you’ll shake hands with me, my dear, after I’ve come all these hundreds and thousands of miles—shake hands and say you’re sorry you hit Esau first.”

“Oh, do be quiet, mother,” cried Esau angrily. “What’s the good o’ making such a fuss? We fell out and had a bit of a fight, and it’s all over, and I’m very sorry, and if he’ll shake hands, there’s mine.”

“Not till you tell me you don’t believe I did that,” I cried fiercely.

“Well, there then, I don’t believe you told him. I can’t now you’ve knocked it all out of me. But I should have won.”

“If I had not been so weak from my wound, you would not have won,” I cried.

“Well, no,” said Esau thoughtfully, as we shook hands, “for you do hit precious hard. There, mother, will that do?”

“Oh yes, my dear,” cried Mrs Dean, clinging to my hands now; “and may I kiss you, my dear?”

I bent down and kissed the little woman, whose face was full of sympathy for me.

“And you’ve been dangerously ill and nearly dead, Mr Raydon told us. Well, that excuses everything. Esau’s temper was horrible after he had been ill with measles. You remember, my dear?”

“I don’t,” said Esau, on being thus appealed to. “I know you were always cross with me, and wouldn’t let me go out.”

“Ah well, ah well,” said Mr John Dempster, “never mind about that now. Mayne, my dear boy, do wash your face, and let’s have a long talk. I am sorry my dear wife saw you like this, for she has been talking so much about you. I am very sorry.”

“Sorry, sir!” I cried passionately; “it is horrible.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate, but an accident,” he said smilingly, as he laid his hand upon my shoulder. “You have not fought much since I saw you last?”

“Fought? No,” I said, unable to keep back a smile at his question.

“Ah! you laugh, but I have one memory of your prowess in that way. There, remove those marks.”

“That’s better,” he said, a few minutes later. “Now I want to know all about your adventures.”

“And I about yours, sir,” I said eagerly, for we were alone, Esau having passed out of the strangers’ quarters with his mother. “Tell me about Mrs John. Is she better?”

“Ah, you did not see,” he said, with a smile that was quite womanly lighting up his face. “For a time she frightened me, but once we were at sea she began to mend, and for months now the change has been wonderful.”

“I am glad,” I cried.

“Yes, wonderful,” he continued. “My brother Raydon was right; but had I known, enthusiastic as I am, what a terribly long, slow, tedious journey it was across those vast plains, I should never have dared to venture.”

“But she has borne it well?”

“Borne it! My dear boy, she is no longer the same. The delightful air, the freedom from all restraint, the grandeur of the scenery we have come through, everything has seemed to be giving her back her lost strength, and it is a new life she is beginning to live.”

“I am thankful,” I said.

“But tell me, Mayne,” he said; “there is some coolness between you and my brother. He did not tell me what it was. Have you not been happy with him?”

“Yes,” I said, “till now.”

And then I told him everything, from the discovery of the gold to the moment of his arrival. He stood looking thoughtful for a few moments, and then said—

“And young Dean believes it too?”

“Yes,” I said; “and that caused the struggle that you saw.”

“Of course—of course. I see.”

“But, Mr John, indeed, indeed I kept my word. I did not—I would not tell a soul; and I have carefully avoided going to the place.”

He stood with his brows knit in silence, looking straight away.

“You do not believe me?” I said, piteously.

“Believe you? Why not?” he said, rousing himself from his musing. “Of course I believe you, Mayne, and so will my brother. He ought not to have doubted you. Ah, here he comes back.”

I felt a curious shrinking as I saw Mr Raydon coming across the enclosure; and as he entered there was the stern severe look in his countenance which he put on when he was angry.

“I came to fetch you back, John,” he said quietly. Then turning to me, “May I know the cause of the disgraceful scene that was taking place a little while ago?”

“Yes,” cried Mr John, instituting himself as my champion directly. “It seems that you have had unjust suspicions of my young friend Mayne, and that his companion shared them. Mayne could not turn and thrash you, but he could young Dean, and he did.”

Mr Raydon looked at me sharply.

“You may take his word for it,” continued Mr John, “as I do. There has been a mistake.”

“You have not altered a bit, John,” said Mr Raydon drily. “Come.”

“Yes, I’ll go back with you, for there is so much to say. Come, Mayne.”

I saw Mr Raydon raise his brows a little, and that was enough.

“Not now, Mr John,” I said.

“But my wife, she wants to see you.”

“Yes, sir, and I want to see her; but not now.”

“He is quite right, John,” said Mr Raydon. “Let him stay for the present.”

Mr John looked from one to the other and then said seriously—“As you will, Dan. Good-bye then for the present, Mayne. There, keep up your heart. I’ll talk to my brother, and I’ll warrant that before long he will see the truth as I do.”

He stopped back to say this, and then went on after Mr Raydon, leaving me to fling myself on the bench, rest my elbows on the table, and bury my face in my hands. For it seemed to me that I had never felt so miserable before, and as if fate was playing me the most cruel of tricks. I felt indignant too with Mr Raydon, who had seemed to look upon his brother-in-law’s faith in me with a cruel kind of contempt, treating him as if he were an enthusiast easily deceived.

And all this stung me cruelly. I was touched in my pride, and the worst part of it seemed to be that Mrs John might have so much faith in her brother, that she would be ready to believe his word before mine.

As I sat there thinking, I was obliged to own that matters did look black against me, and that with such terrible evidence in array, there was some excuse for Mr Raydon.

“But she might believe me,” I said, half aloud. But even as I said this, I recalled how he had evidently dreaded that I should betray the secret, and watched me and Gunson at our last meeting, which certainly did look suspicious when taken into consideration with the object of the latter’s visits to the neighbourhood.

“Gunson shall come here and tell him everything. He shall make him believe,” I said to myself; and then in a despondent way, I felt that I could not go up to the camp without making Mr Raydon think worse of me at once, and then Mrs John would believe in him more and more. And it all seemed over, and as if the happy days I had looked forward to when the travellers came, would never be, and that I was the most unfortunate fellow that had ever breathed, when a hand was laid gently on my head, and a voice said—

“Mayne.”

I started to my feet, and there was Mrs John gazing at me sadly, but so changed since I had seen her before my start, that I could only look at her wonderingly, and when she held out her hand I caught it and was about to raise it to my lips, but she drew me to her, and the next moment she was seated on the bench I had left, and I was down upon my knees gazing up into her sweet face, feeling that while she lived I had one who would always take for me the part of the mother I had lost so long.

Chapter Forty One.

An Invasion of Savages.

It was quite two hours later that, as she rose to go back to Mr Raydon’s quarters, Mrs John said—

“There, I believe in you, Mayne, and so does my husband. Be satisfied.”

“I never shall be till Mr Raydon tells me he was wrong,” I said.

“And he will as soon as he feels convinced, so be patient and wait. My brother is rather strange in his ways, and always was. When he becomes prejudiced through some idea he is very hard to move.”

“But I cannot stay here,” I said.

“You will not go and leave us now that we have come so far. We shall want your help.”

“But—”

“Come, Mayne, you will not object to suffering a little, I hope, for our sake. I dare say my brother will keep on in his stern, hard way, for a time; but when he is fully convinced, you will be glad that you bore with him.”

“I shall do exactly as you wish me to,” I said quietly; and I again looked wonderingly at her, she was so changed.

“We shall not lead you wrong, Mayne,” she said, smiling; and, at her wish, I walked back with her to Mr Raydon’s place, where Mr John rose to make room for us, but Mr Raydon hardly glanced at me, and his manner was so strained during the next hour, as I sat listening to the conversation about the adventures during the long journey across the plain, that I was very glad to make an excuse so as to get away to where Mrs Dean was seated in the strangers’ quarters relating her story to Esau.

“Ah,” she cried, as I entered; “and what do you think of Mrs John?”

“I hardly knew her,” I said. “She is indeed better.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Dean, drawing herself up proudly, “I think I did my duty there.”

“I am sure you did.”

“Such a poor, thin, weak creature as she was till I began to nurse her.”

“The change worked wonders,” I said.

“Yes, of course, it did her good, sir; but no change is of any good without plenty of nursing.”

I saw that I was touching on tender ground, and was trying to think of a fresh subject, when loud, blustering voices outside made both Esau and me get up to see, for there was evidently an angry altercation going on just inside the gate.

“I have told you plainly,” Mr Raydon was saying as we drew near. “This is neither an hotel nor a liquor-bar, and you cannot have it here.”

“Well, you might be civil,” said a voice which made me start and feel puzzled as to where I had heard it before. “Not going to refuse travellers a shelter or a glass of liquor, are you?”

Esau gave my arm a jerk, but I did not look at him, for my attention was taken up by Mr Raydon, who was facing, with Grey and two more of the men, a party of a dozen roughs.

“You do not want shelter on a fine night like this, and I have no spirits except to use for medicine.”

“That’s right,” said the familiar voice. “Medicine—physic—that’s what we want; drop o’ spirits for medicine—eh, lads?”

There was a chorus of laughter at this, and the men began to press forward.

“Then you will not get it here, my lads, so go back to the place from whence you came,” said Mr Raydon, firmly. “Bread and meat, and butter or milk, you can have; nothing more.”

“But we want a drink,” said another man. “Here, we don’t want you to give it us. Look here,” he cried, taking some gold from, his pocket. “Now then, I’ll give you all this for a bottle of whiskey.”

“Ay, and I’ll give you this for another bottle,” cried a third man.

“Keep your stuff in your pockets, lads,” cried the first speaker, and I felt a kind of thrill run through me now, for I had recognised in him the big, fierce fellow who had wrestled with Gunson on board the boat, and threatened mischief next time they met. “Keep your stuff in your pockets; the old ’un is going to give us a bottle or two of the liquor he swaps with the Injuns for the bear-skins. Now then, old boy.”

“I am going to give you nothing, neither food nor drink,” said Mr Raydon, firmly. “You have only come down from the camp yonder this evening.”

“Well, who said we hadn’t? That’s right enough. We’ve got claims up there, and we’ve come to treat you all and have a drink with you.”

“I have told you that you will get no drink here.”

“Get out!” said the big fellow, whose voice I had first heard. “You don’t mean that. Come, get out the bottles. Come along, lads; we arn’t going to be served like this.”

“No,” came angrily in chorus; and the men pressed forward, but Mr Raydon and his party stood their ground.

“We’re going to take it, arn’t we, if he don’t fetch it out—eh, lads?”

“Ay.”

“Stand back!” cried Mr Raydon, authoritatively. “Grey!”

The latter took half a dozen steps backward, and stood waiting for orders.

“You, Gordon, and you, Dean, run to my house, and keep there in shelter.”

“Oh,” said the big fellow, with a laugh. “Turning nasty, eh? Well then, we’ll take it. Show him your shooting-irons, lads, and let him see that we can be nasty too.”

Half a dozen of the men pulled out revolvers, and there were a few sharp clicks heard.

“Did you hear me, Gordon?” said Mr Raydon, harshly. “Run.”

“I can’t run away, and leave you like this,” I said. “Obey orders, boy. Both of you back, quick!”

There was a something about him which enforced obedience, and I went back towards the house wondering why the other men did not come to their chiefs help, especially now that he was being backed slowly across the enclosure by the gang of men, each of whom had a revolver in his hand.

“Yes,” said Mr Raydon, sharply, and Grey and another man turned and ran for one of the little block-houses in the corner of the enclosure.

“Hah! Yah! Hoo!” roared the fellows, derisively; and one of them fired a shot, an example followed by two more, not aimed at the retreating party, but evidently meant to scare them and hasten their retreat. There was another roar of laughter at this, followed by more derisive shouts, as Grey and his companions disappeared in the building before named.

“It’s all right, lads; that’s where the landlord’s cellar is: come on!”

Mr Raydon still backed toward the corner building, and Esau and I continued our retreat to the chiefs quarters, where I saw Mr and Mrs John at the door, alarmed by the firing.

“Tell them to keep in,” cried Mr Raydon to me; and seeing that there was danger, I ran to them, half forced them back, and without instructions I snatched up Mr Raydon’s double rifle and cartridge-belt.

“Good heavens, Gordon, what is the matter?” cried Mr John.

“Nothing serious, I hope,” I said. “Orders: stay inside.”

I darted out again with the rifle, and ran to where Mr Raydon was standing his ground still, and he was saying something in a loud voice to the men, but I only caught the words—“Fair warning.”

“Hah! Good!” he exclaimed, as I ran up with the rifle; and he caught it and the cartridge-belt, but he did not attempt to load.

“Back to them,” said Mr Raydon to me; and I went unwillingly, for it seemed cowardly to go.

“He’s going to fight,” said the leader of the gang. “There, don’t pepper him, mates.”

There was another roar of laughter at this.

“I warn you once more, my good fellows. This is an outrage you are committing, and if blood is shed the fault will be yours.”

“Those bottles o’ whiskey.”

“You get nothing here. Go!”

“Rush them, lads.”

The miners with their revolvers were about a dozen yards from the corner block-house, and Mr Raydon and the man with him were half-way to the door, their backs towards it, when the bully gave his order.

Like an echo of that order, and just as the men were in motion, came one from Mr Raydon.

“Make ready—present!”

I shrank back startled as I heard the loud military commands, and the effect was the same upon the gang of rough gold-diggers, who stopped short, while half of them turned and began to run.

For, as the order rang out, Grey and another man sprang to the door with presented pieces, and from the openings on the floor above half a dozen more rifles were thrust out.

“Another step forward and I give the word—Fire!” cried Mr Raydon, fiercely. “You see we are prepared for unpleasant visitors here, whether they are white savages or red. Now then, have the goodness to go, and don’t trouble us with your presence here again.”

“Oh, it was only a joke, mate,” cried the big fellow. “Needn’t make such a fuss about it.”

“A joke, to fire on my retiring men?” said Mr Raydon, fiercely. “Go, or my men will perpetrate a similar joke on you, you miserable bully and coward.”

“Bully am I?—coward am I?” growled the fellow, menacingly cocking his revolver.

“Cover this fellow, Grey,” said Mr Raydon without turning, and I saw Grey make a slight movement.

“That man is a dead shot, my good man,” said Mr Raydon. “Once more, go!”

“Right; we’re going, eh, mates?”

“No,” said another. “Let’s—”

“Another word, and I order my men to fire,” cried Mr Raydon, fiercely. “We have driven off a hundred Indians before now, and I tell you that we are well prepared.”

“Oh, all right,” growled the fellow. “Come on, mates. This is English hospitality, this is. Well, every dog has his day, and perhaps ours ’ll come next.”

They walked slowly toward the gate, and passed out muttering threateningly; and as they passed out, in obedience to an order, Grey and another man ran across to the opening with their rifles at the trail, each seizing one of the swing-back gates which they were about to close, when half a dozen of the gang reappeared and fired from their

revolvers. Before they could repeat the shots the gates were banged to and barred, while Grey sprang up a few steps and applied his eye to a loop-hole.

“Well?” said Mr Raydon, advancing quietly.

“Running back toward the river, sir. Shall we fire over their heads?”

“No. They have gone,” said Mr Raydon.

Then turning to me, where I stood just outside the door of his house, he said sternly—

“You see why I wished to keep this district free of all that is connected with gold?”

I made no answer, for none would come.

“We have enough enemies among the Indians,” he continued. “These people add to our cares.”

Still I made no answer, for I was thinking of Gunson, who was, as I had heard, gold-finding up our stream, perhaps quite alone. These people, all well-armed, were going up his way, and one of them had sworn to do him some mischief. Did he know that Gunson was there? Did Gunson know that this man was within a few miles of him, perhaps close at hand?

I shuddered as I thought of the wealth up that stream. These men could only be fresh-comers, attracted by rumours of a new find of rich gold. Perhaps Gunson had already found a good deal; he most likely would have found a great deal, and this would be an additional inducement for them to attack him, rob, perhaps kill him out of revenge.

“And this was all due to the discovery of the gold,” I thought, and it was emphasised the next moment, for Mr John came up to his brother-in-law.

“Who are those men, Daniel?” he said, eagerly.

“Scum of the earth come for the metal whose existence I have kept secret ever since I came here. I fought very hard to keep the gold unknown, but my efforts have been in vain. You see for yourself the result of the discovery;” and then, as I saw his lowering brow and anxious face, he exclaimed—

“Yes, the rich finds are made known, and we do not know the extent of the mischief yet.”

He glanced at me again sharply, and I knew I looked very conscious; but it was not on account of the stubborn suspicion he persisted in feeling about me, but because I was excited about Gunson, for I was asking myself what I ought to do with respect to a man who in his rough way had done so much for me, and the answer came at once just as if something had whispered to me—

“Never mind about what people think if your intentions are good and true. Warn the poor fellow before it is too late. Go!”

Chapter Forty Two.

We make up our Minds.

Mr John gave me a troubled look, for in his simple earnest way he was hurt at seeing the strained situation, and, as he told me afterwards, there was great excuse for his brother-in-law, as matters did look black against me, sufficient to make Mr Raydon feel that I had acted a very unworthy part.

I stood there alone, and otherwise quite unnoticed for a few minutes, while Mr Raydon gave his people some quick, sharp orders, and then walked into his quarters with Mr John.

“What shall I do?” I thought. “If I go and ask him to let me run and warn Mr Gunson, he will think I want to join him, and that this is only an excuse. I can’t go down on my knees and vow and protest again that I kept my word. Some one told Gunson, of course. Could it have been Esau, and is he playing unfairly?”

I did not like to think it of him, and I was just trying to drive the thoughts away, when he came out of the strangers’ quarters, where I had seen him go with Mrs Dean.

“Well, it’s all over,” he said. “I thought we was going to have some rare fun.”

“Esau!” I cried, aghast. “What, with men being shot!”

“Yes; why not, if they tried to shoot us? But, I say, they’ll come back again; see if they don’t, to help themselves to all there is here.”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said; “they’ve been too much scared as it is.”

“Not they. Of course they run when they saw the rifles. I shouldn’t wonder if we have a really big fight like you’ve read of in books.”

“You are talking nonsense,” I said. “But look here, Esau. About that gold?”

“Yes,” he cried eagerly; “going to have a try for it?”

“No.”

“Oh,” said Esau, gloomily. “Thought you were coming to your senses. I don’t see why other folks should get it all, and us left nowhere.”

“Esau!” I said, as I caught him by the sleeve, “you see how I am being suspected of all this. Mr Raydon still thinks I told Mr Gunson.”

“Well, so you did, didn’t you?” he replied, with a curiously sly look.

“No,” I cried, fiercely; “and you know I did not. But did you?”

Esau looked me full in the face for a few moments, before turning his eyes away, and beginning to whistle softly.

“Do you hear what I say?” I cried, angrily. “Course I do,” he replied, with a mocking laugh.

“Then tell me—at once—the truth. Did you give Mr Gunson to understand where this gold was?”

“Let’s see: you asked me before, didn’t you?” said Esau, coolly.

“You know I did.”

“Well, then, don’t ask no questions, and nobody won’t tell you no lies.”

“Then it was you,” I cried; “and it was a mean, cowardly, cruel trick to let me be suspected and treated as I have been here. I have always been fair and open with you.”

Esau whistled again in a low soft way, giving me a sidelong glance again, and then taking out his great knife and making a pretence of cutting his nails, for which task the knife was about as suitable as a billhook.

“Are you going to own it?”

No answer.

“Are you going to own to it?” I said, more loudly.

“No, I ain’t,” he cried, angrily, “and I don’t want to be bothered about it no more. Wish I’d gone after the gold myself. I could ha’ made mother rich and comfortable all her life. What business had he to interfere and keep it all from us? Meant to have the place to himself, and now somebody else has got it, and serve him right.”

I turned away from him angrily, but I was too much worried to be able to do without advice, and I walked back to where he was still chopping at his nails.

“Esau,” I said; “you saw that big fellow with the gang?”

“Easy enough to see,” he replied, sulkily.

“You saw who it was?”

“Yes. Chap Gunson pitched over that day aboard the steamer.”

“Yes. And you remember how he threatened Mr Gunson?”

“Course I do.”

“Well, they’re going up the little valley to where Mr Gunson is.”

“And if old Gunson meets him he’ll send him back with a flea in his ear.”

“One man against a party of twelve all well armed, Esau?” I whispered. “I’m afraid about Mr Gunson. Suppose he is up there somewhere alone, and has found a great deal of gold?”

“What!” cried Esau, excitedly, for my words had moved him now.

“I say, suppose he has collected a lot of gold, and those rough fellows know of it?”

“Why, they’d kill him, and take every scrap,” cried Esau. “Here, let’s go and tell Mr Raydon.”

“He would not stir to help, I am sure. Mr Raydon does not want Gunson there, and he would be glad if he was driven away.”

“Think old Gunson knows of those chaps coming?”

“I don’t know. I should think not.”

“Let’s go and see.”

“Yes?”

“And if he don’t know, tell him.”

“Yes; that is what I should like to do,” I said. “We ought to warn him.”

“Course we ought. He helped us.”

“But how can we manage it?”

“Go. We know the way.”

I stood for a few moments thinking, and at last made up my mind.

“You will go with me, Esau?” I said.

“Yes; soon as it’s dark.”

“They wouldn’t let us go now?” I said, dubiously.

“You try,” said Esau, with a laugh. “Why, if old Raydon thought we were going to try and get out, he’d lock us up.”

“Don’t let’s stand here,” I said, in a husky voice, for the excitement was increasing. “Let’s go back to the quarters and talk there.”

“Can’t. Mother’s in there, and we shouldn’t be able to say a word.”

“Then as soon as it’s dark we’ll climb over, and make straight for the mining camp.”

“That’s so,” said Esau; and we waited patiently for the coming on of night.

As soon as it was decided, that which had seemed to me so very easy began to show itself in quite another light, and difficulties sprang up one after the other of which I had not taken thought before.

First of all I learned that a strict watch was to be kept at night, and in consequence it would be next to impossible to get over the palisade without being heard or seen.

Next, when we had escaped—I inadvertently used that word, for it was like running away, though I meant to return—there would be the difficulty of hitting the right valley in the darkness. Then, if we found the valley, how were we to find out the place where Gunson had made his camp? and above all, how were we to pass the camp or resting-place of the gang of men who had been to the Fort that day? It was pretty certain that one of their number would be on guard.

“Yes, and pop at us,” said Esau, when I told him of this difficulty. “Never mind; he couldn’t hit us in the dark. See, too, if old Gunson doesn’t shoot at us if we go disturbing him in the night.”

“He would not fire at us,” I said, contemptuously.

“Oh, we are clever!” cried Esau. “How’s he going to know it’s us?”

“Well, we must risk it,” I said.

