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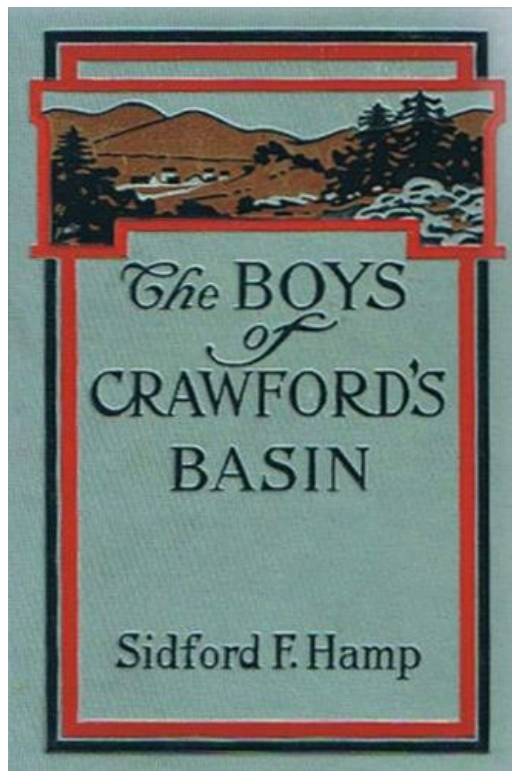
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOYS OF CRAWFORD'S BASIN ***



The Boys of Crawford's Basin

***THE STORY OF A MOUNTAIN RANCH
IN THE EARLY DAYS OF COLORADO***

BY

SIDFORD F. HAMP

Author of "Dale and Fraser, Sheepmen," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHASE EMERSON



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THE BOYS OF CRAWFORD'S BASIN



**"THERE WAS BIG REUBEN
LOOKING DOWN AT US"**

PREFACE

In relating the adventures of "The Boys of Crawford's Basin," the author has endeavored to depict the life of the ranchman in the mountains of Colorado as he knew it towards the end of the "seventies" of the century just past.

At that date, the railroads, after their long climb from the Missouri River to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, were still seeking a practicable passage westward over that formidable barrier, and in consequence, the mountain ranchman—who, by the way, was also sometimes a prospector and frequently a hunter—having no means of shipping his produce

to the outside world, depended for his market upon one or another of the many little silver-mining camps scattered over the State.

That infant State was but just learning to walk without leading-strings; and it has been the aim of the author to show how two stout young fellows, prone to honesty and not afraid of hard work, were able to do their share in advancing the prosperity of the growing Commonwealth in which their lot was cast.

It may not be out of place, perhaps, to mention that, besides having had considerable experience in ranching, the author was, about the date of the story, himself prospecting for silver and working as a miner. He would add, too, that several of the incidents related therein, and those in his opinion the most remarkable, are drawn from actual facts.

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The Boys of Crawford's Basin

[Pg 11]

CHAPTER I

BIG REUBEN'S RAID

"Wake up, boys! Wake up! Tumble out, there! Quick! Big Reuben's into the pig-pen again!"

Our bedroom door was banged wide open, and my father stood before us—a startling apparition—dressed only in his night-shirt and a pair of boots, carrying a stable-lantern in one hand and a rifle in the other.

"What is it?" cried Joe, as he bounced out of bed; and, "Where is it?" cried I, both of us half

dazed by the sudden awakening.

"It's Big Reuben raiding the pig-pen again! Can't you hear 'em squealing? Come on at once! Bring the eight-bore, Joe; and you, Phil, get the torch and the revolver. Quick; or he'll kill every hog in the pen!"

Big Reuben was not a two-legged thief, as one might suppose from his name. He was a grizzly bear, a notorious old criminal, who, for the past two or three years, had done much harm to the ranchmen of our neighborhood, killing calves and colts and pigs—especially pigs. [Pg 12]

Like a robber-baron of old, he laid tribute on the whole community, raiding all the ranches in turn, traveling great distances during the night, but always retreating to his lair among the rocks before morning. This had gone on for a long time, when one day, in broad daylight, while Ole Johnson, the Swede, was plowing his upper potato-patch, the grizzly jumped down from a ledge of rocks and with one blow of his paw broke the back of Ole's best work-steer; Ole himself, frightened half to death, flying for refuge to his stable, where he shut himself up in the hay-loft for the rest of the day.

This outrage had the effect of waking up the county commissioners, who, understanding at last that we had been terrorized long enough, now offered a reward of one hundred dollars for bruin's scalp—an offer which stimulated all the hunters round about to run the marauder to his lair.

But Big Reuben was as crafty as he was bold. His home was up in one of the rocky gorges of Mount Lincoln to the west of us, where it would be useless to try to trail him; and after Jed Smith had been almost torn to pieces, and his partner, Baldy Atkins, had spent two nights and a day up a tree, the enthusiasm of the hunters had suddenly waned and Big Reuben's closer acquaintance had been shunned by all alike. Thereafter, the bear had continued his depredations unchecked. [Pg 13]

Among his many other pieces of mischief, he had killed a valuable calf for us once, once before he had raided the pig-pen, and now here he was again.

Without waiting to put on any extra clothing, Joe and I followed my father through the kitchen, I grabbing a revolver from its nail in the wall, and Joe snatching down the great eight-bore duck-gun and slipping into it two cartridges prepared for this very contingency, each cartridge containing twelve buck-shot and a big spherical bullet—a terrific charge for close quarters. Once outside the kitchen-door, I ran to the wood-shed and seized the torch which, like the cartridges, had been made ready for this emergency. It consisted of a broom-handle with a great wad of waste, soaked in kerosene, bound with wire to one end of it. [Pg 14]

Lighting the torch, I held it high and followed two paces behind the others as they advanced towards the pig-pen. We had not progressed twenty yards, however—luckily for us, as it turned out—when there issued through the roof of the pen a great dark body, dimly seen by the light of the torch.

"There he is!" cried my father, as the bear dropped out of sight behind the corral fence. "Look out, now! We'll get a shot at him as he runs up the hill!"

But Big Reuben had no intention whatever of running up the hill; he feared neither man nor beast, and the next moment he appeared round the corner of the corral, charging full upon us, open-mouthed.

With a single impulse, we all fired one shot at him and then turned and fled, helter-skelter, for the kitchen, all tumbling in together, treading on each others' heels; my father slamming behind us the door, which fortunately opened outward.

The kitchen was a slight frame structure, built on to the back of the house as a T-shaped addition. We were barely inside when bang! came a heavy body against the door, with such force as to send several milk-pans clashing to the floor. [Pg 15]

My father had hastily loaded again, and now, hearing the bear's paws patting high up on the door, he fired a chance shot through it. The bear was hit, seemingly, for we heard him grunt; but that he was not killed by any means was evident, for the next moment, with a clattering crash, the kitchen window, glass, frame and all, was knocked into the room, and a great hairy arm and fierce, grinning head were thrust through the gap.

Joe, who was standing just opposite the window, jumped backward, and catching his heels against the great tub wherein the week's wash was soaking, he sat down in it with a splash. Seeing this, I sprang forward and thrust my torch into the bear's face; upon which he dropped to the ground again. A half-second later, Joe, still sitting in the tub, fired his

second barrel. It was a good shot, but just a trifle too late, and its only effect was to blow my torch to shreds, leaving us with the dim light of the lantern only.

“Into the house!” shouted my father; whereupon we all retreated from the kitchen into the main building. There, while Joe held the door partly open and I held the lantern so as to throw a light into the kitchen, my father knelt upon the floor waiting for the bear to give him another chance. But Big Reuben was much too clever to do anything of the sort; he was not going to put himself into any such trap as that; and presently my mother from up-stairs called out that she could see him going off. [Pg 16]

We waited about for half an hour, but as there was no more disturbance we all went back to bed, where for another half-hour Joe and I lay talking, unable, naturally, to go to sleep at once after such a lively stirring-up.

By sunrise next morning we were all out to see what damage had been done. The bear had torn a great hole in the roof of the pen, had jumped in and had killed and partly eaten one pig, choosing, as a bear of his sagacity naturally would, the best one. We were fortunate, though, to have come off so cheaply; doubtless the light of our torch shining through the chinks of the logs had disturbed him.

If there had been any question as to the marauder’s identity, that was settled at once. His tracks were plain in the dust, and as one of his hind feet showed no marks of claws, we knew it was Big Reuben; for Big Reuben had once been caught in a trap and had only freed himself by leaving his toe-nails behind him. [Pg 17]

Outside the kitchen door and window the tracks were very plain; there was also a good deal of blood, showing that he had been hit at least once. But it was evident also that he had not been hurt very seriously, for there was no irregularity in his trail—no swaying from side to side, as from weakness—though we followed it up to the point where, at the upper end of our valley, the bear had climbed the cliff which bounded the Second Mesa. Though on this occasion he had thought fit to run away, there was little doubt but that he would live to fight another day.

“Father,” said I, as we sat together at breakfast, “may Joe and I go and trail him up? If he keeps on bleeding it ought to be easy, and it is just possible that we might find him dead.”

My father at first shook his head, but presently, reconsidering, he replied: “Well, you may go; but you must go on your ponies: it’s too dangerous to go a-foot. And in any case, if the trail leads you up to the loose rocks or into the big timber you must stop. You know what a tricky beast Big Reuben is. If he sees that he is followed he will lie in hiding and jump out on you. That’s how he caught Jed Smith, you remember.” [Pg 18]

“We’ll take care, father,” said I. “We’ll stick to our ponies, and then we shall be all safe.”

“Very well, then; be off with you.”

With this permission we set off, I carrying a rifle and Joe his “old cannon,” as he called the big shotgun; each with a crust of bread and a slice or two of bacon in his pocket by way of lunch. Picking up the trail where we had left it at the foot of the Second Mesa, we scrambled up the little cliff, looking out very sharply lest Big Reuben should be lying in wait for us in some crevice, and finding that the tracks led straight away for Mount Lincoln, we followed them, I doing the tracking while Joe kept watch ahead. The surface of the Second Mesa was very uneven: there were many little rocky hills and many small cañons, some of the latter as much as a hundred feet deep, so, keeping in mind the bear’s crafty nature, whenever the trail led us near any of these obstacles I would stand still while Joe examined the cañon or the rocks, as the case might be. [Pg 19]

Every time we did this, however, we drew a blank. The trail continued to lead straight away for the mountain without diverging to one side or the other, and for five or six miles we followed it until the stunted cedars began to give place to pine trees, when we decided that we might as well stop, especially as for some time past there had ceased to be any blood-marks on the stones and we had been following only the occasional imprint of the bear’s paws in the patches of sand.

“The trail is headed straight for that rocky gorge, Phil,” said my companion, pointing forward, “and it’s no use going on. Even if your father hadn’t forbidden it, I wouldn’t go into that gorge, knowing that Big Reuben was in there somewhere, not if the county commissioners should offer me the whole county as a reward.”

“Nor I, either,” said I. “Big Reuben may have his mountain all to himself as far as I’m concerned. So, come on; let’s get back. What time is it?” [Pg 20]

“After noon,” replied Joe, looking up at the sun. “We’ve been a long time coming, but it

won't take us more than half the time going back. Let's dig out at once."

Turning our ponies, we set off at an easy lope, and had ridden about two miles on the back track when, skirting along the edge of one of the little cañons I have mentioned, we noticed a tiny spring of water, which, issuing from the face of the cliff close to the top, fell in a thin thread into the chasm.

"Joe," said I, "let's stop here and eat our lunch. I'm getting pretty hungry."

"All right," said Joe; and in another minute we were seated on the edge of the cliff with our feet dangling in space, munching our bread and bacon, while the ponies, with the reins hanging loose, were cropping the scanty grass just behind us.

About five feet below where we sat was a little ledge some eighteen inches wide, which, on our left, gradually sloped upward until it came to the top, while in the other direction it sloped downward, diminishing in width until it "petered out" entirely. The little spring fell upon this ledge, and running along it, fell off again at its lower end. As the best place to fill our tin cup was where the water struck the ledge, we, when we had finished our lunch, walked down to that point.

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Filling the cup, I was in the act of handing it to Joe, who was behind me, when a sudden clatter of hoofs caused us to straighten up. Our eyes came just above the level of the cliff, and the first thing they encountered was Big Reuben himself, not ten feet away, coming straight for us at a run!

"Duck!" yelled Joe; and down we went—only just in time, too, for the bear's great claws rattled on the surface of the rock as he made a slap at us.

Where had he come from? Had he followed us back from the mountain? Hardly: we had come too quickly. Had he seen us coming in the early morning, and, making a circuit out of our sight, lain in wait for us as we returned? Such uncanny cleverness seemed hardly possible, even for Big Reuben, clever as he was known to be.

These questions, however, did not occur to us at the moment. All that concerned us just then was that there was Big Reuben, looking down at us from the edge of the cliff.

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There was no doubt that it was the same bear we had interviewed in the night, for all the hair on one side of his face was singed off where I had thrust at him with the torch, while one of his ears was tattered and bloody, showing that some of Joe's buck-shot, at least, had got him as he dropped from the window.

Joe and I were on our hands and knees, when the bear, going down upon his chest, reached for us with one of his paws. He could not quite touch us, but he came so uncomfortably close that we crept away down the ledge, which, dipping pretty sharply, soon put us out of his reach altogether.

Seeing this, the bear rose to his feet again, gazed at us for a moment, and then stepped back out of sight.

"Has he gone?" I whispered; but before Joe could answer Big Reuben appeared again, walking down the ledge towards us. Of course we sidled away from him, until the ledge had become so narrow that I could go no farther; and lucky it was for us that the ledge was narrow, for what was standing-room for us was by no means standing-room for the bear: his body was much too thick to allow him to come near us, or even to approach the spot whence we had just retreated.

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As it was obvious that the bear could advance no farther, for he was standing on the very edge of the ledge and there was a bulge in the rock before him which would inevitably have pushed him off into the chasm had he attempted to pass it, Joe and I returned to the spring, where we had room to stand or to sit down as we wished.

The enemy watched our approach, with a glint of malice in his little piggy eyes, but when he saw that we intended to come no nearer, he lay down where he was and began unconcernedly licking his paws.

"He thinks he can starve us out," said Joe; "but if I'm not mistaken we can stand it longer than he can, even if he did eat half a pig last night. And there's one thing certain, Phil: if we don't get home to-night, somebody will come to look for us in the morning."

"Yes," I assented. "But they'll get a pretty bad scare at home if we don't turn up. Is there no way of sending that beast off? If we could only get hold of one of the guns——"

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By standing upright we could see my rifle lying on the ground and Joe's big gun standing with its muzzle pointed skyward, leaning against a boulder. They were only six feet away,

but six feet were six feet: we could not reach them without climbing up, and that was out of the question—the bear could get there much more quickly than we could.

“Phil!” exclaimed my companion, suddenly. “Have you got any twine in your pocket?”

“Yes,” I replied, pulling out a long, stout piece of string. “Why?”

“Perhaps we can ‘rope’ my gun. See, its muzzle stands clear. Then we could drag it within reach.”

I very soon had a noose made, and being the more expert roper of the two I swung it round and round my head, keeping the loop wide open, and threw it. My very first cast was successful. The noose fell over the muzzle of the gun and settled half way down the barrel, where it was stopped by the rock.

“Good!” whispered Joe. “Now, tighten it up gently and pull the gun over.”

I followed these directions, and presently we heard the gun fall with a clatter upon the rocks; for, fearing it might go off when it fell, we had both ducked below the rim of the wall. [Pg 25]

Our actions had made the bear suspicious, and when the gun came clattering down he rose upon his hind feet and looked about him. Seeing nothing moving, however, he came down again, when I at once began to pull the gun gently towards me, keeping my head down all the time lest one of the hammers, catching against a rock, should explode the charge.

At length, thinking it should be near enough, I ceased pulling, when Joe straightened up, reached out, and, to my great delight, when he withdrew his hand the gun was in it.

Ah! What a difference it made in our situation!

Joe, first opening the breach to make sure the gun was loaded, advanced as near the bear as he dared, and kneeling down took careful aim at his chest. But presently he lowered the gun again, and turning to me, said:

“Phil, can you do anything to make him turn his head so that I can get a chance at him behind the ear? I’m afraid a shot in front may only wound him.” [Pg 26]

“All right,” said I. “I’ll try.”

With my knife I pried out of the face of the cliff a piece of stone about the size and shape of the palm of my hand, and aiming carefully I threw it at the bear. It struck him on the very point of his nose—a tender spot—and seemingly hurt him a good deal, for, with an angry snarl, he rose upright on his hind feet.

At that instant a terrific report resounded up and down the cañon, the whole charge of Joe’s ponderous weapon struck the bear full in the chest—I could see the hole it made—and without a sound the great beast dropped from the ledge, fell a hundred feet upon the rocks below, bounded two or three times and then lay still, all doubled up in a heap at the bottom.

Big Reuben had killed his last pig!

CHAPTER II

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CRAWFORD’S BASIN

You might think, perhaps, as many people in our neighborhood thought, that Joe was my brother. As a matter of fact he was no relation at all; he had dropped in upon us, a stranger, two years before, and had stayed with us ever since.

It was in the haying season that he came, at a moment when my father and I were overwhelmed with work; for it was the summer of 1879, the year of “the Leadville excitement,” when all the able-bodied men in the district were either rushing off to Leadville itself or going off prospecting all over the mountains in the hope of unearthing other Leadvilles. Ranch work was much too slow for them, and as a consequence it was impossible for us to secure any help that was worth having.

What made it all the more provoking was that we had that year an extra-fine stand of grass—the weather, too, was magnificent—yet, unless we could get help, it was hardly likely that we could take full advantage of our splendid hay-crop. [Pg 28]

Nevertheless, as what could not be cured must be endured, my father and I tackled the job

ourselves, working early and late, and we were making very good progress, all things considered, when we had the misfortune to break a small casting in our mowing-machine; a mishap which would probably entail a delay of several days until we could get the piece replaced.

It was just before noon that this happened, and we had brought the machine up to the wagon-shed and had put up the horses, when, on stepping out of the stable, we were accosted by a tall, black haired, blue eyed young fellow of about my own age, who asked if he could get a job with us.

"Yes, you can," replied my father, promptly; and then, remembering the accident to the machine, he added, "at least, you can as soon as I get this casting replaced," holding out the broken piece as he spoke.

"May I look at it?" asked the young fellow; and taking it in his hand he went on: "I see you have a blacksmith-shop over there; I think I can duplicate this for you if you'll let me try: I was a blacksmith's apprentice only a month ago."

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"Do you think you can? Well, you shall certainly be allowed to try. But come in now: dinner will be ready in five minutes; you shall try your hand at blacksmithing afterwards. What's your name?"

"Joe Garnier," replied the boy. "I come from Iowa. I was going to Leadville, but I met so many men coming back, with tales of what numbers of idle men there were up there unable to get work, that, hearing of a place called Sulphide as a rising camp, I decided to go there instead. This is the right way to get there, isn't it?"

"Yes, this is the way to Sulphide. Did you expect to get work as a miner?"

"Well, I intended to take any work I could get, but if you can give me employment here, I'd a good deal rather work out in the sun than down in a hole in the ground."

"You replace that casting if you can, and I'll give you work for a month, at least, and longer if we get on well together."

"Thank you," said the stranger; and with that we went into the house.

The newcomer started well: he won my mother's good opinion at once by wiping his boots carefully before entering, and by giving himself a sousing good wash at the pump before sitting down to table. It was plain he was no ordinary tramp—though, for that matter, the genus "tramp" had not yet invaded the three-year-old state of Colorado—for his manners were good; while his clear blue eyes, in contrast with his brown face and wavy black hair, gave him a remarkably bright and wide-awake look.

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As soon as dinner was over, we all repaired to the blacksmith-shop, where Joe at once went to work. It was very evident that he knew what he was about: every blow seemed to count in the right direction; so that in about half an hour he had fashioned his piece of iron into the desired shape, when he plunged it into the tub of water, and then, clapping it into the vise, went to work on it with a file; every now and then comparing it with the broken casting which lay on the bench beside him.

"There!" he exclaimed at last. "I believe that will fit." And, indeed, when he laid them side by side, one would have been puzzled to tell which was which, had not the old piece been painted red while the other was not painted at all.

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Joe was right: the piece did fit; and in less than an hour from the time we had finished dinner we were at work again in the hay-field.

The month which followed was a strenuous one, but by the end of it we had the satisfaction of knowing that we had put up the biggest crop of hay ever cut on the ranch.

Our new helper, who was a tall, stout fellow for his age, and an untiring worker, proved to be a capital hand, and though at first he was somewhat awkward, being unused to farm labor, before we had finished he could do a better day's work than I could, in spite of the fact that I had been a ranch boy ever since I had been a boy at all.

We all took a great liking for Joe, and we were very pleased, therefore, when, the hay being in, it was arranged that he should stay on. For there was plenty of work to be done that year—extra work, I mean—such as building fences, putting up an ice-house and so forth, in which Joe, having a decided mechanical turn, proved a valuable assistant. So, when the spring came round again it found Joe still with us; and with us he continued to stay, becoming so much one of the family that many people, as I said, who did not know his story, supposed that he and I were brothers in fact, as we soon learned to become brothers in feeling.

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Long before this, of course, Joe had told us all about himself and how he had come to leave his old home and make his way westward.

Of French-Canadian descent, the boy, left an orphan at three years of age, had been taken in by a neighbor, a kind-hearted blacksmith, and with him he had lived for the twelve years following, when the blacksmith, now an old man, had decided to go out of business. Just at this time "the Leadville excitement" was making a great stir in the country; thousands of men were heading for the new Eldorado, and Joe, his old friend consenting, determined to join the throng.

It was, perhaps, lucky for the young blacksmith that he started rather late, for, on his approach to the mountains, he encountered files of disappointed men streaming in the opposite direction, and hearing their stories of the overcrowded condition of things in Leadville, he determined to try instead the mining camp of Sulphide, when, passing our place on the way he was caught by my father, as I have described, and turned into a ranchman.

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Such was the condition of affairs with us when Big Reuben made his final raid upon our pig-pen.

The reward of one hundred dollars which the county paid us for our exploit in ridding the community of Big Reuben's presence came in very handily for Joe and me. It enabled us to achieve an object for which we had long been hoarding our savings—the purchase of a pair of mules.

For the past two years, in the slack season, after the gathering of our hay and potato crops, we had hired out during the fine weather remaining to a man whose business it was to cut and haul timbers for the mines in and around the town of Sulphide, which lay in the mountains seven miles southwestward from our ranch. We found it congenial work, and Joe and I, who were now seventeen years old, hardened to labor with ax, shovel or pitchfork, saw no reason why we should not put in these odd five or six weeks cutting timbers on our own account. No reason but one, that is to say. My father would readily lend us one of his wagons, but he could not spare a team, and so, until we could procure a team of our own, we were obliged to forego the honor and glory—to say nothing of the expected profits—of setting up as an independent firm.

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Now, however, we had suddenly and unexpectedly acquired the necessary funds, and with the money in our pockets away we went at once to Ole Johnson's, from whom we bought a stout little pair of mouse-colored mules upon which we had long had an eye.

But though the firm of Crawford and Garnier might now, if it pleased, consider itself established, it could not enter upon the practice of its business for some time yet. It was still the middle of summer, and there was plenty to do on the ranch: the hay and the oats would be ready to cut in two weeks, while after that there were the potatoes to gather—a very heavy piece of work.

All these tasks had to be cleared out of the way before we could move up to Sulphide to begin on our timber-cutting enterprise. But between the harvesting of the oats and the gathering of the potato-crop there occurred an incident, which, besides being remarkable in itself, had a very notable effect upon my father's fortunes—and, incidentally, upon our own.

To make understandable the ins and outs of this matter, I must pause a moment to describe the situation of our ranch; for it is upon the peculiarity of its situation that much of my story hinges.

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Anybody traveling westward from San Remo, the county seat, with the idea of getting up into the mountains, would encounter, about a mile from town, a rocky ridge, which, running north and south, extended for several miles each way. Ascending this bluff and still going westward, he would presently encounter a second ridge, the counterpart of the first, and climbing that in turn he would find himself upon the wide-spreading plateau known as the Second Mesa, which extended, without presenting any serious impediment, to the foot of the range—itsself one of the finest and ruggedest masses of mountains in the whole state of Colorado.

In a deep depression of the First Mesa—known as Crawford's Basin—lay our ranch. This "Basin" was evidently an ancient lake-bed—as one could tell by the "benches" surrounding it—but the water of the lake having in the course of ages sawed its way out through the rocky barrier, now ran off through a little cañon about a quarter of a mile long.

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The natural way for us to get from the ranch down to San Remo was to follow the stream down this cañon, but, curiously enough, for more than half the year this road was

impassable. The lower end of Crawford's Basin, for a quarter of a mile back from the entrance of the cañon, was so soft and water-logged that not even an empty wagon could pass over it. In fact, so soft was it that we could not get upon it to cut hay and were obliged to leave the splendid stand of grass that grew there as a winter pasture. In the cold weather, when the ground froze up, it was all right, but at the first breath of spring it began to soften, and from then until winter again we could do nothing with it. It was, in fact, little better than a source of annoyance to us, for, until we fenced it off, our milk cows, tempted by the luxuriant grass, were always getting themselves mired there.

This wet patch was known to every teamster in the county as "the bottomless forty rods," and was shunned by them like a pestilence. Its existence was a great drawback to us, for, between San Remo, where the smelters were, and the town of Sulphide, where the mines were, there was a constant stream of wagons passing up and down, carrying ore to the smelters and bringing back provisions, tools and all the other multitudinous necessities required by the population of a busy mining town. Had it not been for the presence of "the bottomless forty rods," all these wagons would have come through our place and we should have done a great trade in oats and hay with the teamsters. But as it was, they all took the mesa road, which, though three miles longer and necessitating the descent of a long, steep hill where the road came down from the First Mesa to the plains, had the advantage of being hard and sound at all seasons of the year.

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My father had spent much time and labor in the attempt to make a permanent road through this morass, cutting trenches and throwing in load after load of stones and brush and earth, but all in vain, and at length he gave it up—though with great reluctance. For, not only did the teamsters avoid us, but we, ourselves, when we wished to go with a load to San Remo, were obliged to ascend to the mesa and go down by the hill road.

The cause of this wet spot was apparently an underground stream which came to the surface at that point. The creek which supplied us with water for irrigation had its sources on Mount Lincoln and falling from the Second Mesa into our Basin in a little waterfall some twelve feet high, it had scooped out a circular hole in the rock about a hundred feet across and then, running down the length of the valley, found its way out through the cañon. Now this creek received no accession from any other stream in its course across the Basin, but for all that the amount of water in the cañon was twice as great as that which came over the fall; showing conclusively that the marsh whence the increase came must be supplied by a very strong underground stream.

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The greater part of Crawford's Basin was owned by my father, Philip Crawford, the elder, but a portion of it, about thirty acres at the upper end, including the pool, the waterfall and the best part of the potato land, was owned by Simon Yetmore, of Sulphide.

My father was very desirous of purchasing this piece of ground, for it would round out the ranch to perfection, but Yetmore, knowing how much he desired it, asked such an unreasonable price that their bargaining always fell through. Being unable to buy it, my father therefore leased it, paying the rent in the form of potatoes delivered at Yetmore's store in Sulphide—for Simon, besides being mayor of Sulphide and otherwise a person of importance, was proprietor of Yetmore's Emporium, by far the largest general store in town.

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He was an enterprising citizen, Simon was, always having many irons in the fire; a clever fellow, too, in his way; though his way was not exactly to the taste of some people: he drove too hard a bargain. In fact, the opinion was pretty general that his name fitted him to a nicety, for, however much he might get, he always wanted yet more.

My father distrusted him; yet, strange to say, in spite of that fact, and of the added fact that he had always fought shy of all mining schemes, he and Yetmore were partners in a prospecting venture. It was, in a measure, an accident, and it came about in this way:

The smelter-men down at San Remo were always crying out for more lead-ores to mix with the "refractory" ores produced by most of the mines in our district, publishing a standing offer of an extra-good price for all ores containing more than a stated percentage of lead. In spite of the stimulus this offer gave to the prospecting of the mountains, north, south and west of us, there had been found but one mine, the Samson, of which the chief product was lead, and this did not furnish nearly enough to satisfy the wants of the smelter-men.

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Its discovery, however, proved the existence of veins of galena—the ore from which lead chiefly comes—in one part of the district, and the prospectors became more active than ever; though without result. That section of country where the Samson had been discovered was deeply overlaid with "wash," and as the veins were "blanket" veins—lying flat, that is—and did not crop out above the surface, their discovery was pretty much a matter of chance.