“Oh, yes, we’ll risk it. Way is to crawl up; then if they fire, they’re sure to miss.”

That starting-time seemed as if it would never come. I had my evening meal with Mr Raydon and Mr Dempster, Esau having his with his mother at the Greys’, but I hardly ate anything, for in spite of Mrs John’s pleasant smiles and words, the constraint seemed to have increased, and I felt, unjustly enough perhaps, as if my presence was only tolerated on account of my friends.

I got away as soon as I could, and as I waited for Esau to come, I began now to think that I was not doing right. But I drove the thoughts away in a reckless fashion. Esau would laugh at me, I thought, and, full of determination now, I was glad when he came.

“Well,” he said; “mean to go?”

“Mean to go? Of course!”

“’Cause they’re going to be on the look-out pretty sharp, so Grey says, and they’ve got orders to fire at any one strange.”

“To fire?” I said, feeling rather startled.

“Yes; so if we get fired at when we go, and fired at when we get there, it’s bound to be a lively sort of a time.”

I was silent.

“Well, what do you think of it now?” said Esau, as I did not speak. “Going?”

“Do you want to hang back, Esau?” I said, huskily.

“No; I’ll stick to you, o’ course.”

“Then we’ll go as soon as we can.”

“I thought you’d say so,” he said. “You always was so fond of old Gunson.”

“Then you don’t want to go?”

“Course I don’t, now I’ve got mother here, safe. But if you’re going, I’m going, so how soon?”

It was already dark, and feeling if I waited much longer the hesitation I suffered from might increase, I said excitedly —

“Now.”

“All right then; let’s get a little way further from the corner, make straight for that look-out place, where Grey watched the chaps going, and get over there.”

“Yes,” I said, thoughtfully; “we can get on the top of the big paling and drop down from there. But I say, Esau,” I whispered, “how are we to climb back?”

“Dunno. Let’s do one job first,” he whispered back, philosophically. “Now then, are you ready?”

“Yes,” I said, desperately.

“Then down on your hands and knees, and let’s creep like dogs. They will not see us then.”

It is impossible to describe the feeling of excitement which came over me as I followed Esau’s example, and letting him lead, began to crawl pretty quickly across the enclosure. I looked back, and there were the lights in Mr Raydon’s quarters, where my friends were seated, and wondered what they would think when they heard that I had gone, and what construction Mr Raydon would place upon my departure, for something seemed to tell me that we should be found out; and it was not likely that we should be credited with going for so innocent a reason.

“No,” I said to myself; “he will think I have gone to join Gunson to wash for gold, and—”

“Don’t! I say, mind where you are coming.”

For my head had come sharply in contact with my companion.

“What’s the matter? Why did you stop?”

“Only to look back at that place where mother is. My! won’t she be in a taking if they find out we are gone?”

“Go on quickly, then,” I whispered, “and let’s get back before they know it.”

At that moment there was a loud growl toward one of the block-houses.

“Rough’s heard us,” whispered Esau. “Come on.”

We crept forward, and then I felt a chill of dread, for there was a quick rustling sound, a loud bark, and though we could not see him, I knew that the great dog was coming at us full speed.

My first idea was to get up and run, but before I could put my intention in force, the dog was upon us, barking furiously; but the next minute, after knocking me right over, he was whining and fawning upon me, and giving a share of his attentions to Esau.

“Down! Quiet! Get out!” whispered Esau. “Why don’t you wipe your nose?”

“Here, Rough! What is it, lad? Hold him!” came from the direction of the block-house.

“Oh, it’s all up,” I whispered, as the dog set up a loud volley of barking.

“Seize him!” cried the voice, which I knew to be Grey’s; but the dog barked again, as if in remonstrance, and seemed more disposed to play with us than to seize.

“What is it then? What have you got?”

There was another burst of barking.

“Let’s go back,” whispered Esau.

“No, no, go on. Never mind the dog.”

“Let’s run for it then,” whispered Esau, and catching hold of my hand, he led the way quickly toward the fence, with Rough leaping and bounding round us, and every now and then uttering one of the volleys of barking which sounded terribly loud in the utter silence of that dark night.

We had nearly reached the place, when I heard a familiar voice say—

“What’s the matter with that dog?”

“Don’t know, sir. Seems to have found something, or he wouldn’t go on like that. Here! Hi! Rough, Rough, Rough!”

But the dog would not leave us. We were only friends, and he kept on his excited bark.

“Here, Rough!” cried Mr Raydon, angrily; and at that moment we reached the fence, fortunately for us just by the loophole.

“Over with you first,” cried Esau, and I climbed rapidly to the top, threw my legs over, lowered myself to the full extent of my arms, and dropped lightly.

“Come across and see,” came just then from the other side; and now while I heard the rustling and scrambling noise made by Esau in climbing, as I stood there listening with my heart beating heavily, the dog began to bark furiously, then to growl. There was a struggling noise, and then Esau’s voice came through the crack of the paling.

“He’s got hold of me tight. Run, lad, run!”

But I could not run then and leave my companion in the lurch, and I was about to climb back when the worrying, growling sound ceased, and Esau dropped beside me.

“Come on!” he whispered. “This way. He’s got half the leg of my trousers.”

Catching my hand again we trotted on.

“Jumped at me, and held me so as I shouldn’t get over,” he whispered. “Here, this way. We’re right, I know.”

The dog’s barking was furious now, and I whispered to Esau—

“They’re opening the gate.”

“Hist! Don’t take no notice.”

For there was a shout from behind.

“Halt, there, or we fire!”

“Go on then,” muttered Esau. “Sha’n’t halt now. You couldn’t hit us if you tried.”

“Do you hear? Halt!”

It was Mr Raydon who shouted, but I was desperate now I had gone so far, and we kept up our trot, with Esau acting as guide. His eyes were better than mine in the darkness.

“Fire!” came from behind now, and three flashes of light appeared for an instant, followed by the reports of the rifles.

“Not killed me,” muttered Esau, with a chuckle. But I did not laugh, for a thought had struck me.

“Esau,” I whispered; “they’ll set the dog on our scent, and use him to run us down. There, do you hear?”

For the barking of the dog began once more.

“Can we cross the river?” I said.

“No.”

“Then make for the first stream and let’s wade along it a little way.”

“Never thought of that,” muttered Esau. “Here, let’s go along by the river.”

Five minutes later we were splashing along close to the edge, keeping our feet in the water for a time, with the dog’s deep baying behind coming on so slowly that I knew he must be chained and some one holding him back.

“He will not track us now,” I said breathlessly. “They’ll think we have crossed.”

“Then they’ll think we’re drowned, and go and tell mother,” said Esau, stopping short. “Here, let’s go back.”

“Not now we have gone so far,” I said. “I could not face Mr Raydon now. Besides, they will know that we could take care of ourselves.”

“Course they would,” said Esau. “Come on.” But before we had gone a hundred yards he said, “Why they won’t know it is us yet.”

We tramped on as quickly as we could go for the darkness, and by degrees the barking of the dog grew more faint in the distance, and finally ceased.

“There,” said Esau; “they’ll be clever if they find us now.”

“And we shall be clever if we find our way.”

“Oh, I’ll find my way. I shall never forget how to get to that place, after what happened that day.”

I shuddered, for his words brought up my long illness, and made me tramp on down alongside the stream with a curious sensation of awe.

For the darkness was at times intense, and in the blackest parts the river seemed to dash and roar in a way that was startling, and as we had never heard it before.

It was all fancy of course, and so it was that the pines rose up so black that it was hard work to make out the landmarks in the valley which had grown familiar during our many wanderings.

Twice over we stopped to argue, for Esau was positive and obstinate to a degree, insisting that we had come to the right ravine, while I was as sure that we had not.

He gave way sulkily, assuring me that I was going right on past it, and at last I began to think he must be correct. For I had lost all count of time in my excitement, and I stopped short.

“I’ve taken you right by it, Esau,” I said sadly. “We must go back.”

“No, you haven’t,” he replied, to my great surprise. “I’ve thought since that couldn’t be it, because there was no open pool just below the fall. Don’t you remember, where we saw so many trout?”

“Of course,” I cried; “I remember now. Then it is lower down, and we ought to hear the noise of falling water.”

We listened, but there was only the rumbling roar of the river down on our left.

“I’m afraid we’re wrong,” I said despondently. “If it only were not so dark!”

“Let’s go on a bit further first,” said Esau; and I followed him full of doubts, till we turned a corner where the river made a sudden bend, and Esau uttered a low cry.

“There it is,” he said. “Hark!”

Sure enough there was the roar of a fall, and we knew that we had reached the entrance of the little side valley, where the pool lay below the falls.

Another minute, and we were passing through a clump of little fir-trees, also familiar to us; and then Esau stopped short, for there was a bright light just in front—a light which puzzled us for a few moments, before we understood that it must be the reflection from a fire which we could not see, shining in the clear waters of the pool.

Chapter Forty Three.

Our Warning.

After a whispered consultation we crept on again through the trees, until we could see a good-sized fire blazing and sparkling close down by the side of the pool, and about it—some asleep, some sitting resting, and others talking—were a group of rough-looking men, whom we had not much difficulty in making out to be our visitors at the Fort.

It was plain enough. They had come down after leaving us, and had camped there for the night, perhaps found gold there; and this was their station. If so, Gunson must be higher up and safe.

I whispered my ideas to Esau, who thought for a few minutes before speaking.

“No,” he said, “I don’t believe they’d stop here. But p’r’aps they’re quite new-comers. What shall we do?”

“Get by them,” I said resolutely. “We must hurry on to Mr Gunson now.”

“But how?” he whispered. “Ain’t they stopping up all the road?”

“Not all,” I said. “Let’s go down on our hands again, and creep by.”

“All right, only you go first, and be careful. Mind, if they see us they’ll fire.”

I don’t know whether it was recklessness or desperation. I had felt timid, and had shrunk from the task at first; but now that I felt I must go on, the dread had pretty well passed away.

Going down on my hands and knees, I found to my great satisfaction that the fire was invisible; and if so, of course we must be out of sight of the men about it. I whispered this to Esau, who responded by a grunt, which, added to his position, made him bear a strong resemblance to an animal, and for the moment it amused me, and took my attention from the difficulty of my task.

We had had to leave the track, and our way was amongst blocks of stone covered with moss, between which short stiff patches of bush grew, making our passage difficult, and not to be accomplished without noise.

But I kept on with the light on my left, knowing that if I kept it in that position I must be going in the correct direction; and it was necessary to keep this in mind, as every now and then a tree or a block of stone forced me to diverge.

The men were talking loudly, and now and then there arose a rough burst of laughter, while there was no doubt about who the party were, for I heard an allusion made to the Fort.

Just then, as we were about level with the fire, a piece of a branch upon which I pressed my knee gave a loud crack, and the conversation ceased instantly.

We neither of us moved, but crouched there, listening to our beating hearts, and expecting to have either a shot sent in our direction, or to see part of the men come rushing toward us.

At last, after what seemed to be quite ten minutes, a voice said—

“Hear that?”

“Yes,” was growled.

“What was it?”

“Don’t know.”

They began talking again slowly, and by degrees the conversation grew general and loud.

“Go along,” I whispered, after carefully removing the dead branch, and once more our rustling progress began.

Oh, how slow it was, and how I longed to jump up and run. But we were in the opening of the little valley now, and our only chance was to creep on till we were well beyond the light cast by the fire, and so we persevered.

At last, after creeping along inch by inch, we paused, for in front of us the undergrowth ceased, and I saw an open patch of sand faintly lit by the fire, and across this we must pass to reach the shelter beyond.

“Go on first,” whispered Esau, and, drawing a *long* breath, I started, going as silently and quickly as I could into the darkness of the shelter beyond, and turned to look at Esau.

From where I knelt I could see the fire clearly, and as he came across, I was thinking how animal-like he looked, when I fancied I saw a movement, and before I could be sure, there was a flash, a loud report, and a twig dropped from over my head upon one of my hands.

“Bear! bear!” shouted a voice, and the men sprang to their feet. But by this time Esau was alongside of me, and rising up we hurried along in a stooping position, leaving the eager voices more and more behind, the men being evidently hunting for the bear one of them believed that he had shot.

“Was he firing at me?” said Esau.

“Yes; he saw you, I suppose.”

“But he might have hit me,” cried Esau, indignantly. “Chaps like that have no business to be trusted with guns.”

“Hist!”

“Come on, lads,” we heard plainly. “I’m sure I hit him.”

“Don’t be a fool,” cried another voice. “Wait till daylight. Do you want to be clawed?”

“Shall I roar?” whispered Esau.

“Don’t—don’t, whatever you do,” I whispered back in alarm, for I had not the slightest faith in my companion’s imitation, and felt certain that we should be found out.

The men too seemed to be coming on, but in a few minutes the rustling and breaking of wood ceased, and we crept on again for a little way; and then, with the light of the fire reduced to a faint glow, we stood upright and began to ascend the little valley at a fairly rapid rate for the darkness.

“What an escape!” I said, breathing more freely now.

“That’s what I ought to say,” grumbled Esau. “That bullet came close by me.”

“And by me too,” I replied. “I felt a twig that it cut off fall upon me. But never mind as we were not hit.”

“But I do mind,” grumbled Esau. “I didn’t come out here to be shot at.”

“Don’t talk,” I said. “Perhaps we shall come upon another camp before long.”

I proved to be right, for at the end of an hour we came upon a rough tent, so dimly seen that we should have passed it where it stood, so much canvas thrown over a ridge pole, if we had not been warned by a low snoring sound.

We crept down to the waterside, and slowly edged our way on; but when we were some fifty yards farther we stopped to consider our position.

“S’pose that’s old Gunson,” said Esau, “and we’re going away from him now?”

The idea struck me too, but I set it triumphantly aside directly.

“If it were Mr Gunson there would be a fire, and most likely Quong keeping watch. Besides, we don’t know that he had a tent like that.”

“No, he hadn’t got a tent,” assented Esau; and we went on, to find that at every quarter of a mile there was a tent or a fire; and it soon became evident that the solitary little valley we had explored on the day of my accident was rapidly getting to hold a population of its own.

We had passed several of these busy encampments, and were beginning to despair of finding Mr Gunson, when, as nearly as we could guess in the darkness, just about where we washed the gold, we came upon a fire, whose warm yellow glow lit up a huge pine, and at the scene before us we stopped to reconnoitre.

“That’s where I was cutting the tree,” muttered Esau; “and—yes, there’s old Quong. Look!”

Sure enough there was the yellow-faced, quaint little fellow coming out of the darkness into the light to bend down and carefully lay some fresh wood upon the fire, after which he slowly began to walk back.

Mr Gunson must be here, I thought, for Quong would naturally be drawn to him as a strong man who would protect him.

“Come along,” I said; “we are right after all.”

“No, no, stop!” he cried, seizing me and holding me back, for Quong evidently heard our voices, and darted back among the trees.

“Nonsense,” I said, struggling.

“Keep back, I tell you. ’Tain’t safe. They don’t know it’s us, and somebody may shoot.”

It was a foolish thing to do, but I wrested myself free and ran forward.

As I did so I heard the ominous *click click* of a gun-lock, and stopped short.

“Halt! Who’s that? Stand!” cried a deep voice; and the effect was so great upon me, that I felt like one in a nightmare trying to speak, but no words came.

Esau was not so impressed, however, for he shouted wildly—

“Hi! Don’t shoot. It’s only us. Mr Gunson there?”

The boughs were parted, and the familiar figure of the prospector came out into the light, rifle in hand.

“Why, Gordon!” he cried. “You? Glad to see you; you too, Dean. But that’s risky work, my lad. Don’t you know the old proverb—‘Let sleeping dogs lie’? I did not know you were friends, and these are dangerous times; I might have tried to bite.”

He shook hands with us both as he spoke, and Quong came cautiously out from among the trees.

“Ay, ay, ay!” he cried, beginning to caper about. “You come along? How de-do-di-do. Quong make hot flesh tea.”

“No, no; they don’t want tea at this time of night.”

“Yes, please give me some,” I said, for I was hot and faint with exertion. “I shall be glad of a mug.”

“Hot flesh tea,” cried Quong, beginning to rake the fire together. “Makee cakee dleckly.”

“Why, Gordon, what brings you here?” cried Mr Gunson. “You belong to the opposite camp. Raydon hasn’t let you come gold-washing?”

“No,” I said, hurriedly. “Have you seen those men?”

“What men? There are plenty about here.”

“I mean those men you quarrelled with on the steamer about Quong.”

“Eh? ’Bout Quong?” cried the little Chinaman, looking up sharply. “Bad man on puff-boat pullee tail neally off. No.”

“Yes; they have been at the Fort to-day—yesterday—which is it—and they are down below yonder now.”

“What, those fellows?” cried Gunson, excitedly; and he gave vent to a long low whistle. “That’s awkward.”

“I was afraid you did not know,” I said, hurriedly. “I knew you were here, and I came to warn you. Mr Raydon—”

“Sent you to warn me?” interrupted Gunson.

“No,” I said; “we had to break out of the Fort to-night and come. Mr Raydon is not good friends with me.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Gunson. “So you came to let me know?”

“To put you on your guard,” I said. “Yes.”

I saw him look at me fixedly for a few moments, and then in a half-morose way he nodded his head at me, saying—

“Thank you, my lad—thank you too, Dean.”

“Warn’t me,” said Esau, sourly. “It was him. I only come too.”

“Well, it is awkward,” continued Gunson, after a few moments’ thought, “for I have got to the spot now that I have been looking for all these years.”

“Then you’re finding lots of gold?” cried Esau, eagerly.

“I am finding a little gold,” replied Gunson, quietly; “and Quong is too.”

“Eh? Me findee gole?” cried Quong, looking up from the half-boiling kettle, and hastily-made cakes which he had thrust in the embers to bake. “Yes; findee lil bit, and put um in littlee bottle.”

“But these men—will they attack you?” I said, anxiously.

“Yes, if they find that I have a good claim. More than two, you say?”

I told him all about the coming to the Fort, and how we had passed them down below. Gunson looked very serious for a while; then with a smile he said quietly—

“Well, union is strength. Now you two lads have come, my force is doubled. You will stay with me now?”

“No,” I said, firmly. “As soon as it is light I must go back to the Fort to our friends.”

“But you have quarrelled with Mr Raydon, and after this night’s business he will not have you back.”

“No,” cried Esau, eagerly. “Let’s stop and wash gold.”

“And leave your mother,” I said, “for the sake of that.”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so nasty, Mayne Gordon,” cried Esau. “Who’s a-going to leave his mother? Ain’t I trying to get a lot o’ money so as to make her well off?”

“We cannot stay,” I said. “I don’t want Mr Raydon and my friends—”

“They have arrived then?”

“Yes,” I said. “What would they think if I ran off like this?”

“Humph! you’re a strange lad. You take French leave, and come to warn me. They fire at you, and hunt you with that great hound, and yet you are going back!”

“Yes,” I said, “as soon as it is light; Esau too.”

“And suppose old Raydon won’t have us back?” cried Esau.

“But he will when he knows why I came.”

“I am not so sure,” said Gunson. “Well, I suppose you are right.”

“No, no,” cried Esau. “I meant to stop along with you. I shan’t go. If I do, it’ll be to fetch mother.”

I told Esau I did not believe him, and Gunson went on—

“It’s awkward about those fellows, for at present might is right up here. The worst of it is, Quong can’t fight.”

“No fightee,” said Quong, looking up sharply. “Melican man fightee. Quong makee flesh tea, talkee ploper English. Makee flesh blead all hot. Hot closs bun.”

“I should like to stay with you, Mr Gunson,” I said; “and it is very tempting. But I must go back.”

“And if Mr Raydon refuses to have you, my lads, come back, and I’ll make you as welcome as I can.”

“Flesh tea all leady,” said Quong; and I was soon after gladly partaking of the simple meal, close to the spot where I had met with the terrible accident six months before.

Before we lay down for a few hours’ rest, I wanted to tell him more about my trouble, and how Mr Raydon suspected me. I wanted to ask him too how he had found out about this spot. But Esau was lying close by me, and I suspected him of playing a double part. I felt sure just then that he had been Gunson’s informant, so I had to put it all off till a more favourable opportunity; and while I was thinking this I dropped off fast asleep.

Chapter Forty Four.

Grey’s Message.

“Flesh tea allee leady,” cried a familiar voice in my ear; and I started up to see the sun peering over the edge of the mountains to light up the beautiful opalescent mists floating below. There was the scent of the bruised pine-boughs where I lay, and a more familiar one wafted from the fire—that of hot, newly-made bread.

“Yes, all right, I’m getting up,” grunted Esau; and directly after we went down to the stream and had a good wash, finding Gunson waiting by the fire and watching the frizzling of some slices of bacon on our return.

“Good morning,” he said. “Come and have your breakfast. Well,” he continued, as we began, “what’s it to be? Going back?”

“Yes,” I said, “directly after breakfast.”

“Oh!” cried Esau.

“I can’t help it, Esau; we must. We are in honour bound.”

“And we might make our fortunes.”

“You leave me, then, to the mercy of those scoundrels down below?” said Gunson, drily.

“I am only a boy, sir,” I said; “how can I fight for you? I’ll beg Mr Raydon to send help to you though, directly.”

“Yes; do, my lad. I shall be in rather a dangerous position. Say I beg of him to try and give me protection, for though I am fighting against him here, all this was sure to come, and I might as well grow rich as any one else.”

I promised eagerly that I would; and we were hurrying through our breakfast, when there was the trampling of feet and the breaking of wood just below.

Gunson looked up and seized his rifle, to stand ready; and directly after a man strode out of the dense forest and stood before us.

“Grey!” I exclaimed, wonderingly.

“Yes,” he said, stolidly. “Morning.”

“Have some breakfast?” said Gunson.

“Yes. Bit hungry,” said Grey. Then turning to me and Esau—“Chief says I’m to tell you both that as you have chosen to throw in your lot with Mr Gunson here, you are not to come back to the Fort again.”

I dropped my knife and sat half stunned, wondering what Mr and Mrs John would say; and as I recovered myself, it seemed as if when a few words of explanation would have set everything right, those words were never to be spoken.

Esau had been as strongly affected as I was; but he recovered himself first.

“Not to come back to the Fort again?” he cried.

“No,” said Grey, with his mouth full. “Chief said if you were so mad after gold, you might go mad both of you.”

“Hurray!” cried Esau. “Then I’m going to be mad as a hatter with hats full.”

“Right,” said Grey, stolidly, as he munched away at the cake and bacon. “You’re in the right spot.”

“But hold hard,” cried Esau, as another thought struck him. “This won’t do. He ain’t going to keep her shut up in the Fort. I want my mother.”

“Right,” said Grey, setting down the tin mug out of which he drank his hot tea. “I’ll tell him you want your mother.”

“Yes, do. I don’t mind. I wanted to come up here.”

“Well, Gordon, what have you to say?” cried Mr Gunson. “Any message to send back?”

“Yes,” I said, flushing and speaking sharply. “Tell Mr Raydon—no, tell Mr and Mrs John that I have been cruelly misjudged, and that some day they will know the whole truth.”

“Right,” said Grey. “I won’t forget. Nothing to say to the chief?”

“No,” I said; “nothing.”

“Yes; a word from me,” said Gunson. “Tell him that something ought to be done to preserve order here, for the people are collecting fast, and some of them the roughest of the rough.”

“Yes,” said Grey. “I’ll tell him; but he knows already; we had a taste of ’em yesterday. Anything else?”

“No,” said Gunson; “only that perhaps I may want to send to him for help.”

“Best way’s to help yourselves,” said Grey, at last rising from a hearty breakfast. “Good-bye, my lads,” he said, “till we run agen each other later on. I say,” he continued, after shouldering his rifle, “did you two lads bring away guns?”

“No,” I said; “of course not.”

“Haven’t got any then. How many have you?” he continued, turning to Gunson.

“Only my own and a revolver.”

“Lend you mine, young Mr Gordon,” he said, handing it to me, and then unstrapping his ammunition-belt, and with it his revolver in its holster. “Better buy yourself one first chance, and then you can send mine back. Take care of the tackle; it’s all good.”

“Thank you, Grey,” said Gunson, grasping his hand. “You couldn’t have made him a better loan. I won’t forget it.”

“Course you won’t. Nor him neither, I know.”

“Ain’t got another, have you?” said Esau.

Grey shook his head.

“Good-bye,” he said.

“I say, tell mother not to fret, I’m all right,” cried Esau.

“And give old Rough a pat on the head for me,” I cried.

“I will. Nice game you had with him last night,” said Grey, laughing. “Too good friends with you to lay hold.”

“Oh, was I, sir?” cried Esau; “he’s made one of my trousers knee-breeches. Look!”

He held up his leg, where the piece had been torn off below the knee, and Grey laughed as he went and disappeared in the forest that fringed the banks of the stream.

“Then now we can begin gold-digging in real earnest,” cried Esau, excitedly. “I say, Mr Gunson, how’s it going to be?”

“What, my lad?”

“Each keep all he finds?”

“We’ll see about that later on,” said Gunson, sternly. “There will be no gold-washing yet.”

Esau stared.

“There are too many enemies afoot. I am going to wait and see if those men come up this way. If they do, there will be enough work to maintain our claim, for, setting aside any ill-feeling against me, they may want to turn us off.”

“Well, they are ugly customers,” said Esau, rubbing one ear. “I say, do you think they’ll come to fight?”

“If they think that this is a rich claim, nothing is more likely.”

“And I say,” cried Esau, “I didn’t mean that.”

“If you feel afraid you had better go. I dare say you can overtake that man.”

“But I don’t want to go.”

“Then stay.”

“But I don’t want to fight.”

“Then go.”

“But there ain’t nowhere to go, and—Oh, I say, Mayne Gordon, what is a fellow to do?”

“Do what I do,” I said, quickly.

“What’s that?”

“Trust to Mr Gunson the same as we have done before.”

“Thank you, Mayne Gordon,” said Gunson, laying his hand on my shoulder; “but I hardly like exposing you to risk.”

“The danger has not come yet,” I said, smiling, though I confess to feeling uncomfortable. “Perhaps it never will.”

“At any rate we must be prepared,” said Gunson. “Only to think of it! What a little thing influences our careers! I little fancied when I protected that poor little fellow on board the steamer, that in so doing I was jeopardising my prospects just when I was about to make the success of my life.”

“It is unfortunate,” I said.

“Unfortunate, boy?—it is maddening. But for this I should once more have been a rich man.”

I looked at him curiously, and he saw it.

“Yes,” he said, laughingly, “once more a rich man.”

“Is one any the happier for being rich?” I said.

“Not a bit, my lad. I was rich once, and was a miserable idiot. Mayne, I left college to find myself suddenly in possession of a good fortune,” he continued, pausing excitedly now, and speaking quicker, for Esau had strolled off to a little distance with Quong. “Instead of making good use of it, I listened to a contemptible crew who gathered about me, and wasted my money rapidly in various kinds of gambling, so that at the end of a year I was not only penniless, but face to face with half a dozen heavy debts of honour which I knew I must pay or be disgraced. Bah! why am I telling you all this?”

“No, no; don’t stop,” I said eagerly; “tell me all.”

“Well,” he said, “I will; for I like you, Mayne, and have from the day we first met on board the *Albatross*. It may be a warning to you. No: I will not insult you by thinking you could ever grow up as I did. For to make up for my losings, I wildly plunged more deeply into the wretched morass, and then in my desperation went to my sister and mother for help.”

“And they helped you?” I said, for he paused.

“Of course, for they loved me in spite of my follies. It was for the last time, I told them, and they signed away every shilling of their fortunes, Mayne, to enable me to pay my debts. And then—”

“And then?” I said, for he had paused again.

“And then I had the world before me, Mayne,” he said, sadly. “I was free, but I had set myself the task of making money to restore my mother and sister to their old position. I tried first in London, but soon found out it would be vain to try and save a hundredth part of what I ought to pay them, so I tried adventure. There were rumours of gold being discovered in Australia, then in the Malay Peninsula, and again at the Cape, so I went to each place in turn and failed. Other men made fortunes, but I was always unlucky, till once at the Cape, where I hit upon a place that promised well, but my luck was always against me. My tent was attacked one night, and I was left senseless, to come to myself next morning, and find that I had been robbed, and so cruelly ill-used that the sight of one eye was gone for ever, and there was nothing left for me to do but sell my claim for enough money to take me back to England amongst my poor people to be nursed back to health. Then, as I grew strong again, there came rumours of the gold in British Columbia, and I started once more, taking passage as a poor man in the steerage, and meeting on board one Mayne Gordon, with whom I became friends. Am I right?”

“Indeed, yes,” I cried, giving him my hand.

“That’s well,” he said, smiling. “Since then I have worked, as you know, for the golden prize that, if it does not make those at home happy, will place them far above want, but always without success, passing away from Fort Elk, when there was abundance near, and returning poorer than I went, to find out quite by accident that here was indeed the golden land. Mayne, I have gold worth hundreds of pounds already hidden away safe.”

“I am very, very glad,” I cried. “But I want to know—”

“Yes?” he said, for I had stopped.

“Have you—no, not now,” for just then Esau came up to us.

“Look here, my lad,” said Gunson, quickly, “I sincerely hope that we may never have cause to use weapons against our fellow-men; but we must be prepared for emergencies. Do you know how to handle a revolver?”

Esau shook his head.

“Hit ever so much harder with my fists,” he said.

“But that will not do. The sight of our weapons may keep evil visitors off. Let me show you how to load and fire.”

“Will it kick?” said Esau.

“Not if you hold it tightly. Now, look here.”

And as I looked on, Mr Gunson showed Esau how to load and fire, and generally how to handle the weapon, the lesson acting as well for me.

“There,” said Mr Gunson at last, “you ought to be a valuable help to me now; for the beauty of a weapon like this is, that the very sight of its barrel will keep most men at a distance; and if they come I hope it will these.”

“Did yesterday, didn’t it?” said Esau, laughingly, to me.

“Now,” said Gunson, “about your rifle, Mayne; can you manage it?”

“I think so,” I said; and I handled it in a way which satisfied my master.

“That’s right,” he said. “Never mind about hitting. To fire is the thing; the noise will, I hope, scare enemies. Now if Quong could be of some use, it would make a show of four defenders; but we know of old his strong point.”

“Getting up a tree,” I said, laughing.

“Exactly. Perhaps he could throw boiling water, but I shall not ask him to do that. There, we are all right; every force must have a commissariat department, and some general once said that an army fights upon its stomach. We’ll have him to feed us, while we keep guard about the place.”

“And won’t you wash for gold at all?” said Esau, in a disappointed tone of voice.

“No, nor yet mention it,” said Gunson, firmly. “To all intents and purposes there is no gold here whatever. We are settlers, and we are going to hold this spot. You see, there is our brand on that tree.”

As he spoke he pointed to the mark we had cut on the great fir-tree hard by, and I could not help a shudder as I recollected the events of that day.

The morning passed, and the afternoon came without our hearing a sound but those made by the birds and squirrels, and after partaking of a meal we began to look anxiously for the night as the time of danger; but we saw the ruddy blaze of light die out on snow-topped peaks, and then the pale stars begin to appear.

“This place is wonderfully like Switzerland in parts,” said Gunson, as we sat near the fire always on the *qui vive* for danger; and in a low voice he chatted to us till it was quite night, and the sky was a blaze of stars.

“I think we may sleep in peace to-night,” said Gunson, and he was a true prophet, for, though I woke twice with a start of fear, the noise which had wakened me was only caused by Quong going to throw some wood upon the fire, which he never suffered to die out, but coaxed on so as to have a plentiful heap of hot ashes in which to bake.

Two days passed in peace, and then a third, with the inaction telling upon us all. For we were constantly on the strain, and the slightest sound suggested the coming of an enemy.

“You see we cannot stir,” Gunson said to me. “We must keep together. If one of us played spy and reconnoitred, the chances are that the enemy would come while we were away.”

“But what does Quong say?” I asked. “He went down the stream last night.”

“That there are thirty parties between here and the river, and that means some of them are new-comers, making their way up here before long. To-morrow we shall have to send him to the Fort to beg for food.”

“But there is a store lower down, Quong told me.”

“Yes, and to buy off the people at their exorbitant prices, I shall have to pay with gold, and for the present I wish to avoid showing that there is any here.”

The next day dawned, and was passing as the others had passed, for Mr Gunson was hesitating still about sending Quong for provisions, that little gentleman having announced that there would be “plenty bread, plenty tea, plenty bacon for another day.”

“Mayne,” said Mr Gunson, as the sun was getting low, “I think I shall go down the stream to-night, and see if those men are there. Perhaps, after all, we are scared about nothing; they may have gone up another of the valleys instead of this, and found gold in abundance—who knows? But I must end this suspense some—”

He started, for I was pointing down stream at something moving.

“Is that a deer?” I whispered; and before he could answer a voice cried—

“Come on, lads, it’s more open up here, and it looks a likely spot.”

Chapter Forty Five.

Gunson’s Decision.

“Sit fast,” said Gunson, “both of you. Don’t make any sign, and leave me to speak. But mind, if I say ‘Tent,’ run both of you to the tent, and seize your weapons ready to do what I say.”

I gave him a nod, and sat with beating heart watching the moving figure, which directly after caught sight of us.

“Hullo!” he said; “some one here?” Then turning, “Look sharp, some of you.”

Both Gunson and I had recognised the man as Quong’s principal assailant, and I glanced sharply toward the Chinaman, to catch sight of the soles of his shoes as he crept rapidly in amongst the trees, a pretty evident sign that he too had recognised his enemy.

“Nice evening, mate,” said the big fellow, advancing, as Gunson sat by me, coolly filling his pipe. “Ah, I just want a light.”

He came closer, looking sharply round, while we could hear the trampling and breaking of the fir-boughs, as others were evidently close at hand.

Gunson drew a burning stick from the fire, and offered it to the man, who took it, and said quietly, as he lit his own pipe—

“Camping here for the night, mate?”

“Yes: camping here.”

“Going on in the morning?”

“No; this is my claim.”

The man dropped the burning stick, and stared at Gunson.

“What?” he said. “Oh no, that won’t do. Me and my mates have chosen this patch, so you’ll have to go higher up or lower down; haven’t we, lads?” he continued, as one by one the rest of the gang came up.

“Eh? all right, yes, whatever it is,” said one of them, whom I recognised as the second of Quong’s assailants.

“There, you see,” continued the first man; “it’s all right, so you’ll have to budge.”

“No,” said Gunson, quietly; “this is my claim. I’ve been here some days now, and here I stay.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that,” said the fellow, in a bullying tone. “It’s the place for us, so no nonsense. Been here some days, have you?”

“Yes, some days now, my lad; and the law gives me a prior right.”

“Ah, but there arn’t no law up here yet. Look here,” he cried, suddenly seizing Gunson, and forcing him back. “What’s the pay dirt worth? How much gold have you got? How—Why, hallo! it’s you, is it? Here, old lad,” he cried to the other speaker, “it’s our wrastling friend. I told you we should run up agen each other again, and—why of course—here’s the boy too. This is quite jolly.”

“Keep your hands off,” said Gunson, shaking himself free, and springing up, an example we followed. “This part of the country’s wide enough, so go your way. I tell you again, this claim is mine. What I make is my business, so go.”

“Hear all this?” said the big fellow, quickly. “Hear this, mates? We arn’t inside a fence now, with a lot o’ riflemen ready, so just speak up, some of you. Isn’t this the spot we mean to have—isn’t this the claim Tom Dunn come up and picked?”

“Yes, yes,” came in chorus, as the men closed up round us in the gathering gloom; while I felt sick with apprehension, and stood ready to spring away as soon as Mr Gunson gave the order to go, while, fortunately for us, the way was open, being beyond the fire.

“You hear, mate,” cried the big fellow, fiercely, “so no more words. You and your boys can go, and think yourselves lucky we don’t slit your ears. Do you hear?”

“Yes,” said Gunson, smiling.

“There’s plenty of other places, so be off. Where’s your traps? Now then, cut!”

He took a step forward, and his companions seemed about to rush at us, when Mr Gunson’s voice rang out—

“Tent!”

We sprang across the fire, whose thin smoke half hid us as we rushed in among the trees, and seized our weapons.

“Scared ’em,” roared the big fellow; and there was a chorus of laughter from his companions, who gathered about the fire, kicking it together to make a blaze, and get lights for their pipes.

We were in darkness, and they were in full light, the flames flashing up, and giving a strangely picturesque aspect to the group.

“Soon jobbed that job,” said the big fellow. “How they ran! wonder whether they got any dust.”

“You ought to have searched ’em,” said the second. “I know they had, or they wouldn’t have run.”

“*Cock*,” whispered Gunson, as there was a momentary pause; and the men all started, and their hands went to their hips for their pistols, as the ominous clicking of our pieces was heard.

“Bail up!” roared Gunson, his voice pealing out of the darkness; “you are covered by rifles, and the man who moves dies.”

There was an angry growl, and the men threw up their hands, one of them holding a pistol.

“Put that iron away,” roared Gunson; and the man slowly replaced it, and then raised his hands like his fellows.

“Now go back the way you came, or strike up further,” said Gunson, firmly. “Show your faces here again, and it is at your own risk, for I shoot at sight. Off!”

There was a low muttering growl at this, and the men walked slowly away in the direction by which they had come, while we sat listening till there was not a sound.

“Gone,” I said, with the painful beating of my heart calming down.

“Yes, my lad, gone,” said Gunson; “and we shall have to follow their example. It is a horrible shame, but till we have people sent up by the governor, those scoundrels take the law in their own hands.”

“But they will not dare to come back.”

“I don’t know. But I shall not dare to try and hold the place against such a gang.”

“But you weren’t afraid of ’em?” said Esau.

“Indeed, but I was,” said Gunson, with a bitter laugh, “horribly afraid. I should have fought to the end though, all the same, and so would you.”

“Dunno,” said Esau; “but I was going to try and hit one, for I thought it a pity to waste a shot, and I can hit without killing; can’t I, Mayne Gordon?”

“Don’t talk about it,” I said, with a shudder.

“Why not? Wish we could wound all that lot like I wounded you, and that they would be as bad for six months.”

“Don’t talk,” said Mr Gunson. “We will not stir to-night, and the best way will be not to show ourselves—only one at a time to make up the fire. No sleep to-night, lads; or if there is, it must be in turns. Here, Quong! What tree has he gone up?”

There was no reply, and we sat listening with the darkness closing in all around, and the silence growing painful. It was a weary watch in the gloom, though outside the fire lit up the valley, and from time to time I went out and threw on a few sticks, just enough to keep it up.

I don’t know what time it was, probably about midnight, when Mr Gunson said softly.

“Two will be enough to watch. You, Dean, lie down and take your spell till you are called.”

There was no reply.

“Do you hear?”

Still no answer.

“What!” cried Mr Gunson, “has he forsaken us?”

“No, no,” I whispered; “here he is, and fast asleep.”

Mr Gunson uttered a low, half-contemptuous laugh.

“Nice fellow to trust with our lives,” he said. “Shall I wake him to watch while we sleep?”

“Don’t be hard upon him,” I said. “He was very tired, and it always was his weak point—he would go to sleep anywhere.”

“And your weak point to defend your friends, eh, Mayne? There, I will not be hard upon him. Talk in whispers, and keep on the *qui vive*; we must not be surprised. Are you very tired?”

“Not at all now,” I said. “I don’t want to go to sleep.”

“Then we’ll discuss the position, Mayne. Hist!”

We listened, but the faint crack we heard was evidently the snapping of a stick in the fire, and Mr Gunson went on.

“Now, Mayne,” he said, “after years of such toil as few men have lived through, I have found wealth. No, no, don’t you speak. Let me have the rostrum for awhile.”

He had noted that I was about to ask him a question, for it was on my lips to say, “How did you get to know of this place?”

“I am not selfish or mad for wealth,” he continued. “I am working for others, and I have found what I want. In a few months, or less, I shall be a rich man again, and you and your friends can take your share in my prosperity. That is, if I can hold my own here till law and order are established. If I cannot hold my own, I may never have another chance. In other words, if those scoundrels oust me, long before I can get help from the settlement they will have cleared out what is evidently a rich hoard or pocket belonging to old Dame Nature, where the gold has been swept. Now then, for myself I am ready to dare everything, but I have you two boys with me, and I have no right to risk your injury, perhaps your lives. What do you think I ought to do?”

“Stand your ground,” I said, firmly. “I would.”

I said this, for I had a lively recollection of the cowardice these men had displayed, both at the Fort and here, as soon as they had been brought face to face with the rifles.

Gunson grasped my hand and pressed it hard.

“Thank you, my lad,” he said, in a low deep whisper. “I half expected to hear you say this, but my conscience is hard at work with me as to whether I am justified in tying your fate up with that of such an unlucky adventurer as I am.”

“I am only an adventurer too,” I said; “and it is not such very bad luck to have found all this gold.”

He was silent for a few minutes, as if he were thinking deeply, but at last he spoke.

“I’ve been weighing it all in the balance, Mayne,” he said, “and God forgive me if I am going wrong, for I cannot help myself. The gold is very heavy in the scale, and bears down the beam. I cannot, gambler though I may be, give up now. Look here, Mayne, my lad, here is my decision. I am going to try and get a couple of good fellows from down below to come in as partners. So as soon as it is light you had better get back to the Fort, explain your position, and I know Mr Raydon to be so straightforward and just a man, that he will forgive you.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” I said, firmly; “and I’d sooner die than go back now.”

“Nonsense! heroics, boy.”

“It is not,” I said. “Mr Gunson, would two strange men, about whom you know nothing, be more true to you than Esau Dean and I would?”

“No; I am sure they would not,” he cried eagerly. “Then I shall stay with you, and whatever I do Esau will do. He will never leave me. Besides, he is mad to get gold too. We are only boys, but those men are afraid of the rifles, and even if they mastered us, they would not dare to kill us.”

“No, my lad, they would not,” cried Mr Gunson. “Then you shall stay.”

He turned toward me, and grasped my hand. “And look here, Mayne, I have for years now been the rough-looking fellow you met in the steerage of the ship; but I thank heaven there is still a little of the gentleman left, and you shall not find me unworthy of the trust you place in—Ah!”

I started back, for there was the sound of a heavy blow, and Mr Gunson fell forward upon his face, while two strong hands seized me from behind, and I was thrown heavily, while some one lay across my chest.

Chapter Forty Six.

The Representative of the Law.

“Right behind him, mate. Don’t be afraid. Tie his thumbs together too.” I heard these words as I lay there in the darkness, and knew that our assailants must be securing Gunson, while directly after Esau’s angry expostulations told what was going on with him.

“Let go, will you! Oh, I say, it hurts. What yer doing of? Here, hi! Mr Gunson, Mayne Gordon, don’t be such cowards as to run away and leave a fellow. They’re a-killing of me.”

“Hold your row, will you,” cried a gruff voice that was familiar to me now. “There, you won’t run away in a hurry. Have you tied that other shaver up?”

“No,” growled the man, who was lying across me.

“Look sharp then, and let’s see what they’ve got to eat. Done the job neatly this time.”

“Yes,” said another voice, whose words made me shudder; “bit too well, mate. This chap’s a dead ’un.”

“Bah! not he. Crack on the head with a soft bit o’ wood won’t kill a man. Here, let’s see what they’ve got. Make up that fire a bit. Plaguey dark.”

While this was being said, I felt hands busy about my hands and legs, and then a voice by me said—

“There he is, tight as a bull-calf in a butcher’s cart.”

Soon after the fire blazed up vividly, sending its light in amongst the trees; and I saw the faces of the two big fellows, our old friends, and several of the others, who, after making sure of the rifles and revolvers, hunted out what food there was in Gunson’s little tent, and began to prepare themselves a meal.

“Don’t seem to be no whiskey,” said the big fellow, who was leader, as he passed close by me; and there I lay listening, perfectly helpless, and with my heart beating heavily with dread, as I pondered on the man’s words about Gunson.

I waited till the men were talking round the fire, and then whispered—

“Mr Gunson—Mr Gunson,” but there was no reply, and a chill feeling of horror ran through me, and the cold dew gathered on my forehead.

“Ain’t you going to say a word to me, Mayne Gordon?” said Esau, in a piteous voice.

“Say? What can I say?” I replied.

“Dunno, but you might say something. They’ve tied me so tight that the ropes cut right down to the bone.”

“So they have me, and it hurts horribly.”

“Can’t hurt you so much as it does me. Pretty sort of chap you were to keep watch, and let them jump on us like

that.”

“Pretty sort of fellow you were to go to sleep,” I returned, bitterly.

“Didn’t go to sleep,” grumbled Esau. “Only shut my eyes for a moment.”

“There, don’t make paltry excuses,” I said, angrily.

“Dare say you two was asleep too,” he said, sulkily. “I say, have they killed poor old Gunson?”

“Don’t—don’t—don’t!” I whispered, piteously; and in spite of the pain it gave me, I rolled myself over and struggled along, till at last, after a terrible struggle, I reached Gunson’s side.