Among the prospectors was one, Tom Connor, who, having had experience in the lead-mines of Missouri, proposed to adopt one of the methods of prospecting in use in that country, to wit, the core-drill. But to procure and operate a core-drill required money, and this Tom Connor had not. He therefore applied to Simon Yetmore, who agreed to supply part of the necessary funds—making good terms for himself, you may be sure—if Tom would provide the rest. The rest, however, was rather more than the sum-total of Tom's scanty capital, and so he came to my father, who was an old friend of his, and asked him to make up the difference.

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My father declined to take any share in the enterprise, for, though most of the ranchmen round about were more or less interested in mining, he himself looked upon it as being too near akin to gambling; but feeling well disposed towards Tom, and the sum required being very moderate, he lent his friend the money, quite prepared, knowing Tom's optimistic, harum-scarum character, never to see it again.

In this expectation, however, he was happily deceived. It is true he did not get back his money, but he received his money's worth, and that in a very curious way.

CHAPTER III

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YETMORE'S MISTAKE

Three months had elapsed when Tom Connor turned up one day with a very long face. All his drilling had brought no result; he was at the end of his tether; he could see no possible chance of ever repaying the borrowed money, and so, said he, would my father take his interest in the drill in settlement of the debt?

Very reluctantly my father consented—for what did he want with a one-third share in a core-drill?—whereupon Tom, the load of debt being off his mind, brightened up again in an instant—he was a most mercurial fellow—and forthwith he fell to begging my father's consent to his making one more attempt—just one. He was sure of striking it this time, he had studied the formation carefully and he had selected a spot where the chances of disappointment were, as he declared, "next-to-nothing."

My father knew Tom well enough to know that he had been just as sure twenty times before, but Tom was so eager and so plausible that at last he agreed that he should sink one more hole—but no more.

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"And mind you, Tom," said he, "I won't spend more than fifty dollars; that is the very utmost I can afford, and I believe I am only throwing that away. But I'll spend fifty just to satisfy you—but that's all, mind you."

"Fifty dollars!" exclaimed Tom. "Fifty! Bless you, that'll be more than enough. Twenty ought to do it. I'm going to make your fortune for twenty dollars, Mr. Crawford, and glad of the chance. You've treated me 'white,' and the more I can make for you the better I'll be pleased. Inside of a week I'll be coming back here with a lead-mine in my pocket—you see if I don't."

"All right, Tom," said my father, laughing, as he shook hands with him. "I shall be glad to have it, even if it is only a pocket edition. So, good-bye, old man, and good luck to you."

It was two days after this that my father at breakfast time turned to us and said:

"Boys, how would you like to take your ponies and go and see Tom Connor at work? There is not much to do on the ranch just now, and an outing of two or three days will do you good."

Needless to say, we jumped at the chance, and as soon as we could get off, away we went, delighted at the prospect of making an expedition into the mountains.

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The place where Tom was at work was thirty miles beyond Sulphide, a long ride, nearly all up hill, and it was not till towards sunset that we approached his camp. As we did so, a very surprising sight met our gaze: three men, close together, with their backs to us, down on their hands and knees, like Mahomedans saying their prayers.

"What are they up to?" asked Joe. "Have they lost something?"

At this moment, my horse's hoof striking a stone caused the three men to look up. One was Connor, one was his helper, and the other, to our surprise, was Yetmore.

Connor sprang to his feet and ran towards us, crying:

“What did I tell you, boys! What did I tell you! Get off your ponies, quick, and come and see!”

He was wild with excitement.

We slid from our horses, and joining the other two, went down on our knees beside them. Upon the ground before them lay the object of their worship: a “core” from the drill, neatly pieced together, about eight feet long and something less than an inch in diameter. Of this core, four feet or more at one end and about half a foot at the other was composed of some kind of stone, but in between, for a length of three feet and an inch or two, it was all smooth, shining lead-ore.

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Tom Connor had struck it, and no mistake!

“Tom,” said Yetmore, as we all rose to our feet again, “this *looks* like a pretty fair strike; but you’ve got to remember that we know nothing about the extent of the vein—one hole doesn’t prove much. It is three feet thick at this particular point, but it may be only three inches five feet away; and as to its length and breadth, why, that’s all pure speculation. All the same I’m ready to make a deal with you. I’ll buy your interest or I’ll sell you mine. What do you say?”

“What’s the use of that kind of talk?” growled Connor. “You know I haven’t a cent to my name. Besides, I haven’t any interest.”

“You—what!—you haven’t any interest!” cried the other. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve sold it.”

“Sold it! Who to?”

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“To Mr. Crawford, two days ago.”

“Well, you are a——” Yetmore began; but catching sight of Tom’s glowering face he stopped and substituted, “Well, I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Well, I ain’t,” said Tom, shortly. “If Mr. Crawford makes a fortune out of it I’ll be mighty well pleased. He’s treated me ‘white,’ *he* has.”

From the tone and manner of this remark it was easy to guess that Tom did not love Mr. Yetmore: he had found him a difficult partner to get along with, probably.

“I certainly hope he will,” said Yetmore, smiling, “for if he does I shall. Sold it to Mr. Crawford, eh? So that accounts for you two boys being up here. Got here just in time, didn’t you? You’ll stay over to-morrow, of course, and see Tom uncover the vein?”

“Are you proposing to uncover it, Tom?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s only four feet down; one shot will do it. You’ll stay too, I suppose, Mr. Yetmore?”

“Certainly,” replied the other. But as he said it, I saw a change come over his face—it was a leathery face, with a large, long nose. Some idea had occurred to him I was sure, especially when, seeing that I was looking at him, he dropped his eyes, as though fearing they might betray him.

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Whatever the idea might be, however, I ceased to think of it when Tom suggested that it was getting late and that we had better adjourn to the cabin for supper.

Taking our ponies over to the log stable, therefore, we gave them a good feed of oats, and soon afterwards were ourselves seated before a steaming hot meal of ham, bread and coffee; after which we spent an hour talking over the great strike, and then, crawling into the bunks, we very quickly fell asleep.

Early next morning we walked about half a mile up the mountain to the scene of the strike, when, having first shoveled away two or three feet of loose stuff, Tom and his helper set to work, one holding the drill and the other plying the hammer, drilling a hole a little to one side of the spot whence the core had come.

They were no more than well started when Yetmore, remarking that he had forgotten his tobacco, walked back to the cabin to get it—an action to which Joe and I, being interested in the drilling, paid little attention. It was only when Connor, turning to select a fresh drill, asked where he was, that we remembered how long he had been gone.

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“Gone back to the cabin, has he?” remarked Tom. “Well, he’s welcome to stay there as far as I’m concerned.”

The work went on, until presently Tom declared that they had gone deep enough, and while we others cleared away the tools, Connor himself loaded and tamped the hole.

“Now, get out of the way!” cried he; and while we ran off and hid behind convenient trees, Tom struck a match and lighted the fuse. The dull thud of an explosion shortly followed; but on walking back to the spot we were all greatly surprised to see that the rock had remained intact—it was as solid as ever.

“Well, that beats all!” exclaimed Tom. “The thing has shot downward; it must be hollow underneath. We’ll have to put in some short holes and crack it up.”

It did not take long to put in three short holes, and these being charged and tamped, we once more took refuge behind the trees while Tom touched them off. This time there were three sharp explosions, a shower of fragments rattled through the branches above our heads, and on going to inspect the result we found that the rock had been so shattered that it was an easy matter to pry out the pieces with pick and crowbar—a task of which Joe and I did our share.

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At length, the hole being now about three feet deep, Joe, who was working with a crowbar, gave a mighty prod at a loose piece of rock, when, to the astonishment of himself and everybody else, the bottom of the hole fell through, and rock, crowbar and all, disappeared into the cavity beneath.

“Well, what kind of a vein is it, anyhow?” cried Tom, going down upon his knees and peering into the darkness. “Blest if there isn’t a sort of cave down here. Knock out some more, boys, and let me get down. This is the queerest thing I’ve struck in a long time.”

We soon had the hole sufficiently enlarged, when, by means of a rope attached to a tree, Tom slid down into it, and lighting a candle, peered about.

Poor old Tom! The change on his face would have been ludicrous had we not felt so sorry for him, when, looking up at us he said in lugubrious tones: “Done again, boys! Come down and see for yourselves.”

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We quickly slid down the rope, when, our eyes having become accustomed to the light, Tom pointed out to us the extraordinary accident that had caused him to believe he had struck a three-foot vein of galena.

Though there was no sign of such a thing on the surface, it was evident that the place in which we stood had at one time been a narrow, water-worn gully in the mountain-side. Ages ago there had been a landslide, filling the little gully with enormous boulders. That these rocks came from the vein of the Samson higher up the mountain was also pretty certain, for among them was one pear-shaped boulder of galena ore, standing upright, upon the apex of which rested the immense four-foot slab of stone through which Tom had bored his drill-hole. By a chance that was truly marvelous, the drill, after piercing the great slab, had struck the very point of the galena boulder and had gone through it from end to end, so that when the core came up it was no wonder that even Tom, experienced miner though he was, should have been deceived into the belief that he had discovered a three-foot vein of lead-ore.

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As a matter of fact, there was no vein at all—just one single chunk of galena, not worth the trouble of getting it out. Connor’s lead-mine after all had turned out to be only a “pocket edition.”

Tom’s disappointment was naturally extreme, but, as usual, his low spirits were only momentary. We had hardly climbed up out of the hole again when he suddenly burst out laughing.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he went, slapping his leg. “What will Yetmore say? I’m sorry, Phil, that I couldn’t keep my promise to your father, but I’ll own up that as far as Yetmore is concerned I’m rather glad. I don’t like the Honorable Simon, and that’s a fact. What’s he doing down at the cabin all this time, I wonder. Come! Let’s gather up the tools and go down there: there’s nothing more to be done here.”

On arriving at the cabin, Yetmore’s non-appearance was at once explained. Fastened to the table with a fork was a piece of paper, upon which was written in pencil, “Gone to look for the horses.”

Of course, Joe and I at once ran over to the stable. It was empty; all three of the horses were gone.

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“Queer,” remarked Joe. “I feel sure I tied mine securely, but you see halters and all are gone.”

"Yes," I replied. "And I should have relied upon our ponies' staying even if they had not been tied up; you know what good camp horses they are. Let's go out and see which way they went."

We made a cast all round the stable, and presently Joe called out, "Here they are, all three of them." I thought he had found the horses, but it was only their tracks he had discovered, which with much difficulty we followed over the stony ground, until, after half an hour of careful trailing, they led us to the dusty road some distance below camp, where they were plainly visible.

"Our ponies have followed Yetmore's horse," said Joe, after a brief inspection. "Do you see, Phil, they tread in his tracks all the time?"

For the tracks left by our own ponies were easily distinguishable from those of Yetmore's big horse, our animals being unshod.

"What puzzles me though, Joe," said I, "is that there are no marks of the halter-ropes trailing in the dust; and yet they went off with their halters." [Pg 53]

"That's true. I don't understand it. And there's another thing, Phil: Yetmore hasn't got on their trail yet, apparently; see, the marks of his boots don't show anywhere. He must be wandering in the woods still."

"I suppose so. Well, let us go on and see if they haven't stopped to feed somewhere."

We went on for half a mile when we came to a spot where the tracks puzzled us still more. For the first time a man's footmarks appeared. That they were Yetmore's I knew, for I had noticed the pattern of the nails in the soles of his boots as he had sat with his feet resting on a chair the night before. But where had he dropped from so suddenly? We could find no tracks on either side of the road—though certainly the ground was stony and would not take an impression easily—yet here they were all at once right on top of the horses' hoof-prints.

Moreover, his appearance seemed to have been the signal for a new arrangement in the position of the horses, for our ponies had here taken the lead, while Yetmore's horse came treading in their tracks. Moreover, again, twenty yards farther on, the horses had all broken into a gallop. What did it mean? [Pg 54]

"Well, this is a puzzler!" exclaimed Joe, taking off his hat and rumpling his hair, as his habit was in such circumstances. "How do you figure it out, Phil?"

"Why," said I. "I'll tell you what I think. Yetmore has caught sight of the horses strolling down the road and has followed them, keeping away from the road himself for fear they should see him and take alarm. Dodging through the scrub-oak and cutting across corners, he has come near enough to them to speak to his own horse; the horse has stopped and Yetmore has caught him. That was where his tracks first showed in the road. Then he has jumped upon his horse and galloped after our ponies, which appear to have bolted."

"That sounds reasonable," Joe assented; "and in that case he'll head them and drive them back; so we may as well walk up to the cabin again and wait for him."

To this I agreed, and we therefore turned round and retraced our steps.

"There's only one thing about this that I can't understand," remarked Joe, as we trudged up the hill, "and that is about the halters—why they leave no trail. That does beat me." [Pg 55]

"Yes, that is certainly a queer thing; unless they managed to scrape them off against the trees before they took to the road. In that case, though, we ought to have found them; and anyhow it is hard to believe that all three horses should have done the same thing."

We found Tom very busy packing up when we reached the cabin, and on our telling him the result of our horse-hunt he merely nodded, saying, "Well, they'll be back soon, I suppose, and then I'll ride down with you."

"Why, are you going to quit, Tom?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Your father limited me to one more hole, you remember, and if I know him he'll stick to it; and as to working any longer for Yetmore, no thank you; I've had enough of it."

So saying, Tom, who had already cleaned and put away the tools, began tumbling his scanty wardrobe into a gunny-sack, and this being done, he turned to us and said:

"I've got a pony out at pasture about a mile up the valley. I'll go and bring him down; and while I'm gone you might as well pitch in and get dinner ready. You needn't provide for [Pg 56]

Sandy Yates: he's gone off already to see if he can get a job up at the Samson."

Sandy Yates was the helper.

In an hour or less Tom was back and we were seated at dinner, without Yetmore, who had not yet turned up, when the conversation naturally fell upon the subject of the runaway horses. We related to Tom how we had trailed them through the woods down to the road, told him of the sudden appearance of Yetmore's tracks, and how the horses had then set off at a run, followed by Yetmore.

"But the thing I *cannot* understand," said Joe, harking back to the old subject, "is why the halter-ropes don't show in the dust."

"Don't they?" exclaimed Tom, suddenly sitting bolt upright and clapping his knife and fork down upon the table. "Don't they? Just you wait a minute."

With that he jumped up, strode out of the cabin, and went straight across to the stable. In two minutes he was back again, and standing in the doorway, with his hands in his pockets, he said:

"Boys, I've got another surprise for you: Yetmore's saddle's gone!"

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"His saddle gone!" I exclaimed. "Is that why you went to the stable? Did you expect to find it gone?"

"That's just what I did."

"You did! Why?"

Without replying directly, Tom came in, sat down, and leaning his elbows on the table, said, with a quiet chuckle, the meaning of which we could not understand:

"Should you like to know, boys, what Yetmore did when he came down for his tobacco this morning? He went to the stable, saddled his horse, untied your two ponies and led them out. Then he mounted his horse and taking the halter-ropes in his hand he led your ponies by a roundabout way through the woods down to the road. After leading them at a walk along the road for half a mile he dismounted—that was where his tracks showed—and either took off the halters and threw them away, or what is more likely, tied them up around the ponies' necks so that they shouldn't step on them. Then he mounted again and went off at a gallop, driving your ponies ahead of him."

As Tom concluded, he leaned back in his chair, bubbling with suppressed merriment, until the sight of our round-eyed wonder was too much for him and he burst into uproarious laughter, which was so infectious that we could not help joining in, though the cause of it was a perfect mystery to us both.

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At length, when he had laughed himself out, he leaned forward again, and rubbing the tears out of his eyes with the back of his hand, he said:

"Can't you guess, boys, why Yetmore has gone off with your horses?"

I shook my head. "No," said I, "unless he wants to steal them, and he'd hardly do that, I suppose."

"No; anyhow not in such a bare-faced way as that. What he's after is to make you boys walk home."

"Make us walk home!" cried Joe. "What should he want to do that for?"

Tom grinned, and in reply, said: "Yetmore thought that as soon as we uncovered that fine three-foot vein of galena you would be for getting your ponies and galloping off home to tell Mr. Crawford of the great strike, and as he wanted to get there first he stole your ponies—temporarily—to make sure of doing it."

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"But why should he want to get there first?" I asked. "You are talking in riddles, Tom, and we haven't the key."

"No, I know you haven't. You don't know Yetmore. I do. He's gone down to buy your father's share in the claim for next-to-nothing before he hears of the strike!"

The whole thing was plain and clear now; and the hilarity of our friend, Connor, was explained. He had no liking for Yetmore, as we have seen, and it delighted him immeasurably to think of that too astute gentleman rushing off to buy my father's share of a valuable mine, and, if he succeeded, finding himself the owner of a worthless boulder instead.

For myself, I was much puzzled how to act. Naturally, I felt pretty indignant at Yetmore's action, and it seemed to me that if, in trying to cheat my father, he should only succeed in cheating himself, it would be no more than just that he should be allowed to do so. But at the same time I thought that my father ought to be informed of the state of the case as soon as possible—he, not I, was the one to judge—and so, turning to Connor, I asked him to lend me his pony so that I might set off at once.

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"What! And spoil the deal!" cried Connor; and at first he was disposed to refuse. But on consideration, he added: "Well, perhaps you're right. Your father's an honest man, if ever there was one, and I doubt if he'd let even a man like Yetmore cheat himself if he could help it; and so I suppose you must go and tell him the particulars as soon as you can. All I hope is that he will have made his deal before you get there. Yes, you can take the pony."

But it was not necessary to borrow Connor's steed after all, for when we stepped outside the cabin, there were our own ponies coming up the road. The halters were fastened up round their necks, and they showed evident signs of having been run hard some time during the morning. Presumably Yetmore had abandoned them somewhere on the road and they had walked leisurely back.

"Well, boys," said Connor, "we may as well all start together now; but as your ponies have had a good morning's work already, we can't expect to make the whole distance this evening. We'll stop over night at Thornburg's, twenty miles down, and go on again first thing in the morning."

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This we did, and by ten o'clock we reached home, where the first person we encountered was my father.

"Well, Tom," he cried, as the miner slipped down from his horse. "So you made a strike, did you?"

At this Tom opened his eyes pretty widely. "How did you know?" he asked.

"I didn't know," my father replied, smiling, "but I guessed. Does it amount to much?"

"Well, no, I can't say it does," Tom replied, as he covered his mouth with his hand to hide the grin which would come to the surface. "Yetmore's been here, I suppose?" he added, inquiringly.

"Yes, he has," answered my father, surprised in his turn. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just thought he might have, that's all."

"Yes, he was here yesterday afternoon. I sold him my one-third share."

"Did you?" asked Tom, eagerly. "I hope you got a good price."

"Yes, I made a very satisfactory bargain. I traded my share for his thirty acres here, so that now, at last, I own the whole of Crawford's Basin, I'm glad to say."

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"Bully!" cried Tom, clapping his hands together with a report which made his pony shy. "That's great! Tell us about it, Mr. Crawford."

"Why, Yetmore rode in yesterday afternoon, as I told you, on his way to town—he said. But I rather suspected the truth of his statement. He had come in a desperate hurry, for his horse was in a lather, and if he was in such haste to get to town, why did he waste time talking to me, as he did for twenty minutes? But when, just as he was starting off again, he turned back and asked me if I wanted to sell my share in the drill and claim, I knew that that was what he had come about, and I had a strong suspicion that he had heard of a strike of some sort and was trying to get the better of me. So when he asked what I wanted for my share, I said I would take his thirty acres, and in spite of his protestations that I was asking far too much, I stuck to it. The final result was that I rode on with him to town, where we exchanged deeds and the bargain was completed."

"That's great!" exclaimed Connor once more, rubbing his hands. "And now I'll tell you our part of the story."

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When he had finished, my father stood thinking for a minute, and then said: "Well, the deal will have to stand. Yetmore believed we had a three-foot vein of galena, and it is perfectly evident that he meant to get my share out of me at a trifling price before I was aware of its value. It was a shabby trick. If he had dealt squarely with me, I would have offered to give him back his deed, but, as it is, I shan't. The deal will have to stand."

Thus it was that my father became sole owner of Crawford's Basin.

LOST IN THE CLOUDS

The fact that he had lost his little all in the core-boring venture did not trouble Tom Connor in the least; the money was gone, and as worrying about it would not bring it back, Tom decided not to worry. The same thing had happened to him many a time before, for his system of life was to work in the mines until he had accumulated a respectable sum, and then go off prospecting till such time as the imminence of starvation drove him back again to regular work.

It was so in this case; and being known all over the district as a skilful miner, his specialty being timber-work, he very soon got a good job on the Pelican as boss timberman on a section of that important mine.

One effect of Tom's getting work on the Pelican was that he secured for Joe and me an order for lagging—small poles used in the mines to hold up the ore and waste—and our potato-crop being gathered and marketed, my father gave us permission to go off and earn some extra money for ourselves by filling the order which Tom's kindly thoughtfulness had secured for us.

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The place we had chosen as the scene of our operations was on the northern slope of Elkhorn Mountain, which lay next south of Mount Lincoln, and one bright morning in the late fall Joe and I packed our bedding and provisions into a wagon borrowed from my father and set out.

We had chosen this spot, after making a preliminary survey for the purpose, partly because the growth of timber was—as it nearly always is—much thicker on the northern slopes of Elkhorn than on the south side of Lincoln, and also because, being a rather long haul, it had not yet been encroached upon by the timber-cutters of Sulphide.

On a little branch creek of the stream which ran through Sulphide we selected a favorable spot and went to work. It was rather high up, and the country being steep and rocky, we had to make our camp about a mile below our working-ground, snaking out the poles as we cut them. This, of course, was a rather slow process, but it had its compensation in the fact that from the foot of the mountain nearly all the way to Sulphide our course lay across the Second Mesa, which was fairly smooth going, and as it was down hill for the whole distance we could haul a very big load when we did start. In due time we filled our contract and received our pay, after which, by advice of Tom Connor, we branched out on another line of the same business.

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Being unable to get a second contract, and being, in fact, afraid to take one if we could get it on account of the lateness of the season—for the snow might come at any moment and prevent our carrying it out—we consulted Tom, who suggested that we put in the rest of the fine weather cutting big timbers, hauling them to town, and storing them on a vacant lot, or, what would be better, in somebody's back yard.

"For," said he, "though the Pelican and most of the other mines have their supplies for the winter on hand or contracted for, it is always likely they may want a few more stulls or other big timbers than they think. I'll keep you in mind, and if I hear of any such I'll try and make a deal for you, either for the whole stick or cut in lengths to order."

As this seemed like good sense to us, we at once went off to find a storage place, a quest in which we were successful at the first attempt.

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Among my father's customers was the widow Appleby, who conducted a small grocery store on a side street in town. She was accustomed to buy her potatoes from us, and my father, knowing that she had a hard struggle to make both ends meet, had always been very easy with her in the matter of payment, giving her all the time she needed.

This act of consideration had its effect, for, when we went to her and suggested that she rent us her back yard for storage purposes, she readily assented, and not only refused to take any rent, but gave us as well the use of an old stable which stood empty on the back of her lot.

This was very convenient for us, for though a twenty-foot pole, measuring twelve inches at the butt is not the sort of thing that a thief would pick up and run away with, it was less likely that he would attempt it from an enclosed back yard than if the poles were stored in an open lot. Besides this, a stable rent-free for our mules, and a loft above it rent-free for ourselves to sleep in was a great accommodation.

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Returning to the Elkhorn, therefore, we went to work in a new place, a place where some time previously a fire had swept through a strip of the woods, killing the trees, but leaving them standing, stark and bare, but still sound as nuts—just the thing we wanted. Our chief difficulty this time was in getting the felled timbers out from amidst their fellows—for the dead trees were very thick and the mountain-side very steep—but by taking great care we accomplished this without accident. The loading of these big “sticks” would have been an awkward task, too, had we not fortunately found a cut bank alongside of which we ran our wagon, and having snaked the logs into place upon the bank we skidded them across the gap into the wagon without much difficulty.

We had made three loads, and the fine weather still holding, we had gone back for a fourth and last one, when, having got our logs in place on the cut bank all ready to load, Joe and I, after due consultation, decided that we would take a day off and climb up to the saddle which connected the two mountains. We had never been up there before, and we were curious to see what the country was like on the other side.

Knowing that it would be a long and hard climb, we started about sunrise, taking a rifle with us; not that we expected to use it, but because it is not good to be entirely defenseless in those wild, out-of-the-way places. Following at first our little creek, we went on up and up, taking it slowly, until presently the pines began to thin out, the weather-beaten trees, gnarled, twisted and stunted, becoming few and far between, and pretty soon we left even these behind and emerged upon the bare rocks above timber-line. Here, too, we left behind our little creek.

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For another thousand feet we scrambled up the rocks, clambering over great boulders, picking our way along the edges of little precipices, until at last we stood upon the summit of the saddle.

To right and left were the two great peaks, still three thousand feet above us, but westward the view was clear. As far as we could see—and that, I expect, was near two hundred miles—were ranges and masses of mountains, some of them already capped with snow, a magnificent sight.

“That is fine!” cried Joe, enthusiastically. “It’s well worth the trouble of the climb. I only wish we had a map so that we could tell which range is which.”

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“Yes, it’s a great sight,” said I. “And the view eastward is about as fine, I think. Look! That cloud of smoke, due east about ten miles away, comes from the smelters of San Remo, and that other smoke a little to the left of it is where the coal-mines are. There’s the ranch, too, that green spot in the mesa; you wouldn’t think it was nearly a mile square, would you?”

“That’s Sulphide down there, of course,” remarked Joe, pointing off towards the right. “But what are those other, smaller, clouds of smoke?”

“Those are three other little mining-camps, all tributary to the smelters at San Remo, and all producing refractory ores like the mines of Sulphide. My! Joe!” I exclaimed, as my thoughts reverted to Tom Connor and his late core-boring failure. “What a great thing a good vein of lead ore would be! Better than a gold mine!”

“I expect it would. Poor old Tom! He bears his disappointment pretty well, doesn’t he?”

“He certainly does. He says, now, that he’s going to stick to straightforward mining and leave prospecting alone; but he’s said that every year for the past ten years at least, and if there’s anything certain about Tom it is that when spring comes and he finds himself once more with money in his pocket, he’ll be off again hunting for his lead-mine.”

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“Sure to. Well, Phil, let’s sit down somewhere and eat our lunch. We mustn’t stay here too long.”

“All right. Here’s a good place behind this big rock. It will shelter us from the east wind, which has a decided edge to it up here.”

For half an hour we sat comfortably in the sun eating our lunch, all around us space and silence, when Joe, rising to his feet, gave vent to a soft whistle.

“Phil,” said he, “we must be off. No time to waste. Look eastward.”

I jumped up. A wonderful change had taken place. The view of the plains was completely cut off by masses of soft cloud, which, coming from the east, struck the mountain-side about two thousand feet below us and were swiftly and softly drifting up to where we stood.

“Yes, we must be off,” said I. “It won’t do to be caught up here in the clouds: it would be dangerous getting down over the rocks. And besides that, it might turn cold and come on to snow. Let us be off at once.”

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It was fortunate we did so, for, though we traveled as fast as we dared, the cloud, coming at first in thin whisps and then in dense masses, enveloped us before we reached timber-line, and the difficulty we experienced in covering the small intervening space showed us how risky it would have been had the cloud caught us while we were still on the summit of the ridge.

As it was, we lost our bearings immediately, for the chilly mist filled all the spaces between the trees, so that we could not see more than twenty yards in any direction. As to our proper course, we could tell nothing about it, so that the only thing left for us to do was to keep on going down hill. We expected every moment to see or hear our little creek, but we must have missed it somehow, for, though we ought to have reached it long before, we had been picking our way over loose rocks and fallen trees for two hours before we came upon a stream—whether the right or the wrong one we could not tell. Right or wrong, however, we were glad to see it, for by following it we should sooner or later reach the foot of the mountain and get below the cloud.

But to follow it was by no means easy: the country was so unexpectedly rough—a fact which convinced us that we had struck the wrong creek. As we progressed, we presently found ourselves upon the edge of a little cañon which, being too steep to descend, obliged us to diverge to the left, and not only so, but compelled us to go up hill to get around it, which did not suit us at all. [Pg 73]

After a time, however, we began to go down once more, but though we kept edging to the right we could not find our creek again. The fog, too, had become more dense than ever, and whether our faces were turned north, south or east we had no idea.

We were going on side by side, when suddenly we were astonished to hear a dog bark, somewhere close by; but though we shouted and whistled there was no reply.

"It must be a prospector's dog," said Joe, "and the man himself must be underground and can't hear us."

"Perhaps that's it," I replied. "Well, let's take the direction of the sound—if we can. It seemed to me to be that way," pointing with my hand. "I wish the dog would bark again."