“Mr Gunson,” I said; “Mr Gunson, pray, pray speak.”

He uttered a low groan, and it sent a thrill of joy through me.

“Hurray!” whispered Esau; “he ain’t dead. I say, can’t we get untied and drop on to them now when they don’t expect it?”

“Impossible,” I said, bitterly, “they’ve got the rifles too.”

“Oh, I say,” groaned Esau, “ain’t it too bad, Mayne Gordon! Just as we was all going to be rich, and now we shall be cheated out of it all. Only wish I could get my hands undone.”

What he would have done I cannot say, for his hands were tied fast, and we lay there listening to the talking and coarse laughter of the men about the fire, and a faint groan now and then from Mr Gunson, till the day began to break; and as the sun lit up the misty valley, and shot its bright, golden arrows through the trees, the men rose, and two of them took hold of Mr Gunson’s head and heels, and carried him out into the open. “Dead?” said one of them.

“Not he. Take a harder crack to kill him,” said the big fellow. “Bring out them two boys and lay ’em here. I’m going to hold a court.”

“Here, mind what you’re doing,” cried Esau, as he was lifted. “You hurt.”

“Hold your row, warmint,” growled one of his hearers; and as Esau kicked out viciously, they threw him down by Gunson just as if he was a sack of wheat.

“All right, cowards,” exclaimed Esau, viciously. “I’ll serve you out for this.”

I set my teeth hard, so as not to make a sound, though they hurt me horribly, and I too was thrown down on the grass near the fire, while the big leader seated himself on a stone, took out and filled his pipe, lit it with a burning brand, and then began to smoke, while the men formed a circle round.

“Now then, young ’un,” the big ruffian said to me, “speak up, and we shan’t hurt you, but if you don’t tell the whole truth, one of my mates here will take you into the woods there, and use his knife.”

“And then you’ll be hung,” said Esau, sharply. “For cutting off his ears, monkey,” growled the fellow. “Well, they wouldn’t do it for cutting off yourn, so we’ll try them first.”

“Yah! you daren’t,” cried Esau, viciously. “Don’t, don’t,” I said. “It’s of no good.”

“Not a bit,” said the big fellow. “Now then, boy, where’s your mate hid his pile?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What! No lies, or—”

He clenched his fist, and held it towards me threateningly.

“I tell you I don’t know, and if I did I wouldn’t tell you.”

“We’ll soon see about that. Now then, you,” he said, turning to Esau, “where’s your mate keep his pile?”

“Dunno,” said Esau, laughing. “Find out.”

“Oh, we can soon do that. Won’t take long. Here, you, how much did you get out of the stream every day?”

“Don’t know,” I said, “anything about it.”

“Ho! Very good. I say, mates, who’s got the sharpest knife?”

“All on us,” said his principal companion—the man who was with him first.

“Well then, we’ll have his ears off, and if that don’t make him speak, his tongue ain’t no use, and we’ll have off that.”

“You dare to touch him,” cried Dean, fiercely, “and I’ll never rest till the police catch you.”

“Thank ye,” said the big ruffian, and one man burst into a roar of laughter. “There, it’s of no use, boys; tell us where he buried his pile, and you shall have a handful apiece. I don’t know but what we’ll let you stop in camp and cook for

us. Now then, out with it."

"I told you before," I said firmly, "I don't know, and if I did I would not tell you."

"Look here," said one of the men, "give him a taste o' Indian. That'll make him speak."

"What d'yer mean?"

"Pull off his boots, and put his feet close to the fire to warm."

"Oh!" cried Esau, "I wish my hands were untied."

"And serve him the same," said the man who had made the proposal. "It'll be a race between 'em who shall speak first."

"There, it's all right. Ears off last. But they're going to speak; arn't you, boys?"

We both remained silent.

"Oh, very well," said the big fellow; "off with their boots then."

"Don't you say a word, Esau," I whispered; "it's only to frighten us."

"No, it arn't," said the big ruffian, fiercely, for he must have guessed what I said. "It arn't done to frighten you. Off with 'em, lads, and hold their feet close. That'll make 'em speak—or squeak," he added, with a grin.

"It will not, you cowardly brute," I cried, desperately, "for we neither of us know."

"And him as does can't speak," cried Esau, fiercely. "Call yourselves men to tie us two lads up, and do this? Yah! you're afraid."

"Where's he hid his pile, then?" growled the big ruffian.

"Don't answer him," I said; "it's of no use."

"Not a bit, my saucy young whelps. Now I give you one more chance. Hold hard a moment," he cried to the men who held us. "Now then, where's that there gold?"

"I don't know," I said, furiously, for the pain I suffered made me reckless; "and I tell you again, if I did know I wouldn't say."

"I say, mates," said the big fellow, with mock seriousness, "arn't it awful to hear two boys lie like that? Must teach 'em better, mustn't us?"

There was a burst of laughter at this, and the men dragged off our boots and stockings.

"That's the way," he said; "now set 'em down close to the fire, and just warm their soles a bit; just to let 'em know what it's like."

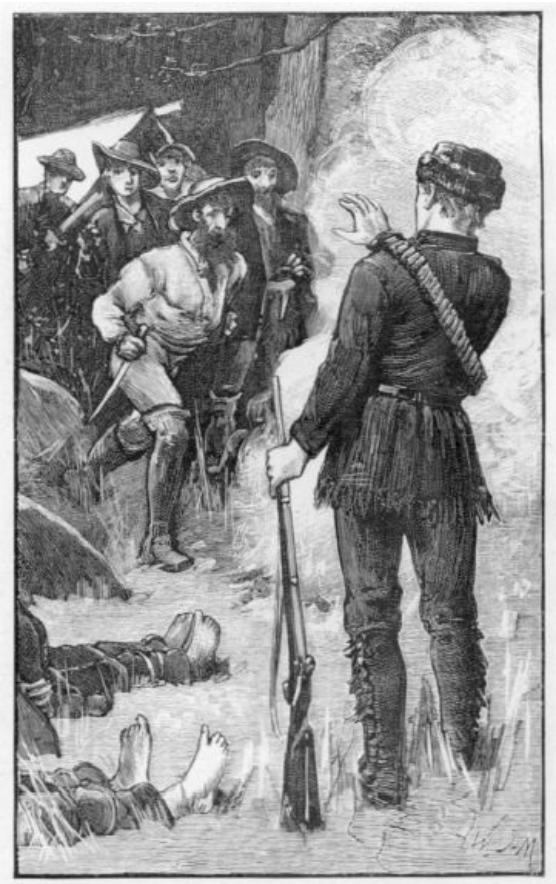
"Oh, Esau!" I groaned, as I was seized; but he did not hear me, for as they took hold of him he began to struggle and writhe with all his might. Then for a few moments I began to think that this was all done to frighten us, till I heard Esau give a shriek of pain.

"Now, will you tell us?" cried the big fellow. "Give the other a taste too."

Four men laid hold of me, and they carried me close up to the fire, whose glow I felt upon my face, as I too made a desperate effort to escape. But it was useless, and I was turning faint with horror and dread combined, for in another moment they would have forced my feet close to the glowing embers, when I uttered a cry of joy, for Mr Raydon, rifle in hand, suddenly strode out from among the pines, and I was dropped, for every man seized his weapon.

"Put up your pistols," cried Mr Raydon, in a voice of thunder, as he came up to us, his piece in his left hand, while with his right he struck the man nearest to me a blow full in the eyes which sent him staggering across the fire, to fall heavily on the other side.

"Stand fast, mates," cried the big ruffian, fiercely; "he's only one. It's him from the Fort, and we've got my gentleman now."



"Stand back, sir!" roared Mr. Raydon, "if you value your life."—p. 486.

"Stand back, sir!" roared Mr Raydon, "if you value your life."

"Give up that gun if you value yours," cried the man, and, bowie-knife in hand, he sprang right at Mr Raydon.

But at that moment there was the sharp crack of a rifle, the ruffian's legs gave way beneath him, and he fell forward, sticking his knife deep into the earth.

"Fool! I warned you," said Mr Raydon, hoarsely. "Stand! all of you. You are surrounded and covered by rifles—look!"

He pointed to where a thin film of smoke rose from among the pines, close by where Esau had blazed the tree.

"It's a lie, mates," groaned the prostrate ruffian; "there's only two of 'em. Don't let him bully you like that."

"No, mate," cried his chief companion. "It was a shot from behind. Come on."

He in turn rushed at Mr Raydon, who merely stepped back as the man raised his hand to strike, when a second shot rang out from the same place, and, with a yell of agony, the hand which held a knife dropped, and the blade fell with a jingling sound upon a block of stone.

"Will you believe me now?" said Mr Raydon. "I tell you there are men all round you, and every one is a marksman who can bring you down. Do you surrender?"

"No," cried the big ruffian, through his set teeth, as he dragged himself up on his hands. "It's the same one fired both shots. Mates, you won't cave in and give up a claim like this?"

"No!" came in chorus. "It's our claim, and we'll fight for it."

"It is Mr Gunson's claim," I cried, angrily; "and it was ours before he came."

"If any one has a right to the claim, it is I," said Mr Raydon; "and I give you warning, my men, if one of you is seen in these parts after to-day, he shall be hunted down and placed in irons till he can be sent back to the coast for attempted murder and robbery."

"Don't listen," cried the big ruffian, hoarsely; and I could see that he was ghastly pale. "He's nobody. He's trying to scar' you. Stand up and fight for your rights."

"Mr Raydon, quick!" I shouted. "Take care!"

I was too late, for a revolver-shot rang out, fired by the second man; but it was with his left hand, and I uttered a cry of joy, for it had missed.

"Keep to your places," cried Mr Raydon; "I am not hurt. Grey and number two advance. Stop number two and number three advance, and collect their weapons. You others cover your men. Grey, bring down the next who lifts a hand."

Two of the men from the Fort ran out from the pines, rifle in hand; but at that moment there was a crackling and rustling of branches, and one by one at least a dozen gold-finders from below came running up, armed with rifles and revolvers.

“Ah,” cried the big ruffian, from where he lay; “come on, mates. They’re trying to put a stop to the gold-washing, and to rob us of our claim.”

“Gag that scoundrel if he speaks again,” cried Mr Raydon, coolly, as the rough-looking men clustered together, dirt-stained, unkempt, and drenched with water some of them, and all anxiously handling their pieces. There was a low angry murmur from the new-comers, and our assailants shouted—

“Yes; come to rob us of our claim.”

“Silence!” cried Mr Raydon, turning then to the gold-finders. “I am Mr Daniel Raydon, chief officer of Fort Elk, the station of the Hudson’s Bay Company.”

“Ay, that’s right,” said one of the new-comers.

“I stand to all here as the magistrate of this district till the Governor, her Majesty’s representative, sends officers to preserve order, and protect you and your rights and claims in this newly-discovered goldfield.”

“That’s right, sir; that’s right, sir,” said the same man. “But when we’ve chosen claims you’re not to take them away.”

“Hear, hear!” roared the big ruffian, faintly.

“And shoot him down,” cried another of the fresh coiners; and there was a loud murmur like a chorus of approval.

“Of course not, my men,” said Mr Raydon, calmly.

“Don’t listen to him. It’s a robbery,” cried one of the big ruffian’s gang. “Fired at us; shot two of our men.”

“Yes; we heard the shots,” said the first gold-finder.

“And I am glad you have come,” said Mr Raydon. “Now then, you boys. Has either of you seen a man here and those two lads before?”

“Seen the man,” said the first speaker; “not the boys.”

“Well, do you know he was working this claim with a Chinaman?”

“Yes,” said another; “I saw the Chinaman only yesterday morning.”

“Last night the Chinaman came to the Fort to tell me they were attacked by a gang of ruffians, and I brought my men over the mountains to come to their help.”

“It’s all a lie,” said the big fellow, in a faint voice.

“Ask the boys, my good fellows,” said Mr Raydon. “Ask them where Mr Gunson is.”

“Lying yonder,” cried Esau, “half dead. They did it.”

“These boys are bound too, you see. Tell them, Mayne Gordon, what they were about to do when I came to your help.”

“Hold our feet in the fire to make us tell where the gold is hidden.”

“No, no; a bit of a game,” chorussed the gang.

“Look at my feet,” cried Esau, piteously; “is that a bit of a game?” and he tried to hold up his bound legs, which the leader of the new-comers raised and examined.

“It’s true enough,” said the chief speaker, indignantly; and a roar of execration arose.

“It is all true,” cried Mr Raydon. “Where is the Chinaman?”

“Allee light—me come along,” cried Quong; and there was a roar of laughter, for his voice came from high up in a tree.

“Come down, Quong; there is no danger,” said Mr Raydon. “Some of you cut these poor lads’ limbs free. Stop, fool!” he roared, as one of the gang began to sidle off. “Stand, all of you, if you value your lives. Fire on the first scoundrel who tries to escape. I have men planted, and good shots,” he said to the leader of the gold-finders.

“You carry it with a high hand, governor,” said this man, rather abruptly.

“Well, sir, I have come to save these people here. I should have done the same for you. This is English ground, where every man’s life and property must be protected by the law. For the time being I represent the law, and I’ll have myself obeyed. Now what have you—what have any of you to say?”

“Three cheers for old England and the law!” cried the man. “I beg your pardon, sir: you’re right, and I’m wrong. What shall we do? Hang this lot?”

“That’s not obeying the law,” said Mr Raydon, smiling. “No; two of them are wounded. Their leader has his thigh broken; and his companion his hand smashed, as he tried to stab me. They have got their punishment. Disarm the rest. Then four of my men shall go with you to see these scoundrels well down the valley. If they show their faces here again they know the risks.”

“Right!” cried the leader; and he snatched the revolver from the nearest man, and his example was so rapidly followed, that in a few minutes the utterly cowed gang was huddled together, unarmed, and guarded by four of the Company’s people, who had advanced from the wood at a word from their chief.

“And now what about our claims along this stream?” said the leader of the new-comers.

“I am here to help you maintain your just rights, sir,” said Mr Raydon, quietly. “Now help me to maintain order, and to see to the wounded men. Bring lint and bandages, Grey.”

And as that individual produced the linen from his haversack, Mr Raydon handed his rifle to one of the gold-finders, and went down on one knee to examine Mr Gunson’s injury, which he carefully washed and bandaged.

“A terrible cut,” he said, in answer to my inquiring eyes, “and concussion of the brain. I hope not more serious. Now, my man,” he continued, turning to the big ruffian, “you tried to take my life, and I have got to try and save yours.”

The fellow made no answer, but winced and groaned with pain as his shattered limb was set and supported by rough splints.

“This fellow will have to be carried,” said Mr Raydon, rising; “he will not walk again for many months. Now, sir, you.”

He bent over the second ruffian and examined his hand, bathed and bandaged it, and then went to the stream to wash his own.

By this time several more armed men had come up from the lower part of the stream, and eagerly asked for particulars, while I heard a great deal, and noted nearly everything, as I sat by Mr Gunson, suffering agonies, for my arms and legs throbbed with the return of the circulation.

Mr Raydon had only just finished his task when the chief speaker of the gold-finders came up with half a dozen more.

“All my mates here, sir,” he said, “from down stream ask me to speak, and say we thank you for what you’ve done. We want protection, and law, and order, and for every man to make his pile in peace. We see you’ve got half a dozen men with you, and you talk of sending four down the river with this gang.”

“Yes,” said Mr Raydon.

“Well, sir, we think we can save you that job. We’ll see those chaps off the premises.”

“No violence,” said Mr Raydon, sternly.

“Not if they behave themselves, sir, I promise that. For we think, as there’s no knowing who may come next, we should be glad if you’ll keep your men, so that in case of trouble we can appeal to you.”

“Very well,” said Mr Raydon; “let it be so then.”

“Don’t trust him,” snarled one of the wounded men; “he’ll rob you all of your claims.”

“Not he,” said the chief speaker.

“No,” said Mr Raydon, “and the first step I shall take will be to leave two of my men in charge of this claim, which has been taken up by the wounded prospector, Gunson.”

“That’s right; that’s fair,” came in chorus, and after a little more conversation the men moved off with the prisoners, the wounded fellow being carried on a litter of poles.

“Edwards,” said Mr Raydon, “you and another had better stay here with the Chinaman. Gordon, where is the gold?”

“I have not the least idea, sir.”

“Oh, then you, Dean.”

“Don’t know a bit, sir,” said Esau, who was nursing his blistered feet.

“Here, Quong, where has Mr Gunson stored the gold he has found?”

“Me no sabbee, sah. Quong give allee gole Mis Gunson take callee. No sabbee. Hide allee gole ploply.”

“Cut poles and lash them together,” said Mr Raydon to Grey; “we must carry him to the Fort. Gordon, Dean, you had better come and stay till he is better.”

I looked up at him doubtingly.

“Yes,” he said; “it will be best.”

Half an hour after we were on our way back, with Esau limping painfully. Two of the miners volunteered to help carry the litter, so as to relieve the four we had, and the claim was left in charge of the two others, for whom, as we came away, Quong was making, as he expressed it, “plenty good flesh tea.”

It was dark night again as we reached the gate of the Fort, and heard the deep-toned baying of the great dog; and a few minutes later Mrs John was holding my hands, and as she kissed me there was a tear left upon my cheek.

“So glad, so very glad to see you back, Mayne,” said Mr John, warmly. “I hope all the trouble now is at an end.”

I said nothing, only helped to get Mr Gunson in his old quarters, after Esau had at last extricated himself from his mother’s arms.

“Is it all real, Esau?” I said, after Mr Raydon had gone, telling us not to be alarmed at Mr Gunson’s insensibility, for it might be hours before he came to.

“I shall come and see him twice in the course of the night,” he said, as he went out. “You, Esau, you must rest those feet.”

“Yes, sir; all right,” said Esau; and it was then that I said, “Is it all real?”

“If your feet smarted like mine do, you wouldn’t ask that,” he replied, sulkily. “I want to know why I wasn’t carried back in a litter too?”

“It was impossible,” I said.

“Wasn’t impossible to have given a fellow a pig-a-back. Oh, my feet, my feet! Oh, yes, it’s precious real.”

“I never expected to come back here like this,” I said.

“Nor I neither,” replied Esau. “I say, you’ll keep watch by Mr Gunson, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“That’s right. I’m going to do something for my trotters.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Go off to sleep.”

In a few minutes I was listening to his hard breathing, and asking myself whether, after the past night, I could do duty in watching the wounded man, when there were footsteps, and two of the men’s Indian wives came in.

“To nurse Mr Gunson,” they said, in fair English, and a short time after I too was fast asleep.

Chapter Forty Seven.

Almost Soldiers.

I awoke that next morning sore, miserable, and seeing everything through the very reverse of rose-coloured spectacles. For I was back at the Fort, and it now looked a very different place to the home I had journeyed so many months to find when I was sanguine and hopeful.

There appeared to be a dead weight upon me; and as I first opened my eyes, I felt as if the best thing I could do would be to rouse up Esau, and go right away. But as I looked round, my eyes lit upon Mr Gunson lying insensible in his bed, with Mrs Dean seated patiently by his side, and I felt ashamed of my thoughts, for I could not go away and leave one who had shown himself so true a friend from our first meeting, and I at once determined, no matter how painful my position might be, to stay by his side, and tend him till he grew strong again.

I shivered as I thought this, for I could just see his pale face below his bandaged head, and the ideas came—suppose he does not recover—never grow strong again? suppose he dies? The weak tears rose to my eyes at the thought, and I lay wistfully gazing at him in the silence of that bright morning, for I felt that I should be almost alone out there in that wild, new country. For Mr and Mrs John would certainly be more and more influenced by Mr Raydon; and as I could not stay at the Fort, I should never see them. The old plans of staying with them, and building up a new house somewhere in one of the lovely spots by the river, were gone, and I told myself that I should soon have to say good-bye to them.

There would be Esau, though;—perhaps not: for Mrs Dean would naturally want to stay where there were women; and as she had become attached to Mrs John, the chances were that she would stay at or near the Fort, and that would influence Esau, who would be forgiven by Mr Raydon, and stay too, while I should go off into the wilderness all alone.

Taken altogether, I was about as miserable and full of doleful ideas as a boy of my age could be. Not one bit of blue sky could I see through the clouds that shut in my future; and I was growing worse as I lay there with an indistinct fancy that I had heard Mr Raydon’s voice in the night, when a bright ray of sunshine came through the window, and made a ruddy golden spot on the pine-wood ceiling.

It was only a ray of light, but it worked wonders, for it changed the current of my thoughts, setting me thinking that the sun was just peeping over the edge of the mountain lying to the east, and brightening the mists that lay in the valleys, and making everything look glorious as it chased away the shadows from gully and ravine, till it shone full upon the river, and turned its grey waters into dazzling, rippling, and splashing silver.

I don't know how it was, but that sunlight began to drive away the mists and dark vapours in my mind. I did not feel so miserable, though I was painfully stiff and sore. The future was bright, my case not so hopeless, and I was just making up my mind that Esau would never forsake me, and that Mr Gunson would not die, when Mrs Dean looked round.

"Ah, my dear," she said; "awake?"

"Yes," I said, springing up, all dressed as I was. "You have not been watching here all night?"

"Oh, no; I only came on at daybreak. He's sleeping very calmly."

"Has he spoken?"

"Oh dear no, and is not likely to for long enough. Such a pity as it is, poor man!"

"It is a terrible injury," I said. "Yes, my dear; and how thankful I am it wasn't my poor Esau. What should I have done if it had been he?"

"It would have been terrible," I said. "Or you, my dear," she whispered hurriedly, as if in apology for not naming me before.

"Oh, that would have been no consequence," I replied, bitterly.

"Oh, my dear," she cried, with the tears in her eyes; "don't—don't talk like that. I know you've been in trouble, but we all have that, and they say it makes the happiness all the sweeter."

"Yes, they say so," I replied gloomily.

"Ah, it does, my dear. There, as Mr John said to me about you, 'it will all come right in the end.'"

"Here, what's the matter?" said Esau gruffly, still half asleep. "Time to get up? Hullo, mother! Oh, oh! I recollect now. I was dreaming about old Quong. I say! Oh, my feet—my feet!"

"There, there, there, my dear; they'll soon be better," said Mrs Dean, bending over him; and the sight of those two, with Esau's pettish ill-humour, quite drove away the rest of my gloom for the time. For as Mrs Dean bent over her son, he pushed her away.

"Don't, mother; I do wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what, my dear?"

"Talk to me, and pull me about like that."

"Hush! not so loud, my dear. You'll wake Mr Gunson."

"Bother Mr Gunson! There you go again. Can't you see I'm growed up now?"

"Yes, of course, Esau."

"No you can't, or you wouldn't talk to me like that. You always seem to treat me as if I was two years old; you'll be wanting to rock me to sleep some night."

"Esau, my dear, how can you?"

"Well, so you will. Pet, pet, pet, every time you get near me."

"Esau, my darling," cried Mrs Dean, excitedly. "What are you going to do?"

"Get up."

"With your feet like that?"

"Well, they'll be just the same if I lie here, and I'm not going to be ill."

"But you will be, dear, if you walk about."

"Then I shall be ill. I'm not going to lie here for you to feed me with a spoon, and keep on laying your hand on my head."

"Now, Esau, when did I try to feed you with a spoon?"

"I mean mettyphorically," grumbled Esau. "You always seem to think I'm a baby. Ah, if you begin to cry, I'll dance about and make my feet worse."

Mrs Dean wiped her eyes furtively, and Esau put his arm round her and gave her a hearty kiss, which made her beam

again.

“Well,” he said, turning to me with a very grim look, “not much fun in getting gold, is there? I say, who’d have thought of our coming back again like this? What ’ll Mr Raydon say to us this morning?”

I felt half startled at the idea of meeting him again, but my attention was taken up by a low muttering from Mr Gunson, and I went with Mrs Dean to his side, and stood watching her bathe his head till he sighed gently, and seemed to calm down.

“Poor old chap!” said Esau; “he got a nasty one, that he did. I say, wonder how much gold him and old teapot had found?”

“Oh, never mind that now.”

“But I do,” said Esau; “and so would he mind if he could think and talk. Wonder where he hid it all? Let’s ask Quong, because it oughtn’t to be lost.”

I made no answer, but stood watching the injured man, while Esau preferred sitting down and nursing first one foot and then the other, but always obstinately refusing to lot his mother touch them. “I say,” he said, after a pause. “Well.”

“What’s old Raydon going to say to us? It was very jolly of him to come and help us as he did, but he looked pickled thunder at me and you here. He won’t let us stay. We shall have to start off again.”

“I suppose so,” I said drearily, with my old troubles coming back; and we relapsed into silence, till there was a soft light step at the door, and Quong entered and looked sharply at the plain rough bed-place where Mr Gunson lay.

“Come over see how d’ye do,” he said quickly. “Cap Gunson no go long die self?”

“No, no,” I cried; “he will get well.”

“Yes; get well, ploper quite well, and go wash gole. Makee flesh blead—flesh tea?”

“No, not yet,” said Mrs Dean, who looked askant at the fresh-comer, and as if she did not approve of him.

“Allee light. Wait. Good fi’ makee blead cakee.”

“I say, Quong,” whispered Esau, “did you two find much gold?”

Quong gave him a quaint laughing look. “You waitee littee bit. Allee same ask Mas Gunson. You sabbee?”

“But he can’t tell us. I say, do you know where he hid what you got?”

“No; no sabbee. Mas Gunson know allee same. You wait.”

Just then I heard a cough in the enclosure, and drew back a little uneasily as the door opened, and Mr Raydon entered.

“Good morning, my lads,” he said, gravely and coldly. “Ah, Quong, you here? Well, nurse, how is your patient?”

“He seems very nicely, sir, and I don’t think there is much fever.”

“Does he seem in great pain?”

“Only at times, sir, and then I bathe his temples.”

Quong looked sharply from one to the other, and began to fumble about under his blue cotton blouse till he produced from some hidden pocket a tiny thin bottle, less than my little finger, and gave it to Mr Raydon.

“Velly good,” he said, eagerly. “You sabbee? Touch velly little dlop allee long Cap Gunson head. No makee hurt then.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mr Raydon, taking the bottle. “I have seen this before;” and as Gunson just then uttered an uneasy moan, the cork was taken out, and a very tiny drop spread with a finger lightly about his temples.

“Makee seep,” said Quong, smiling. “Velly good.”

The essence certainly produced the required effect, and Quong showed his yellow teeth.

“Not muchee,” he said. “Velly lit dlop. Velly ofen? No, no.”

“I understand,” said Mr Raydon, handing back the bottle.

“No,” said Quong. “No. Keep all along. You sabbee?”

“Very well, I’ll keep it,” said Mr Raydon; and just then there was a tap at the door.

“Come in.”

Grey entered.

“Want me?”

“Bad news, sir,” said Grey, in a sharp whisper. “That man from the little valley—Barker he says his name is—”

“Which was Barker?”

“That sensible man you shook hands with.”

“What does he want?”

“Wants to see you, sir. They started that gang down the river with half a dozen armed miners, and they rose against them in the night.”

“Yes,” said Mr Raydon, excitedly. “Well?”

“They killed two, wounded all the rest, and they are all free again.”

“And their own wounded men?”

“Took them into the woods with them.”

“This is bad news indeed,” said Mr Raydon, beginning to pace the room.

“He wants to know what’s to be done,” said Grey.

“I must think—I must think,” said Mr Raydon, hastily. “Two men away guarding that claim.”

“Yes, sir. Weakens us.”

“Yes,” said Mr Raydon; “and we must be weakened more. Two of our men must go to strengthen them at the claim. There must be four there.”

“Won’t draw them away and give up the claim, sir?”

“No,” said Mr Raydon, firmly. “Go back to this Mr Barker, and say I’ll be with him directly.”

“Yes, sir,” said Grey; and he went out with all the quiet precision of a soldier.

“Bad news—bad news indeed,” said Mr Raydon, half aloud. “More trouble to lay upon your shoulders, Mayne Gordon. All your fault.”

I felt a chill run through me, and I believe a cold hard look must have come into my face.

“Well, we must make the best of it. Of course you two lads must stop here.”

“If you wish it, sir,” I said, “we will go directly.”

“I do not wish it, boy,” he replied sternly. “Do you wish to leave those who have been your friends in the lurch now you have dragged all this trouble to their door?”

“No, sir,” I said, as I set my teeth hard, determined to be cool, in spite of the injustice with which I felt that I was being treated.

“No, of course not. You have some stubborn pluck in you—both of you.”

Esau growled in a very low tone, and made his mother look at him in a startled way, as if she had suddenly awakened to the fact that her son possessed the nature of a bear’s cub.

Mr Raydon took another turn or two up and down the room.

“Mrs Dean,” he said, “I can do nothing more for your patient. No doctor could; time is the only thing. I’ll come back as soon as I can. Meantime my sister will come to you, and you can have either of my men’s wives to assist you in nursing. They are Indians, but well trained in that way. Do your best.”

“Mother always does,” growled Esau.

Mr Raydon gave him a sharp look, but Esau did not flinch.

“Look here, you two,” said Mr Raydon, after a pause. “I am going to send two more of my men away, for the fellows in that gang are not going to beat me. The law-and-order party must and shall prevail. This will weaken my little garrison, so you two will have to mount rifles, and take the places of two of my absent men.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, eagerly. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you. Now, Esau Dean, what do you say?”

“Course I shall do as he does. I’m ready.”

“No, no, Esau, my boy. Your feet, your feet,” cried Mrs Dean.

“Do be quiet, mother. There you go with the spoon again. Fellow don’t shoot off a rifle with his foot.”

I saw Mr Raydon bite his lips to repress a smile.

“I had forgotten your burnt feet. Do they feel very bad?”

“Oh, pretty tidy, sir, but I don’t mind. I should like to have a pop at one of them as held me to that fire.”

“Naturally,” said Mr Raydon.

“But I’m afraid I can’t do much marching.”

“You will be posted in one of the block-houses.”

“That’ll do,” cried Esau. “Come along, Mayne Gordon.”

“You have never used a rifle.”

“Why, Mr Gunson there showed us all about it. Don’t you be afraid; I’ll try.”

“Oh, Esau!” cried Mrs Dean.

“And mother shall nurse me when I’m wounded.”

“Oh, my boy—my boy!”

“Silence, sir! Mrs Dean, he is only tormenting you. It is not likely that he will be hurt, but out here in the wilderness we do sometimes have to fight to protect the women and children. There, do not be uneasy; I see your son will do you credit.”

Esau gave a gulp, and turned red in the face, while I suffered a twinge of jealousy on finding that the lad, whom I blamed as the cause of all the trouble, should be spoken to in this way while I was treated with a coldness that, in my sensitive state, seemed to freeze all the better nature within me.

“A pretty mess this, sir,” said Barker, as we joined him out in the enclosure. “Those stupid donkeys have let loose a nice gang. They’ll be as savage as possible against everybody, and be coming down upon us just when we don’t expect it.”

“But have they arms and ammunition?”

“Plenty, sir. They stripped our men, and if we don’t look out they’ll strip us. Why, the little valley will never be safe again while they are about.”

“No,” said Mr Raydon. “It’s a bad look-out, but we must take every precaution. You may rely on my helping you, as I promised, and if I am the unlucky one attacked first, I look for help from you.”

“And you shall have it, sir. I answer for the lads up the valley. What do you propose doing first?”

“Nothing,” said Mr Raydon.

The man stared at him aghast, and Mr Raydon smiled.

“But—but hadn’t we better get a party together, and hunt them down, sir?”

“An excellent plan,” said Mr Raydon, “but impossible in this wild country. They would lead us a terrible dance, weary us out, and perhaps take advantage of our absence to plunder our places. The better way will be to keep a sharp look-out, and punish them if they attack us.”

“But if they take us by surprise, sir?”

“They must not,” said Mr Raydon, quietly. “My advice to you is, that you go back and make arrangements for mutual support, so that all can hurry at once to the place attacked. You will make it one man’s duty to act as messenger, and come directly to give warning here, and another to give notice up the valley at Gunson’s claim.”

“And the two men there will come and help us? Yes: that’s good.”

“There will be four of my men stationed there,” said Mr Raydon. “That is a very likely place for the first attack, if they can find their way over the mountains and through the dense forest. The trouble began by their trying to seize that claim.”

“Why not let them go to it again, and attack them when they are settled down?” said Barker.

“No, my man, it is not our line to attack; let that come from the enemy. Besides, I particularly wish Mr Gunson’s claim to be reserved for him till he has recovered. So if the enemy find their way there you will go up to my men’s help. If there is anything you want from the Fort here at your camp, you can send up, and I will supply you if I can.”

“Thankye, sir, thankye. That’s very neighbourly,” said Barker. “I think the more of it because there’s a report about that you were dead against the claims being taken up.”

I stared at Mr Raydon wonderingly, for his behaviour was inexplicable to me; but I had no time given me for thought. As soon as Barker and the two men who came up with him had gone, Mr Raydon chose two of his little garrison, and sent them, well armed, and with as big loads of supplies as they could carry, by the near cut over the mountains, that is by the track taken when he and his men came to our help.

Directly after, in a sharp military way, he led us to his little armoury, and gave us each a rifle and pistol, with a few words of instruction as to where the weapons were to be kept in readiness for use; and, in addition, what we were to do in the places of the two men who had gone.

I was glad of this, for it took up my time, and gave me something else to think about. It was pleasant too—the duty of having to help in the defence of the Fort where my friends were gathered.

“Some day he’ll be sorry for it all,” I said to myself; and I was brooding over the past again, when Esau uttered a low chuckle, which made me turn to him wonderingly.

“Only think of it, Mayne Gordon,” he said. “What a game!”

“What is a game?”

“You always being so dead on to me about going for a soldier, and here we are both of us good as soldiers after all. Why, if he’d let us tackle one of those guns,” he continued, pointing to a little cannon mounted in the block-house, “it would be like joining the Ryle Artilleree.”

Chapter Forty Eight.

Lost!

We were not kept in doubt long about the proceedings of the enemy. I was in the strangers’ quarters next day, talking in a whisper to Mrs John, while taking her turn at nursing poor Gunson, who still lay perfectly insensible, and so still that I gazed at him with feelings akin to terror, when Mr Raydon came in and walked straight to the bedside. We watched him as he made a short examination, and then in answer to Mrs John’s inquiring look—

“I can do nothing,” he said. “He is no worse. There is no fracture; all this is the result of concussion of the brain, I should say, and we can only hope that nature is slowly and surely repairing the injury.”

“But a doctor, Daniel?” said Mrs John.

“My dear sister, how are we to get a surgeon to come up here? It is a terrible journey up from the coast, and I believe I have done and am doing all that a regular medical man would do.”

“But—”

“Yes,” he said, smiling gravely, “I know you look upon me as being very ignorant, but you forget that I have had a good deal of experience since I have been out here. I learned all I could before I came, and I have studied a good deal from books since. Why, I have attended scores of cases amongst my own people—sickness, wounds, injuries from wild beasts, falls and fractures, bites from rattlesnakes, and I might say hundreds of cases among the Indians, who call me the great medicine man.”

“I know how clever you are, dear,” said Mrs John.

“Thank you,” he said, kissing her affectionately. “I wish I were; but I am proud of one achievement.”

“What was that, dear?”

“The prescription by which I cured you.” Then, turning sharply on me, his face grew hard and stern again.

“Well, Mayne Gordon,” he said, “you have heard the news, of course?”

“I have heard nothing, sir,” I said, eagerly, for it was pleasant to find him make the slightest advance towards the old friendly feeling. But my hopes were dashed the next moment, as I heard his words, and felt that they were intended as a reproach.

“Your friends made a raid on one of the little camps nearest the river last night, and carried off all the gold the party had washed.”

“Was any one hurt?” said Mrs John, excitedly.

“Happily nothing beyond a few blows and bruises,” replied Mr Raydon. “It was a surprise, and the gold-diggers fled for help. When they returned in force the gang had gone. Taken to the forest, I suppose. Get back to your duty, Mayne,” he said; and I hurried away to find Esau deep in conversation with Grey about the last night’s attack.

“Think they’ll come up here?” said Esau.

“Like enough. If they do—”

“Well?” I said, for the man stopped. “If they do?”

“I shall be obliged to fire straight,” he said, slowly. “Men who act like that become wild beasts, and they must be treated similarly.”

I shuddered slightly, as I thought of his skill with the rifle.

“I know what you think,” he said, gravely; “that it’s horrible to shed blood. So it is; but I’ve got a wife here, and children, and out in a wild place like this, a man has to be his own soldier and policeman, and judge and jury too.”

“It seems very horrible,” I said. “It is very horrible, my lad, but it’s not our doing. If these people will leave us alone, we shall not interfere with them.”

“Of course not,” said Esau. “Wonder whether I could hit a man.”

“I hope you will not have to try,” said Grey. “It’s what the Governor has been afraid of for years and years.”

I winced again, for it was as if everything I saw or heard tended to accuse me of destroying the peace of the place.

“Wonder whether they’ll come here to-night,” said Esau.

“We must be ready for them; but I don’t think it’s likely,” said Grey. “They got a good deal of plunder last night, and plenty of provisions. I should say that they will do nothing now for a few days. They’ll wait till they think we are not on the look-out.”

It proved as Grey said, and for the next few days there was no alarm. Communications had been kept up with the mining camps, and one morning, as I was talking with Mr John about the terribly weak state in which Mr Gunson lay, partaking of the food and medicine administered, but as if still asleep, Mr Raydon came up.

“Gordon,” he said, “you and Dean have wandered about well, and gone in nearly every direction, have you not?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, wondering what was coming.

“Do you think you could find your way to Gunson’s claim?”

“Of course, sir,” I said, smiling.

“I do not mean by the valley,” he said, testily. “I want some one to go by the short cut over the mountains—the way I came to your relief.”

“I don’t know, sir,” I said. “I have never been there, but I will try.”

“Bravo!” said Mr John. “Mayne, you’re like Pat with the fiddle. He said he would try if he could play.”

“Are you willing to try?” said Mr Raydon.

“With Dean, sir?”

“No; alone. I cannot spare two.”

“Yes,” I said, eagerly; “I’ll go.”

“I do not see what harm could befall you,” said Mr Raydon, musingly. “The direction is well marked, and the trees are blazed through the bit of forest. Any beasts you came near would skurry off. Yes; I think I will let you go. By the way, you may as well take your rifle and pistol.”

“Yes,” I said, feeling quite excited over my mission. “Have you anything for me to take to the men?”

“No; it is only a visit to an outpost, to let them see that they are not forgotten, and to ask them if they have seen the enemy, or want anything. But perhaps you had better go by the valley; it is surer.”

“I should like to try the near way, sir,” I said.

He gazed at me thoughtfully for a few moments.

“Well,” he said, to my great satisfaction, “you shall try it. You ought to know every trail round. Go and make a hearty meal before you start, and then you need not take any provisions, for you can easily be back before dark. Which way shall you go at first?”

“Up through the pines at the back,” I said.

“No. Go down the valley to where that rounded rock stands up like a dome, and climb up at once, keeping to the left. Then go right over the side of the valley, and make straight for the big pine-forest you will see across the open, striking for the tallest pine at the edge. That tree is blazed with a white patch cut out by an axe. The trees right through are blazed, and from one you can see the next, and from that the next, so that you cannot go wrong.”

“I see,” I said; “I see.”

Then he went on and told me what to do when I got through the dense forest—this being a narrow corner which ran out into the open lands, and on the other side went right off into the wilds, where it was impenetrable. He roughly sketched out points, buttresses, and ravines, which were to serve me as landmarks to make for; and then I was to go

to right or left, as the case might be; and one way and another, he marked down for me a series of prominences to make for, so as to gain one and then see another from it, till I reached to where I could look down into Golden Valley, as I called it now, right above Gunson's claim.

He made me repeat my instructions, impressing upon me that I was to treat the landmarks he gave me just as I did the blazed trees in the forest, making sure of another's position before I left one, and, satisfied at last, he gave me a nod of the head, and said abruptly—

"Off as soon as you can."

"I should like to go with you, Mayne," said Mr John, eagerly.

"No, no! Nonsense!" cried Mr Raydon. "I cannot spare you, John. I may want you to shoot down a few hundreds of the enemy."

Mr John took these words so seriously that I could not help laughing, when he saw them in the right light, came with me to my quarters, watched me make a good meal, and then walked with me to the slope beneath the dome, where he shook hands and stood to see me climb.

"Be careful, my boy," he said, at parting. "It is very steep and dangerous."

I laughed, and ran up the side feeling like a goat. There was something very delightful in the excursion, after the confinement within the block-house, and in the glorious sunshine and the bright clear air, I sprang forward, turning from time to time, as I climbed higher, to wave my hand to him, and look down on Fort and valley, till the inequalities of the wild, stony side hid him from my view.

I felt in high spirits, for this task made me think that Mr Raydon was beginning to trust me again; and as I went on I thought about Mrs John and her gentle words, as she told me all would come right in the end. Then I began to think about poor Gunson, and wondered whether he would soon be better, as I hoped and prayed that he would.

This made me feel low-spirited for a while, but the glorious scene around me chased these gloomy thoughts away, for there before me in the distance was the great pine towering up above its fellows at the edge of the forest.

"Oh, it's easy enough to find one's way," I said, and excited by my task I whistled, sang, and shouted, to have my voice come echoing back.

"I want Esau over here," I said aloud, as I shifted the heavy rifle from one shoulder to the other. "How he would enjoy it!" Then I began thinking of how attentive Mr Raydon was in his stern, grave way to poor Gunson, and it struck me that he must feel a great respect for him, or he would not be so careful, seeing how he disliked it all, in keeping guard over his gold claim.

Then I had to think of my task, and climb over some rough ground, till I reached the first trees, which very soon hid the huge pine, and found it to be not quite at the edge of the forest. But I soon caught sight of it again, and on reaching it saw the great mark or blaze in its side, and from it the next. From this I could see another, and so found no difficulty in getting through the solemn groves.

On the other side, as I stood by the last blazed tree, I had no difficulty in making out a vast mass of rock, for which I at once stepped out, and all proved to be so clear, there were so many landmarks in the shape of peculiar stones, falls, and clumps of trees, that I made my way easily enough, and felt no little pride in being so trusted to tramp through these vast solitudes with a pistol in my belt and my rifle over my shoulder.

"How grand! how grand!" I kept on saying to myself, as I climbed to the top of some high point and looked around, while at such times a feeling of awe came over me at the silence and loneliness of the scene.

I found my way at last to the top of a ridge where I could look down into a green valley, seeing here and there in the distance faint lines of smoke rising over the tops of the trees, and after a hot, rather difficult descent through the pines, just as Mr Raydon must have come to our help that day, I reached the little camp, and was greeted by the men with a cheery shout.

They had not seen a sign of danger, they said, and as I looked round I saw no sign of the place having been disturbed. I heard too that the gold-washing was going on very busily below, but no party had gone higher than they were, Barker having urged upon his fellow-miners the necessity for keeping well together.

After a rest and a mug of tea, which they soon had ready for me, two of them saw me up to the ridge above the valley, and gave me a hint or two about my way, with a warning to be careful; and, full of confidence, I started forward on my return journey.

I soon lost sight of the men and trudged on, keeping a sharp look-out in the hope that I might see something in the form of game for a shot, and a change in the fare at the Fort, but the utter absence of animals was wonderful, and it was only at rare intervals that I heard the cry of a bird, or caught sight of a squirrel.

I soon found that going back was not so easy, everything looking very different reversed, and consequently I went astray twice, and had to tramp back to the spot where I knew I had erred. Once I was brought up short by a terrible precipice; a second time by a huge wall of rock, going up hundreds of feet, ample proof that I was wrong.

Returning to the starting-place was best, and each time I soon realised where I had strayed from the right track, and went on afresh.

But these wanderings took up time, and evening was setting in as I reached the great patch of wood where the trees were blazed, and under the shade of these great pines it was twilight at once, and soon after, to my dismay, I found that it was quite dark. Still I knew the direction in which I ought to go, and pressed on as fast as I could, trusting to get through the forest; and then the four miles or so out in the open could soon be got over. So I thought, but if you try to realise my position it will be easy to understand how difficult it is to keep to a certain direction, when one has constantly to turn to right or left to pass round some big tree.

Not very difficult, you may say. Trees are not so big as that. But they are out there. Just picture to yourself one of our pines starting from the ground with a beautiful curve, before growing up straight as an arrow, and so far round that I have seen them, when lying on the ground felled by the axe, about ten feet up from the roots, where they would not be so big, with the butt where it was cut, ten feet across or thirty feet round, while, down at the level of the ground, it would be a long way on to double that thickness.

To walk round such trees as that, and avoid the great roots, means taking a good many steps, and when this is done again and again, in a place where there is no beaten track, it is very easy to go astray.

It was so with me in the darkness of that forest, and I began to repent bitterly now of my determination, for I had volunteered to come, feeling positive of being able to find my way, while the more I tried to see, the more confused I grew; till, hot, panting, and weary, I came to a dead stand.