The dog, however, did not bark again, but instead there happened another surprising thing. We were walking near together, carefully picking our way, when suddenly a big raven, coming from we knew not where, flew between us, so close that we felt the flap of his wings and heard their soft *fluff-fluff* in the moisture-laden air, and disappeared again into the fog before us with a single croak. [Pg 74]

It was rather startling, but beyond that we thought nothing of it, and on we went again, until Joe stopped short, exclaiming:

"Phil, I smell smoke!"

I stopped, too, and gave a sniff. "So do I," I said; "and there's something queer about it. It isn't plain wood-smoke. What is it?"

"Sulphur," replied Joe.

"Sulphur! So it is. What can any one be burning sulphur up here for? Anyhow, sulphur or no sulphur, some one must have lighted the fire, so let us follow the smoke."

We had not gone far when we perceived the light of a fire glowing redly through the fog, and hurried on, expecting to find some man beside it.

But not only was there nobody about, which was surprising enough, but the fire itself was something to arouse our curiosity. Beneath a large, flat stone, supported at the corners by four other stones, was a hot bed of "coals," while upon the stone itself was spread a thin layer of black sand. It was from these grains of sand, apparently, that the smell of sulphur came; though what they were or why they should be there we could not guess. [Pg 75]

We were standing there, wondering, when, suddenly, close behind us, the dog barked again. Round we whirled. There was no dog there! Instead, perched upon the stump of a dead tree, sat a big black raven, who eyed us as though enjoying our bewilderment. Bewildered we certainly were, and still more so when the bird, after staring us out of countenance for a few seconds, cocked his head on one side and said in a hoarse voice:

"Gim'me a chew of tobacco!"

And then, throwing back his head, he produced such a perfect imitation of the howl of a coyote, that a real coyote, somewhere up on the mountain, howled in reply.

All this—the talking raven, the mysterious fire, the encompassing shroud of fog—made us wonder whether we were awake or asleep, when we were still more startled by a voice behind us saying, genially:

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“Good-evening, boys.”

Round we whirled once more, to find standing beside us a man, a tall, bony, bearded man, about fifty years old, carrying in his hand a long, old-fashioned muzzle-loading rifle. He was dressed all in buckskin, while the moccasins on his feet explained how it was he had been able to slip up on us so silently.

Naturally, we were somewhat taken aback by the sudden appearance of this wild-looking specimen of humanity, when, thinking that he had alarmed us, perhaps, the man asked, pleasantly: “Lost, boys?”

“Yes,” I replied, reassured by his kindly manner. “We have been up to the saddle and got caught in the clouds. We don’t know where we are. We are trying to get back to our camp on a branch of Sulphide creek.”

“Ah! You are the two boys I’ve seen cutting timbers down there, are you? Well, your troubles are over: I can put you on the road to your camp in an hour or so; I know every foot of these mountains.”

“But come in,” he continued. “I suppose you are hungry, and a little something to eat won’t be amiss.”

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When the man said, “Come in,” we naturally glanced about us to see where his house was, but none being visible we concluded it must be some distance off in the mist. In this, however, we were mistaken. The side of the mountain just here was covered with enormous rocks—a whole cliff must have tumbled down at once—and between two of these our guide led the way. In a few steps the passage widened out, when we saw before us, neatly fitted in between three of these immense blocks of stone—one on either side and one behind—a little log cabin, with chimney, door and window all complete; while just to one side was another, a smaller one, which was doubtless a storehouse. Past his front door ran a small stream of water which evidently fell from a cliff near by, for, though we could not see the waterfall we could hear it plainly enough.

“Well!” I exclaimed. “Whoever would have thought there was a house in here?”

“No one, I expect,” replied the man. “At any rate, with one exception, you are the first strangers to cross the threshold; and yet I have lived here a good many years, too. Come in and make yourselves at home.”

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Though we wondered greatly who our host could be and were burning to ask him his name, there was something in his manner which warned us to hold our tongues. But whatever his name might be, there was little doubt about his occupation. He was evidently a mighty hunter, for, covering the walls, the floor and his sleeping-place were skins innumerable, including foxes, wolves and bears, some of the last-named being of remarkable size; while one magnificent elk-head and several heads of mountain-sheep adorned the space over his fireplace.

Our host having lighted a fire, was busying himself preparing a simple meal for us, when there came a gentle cough from the direction of the doorway, and there on the threshold stood the raven as though waiting for permission to enter.

The man turned, and seeing the bird standing there with its head on one side, said, laughingly: “Ah, Sox, is that you? Come in, old fellow, and be introduced. These gentlemen are friends of mine. Say ‘Good-morning.’”



“AH, SOX, IS THAT YOU?”

“Good-morning,” repeated the raven; and having thus displayed his good manners, he half-opened his wings and danced a solemn jig up and down the floor, finally throwing back his head and laughing so heartily that we could not help joining in.

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“Clever fellow, isn’t he?” said the man. “His proper name is Socrates, though I call him Sox, for short. He is supposed to be getting on for a hundred years old, though as far as I can see he is just as young as he was when I first got him, twenty years ago. Here,”—handing us each a piece of meat—“give him these and he will accept you as friends for life.”

Whether he accepted us as friends remained to be seen, but he certainly accepted our offerings, bolting each piece at a single gulp; after which he hopped up on to a peg driven into the wall, evidently his own private perch, and announced in a self-satisfied tone: “First in war, first in peace,” ending up with a modest cough, as though he would have us believe that he knew the rest well enough but was not going to trouble us with any such threadbare quotation.

This solemn display of learning set us laughing again, upon which Socrates, seemingly offended, sank his head between his shoulders and pretended to go to sleep; though, that it was only pretense was evident, for, do what he would, he could not refrain from occasionally opening one eye to see what was going on.

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Having presently finished the meal provided for us, we suggested that we ought to be moving on, so, bidding adieu to Socrates, and receiving no response from that sulky philosopher, we followed our host into the open.

That he had not exaggerated when he said he knew every foot of these mountains, seemed to be borne out by the facts. He went straight away, regardless of the fog, up hill and down, without an instant’s hesitation, we trotting at his heels, until, in about an hour we found ourselves once more below the clouds, and could see not far away our two mules quietly feeding.

“Now,” said our guide, “I’ll leave you. If ever you come my way again I shall be glad to see you; though I expect it would puzzle you to find my dwelling unless you should come upon it by accident. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” we repeated, “and many thanks for your kindness. If we can do anything in return at any time we shall be glad of the chance. We live in Crawford’s Basin.”

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“Oh, do you?” said our friend. “You are Mr. Crawford’s boys, then, are you? Well, many thanks. I’ll remember. And now, good-bye to you.”

With that, this strange man turned round and walked up into the clouds again. In two minutes he had vanished.

"Well, that was a queer adventure," remarked Joe. "I wonder who he is, and why he chooses to live all by himself like that."

"Yes. It's a miserable sort of existence for such a man; for he seems like a sociable, good-hearted fellow. It isn't every one, for instance, who would walk three or four miles over these rough mountains just to help a couple of boys, whom he never saw before and may never see again. I wish we could make him some return."

"Well, perhaps we may, some day," Joe replied.

Whether we did or not will be seen later.

CHAPTER V

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WHAT WE FOUND IN THE POOL

Though we got back to camp pretty late, we set to work to load our poles at once, fearing that there was going to be a fall of snow which might prevent our getting them to town. This turned out to be a wise precaution, for when we started in the morning the snow was already coming down, and though it did not extend as far as Sulphide, the mountains were covered a foot deep before night.

This fall of snow proved to be much to our advantage, for one of the timber contractors, fearing he might not be able to fill his order, bought our "sticks" from us, to be delivered, cut into certain lengths, at the Senator mine.

This occupied us several days, when, having delivered our last load, we thanked Mrs. Appleby for the use of her back yard—the only payment she would accept—and then set off home, where we proudly displayed to my father and mother the money we had earned and related how we had earned it; including, of course, a description of our meeting with the wild man of the woods.

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"And didn't he tell you who he was?" asked my father, when we had finished.

"No," I replied; "we were afraid to ask him, and he didn't volunteer any information."

"And you didn't guess who he was?"

"No. Why should we? Who is he?"

"Why, Peter the Hermit, of course. I should have thought the presence of the raven would have enlightened you: he is always described as going about in company with a raven."

"So he is. I'd forgotten that. But, on the other hand he is always described also as being half crazy, and certainly there was no sign of such a thing about him that we could see. Was there, Joe?"

"No. Nobody could have acted more sensibly. Who is he, Mr. Crawford? And why does he live all by himself like that?"

"I know nothing about him beyond common report. I suppose his name is Peter—though it may not be—and because he chooses to lead a secluded life, some genius has dubbed him 'Peter the Hermit'; though who he really is, or why he lives all alone, or where he comes from, I can't say. Some people say he is crazy, and some people say he is an escaped criminal—but then people will say anything, particularly when they know nothing about it. Judging from the reports of the two or three men who have met him, however, he appears to be quite inoffensive, and evidently he is a friendly-disposed fellow from your description of him. If you should come across him again you might invite him to come down and see us. I don't suppose he will, but you might ask him, anyhow."

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"All right," said I. "We will if we get the chance." And so the matter ended.

It was just as well that we returned to the ranch when we did, for we found plenty of work ready to our hands, the first thing being the hauling of fire-wood for the year. To procure this, it was not necessary for us to go to the mountains: our supply was much nearer to hand. The whole region round about us had been at some remote period the scene of vigorous volcanic action. Both the First and Second Mesas were formed by a series of lava-flows which had come down from Mount Lincoln, and ending abruptly about eight miles from the mountains, had built up the cliff which bounded the First Mesa on its eastern side. Then, later, but still in a remote age, a great strip of this lava-bed, a mile wide and ten or

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twelve miles long, north and south, had broken away and subsided from the general level, forming what the geologists call, I believe, a "fault," thus causing the "step-up" to the Second Mesa. The Second Mesa, because the lava had been hotter perhaps, was distinguished from the lower level by the presence of a number of little hills—"bubbles," they were called, locally, and solidified bubbles of hot lava perhaps they were. They were all sorts of sizes, from fifty to four hundred feet high and from a hundred yards to half a mile in diameter. Viewed from a distance, they looked smooth and even, like inverted bowls, though when you came near them you found that their sides were rough and broken. I had been to the top of a good many of them, and all of those I had explored I had found to be depressed in the centre like little craters. From some of them tiny streams of water ran down, helping to swell the volume of our creek.

Most of these so-called "bubbles," especially the larger ones, were well covered with pine-trees, and as there were three or four of them within easy reach of the ranch, it was here that we used to get our fire-wood.

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There was a good week's work in this, and after it was finished there was more or less repairing of fences to be done, as there always is in the fall, and the usual mending of sheds, stables and corrals.

The weather by this time had turned cold, and "the bottomless forty rods" having been frozen solid enough to bear a load, Joe and I were next put to work hauling oats down to the livery stable men in San Remo, as well as up to Sulphide.

Before this task was accomplished the winter had set in in earnest. We had had one or two falls of snow, though in our sheltered Basin the heat of the sun was still sufficient to clear off most of it again, and the frost had been sharp enough to freeze up our creek at its sources, so that our little waterfall was now converted into a motionless icicle. Fortunately, we were not dependent upon the creek for the household supply of water: we had one pump which never failed in the back kitchen and another one down by the stables.

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The creek having ceased to run, the surface of the pool was no longer agitated by the water pouring into it, and very soon it was solidly frozen over with a sheet of ice twelve inches thick, when, according to our yearly custom, we proceeded to cut this ice and stow it away in the ice-house; having previously been up to the sawmill near Sulphide and brought away, for packing purposes, several wagon-loads of sawdust, which the sawmill men readily gave us for nothing, being glad to have it hauled out of their way. We had taken the opportunity to do this when we took our loads of oats up to Sulphide, thus utilizing the empty wagons on the return trip.

The pool, as I have said, measured about a hundred feet each way, though on account of its shallowness around the edges we could only cut ice over a surface about fifty feet square. Being frozen a foot thick, however, this gave us an ample supply for all our needs.

The labor of cutting, hauling and housing the ice fell to Joe and me, my father having generally plenty of other work to do. He had taken in a number of young cattle for a neighboring cattleman for the winter, and having sold him the bulk of our hay crop and at the same time undertaken to feed the stock, this daily duty alone took up a large part of his time. Besides this, "the forty rods" having become passable, the freighters and others now came our way instead of taking the longer hill-road, and their frequent demands for a sack, or a load, of oats, and now and then for hay or potatoes, added to the work of stock-feeding, kept my father pretty well occupied.

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Joe and I, therefore, went to work by ourselves, beginning operations on that part of the pool nearest the point where the water used to pour in. We had taken out ten or a dozen loads of beautiful, clear ice, when, one day, Yetmore, who was riding down to San Remo, seeing us at work, stopped to watch us.

He was a queer fellow. Though he must have been perfectly well aware that we distrusted him; and though, after the late affair of the lead-boulder—a miscarriage of his schemes which was doubtless extremely galling to him—one would think he would have rather avoided us than not, he appeared to feel no embarrassment whatever, but with a greeting of well-simulated cordiality he dismounted and walked over to the pool to see what we were doing. Perhaps—and this, I think, is probably the right explanation—if he did entertain the idea of some day "getting even" with us, he had decided to postpone any such attempt until he saw an opportunity of doing so at a profit.

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"Fine lot of ice," he remarked, after standing for a moment watching Joe as he plied the saw. "Does this creek always freeze up like this?"

"Yes," I replied. "It heads in Mount Lincoln, and is made up of a number of small streams which always freeze up about the first of November. That reduces the flow to about one-

third its usual size; and when the little streams which come down from three or four of the 'bubbles' freeze up too, the creek stops entirely; which makes it mighty convenient for us to cut ice, as you see."

"I see. Is the pool the same depth all over?"

"No," I answered. "Just here, under the fall, it is deepest, but round the edges it is so shallow that we can't take a stroke with the saw, the sand comes so close up to the ice. In fact, in some places, the ice rests right upon the sand."

"How deep is it here?"

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"Four or five feet, I think. Try it, Joe."

Joe, who had just laid down the saw and had taken up the long ice-hook we used for drawing the blocks of ice within reach, lowered the hook, point downward, into the water. Then, pulling it out again, he stood it up beside him, finding that the wet mark on the staff came up to his chin.

"Five feet and three or four inches," said he.

"Is the bottom solid or sandy?" asked Yetmore.

"I didn't notice. I'll try it."

With that Joe lowered the pole once more.

"Seems solid," he remarked, giving two or three hard prods. But he had scarcely said so, when, to our surprise, several bits of rough ice about as big as my hand bobbed up from the bottom.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Yetmore. "Ground ice!"

"What's ground ice?" I asked.

"Why, ice formed at the bottom of the pool. It is not uncommon, I believe, though I don't remember to have seen any before. Pretty dirty stuff, isn't it? Must be a sandy bottom."

So saying, he stooped down, and picking up the only bit of ice which happened to be within reach, he examined its under side. As he did so, I saw him give a little start, as though there were something about it to cause him surprise, but just as I reached out my hand to ask him to let me see it, he threw it back into the water out of reach—an action which struck me as being hardly polite.

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"I must be off," said he, in apparent haste, "so, good-bye. Hope you will get your crop in before it snows. Looks threatening to me; you'll have to hurry, I think."

This prediction seemed to me rather absurd, with the thermometer at zero and the sky as clear as crystal; but Yetmore was an indoor man and could not be expected to judge as can one whose daily work depends so much upon what the weather is doing or is going to do. It did not occur to me then—though it did later—that he only wanted us to get to work again at once, and so divert our minds from the subject of the ground ice.

As I made no comment on his remark, Yetmore walked away, remounted his horse and rode off; while Joe and I went briskly to work again.

We had been at it some time, when Joe stopped sawing, and straightening up, said:

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"It's queer about those bits of ground ice, Phil. Do you notice how they all float clean side up? Wait a bit and I'll show you."

Taking the ice-hook, he turned over one of the bits with its point, showing its soiled side, but the moment he released it, the bit of ice "turned turtle" again.

"Do you see?" said he. "The sand acts like ballast. It must be heavy stuff."

"Yes," said I. "Hook a bit of it out and let's look at it."

This was soon done, when, on examining it, we found the under side to be crusted with very black sand, which, whatever might be its nature, was evidently heavy enough to upset the balance of a small fragment of ice.

"What is it made of, I wonder?" said Joe.

"I don't know," I replied, "but perhaps it is that black sand which the prospectors are always complaining of as getting in their way when they are panning for gold."

"That's what it is, Phil, I expect," cried Joe. "And what's more, that's what Yetmore thought, too, or else why should he throw that bit of ice back into the water so quickly when you held out your hand for it? He didn't want you to see it."

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"It does look like it," I assented. "Poke up a few more, Joe, and we will take them home and show them to my father: perhaps he'll know what the stuff is."

Joe took the ice-hook and prodded about on the bottom, every prod bringing up one or two bits of ice, each one as it bobbed to the surface showing its sandy side for a moment and then turning over, clean side up. Drawing these to the edge of the ice, we picked them out, laying them on a gunny-sack we had with us, and when, towards sunset, we had carried home and housed our last load, and had stabled and fed the mules, we took our scraps over to the blacksmith-shop, where the tinkle of a hammer proclaimed that my father was at work doing some mending of something.

He was much interested in hearing of the ground ice and of the way it brought up the black sand with it, and still more so in our description of Yetmore's action.

"Let me look at it," said he; and taking one of our specimens, he stepped to the door to examine it, the light in the shop being too dim. He came back smiling.

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"Queer fellow, Yetmore!" said he. "One would think that the lesson of the lead-boulder might have taught him that a man may sometimes be too crafty. I think this is likely to prove another case of the same kind. I believe he has made a genuine discovery here—though what it may lead to there is no telling—and if he had had the sense to let you look at that piece of dirty ice, instead of throwing it back into the water, thus arousing your curiosity, he would probably have kept his discovery to himself. As it is, he is likely to have Tom Connor interfering with him again—that is to say, if this sand is what I think it is. I don't think it is the 'black sand' of the prospectors—it is too shiny, and it has a bluish tinge besides—I think it is something of far more value. We'll soon find out. Give me that piece of an iron pot, Phil; it will do to melt the ice in."

Having broken up some of our ice into small pieces, we placed it in a large fragment of a broken iron pot, and this being set upon the forge, Joe took the bellows-handle and soon had the fire roaring under it. It did not take long to melt the ice, when, pouring off the water, we added some more, repeating the process until there was no ice left. The last of the water being then poured away, there remained nothing but about a spoonful of very fine, black, shiny sand.

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The receptacle was once more placed upon the fire, and while my father kept the contents stirred up with a stick, Joe seized the bellows-handle again and pumped away. Presently he began to cough.

"What's the matter, Joe?" asked my father, laughing.

"Sulphur!" gasped Joe.

"Sulphur!" cried I. "I don't smell any sulphur."

"Come over here, then, and blow the bellows," replied Joe.

I took his place, but no sooner had I done so than I, too, began to cough. The smell of sulphur evidently came from our spoonful of sand, and as I was standing between the door and the window the draft blew the fumes straight into my face. On discovering this, I pulled the bellows-handle over to one side, when I was no more troubled.

The iron pot, being set right down on the "duck's nest" and heaped all around with glowing coals, had become red-hot, when my father, peering into it, held up his hand.

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"That'll do, Phil. That's enough," he cried. "Give me the tongs, Joe."

My father removed the melting-pot, and making a hole with his heel in the sandy floor of the shop, he poured the contents into it.

"Lead!" we both cried, with one voice.

"Yes, lead," my father replied. "Galena ore, ground fine by the action of water."

"Do you mean," I asked, "that there is a lead-mine in the bottom of the pool?"

"No, no. But there is a vein of galena, size and value unknown, somewhere up on Lincoln Mountain. The fine black sand sticking to the ground ice was brought down by our stream, being reduced to powder on the way, and deposited in the pool, where its weight has kept it from being washed out again."

"I see. And do you suppose Yetmore recognized the sand as galena ore? Would he be likely to know it in the form of sand?"

"I expect so. He's a sharp fellow enough. He must have seen pulverized samples of galena many a time in the assayers' offices. I've seen them myself: that was what gave me my clue." [Pg 97]

"And what do you suppose he'll do?"

"He is pretty certain, I think, to try to get hold of some of the stuff, so that he may test it and make sure; though how he will go about it there's no telling. It will be interesting to see how he manages it."

"And what shall you do, father? Go prospecting?"

My father laughed, knowing that this was a joke on my part; for I was well aware that he would not think of such a thing.

"Not for us, Phil," he answered. "We have our mine right here. Raising oats and potatoes may be a slow way of getting rich, but it is a good bit surer than prospecting. No, we'll tell Tom Connor about it and let him go prospecting if he likes. You shall go up to Sulphide the first Saturday after the ice-cutting is finished and give him our information. There's no hurry about it: he can't go prospecting while the mountains are all under snow. Come along in to supper now. You've fed the mules, I suppose."

It was a snapping cold night that night, and about half-past eight I went into the kitchen to look at the thermometer which hung outside the door. As I came back, I happened to glance out of the west window, when, to my surprise, I thought I saw a glimmer of light up by the pool. Stepping quickly into the house again, I went to the front door and looked out. Yes, there was a light up there! [Pg 98]

"Father," I called out, "there's somebody up at the pool with a light."

My father sprang out of his chair. "Is there?" he cried. "Then it's Yetmore, up to some of his tricks. Get into your coats, boys, and let's go and see what he's about."

As we went out I took down the unlighted stable-lantern and carried it with me in case we might need it, and shutting the door softly behind me, ran after the others. We had not covered half the distance to the pool, however, when the light up there suddenly went out, and a minute later we heard the sound of galloping hoofs, muffled by the thin carpet of snow, going off in the direction of Sulphide. Our visitor, whoever he was, had departed.

"Well, come on, anyhow," said my father. "Let us see what he was doing." [Pg 99]

As the thermometer was then standing at three degrees below zero, we knew that the sheet of clear water we had left in the afternoon should have been solidly frozen over again by this time. What was our surprise, therefore, to find that such was not the case: there was only a thin film of ice; it was but just beginning to form.

"That is easily explained," remarked my father. "The ice did form, but some one has chopped it out and thrown it to one side there. See?"

"Yes," replied Joe, "and then he took the ice-hook, which I know I left standing upright against the rocks, and poked up the ground ice. See, there are several bits floating about, and I remember quite well that we cleared out every one of them this afternoon. Didn't we, Phil?"

"Yes," said I, "I'm sure we did, because I remember that those two or three bits that had no sand in them we threw into that corner instead of pitching them into the water again. I suppose it's Yetmore, father."

"Oh, not a doubt of it. Did he leave any tracks?" [Pg 100]

By the light of the lantern we searched about, and though there were no tracks to be seen on the smooth ice, there were plenty in the snow below the pool. They were the foot-prints of a smallish man, for his tracks, in spite of his wearing over-shoes, were not so big as the prints made by Joe's boots—though, as Joe himself remarked, that was not much to go by, he being a six-footer with feet to match, "and a trifle over," as his friends sometimes considerably assured him.

Following these foot-prints, we were led to the south gate, where, it was easy to see, a horse had been standing for some time tied to the gate-post.

"Well, he's got off with his samples all right," remarked my father. "He's a smart fellow, and enterprising, too. He would deserve to win, if only he were not so fond of taking the

crooked way of doing things. Come along. Let's get back to the house. There's nothing more to be done about it at present."

CHAPTER VI

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LONG JOHN BUTTERFIELD

"Boys," said my father next morning, "I've been thinking over this discovery of ours. It won't do to wait till you've finished the ice-cutting to notify Tom Connor. He has been a good friend to us, and I feel that we owe him some return for enabling me to get this piece of land from Yetmore, even though it was, in a manner, accidental; and as Tom is sure to go off prospecting in the spring, whether or no, we may as well give him the chance—if he wants it—to go hunting for this supposed vein of galena."

"He's pretty sure to want to," said I.

"Yes, I think he is. And as Yetmore will certainly find out the nature of the black sand, and will be sending out a prospector or two himself as soon as the snow clears off, we must at least give Tom an equal chance. So, instead of waiting for you to finish cutting the ice, I'll write him a letter at once, telling him all about it, and send it up by this morning's coach."

One of the advantages to us of the frosty weather was that the mail coach between San Remo and Sulphide came our way instead of taking the hill-road, so that during the winter months we received our mail daily, whereas, through the greater part of the year, while the "forty rods" were "bottomless," we had to go ourselves to San Remo to get it. The coach, going up, passed our place about ten in the morning, and by it my father sent the promised letter.

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We quite expected that Tom would come flying down at once, but instead we received from him next morning a reply, stating that he could not leave his work, and asking my father to allow us boys to do a little prospecting for him—which, I may say, we boys were ready enough to do if my father did not object.

He did not object; being, indeed, very willing that we should put in a day's work for the benefit of our friend. For, as he said, to undertake one day's prospecting for a friend was a very different matter from taking to prospecting as a business.

It is a fascinating pursuit; men who contract the prospecting disease seldom get the fever entirely out of their systems again, and it was for this reason my father was so set against it, considering that no greater misfortune could befall two farmer-boys like ourselves than to be drawn into such a way of life. Now that we were seventeen years old, however, and might be supposed to have some discretion, he had little fear for Joe and me, knowing, as he did, that we shared his sentiments. We had seen enough of the life of the prospector to understand that a more precarious way of making a living could hardly be invented.

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How many men get rich at it? I have heard it estimated at one man in five thousand; and whether this estimate—or, rather, this guess—is right or wrong, it shows the trend of opinion.

Suppose a prospector does strike a vein of ore: what is the common result? By the time he has sunk a shaft ten feet deep he must have a windlass and a man to work it, and being in most cases too poor to hire a miner, his only way of getting help is to take in a partner. The two go on sinking, until presently the hole is too deep to use a windlass any more—a horse-whim is needed and then a hoisting engine. But it is seldom that the ore dug out of a shaft will pay the expense of sinking it—for powder and drills, ropes, buckets and timbers, are expensive things—much less enable the owner to lay by anything, and the probability is that to buy a hoisting engine he must sell another portion of his claim. And so it goes, until, by the time his claim has been turned into a mine—for, as the common and very true saying is, "Mines are made, not found"—his share of it will probably have been reduced to one-quarter or less; while it is quite within the limits of probability that, becoming wearied by long waiting for the slow development of his prospect, he will have sold out for what he can get and gone back to his old life.

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But though I do not advocate the business of prospecting as a way of making a living—I had rather pitch hay or dig potatoes myself—I am far from wishing to disparage the prospector himself or to belittle the results of his work. He is the pioneer of civilization; and personally he is generally a fine fellow. At the same time, as in every other profession, the ranks of the prospectors include their share of the riff-raff. It was so in our district, and we were

destined shortly to come in contact with one of them.

Tom Connor in his letter instructed us as to what he wished us to do: it was very simple. He asked us to walk up the little cañon along which our stream flowed, when it did flow, and to examine the bed of each of its feeders as we came to them, to determine, if possible, which of the branch streams it was that brought down the powdered lead-ore. He also suggested that we get out some more of the black sand from the bottom of the pool for him to see, and at the same time ascertain, if we could, how much of a deposit there was there.

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The last request we performed first. Taking down to the pool a long, pointed iron rod, we lowered it into the water, marking the depth by tying a bit of string round the rod at high-water-mark, and then bored a hole down through the frozen sand until we struck bed-rock. By this means we discovered that the deposit was five inches thick at the upper end of the pool. A few feet further from the waterfall, however, the deposit was thicker, but we noticed at the same time that the ground ice which came up carried with it more or less yellow sand. The further we retreated from the waterfall, too, the larger became the proportion of yellow sand, until towards the edge of the pool it had taken the place of the black sand altogether.

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Having done this, we poked up a lot of the ground ice, which we collected and put into a tin bucket, and taking this home we melted the ice, poured off the water, and made a little parcel of the sand that remained.

A few days later we had finished our ice-cutting and had stowed away the crop in the ice-house, when we were at length free to go off and make the little prospecting expedition that Tom had asked us to undertake.

First walking up the bed of the cañon, where the water was now represented by sheets of crackling white ice, we arrived presently at the first branch creek which came in on the right. This we ascended in turn, going some distance up it before we found a likely patch of sand, into which we chopped a hole with the old hatchet we had brought for the purpose, disclosing a little of the black material at the bottom; though the amount was so scanty that we could not be sure it was really the black sand we were seeking.

Going on up this branch creek, much impeded by the snow which became deeper and deeper the higher we ascended, we were nearing one of the bends when Joe, who was in advance, suddenly stopped, exclaiming:

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"Look there, Phil! Tracks coming down the bank. Somebody is ahead of us."

"So there is," said I. "What can he be doing, I wonder?"

Following these tracks a short distance, we very soon discovered the reason for their being there. The man was on the same quest as ourselves!

In a bend of the stream where the snow lay two feet thick, he had dug a hole down to the sand, and then through the sand itself to bed-rock. At the bottom of the hole was a little black sand, showing the marks of a hatchet or knife-blade where it had been gouged out, but all around the hole, between the bed-rock and the yellow sand above, was a black line an inch thick, composed of the shiny, powdered galena ore. There could be no doubt that the man ahead of us was hunting the same game as we were.

"Do you suppose it's Yetmore, Joe?" said I.

"No," Joe answered, emphatically, "I'm sure it isn't. Look at his tracks: they are bigger than mine."

"It can't be Tom, himself, can it?"

"No, I'm pretty sure it isn't Tom either. Tom is a big, powerful fellow, all right, but he's not more than five feet ten, while this man, I think, is extra-tall—see the length of his stride where he came down the bank. Whoever he is, though, Phil, he's an experienced prospector. He hasn't wasted his time, as we have, trying unlikely places, but has chosen this spot and gone slap down through snow and everything, just as if he knew that the black sand would be found at the bottom."

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"That's true," said I. "I wonder who it is. We must find out if we can, Joe, so that we may be able to tell Tom who his competitor is. Let's follow his tracks."

Getting out of the creek-bed again, we walked along the bank for nearly a mile, until Joe, stopping short, held up his finger.

"Hark!" he whispered. "Somebody chopping."

There was a sound as of metal being struck against stone somewhere ahead of us, so on we went again, making as little noise as possible, until presently Joe stopped again, and pointing forward, said softly, "There he is, look!"

The man was down in the creek-bed again, and all we could see of him above the bank was his hat. We therefore went forward once more, timing our steps by the blows of the hatchet, until we could see the man's head and shoulders; but we did not gain much by that, as he had his back to us and was too intent upon his work to turn round. At length, however, he ceased chopping, and gathering the chips of frozen sand in his hands, he cast them to one side. In doing so, he showed his face for a moment, and in that brief glimpse I recognized who it was.

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Joe looked at me with raised eyebrows, as much as to say, "Do you know him?" to which I replied with a nod, and laying my hand on my companion's arm, I drew him back until only the top of the man's hat was visible again, when I whispered, "It's Long John Butterfield."

"What! The man they call 'The Yellow Pup'? How do you suppose *he* came to hear of the black sand?"

"From Yetmore. He is a prospector whom Yetmore grub-stakes every summer."

"'Grub-stakes,'" repeated Joe, inquiringly.

"Yes. Some prospectors go out on their own account, you know, but some of them are 'grub-staked.' This man is employed by Yetmore. He sends him out prospecting every spring, providing him with tools and 'grub' and paying him some small wages. Whether it is part of the bargain that Long John is to get any share of what he may find, I don't know, but probably it is—that is the general rule. There is very little doubt that Yetmore has sent him out now, just as Tom has sent us out, to see which stream the lead-ore in the pool came from."

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"Not a doubt of it. Well, shall we go ahead and speak to him?"

Before I could reply, the man himself rose up, looked about him, and at once espied us. At seeing us standing there silently watching him, he gave a not-unnatural start of alarm, but perceiving that he had only two boys to deal with, even if we were pretty big, he climbed up the bank and advanced towards us with a threatening air.

Standing six feet five inches in his over-shoes, he was a rather formidable-looking object as he came striding down upon us, a shovel in one hand and a hatchet in the other; but as we knew him by reputation for a blusterer and a coward, we awaited his coming without any alarm for our safety.

Long John Butterfield was a well-known character in Sulphide. Though a prospector all summer, he was a bar-room loafer all winter, spending his time hanging around the saloons, and doing only work enough in the way of odd jobs to keep himself from starving until spring came round again, when Yetmore would provide for him once more.

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It had formerly been his ambition to pass for a "bad man," though he found it difficult to maintain that reputation among the unbelieving citizens of Sulphide, who knew that he valued his own skin far too highly to risk it seriously. He had been wont to call himself "The Wolf," desiring to be known by that title as sounding sufficiently fierce and "bad," and being of a most unprepossessing appearance, with his matted hair, retreating forehead, long, sharp nose and projecting ears, he did represent a wolf pretty well—though, still better, a coyote.

As the people of Sulphide, however, declined to take him at his own valuation, greeting his frequent outbreaks of simulated ferocity with derisive jeers—even the small boys used to scoff at him—he was reduced to practising his arts upon strangers, which he always hastened to do when he thought it was not likely to be dangerous. Unluckily for him, though, he once tried one of his tricks upon an inoffensive newcomer, with a result so unexpected and unwelcome that his only desire thereafter was that people should forget that he had ever called himself "The Wolf"—a desire in which his many acquaintances, whether working-men or loafers, readily accommodated him. But as they playfully substituted the less desirable title of "The Yellow Pup," Long John gained little by the move.

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It happened in this way: There came out from New York at one time a young fellow named Bertie Van Ness, a nephew of Marsden, the cattle man, some of whose stock we were feeding that winter. He arrived at Sulphide by coach one morning, and before going on to Marsden's he stepped into Yetmore's store to buy himself a pair of riding gauntlets. Long John was in there, and seeing the well-dressed, dapper little man, with his white collar and eastern complexion—not burned red by the Colorado sun, as all of ours are—he winked to

the assembled company as much as to say, "See me take a rise out of the tenderfoot," sidled up to Bertie, who was a foot shorter than himself, leaned over him, and putting on his worst expression, said, in a harsh, growling voice, "I'm 'The Wolf.'"

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It was a trick that had often been successful before: peace-loving strangers, not knowing whom they had to deal with, would usually back away and sometimes even take to their heels, which was all that Long John desired. In the present instance, however, the "bad man" miscalculated. The little stranger, seeing the ugly face within a foot of his own, withdrew a step, and without waiting for the formality of an introduction, struck "The Wolf" a very sharp blow upon the end of his nose, at the same time remarking, "Howl, then, you beast."

Long John did howl. Clapping his hands over his face, he retreated, roaring, from the store, amid the enthusiastic plaudits of those present.

Thus it was that the name of "The Wolf" fell into disuse and the title, "Yellow Pup," was substituted; and if at any time thereafter Long John became obstreperous or in any way made himself objectionable, it was only necessary for some one in company to say "Bow-wow," when the offender would forthwith efface himself, with promptness and dispatch.

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This was the man who came striding down upon Joe and me, looking as though he were going to eat us up at a mouthful and think nothing of it. Doubtless he supposed that, being country boys, we had not heard the story of Bertie Van Ness, for, advancing close to us he said fiercely:

"What you doing here? Be off home! Do you know who *I* am? I'm 'The Wolf!'"

"So I've heard," said I, calmly; a remark which took all the wind out of the gentleman's sails at once. He collapsed with ridiculous suddenness, and with a sheepish grin, said, "I was only just a-trying you, boys, to see if you was easy scart."

"Well, you see we're not," remarked Joe. "What are *you* doing up here? Pretty early for prospecting, isn't it?"

"Not any earlier for me than it is for you," replied Long John, with a glance at the hatchet in Joe's hand. He was sharp enough.

Joe laughed. "That's true," said he. "I suppose we're both hunting the same thing. Did you find any of it in that hole up there?"

Long John hesitated. He would have preferred to lie about it, probably, but knowing that we could go and see for ourselves in a couple of minutes, he made a virtue of necessity and replied:

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"Yes, there's some of it there; but it don't amount to much. I guess the vein ain't worth looking for. Come and see."

We walked forward and looked into the hole Long John had chopped, when we saw that his prospector's instinct had hit upon the right place again. Here also was a black streak an inch thick below the yellow sand.

It was evident that the vein of galena was somewhere up-stream, though we ourselves were unable to judge from the amount of the deposit whether it was likely to be big or little. Long John might be telling the truth when he "guessed" that it was not worth looking for, though, from what we knew of him, we, in turn, "guessed" that what he said was most likely to be the opposite of what he thought.

We could not tell, either, whether our new acquaintance was speaking the truth when he declared that he was satisfied with his day's work and had already decided to go home again; I think it rather likely that, being unable to devise any scheme for shaking us off, and not caring to act as prospector for us as well as for Yetmore, he preferred to go back at once and report progress. He was right, at any rate, in saying that the drifts ahead were too deep to admit of further prospecting; for the mountains began to close in just here, and the snow was becoming pretty heavy.

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Nevertheless, Joe and I thought we would try a little further, if only for the reason that Long John would not, and we were about to part company, when we were startled to hear a voice above our heads say, "Good-morning," and, looking quickly up, we saw, seated on a dead branch, a raven, to all appearance asleep, with his feathers fluffed out and his head sunk between his shoulders.

That it was our friend, Socrates, we could not doubt, and we looked all around for the hermit, but as there was no one to be seen, Joe, addressing the raven, said:

"Hallo, Sox! Where's your master?"

"Chew o' tobacco," replied the raven.

At this Long John burst out laughing. "Well, you're a cute one," said he; and thrusting his hand into his pocket he brought out a piece of tobacco which he invited Socrates to come and get. Sox flew down to a convenient rock and reached for the morsel, but the moment he perceived that it was not anything he could eat, he drew back in disdain, and eyeing Long John with severity, remarked, "Bow-wow."

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Now, as I have intimated, nothing was so exasperating to Long John as to have any one say "bow-wow" to him, and not considering that the offender was only a bird, he raised his hatchet and would have ended Sox's career then and there had not Joe stayed his arm.

At being thus thwarted, Long John turned upon my companion, and for a moment I felt a little uneasy lest his temper should for once get the better of his discretion; but I need not have alarmed myself, for Long John's outbreaks of rage were always carefully calculated when directed against any one or anything capable of retaliation in kind, and very probably he had already concluded that two well-grown boys like ourselves, used to all kinds of hard work, might prove an awkward handful for one whose muscles had been rendered flabby by lack of exercise.

At any rate, he quickly calmed down again, pretending to laugh at the incident; but though he made some remark about "a real smart bird," I guessed from the gleam in his little ferrety eyes that if he could lay hands on Socrates, that aged scholar's chances of ever celebrating his one hundredth anniversary would be slim indeed.

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"Who's the thing belong to, anyhow?" asked John. "There's no one living around here that I know of."

"He belongs to a man who lives somewhere up on this mountain," I replied. "You've probably heard of him: Peter the Hermit."

"Him!" exclaimed Long John, looking quickly all around, as though he feared the owner might make his appearance. "Well, I'm off. I've got to get back to Sulphide to-night, so I'll dig out at once."

So saying, he picked up his long-handled shovel, and using it upside-down as a walking-staff, away he went, striding over the snow at a great pace; while Socrates, seeing him depart, very appropriately called after him, "Good-bye, John."

CHAPTER VII

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THE HERMIT'S WARNING

As it was now after midday, we concluded to eat our lunch before going any further, so, sitting down on the rocks, we produced the bread and cold bacon we had brought with us and prepared to refresh ourselves. Observing this, Socrates, who had flown up into a tree when Long John threatened him with the hatchet, now flipped down again and took up his station beside us, having plainly no apprehension that we would do him any harm, and doubtless thinking that if there was any food going he might come in for a share.

I was just about to offer him a scrap of bacon, when the bird suddenly gave a croak and flew off up the mountain. Naturally, we both looked up to ascertain the reason for this sudden departure, when we were startled to see a tall, bearded man with a long staff in his hands, skimming down the snow-covered slope of the mountain towards us. One glance showed us that it was our friend, the hermit, though how he could skim over the snow like that without moving his feet was a puzzle to us, until, on approaching to within twenty yards of where we sat, he stuck his staff into the snow and checked his speed, when we perceived that he was traveling on skis.

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"How are you, boys?" he cried, shaking hands with us very heartily. "I'm glad to see you again. Much obliged to you, Joe, for interfering on behalf of old Sox. I would not have the bird hurt for a good deal. I saw the whole transaction from where I was standing up there in that grove of aspens. Why did your companion go off so suddenly?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I only just mentioned to him that Sox belonged to you, when he picked up his shovel and skipped."

Peter laughed. "I understand," said he. "The gentleman and I have met before, and have no wish to meet again. Our first and only interview was not conducive to a desire for further acquaintance. He is not a friend of yours, I hope."

"Not at all," I replied. "We never met him before."

"Well, I'm glad of that, because he is not one to be intimate with: he is a thief."

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"Why do you say that?" asked Joe, rather startled.

"Because I happen to know it's so. I'll tell you how. I had set a bear-trap once up on the mountain back of my house, and going up next day to see if I had caught anything, I found this fellow busy skinning my bear. He had come upon it by accident, I suppose, and the bear being caught by both front feet, and being therefore perfectly helpless, he had bravely shot it, and was preparing to walk off with the skin when I appeared."

"And what did you say to him?" I asked.

"Nothing," replied Peter. "I just sat down on a rock near by, with my rifle across my knees, and watched him; and he grew so embarrassed and nervous and fidgety that he couldn't stand it any longer, and at last he sneaked off without completing his job and without either of us having said a word."

"That certainly was a queer interview," remarked Joe, laughing, "and a most effective way, I should think, of dealing with a blustering rogue like Long John."

"Long John?" repeated the hermit, inquiringly.

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"Yes, Long John Butterfield; known also as 'The Yellow Pup.'"

"Oh, that's who it is, is it? I've heard of him from my friend, Tom Connor."

"Tom Connor!" we both exclaimed. "Do you know Tom Connor, then?"

"Yes, we have met two or three times in the mountains, and he once spent the night with me in my cabin—he is the 'one exception' I told you about, you remember. He seems like a good, honest fellow, and he has certainly been most obliging to me."

As we looked inquiringly at him, wondering how Tom could have found an opportunity to be of service to one living such a secluded life as the hermit did, our friend went on:

"I happened to mention to him that I had great need of an iron pot, and three days afterwards, on returning home one evening, what should I find standing outside my door but a big iron pot, and in it a chip, upon which was written in pencil, 'Compliments of T. Connor.'"

"Just like Tom," said I, laughing. "He has more friends than any other man in the district, and he deserves it, for when he makes a friend he can't rest easy until he has found some way of doing him a service."

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"And he's as honest as they make 'em," Joe continued. "If he's a friend, he's a friend, and if he's an enemy, he's an enemy—he doesn't leave you in doubt."

"Just what I should think," said the hermit. "Very different from Long John, if I'm not mistaken. That gentleman, I suspect, is of the kind that would shake hands with you in the morning and then come in the night and burn your house down. What were you and he doing, by the way? I've been watching you for an hour. First one and then the other would kneel down in the snow and chop a hole in the bed of the creek, then get up, walk a mile, and do it again. If I may be allowed to say so," he went on, laughing, "it appeared to an outsider like a crazy sort of amusement."

"I should think it might," said I, laughing too; and I then proceeded to tell our friend the object of these seemingly senseless actions.

"And do you expect to go prospecting for this vein of galena in the spring?" he inquired, when I had concluded.

"Not we!" I exclaimed. "My father wouldn't let us if we wanted to. We are doing this work for Tom Connor, whom my father is anxious to serve, he having done us, among others, a very good turn."

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"I see," said the hermit. "And this man, Yetmore, or, rather, his henchman, Long John, will be coming as soon as the snow is off to hunt for the vein in competition with our friend, Connor."

"That is what we expect."

"Well, then, I can help you a little. We will, at least, secure for Connor a start over the enemy."

"How?" I asked.

"You remember, of course," said the hermit, "that sulphurous stuff that was cooking on the flat stone outside my door the day you came down to my house through the clouds? That was galena ore."

"Why, of course!" I exclaimed, slapping my leg. "What pudding-heads we must have been, Joe, not to have thought of it before. I had forgotten all about it. Have you found the vein, then?"

"No, I have not; nor have I ever taken the trouble to look for it, having found a place where I can get a sufficient supply for my purposes to last for years." [Pg 125]

"And what do you use it for?" I asked.

"To make bullets from. I get the powdered ore, roast out the sulphur on that flat stone, and then melt down the residue."

"And where do you get it?"

"That is what I am going to tell you. You know that deep, rocky gorge where Big Reuben had his den? Well, near the head of that gorge is a basin in the rock in which is a large quantity of this powdered galena, all in very fine grains, showing that they have traveled a considerable distance. That stream is one of the four little rills which make up this creek, and if you tell Connor of this deposit it will save him the trouble of prospecting the other three creeks, as he would otherwise naturally do; and as Long John will pretty certainly do, for the creek coming out of Big Reuben's gorge is the last of the four he would come to if he took up his search where he left off to-day—which would be the plan he would surely follow. It should save Connor a day's work at least—perhaps two or three."

"That's true," I responded. "It is an important piece of information. I wonder, though, that nobody else has ever found the deposit you speak of." [Pg 126]

"Do you? I don't. Considering that Big Reuben was standing guard over it, I think it would have been rather remarkable if any one had discovered it."

"That's true enough," remarked Joe. "But that being the case, how did you come to discover it yourself? Big Reuben was no respecter of persons, that I'm aware of."

"Ah, but that's just it. He was. He was afraid of me; or, to speak more correctly, he was afraid of Sox—the one single thing on earth of which he was afraid. Before I knew of his existence, I was going up the gorge one day when Big Reuben bounced out on me, and almost before I knew what had happened I found myself hanging by my finger-tips to a ledge of rock fifteen feet up the cliff, with the bear standing erect below me trying his best to claw me down. My hold was so precarious that I could not have retained it long, and my case would have been pretty serious had it not been for Socrates. That sagacious bird, seeming to recognize that I was in desperate straits, flew up, perched upon the face of the cliff just out of reach of the bear's claws, and in a tone of authority ordered him to lie down. The astonishment of the bear at being thus addressed by a bird was ludicrous, and at any other time would have made me laugh heartily. He at once dropped upon all fours, and when Socrates flipped down to the ground and walked towards him, using language fit to make your hair stand on end, the bear backed away. And he kept on backing away as Sox advanced upon him, pouring out as he came every word and every fragment of a quotation he had learned in the course of a long and studious career. One of the reasons I have for thinking that he is getting on for a hundred years old is that Sox on that occasion raked up old slang phrases in use in the first years of the century—phrases I had never heard him use before, and which I am sure he cannot have heard since he has been in my possession." [Pg 127]

"This stream of vituperation was too much for Big Reuben. He feared no man living, as you know, but a common black raven with a man's voice in his stomach was 'one too many for him,' as the saying is. He turned and bolted; while Socrates, flying just above his head, pursued him with jeers and laughter, until at last he found inglorious safety in the inmost recesses of his den, whither Sox was much too wise to follow him." [Pg 128]

"I don't wonder you set a high value on old Sox, then," said I. "He probably saved your life that time."

"He certainly did: I could not have held on five minutes longer."

"And did you ever run across Big Reuben again?" asked Joe.

"Yes. Or, rather, I suppose I should say 'no.' I saw him a good many times, but he never would allow me to come near him. Whether he thought I was in league with the Evil One, I can't say, but, at any rate, one glimpse of me was enough to send him flying; and as I was sure I need have no fear of him, I had no hesitation in walking up the gorge if it happened to be convenient; and thus it was that I discovered the deposit of lead-ore up near its head."

As this piece of information precluded the necessity of our prospecting any further, and as we had by this time finished our meal—which was shared by Peter and his attendant sprite—we informed our friend that it was time for us to be starting back; upon which he remarked that he would go part of the way with us, as, by taking one of the gulches farther on he would find an easier ascent to his house than by returning the way he had come. Hanging his skis over his shoulder, therefore, he trudged along beside us at a pace which made us hustle to keep up with him.

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"Do you think you would be able to find my house again?" asked the hermit as we walked along.

"No," I replied, "I'm sure we couldn't. When we came down the mountain in the clouds that day we were so mixed up that we did not even know whether we were on Lincoln or Elkhorn, though we had kept away so much to the left coming down that we rather thought we must have got on to one of the spurs of Lincoln."

"Well, you had. I'll show you directly what line you took."

Half a mile farther on, at the point where the stream we were following joined our own creek, our friend stopped, and pointing up the mountain, said:

"If you ever have occasion to come and look me up, all you have to do is to follow your own creek up to its head, when you will come to a high, unscalable cliff, and right at the foot of that cliff you will see the great pile of fallen rocks in which my house is hidden. You can see the cliff from here. When you came down that day you missed the head of the creek you had followed in going up, and by unconsciously bearing to your left all the time you passed the heads of several others as well, and so at length you got into the valley which would have brought you out here if you had continued to follow it."

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"I see. How far up is it to your house?"

"About five miles from where we stand."

"It must be all under snow up there," remarked Joe. "I wonder you are not afraid of being buried alive."

The hermit smiled. "I'm not afraid of that," said he. "It is true the gulch below me gets drifted pretty full—there is probably forty feet of snow in it at this moment—but the point where my house stands always seems to escape; a fact which is due, I think, to the shape of the cliff behind it. It is in the form of a horseshoe, and whichever way the wind blows, the cliff seems to give it a twist which sends the snow off in one direction or another, so that, while the drifts are piled up all around me, the head of the gulch is always fairly free."

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"That's convenient," said Joe. "But for all that, I think I should be afraid to live there myself, especially in the spring."

"Why?" asked the hermit. "Why in the spring particularly?"

"I should be afraid of snowslides. The mountain above the cliff is very steep—at least it looks so from here."

"It is very steep, extremely steep, and the snow up there is very heavy this winter—I went up to examine it two days ago. But at the same time I saw no traces of there ever having been a slide. There are a good many trees growing on the slope, some of them of large size, which is pretty fair evidence that there has been no slide for a long time—not for a hundred years probably. For as you see, there and there"—pointing to two long, bare tracks on the mountain-side—"when the slides do come down they clean off every tree in their course. No, I have no fear of snowslides."

"By the way," he continued, "there is one thing you might tell Tom Connor when you see him, and that is that Big Reuben's creek heads in a shallow draw on the mountain above my house. If you follow with your eye from the summit of the cliff upward, you will notice a stretch of bare rock, and above it a strip of trees extending downward from left to right. It is among those trees that the creek heads."

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"You might mention that to Connor," he went on, "in case he should prefer to begin his prospecting downward from the head of the creek instead of upward from Big Reuben's gorge. And tell him, too, that if he will come to me, I shall be glad to take him up there at

any time."

"Very well," said I, "we'll do so."

"Yes, we'll certainly tell him," said Joe. "It might very well happen that Tom would prefer to begin at the top, especially if he should find that Long John had got ahead of him and was already working up from below."

"Exactly. That is what I was thinking of. Well, I must be off. I have a longish tramp before me, and the sunset comes pretty early under my cliff."

"Won't you come home with us to-night?" I asked. "We have only two miles to go. My father told me to ask you the next time we met, and this is such a fine opportunity. I wish you would."

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"Yes; do," Joe chimed in.

But the hermit shook his head. "You are very kind to suggest it," said he, "and I am really greatly obliged to you, and to Mr. Crawford also, but I think not. Thank you, all the same; but I'll go back home. So, good-bye."

"Some other time, perhaps," suggested Joe.

"Perhaps—we'll see. By the way, there was one other thing I intended to say, and that is:—look out for Long John! He is a dangerous man if he is a coward; in fact, all the more dangerous *because* he is a coward. So now, good-bye; and remember"—holding up a warning finger—"look out for Long John!"

With that, he slipped his feet into his skis and away he went; while Joe and I turned our own faces homeward.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 134]

THE WILD CAT'S TRAIL

"He is quite right," said my father, when, on reaching home again, we related to him the results of our day's work and told him how the hermit had warned us against Long John. "He is quite right. Your hermit is a man of sense in spite of his reputation to the contrary. Yetmore, of course, will do anything he can to forestall Tom Connor, but, if I am not mistaken, he will not venture beyond the law; whereas Long John, I feel sure, would not be restrained by any such consideration. He would be quite ready to resort to violence, provided always that he could do it without risk to his own precious person. The hermit is right, too, in saying that Long John is all the more dangerous for being the cowardly creature that he is: whatever he may do to head off Tom will be done in the dark—you may be sure of that. We must warn Tom, so that he may be on his guard."

"I'm afraid it won't be much use warning Tom," said I. "He is such a heedless fellow and so chuck full of courage that he won't trouble to take any precautions."

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"I don't suppose he will, but we will warn him, all the same, so that he may at least go about with his eyes open. I'll write to him again to-morrow. And now to our own business. Come into the back room. I want your opinion."

It had been my father's custom for some time back—and a very good custom, too, I think—whenever there arose a question of management about the affairs of the ranch, to take Joe and me into consultation with him. It is probable enough that our opinion, when he got it, was not worth much, but the mere fact that we were asked for it gave us a feeling of responsibility and grown-up-ness which had a good effect. Whenever, therefore, any question of importance turned up, the whole male population of Crawford's Basin voted upon it, and though it is true that nine times out of ten any proposition advanced by my father would receive a unanimous vote, it did happen every now and then that one of us would make a suggestion which would be adopted, much to our satisfaction, thus adding a zest to the work, whatever it might be. For whether the plan originated with my father or with one of us, as we all voted on it we thereby made it our own, and having made it our own; we took infinitely more interest in its accomplishment than does the ordinary hired man, who is told to do this or do that without reason or explanation.

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It will be readily understood, too, how flattering it was to a couple of young fellows like ourselves to be asked for our opinion by a man like my father, for whose good sense and

practical knowledge we had the greatest respect, and of course we were all attention at once, when, seating himself in his desk chair, he began:

"You remember that when Marsden's cattle first came they broke a couple of the posts around the hay-corral, and that when we re-set them we found that the butt-ends of the posts were beginning to get pretty rotten?"

He happened to catch Joe's eye, who replied:

"I remember; and you said at the time that we should have to renew the fence entirely in two years or less."

"Exactly. Well, now, this is what I've been thinking: instead of renewing with posts and poles, why not build a rough stone wall all round the present fence, which, when once done, would last forever? Within a half-mile of the corral there is material in plenty fallen from the face of the Second Mesa; and everything on the ranch being in good working order, you two boys would be free to put in several weeks hauling stones and dumping them outside the fence—the actual building I would leave till next fall. It will mean a long spell of pretty hard work, for you will hardly gather material enough if you keep at it all the rest of the winter. Now, what do you think?"

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"It seems to me like a good plan," Joe answered. "We can take two teams and wagons, help each other to load, drive down together, and help each other to unload; for I suppose you would use stones as big as we can handle by preference."

"Yes, the bigger the better; especially for the lower courses and for the corners. What's your opinion, Phil?"

"I agree with Joe," I replied. "And with such a short haul—for it will average nearer a quarter than half a mile—I should think we might even collect stones enough for the purpose this winter, provided there doesn't come a big fall of snow and stop us."

"Then you shall begin to-morrow," said my father.

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"But here's another question," he continued. "Should we build the wall close around the present fence, or should we increase the size of the corral while we are about it?"

"I should keep to the present dimensions," said I. "There is no chance that I see of our ever increasing the size of our hay-crop to any great extent, and the corral we have now has always held it all, even that very big crop we had the summer Joe came. If——"

"Yes, 'if,'" my father interrupted, knowing very well what I had in mind. "If we could drain 'the bottomless forty rods' we should need a corral half as big again; but I'm afraid that is beyond us, so we may as well confine ourselves to providing for present needs."

"My wig!" exclaimed Joe—his favorite exclamation—at the same time rumpling his hair, as though that were the wig he referred to. "What a great thing it would be if we could but drain those forty rods!"

"It undoubtedly would," replied my father. "It would about double the value of the ranch, I think; for, besides diverting the present county road between San Remo and Sulphide—for everybody would then leave the old hill-road and come past our door instead—it would give us a large piece of new land for growing oats and hay. And, do you know, I begin to think it is very possible that within a couple of years we shall have a market for more oats and hay than we can grow, even including the 'forty rods.'"

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"Why?" I asked, in surprise; for, at present, though we disposed of our produce readily enough, it could not be said that there was a booming market.

"It is just guess-work," my father replied, "pure guess-work on my part, with a number of good big 'ifs' about it; but if Tom Connor or Long John, or, indeed, any one else, should discover a big vein of lead-ore up on Mount Lincoln—and the chances, I think, begin to look favorable—what would be the result?"

"I don't know," said I. "What?"

"Why, this whole district would take a big leap forward—that is what would happen. You see, as things stand now, the smelters, not being able to procure in the district lead-ores enough for fluxing purposes, are obliged to bring them in by railroad from other camps. This is very expensive, and the consequence is that they are obliged to make such high charges for smelting that any ore of less value than thirty dollars to the ton is at present worthless to the miner: the cost of hauling it to the smelter and the smelter-charges when it gets there eat up all the proceeds."

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"I see," said Joe. "And the discovery of a mine which would provide the smelters with all the lead-ore they wanted would bring down the charges of smelting and enable the producers of thirty dollar ore to work their claims at a profit."

"Precisely. And as nine-tenths of the claims in the district produce mainly low-grade ore, which is now left lying on the dumps as worthless, and as even the big mines take out, and throw aside, probably ten tons of low-grade in getting out one ton of high-grade, you can see what a 'boost' the district would receive if all this unavailable material were suddenly to become a valuable and marketable commodity."