The silence was terrible, for there was not so much as a whisper in the tops of the pines. The darkness had increased so that I had to feel my way, and in a hopeless state of misery I leaned against a tree, fancying I heard steps; then the heavy breathing of some huge beast; and at last, asked myself if I was to wander about there till I fell down and died of exhaustion and want of food.

Chapter Forty Nine.

I make a Discovery.

All this was very cowardly no doubt, but circumstances alter cases, and it is only those who have lost their way in some wild solitude who can realise the terrible feeling of bewilderment and dread which comes over him who feels that he is lost where he may never find his way again, perhaps never be found.

Fortunately these emotions come as a shock, and soon after there is a reaction. Hope revives as it did to me, and getting over the first horror and excitement, I stood leaning against the tree thinking out my position. I was lost, that was certain; and if I went on stumbling about in the dark I might perhaps be going either farther away from my destination, or perhaps round and round in a great circle. Upon thinking it out coolly there were two courses open: to lie down on a bed of pine-needles till daylight, or to try and get a glimpse of the stars through the trees, and guide myself by them.

“If I stay,” I thought, “I shall frighten Mrs John horribly, and it will be very cowardly. As to being lost altogether, that’s all nonsense; Mr Raydon and his men would soon find me or send Indians to hunt me out. I’m going to find the way back.”

I drew a long breath, closed my eyes, and knelt down there in the utter darkness for a few minutes, to spring up again confident and refreshed to begin peering up through the trees for the stars. For I wanted to make out the Great Bear; and I quite laughed as I thought that it was the shining one I sought, not a grizzly. If I could see that, I thought I could shape my course due south-east. That must lead me out of the forest, when, even in the darkness, the rest was easy.

It might have been the most cloudy night ever seen, for the blackness above me was dense, the branches effectually shutting out every star, and I had to pause and wonder whether there was any other way by which I could steer my steps. But I could find no way out of my difficulty, and I was beginning to think that I should have to stay where I was and wait for day.

But I could not do that. I tried sitting down for a short time, but the darkness and want of action became too oppressive, and leaping up I began to walk slowly and carefully on, with my free hand extended to guide myself by the trunks of the trees, of whose proximity I was, however, generally made aware by my feet coming in contact with their roots.

My progress was very slow, and so silent that I was able to listen intently for a signal, the hope having sprung up in my breast that, as it had grown dark, Mr Raydon might have sent Grey or one of the other men to meet me, and in all probability they would fire guns to give me an idea of the direction I ought to take.

I had read of such things, and felt that in all probability this was what Mr Raydon would do. But time went on as I slowly crept along from tree to tree, cautiously picking my way, till I began to feel convinced that my chance of escaping this night was hopeless, and once more I stood gazing straight before me, till I fancied I saw a gleam of light close at hand. It was so strange and misty-looking, that it was as if a bit of phosphorus had been rubbed upon the back of a tree.

As I stared at it, the dim light died out, and all was so black once more that for the moment I thought it must have been fancy, but as I was coming to this conclusion, there it was again, and now fully convinced that it must be phosphorescent wood, I stepped forward cautiously to touch it, when it went out again. But I stretched out my hand, and leaning forward touched the trunk of a tree which grew luminous once more, till as I changed my position there it was out again. I repeated my movements, feeling puzzled at its coming and going so strangely, and then like a flash

of mental light the reason came to me, and I turned sharply round with my heart beating, to look for the gleam of which this must be the reflection.

I was quite right, and I was ready to shout for joy, for there, glimmering among the trees, some distance from where I stood, I could see that there was the blaze of a small fire, which rose and fell, and flickered, sending flashes of light up among the branches overhead; and I knew at once that it must be the fire in connection with some camp, but whether Indian or English it was impossible to say. But that did not matter. The Indians all about were peaceable, and very friendly to the people of the Fort. They knew a few words of English too, so that with an intense feeling of relief, thinking that I could at least get food and shelter, if I could not obtain a guide, I stepped out more freely, the light growing now, and enabling me to see dangers in my path in the shape of the thick-growing trees.

I was not long in finding out as I approached that the party around the fire were not Indians; and as I grew near enough to see the rough, ruddy faces of a party of men, I thought it would be better to announce my coming with a shout, lest my sudden appearance should be taken as that of an enemy. Somehow or other, though, I deferred this till I had made my way close up, when I heard a voice that sounded familiar say—

“Well, it’s ’bout time we started. Be late enough when we get there. Wonder whether any one ’ll be on the look-out.”

As I heard these words, a cold perspiration broke out on my cheeks, and I felt as if something were stirring the hair about my forehead, for I had just been walking into the lion’s den; and if I had had any hope that my ears were deceiving me, there, plainly enough, in the bright glow cast by the fire, stood the second of the two men we had encountered first in the steamer.

It was he plainly enough, and he had one hand in a sling; while, as I peered forward round one of the trees, I counted eight men about the fire; and they all seemed to be well armed.

Where were they going? I asked myself. Along the track by which I had just come? They must be, I thought, and bent on seizing Gunson’s claim. They would surprise the four men; and there would be blood shed, unless I could warn the poor fellows first.

“I’ll go back at once,” I thought; and then with a horrible sensation of depression, I realised that this was impossible, for I did not know in which direction to go.

I had hardly thought this when I saw the whole party afoot, moving off in the direction away from me, and quickly making up my mind to follow them out of the forest, and as soon as I could make out my whereabouts, to get on somehow in front, and go on ahead, I followed them. It was no easy task, for I had to get some distance round, away from the fire, and I should have lost them if one of them had not laughed aloud at some remark. This told me of the direction in which they were, and I crept on in dread lest I should get too close and be seen, and again in dread for fear I should be left behind.

To my great satisfaction they kept on talking, as if in not the slightest fear of being overheard, and I followed as near as I dared go, till in a few minutes, to my great delight, I found that we were out in the open, and I could see the stars.

“Now,” I thought, “whereabouts are we? If I could only make out that large mass of rock that lay off to the left where I passed through the forest in the morning, I could soon get on before them. Why I must have walked right back, and —”

I stopped short, quite startled, for to my great astonishment I found, instead of going in the direction leading to Gunson’s claim, I had come through the forest on the side I had been seeking for.

“Then they are not going to Golden Valley,” I said to myself; and then it came to me like a flash of light—they were going to attack the Fort!

Of course; and that was what was meant about any one being on the watch.

My heart now beat violently, and I began to hasten my steps to get on before the party, and warn Mr Raydon of their coming. But at the end of a minute I had to check my pace, and follow more cautiously, as I tried to think where I could get before them; and the more I tried to think, the more confused and troubled I grew, for, as far as I could make out, there was no way but the track which they seemed to know; and to have gone to right or left meant to encounter some place impossible to climb in the dark, or a precipice down which I might fall. It was difficult enough in broad daylight—impossible in the dark; and in spite of all my thinking, I was at last despairingly compelled to confess that until the open ground was reached in front of the Fort, I could do nothing but follow while the enemy led.

I thought of a dozen plans to warn the defenders of the Fort, so as to put them on the alert, but the only one that seemed possible, was to wait till we were all pretty near, and then fire my rifle to give the alarm.

That I knew meant making the ruffians turn on me, but though the risk was great, I hoped to dash by them in the darkness, and reach the gate.

All this time I had been cautiously creeping along behind the gang, for at a word from their leader, the men had suddenly become very silent, and the only sound to be heard was the rattle of a stone kicked to one side, or a low whisper, evidently an order about the advance.

A curious feeling of despair was creeping over me, and I felt more and more convinced that I could not get to the front, so that all I should be able to do would be to wait till they were near the gate, and about to scale the palisade, for that was what I felt sure they meant to do, and then fire, let the result be what it might to me.

My difficulties grew greater every minute, as we advanced, and the strain upon me heavier than I could bear. In anticipation I saw the scoundrels creeping up to the Fort, cautiously getting over and silencing whoever was on guard; and then, with a feeling of horror that was almost unbearable, I saw in imagination the whole place given up to pillage and destruction, at a time too when I knew that there were many bales of valuable furs in the stores.

My progress at last became like a nightmare, in which I was following the attacking party, and unable to do anything to help my friends; so that when we were within, as a German would say, half an hour of our destination, I was in no wise startled or surprised to faintly make out in the darkness the figures of two men who suddenly rose up on either side of me; a hand was clapped over my mouth, and I was dragged down, and a knee placed on my chest.

I divined it all in an instant, and tried to resign myself to my fate, as I saw that, being well on their guard against surprise, two of the gang had fallen back and seen me, with the result I have described, so that I was absolutely stunned after a feeble struggle, when a voice at my ear said in a harsh whisper—

“What is the meaning of this treachery, Gordon? Who are those men?”

My hand caught the speaker’s, and I uttered a low sob of relief.

“Mr Raydon—the men—going to attack the Fort.”

“Ah!” he panted. “You hear, Grey?”

“Yes.”

“But why did you not warn us?”

“They were before me. I could not get by,” I whispered. “I was going to fire to alarm you all.”

I heard Mr Raydon draw a low hissing breath.

“How did you know this?” he said.

“Lost my way in the forest, and saw the light of their fire.”

“And the men at the claim?”

“All right, sir.—I heard these wretches say they were coming on.”

“Lost, eh?” said Mr Raydon.

“Yes, sir. I’ve been wandering for hours.”

“We were in search of you, and drew back to let these men go by. You hear his story, Grey?”

“Yes, sir. Quite right. He would lose his way in the dark. What orders?”

“His plan will be the best,” said Mr Raydon. “Gordon, finding you in such company made me suspicious.”

“You always do suspect me, sir,” I said, bitterly.

“Silence, and come along. Grey, I shall wait till they are close up, and about to make their attempt; then at the word, fire and load again. They will be taken by surprise, and think they are between two parties. The surprise may be sufficient. If not it will alarm those within.”

“And then?”

“Be ready to fire again, or make for the far side. We must get in there. Forward! I’ll lead.”

Mr Raydon went on first and I followed, Grey bringing up the rear. I was hurt, for it was evident that Mr Raydon’s ideas of my character were poor indeed, and that at the slightest thing he was ready to suspect me of any enormity. But as I paced on quickly behind him I grew more lenient in my judgment, for I was obliged to own that my position was not a satisfactory one. I had not returned as I should have done, and when I was found, it was in company with a gang of men who were about to attack and pillage the Fort.

I had no farther time for thoughts like these. We were gaining rapidly on the gang now, and in a few minutes’ time we could hear footsteps, and then they had suddenly ceased, and a whispering began, as if the leader of the party were giving orders.

Mr Raydon touched me to make out that I was close up, and I felt Grey take his position on the other side, while my heart beat so loudly that I half thought it might be heard.

All at once Mr Raydon pressed on my shoulder, and leaned over me to whisper to Grey.

“They ought to have heard this approach,” he whispered. “This is not keeping good watch.”

“Dark—very quiet,” said Grey, in what sounded to me like a remonstrant tone; and directly after a loud clear voice rang out from the block-house at the left-hand corner near the gate.

“Who goes there? Halt, or I fire.”

A low murmur arose in front of us, and Mr Raydon drew a deep breath, as if relieved. Then there was a quick advance, the flash of a rifle, and the sharp clear report.

“Only one,” cried a hoarse voice. “Too dark to see. Over with you, boys!”

Bang! Another shot; and then, as I panted with excitement, Mr Raydon whispered—

“Now, altogether, fire!”

I had raised my piece at his warning, and drew the trigger; but though there was a sharp report on either side of me, my piece did not speak, and suddenly recollecting that I had forgotten to cock it, I lowered it again.

“Who’s that behind? Who fired there?” cried the hoarse voice of the leader from the darkness ahead.

It was just as I was ready, and raising my piece, I fired, the butt seeming to give my shoulder a heavy blow; while directly after came three flashes from the block-house, as many roars, and, like their echoes, Mr Raydon and Grey fired again, after a rapid reloading.

This was too much for the attacking party. They were so thoroughly taken between two fires, that the next thing we heard was the hurried rush of feet, and I saw very faintly what appeared to be a shadow hurry by me, while a couple more shots from Mr Raydon and Grey completed the enemy’s rout.

“Cease firing, there!” roared Mr Raydon.

A loud hail came back from the block-house, and a few minutes later we were being admitted through the well-barred gate, whose fastenings dropped with a loud clang. Then I walked up to the quarters with Mr Raydon, where the next thing I heard was Mr John’s voice.

“Found him?”

“Yes; all right, and the enemy beaten,” said Mr Raydon, cheerily. “Go and tell them inside.”

“No need,” said Mr John; “they have heard. Where are you, Mayne? Ah, that’s better. Why, my dear lad, you have scared us terribly.”

“I lost my way,” I said, hastily.

“But what was the meaning of this firing?”

“The enemy coming in force,” said Mr Raydon. “We have beaten them off though without bloodshed, and Mayne Gordon here has had another lesson in the dangers of opening up gold-claims to the scum of the earth.”

“That you, Mayne Gordon?” said a familiar voice soon after, as I approached our quarters.

“Yes,” I said. “Not hurt, are you, Esau?”

“Not a bit; nor you neither?”

“Yes,” I said, bitterly; “wounded again.”

“Eh? whereabouts? Here, come on. Mother’s got lots of rag.”

“No, no,” I said, laughing sadly. “Not that sort of wound. It was with words.”

“Go on with you. Frightening a chap like that,” cried Esau. “I thought it was real.”

Chapter Fifty.

Our Patient awakes.

There was no alarm next day, and scouts who were sent out came back to report that they had tracked the enemy down the river, and then up into the forest by one of the side streams, the second beyond the Golden Valley.

“Humph!” ejaculated Mr Raydon, “pleasant that, John. They have taken to the lovely wooded vale I had marked down in my own mind for your future home.”

Mr John shrugged his shoulders, and gave his wife and brother-in-law a half-sad, half-laughing look.

“I am not surprised,” he said, “I always was the most unlucky of men.”

“Nothing of the kind, sir,” retorted Mr Raydon. “You have had as much good fortune as other men—quite as much as I have. My dear John,” he added more gently, “we men have a bad habit of forgetting the good in our lives, and remembering all the bad. My dear fellow, half your troubles have been caused by your want of energy.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling sadly, “I suppose so. I have always been too ready to give up. But,” he added quickly, “I never complain.”

Mr Raydon never looked so pleasant in my eyes before as he smiled at his sister, and then laid his hand on Mr John’s

shoulder.

“Never, John, never. You annoy me sometimes by being so easy and yielding.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr John; “but I’m going to turn over a new leaf, and be stern and energetic as you are.”

Mrs John crossed to him and took his hand.

“No,” she said quietly, “you are going to turn over no new leaves, dear. You are best as you always have been. Daniel is wrong; we cannot have all men of the same mould.”

“Do you hear all this, Mayne Gordon?” said Mr Raydon, laughingly; and before I could reply, he said quickly, “Go on now, and take your turn as sentry; I want to think out my plans. Don’t talk about it to the men, but something must be done. A combination must be made to capture these men again, for we shall have no peace or safety till they are cleared away.”

“What are you thinking of doing?” said Mrs John, taking alarm at his words.

“Trying to end the matter peaceably, and without bloodshed.”

Mrs John uttered a sigh of relief, and I went out wondering what would be done, and thinking that if I had my way, I should collect all the miners, join forces, and then send one party to the head of the little vale, and attempt to advance with the others from the bottom by the river, little thinking what difficulties there would be in such a plan.

As soon as I was outside Mr Raydon’s office, I met Grey, who gave me a grim, dry look.

“Know how many men you shot last night?” he said.

I looked at him in horror.

“Don’t—don’t say—” I faltered.

“All right!” he replied; “but if you’re going to carry a rifle, and you use it, you must expect to knock some of the enemy over. There, I was only joking you, soldier. I don’t think anybody was even scratched by a ball. If you’re going to stop with us, I shall have to make a marksman of you, so that you can do as I do—give a man a lesson.”

“In shooting?” I said.

He laughed.

“Yes, but you don’t understand me. I mean give him such a lesson as will make him behave better. ’Tisn’t pleasant, when you have grown cool after a fight, to think you have dangerously wounded or killed a man; not even if he tried to kill you. I felt that years ago, and I practised up, so that I can hit a man with a rifle just where I like—that is nearly always.”

“It was you who fired at those two wretches then?” I said eagerly.

“Of course it was, and I hit one in the leg, and the other in the hand. Did nearly as well as killing ’em, eh?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing. “I must practise too.”

“You shall, and I hope you’ll have no need to use your rifle afterwards, except on bears or deer. Where are you going?”

“Mr Raydon said I was to relieve one of the men.”

“So you shall, but the first one’s got an hour yet to be on duty. I’ll call you when you’re wanted. How’s Mr Gunson?”

“I’m just going to see,” I said; and I went up to the strangers’ quarters and looked in, to find Mrs Dean on duty by the bedside, and Esau seated by the fire, cutting out something which he informed me was part of a trap he had invented to catch squirrels.

“How is he?” I said in a low voice to Mrs Dean.

“Very bad, my dear, and so weak.”

“But hasn’t he shown any sign of recovering his senses?”

“No, my dear; and it does seem so discouraging.”

“Never mind, mother; you’ll cure him.”

“Hist!” I said.

“Well, I am whispering, ain’t I,” said Esau. “He couldn’t hear if I didn’t.”

“But he must be kept quiet, Esau, and you have such a big voice. Your whispers are as loud as some people’s shouts.”

“Hush!” I said, as I heard steps. “Mr Raydon.”

Mrs Dean rose and curtseyed as Mr Raydon entered, followed by Mr and Mrs John; and he looked surprised on seeing me there.

“Not on duty, Gordon?” he said.

“Mr Grey told me to wait till he was ready for me, sir.”

“Oh!—Well, Mrs Dean, how is your patient?”

“Seems to sleep very calmly and gently, sir. I did think he looked at me sensibly once, but I’m not sure.”

“Poor fellow!” said Mr Raydon gravely, as Mrs Dean left the place, followed by Esau, while I felt as if I should like to follow them; but I stayed, knowing that if I did go, Mr Raydon would think I felt guilty at being found there, when I was only obeying his officer’s orders. So I remained watching, and waiting to be called.

Mr Raydon bent over the couch, and laid his hand upon his patient’s head.

“Nice and cool. He must be mending, and sooner or later I believe he will recover. It is time, though, that he made some sign of returning consciousness. Ah, Mayne, my lad, this is the thirst for gold with a vengeance. I dreaded it; I have dreaded it for years. Poor fellow! A thorough gentleman at heart, but his desire for wealth was his ruin.”

The words leaped to my lips, but I felt that all Mr Gunson had told me of his former life was in confidence; and beside, Mr Raydon’s treatment did not encourage mine, so I was silent for a moment or so, gazing sadly at the thin worn face before me, and wishing that I was a clever doctor and able to cure him, when I started with surprise and pleasure, for Mr Gunson’s eyes opened, and he lay looking fixedly at me for some time in the midst of a painful silence.

Then a look of recognition came into his gaze, and he smiled at me faintly.

“Time to get up?” he said, in a whisper. “I—”

He looked quickly round then, and his face worked a little.

“Where am I?—what?” he faltered. “Mayne, where am I? Ah! I remember now,” he said, faintly.

Mr Raydon bent over him.

“Don’t try to talk, Gunson. You have been ill, but you are getting better now.”

“Yes,” he said, softly; “I remember. Struck down just now.”

I exchanged glances with Mr Raydon.

“No, not just now, because I have been lying here. Some one nursing me—yes,” he cried, with more energy, as his eyes rested on Mrs John’s sympathetic face, “you.”

“We have all nursed you,” said Mrs John, quietly. “But do not try to talk.”

“No,” he said, decisively; “but—there is one thing—must say—my claim—the gold.”

I saw Mr Raydon’s face pucker up, and a frown gather on his brow, but it cleared away directly, and he bent down over his patient, and laid his hand upon his forehead.

“Gunson, you must be quiet,” he said. “Your claim is quite safe. I have men protecting it, and no gold has been found or taken away.”

“Thank heaven!” sighed Gunson; and giving a grateful look round he closed his eyes, and seemed to go to sleep.

“Come away now,” whispered Mr Raydon. “You will stay with him?”

Mrs John bowed her head, and softly took the chair by the pillow, while we all stole gently out of the room.

“His first waking thought, John,” said Mr Raydon, bitterly; “gold—gold—gold. There, it is of no use to murmur: I must swallow my pet antipathy, I suppose.”

Once more the thought of all Mr Gunson had said to me came as words to my lips; but though my friend was being wrongly judged, I felt that I could not speak.

“Some day he will know all the truth,” I said, “and I must wait.”

Just then Grey came up.

“Your time, Gordon,” he said, abruptly. Then seeing our excited looks, he glanced towards the strangers’ quarters.

“Not worse, sir?” he said, eagerly.

“No, Grey; the turn has come—better,” said Mr Raydon.

Grey took off his fur cap, waved it in the air, and then with a satisfied smile he marched me off.

“That’s what I like to hear; he’ll be all right soon now. This place would set any man up. But I can’t understand the

gov'nor. He was always mad against any one coming about here hunting for gold, and yet somehow he seems to have quite taken to your friend, who talks about nothing else."

"Yes," I said; "I can't help thinking that he likes Mr Gunson."

"Oh, there's no doubt about it, my lad. We shall have him taking to gold-hunting himself one of these days."

"Never," I said, decisively, as we reached my post.

"Never's a long day, boy," said Grey, thoughtfully; "but I think you're right."

Chapter Fifty One.

On active Service.

The scouts went out again and again, and though they never saw the enemy, they always brought back reports that they were still in the little valley, and trying for gold there.

Mr Barker had been up to the Fort with some of the principal gold-seekers, and Mr Raydon had been down to the valley, which had rapidly grown into a busy hive. But days glided by and no plans were made, while the enemy made not the slightest sign of their presence; and Mr Raydon said it was a mystery to him how they obtained provisions.

Then, as no more attacks were made at the camp, the excitement gradually cooled down, and it was decided to leave the men alone so long as they remained peaceable, or until such time as the Governor of the colony was in a position to send up a little force to protect people, and ensure peace in his increasing settlement.

The days glided on and Mr Gunson rapidly began to mend, while I spent all the time I could at his side—Mr Raydon quietly letting me see that I was only a visitor there, the companion of the sick man; and it was regularly settled that as soon as Mr Gunson was quite well again he was to return to his claim, and I was to go with him; Esau also having, after quite a verbal battle with his mother, determined to cast in his lot with ours.

"And I shall be very glad to get away from this life of inaction," Gunson said to me one day. "They are all wonderfully kind, and I am most grateful, but I think Raydon will be pleased to see us gone."