"I should think it would!" exclaimed Joe, enthusiastically. "The prospectors would be getting out by hundreds; the population of Sulphide would double; San Remo would take a great jump forward; while we—why, we shouldn't *begin* to be able to grow oats and hay enough to meet the demand."

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My father nodded. "That's what I think," said he.

"And there's another thing," cried I, taking up Joe's line of prophecy. "If a big vein of lead-ore should be discovered anywhere about the head of our creek, the natural way for the freighters to get down to San Remo would be through here, if——"

"That's it," interrupted my father. "That's the whole thing. I-F, IF."

Dear me! What a big, big little word that was. To represent it of the size it looked to us, it would be necessary to paint it on the sky with the tail of a comet dipped in an ocean of ink!

After a pause of a minute or two, during which we all sat silent, considering over again what we had considered many and many a time before: whether there were not some possible way of draining off the "forty rods," Joe suddenly straightened himself in his seat, rumbled his hair once more—by which sign I knew he had some idea in his head—and said:

"I suppose you have thought of it before, Mr. Crawford, but would it be possible to run a tunnel up from the lower edge of the First Mesa, and so draw off the water?"

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"I have thought of it before, Joe," replied my father, "and while I think it might work, I have concluded that it is out of the question. How long a tunnel would it take, do you calculate?"

"Well, a little more than a quarter of a mile, I suppose."

"Yes. Say twelve hundred feet, at least. Well, to run a tunnel of that length would be cheap at ten dollars a foot."

"Phew!" Joe whistled, opening his eyes widely. "That is a staggerer, sure enough. It does look as if there was no way out of it."

"No, I'm afraid not," said my father. "And as to making a permanent road across the marsh, I have tried everything I can think of including corduroying with long poles covered with brush and earth. But it was no use. We had a very wet season that summer, and the road, poles and all, was covered with water. That settled it to my mind; we could not expect the freighters and others to come our way when, at any time, they might find the road under water."

"No; that did seem to be a clincher. Well, as there appears to be no more to be said, let's get to bed, Phil. If we are going to haul rocks to-morrow, we shall need a good night's sleep as a starter."

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The cliff which bounded the eastern edge of the Second Mesa—at the same time bounding the ranch on its western side—was made up of layers of rock of an average thickness of about a foot, having been evidently built up by successive small flows of lava. The stones piled at the foot of the bluff being flat on both sides were therefore very convenient for wall-building, and so plentiful that we made rapid progress at first in hauling them down to the corral. At the end of three weeks, however, we had picked up all those fragments that were most accessible, and were now obliged to loosen up the great heaps of larger slabs and crack the stones with a sledgehammer. Some of these heaps were so large, and the stones composing them of such great size, that when we came to dislodge them we found that an ordinary crowbar made no impression; but we overcame that difficulty, at Joe's suggestion, by using a big pine pole as a lever. Inserting the butt-end of the pole between two big rocks, we would tie a rope to the other end and hitch the mules to it. The leverage thus obtained was tremendous, and unless the pole broke, something had to come. In this way we could sometimes bring down at one pull rock enough to keep us busy for a week.

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Day after day, without a break, we continued this work, and though it was certainly hard labor we enjoyed it, especially when, by constant practice we found ourselves handling all the time bigger and bigger stones with less and less exertion.

It would seem that there could not be much art in so simple a matter as putting a stone into a wagon, and as far as stones of moderate size are concerned there is not. But when you come to deal with slabs of rock weighing a thousand pounds or more, you will find that the "know how" counts for very much more than mere strength.

Of course, to handle pieces of this size it was necessary to use skids and crowbars, with which, aided by little rollers made of bits of gas-pipe, we did not hesitate to tackle stones which, when we first began, we should have cracked into two or three pieces.

We had been at it, as I have said, for more than three weeks, when it happened one day that while driving down with our last load, we were met face to face by a wildcat, with one of our chickens in its mouth. There were a good many of these animals having their lairs among the fallen rocks at the foot of the mesa, and they caused us some trouble, but this was the first time I had known one to make a raid on the chicken-yard in broad daylight. I suppose rabbits were scarce, and the poor beast was driven to this unusual course by hunger.

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I was driving the mules at the moment, but Joe, who was walking beside the wagon, picked up a stone and hurled it at the cat. The animal, of course, bolted—taking his chicken with him, though—and disappeared among the rocks close to where we had just been at work.

"Joe," said I, "we'll bring up the shotgun to-morrow. We may stir that fellow out and get a shot at him."

Accordingly, next day, we took the gun with us, and leaning it against a tree near the wagon, set about our usual work. The first stone we loaded that morning was an extra-large one, and Joe on one side of the wagon and I on the other were prying it into position with our pinch-bars, when my companion, who was facing the bluff, gently laid down his bar and whispered:

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"Keep quiet, Phil! Don't move! I see that wildcat! Get hold of the lines in case the mules should scare, while I see if I can reach the gun."

Stooping behind the wagon, he slipped away to where the gun stood, came stooping back, and then, straightening up, he raised the gun to his shoulder. Up to that moment the cat had stood so still that I had been unable to distinguish it, but just as Joe raised the gun it bolted. My partner fired a snap-shot, and down came the cat, tumbling over and over.

"Good shot!" I cried. But hardly had I done so when the animal jumped up again and popped into a hole between two rocks before Joe could get a second shot.

"Let's dig him out, Joe," I cried. And seizing a crowbar, I led the way to the foot of the cliff.

Working away with the bar, while Joe stood ready with the gun, I soon enlarged the hole enough to let me look in, but it was so dark inside, and I got into my own light so much that I could see nothing.

I happened to have a letter in my pocket, and taking the envelope I dropped a little stone into it, screwed up the corner, and lighting the other end, threw the bit of paper into the hole. My little fire-brand flickered for a moment, and then burned up brightly, when I saw the wildcat lying flat upon its side, evidently quite dead.

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Thereupon we both set to work and enlarged the hole so that Joe could crawl in, which he immediately did. I expected him to come out again in a moment, but it was a full minute before he reappeared, and when he did so he only poked out his head and said, in an excited tone:

"Come in here, Phil! Here's the queerest thing—just come in here for a minute!"

Of course I at once crept through the hole, to find myself in a little chamber about ten feet long, six feet wide and four feet high, built up of great flat slabs of stone, which, falling from above, had accidentally so arranged themselves as to form this little room.

At first I thought it was the little room itself to which Joe had referred as "queer," but Joe, scouting such an idea, exclaimed:

"No, no, bless you! I didn't mean that. That's nothing. Look here!"

So saying, he struck a match and showed me, along one side of the chamber, a great crack in the ground, three feet wide, extending to the left an unknown distance—for in that direction it was covered by loose rocks of large size—while to the right it pinched out entirely.

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It was evident to me that this crevice had existed ever since the great break had occurred

which had separated the First from the Second Mesa, but that, being covered by the fragments which had fallen from the cliff—itsself formed by the subsidence of the First Mesa from what had once been the general level—it had hitherto remained concealed.

“Well, that certainly is ‘queer,’” said I. “How deep is it, I wonder?”

“Don’t know. Pitch a stone into it.”

I did so; judging from the sound that the crevice was probably thirty or forty feet deep.

“That’s what I should guess,” said Joe. “But there’s another thing, Phil, a good deal queerer than a mere crack in the ground. Lie down and put your ear over the hole and listen.”

I did as directed, and then at length I understood where the “queerness” came in. I could distinctly hear the rush of water down below!

Rising to my knees, I stared at Joe, who, kneeling also, stared back at me, both keeping silence for a few seconds. At length: [Pg 149]

“Where does it come from, Joe?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Joe replied. “Mount Lincoln, perhaps. But I do know where it goes to.”

“You do? Where?”

“Down to ‘the forty rods,’ of course.”

“That’s it!” I cried, thumping my fist into the palm of the other hand. “That’s certainly it! Look here, Joe. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll quit hauling rock for this morning, go and get a long rope, climb down into this crack, see how much water there is, and find out if we can where it goes to.”

“All right,” said Joe. “Your father won’t object, I’m sure.”

“No, he won’t object. Though he relies on our doing a good day’s work without supervision, he relies, too, on our using our common sense, and I’m sure he’ll agree that this is a matter that ought to be investigated without delay. It may be of the greatest importance.”

“All right!” cried Joe. “Then let us get about it at once!”

CHAPTER IX

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THE UNDERGROUND STREAM

It was on a Saturday morning that we made this discovery, and as my father and mother had both driven down to San Remo and would not be back till sunset, we could not ask permission to abandon our regular work and go exploring. But, as I had said to Joe, though he trusted us to work faithfully at any task we might undertake, my father also expected us to use our own discretion in any matter which might turn up when he was not at hand to advise with us.

I had, therefore, no hesitation in driving back to the ranch, when, having unloaded our one stone and stabled the mules, Joe and I, taking with us a long, stout rope and the stable-lantern, retraced our steps to the wildcat’s house.

The first thing to be done was to enlarge the entrance so that we might have daylight to work by, and this being accomplished, we lighted the lantern and lowered it by a cord into the hole. We found, however, that a bulge in the rock prevented our seeing to the bottom, and all we gained by this move was to ascertain that the crevice was about forty feet deep, as we had guessed. The next thing, therefore, was for one of us to go down, and the only way to do this was to slide down a rope. [Pg 151]

This, doubtless, would be easy enough, but the climbing up again might be another matter. We were not afraid to venture on this score, however, for, as it happened, we had both often amused ourselves by climbing a rope hung from one of the rafters in the hay-barn, and though that was a climb of only twenty feet, we had done it so often and so easily that we did not question our ability to ascend a rope of double the length.

“Who’s to go down, Joe, you or I?” I asked.

“Whichever you like, Phil,” replied my companion. “I suppose you’d like to be the first, wouldn’t you?”

"Oh, yes, that's a matter of course," I answered, "but as you are the discoverer you ought to have first chance, so down you go, old chap!"

"Very well, then," said Joe, "if you say so, I'll go."

"Well, I do—so that settles it."

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I knew Joe well enough to be sure he would be eager to be the first, and though I should have liked very much to take the lead myself, it seemed to me only just that Joe, as the original discoverer, should, as I had said, be given the choice.

This question being decided, we tied one end of the rope around a big stone, heavy enough to hold an elephant, and dropped the other end into the hole. The descent at first was very easy, for the walls being only three feet apart, and there being many rough projections on either side, it was not much more difficult than going down a ladder, especially as I, standing a little to one side, lowered the lantern bit by bit, that Joe might have a light all the time to see where to set his feet.

Arrived at the bulge, Joe stopped, and standing with one foot on either wall, looked up and said:

"It opens out below here, Phil; I shall have to slide the rest of the way. You might lower the lantern down to the bottom now, if you please."

I did so at once, and then asked:

"Can you see the bottom, Joe?"

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"Yes," he replied. "The crevice is much wider down there, and the floor seems to be smooth and dry. I can't see any sign of water anywhere, but I can hear it plainly enough. Good-bye for the present; I'm going down now."

With that he disappeared under the bulge in the wall, while I, placing my hand upon the rope, presently felt the strain slacken, whereupon I called out:

"All right, Joe?"

"All right," came the answer.

"How's the air down there?"

"Seems to be perfectly fresh."

"Can you see the water?"

"No, I can't; but I can hear it. There's a heap of big rocks in the passage to the south and the splashing comes from the other side of it. I'm going to untie the lantern, Phil, and go and explore a bit. Just wait a minute."

Very soon I heard his voice again calling up to me.

"It's all right, Phil. I've found the water. You may as well come down."

"Look here, Joe," I replied. "Before I come down, it might be as well to make sure that you can come up." [Pg 154]

"There's something in that," said Joe, with a laugh. "Well, then, I'll come up first."

I felt the rope tauten again, and pretty soon my companion's head appeared, when, scrambling over the bulge, he once more stood astride of the crevice, and looking up said:

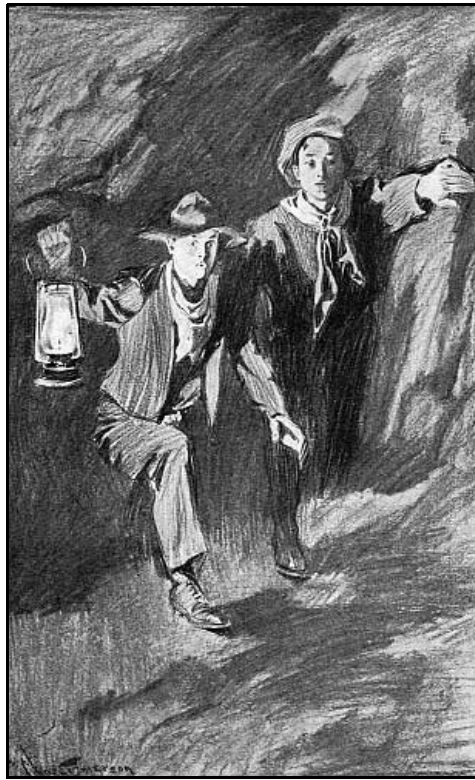
"It's perfectly safe, Phil. The only troublesome bit is in getting over the bulge, and that doesn't amount to anything. It's safe enough for you to come down."

"Very well, then, I'll come; so go on down again."

Taking a candle we had brought with us, I set it on a projection where it would cast a light into the fissure, and seizing the rope, down I went. The descent was perfectly easy, and in a few seconds I found myself standing beside Joe at the bottom.

The crevice down here was much wider than above—ten or twelve feet—the floor, composed of sandstone, having a decided downward tilt towards the south. In this direction Joe, lantern in hand, led the way.

Piled up in the passage was a large heap of lava-blocks which had fallen, presumably, through the opening above, and climbing over these, we saw before us a very curious sight. [Pg 155]



**“WE SAW BEFORE US A VERY
CURIOUS SIGHT”**

On the right hand side of the crevice—that is to say, on the western or Second Mesa side—between the sandstone floor and the lowest ledge of lava, there issued a thin sheet of water, coming out with such force that it swept right across, and striking the opposite wall, turned and ran off southward—away from us, that is. Only for a short distance, however, it ran in that direction, for we could see that the stream presently took another turn, this time to the eastward, presumably finding its way through a crack in the lava of the First Mesa.

“I’m going to see where it goes to,” cried Joe; and pulling off his boots and rolling up his trousers, he waded in. He expected to find the water as cold as the iced water of any other mountain stream, but to his surprise it was quite pleasantly warm.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Phil,” said he, stepping back again for a moment. “This water must run under ground for a long distance to be as warm as it is. And what’s more, there must be a good-sized reservoir somewhere between the lava and the sandstone to furnish pressure enough to make the water squirt out so viciously as it does.”

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Entering the stream again, which, though hardly an inch deep, came out of the rock with such “vim” that when it struck his feet it flew up nearly to his knees, Joe waded through, and then turning, shouted to me:

“It goes down this way, Phil, through a big crack in the lava. It just goes flying. Don’t trouble to come”—observing that I was about to pull off my own boots—“you can’t see any distance down the crack.”

But whatever there was to be seen, I wanted to see too, and disregarding his admonition, I pretty soon found myself standing beside my companion.

The great cleft into which we were peering was about six feet wide at the bottom, coming together some twenty feet above our heads, having been apparently widened at the base by the action of the water, which, being here ankle-deep, rushed foaming over and around the many blocks of lava with which the channel was encumbered. As far as we could see, the fissure led straight away without a bend; and Joe was for trying to walk down it at once. I suggested, however, that we leave that for the present and try another plan.

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“Look here, Joe,” said I. “If we try to do that we shall probably get pretty wet, and stand a good chance besides of hurting our feet among the rocks. Now, I propose that we go down to the ranch again, get our rubber boots, and at the same time bring back with us my father’s compass and the tape-measure and try to survey this water-course. By doing that, and then by following the same line on the surface, we may be able to decide whether it is really this stream which keeps ‘the forty rods’ so wet.”

“I don’t think there can be any doubt about that,” Joe replied; “but I think your plan is a

good one, all the same, so let us do it.”

We did not waste much time in getting down to the ranch and back again, when, pulling on our rubber boots, we proceeded to make our survey. It was not an easy task.

With the ring at the end of the tape-measure hooked over my little finger, I took a candle in that hand and the compass in the other, and having ascertained that the course of the stream was due southeast, I told Joe to go ahead. My partner, therefore, with his arm slipped through the handle of the lantern and with a pole in his hand with which to test the depth of the stream, thereupon started down the passage, stepping from rock to rock when possible, and taking to the water when the rocks were too far apart, until, having reached the limit of the tape-measure, he made a mark upon the wall with a piece of white chalk.

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This being done, I noted on a bit of paper the direction and the distance, when Joe advanced once more, I following as far as to the chalk-mark, when the operation was repeated.

In this manner we worked our way, slowly and carefully, down the passage, the direction of which varied only two or three degrees to one side or the other of southeast, until, having advanced a little more than a thousand feet, we found our further progress barred.

For some time it had appeared to us that the sound of splashing water was increasing in distinctness, though the stream itself made so much noise in that hollow passage that we could not be sure whether we were right or not. At length, however, having made his twentieth chalk-mark, indicating one thousand feet, Joe, waving his lantern for me to come on, advanced once more; but before I had come to his last mark, he stopped and shouted back to me that he could go no farther.

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Wondering why not, I slowly waded forward, Joe himself winding up the tape-measure as I approached, until I found myself standing beside my companion, when I saw at once “why not.”

The stream here took a sudden dive down hill, falling about three feet into a large pool, the limits of which we could not discern—for we could see neither sides nor end—its surface unbroken, except in a few places where we could detect the ragged points of big lava-blocks projecting above the water, while here and there a rounded boulder showed its smooth and shining head.

Joe, very carefully descending to the edge of the pool, measured the depth with his rod, when, finding it to be about four feet deep, we concluded that we would let well enough alone and end our survey at this point.

“Come on up, Joe,” I called out. “No use trying to go any farther: it’s too dangerous; we might get in over our heads.”

“Just a minute,” Joe replied. “Let’s see if we can’t find out which way the current sets in the pool.”

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With that he took from his pocket a newspaper he had brought with him in case for any purpose we should need to make a “flare,” and crumpling this into a loose ball he set it afloat in the pool. Away it sailed, quickly at first, and then more slowly; and taking a sight on it as far as it was distinguishable, I found that the set of the current continued as before—due southeast.

“All right, Joe,” I cried. “Come on, now.” And Joe, giving me the end of his stick to take hold of, quickly rejoined me, when together we made our way carefully up the stream again, and climbing the rope, once more found ourselves out in the daylight.

“Now, Joe,” said I, “let us run our line and find out where it takes us.”

Having previously measured the distance from the point where the underground stream turned southeast to where the rope hung down, we now measured the same distance back again along the foot of the bluff, and thence, ourselves turning southeastward, we measured off a thousand feet. This brought us down to the lowest of the old lake-benches, about a hundred yards back of the house, when, sighting along the same line with the compass, we found that that faithful little servant pointed us straight to the entrance of the lower cañon.

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“Then that does settle it!” cried Joe. “We’ve found the stream that keeps ‘the forty rods’ wet; there can be no doubt of it.”

It did, indeed seem certain that we had at last discovered the stream which supplied “the forty rods” with water; but allowing that we *had* discovered it:—what then? How much better off were we?

Beneath our feet, as we had now every reason to believe, ran the long-sought water-course, but between us and it was a solid bed of lava about forty feet thick; and how to get the water to the surface, and thus prevent it from continuing to render useless the meadow below, was a problem beyond our powers.

"It beats me," said Joe, taking off his hat and tousling his hair according to custom. "I can see no possible way of doing it. We shall have to leave it to your father. Perhaps he may be able to think of a plan. Do you suppose he'll venture to go down the rope, Phil?"

"No, I don't," I replied. "It is all very well for you and me, with our one hundred and seventy pounds, or thereabouts, but as my father weighs forty pounds more than either of us, and has not been in the habit of climbing ropes for amusement as long as I can remember, I think the chances are that he won't try it."

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"I suppose not. It's a pity, though, for I'm sure he would be tremendously interested to see the stream down there in the crevice. Couldn't we—Look here, Phil: couldn't we set up a ladder to reach from the bottom up to the bulge?"

I shook my head.

"I don't think so," I answered. "It would take a ladder twenty feet long, and the bulge in the wall would prevent its going down."

"That's true. Well, then, I'll tell you what we can do. We'll make two ladders of ten feet each—a ten-foot pole will go down easily enough—set one on the floor of the crevice and the other on that wide ledge about half way up to the bulge. What do you think of that?"

"Yes, I think we could do that," I replied. "We'll try it anyhow. But we must go in and get some dinner now: it's close to noon."

We did not take long over our dinner—we were too anxious to get to work again—and as soon as we had finished we selected from our supply of fire-wood four straight poles, each about ten feet long, and with these, a number of short pieces of six-inch plank, a hammer, a saw and a bag of nails, we drove back to the scene of action.

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Even a ten-foot pole, we found, was an awkward thing to get down to the bottom of the fissure, but after a good deal of coaxing we succeeded in lowering them all, when we at once set to work building our ladders.

The first one, standing on the floor of the crevice, reached as high as the ledge Joe had mentioned, while the second, planted upon the ledge itself, leaned across the chasm, its upper end resting against the rock just below the bulge, so that, with the rope to hold on by, it ought to be easy enough to get up and down. It is true that the second ladder being almost perpendicular, looked a little precarious, but we had taken great care to set it up solidly and were certain it could not slip. As to the strength of the ladders, there was nothing to fear on that score, for the smallest of the poles was five inches in diameter at the little end.

This work took us so long, for we were very careful to make things strong and firm, that it was within half an hour of sunset ere we had finished, and as it was then too late to begin hauling rocks, we drove down to the ranch again at once.

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As we came within sight of the house, we had the pleasure of seeing the buggy with my father and mother in it draw up at the door. Observing us coming, they waited for us, when, the moment we jumped out of the wagon, before we could say a word ourselves, my father exclaimed:

"Hallo, boys! What are you wearing your rubber boots for?"

My mother, however, looking at our faces instead of at our feet, with that quickness of vision most mothers of boys seem to possess, saw at once that something unusual had occurred.

"What's happened, Phil?" she asked.

"We've made a discovery," I replied, "and we want father to come and see it."

"Can't I come, too?" she inquired, smiling at my eagerness.

"I'm afraid not," I answered. "I wish you could, but I'm afraid your petticoats would get in the way."

To this, perceiving easily enough that we had some surprise in store for my father, and not wishing to spoil the fun, my mother merely replied:

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"Oh, would they? Well, I'm afraid I couldn't come anyhow: I must go in and prepare supper. So, be off with you at once, and don't be late. You can tell me all about it this evening."

"One minute, father!" I cried; and thereupon I ran to the house, reappearing in a few seconds with his rubber boots, which I thrust into the back of the buggy, and then, climbing in on one side while Joe scrambled in on the other, I called out:

"Now, father, go ahead!"

"Where to?" he asked, laughing.

"Oh, I forgot," said I. "Up to our stone-quarry."

If we had expected my father to be surprised, we were not disappointed. At first he rather demurred at going down our carefully prepared ladders, not seeing sufficient reason, as he declared, to risk his neck; but the moment we called his attention to the sound of water down below, and he began to understand what the presence of the rubber boots meant, he became as eager as either Joe or I had been. [Pg 166]

In short, he went with us over the whole ground, even down to the pool; and so interested was he in the matter that he quite forgot the flight of time, until, having reascended the ladders and followed with us our line on the surface down to the heap of stones with which we had marked the thousand-foot point, he—and we, too—were recalled to our duties by my mother, who, seeing us standing there talking, came to the back-door of the kitchen and called to us to come in at once if we wanted any supper.

Long was the discussion that ensued that evening as we sat around the fire in the big stone fireplace; but long as it was, it ended as it had begun with a remark made by my father.

"Well," said he, as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his slippered feet before the fire, "it appears to come to this: instead of discovering a way to drain 'the forty rods,' you have only provided us with another insoluble problem to puzzle our heads over. There seems to be no way that we can figure out—at present, anyhow—by which the water can be brought to the surface, and consequently our only resource is, apparently, to discover, if possible, where it first runs in under the lava-bed, to come squirting out again down in that fissure—an almost hopeless task, I fear." [Pg 167]

"It does look pretty hopeless," Joe assented; "though we have found out one thing, at least, which may be of service in our search, and that is that the water runs between the lava and the sandstone. That fact should be of some help to us, for it removes from the list of streams to be examined all those whose beds lie below the sandstone."

"That's true enough," I agreed. "But, then again, the source may not be some mountain stream running off under the lava, as we have been supposing. It is quite possible that it is a spring which comes up through the sandstone, and not being able to get up to daylight because of the lava-cap, goes worming its way through innumerable crevices to the underground reservoir we suppose to exist somewhere beneath the surface of the Second Mesa."

"That is certainly a possibility," replied my father. "Nevertheless, it is my opinion that it will be well worth while making an examination of the creeks on Mount Lincoln. The streams to search would be those running on a sandstone bed and coming against the upper face of the lava-flow. It is worth the attempt, at least, and when the snow clears off you boys shall employ any off-days you may have in that way." [Pg 168]

"It would be well, wouldn't it, to tell Tom Connor about it?" suggested Joe. "He would keep his eyes open for us. I suppose prospectors as a rule don't take much note of such things, but Tom would do so, I'm sure, if we asked him."

"Yes," replied my father. "That is a good idea; and if either of you should come across your friend, the hermit, again, be sure to ask him. He knows Mount Lincoln as nobody else does, and if he had ever noticed anything of the sort he would tell us. Don't forget that. And now to bed."

CHAPTER X

HOW TOM CONNOR WENT BORING FOR OIL

One thing was plain at any rate: we could do nothing towards finding the source of the

underground stream until the snow cleared off the mountain, and that was likely to be later than usual this year, for the fall had been exceedingly heavy in the higher parts. We could see from the ranch that many of the familiar hollows were obliterated—leveled off by the great masses of snow which had drifted into them and filled them up.

We therefore went about our work of hauling stone, and so continued while the cold weather lasted, interrupted only once by a heavy storm about the end of January, which, while it added another two feet to the thick blanket of snow already covering the mountains, quickly melted off down in the snug hollow where the ranch lay, so that our work was not delayed more than two or three days.

One advantage to us of this storm was that it enabled us to learn something—not much, certainly, but still something—regarding the source of the stream in the fissure. It did not show us where that source was, but it proved to us pretty clearly where it was *not*.

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On the morning of the storm, Joe, at breakfast-time, turning to my father, said:

“Wouldn’t it be a good plan to go and measure the flow of the water down in the crevice, Mr. Crawford? We might be able to find out, by watching its rise and fall, whether the melting of the snow on the Second Mesa, or on the foot-hills beyond, or on the mountain itself affects it most.”

“That’s a very good idea, Joe,” my father replied. “Yes; as soon as we have fed the stock you can make a measuring-stick and go up there; and what’s more, you had better make a practice of measuring it every day. The increase or decrease of the flow might be an important guide as to where it comes from.”

This we did, and thereby ascertained pretty conclusively that the source was nowhere on the Second Mesa, for in the course of a couple of weeks the heavy fall of new snow covering that wide stretch of country melted off without making any perceptible difference in the volume of the stream.

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Though there were several other falls of snow up in the mountains later in the season, this was the last one of any consequence down on the mesas. The winter was about over as far as we were concerned, and by the middle of the next month, the surface of “the bottomless forty rods” beginning to soften again, the freighters, who had been coming our way ever since the early part of November, deserted us and once more went back to the hill road—to our mutual regret. For a few days longer the stage-coach kept to our road, but very soon it, too, abandoned us, after which, except for an occasional horseback-rider, we had scarcely a passer-by.

As was natural, we greatly missed this constant coming and going, though we should have missed it a good deal more but for the fact that with the softening of the ground our spring work began, when, Marsden’s cattle having been removed by their owner, Joe and I started plowing for oats. With the prospect of a steady season’s work before us, we entered upon our labors with enthusiasm. We had never felt so “fit” before, for our long spell of stone-hauling had put us into such good trim that we were in condition to tackle anything.

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At the same time, we did not forget our underground stream, keeping strict watch upon it as the snow-line retreated up the foot-hills of Mount Lincoln. But though one of us visited the stream every day, taking careful measurement of the flow, we could not see that it had increased at all. The intake must be either high on the mountain, or, as I had suggested, the spring must come up through the sandstone underlying the Second Mesa and was therefore not affected by the running off of the snow-water on the surface.

As the town of Sulphide was so situated that its inhabitants could not see Mount Lincoln on account of a big spur of Elkhorn Mountain which cut off their view, any one in that town wishing to find out how the snow was going off on the former mountain was obliged to ride down in our direction about three miles in order to get a sight of it.

Tom Connor, having neither the time to spare nor the money to spend on horse-hire, could not do this for himself, but, knowing that the mountain was visible to us any day and all day, he had requested us to notify him when the foot-hills began to get bare. This time had now arrived—it was then towards the end of March—and my father consequently wrote to Tom, telling him so; at the same time inviting him to come down to us and make his start from the ranch whenever he was ready.

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To our great surprise, we received a reply from him next afternoon, brought down by young Seth Appleby, the widow Appleby’s ten-year-old boy, in which he stated that he could not start just yet as he was out of funds, but that he was hoping to raise one hundred and fifty dollars by a mortgage on his little house, which would be all he would need, and more, to keep him going for the summer.

"Why, what's the meaning of this!" exclaimed my father, when he had read the letter. "How does Tom come to be out of funds at this time of year? He's been at work all winter at high wages and he ought to have saved up quite a tidy sum—in fact, he was counting on doing so. What's the matter, I wonder? Did he tell you anything about it, Seth?"

"No," replied the youngster, "he didn't tell me, but he did tell mother, and then mother, she asked all the miners who come to our store, and they told her all about it. It was mother that sent me down with the letter, and she told me I was to be sure and 'splain all about it to you."

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"That was kind of Mrs. Appleby," said my father. "But come in, Seth, and have something to eat, and then you can give us your mother's message."

Seated at the table, with a big loaf, a plate of honey and a pitcher of milk before him, young Seth, after he had taken off the fine edge of a remarkably healthy appetite, related to us between bites the story he had been sent down to tell. It was a long and complicated story as he told it, and even when it was finished we could not be quite sure that we had it right; but supposing that we had, it came to this:

Tom had worked faithfully on the Pelican, never having missed a day, and had earned a very considerable sum of money, of which he had, with commendable—and, for him, unusual—discretion, invested the greater part in a little house, putting by one hundred and fifty dollars for his own use during the coming summer. The fund reserved would have been sufficient to see him through the prospecting season had he stuck to it; but this was just what he had not done.

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Two years before, a friend of his had been killed in one of the mines by that most frequent of accidents: picking out a missed shot; since which time the widow, a bustling, hearty Irishwoman, had supported herself and her five children. But during the changeable weather of early spring, Mrs. Murphy had been taken down with a severe attack of pneumonia—a disease particularly dangerous at high altitudes—and distress reigned in the family. As a matter of course, Tom, ever on the lookout to do somebody a good turn, at once hopped in and took charge of everything; providing a doctor and a nurse for his old friend's widow, and seeing that the children wanted for nothing; and all with such success that he brought his patient triumphantly out of her sickness; while as for himself, when he modestly retired from the fray, he found that he was just as poor as he had been at the beginning of winter.

It is not to be supposed, however, that this worried Tom. Not a bit of it. It was unlucky, of course, but as it could not be helped there was no more to be said; and so long as he owned that house of his he could always raise one hundred and fifty dollars on it—it was worth three or four times as much, at least.

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As the prospecting season was now approaching, he therefore let it be known that he desired to raise this money, and then quietly went on with his work again, feeling confident that some one would presently make his appearance, cash in hand, anxious to secure so good a loan. Up to that morning, Seth believed, the expected capitalist had not turned up.

As the boy finished his story, and—with a sigh at having reached his capacity—his meal as well, my father rose from his chair, exclaiming:

"What a good fellow that is! When it comes to practical charity, Tom Connor leads us all. In fact, he is in a class by himself:—There is no Tom but Tom, and"—smiling at the little messenger—"Seth Appleby is his prophet—on this occasion."

At which Seth opened his eyes, wondering what on earth my father was talking about.

"Now, I'll tell you what we'll do," the latter continued. "Seth says his mother wants another thousand pounds of potatoes; so you shall take them up this afternoon, Phil; have a good talk with her; find out the rights of this matter; and then, if there is anything we can do to help, we can do it understandingly."

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I was very glad to do this, and with Seth on the seat beside me and his pony tied behind the wagon, away I went.

As I had permission to stay in town over night if I liked, and as Mrs. Appleby urged me to do so, saying that I could share Seth's room, I decided to accept her offer, and after supper we were seated in the store talking over Tom Connor's affairs—which I found to be just about as Seth had described them—when who should burst in upon us but Tom himself. Evidently my presence was a surprise to him, for on seeing me he exclaimed:

"Hallo, Phil! You here! Got my message, did you?"

"Yes," I replied, "we got it all right; and very much astonished we were."

Forthwith I tackled him on the subject, and though at first Tom was disposed to be evasive in his answers, finding that I had all the facts, he at length admitted the truth of the story.

"But, bless you!" cried he. "That's nothing. I can raise a hundred and fifty easy enough on my house and pay it off again next winter, so there's nothing to fuss about. And now, ma'am," turning to Mrs. Appleby, and abruptly cutting off any further discussion of the topic, "now, ma'am, I'll give you a little order for groceries, if you please—which was what I came in for." [Pg 178]

So saying, he took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and proceeded to read out item after item: flour and bacon, molasses and dried apples, a little tea and a great deal of coffee, and so on, and so on, until at last he crumpled up his list between his two big hands, saying:

"There! And we'll top off with a gallon of coal oil, if you please."

"Ah," said the widow, laying down her pencil—she was a slight, nervous little woman—"I was afraid you'd come to coal oil presently. I haven't a pint of it in the house."

"Well, that's a pity," said her customer. "Then I suppose I'll have to go down to Yetmore's for coal oil after all."

"Yes, Yetmore can let you have it, I know," replied the widow, in a tone of voice which caused us both to look at her inquiringly. [Pg 179]

"He's got a barrel of it," she continued. "A whole barrel of it—belonging to me."

"Eh! What's that?" cried Tom. "Belonging to you?"

"Yes. And he won't give it up. You see, it was this way. I ordered a barrel from the wholesale people in San Remo, and they sent it up two days ago. Here's the bill of lading. 'One barrel coal oil, No. 668, by Slaughter's freight line.' The freighters made a mistake and delivered it at Yetmore's, and now he won't give it up."

"Won't, eh!" cried Tom, with sudden heat. "We'll just look into that."

"It's no use," interposed Mrs. Appleby, holding up her hand deprecatingly. "You can't take it by force; and I've tried persuasion. He's got my barrel; there's no mistake about that, because Seth went down and identified the number; but he says he ordered a barrel himself from the same firm and it isn't his fault if they didn't put the right number on."

"Well, that's coming it pretty strong," said Tom, indignantly.

"Yes, and it's hard on me," replied the widow, "because people come in here for coal oil, and when they find I haven't any they go off to Yetmore's, and of course he gets the rest of their order. I might go to law," she added, "but I can't afford that; and by the time my case was settled Yetmore's barrel will have arrived and he'll send it over here and pretend to be sorry for the mistake." [Pg 180]

"I see. Well, ma'am, you put me down for a gallon of coal oil just the same, and get my order together as soon as you like. I'm going out now to take a bit of a stroll around town."

Though he spoke calmly, the big miner was, in fact, swelling with wrath at the widow's tale of petty tyranny. Without saying a word more to her, and forgetting my existence, apparently, he marched off down the street with the determination of going into Yetmore's and denouncing the storekeeper before his customers. But, no sooner had he come within sight of the store than he suddenly changed his mind.

"Ho, ho!" he laughed, stopping short and shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "Ho, ho! Here's a game! He keeps it in the back end of the store, I know. I'll just meander in and prospect a bit." [Pg 181]

The store was a long, plainly-constructed building, such as may be seen in plenty in any Colorado mining camp, standing on the hillside with its back to the creek. In front its foundation was level with the street, but in the rear it was supported upon posts four feet high, leaving a large vacant space beneath—a favorite "roosting" place for pigs. It was the sight of these four-foot posts which caused the widow's champion so suddenly to change his mind.

To tell the truth, Tom Connor, in spite of his forty years, was no more than an overgrown boy, in whose simple character the love of justice and the love of fun jostled each other for first place. He believed he had discovered an opportunity to "take a rise" out of Yetmore and at the same time to compel the misappropriator of other people's goods to restore the widow's property. That the contemplated act might savor of illegality did not trouble him—

did not occur to him, in fact. He was sure that he had justice on his side, and that was enough for him.

Full of his idea, Tom walked into the store, where he found Yetmore very busy serving customers, for it was near closing time, and to an inquiry as to what he wanted, he replied: [Pg 182]

“Nothing just now, thank ye. I’ll just mosey around and take a look at things.”

To this Yetmore nodded assent; for though he and the miner had no affection for each other, they were outwardly on good terms, and it was no unusual thing for Tom to come into the store.

Connor “moseyed” accordingly, and kept on “moseying” until he reached the back of the building, and there, standing upright against the rear wall, was the barrel, and beside it, mounted on a chair, a putty-faced boy, a stranger to Tom, who was busy boring a hole in the top of it.

“Trade pretty brisk?” inquired Connor, sauntering up.

“You bet,” replied the youth, laconically.

“What does ‘668’ stand for?” asked the miner, tapping the top of the barrel with his finger.

“That’s the number of the barrel,” was the reply. “The wholesalers down in San Remo always cut a number in their barrels when they send ‘em out.”

“Your boss must be a right smart business man to run a ‘stablishment like this,” remarked Tom, after a pause, glancing about the store. [Pg 183]

“That’s what,” replied the boy, admiringly. “You’ll have to get up early to get around the boss. Why, this barrel here——” He stopped short, as though suddenly remembering the value of silence, and screwing up one eye as if to indicate that he could tell things if he liked, he added, “Well, when the boss gets his hands on a thing he don’t let go easy, I tell you that.”

“Ah! Smart fellow, the boss.”

“You bet,” remarked the youth once more.

All this time Tom had been taking notes. The thin, unplastered wall of the store was constructed of upright planks with battens over the joints. It was pierced with one window; and Tom noted that between the edge of the window and the centre of the barrel were four boards. He noted also that the barrel stood firm and square upon the floor and that the floor itself was water-tight.

While he was making these observations, the boy finished his boring operation and having inserted a vent-peg in the hole, walked off. As soon as he was out of sight, Tom stepped up to the barrel, pulled out the vent-peg, dropped it into his pocket, and having done so, sauntered leisurely up the store again and went out. [Pg 184]

For a little while he hung around on the other side of the street and presently he had the satisfaction of seeing the lights in the store extinguished, soon after which Yetmore came out and locking the door behind him, walked away to his house.

“Ah! So the putty-faced boy sleeps in the store, does he?” remarked Tom to himself; a conclusion in which he was confirmed when he saw a candle lighted and the boy making up his bed under the counter. A few minutes later the candle was blown out, when Tom set off briskly up the street for the widow’s store.

He found Mrs. Appleby and Seth tidying up preparatory to closing the store, and stepping in, he said, “You don’t take in lodgers, I suppose, ma’am? I’m intending to stay down town to-night.”

“No, we don’t,” replied the widow. “The house is not large enough. But if you’ve nowhere to sleep, you’re welcome to make up a bed on the floor—I can let you have some blankets.”

“Thank ye, ma’am, I’ll be glad to do it, if you please.” [Pg 185]

Accordingly, after the widow had retired up-stairs to her room and Seth and I to ours, Tom spread his blankets on the floor and went to bed himself.

All was dark and silent when, at one o’clock in the morning, Tom sat up in bed, and after fumbling about for a minute, found a match and lighted a candle.

“Have to get up early to get around the boss, eh?” said he to himself, with a chuckle. “Wonder if this is early enough.”

In his stocking-feet he walked to the back door and opened it wide. After pausing for an instant to listen, he came back, and lifting the empty oil barrel from its stand he carried it outside. Next he selected two buckets, and having reached down from a high shelf a large funnel, an auger and a faucet, he carried them and his boots into the back yard, and having locked the door behind him, walked off into the darkness.

In a short time he reappeared, leading a horse, to which was harnessed a low wood-sled. Upon this sled he firmly lashed the barrel, and gathering up the other implements he took the horse by the bridle and led him away down the silent street; for the town of Sulphide as yet boasted neither a lighting system nor a police force—or, rather, the police force was accustomed to betake himself to bed with the rest of the community—so Tom had the dark and empty street entirely to himself.

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In a few minutes he drew up at the rear of Yetmore's store, where, leaving the horse standing, he proceeded to count four planks from the edge of the window. Having marked the right plank, he took the auger, and crawling beneath the store, set to work boring a hole up through the floor. Presently the auger broke through, coming with a thump against the bottom of the barrel above, when Tom withdrew the instrument, and taking out his knife enlarged the hole considerably.

So far, so good. Next he set a bucket beneath the hole, took the faucet between his teeth in order to have it handy, and inserting the auger, he set to, boring a hole in the bottom of the barrel. Soon the tool popped through, when Tom hastily substituted the faucet, which he drove firmly in with a blow of his horny palm.

The putty-faced boy inside the store stirred in his blankets, muttered something about "them pigs," and went to sleep again.

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Tom waited a moment to listen, and then drew off a bucket of oil. As soon as this was full he replaced it with the other bucket and emptied the first one into the barrel on the sled. This process he repeated until the oil began to dribble, when he carefully knocked out the faucet, and having collected his tools and emptied the last bucket into the barrel, he again took the horse by the bridle and silently led him away.

Arrived once more in the widow's back yard, Tom unshipped the barrel and went off to restore the horse to its stable. He soon returned, and having unlocked the back door and re-lighted his candle, he proceeded to get the barrel into the house and back upon its stand; a work of immense labor, rendered all the harder by the necessity of keeping silence. Tom was a man of great strength, however, and at last he had the satisfaction of seeing the barrel once more in its place without having heard a sound from the sleepers overhead. Having washed the buckets and tools, he put them back where they came from, locked the door, and for the second time that night went to bed.

It was about half-past six in the morning that Tom, happening to look out of the front window, saw Yetmore coming hurriedly up the street, like a hound following the trail of the sled. Stepping to the little window at the rear, Tom peeped out and saw the storekeeper enter the back yard, walk to the spot where the sled had stopped, and stand for a minute examining the marks in the soil. Having apparently satisfied himself, he turned about and went off down the street again.

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"What's he going to do about it, I wonder?" said Tom to himself. "Reckon I'll just mosey down to the store and see."

As he heard Seth coming down the stairs, he unlocked the front door and stepping outside, walked down to Yetmore's.

"Morning," said he, cheerfully. "It's a bit early for customers, I suppose, but I'm in a hurry this morning and I'd like to know whether you can let me have a gallon of coal oil."

"Sorry to say I can't," replied the storekeeper. "Our only barrel sprang a leak last night and every drop ran out."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Tom, with an air of concern. "Then I suppose I'll have to go up to the widow Appleby's. She's got plenty, I know."

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As he said this he looked hard at Yetmore, who in turn looked hard at him.

"Maybe," said the storekeeper presently, "maybe you know something about that leak?"

Tom nodded. "I do," said he. "I know *all* about it; and I'm the only one that does. I know the whole story, too, from one end to the other. The widow has got her barrel of oil; and you and I can make a sort of a guess as to how she got it. As to your barrel, it unfortunately sprung a leak. Is that the story?"

Yetmore stood for a minute glowering at the big miner, and then said, shortly, "That's the story."

"All right," replied Tom; and turning on his heel, he went out.

CHAPTER XI

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TOM'S SECOND WINDOW

Mrs. Appleby never did quite understand how her barrel of oil had been recovered for her. All she knew for certain was that her good friend, Mr. Connor, had somehow procured it from Yetmore, and that Yetmore was, as Mr. Connor said, "agreeable."

As for myself, when Tom that morning, taking me aside, related with many chuckles how he had occupied himself during the night, I must own that my only feeling was one of satisfaction at the thought that Yetmore had been made to restore the widow's property, and that the fear of ridicule would probably keep him silent on the subject. Sharing with most boys the love of fair play and the hatred of oppression, Tom's cleverness and promptness of action seemed to me altogether commendable.

Nevertheless, I foresaw one consequence of the transaction which, I thought, was pretty sure to follow, namely, that it would arouse in Yetmore an angry resolve to "get even" with Tom by hook or by crook. That he would resort to active reprisals if the opportunity presented itself I felt certain, and so I warned our friend. But Tom, careless as usual, refused to take any precautions, believing that Yetmore would not venture as long as he—Tom—had, as he expressed it, two such damaging shots in his magazine as the story of the lead boulder and the story of the oil barrel; on both of which subjects he had, with rare discretion, determined to keep silence unless circumstances should warrant their disclosure.

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It was not till I had reached home again and had jubilantly retailed the story to my father, that I began to understand how there might be yet another aspect to the matter. Instead of receiving it with a hearty laugh and a "Good for Tom," as I had anticipated, he shook his head and said:

"I'm sorry to hear it. Tom made a mistake that time. That Yetmore should be made to give up the barrel of oil is proper enough; but what right has Tom to appropriate to himself the duties of judge, jury and executive officer? It is just such cases as this that earn for the American people the reputation of a nation without respect for law. No. Tom meant well, I know, but in my opinion he made a mistake all the same."

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"I never thought of it in that light," said I; "so it is just as well, probably, that Tom didn't let me into the secret beforehand, because I'm afraid I should have been only too ready to help if he had asked me."

"Yes, it is just as well you were not given the choice, I expect," replied my father, smiling. "I'm glad Tom had the sense to take the whole responsibility on his own shoulders. Does he expect that Yetmore will be content to let the matter rest where it is?"

"He seems to think so; though he is such a heedless fellow that it wouldn't bother him much if he thought otherwise."

"Well, in my opinion he will do well to keep his eyes open. As I told you before, I think Yetmore's natural caution would prompt him to keep within the law, but it is not impossible now, Tom having set him the example—for one such transgression of the law is apt to breed another—that he will think himself justified in resorting to lawless measures in his turn; especially as he will have that fellow, Long John, jogging his elbow and whispering evil counsels in his ear all the time."

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How correct my father was in his presumption; how Long John did devise a scheme of retaliation; and how Joe and I inadvertently got our fingers into the pie, I shall have to relate in due course.

But though my father disapproved of Tom's action, that fact did not lessen his desire to help his friend when I had related to him how Tom had indeed spent all his savings on Mrs. Murphy and her family.

"What a good-hearted, harum-scarum fellow he is!" exclaimed my father. "He knows—in fact, no one knows better—that there is a possible fortune waiting for him somewhere up

here on Lincoln; he saves up all winter so that he may be free to go and hunt for it in the spring; yet at the first note of distress, away he runs and tumbles all his savings into Mrs. Murphy's lap, who, when all is said and done, has no real claim upon him, thus taking the risk of being stranded in town while Long John goes off and cuts him out. What are we going to do about it, boys? What can you suggest?"

"It would certainly be a shame," said Joe, "if Tom, by his act of charity, should put himself out of the running in the search for that vein of galena. Yet he will surely do so if he can't raise that money. And even if he should raise it, he might be late in getting it, in which case Long John would get the start of him." [Pg 194]

"That's the case in a nutshell," my father assented; "and, as I said before: What are we going to do about it?"

"Why——" Joe began; and then he suddenly jumped up and coming across the room he whispered something in my ear. I replied with a nod; whereupon Joe returned to his chair, and addressing my father once more, said:

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Mr. Crawford. Phil and I made forty dollars last fall cutting timbers—it was Tom who got us our order, too—and we have it still. We'll put that in—eh, Phil?—if it will be any use."

"Yes," said I. "Gladly."

"Good!" exclaimed my father. "Then that settles it. Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll add sixty dollars to it—that is all I can afford just now—and you two shall ride back to Sulphide this afternoon, give Tom the money, and tell him he shall have fifty more in a couple of months if he needs it. And tell him at the same time that he needn't go mortgaging his little house. We don't want security from Tom Connor: we know him too well. I'd rather have his word than some men's bond. You shall ride up to see him this afternoon, and you needn't hurry back to-day; for that rain of last night has made the ground too wet to continue plowing; and, if I'm not mistaken, we're in for another storm to-night, in which case the soil won't be in condition again for two or three days." [Pg 195]

I need hardly say that Joe and I were delighted to undertake this mission, and about four o'clock we reached Mrs. Appleby's, where we put up our ponies in her stable. Then, as Tom would not be quitting work for another hour, instead of going direct to his house, we climbed up to the Pelican, intending to catch him there and walk home with him.

Presently arriving at the great white dump of bleached porphyry to which the citizens of Sulphide were accustomed to point with pride as an indication of the immense amount of work it had taken to make the Pelican the important mine it was, we scrambled up to the engine-house, where for some minutes we stood watching the busy engine as it whirled to the surface the buckets of waste. Then, stepping over to the mouth of the shaft, we paused again to watch the top-men as they emptied the big buckets into the car and trundled the car itself to the edge of the dump, upset it, and trundled it back again for more. [Pg 196]

As we stood there, a miner came up, and stepping out of the cage, nodded to us in passing.

"Want anybody, boys?" he asked.

"We're waiting for Tom Connor," I replied. "He's down below, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's down in the fifth. I'll take you down there if you like. I'm going back in a minute."

"What do you think, Joe?" I asked.

"Yes, let's go," my companion replied. "I've never been inside a mine, and I should like to see one."

"All right," said the miner. "Come over here to the dressing-room and I'll give you a lamp and a couple of slickers. It's a bit wet down there."

Joe and I were soon provided with water-proof coats, and in company with our new friend we stepped into the cage, when the miner, shutting the door behind us, called out to the engineer, "Fifth level, McPherson," and instantly the floor of the cage seemed to drop from under us. After a fall of several miles, as it appeared to us, the cage stopped, when, peering through the wire lattice-work, we saw before us a dark passage, upon one side of which hung a white board with a big "5" painted upon it. [Pg 197]

"Here you are," said the miner, stepping out of the cage and handing us a lighted lamp. "Just walk straight along this drift about three hundred feet—it's all plain sailing—and you'll find Tom Connor at work there. I'm going on down to the seventh myself."

With that he stepped back into the cage, rang the bell, and vanished, leaving us standing there eyeing each other a little dubiously at finding ourselves left to our own guidance, four hundred feet below the surface of the earth.

"I hadn't reckoned on that," said I. "I thought he was coming with us."

"So did I," replied Joe. "But it doesn't really matter. All we have to do is to walk along this passage; so let's go ahead."

That our obliging friend had been right when he stated that it was "a bit wet" down here was evident, for the drops of water from the roof of the drift kept pattering upon our slickers, and presently, when we had advanced something over half the distance, one of them fell plump upon the flame of our lamp and put it out! [Pg 198]

We stopped short, not knowing what pitfalls there might be ahead of us, and each felt in all his pockets for a match. We had none! Never anticipating any such contingency as this, we had ventured into this black hole without a match in our possession.

I admit that we were scared—the darkness was so very dark and the silence so very silent—but fortunately it was only for a moment. Standing stock still, for, indeed, we dared not move, we shouted for Tom, when, to our infinite relief, we heard his familiar voice call out:

"Hallo, there! That you, Patsy? I'm coming. Does the boss want me?"

The next moment a light appeared moving towards us, and as soon as we could safely do so we advanced to meet it.

"How are you, Tom?" we both cried, simultaneously, assuming an off-hand manner, as though we had not been scared a bit.

Tom stopped, not recognizing us for a moment, and then exclaimed: [Pg 199]

"Hallo, boys! What are you doing down here? Who brought you down?"

We told him how we came to be there, and how our lamp had gone out; at which Tom shook his head.

"Well, it was certainly a smart trick to send you down into this wet hole and not even see that you had a match in your pocket. What would you have done if I'd happened to have left the drift?"

The very idea gave me cold chills all down my back.

"We should have been badly scared, Tom, and that's a fact," I replied; "but I hope we should have kept our heads. I believe we should have sat down where we were and shouted till somebody came."

"Well, that would have been the best thing you could do, though you might have had to shout a pretty long time, for there is nobody working in this level just now but me, and, as a matter of fact, I should have left it myself in another five minutes. But it's all right as it happens; so now you can come along with me. I'm going out the other way through Yetmore's ground." [Pg 200]

"Yetmore's ground?" exclaimed Joe, inquiringly.

"Yes, Yetmore is working the old stopes of the Pelican on a lease—it is one of his many ventures. In the early days of the camp mining was conducted much more carelessly than it is now; freight and smelter charges were a good bit higher, too, so that a considerable amount of ore of too low grade to ship then was left standing in the stopes. Yetmore is taking it out on shares. His ground lies this way. Come on."

So saying, Tom led the way to the end of the drift, where, going down upon his hands and knees, he crawled through a man-hole, coming out into a little shaft which he called a "winze." Ascending this by a short ladder, we found ourselves in the old, abandoned workings, and still following our guide, we presently walked out into the daylight—greatly to our surprise.

"Why, where have we got to, Tom?" cried Joe, as we stared about us, not recognizing our surroundings.

Tom laughed. "This is called Stony Gulch," he replied. "The mine used to be worked through this tunnel where we just came out, but the tunnel isn't used now except temporarily by Yetmore's men. He only runs a day shift and at night he closes the place with that big door and locks it up. The Pelican buildings are just over the hill here, and we may as well go up at once: it will be quitting-time by the time we get there." [Pg 201]

We climbed over the hill, therefore, and having restored our slickers, went on with Tom down to his little cottage, which was only about a quarter of a mile from the mine.

It was not until we were inside his house that we explained to Tom the object of our visit, at the same time handing over to him my father's check for one hundred dollars. The good fellow was quite touched by this very simple token of good-will on our part; for, though he was ever ready to help others, it seemed never to have occurred to him that others might like sometimes to help him.

This little bit of business being settled, we all pitched in to assist in getting supper ready, and presently we were seated round Tom's table testing the result of our cookery. As we sat there, Joe, pointing to a window-sash and some planed and fitted lumber which stood leaning against the wall, asked:

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"What are you going to do with that, Tom? Put in a second window?"

"Yes," replied our host. "And I was intending to do it this evening. You can help me now you're here. The stuff is all ready; all we have to do is to cut the hole in the wall and slap it in. It's just one sash, not intended to open and shut, so it's a simple job enough."

"Where does it go?" asked Joe.

"There, on the right-hand side of the door. Old man Snyder, in the next house west, put one in some time ago, and it's such an improvement that I decided to do the same. We'll step out presently and look at Snyder's, and then you'll see. Hallo! Come in!"

This shout was occasioned by a tapping at the door, and in response to Tom's call there stepped in a tall miner, whom I recognized as George Simpson, one of the Pelican men.

"Come in, George," cried our host. "Come in and have some supper. What's new?"

"No, I won't take any supper, thank ye," replied the miner. "I must get along home. I just dropped in to speak to you. You know Arty Burns?—works on the night shift? Well, Arty's sick. When he came up to the mine to-night he was too sick to stand, so I packed him off home again and told him to go to bed where he belonged and I'd see to it that somebody went on in his place, so that he shouldn't lose his job. I'm proposing to work half his shift for him myself, and I want to find somebody——"

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"All right, George," Connor cut in. "I'll take the other half. Which do you want? First or second?"

"Second, if it's all the same to you, Tom. If I don't get home first my old woman will think there's something the matter. So, if you don't mind, you can go on first and I'll relieve you at half-time."

"All right, George, then I'll get out at once. You boys can wash up, if you will; and you'll find a mattress and plenty of blankets in the back room. I'll be back soon after eleven."

With that, carrying a lantern in his hand, for it was getting dark, away he went; while the miner hurried off across lots for town; neither of them, apparently, thinking it anything out of the way to do a full day's work and then, instead of taking his well-earned rest, to go off and do another half-day's work in order to "hold the job" for a third man, to whom neither of them was under any obligation.

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Nor *was* it anything out of the way; for the silver-miners of Colorado, whatever their faults, did in those days, and probably do still, exercise towards their fellows a practical charity which might well be counted to cover a multitude of sins.

"Look here, Phil!" exclaimed my companion, after we had washed and put away the dishes. "I'll tell you what we'll do. Let's pitch in and put in Tom's second window for him!"

"Good idea!" I cried. "We'll do it! Let's go out first, though, Joe, and take a look at old Snyder's house, so that we may see what effect Tom expects to get."

"Come on, then!"

The row of six little houses, of which Tom's was the third, counting from the west, had been one of Yetmore's speculations. They were situated on the southern outskirts of town, and were mostly occupied by miners working on the Pelican. Each house was an exact counterpart of every other, they having been built by contract all on one pattern. Each had a room in front and a room behind; one little brick chimney; a front door with two steps; and a window on the right-hand side of the door as you faced the house. All were painted the same color.

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Yetmore having secured the land, had laid it out as "Yetmore's Addition" to the town of

Sulphide; had marked out streets and alleys, and had built the six houses as a starter, hoping thereby to draw people out there. But as yet his building-lots were a drug in the market: they were too far out; there being a vacant space of a quarter of a mile or thereabouts between them and the next nearest houses in town. The streets themselves were undistinguishable from the rest of the country, being merely marked out with stakes and having had no work whatever expended upon them.