"Yes," I said; "I shall be glad to go."

"You mean it, boy?" he said, smiling.

"Yes; there is nothing I am wanted for, and I feel as if I were an intruder. It was an unlucky day when we found that gold."

"No," cried Mr Gunson, with fierce energy; "a most fortunate day. You forget what it is going to do for me and mine."

"Yes; I spoke selfishly," I said, bitterly.

"Bah! don't look back, boy; look forward," he cried; and he suddenly became silent, and leaned back in his chair, gazing out through the open window at the wide prospect of hill, mountain, and dark green forest. "I am looking forward to being out again in those glorious pine-woods, breathing the sweet mountain air. I shall soon be quite strong again then."

I thought of my own wound, and how I had seemed to drink in health and strength as soon as I got out.

"It would not be a bad life to settle down here," continued Mr Gunson; "I should enjoy it. A beautiful life, far better than hunting for gold. But what about those scoundrels who made me like this? Is there any fresh news of them?"

"None," I said.

"That's bad. They may be in mischief. Awkward if they come and attack us again when we get back to the claim. Raydon must lend us some of his men, or else I must join forces with that Barker, though I would far rather keep the place to myself. But we cannot risk another such attack. You see what a coward weakness has made me."

"You a coward!" I cried, scornfully.

"Yes, my lad," he said, with a smile. "I do not feel a bit like a brave man should. Well," he cried, with a laugh, "that is strange!"

"What is?" I cried.

"Look," he said, pointing out of the window to a group of men coming in at the gate; "the very man I was speaking about—Barker."

"There's something wrong," I said, excitedly, as I sprang from my chair.

"Go and see," he cried; but I was already at the door, and rushed out just as Mr Raydon and Mr John came from the office, and Grey from one of the block-houses.

"How are you?" said Barker, coming up with a serious look on his face that told of bad news before he spoke.

Mr Raydon took the extended hand.

“Well,” he said, “what is it? That gang again?”

“Yes,” said Barker, rather huskily; “we were in hopes that we had seen the last of them, but they made an attack last night. We did not know till quite late this morning, when a man from the next claim went down to the bar nearest the big river.”

“Yes, go on—quick!” said Mr Raydon.

“They had been there some time in the night. There was a party of six working together, and I suppose they surprised them.”

“Well?”

“Two of the poor fellows are lying dead, sir, and the other four badly wounded. They have swept the place of everything, and got a good deal of gold.”

As this bad news was told I could not look at Mr Raydon, for fear his eyes should gaze reproachfully into mine. I felt that he did glance at me as if to say—“Your work, Gordon!”

But at that moment the visitor went on speaking—

“I’ve come up, sir, with my mates, as we agreed to help one another. We are peaceable people, and we only ask to be let alone; but after last night’s work it must be war. This can’t go on.”

“No,” said Mr Raydon, firmly.

“We’re right away here from any settlement, and there might be no law at all for any help it can give us, so we must be our own judges and jury.”

“No,” said Mr Raydon, firmly; “not that, but we must be our own soldiers and police.”

“Then you will act with us, sir? You and your people know the country, and perhaps can lead us to where we can find and surprise them.”

“If you all give me your undertaking that there shall be no unnecessary bloodshed, and that these men shall be merely seized and taken down to the coast, I will help you to the best of my power.”

“Here’s my hand upon it,” cried Barker. “You’re more of a soldier than I am, so tell us what to do, and the sooner it’s done the better.”

“Go back then at once, and get all your men together, and I will join you with all I can spare from the protection of my place.”

“How long will you be, sir?”

“Half an hour after you get back. But be quiet, and do not let a hint reach the enemy of what is afoot.”

“You may trust us, sir,” said Barker. “Come on back, lads;” and all looking very stern and serious, the men turned and went steadily off.

“You’ll take me, sir?” said Grey, appealingly.

“I wish I could, my man,” replied Mr Raydon. “One of us must stay to take charge here, and my place is with the men to guard against excesses.”

Grey looked disappointed, but he was soldier-like in his obedience to orders, and without another word he went with us to the block-house, where four men were selected and duly armed.

All at once Mr Raydon turned, and found me gazing intently at him.

“Well?” he said.

“You will let me go too, sir?” I said.

“No; you are too young to fight. Yes; you shall carry an extra rifle for me, and my surgical case.”

I ran back to where Gunson lay impatiently waiting for news, and told him.

“Yes,” he said, “it is quite right. This must be put down with a strong hand. Oh, if I had only strength to be one of the party! Mayne Gordon, I envy you.”

Ten minutes later I was saying good-bye to Mrs John, who looked pale and horrified at the news she had heard, and began to object to my going, till Mr John whispered a few words to her, when she turned upon me a piteous look.

“I am only going as the doctor’s assistant,” I said, lightly, but I felt as excited as if I were about to form one of a forlorn hope.

“Ready?” said Mr Raydon, coming to the door. “Get to the men, Gordon. Good-bye, sister.”

“But, Daniel!” she said, clinging to him; “is this necessary?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “John, I look to you to shoulder a rifle, and help to defend this place. Good-bye.”

He shook hands hastily to avoid a painful parting, and strode out with me, so that I only had time to wave my hand to Mrs John, who was watching us as we tramped out of the gate—the five men by me looking stern and determined enough to be more than a match for the enemy, if it was a case of fair fighting, though that was too much to expect from such men as these.

Hardly a word was spoken as we descended the valley, keeping close down to the river-side, till we reached the narrow entrance to the little gorge, whose stream came bubbling and plashing down into the pool, and we had not gone above a couple of hundred yards up it, when a stern voice bade us stand, and we found ourselves face to face with the whole strength of the mining camp.

“That’s right, sir,” said Barker; “ready for action. Yes? Then what’s it to be?”

“My plan is very simple,” replied Mr Raydon. “I propose going up the valley with my men to Gunson’s claim, where I shall, of course, join the four stationed there.”

“That’s right,” said Barker. “We asked them to come with us, but they refused. Well, sir?”

“You and your men will march down to the river, and descend till you are opposite the little vale where these people are hiding. You will find it very beautiful and park-like for the first half mile, but as the glade narrows it grows more dense, till it is filled from side to side with magnificent pines. You will spread your men out, to guard against the enemy passing you, and this will grow more and more easy as you go slowly on.”

“I understand; and what are you going to do, sir?” said the man.

“Come over the ridge, and through the forest which separates this valley from that, so as to get to the head of the little stream. Then we shall begin to descend, and, I hope, drive the scoundrels into your hands.”

Barker gave his rifle-stock a hearty slap.

“Capital!” he cried. “And you can get over there?”

“I know every part here for miles round,” said Mr Raydon, as I felt quite startled at his plan being exactly the same as the one I had thought of. “I will set over there somehow.”

“Then we shall have them between two fires, sir,” cried Barker—“good!”

We parted directly after this, it being understood that the miners were to move slowly, so as to give us ample time to make our arrangements, get round over the mountain-ridge, and go down to meet them so as to have the enemy safely between us, Mr Raydon being of opinion that the sides of the valley in which they were encamped would be too steep to give them a chance of escape.

We pressed on past the various little claims, with the place looking untidy and desolate, consequent upon the number of camping-places all along the beautiful stream; and whenever we came upon the more desolate places, with the traces of fire and burned trees, I saw Mr Raydon’s brow knit, and more than once he uttered an angry ejaculation.

Gunson’s claim was neared at last, just as I was beginning to feel exhausted with the difficulties of the climb up the rugged rock-strewn track, and Mr Raydon was looking more severe than ever, when all at once, from out of the trees there rang out a sharp “Halt!” and there was the clicking of a rifle-lock.

“Hah!” ejaculated Mr Raydon, brightening up at once at this display of watchfulness, which proved to him how trustworthy his men were. Then stepping to the front he shouted a few words, and the man who had spoken came from his post, which commanded an approach to the claim.

We were met with an eager welcome, and in spite of the risks they would have to encounter, the four men were overjoyed at hearing of the business in hand, clearly showing that they were tired of their monotonous inactive life.

A brief halt was made, during which our party lay about making a good meal; and then, at a word from Mr Raydon, they all sprang up together quite in military fashion, while he explained to the four men the plan.

“We must try and get over here at once,” he said, as he glanced up at the tremendous wall of rock, piled up quite a thousand feet above our heads, and dotted with patches of trees, wherever there was soil or crevice in which a pine could take root.

“Better place higher up, sir,” said one of the men. “There’s a little branch of the stream goes off west: I followed it the other day after a sheep. I think we could get far enough up the mountain then to cross over and strike the other stream.”

“Right,” said Mr Raydon at once; “that will be better. All ready? Ammunition?”

“Ready! ready!” rang along the little line.

Mr Raydon nodded.

“No talking, and go as silently as you can; sound travels in these high parts, and we do not know how high up the scoundrels may be camping. Now, understand once more—single file till we cross over into the other valley, then spread out as widely as the place will allow, and keep as level a line as possible. The object is to drive these men back to the mining party, and not one must break through our line now. You lead. I trust to you to get us well over into that valley.”

The man who had spoken of the branch from the stream stepped to the front, rifles were shouldered, the word was given, and with Mr Raydon next to the leader, and I behind him, carrying a spare rifle and the surgical case, the advance was begun.

Chapter Fifty Two.

A new Enemy.

We had not lost more than a quarter of an hour in this halt; but it was sufficient, as I found when I rose, to have cooled me down and made me feel fresh and ready for the arduous climb that we now had to make. Our path was along by the stream for a time, but more often right in it, for the valley grew narrower, and was frequently little more than a gigantic crack in the mountain-side; but so beautiful that I often longed to stop and gaze at the overhanging ferns and velvety moss by some foaming fall, where the water came down from above like so much fine misty rain.

But there was no halting, and we kept on till the leader suddenly turned into a gloomy niche on our left, out of which another stream rushed; and here for some time we had to climb from rock to rock, and often drag ourselves on to some shelf by the overhanging roots of trees. The ascent was wonderfully steep, and sometimes so narrow that we were in a dim twilight with the sky far away above us, like a jagged line of light. As for the stream in whose bed we were, it was a succession of tiny falls now, and we were soon dripping from the waist downward.

But no word was spoken, and the men worked together as if trained by long service to this kind of travelling. When some awkward rock had been climbed by the leader, he stopped and held down his hand to Mr Raydon, who sprang up and offered me the same assistance, while I, taking it as the proper thing to do, held my hand down to the next.

For full two hours we struggled up this narrow rift before it became less deep, and the light nearer. Then the climbing was less difficult, and drier, and I could see that we were getting up more on to the open mountain-side, amid the bare rocks and piled-up stones. All at once the leader stopped short, and pointed up to where, quite half a mile away, I could see about a dozen sheep standing clearly defined against the sky, their heads with the great curled horns plainly visible. Some were feeding, but two stood above the rest as if on guard.

Mr Raydon nodded, and the man said—

“I lost sight of my sheep just below where you see those, sir, and I think if we keep on along for a mile beyond we shall find the stream we want running down into the other valley.”

Mr Raydon stood shading his eyes for a few minutes.

“Yes,” he said, at last. “You are quite right. I can see the mountain I have been on before. Forward!”

The way was less arduous now, and the fresh breeze into which we had climbed made it cooler; but still it was laborious enough to make me pant as I followed right in Mr Raydon’s steps. Before we had gone on much further I saw the sheep take alarm, and go bounding up, diagonally, what looked like a vast wall of rock, and disappear; and when we had climbed just below where I had seen them bound, it seemed impossible that they could have found footing there.

Another half-hour’s toilsome ascent, for the most part among loose stones, and we stood gazing down into a narrow gully similar to that up which we had climbed, and at the bottom I saw a little rushing stream, which Mr Raydon said was the one we sought, and I knew that we had but to follow that to where it joined the big river, after a journey through the dense mass of forest with which the valley was filled.

Here we halted for a few minutes in a stony solitude, where there was not the faintest sound to be heard; and then Mr Raydon’s deep voice whispered “Forward!” and we began to descend cautiously, for the way down to the stream was so perilous that it was only by using the greatest care that we reached the bottom in safety, and began to follow the torrent downward.

“No chance for them to escape by us this way,” said Mr Raydon to me with a grim smile, looking back as we descended the chasm in single file, gradually going as it were into twilight, and then almost into darkness, with perpendicular walls of rock on either hand, and the moist air filled with the echoing roar and rush of water.

Here Mr Raydon took the lead, the man who had been in advance letting us both pass him, and then following behind, me.

“I have been up this stream to this point before,” said Mr Raydon to me. “You never thought to see such places as this, Gordon,” he continued, “when you left London.”

“No,” I said eagerly, for it was pleasant to hear him make some advances towards me; but he said no more, relapsing into complete silence as he strode on or leaped from rock to rock, till by degrees, and repeating our morning’s experience in the reverse way, we began to find the narrow gorge widen and grow less dark; then we came to places where the sunshine gleamed down, and there were ferns; then lower down to more light, and where bushes were

plentiful, but still with the valley so narrow that we had to keep in single file.

At last, the perpendicular walls were further back, the valley grew V-shaped, and patches of dwarf forest grew visible high up. Bigger trees appeared, and soon after the place became park-like, and a man stepped out to right and left, so that in front we were three abreast; and half an hour later we were amongst the thickly-growing pines—a line of eight men abreast with Mr Raydon in the middle, and I and the other behind.

“Halt!” said Mr Raydon, in a whisper. “Join up.”

The men from right and left drew in, and he said in quite a whisper—

“The forest grows more and more dense here for miles away to the river. I propose now going on for another half-hour, to where there is a sudden narrowing in of the valley to about thirty yards. If we do not meet the enemy before this, I shall halt there, and keep that pass, waiting till they are driven up to us. But we may have them upon us at any moment now.”

“They could not have got by us, sir?” I ventured to say.

Mr Raydon looked at me, and smiled.

“Impossible, my lad. Ready? Forward!”

Our advance now was slow, as we had to pass in and out among the thickly-growing trees, and to be careful to keep in line as nearly as was possible. Every man was eager and excited, and from time to time, as I looked to right and left, I kept catching sight of one of our party pressing forward with rifle ready, and waiting to fire at the first sight of the enemy, this shot being the appointed signal for all to halt and stand fast, waiting for further orders.

At last, after what in my excited state seemed to be hours, but which afterwards proved not to have been one, Mr Raydon said in a whisper—

“There is the gate.”

I stared, but could see nothing till we had gone a few yards further, when I found that two huge shoulders of the mountain had fallen in, and blocked the valley, which was narrowed here, as Mr Raydon said, to a sharply-cut passage of about thirty yards wide. Here we halted, and were disposed so that a dog could not pass through without being seen, and for a full hour we remained in utter silence, watching, till, unable to bear the inaction any longer, Mr Raydon said sharply—

“Forward! Open out! I am afraid there is something wrong below. They ought to have been up here by this time.”

We tramped on again now, still with the same precautions, but making as much speed as we could after our rest, though our pace was slow on account of the dense nature of the forest. I cannot tell how long we had been going downward, but suddenly, just as I was growing weary of the whole business, and thinking that the men were after all, perhaps, not here, or that we had come down the wrong valley, my blood rose to fever-heat again, for Mr Raydon whispered—

“Halt!” and the word ran along to right and left. “Be ready,” he whispered again. And now I heard a faint muttering in front of us, similar to that which we had made in our progress; and at last, away among the great tree-trunks dimly seen in the shade, I caught sight of a man, then of another and another, and now Mr Raydon’s voice rang out hoarsely—

“Halt, or we fire!”

There was a low murmuring from before us, and a bit of a rush, as of men collecting together, and then a voice roared from among the trees—

“Surrender there, or we will shoot you down to a man.”

“Do you hear?” cried Mr Raydon. “Surrender! The game’s up, you scoundrels.”

“Mr Raydon,” I whispered, excitedly, for I had caught sight of the advancing party, “don’t fire; it’s Mr Barker and his men.”

“What? Hi! Barker! Is that you?”

“Ay—ay!” came back. “That you, Mr Raydon?”

“Yes, man, yes; where are the enemy?”

“Why, I thought you was them,” cried Barker, advancing.

“We thought the same,” said Mr Raydon, as he too stepped forward, and we all stood face to face. “Then they were not here. Or have you passed them?”

“I don’t think—” began Barker.

“Why, I told you so,” cried one of the men. “I felt sure I heard something out to our left among the trees hours ago.”

“What?” cried Mr Raydon; “did you not open out your men in line?”

“Far as we could,” said Barker, gruffly. “It’s so thick down below we couldn’t get along.”

“Man!” cried Mr Raydon, “they’ve been too sharp for you, and let you pass. Why—oh, good heavens! they must have known of our plans. They’ll have stolen out at the mouth of the valley, gone up, and taken the Fort.”

A dead silence reigned for a few minutes, as Mr Raydon stood thinking. Then suddenly—

“We did not give them credit for being so sharp as they are,” he continued. “Here, forward all of you, back to the river. I hope my fears are wrong.”

“Hadn’t we better go your way?” said Barker. “The forest is frightfully thick below, and it will take us hours.”

“The way we came will take twice as long,” said Mr Raydon, sternly; “and it is one fearful climb right up into the mountain. We must go this way. Follow as quickly as possible. There will be no need to keep a look-out now.”

The men mustered up without a word, and with Mr Raydon and Barker leading, we tramped on as fast as we could, but making very poor progress during the next hour, for all were growing hot and exhausted, and the labour was really terrible. But they pressed on in silence, while Mr Raydon and Barker talked together rather bitterly about the ill success of the expedition.

We must have been walking about two hours when—

“It will be night before we get to the Fort,” I heard the former say; “and who knows what may have happened there!”

“But your men will make a fight for it,” said Barker.

“My principal fellow, Grey, will fight to the death,” said Mr Raydon; “but there are not enough to hold the place. It is ruin and destruction. I ought not to have come.”

“Hush!” I said, excitedly. “What’s that?”

Mr Raydon stopped short, and held up his hand, when a low, dull, roaring sound as of a flood of water rushing up the valley was heard increasing rapidly.

“Great heavens!” cried Mr Raydon, excitedly; “they have fired the forest down below.”

And as he spoke there was a faint hot puff of air borne toward us, and with it the unmistakable odour of burning wood.

A thrill of excitement ran through the men at the above words, and they looked at one another. The next moment they would have rushed back up the valley, but Mr Raydon cried sharply—

“No, no, my lads; the fire cannot be right across the valley; let’s go on and try and pass it.”

They seemed to be ready to obey the first who gave them orders, and Mr Raydon led on again, but in less then ten minutes, during which the hot puffs of air and the roar had increased rapidly, we were face to face with the fact that the fire was coming up like some terrible tide, evidently stretching right across from side to side, and already above our heads there were clouds of pungent smoke; and the crackle, roar, and hiss of the burning wood was rapidly growing louder.

“Halt!” roared Mr Raydon. “It is death to go on. Back at once.”

“But the sides,” cried Barker; “can’t we all climb up here?”

“The fire would be on us before we were half-way up, even if we could climb, man,” said Mr Raydon, “which I doubt. Back at once!”

“Yes; quick! quick!” shouted one of the men. “Look, look!”

It did not need his shouts, for we could see the flames rushing up the higher trees, which seemed to flash with light, as if they had been strewn with powder; the heat was growing unbearable, and already I felt faint and giddy.

It was quite time we were in full retreat, for there above our heads was a pall of black smoke, dotted with flakes of flame, and a horrible panic now smote the men as they hurried on.

“Keep close to me, Gordon,” said Mr Raydon, glancing back. “Why, it is coming on like a hurricane of fire.”

It was too true, for the hot wind rushed up between the towering walls of the valley as if through a funnel, and before many minutes had passed we knew that the forest was on fire where we so lately stood, and that it was rapidly growing into a race between man’s endurance and the wild rush of the flames.

I looked back twice, to feel the hot glow of the fire on my face, and to see the lurid glare coming on with the black smoke-clouds wreathing up at terrific speed. Then as we tramped on with the roar behind us as of some vast furnace, there came explosions like the firing of guns; the crashes of small arms; and from time to time the fall of some tree sounded like thunder.

The men needed no spurring to get on out of the dense labyrinth of trees, through which we toiled on hot to suffocation, breathless, and in mortal dread of being overtaken by the fearful enemy roaring in our rear. For, so rapid was the advance of the fire, that for a certainty a ten minutes’ halt would have been enough to have brought the line

of fire up to us.

“Don’t stop to look back,” cried Mr Raydon. “Press on, men; press on. Keep together.”

I thought of the consequences of one of our party losing his way ever so little, and the men knew it only too well as they kept together in a little crowd which was constantly being broken up and separated by the trees round which they threaded their way.

“Is there much more of this?” said Barker, suddenly appearing close to us.

“Yes,” replied Mr Raydon; “miles.”

“Shall we do it?” he panted.

“With God’s help,” was Raydon’s quiet reply; and I saw Barker set his teeth hard, and throw his gun further over his shoulder as he bent down to his task.

The narrow gate of the valley at last; and as we filed through the opening I wondered whether it would tend to check the advance of the fire, and began to wonder whether the trees were much thinner on the higher side. But I felt that they were not, and that it would be long enough before we struggled on to a place where we could be in safety; while what seemed directly after, there was a deafening roar which I knew to be that of the flames closed up by the narrow way, and leaping after us now, as if in dread that we should escape.

“Man down!” shouted a voice; and in the horrible selfishness of their fear the rest were passing on, but at a word from Mr Raydon four of his men seized the poor exhausted fellow, each taking an arm or leg, and bearing him on, while a few drops were trickled from a flask between his lips.

“Man down!” was shouted again; and this time the retreating party seized the poor fellow, following the example of our men, and bore him on, while he was submitted to the same treatment.

Ten minutes after the poor fellows were on their feet again, struggling on with the support of the arms of two of their fellows.

A dozen times over I felt that all was over, and that we might as well accept our fate. For we could hardly breathe, and now the sparks and flakes of fire and burning twigs came showering down upon us, as if sent forward by the main body of the flame to check us till the advance came on.

The latter part of that retreat before our merciless enemy became to me at last like a dream, during which I have some recollection of staggering along with my arm in Mr Raydon’s, and the people about us tottering and blundering along as if drunk with horror and exhaustion. Every now and then men went down, but they struggled up again, and staggered on, a crew of wild, bloodshot-eyed creatures, whose lips were parched, and white with foam; and then something cool was being splashed on my face.

“Coming round, sir?” said a familiar voice.

“Yes; he’ll be better soon. A terrible experience, Mr Barker.”