The six houses, built about three hundred feet apart, all faced north—towards the town—and being so far apart and all so precisely alike, it was absolutely impossible for any one coming from town on a dark night to tell which house was which. Not even the tenants themselves, coming across the vacant lots after nightfall, could tell their own houses from those of their neighbors; and consequently it was a common event for one of the sleepy inmates, stirred out of bed by a knock at the door, to find a belated citizen outside inquiring whether this was his house or somebody else's. Not infrequently they neglected to knock first, and walking straight in, found themselves, to their great embarrassment, in the wrong house.

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Old man Snyder, a somewhat irritable old gentleman, having been thus disturbed two nights in succession, determined that he would no longer subject himself to the nuisance. He bought a single sash and inserted a second window on the other side of his door; a device which not only saved him from intrusion, but served as a guide to his neighbors in finding their own houses. It was also a very obvious improvement, and we did not wonder that Tom Connor had determined to follow his neighbor's example.

Old Snyder's house was the second from the western end of the street, Tom Connor's, three hundred feet distant, came next, while next to Tom's, another three hundred feet away, was a house which still belonged to Yetmore and was at that moment standing empty.

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You will wonder, very likely, why I should go into all these details, but you will cease to wonder, I think, when you see presently of what transcendent importance to Joe and me was the situation of these three houses.

Joe and I, laying hands on our host's kit of tools, at once went to work on the window. As Tom had said, it was a simple job, and though it was something of a handicap to work by lamplight, we went at it so vigorously that by nine o'clock we had completed our task—very much to our satisfaction.

Stepping outside to observe the effect, we saw that old Snyder's windows were lighted up also; but we had hardly noted that fact when his light went out.

"The old fellow goes to bed early, Joe," said I.

"Yes," Joe replied; and then, with a sudden laugh, added: "My wig, Phil! I hope there won't be anybody coming out from town to-night. If they do, there'll be complications. They will surely be taking our two windows for old Snyder's, for, now that his light is out, you can't see his house at all."

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"That's a fact," said I. "If Snyder's right-hand neighbor should come out across the flats to-night he would see our two windows, and, supposing them to be Snyder's windows, he would be almost sure to go blundering into the old fellow's house. My! How mad he would be!"

"Wouldn't he! And any one coming out to visit Tom would pretty certainly go and pound on the door of the empty house to the left."

"Well, let us hope that nobody does come out," said I. "Come on, now, Joe. Let's get back. It's going to rain pretty soon."

"Yes; your father was right when he predicted more rain. It's going to be a biggish one, I should think. How dark it is! I don't wonder people find a difficulty in telling which house is which when all the lights are out. Here it comes now. Step out, Phil."

As he spoke, a blast of wind from the mountains struck us, and a few needles of cold rain beat against our right cheeks.

We were soon inside again, when, having shut our door, we sat down to a game of checkers, in which we became so absorbed that we failed to note the lapse of time until Tom's dollar clock, hanging on the wall, banged out the hour of ten.

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"To bed, Joe!" I cried, springing out of my chair. "Why, we haven't been up so late for weeks."

Stepping into the back room, we soon had mattress and blankets spread upon the floor, when, quickly undressing, I crept into bed, while Joe, returning to the front room, blew out

the light.

Five minutes later we were both asleep, with a comfortable consciousness that we had done a good evening's work; though we little suspected how good an evening's work it really was. For it is hardly too much to say that had we *not* put in Tom's second window that night we might both have been dead before morning.

CHAPTER XII

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TOM CONNOR'S SCARE

When Long John Butterfield (it was Yetmore himself who told us all this long afterwards) when Long John, returning from his day's prospecting up among the foot-hills of Mount Lincoln, had related to his employer the result of his labors, two conclusions instantly presented themselves to the worthy mayor of Sulphide. A man less acute than Yetmore would have understood at once that we had discovered the nature of the black sand in the pool, and that just as he had sent out Long John, so my father had sent out us boys to determine, if possible, which stream it was that had brought down the powdered galena.

Moreover, knowing my father as he did—whose opinions on prospecting as a business were no secret in the community—Yetmore was sure that it was in the interest of Tom Connor we had been sent out; and it was equally plain to him that, such being the case, Tom's information on the subject would be just as good as his own. He was, of course, unaware that our information was in reality a good deal better than his own, thanks to the hint given us by our friend, Peter, as to the deposit at the head of Big Reuben's gorge.

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Knowing all this, Yetmore had no doubt that Tom would be starting out the moment the foot-hills were bare, and as Long John could do no more—for it was obviously useless to start before the ground was clear—it would result in a race between the two as to who should get out first and keep ahead of the other; in which case Tom's chances would be at least equal to his competitor's.

But was there no way by which Tom Connor might be delayed in starting, if only for a day or two? That was the question; and very earnestly it was discussed between the pair.

Vain, however, were their discussions; they could think of no way of keeping Tom in town. For, though Long John threw out occasional hints as to how *he* would manage it, if his employer would only give him leave, his schemes always suggested the use of unlawful means of one sort or another, and Yetmore would have none of them; for he had at least sufficient respect for the law to be afraid of it.

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A gleam of hope appeared when it was rumored about town that Tom Connor was trying to raise money on his house; a rumor which Yetmore very quickly took pains to verify. In this he had no trouble whatever, for everybody knew the circumstances, and everybody, Yetmore found, was loud in his praises of Tom's self-sacrifice in spending his hard-earned savings for the benefit of Mrs. Murphy and her distressed family.

The fact that his rival was out of funds caused Yetmore to rub his hands with glee. Here, indeed, was a possible chance to keep him tied up in town. It all depended upon his being able to prevent Tom from securing the loan he sought, and diligently did the storekeeper canvass one plan after another in his own mind—but still in vain. The sum desired was so moderate that some one would almost surely be found to advance it.

While his schemes were still fermenting in his head, there came late one night a knock at his door—it was the very night that Tom Connor went boring for oil—and Long John Butterfield slipped into the house. Long John, too, had heard of Tom's necessities; he, too, had perceived the value of the opportunity; and being untrammelled by any respect for law as long as there was little likelihood that the law would find him out, he had devised in his own mind a plan which would promptly and effectually prevent Tom from raising any money on his house.

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**“CAN FOLKS SEE IN FROM
OUTSIDE?”**

This plan he had now come to suggest to his employer.

“Any one in the house with you, Mr. Yetmore?” he inquired.

“No, John, I’m all alone. Come in. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I just wanted to talk to you, and I didn’t want anybody listening, that’s all. Can folks see in from outside?”

“No, not while the curtains are drawn. Come on in. What’s all this mystery about?”

Long John entered, and sitting down close to his friend, he began, speaking in a low tone:

“You’ve heard about Tom Connor trying to raise money on his house, o’ course? Well, I can stop him, if you say so. Any one can see what Tom wants the money for. He’ll get that hundred and fifty, sure, and then off he’ll go. He’s a thorough good prospector, better’n me, and with equal chances the betting will be in his favor. If there’s a big vein, there’s a big fortune for the finder, and it’s for you to say whether Tom Connor is to get a shot at it or not.”

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Long John paused a moment, and then, emphasizing each point with an extended finger, he continued: “Without money Tom can’t move—that’s sure; he’s strapped just now—that’s sure; and his only way of getting the cash is by raising it on that house of his—and that’s sure. Now, Mr. Yetmore, you say the word and he shan’t get it. No personal violence that you’re always objecting to. Just the simplest little move; nobody hurt and nobody the wiser.”

Yetmore gazed at him earnestly for a few moments, and then said: “It’s against the law, I suppose.”

“Oh, yes,” replied Long John, with a careless shrug of his shoulders. “It’s against the law all right; but what does that matter to you? I’m the one to do the job, and I’m the only one the law can touch, if it can touch any one; and I don’t mean that it shall touch me. It’s safe and it’s sure.”

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“Well, John, what is it?”

Long John rose from his chair, leaned forward, and whispered in the other’s ear a little sentence of five words.

For a moment Yetmore gazed open-eyed at his henchman, then suddenly turned pale, then shook his head.

“I daren’t, John,” said he. “It’s a simple plan and it looks safe; and even if it were found out

it would be about impossible for the law to prove anything against me, whatever it might do to you. But it isn't the law I'm afraid of—it's the people. Tom Connor has always been a favorite, and just now he is more of a favorite than ever, and if it should be found out, or even suspected, that I had any part in such a deed my business would be ruined: the whole population would turn their backs upon me. I daren't do it, John."

"Well, boss," said Long John, with an air of resignation, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and thrusting out his long legs to the fire, "if you won't, you won't, I suppose; but it seems to me you're a bit over-timorous. Who's to suspect, anyhow?"

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"Who's to suspect!" exclaimed Yetmore, sharply. "Why, Tom Connor, himself, and old Crawford and those two meddling boys of his. They'd not only suspect—they'd know that you had done the job and that I'd paid you for it. And if they should go around telling their version of the story, everybody would believe them and nothing I could say would count against them; for they've all of them, worse luck, got the reputation of being as truthful as daylight, while, as for me——"

Long John laughed. "As for you, you haven't, eh? Well, Mr. Yetmore, it's for you to say, of course, but it seems to me you're missing the chance of a lifetime. Anyhow, my offer stands good, and if you change your mind you've only got to wink at me and I'll trump Tom Connor's ace for him so sudden he'll be dizzy for a week."

With that, Long John arose, slipped out of the house and sneaked off home by a back alley, leaving Yetmore pacing up and down his room with his hands behind him, thinking over and over again what would be the result if he should authorize Long John to go ahead.

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"No," said he at last, as he took up the lamp to go to bed, "I daren't. It's a good idea, simple, sure and probably safe, but I daren't risk it. No. Law or no law, the public would be down on me for certain. I must think up some other scheme."

Though he thus dismissed the subject from his mind, as he believed, the idea still lurked in the corners of his brain in spite of himself, and when at six in the morning he awoke, there was the little black imp sitting on the pillow, as it were, waiting to go on with the discussion.

Yetmore, however, brushed aside the tempter, jumped into his clothes and walked off to the store, where he found the putty-faced boy anxiously awaiting his appearance in order that he himself might be off to his breakfast.

"Pht!" exclaimed the proprietor, the moment he set foot inside the store. "What's this smell of coal oil?"

"I don't smell it," replied the boy.

"You don't! Hm! I suppose you've got used to it. Well, get along to your breakfast."

As the boy ran off, Yetmore walked to the back of the building. Here the scent was so strong that he was convinced the barrel must be leaking, so, seizing hold of it, he gave a mighty heave, when the empty barrel came away in his hands, as the saying is. He almost fell over.

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To ascertain the nature of the leak was the work of a moment; to trail the sled to Mrs. Appleby's back yard was the work of five minutes; but having done this, Yetmore was at fault, for, knowing well enough that neither the widow nor her son were capable of such an undertaking, he was at a loss to imagine who the culprit might be.

It was only when Tom Connor a minute later stepped into the store and arranged that story of the leaky oil-barrel which he had described as being "agreeable" to Yetmore, that the storekeeper arrived at a true understanding of the whole matter. To say that he was enraged would be to put it too mildly, and, as always seems to be the case, the fact that he, himself, had been in the wrong to begin with, only exasperated him the more.

The result was what any one might have expected.

Hardly had Connor turned the corner out of sight, than there appeared, "snooping" up the street, that sheep in wolf's clothing, Long John Butterfield. Instantly Yetmore's resolution was taken. Seizing a broom, he stepped outside and made pretense to sweep the sidewalk, and as Long John, with a casual nod, sauntered past, the angry storekeeper caught his eye and whispered:

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"I've reconsidered. Go ahead."

"Bully for you," replied the other in a low tone; and passed on.

No one would have guessed that in that brief instant a criminal act had been arranged. Nor did Tom Connor, as he went chuckling up the street, guess that by his lawless recovery of the widow's property he had given Yetmore the excuse he longed for to defy the law himself. Least of all did any of them—not even Long John—guess that between them they were to come within an ace of snuffing out the lives of two innocent outsiders, namely, Joe Garnier and myself. Yet such was the case. It was only the accidental putting in of Tom's second window that saved us.

Long John, being authorized to proceed, at once made his preparations, which were simple enough, and all he wanted now was an opportunity. By an unlooked-for chance, which, with his perverted sense of right and wrong, seemed to him to be providential, his opportunity turned up that very night.

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The miner, George Simpson, hastening homeward from Connor's house, happened to overtake Long John in the street, and as he passed gave him a friendly "Good-night."

"Good-night," said John. "You're late to-night, aren't you?"

"Yes, a bit late. One of our men's sick, and I've been fixing things so's he won't lose his job. Tom Connor and I are going to work his shift for him."

"So!" cried Long John, with sudden interest. "Which half do you take?"

"The second. Tom's gone off already, and I'm going to relieve him at eleven. So I must be getting along: I want my supper and two or three hours' sleep."

So Tom would be out of his house till eleven o'clock! Such a chance might never occur again. Long John hastened home at once and got everything ready.

As it would not do to start too early, because people might be about, John waited till nearly ten o'clock, and then sallied out. As he rounded the corner of his shack a furious blast of wind, driving the rain before it, almost knocked him over.

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"Good!" he exclaimed. "There won't be a soul out o' doors to-night."

With his head bent to the storm and his hat pulled down over his ears, John made his way through alleys and bye-streets to the edge of town, and then set off across the intervening empty space towards the house where Joe and I were at that moment playing our last game of checkers. As he approached, he saw dimly through the blur of rain the light of two windows.

"Good!" he exclaimed a second time. "Old Snyder not gone to bed yet. Mighty kind of the old gent to leave his light burning for me to steer by. If it hadn't been for him I'd 'a' had a job to tell which was the right house. As it is, I've borne more to the right than I thought."

At this moment the town clock struck ten, and almost immediately afterwards the light in the windows went out.

"Never mind," remarked John to himself. "I know where I am now."

Advancing a little further, he caught sight of the dim outline of the house through the rain, and turning short to his left, he measured off one hundred steps along the empty street, a distance which brought him opposite the next house to the east.

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All was dark and silent, as he had expected, but to make sure he approached the house and thumped upon the door. There was no reply. Again he thumped and struck the door sharply with the handle of his knife. Silence!

"He's out all right," muttered John. "Was there ever such a lucky chance? Howling wind, driving rain, dark as the ace of spades, and Tom Connor not coming back for an hour!"

Dark it surely was. The night was black. Not a glimmer of light in any direction. Even the town itself, only a quarter-mile away, seemed to have been blotted from the face of the earth.

As he had noticed in coming across the flats that there were lights still burning in two of the other houses, the patient plotter, in order to give the inmates a chance to get to bed and to sleep, sat waiting on the leeward side of the building for a full half hour. At the end of that time, however, he arose, moved along a few steps, and then, going down on his hands and knees, crept under the house. Ten minutes later he came crawling out again, feet foremost. Once outside, he struck a match, and sheltering it in his cupped hands he applied the flame to the end of something which looked like a long, stiff cord about as thick as a lead pencil. Presently there was a sharp "spit" from the ignited "cord," blowing out the match and causing John to shake his hand with a gesture of pain, as though it had been

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scorched.

Next moment Long John sprang to his feet and fled away into the darkness; not straight across lots as he had come, but by a roundabout way which would bring him into town from the eastern side.

Then, for two minutes, except for the roaring of the wind, all was silence.

Joe and I were sound asleep on the floor of Tom's back room, when by a single impulse we both sprang out of bed with an irrepressible cry of alarm, and stood for a moment trembling and clinging to each other in the darkness. The sound of a frightful explosion was ringing in our ears!

"What was it, Joe?" I cried. "Which direction?"

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"I don't know," my companion replied. "I hope it isn't an accident up at the Pelican. Let's get into our clothes, Phil."

Lighting the lamp, we quickly dressed, and putting on our hats and overcoats we went out into the storm. All was dark, except that in the windows of each of the occupied houses in the row we could see a light shining. The whole street had been roused up.

"It must have been a powder-magazine," Joe shouted in my ear. "Or else the boiler in the engine-house of the Pelican. What do you say, Phil? Shall we go up there? We might be able to help."

"Yes, come on!" I cried. "Let's go and see first, though, if Tom hasn't a second lantern. We shall save time by it if he has."

Our hurried search for a lantern was vain, however, so we determined to set off without one. As we closed the door behind us, our clock struck eleven, and a moment later we heard faintly the eleven o'clock whistle up at the Pelican.

"Good!" cried Joe. "It isn't the boiler blown up, anyhow, so Tom's safe; for he is working underground and the explosion, whatever it was, was on the surface."

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With bent heads we pushed our way against the wind, until, looking up presently, I saw the light of a lantern coming quickly towards us.

"Here's Tom, Joe," I shouted. "Pull up!"

We stopped, and as the light swiftly approached we detected the beating footsteps of a man running furiously.

"Then there is an accident!" cried Joe. "Ho, Tom! That you?" he shouted.

It was Tom, who, suddenly stopping, held the lantern high, looking first at one and then at the other of us. He was still in his miner's cap and slicker, his face was as white as a ghost's, and he was so out of breath that for a moment he could not speak.

"Hurt, Tom?" I cried, in alarm.

"No,"—with a gasp.

"Anybody hurt?"

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"Scared!" And then, still panting violently: "Come to the house," said he.

Once inside, I brought Tom a dipper of water, which quickly restored him, when, turning his still blanched face towards us, he said:

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"Boys, I've had the worst scare of my life!"

"How, Tom?" I asked. "That explosion? Was it up at the Pelican?"

"No, it wasn't; and I didn't know anything about it until I came up at eleven, when George, who was waiting to go on, told me there had been a heavy explosion down in the direction of my house. When he told me that, there rushed into my head all of a sudden an idea which nearly knocked me over—it was like a blow from a hammer. I grabbed the lantern, which I had just lighted, and ran for it. Can you guess what I expected to find?"

We shook our heads.

"I expected to find my house blown to pieces, and you two boys lying dead out in the rain!"

We stared at him in amazement.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Look here, boys," Tom went on. "When George Simpson told me there had been an explosion down this way, it came into my head all at once that Yetmore or Long John—probably Long John—had heard that I was out at work to-night, and not knowing that you were staying the night with me, had come and wrecked my house."

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"But why should they?" Joe asked.

"So as to prevent my raising money on it, and so keep me tied up in town while they skipped out to look for that vein of galena. I'm glad to find I was wrong. I did 'em an in——"

He stopped short, and following his gaze, we saw that he was staring at the second window.

"When did you put that in?" he cried.

"Just after you left. We finished by nine o'clock."

"How soon did you go to bed?"

"Just after ten."

"Come with me!" cried Tom, springing from his chair and seizing the lantern. "I know what's happened now!"

With us two close at his heels, he led the way to the spot where Yetmore's empty house had stood. Not a vestige of it remained, except the upper part of the chimney, which lay prone in the great hole dug out by the violence of the explosion.

"Boys," said Tom, in a tone of unusual gravity, "if you live a hundred years you'll never have a narrower squeak than you've had to-night. If Long John did this—and I'm pretty sure he did—he meant to blow up my house, but being misled by those two windows, he has blown up Yetmore's house instead. You never did, and I doubt if you ever will do, a better stroke of work in your lives than when you put in my second window!"

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CHAPTER XIII

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THE ORE-THEFT

At half past five next morning Joe and I slipped out of bed, leaving Tom Connor, who had to go to work again at seven, still fast asleep. While Joe quietly prepared breakfast, I went out to examine by daylight the scene of last night's explosion.

The first discovery I made was the imprint in the mud of footsteps, half obliterated by the rain. The tracks were very large and very far apart, proving that the owner of the boots that made them was a big man, and that he had gone off at a great pace; a discovery which tended to confirm in my mind Tom's guess that it was indeed Long John who had done the mischief.

At this moment the tenant of the house next to the east came out—Hughy Hughes was his name; a Welshman—and as he walked towards me I saw him stoop to pick up something.

"That was a rascally piece of work, wasn't it?" said he, as he joined me. "Scared us 'most to death, it did. See, here's the fuse he used. I just picked it up; fifteen feet of it. Wonder who the fellow was. Pretty state of things when folks take to blowing up each other's houses. Like enough Yetmore has his enemies, but it's a pretty mean enemy as 'd try to get even by any such scalawag trick as this."

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This speech enlightened me as to what would be the general theory regarding the outrage. It would be set down as an act of revenge on the part of some enemy of Yetmore's; and so Tom and Joe thought, too, when I went back to the house and told them about it.

"That'll be the theory, all right," said Tom. "And as far as I see, we may as well let it go at that. We have no evidence to present, and it would look rather like malice on our part if we were to charge Long John with blowing his best friend's house to pieces just because we happen to suspect him of it. And so, I guess, boys, we may as well lay low for the present: we shan't do any good by putting forward our own theories.

"I dare say," he went on, after a moment's reflection, "I dare say, if we were to go around

telling what we thought and why we thought it, we might influence public opinion; but, when you come to think of it, we have no real proof; so we'll just hold our tongues. Are you in a hurry to get home?"

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"No," I replied. "We shan't be able to plow for two days at the very least, so there is nothing to hurry home for."

"Well, then," said Tom, "I'll tell you what I wish you'd do. I must go back to work in a few minutes, but I wish you two would go down town and hear what folks have to say about this business, and then come back here and have dinner with me at twelve. Will you?"

"All right," said I. "We'll do that."

We found the town in a great state of excitement. Everybody was talking about the explosion, which, as the newspaper said, "would cast a blight upon the fair fame of Sulphide." Yetmore's store was crowded with people, shaking hands with him and expressing their indignation at the outrage; the universal opinion being, as we had anticipated, that some miscreant had done it out of revenge.

Joe and I, squeezing in with the rest, presently found ourselves near the counter, when Yetmore, catching my eye, nodded to me and said:

"How are you, Phil? I didn't know you were in town."

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"Yes," said I, "we came in last evening and spent the night in Tom Connor's house."

Yetmore started and turned pale.

"In Tom Connor's house?" he repeated, huskily.

"Yes," I replied. "We were asleep in his back room when that explosion woke us up."

At this Yetmore stared at me for a moment, and then, as he realized how narrowly he had missed being party to a murder, he turned a dreadful white color, staggered, and I believe might have fallen had he not sat himself down quickly upon a sack of potatoes.

A draft of water soon brought back his color, when, addressing the sympathizing crowd, Yetmore said:

"It made me feel a bit sick to think what chances these boys ran last night. Every one knows how hard it is to tell those houses apart; and that fellow might easily have made a mistake and blown up Tom Connor's house on one side or Hughy Hughes' on the other."

"Yes," said I; "and all the more so as Joe and I last evening put a second window into Tom's house, so that any one coming across lots after dark might just as well have taken Tom's house for old Snyder's."

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"Phew!" whistled one of the men in the crowd. "Then it's Hughy Hughes that's to be congratulated. If that rascal *had* made such a mistake, and had chosen the second house from Tom's instead of the second house from Snyder's we'd have been making arrangements for six funerals about now. Hughy has four children, hasn't he?"

I could not help feeling sorry for Yetmore. Convinced as I was that he had at least connived in a plot to destroy Tom's house, I felt sure that he had been far from intending personal injury to any one; and I felt sure, too, that he was thoroughly sincere, when, rising from his seat and addressing the assemblage, he said:

"Men, I'm sorry to lose my house, of course—that goes without saying—but when I think of what might have happened it doesn't trouble me that much"—snapping his finger and thumb. "I tell you, men, I'm downright thankful it was *my* house that was blown up and nobody else's."

As he said this he looked at Joe and me, and I felt convinced that it was to us and not to the assembled throng that he addressed his remark. The people, however, not knowing what we did, loudly applauded the magnanimity of the sentiment, and many of them pressed forward to shake hands again.

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Yetmore had never been so popular as he was at that moment. Everybody sympathized with him over his loss; everybody admired the dignified way in which he accepted it; and everybody would have been delighted to hear that some compensating piece of good fortune had befallen him.

Strange to say, at that very moment that very thing happened.

Suddenly we were all attracted by a distant shouting up the street. Looking through the

front window, we saw that all the people outside had turned and were gazing in that direction. By one impulse everybody in the store surged out through the doorways, when we saw, still some distance away, a man running down the middle of the street, waving his cap and shouting some words we could not distinguish. We were all on tiptoe with expectation.

At length the man approached, broke through the group, ran up to Yetmore, who was standing on his door-step, shook hands with him, and then turning round, he shouted out: [Pg 235]

“Great strike in the Pelican, boys! In the old workings above the fifth—Yetmore’s lease. One of those pockets of tellurium that’s never been known to run less than twenty thousand to the ton. Hooray for Yetmore!”

The shout that went up was genuinely hearty. Once more the mayor was mobbed by his enthusiastic fellow citizens and once more he shook hands till his arm ached—during which proceeding Joe and I slipped away.

We had not gone far when I heard my name called, and turning round I saw a man on horseback who handed me a letter.

“I’ve just come up through your place,” said he, “and your father asked me to give you this if I should see you.”

The note was to the effect that the rain had been heavy on the ranch, no plowing was possible, and so we were to stay in town that day and come down on the morrow after the mail from the south came in, as he was expecting an important letter, and it would thus save another trip up and down.

We were glad enough to do this, so, making our way up the street past the knots of people, all talking over and over again the two exciting topics of the day, we retraced our steps to Tom’s house, where we got ready the dinner against Tom’s return. Shortly after twelve he came in, when we related to him what we had learned in town; demanding in our turn particulars of the great strike. [Pg 236]

“It’s a rich strike, all right,” said Tom, “but there isn’t much of it—about five hundred pounds—just a pocket, and not a very large one. But it is very rich stuff, carrying over three thousand ounces of silver and a thousand of gold to the ton. The five hundred pounds should be worth ten or twelve dollars a pound. They’ve found the same stuff several times before in the Pelican, always unexpectedly and always in pockets.”

“Then,” remarked Joe, “Yetmore will have made, perhaps, six thousand dollars this morning.”

“No, no,” said Tom; “he won’t have done anything of the sort; though I don’t wonder you should think so after the way the people have been carrying on down town. They’ve just been led away by their enthusiasm. Most of ’em know the terms of Yetmore’s lease well enough, but they have forgotten them for the moment. Yetmore pays the company a certain percentage of all the ore he gets out, and it is specially provided in the lease that should he come upon any of the well-known tellurium ore, the company is to have three-fifths of the proceeds and Yetmore only two-fifths. He’ll make a good thing out of it though, anyway.” [Pg 237]

“You say there’s about five hundred pounds of the ore: have they taken it all out already?” asked Joe.

“Yes, taken it out, sorted it, sacked it in little fifty-pound sacks, sewed up the sacks and piled them in one of the drifts, all ready to ship down to San Remo to-morrow by express.”

“Why do they leave it in the mine?” I asked. “Is it safer than taking it down to the express office?”

“Yes: it would be pretty difficult to steal it out of the mine, with all the lights going and all the miners about, whereas, if it was just stacked in the express office, somebody might—”

“Somebody might cut a hole in the floor and drop it through,” remarked Joe, laughing.

“That’s so,” said Tom, adding, “I tell you what it is, boys: I begin to think I wasn’t quite so smart as I thought I was when I got back that coal oil for the widow. I wouldn’t wonder a particle if it wasn’t just that that decided Yetmore to come and blow my house to smithereens.” [Pg 238]

“I shouldn’t either,” said Joe.

Tom having departed to his work again, Joe and I once more went into town, where we spent the time going about, listening to the talk of the people, who were still standing in

groups on the street corners, discussing the great events of the day.

But if the people were excited, as they certainly were, their excitement was a mere flutter in comparison with the storm which swept over the community next morning.

The ten sacks of high-grade ore had been stolen during the night!

The news came down about eight o'clock in the morning, when, at once, and with one accord, all the men in the place who could get away swarmed up to the Pelican—we among them.

The thief, whoever he was, was evidently familiar with the workings of the mine, for, going round into Stony Gulch, he had forced the door at the exit of the old tunnel, cutting out the staple with auger and saw, and then, clambering through the disused, waste-encumbered drifts, he had carried out the little sacks one by one and made away with them somehow.

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Wrapping his feet in old rags in order to disguise his foot-prints, he had taken the sacks of ore across the gulch to the stony ground beyond, where his boots would leave no impression, and there all trace of him was lost. Whether he had buried the sacks somewhere near by, or, if not, how he had managed to spirit them away, were matters of general speculation; though to most minds the question was settled when one of Yetmore's clerks came hastily up to the mine and called out that the roan pony and the two-wheeled delivery cart, used to carry packages up to the mines, were missing. The thief, seemingly, had not only stolen Yetmore's ore, but had borrowed Yetmore's horse and cart to convey it away.

If this were true, it proved that the thief must have an intimate knowledge of the country, for, in spite of the heavy rain of the night before, not a sign of a wheel-mark was there to be found: the cart had been conducted over the rocks with such skill as to leave no trace whatever. Cart, pony, ore and thief had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them.