“Terrible isn’t the word for it, sir. I gave up a dozen times or so, and thought the end had come. Why, it was almost like a horse galloping. I never saw anything like it.”

“Nor wish to see anything like it again,” said Mr Raydon.

By this time I was looking round, to find that we were seated by the stream, where the water came bubbling and splashing down, while far below us the smoke and flame went up whirling into the sky.

“Better, my lad?” said Mr Raydon.

“Yes, only giddy,” I said; and after drinking heartily and washing my face in the fresh, cool water, I was ready to continue our journey.

Chapter Fifty Three.

Mr John’s Scruples.

It was a dreary, toilsome climb up the narrow portion of the valley, and it was quite dark by the time we had reached the spot where we descended first that morning, and consequently our task grew more risky and difficult; but there was no shrinking, and following in each other’s steps, we went on over the bare mountain below where the sheep had been seen, and with no other light than that of the stars, descended into the narrow gorge which led down into Golden Valley.

Here we of necessity, on reaching Gunson’s claim, made a halt to refresh; but as soon as possible Mr Raydon gave the word “Forward!” again, and the men stepped out better, for this was all well-known ground.

Five-minute halts were made twice on the way down, so as to obtain food at a couple of tents. Then it was on again, and the river was reached at last, and the steady upward trudge commenced for the Fort.

Mr Raydon did not speak, but I felt that his thoughts must have been the same as mine, as I wondered what had

taken place, and whether he was right in his belief that the enemy had gone up to the Fort after firing the forest.

All doubt was cleared when we were about half a mile from our destination, for there suddenly boomed out on the still night air, to echo and die rumbling away among the mountains, the heavy report of one of the small cannon of the block-houses, and this sound sent the men onward at double speed, for it meant not only that the Fort was attacked, but that Grey and those with him were making a brave defence.

“Steady, steady!” said Mr Raydon, in a low, stern voice. “We must get up there ready for a run in. You are out of breath, my lads.”

The men from the Fort, who were in front, slowed down a little at this, dropping from the double into a sharp, quick walk; but the report of a second gun, and then the crackle of rifle-firing, started them again into a steady trot, and I found myself forgetting my weariness, and running by Mr Raydon step for step.

The firing grew sharper as we neared the palisade, which was dimly seen in the starlight, and the flashes of the rifles and the lights we saw going here and there added to the excitement of the scene as Mr Raydon said aloud—

“They have got in, and are trying to take the west block-house. Too late! they have taken it,” he cried, as a burst of cheering rose from within the great fence. Then in a quick whisper he bade the men halt, about a dozen yards from the gateway.

“Mr Barker,” he said, “keep the gate, and come to our help if we want it. Don’t let a man pass. No bloodshed if you can help it—prisoners. Now, Hudson’s Bay boys, ready!”

A fresh burst of cheering arose just then, and directly after the loud shriek of a woman, and a voice I knew as Esau’s roaring out angry words.

“Forward!” said Mr Raydon. “Open out into line, and use the butts of your rifles.”

I ran with them from the force of example, and carried away by the excitement, as our men charged rapidly across the enclosure to where, in happy ignorance of the fact that help was at hand, the gang of scoundrels were busy binding their prisoners, whom they had just dragged out of the block-house. But the next minute there was a yell of rage and hate, with the sound of heavy blows, pistol-shots, oaths and curses, and then the pattering of feet, and Mr Raydon’s voice rang out.

“Four men your way,” he cried; and directly after there was a repetition of the blows, shots, and yells, followed by a cheer from the gate.

For the last of the gang had been beaten down, and as pine-torches were lit, the wounded were separated from the uninjured, and these latter were placed in rows under a strong guard; while explanations followed, Grey assuring us that the women were safe; that the cry came from Mrs Dean, who had tried to protect her son; and that we had come just in time, after a desperate struggle, first at the gate, and lastly at the block-house, which he had defended as vigorously as his limited means would allow. But at last, after being wounded twice, and his two most helpful men laid low, he had succumbed to a desperate rush.

Day broke on as wild a looking set as can be imagined; jaded, exhausted, blackened with smoke, our men sat and lay about for the most part unhurt, though several showed traces of the desperate struggle made by the surprised gang, whose one-handed leader told Mr Raydon with a savage oath that he thought our party had been burned in the forest.

“Then it was your doing,” said Barker, fiercely.

“Course it was,” said the ruffian. “Give me a chance, and I’ll burn this place too.”

Barker raised his fist to strike the fellow, but Mr Raydon seized his arm.

“Don’t do that,” he said; “we shall not give him a chance.”

And so it proved, for that night, when I rose after a long deep sleep, I found that a party had started down the valley with the prisoners.

“You came just in time, Mayne Gordon,” said Mr John to me. “I was so frightened that it made me desperate too. I’m afraid I hurt one man.”

“You did, sir,” I said laughing. “Grey told me how you swung your rifle round, and struck him down.”

“I did, my boy, I did,” he said. “Don’t laugh. I do not feel satisfied that I did right.”

“You did it to defend your wife,” said Mr Raydon, who came up; “and I never felt so proud of you before, John. There, I must go and see my injured men.”

Chapter Fifty Four.

We make a fresh Start.

The wounded prisoners were not got rid of for quite a fortnight, during which time matters settled down again into the regular routine, one of my principal tasks being helping Mr Gunson to take little walks, then longer and longer

ones, after which we used to go and have a chat with Grey, who made very light of his wounds.

One day I asked leave of Mr Raydon to go and have a look at the valley where we had had so narrow an escape. He gave me leave freely enough; and as Mr Gunson did not care to accompany me, saying he had no taste for works in charcoal, I asked leave for Esau to come; and in due time we stood at the mouth of the valley gazing up.

"'Nuff to make a fellow sit down and cry," said Esau, as I recalled our escape.

"Pitiful!" I said sadly.

"Ah, that ain't half strong enough," he said, as we tramped on amongst the ashes and charred wood, with the tall stumps of the great pines standing burned for the most part to sharp points, and looking like landmarks to show the terrible devastation in the once lovely wooded vale.

"I only feel as if I could not use words strong enough," I replied, as we slowly tramped on, with the charred wood cracking under our feet, and the only thing that redeemed the burned region being the beautiful stream which rushed and leaped and sparkled, just as it had been wont before the fire scorched the whole place into a desert.

"Why, it'll take hundreds of years for the trees to grow up again, if they ever do, for it strikes me the fire's spoiled even the ground."

"It may," I said sadly.

"Well, it's too hot to go on any further," said Esau. "Let's go back. Ugh! see how black we're getting. I say, look! I can't see a single green thing. Everything's burnt!"

"Yes," I said; "and this was to have been our home."

"What!" cried Esau, giving such a start that he raised a little puff of black dust.

"This valley, with its pleasant meadows and the park-like entrance, was to have been our home. Mr Raydon had chosen it for Mr and Mrs John."

"Well," cried Esau; "then it is too bad. It was bad enough before for such a glorious place to be burned up; but as it was to have been ours—Oh, I hope they'll transport those fellows for life."

We tramped back, having seen enough of the desolation to make our hearts ache, and stayed for a couple of hours in the lower part catching trout to take back with us before starting homeward, and passing two parties of gold-diggers from the coast on their way to the Golden Valley.

They asked us eagerly to direct them, and I showed them the way with a curious feeling of dissatisfaction.

But that was of little use, for if I had not pointed out the way some one else would, for the news had spread far and wide, and the gold-washing was going on more vigorously every day. Crowds of people were flocking up the valleys, some to gain fortunes, but the greater part nothing but ill-health and disappointment.

The constant accessions of strangers made it the more difficult for Gunson's claim to be held; but, in spite of all opposition and complaint, this was done, the four men, or others in their place, being always kept on guard.

At last came the day when, in spite of Mr Raydon's advice to stay longer, Gunson declared himself quite strong and well.

"I am anxious to get back," he said, "and the more so that I am keeping your men there."

"I have not complained," said Mr Raydon.

"No; and you puzzle me," replied Gunson. "I should have thought you would have tried all you could to keep me back."

"Why should I? What difference does one make?"

"Then one more or less is of no consequence?" said Gunson, laughing. "Well, I am not going to repeat all I have said before as to being grateful."

"I beg you will not," said Mr Raydon. "We had our duty to do to a sick man, and we have done it."

"Nobly," said Gunson, warmly.

"And you intend to start?"

"To-morrow morning, eagerly but unwillingly, for I am loth to leave the society of the tender friends who have nursed me back to life."

He looked at Mrs John and then at Mr John, ending by beckoning to me to come out with him into the enclosure, where Mr Raydon joined us, to begin talking about the stores he meant Gunson to have.

"But really, I cannot be putting myself under fresh obligations," said Gunson.

"Very well then," said Mr Raydon, rather bitterly; "pay me, and be independent." Then facing round and looking at

me, and at Esau, who was some little distance away, he said sharply—

“You will take these two lads to help you, of course?”

“Yes,” said Gunson, as the blood flushed to my temples, “of course. I could not do without them.” I saw Mr Raydon frown, but no more was said, and we spent the rest of the day making preparations for our start, Mrs Dean helping, with the tears trickling down her cheeks as she worked, and bringing forth appeal after appeal from Esau not “to do that.” Those few hours seemed to run away, so that it was night long before I expected it, and at last I went to Mr Raydon’s quarters to say good-bye.

“There is no need,” said Mr John, sadly. “The morning will do.”

“But we start directly after daylight,” I said. “Yes, I know; but we shall be up to see you off.” I went away to my own quarters sadly dispirited; and my feelings were not brightened by the scene going on between Esau and his mother; and I gladly went out into the cool dark night to try and grow composed, when a high-pitched voice saluted me.

“Allee leady,” it said. “Plenty tea, plenty flou, plenty bacon. Quong velly glad to go.”

I could not say the same, and I passed a very poor night, gladly rising at Gunson’s call, and dressing in the half-darkness, so eager was I to get the painful farewells over and make a start.

Mr and Mrs John had kept their words, and Mrs Dean was waiting to kiss me and say good-bye, and beg me to take care of Esau.

“For he is so rash,” she whimpered. “Do keep him out of danger, my dear.”

I promised, and it was understood that we all parted the best of friends, Mr Raydon inviting us all to come over and see them when we chose, and offering to take charge of any gold Gunson might feel disposed to bring over to the Fort.

Then we were off, all well laden, and with two of the men and their Indian wives to carry stores.

The way chosen was through the forest, and away over the mountain ridge, so as to avoid passing all the little camps; and in due time we reached the claim, dismissed the bearers, and once more settled down to our work.

“We must try hard to make up for lost time, my lads,” said Gunson. “Why, Gordon, you don’t seem to relish the task.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, “only I feel a little dull at leaving the Fort.”

Chapter Fifty Five.

Mr Raydon quotes Latin.

“Nothing has been touched,” said Mr Gunson, the next morning. “I don’t believe Raydon’s men have even washed a pan of gold, and my bank is quite safe.”

I looked at him inquiringly.

“I examined it while you were asleep, Mayne,” he said.

“Then you have a good deal stored up here?”

“Yes—somewhere,” he said. “I’ll show you one of these days. Now then; ready?”

We declared our readiness, and once more we began work, out in the silence of that beautiful valley, digging, washing, and examining, as we picked out the soft deadened golden scales, beads, grains, and tiny smooth nuggets.

We all worked our hardest, Quong being indefatigable, and darting back, after running off to see to the fire, to dig and wash with the best of us.

We had very fair success, but nothing dazzling, and the gold we found was added to the bank on the fourth day, this bank proving to be a leather bag which Mr Gunson dug up carefully in my presence, while I stared at him, and burst out laughing at his choice of what I thought so silly and unsafe a place for his findings.

“Why do you laugh?” he said, quietly. “Do you think I might have had a strong box instead of a leather bag?”

“I should have thought that you would have buried it in some out-of-the-way, deserted corner,” I said. “I could find hundreds about.”

“Yes,” he said; “and so could other people, my lad. Those are the very spots they would have searched. I wanted a place where no one would look.”

“And so you hid it here,” I said, wonderingly, for I could not quite see that he was right, and yet he must have been, for the gold was safe.

His hiding-place was down in the sand, right in the beaten track people walked over on their way up the valley.

We worked on busily for a month after Mr Gunson's coming back to his claim; and then one day we struck camp and marched back to the Fort, with a small quantity of gold, the fifth that we had taken up.

"Why, hallo!" cried Mr Raydon as he came in and found us there, with Mr and Mrs John, and Gunson looking very serious.

"Yes," he said. "It's all over. My luck again."

"What do you mean?"

"That was a rich little deposit, and we have gleaned the last grain. The other people are doing badly too, and going back."

"But there must be plenty more," said Mr Raydon.

"No; I believe we have pretty well cleared the valley."

"Then I am delighted," cried Mr Raydon. "Gunson, I congratulate you."

"Indeed!" said Gunson, coldly.

"Yes, for now there will be an end to this grasping, avaricious work, and our pleasant vales will return to the condition that is best."

"The hope of my life is crushed, man, and I must begin my weary hunt again," said Gunson, bitterly.

"No; your new and happier, more manly life is now about to commence. Look here, what gold have you got?"

"You know."

"Not I. I know that I supplied you with a couple of sheep-skins, which you made into bags, and that those bags are in my strong box. What have you?"

"After I have fairly apportioned shares to Mayne, to Dean, and to my little Chinese friend, I shall have a thousand pounds' worth for myself."

"Ample, and double what you will require, man," said Mr Raydon. "Think where you are, in a country—a virgin country—as beautiful, more beautiful than dear old England, a place where for almost nothing you may select land by one of our lovely streams, which, as the writer said, is waiting to be tickled with a hoe, that it may laugh with a harvest. Come: England is too narrow for such a man as you. Take up land, make a ranch if you like, or farm as they farm at home; sow your grains of gold in the shape of wheat, and they will come up a hundredfold. Build your house, and send for the mother and sister of whom you spoke to me when you were so weak."

"I spoke!" said Gunson, wonderingly. "Yes; you were half delirious, but you spoke of a dear mother and sister in England; bring them to share your prosperity, for prosperity must come; and it is a life worth living, after all."

As he spoke I felt my heart swell with hope; the gloomy feelings of disappointment passed away, and I found myself gazing with astonishment at Mr Gunson, whose morose, disfigured face seemed to brighten up and glow, while his eye flashed again, as when Mr Raydon finished speaking he leaned forward and grasped his hand.

"God bless you for those words," he said; "you have made light shine into a darkened heart. I will do this thing. Heaven helping me, I will never seek for a grain of gold again."

"I shall register your oath, Gunson," said Mr Raydon, smiling.

"Do. It will be kept. Yes: I will fetch them over; and, Mrs John, it will be one of the delights of my new life, to introduce two ladies most dear to me to one whom they will venerate and love. Mayne, you have never told them all I said to you?"

"No," I said; "it would have been a breach of confidence."

I looked up as I spoke, and saw that Mr Raydon's eyes were fixed upon me searchingly, and his voice sounded harsh again as he said—

"It was a breach of confidence, Mayne Gordon, to tell Mr Gunson here of the existence of gold in the little valley. Do you remember your promise to me?"

"Yes, sir," I said, boldly, for I felt that at last the truth must come out, and I should be cleared; for I would speak now if Mr Gunson did not. "I remember well."

"Mayne," said Gunson; and my heart seemed to leap—"Mayne tell me about the gold up yonder? No, no; it was not he."

"What!" cried Mr Raydon, excitedly. "It was not Mayne Gordon who told you?"

"No; it was that little Chinaman confided to me that he had made a big find. The little fellow always had confidence in me. He brought me quite a hundred pounds' worth to take care of for him when I was here last, and proposed to put himself under my protection and to work for me if I allowed him a tenth."

“Then it was not Mayne?” cried Mrs John, excitedly.

“No, madam. I knew friend Raydon would be angry, but I was obliged to accept the offer, for I felt that some time or other the people would come, and I argued that the sooner it was all cleared out the better for Raydon’s peace of mind. You knew it must be discovered.”

“Yes; I always knew that; but I wanted to keep away those who came as long as possible.”

“They are going already, and you will soon have your vales in peace again.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” muttered Mr Raydon, beginning to walk up and down the room, while I felt in such a whirl of excitement, as I saw Mrs John’s beautiful, motherly eyes fixed lovingly on mine, and felt Mr John snatch my hand and press it, and then give vent to his delight at the clearing up by slapping me heavily on the shoulder, that I could not see Mr Raydon’s puckered brow. What I did see was the bear’s head looking down at me, showing its grinning teeth as if it were laughing and pleased, and the moose staring at me with its mournful aspect less marked. All nonsense this, I know, but there was a feeling of joy within me that filled me with exultation.

The silence was almost painful at last, and the tension grew to such an extent that I felt at last that I must run out and tell Esau I had misjudged him, as I had been misjudged, when Mr Raydon stopped before me and said softly—

“You remember your Latin, Mayne?”

“A little, sir,” I said, wondering at his words.

“*Humanum est curare*. You know that?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, huskily; “but please don’t say any more.”

“I must. I have erred bitterly. I was blind to the truth. Will you forgive me?”

“Mr Raydon!” I cried.

“My dear boy,” he said, as he grasped my hands; and, to my astonishment, I saw the tears standing in his eyes, while I could not help thinking as he stood there softened towards me, how like he seemed to his sister; “you do not know how I have suffered, hard, cold man as I have grown in my long residence in these wilds.”

“But it’s all past now, sir,” I said; “and you know the truth.”

“Yes; all past,” said Gunson, warmly.

“Past; but I shall never forget it, Mayne. My dear sister’s letter interested me deeply in you, and when you came I felt that she had not exaggerated, and you at once made your way with me. Then came this wretched misunderstanding, blinding me to everything but the fact that I had received a wound, one which irritated me more than I can say.”

“Pray, pray say no more, sir,” I cried, excitedly.

“I must, Mayne. I ought to have known better.”

“I am glad, Dan,” cried Mr John, exultingly. “I have always been such a weak, easily-led-away man, that my life has been a series of mistakes; and it is a delightful triumph to me to find that my hard-headed, stern brother-in-law can blunder too.”

“Yes; it will take some of the conceit out of me,” said Mr Raydon, smiling. “There; shake hands, my lad. I read your forgiveness in your eyes.”

“Why, my dear Raydon,” cried Mr Gunson, merrily, “what moles we all are, and how things shape themselves without our help! I find that in my wild thirst for gold I have been acting as your good genii.”

“How?” said Mr Raydon.

“By bringing Mayne and you closer together than you would ever have been without this mistake. See what I have done for you too, in clearing the valley of this horrible gold!” he cried, merrily.

“But you’ve ruined the estate I was to have had,” said Mr John. “My brother and I went down and had a look at it, and it is one horrible black desert.”

“Pish, man!” cried Gunson; “may work for the best.”

“What!” cried Mr John; “are you mad?”

“No, sir. Never more sane; for the gold mania has gone. That vale was grand with its mighty trees, but it was the work of a generation to clear that forest. Through me, that place was swept clean in a couple of days.”

“Clean?” said Mr John, dolefully.

“Yes; and the ground covered with the rich, fertilising ashes of the forest. Raydon, what will that place be in a year?”

“Green again; and in two years, when the black stumps are demolished, far more beautiful and suitable for settlement than it was before. He is quite right, John; it is a blessing for us in disguise.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Mr John; and Mrs John shook her head sadly.

“I do not like disguises,” she said; “and I grieve for those lovely pyramidal trees.”

“Trees enough and to spare everywhere,” said Mr Raydon. “Don’t be afraid; you shall have a lovely home—eh, Mayne? I think we can manage that. There, Gunson, the sooner the better. Let’s have a happy settlement there, and no more gold.”

Chapter Fifty Six.

The Golden Harvest.

In a year from that time there was not a single gold-digger left in the neighbourhood, for the news of fresh discoveries further north had drawn them all away, and Nature soon hid the untidy spots they had made in Golden Valley with their camps. Gunson had no hesitation in selecting the black valley for his farm, where, in a wonderfully short space of time, patches of green began to appear; while Mrs John, in perfect faith that the place would soon recover, herself picked out the spot at the entrance of the burned valley, close by a waterfall, and was more contented by the fact that several magnificent pines were left standing by the fire, which at starting had not extended so far. Here a delightful little cottage was built almost in Swiss fashion, the men from the Fort helping eagerly to prepare a home for one who, by her gentleness, had quickly won a place in their esteem, without counting the fact that she was their chief officer’s sister.

In a very short time this was surrounded by a garden, in which Mr John spent the greater part of his time, planting flowers that his wife loved, while Esau and I had our shares of the gold invested in land bought by acting under Mr Raydon’s advice, ready for our working at some future time, for then we were busy helping the Dempsters and Gunson, making plans and improvements.

How we all worked! and what delightful days those were, the more so that in due time there came to our friend’s home a sweet-looking, grey-haired lady with a patient, rather pinched aspect, and a grave, handsome woman, whom I knew at once for Gunson’s sister; but I was rather puzzled when I heard that their names were Mrs and Miss Effingham.

“My name, Mayne, my lad,” said the prospector, “when I was a gentleman, and now I take it once again.”

Those two ladies looked scared and sad till they saw Mrs John, and then a change seemed to come over them, such as I had seen in Gunson—I mean Effingham—as he listened to Mr Raydon’s words.

In a week Mrs Effingham was ready for me with a smile, and Miss Effingham was singing about the place while I helped her plan a garden for the alpine flowers we collected.

Yes: that soon became a happy valley, where there was always some new pleasure of a simple kind—the arrival of boxes of seeds, or packages of fruit-trees from England, implements for the farming—endless things that civilisation asks for.

Then Esau developed into a wonderful carpenter, after instructions from Grey at the Fort; and from carpentering blossomed into cabinet-making. Every one was busy, and as for Quong, he quite settled down as cook in general, baker, and useful hand, confiding to me that he did not mean to go back to China till he died.

“This velly nice place, sah. No sabbee more ploper place. Quong velly happy, sah. You like cup flesh tea?”

He always offered me that whenever I went near him, and I think his feelings were those of every one there. For it was a pleasant sight to see Mr and Mrs John in their garden, which was half Nature-made when they began, and grew in beauty as the years rolled on, though they had formidable competitors up at the farm.

“Yes,” said Mr Effingham one day as I stood with him and Mr Raydon in the big barn—that big barn built of Douglas pine planks, cut down by Esau and me, sawn in our own mill turned by the beautiful stream—a mill erected with Mr Raydon’s help. “Yes,” he said, as he thrust his hand into a sack, and let the contents trickle back; “that’s as good wheat as they grow in England. You were right, old fellow. Do you hear, Mayne? These are the real golden grains, and the best that man can find.”

The End.

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