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At first everybody sympathized with Yetmore over his loss, but presently an ugly rumor began to get about when people bethought them of the terms of the lease. Those who did not like the storekeeper, and they were not a few, began to pull long faces, nudge each other with their elbows, and whisper together that perhaps Yetmore knew more of this matter than he pretended.

Joe and I were at a loss to understand what they were driving at, until one man, more malicious or less discreet than the others, spoke up.

"How are we to know," said he, "that Yetmore didn't steal this ore himself? Three-fifths of it belongs to the company—he'd make a mighty good thing by it. I'm not saying he did do it, but—"

He ended with a closing of one eye and a sideways jerk of his head more expressive than words.

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" Joe blurted out. "Yetmore isn't over-scrupulous, I dare say, but he's a long way from being a fool, and he'd never make such a blunder as to steal the ore and then use his own horse and cart to carry it off."

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"Well, I don't know," said the man. "It might be just a trick of his to put folks off the scent."

And though Joe and I, for our part, felt sure that Yetmore had had nothing to do with it, we found that many people shared this man's suspicions; the consequence being that the mayor's popularity of the day before waned again as suddenly as it had arisen.

In the midst of this excitement the mail-coach from the south came in, when Joe and I, carrying with us the expected letter for my father, set off home again; little suspecting—as how should we suspect—that the ore-thief, whoever he might be, was about to render us a service of greater value by far than the ore and the cart and the pony combined.

We were jogging along on the homeward road, and were just rounding the spur of Elkhorn Mountain which divided our valley from Sulphide, when Joe suddenly laid his hand on my arm and cried: "Pull up, Phil. Stop a minute."

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"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Get down and come back a few steps," Joe answered; and on my joining him, he pointed out to me in a sandy patch at the mouth of a steep draw coming in from the left, some deeply-indented wheel-marks.

"Well, what of that, Joe?" said I, laughing. "Are you thinking you've found the trail of the

ore-thief?"

"No," Joe replied, "I'm not jumping at any such conclusion; but, at the same time, it's possible. If the ore-thief started northward from the Pelican, and the chances are he did, for we know he carried the sacks across to the north side of Stony Gulch, this would be the natural place for him to come down into the road; for it is plain to any one that he could never get a loaded cart—or an empty one either, for that matter—over the rocky ridge which crowns this spur. If he was making his way north, he had to get into the road sooner or later, and this gully was his last chance to come down."

"That's true," I assented; "and this cart—it's a two-wheeler, you see—was heavily loaded. Look how it cuts into the sand." [Pg 243]

"Yes," said Joe; "and it was drawn by one smallish horse, led by a man; a big man, too: look at his tracks."

"But the ore-thief, Joe, had his feet wrapped up in rags, and these are the marks of a number twelve boot."

"Well, you don't suppose the thief would walk over this rough mountain with his feet wrapped up in rags, do you? In the dark, too. They'd be catching against everything. No; he would take off the rags as soon as he reached hard ground and throw them into the cart; for it is not to be expected either that he would leave them lying on his trail to show people which way he had gone."

"No, of course not. But which way did he go, Joe; across the road or down it?"

"Down it. See. The wheel-tracks bear to the left. And if you want evidence that he came down in the dark, here you are. Look how one wheel skidded over this half-buried, water-worn boulder and slid off and scraped the spokes against this projecting rock. Look at the blue paint it left on the rock."

"Blue paint!" I cried. "Joe, Yetmore's cart was painted blue! I remember it very well. A very strongly-built cart, as it had to be to scramble up those rough roads that lead to the mines, painted blue with black trimmings. Joe, I begin to believe this is the ore-thief, after all." [Pg 244]

"It does look like it. But where was he going? Not down to the smelter at San Remo, surely."

"Not he," I replied. "He would know better than that. The smelter has undoubtedly been notified of the robbery by this time, and the character of the Pelican tellurium is so well known that any one offering any of it for sale would have to give a very clear story as to how he came by it. No; this fellow will have to hide or bury the ore and leave it lying till he thinks the robbery is forgotten; and even then he will probably have to dispose of it at a distance in small lots or broken up very fine and mixed with other ore."

"In that case," said Joe, "we shall find his trail leaving the road again on one side or the other."

"I expect so. We'll keep a lookout. But come on, now, Joe: we mustn't delay any longer." [Pg 245]

The road had been traveled over by several vehicles since last night, and the trail of the cart was undistinguishable with any certainty until we had passed the point where the highway branched off to the right to go down to San Remo; after which it appeared again, apparently headed straight for the ranch.

"Do you suppose he can have crossed our valley, Phil?" asked my companion.

"No, I expect not," I replied. "Keep your eyes open; we shall find the tracks going off to one side or the other pretty soon—to the left most likely, for the best hiding-places would be up in the mountains."

Sure enough, after traversing a bare, rocky stretch of road, we found that the tracks no longer showed ahead of us. The man had taken advantage of the hard ground to turn off. Pulling up our ponies, we both jumped to the ground once more, and going back a short distance, we made a cast on the western side of the road. In a few minutes Joe called out:

"Here we are, Phil! See! The wheel touched the edge of this little sandy spot, and if you look ahead about forty yards you'll see where it ran over an ant-hill. It seems as though he were heading for our cañon. Do you think that's likely?" [Pg 246]

"Yes," I replied. "I think it is very likely. There is one place where he can get down, you remember, and then, by following up the bed of the stream for a short distance he will come to a draw which will lead him to the top of the Second Mesa—just the place he would

make for. For, to any one knowing the country, as he evidently does, there would be a thousand good hiding-places in which to stow away ten small sacks of ore—you might search for years and not find them.”

“Yes,” said Joe. “But there’s the horse and cart, Phil. How will he dispose of them?”

“Oh, that will be easy enough. He would tumble the cart into some cañon, perhaps, turn loose the horse, and be back in Sulphide before morning. But come on, Joe. We really mustn’t waste any more time; it’s getting on for six now.”

It was fortunate we did not delay any longer, for we found my father anxiously pacing up and down the room, wondering what was keeping us. Without heeding our explanation at the moment, he hastily tore open the letter we had brought, read it through, and then stepping to the foot of the stairs, called out:

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“Get your things on, mother. We must start at once. The train leaves at seven forty-five. There’s no time to lose.”

Turning to us, he went on: “Boys, I have to go to Denver. I may be gone five or six days—can’t tell how long. I leave you in charge. If you can get at the plowing, go ahead; but I’m afraid you won’t have the chance. If I’m not mistaken, there’s another rain coming—wettest season I remember. Joe, run out and hitch up the big bay to the buckboard. Phil, you will have to drive down to San Remo with us and bring back the rig. Go in and get some supper now; it’s all ready on the table.”

In ten minutes we were off, I sitting on a little trunk at the back of the carriage, explaining to my father over his shoulder as we drove along the events of the last two days, and how it was we had taken so much time coming down from Sulphide.

“It certainly does look as though the thief had come down this way,” said he; “and though we are not personally concerned in the matter, I think one of you ought to ride up to Sulphide again on Monday and give your information. Hunt up Tom Connor and tell him. And I believe”—he paused to consider—“yes, I believe I would tell Yetmore, too. I’m sure he is not concerned in this robbery; and I’m even more sure that if he was a party to the blowing up of that house, he never intended any harm to you. Yes, I think I’d tell Yetmore. It will prove to him that we bear him no ill-will, and may have a good effect.”

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Having seen them off on the train, I turned homeward again, going slowly, for the clouds were low and it was very dark. The consequence was that it was nearly ten by the time I reached the ranch, and before I did so the rain was coming down hard once more.

“Wet night, Joe,” said I, as I pulled off my overcoat. “No plowing for a week, I’m afraid.”

“I expect not,” replied my companion. “It isn’t often we have to complain of too much rain in Colorado, but we are certainly getting an over supply just now. There’s one man, though, who’ll be glad of it.”

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“Who’s that?”

“That ore-thief. It will wash out his tracks completely.”

CHAPTER XIV

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THE SNOW-SLIDE

The rain, which continued pretty steadily all day, Sunday, had ceased before the following morning, when, looking through the rifts in the clouds to the west we could see that a quantity of new snow had fallen on the mountains.

“There’ll be no trouble about water for irrigating this year, Joe,” said I, as I returned from the stable after feeding the horses. “There’s more snow up there, I believe, than I’ve ever seen before. It ought to last well into the summer, especially as the winds have drifted the gulches full and it has settled into solid masses.”

“Yes, there ought to be a good supply,” answered Joe, who was busy cooking the breakfast. “Which of the ponies do you think I had better take this morning, Phil? The pinto?”

“I thought so. I’ve given him a good feed of oats. He’ll enjoy the outing, I expect, for he’s feeling pretty chipper this morning. He tried to nip me in the ribs while I was rubbing him down. He needs a little exercise.”

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We had arranged between us that Joe should ride to Sulphide that morning to see Tom Connor and Yetmore, as my father had directed; and accordingly, as soon as he could get off, away he went; the pinto pony, very fresh and lively, going off as though he intended to gallop the whole distance.

Left to myself, I first went up to measure the flow of the underground stream, according to custom, and then, taking a shovel, I went to work clearing the headgates of our ditches, which had become more or less encumbered with refuse during the winter. There were two of them, set in niches of the rock on either side of the pool; for, to irrigate the land on both sides of the creek, we necessarily had to have two ditches. I had been at it only a few minutes when I noticed a curious booming noise in the direction of the mountains, which, continuing for a minute or two, presently died out again. From my position close under the wall of the Second Mesa, I could see nothing, and though it seemed to me to be a peculiar and unusual sound, I concluded that it was only a storm getting up; for, even at a distance of seven miles, we could often hear the roaring of the wind in the pine-trees.

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A quarter of an hour later, happening to look up the Sulphide road, I was rather surprised to see a horseman coming down, riding very fast. He was about a mile away when I first caught sight of him, and I could not make out who he was, but presently, as I stood watching, a slight bend in the road allowed the sunlight to fall upon the horse's side, when I recognized the pinto. It was Joe coming home again.

I knew very well, of course, that he could not have been all the way to Sulphide and back in so short a time, and my first thought was that the spirited pony was running away with him; but as he approached I saw that Joe was leaning forward in the saddle, rather urging forward his steed than restraining him.

"What's up?" I thought to myself, as I stood leaning on my shovel. "Has he forgotten something? He seems to be in a desperate hurry if he has: Joe doesn't often push his horse like that. Something the matter, I'm afraid."

There was a rather steep pitch where the road came down into our valley, and it was a regular practice with us to descend this hill with some caution. Here, at any rate, I expected Joe to slacken his pace; but when I saw him come flying down at full gallop, where a false step by the pony would endanger both their necks, I knew there was something the matter, and flinging down my shovel, I ran to meet him.

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"What is it, Joe?" I cried, as soon as he came within hearing.

Pulling in his pony, which, poor beast, stood trembling, with hanging head and legs astraddle, the breath coming in blasts from its scarlet nostrils, Joe leaped to the ground, crying:

"A snow-slide! A fearful great snow-slide! Right down on Peter's house!"

For a moment we stood gazing at each other in silence, when Joe, speaking very rapidly, went on:

"We must get up there at once, Phil: we may be able to help Peter. Though if he was in his house when the slide came down, I'm afraid we can do nothing. His cabin must be buried five hundred feet deep, and the heavy snow will pack like ice with its own weight."

"We'll take a couple of shovels, anyhow," I cried. "I'll get 'em. Pull your saddle off the pinto, Joe, he's used up, poor fellow, and slap it on to the little gray. Saddle my pony, too, will you? I'll clap some provisions into a bag and bring 'em along: there's no knowing how long we'll be gone!"

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"All right," replied Joe. And without more words, he turned to unsaddle the still panting pony, while I ran to the house.

In five minutes, or less, we were under way.

"Not too fast!" cried Joe. "We mustn't blow the ponies at the start. It's a good eight miles up to Peter's house."

As we ascended the hill and came up on top of the Second Mesa, I was able to see for the first time the great scar on the mountain where the slide had come down.

"Phew!" I whistled. "It was a big one, and no mistake. Did you see it start, Joe?"

"Yes, I saw it start. I happened to be looking up there, thinking it looked pretty dangerous, when a great mass of snow which was overhanging that little cliff up there near the saddle, fell and started the whole thing. It seemed to begin slowly. I could see three or four big patches of snow fall from the precipice above Peter's cabin as though pushed over, and

then the whole great mass, fifteen feet thick, I should think, three hundred yards wide and four or five times as long, came down with a rush, pouring over the cliff with a roar like thunder. I wonder you didn't hear it."

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"I did," I replied, remembering the noise I had taken for a wind-storm, "but being under the bluff, and the waterfall making so much noise, I couldn't hear distinctly, and so thought nothing of it. Why!" I cried, as I looked again. "There used to be a belt of trees running diagonally across the slope. They're all gone!"

"Yes, every one of them. There were some biggish ones, too, you remember; but the slide snapped them off like so many carrots. It cut a clean swath right through them, as you see."

"Where were you, Joe, when you saw it come down?" I asked.

"More than half way to Sulphide. I came back in fifteen minutes—four miles."

"Poor little Pinto! No wonder he was used up!"

We had been riding at a smart lope, side by side, while this conversation was going on, and in due time we reached the foot-hills. Here our pace was necessarily much reduced, but we continued on up Peter's creek as rapidly as possible until the gulch became so narrow and rocky, and so encumbered with great patches of snow, that we thought we could make better time on foot.

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Leaving our ponies, therefore, we went scrambling forward, until, about half a mile from our destination, Joe suddenly stopped, and holding up his hand, cried eagerly:

"Hark! Keep quiet! Listen!"

"Bow, wow, wow! Bow, wow, wow, wow, wow!" came faintly to our ears from far up the mountain.

"It's old Sox!" cried Joe. "There are no dogs up here!" And clapping his hands on either side of his mouth, he gave a yell which made the echoes ring. Almost immediately the sharp report of a rifle came down to us, and with a spontaneous cheer we plunged forward once more.

It was hard work, for we were about nine thousand feet above sea level; the further we advanced, too, the more snow we encountered, until presently we found the narrow valley so blocked with it that we had to ascend the mountain-spur on one side to get around it. In doing so, we came in sight of the cliff behind Peter's house, and then, for the first time, we understood what a snow-slide really meant.

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Reaching half way up the thousand-foot precipice was a great slope of snow, completely filling the end of the valley; and projecting from it at all sorts of angles were trees, big and little, some whole, some broken off short, some standing erect as though growing there, some showing nothing but their roots. At the same time, from the edge of the precipice upward to the summit of the ridge, we had a clear view of the long, bare track left by the slide, with the snow-banks, fifteen or twenty feet thick, still standing on either side of it, held back by the trees.

"What a tremendous mass of snow!" I exclaimed, "There must be ten million tons of it! And what an irresistible power! Peter's house must have been crushed like an eggshell!"

"Yes," replied Joe. "But meanwhile where's Peter?"

Once more he shouted; and this time, somewhere straight ahead of us, there was an answering shout which set us hurrying forward again with eager expectancy.

At the same moment, up from the ground flew old Sox, perched upon the root of an inverted tree, where, showing big and black against the snow bank behind him, he set to work to bark a continuous welcome as we struggled forward to the spot, one behind the other.

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Beneath a tree, stretched on a mat of fallen pine-needles, just on the very outer edge of the slide, lay our old friend, the hermit, who, when he saw us approaching, raised himself on his elbow, and waving his other hand to us, called out cheerily:

"How are you, boys? Glad to see you! You're welcome—more than welcome!"

"Hurt, Peter?" cried Joe, running forward and throwing himself upon his knees beside the injured man.

"A trifle. No bones broken, I believe, but pretty badly bruised and strained, especially the right leg above the knee. I find I can't walk—at least not just yet."

"How did you escape the slide?" I asked.

"Why, I had warning of it, luckily. I was up pretty early this morning and was just about to leave the house, when a dab of snow—a couple of tons, maybe—came down and knocked off my chimney. I knew what that meant, and I didn't waste much time, you may be sure, in getting out. I grabbed my rifle and ran for it. I was hardly out of my door when the roar began, and you may guess how I ran then. I had reached almost this spot when down it came. The edge of it caught me and tumbled me about; sometimes on the surface, sometimes on the ground; now on my face and now feet uppermost, I was pitched this way and that like a cork in a torrent, till a big tree—the one Sox is sitting on, I think—slapped me on the back with its branches and hurled me twenty feet away among the rocks. It was then I got hurt; but on the other hand, being flung out of the snow like that saved me from being buried, so I can't complain. It was as narrow a shave as one could well have."

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"It certainly was," said I. "And did you hold on to the rifle all the time?"

"Yes; though why, I can't say. The natural instinct to hold on to something, I suppose. But how is it you are on hand so promptly? It did occur to me as I lay here that one of you might notice that there had been a slide and remember me, but I never expected to see you here so soon."

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"Well, that was another piece of good fortune," I replied. "Joe saw the slide come down and rode a four-mile race to come and tell me. We did not lose a minute in getting under way, and we haven't wasted any time in getting here either. But now we are here, the question is: How are we going to get you out?"

"Where do you propose to take me?" asked Peter.

"Down to our house."

For a brief instant the hermit looked as though he were going to demur; but if he had entertained such an idea, he thought better of it, and thanked me instead.

"It's very good of you," said he; "though it gives me an odd sensation. I haven't been inside another man's house for years."

"Well, don't you think it's high time you changed your habits?" ask Joe, laughing. "And you couldn't have a better opportunity—your own house smashed flat; yourself helpless; and we two all prepared to lug you off whether you like it or not."

"Well," said Peter, smiling at Joe's threat, "then I suppose I may as well give in. You're very kind, though, boys," he added, seriously, "and I'm very glad indeed to accept your offer."

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"Then let us pitch in at once and start downward," said Joe. "Do you think you could walk with help?"

"I doubt it; but I'll have a try."

It was no use, though. With one arm over Joe's shoulder and the other over mine he essayed to walk, but the attempt was a failure. His right leg dragged helplessly behind; he could not take a step.

"We've got to think of some other way," said Joe, as Peter once more stretched himself at full length upon the ground. "Can we—"

But here he was interrupted.

All this time, Sox, with rare backwardness, had remained perched upon his tree-root, looking on and listening, but at this moment down he flew, alighted upon the ground near Peter's head, made a complete circuit of his master's prostrate form, then hopped up on his shoulder, and having promenaded the whole length of his body from his neck to his toes, he shook out his feathers and settled himself comfortably upon the hermit's left foot.

We all supposed he intended to take a nap, but in another two seconds he straightened up again, eyed each of us in turn, and, with an air of having thought it all out and at last decided the matter beyond dispute, he remarked in a tone of gentle resignation:

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"John Brown's body."

Having delivered this well-considered opinion with becoming solemnity, he threw back his head and laughed a rollicking laugh, as though he had made the very best joke that ever was heard.

"You black heathen, Sox!" cried his master. "I believe you would laugh at a funeral."

"Lies," said Sox, opening one eye and shutting it again; a remark which, though it sounded very much as though intended as an insult to Peter, was presumably but the continuation of his previous quotation.

"Get out, you old rascal!" cried the hermit, "shooing" away the bird with his hat. "Your conversation is not desired just now." And as Sox flew back to his perch, Peter continued: "How far down did you leave your ponies, boys?"

"About a mile," I replied.

"Then I believe the best way will be for one of you to go down and bring up one of the ponies. I can probably get upon his back with your help, and then, by going carefully, I believe we can get down." [Pg 263]

"All right," said Joe, springing to his feet. "We'll try it. I'll go down. The little gray is the one, Phil, don't you think?"

"Yes," I answered. "The little gray's the one; he's more sober-minded than my pony and very sure-footed. Bring the gray."

Without further parley, away went Joe, and in about three-quarters of an hour he appeared again, leading the pony by the bridle.

"It's pretty rough going," said he, "but I think we can make it if we take it slowly. The pony came up very well. Now, Peter let's see if we can hoist you into the saddle."

It was a difficult piece of work, for Peter, though he had not an ounce of fat on his body, was a pretty heavy man, and being almost helpless himself, the feat was not accomplished without one or two involuntary groans on the part of the patient. At last, however, we had him settled into the saddle, when Joe, carrying the rifle, took the lead, while I, with the two shovels over my shoulder, brought up the rear. In this order the procession started, but it had no more than started when Peter called to us to stop. [Pg 264]

In order to avoid going up the hill more than was necessary, we were skirting along the edge of the great snow-bank, when, as we passed just beneath the big tree upon one of whose roots Socrates was perched, Peter, looking up to call to the bird, espied something which at once attracted his attention.

"Wait a moment, boys, will you?" he requested, checking the pony; and then, turning to me, he continued: "Look up there, Phil. Do you see that black stone stuck among the roots? Poke it out with the shovel, will you? I should like to look at it."

Wondering rather at his taking any interest in stones at such a time, I nevertheless obeyed his behest, and with two or three vigorous prods I dislodged the black fragment, catching it in my hand as it fell; though it was so unexpectedly heavy that I nearly let it drop.

"Ah!" exclaimed Peter, when I had handed it up to him. "Just what I thought! This will interest Tom Connor."

"Why?" we both asked. "What is it?"

"A chunk of galena. Look! Do you see how it is made up of shining cubes of some black mineral? Lead—lead and sulphur. There's a vein up there somewhere." [Pg 265]

"And the big tree, pushing its roots down into the vein, has brought away a piece of it, eh?" asked Joe.

"Yes, that is what I suppose. There are some bits of light-colored rock up there, too, Phil. Pry out one or two of those, will you?"

I did as requested, and on my passing them to Peter, he said:

"These are porphyry rocks. The general formation up there is limestone, I know—I've noticed it frequently—but I expect it is crossed somewhere—probably on the line of the belt of trees—by a porphyry dike. Put the specimens into your pocket, Joe; we must keep them to show to Connor. It's a very important find. And now let us get along."

The journey down the gulch was very slow and very difficult—we made hardly a mile an hour—though, when we left the mountain and started across the mesa we got along better. When about half way, I left the others and galloped home, where I lighted a fire and heated a lot of water, so that, when at length Peter arrived, I had a steaming hot tubful all ready for him in the spare room on the ground floor. [Pg 266]

Though our friend protested against being treated like an invalid, declaring his belief that he would be about right again by morning, he nevertheless consented to take his hot bath

and go to bed; though I think he was persuaded to do so more because he was unwilling to disappoint us after all our preparations, than because he really expected to derive any benefit.

Be that as it may—and for my part I shall always hold that it was the hot bath that did it—when we went into Peter’s room next morning, what was our surprise to find our cripple up and dressed. Though his right leg was still so stiff as to be of little use to him, he declined our help, and with the aid of a couple of broomsticks propelled himself out of his bedroom and into the kitchen, where Joe was busy getting the breakfast ready. His rapid recovery was astonishing to both of us; though, as Joe remarked later, we need not be so very much surprised, for, with his hardy life and abstemious habits he was as healthy as any wild animal.

As we sat at our morning meal, we talked over our find of yesterday, and discussed what was the proper course for us to pursue. [Pg 267]

“First, and most important,” said Peter, “Tom Connor must be notified. We must waste no time. The prospectors are beginning to get out, and any one of them, noticing the new scar on the mountain, might go exploring up there. When does Tom quit work on the Pelican?”

“This evening,” replied Joe. “It was this evening, wasn’t it, Phil?”

“Yes,” I replied. “He was to quit at five this evening, and his intention then was to come down here next day and make this place his base of operations.”

“Then the thing to do,” said Joe, “is for me to ride up there this morning—I started to go yesterday, you know, Peter—and catch Tom up at the mine at noon. When he hears of our discovery, I’ve not a doubt but that he will pack up and come back with me this evening, so as to get a start first thing to-morrow.”

“I expect he will,” said I. “And while you are up there, Joe, you can see Yetmore and give him your information about those cart-tracks.”

“What do you mean?” asked Peter. “Information about what cart-tracks?”

“Oh, you haven’t heard of it, of course,” said I; and forthwith I explained to him all about the ore-theft, and how we suspected that the thief was in hiding somewhere in the foot-hills. Peter listened attentively, and then asked: [Pg 268]

“Are you sure there was only one of them?”

“Well, that’s the general supposition,” I replied. “Why?”

“I thought there might be a pair of them, that’s all. I’ll tell you an odd thing that happened only the day before yesterday, which may or may not have a bearing on the case. When I got home about dusk that evening, I found that some one had broken into my house and had stolen a hind-quarter of elk, a box of matches, a frying-pan, and—of all queer things to select—a bear-trap. What on earth any one can want with a bear-trap at this season of the year, I can’t think, when there is hardly a bear out of his winter-quarters yet; and if he was he’d be as thin as a rail. I found the fellow’s tracks easily enough—tall man—big feet—long stride—and trailed them down the gulch to a point where another man had been sitting on a rock waiting for him. This other man’s track was peculiar: he was lame—stepped short with his right foot, and the foot itself was out of shape. Their trail went on down the hill towards the mesa, but it was then too dark to follow it, and I was going off to take it up again next morning when that slide came down and changed my programme.” [Pg 269]

“Well,” said Joe, who had sat with his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands, listening closely, “where the lame man springs from I don’t know, but if they should be the ore-thieves their stealing the meat and the frying-pan was a natural thing to do; for if they are going into hiding they will need provisions.”

“Yes,” replied Peter; “and whether they knew of my place before or came upon it by accident, they would probably think it safer to steal from me than to raid one of the ranches and thus risk bringing all the ranchmen about their ears like a swarm of hornets.”

“That’s true,” said Joe. “Yes, I must certainly tell Tom and Yetmore about them: it may be important. And I’ll start at once,” he added, rising from the table as he spoke. “I’ll take the buckboard, Phil, and then I can bring back Tom’s camp-kit and tools for him; otherwise he would have to pack them on his pony and walk himself. I expect you will see us back somewhere about seven this evening.” [Pg 270]

With that he went out, and soon afterwards we heard the rattle of wheels as he drove away.

THE BIG REUBEN VEIN

But it seemed as though Joe were destined never to get to Sulphide. I was still in the kitchen, when, not more than twenty minutes later, I heard the rattle of wheels again, and looking out of the window, there I saw my partner by the stable tying up his horse.

"Hallo, Joe!" I cried, throwing open the door. "What's up?"

Without replying at the moment, Joe came striding in, shut the door, and throwing his hat down upon the table, said:

"I came back to tell you something. I've a notion, Phil, that we've got to go hunting for that vein ourselves, and not lose time by going up to tell Tom."

"Why? What makes you think that, Joe?" I asked, in surprise.

"That's what I came back to tell you. You know that little treeless 'bubble' that stands on the edge of the cañon only about half a mile up-stream from here? Well, when I drove up the hill out of our valley just now I turned, naturally, to look at the scar on the mountain, when the first thing to catch my eye was the figure of a man standing on top of the 'bubble.'" [Pg 272]

"Is that so? What was he doing?"

"He was looking at the scar, too."

"How do you know that, Joe?" I asked, incredulously. "You couldn't tell at that distance whether he had his back to you or his face."

"Ah, but I could, though," Joe replied; "and I'll tell you how. After a minute or so the man turned—I could see that motion distinctly enough—caught sight of me, and instantly jumped down behind the rocks."

"Didn't want to be seen, eh?" remarked Peter. "And what did you do next?"

"I felt sure he was watching me, though I couldn't see him," Joe went on, "and so, to make him suppose I hadn't observed him, I stayed where I was for a minute, and then drove leisurely on again. There's a dip in the road, you know, Phil, a little further on, and as soon as I had driven down into it, out of sight, I pulled up, jumped out of the buckboard, and running up the hill again I crawled to the top of the rise and looked back. There was the man, going across the mesa at a run, headed straight for Big Reuben's gorge!" [Pg 273]

Joe paused, and for a moment we all sat looking at each other in silence.

"Any idea who he was?" I asked presently.

"Yes," replied Joe, without hesitation. "It was Long John Butterfield."

"You seem very sure," remarked Peter; "but do you think you could recognize him so far off?"

"I feel sure it was Long John," Joe answered. "I have very long sight; and as the man stood there on top of the 'bubble,' with the sun shining full upon him, he looked as tall as a telegraph pole. Yes, I feel certain it was Long John."

"Then Yetmore has started him out to prospect for that vein!" I cried. "He is probably camped in the neighborhood of Big Reuben's gorge, following up the stream, and I suppose he heard the roar of the slide yesterday and came down this way the first thing this morning to get a look at the scar."

"That's it, I expect," Joe answered.

"And you suppose," said Peter, "that he went running back to his camp to get his tools and go prospecting up on the scar." [Pg 274]

Joe nodded.

"Then, what do you propose to do?" asked the hermit.

"I've been thinking about it as I drove back," replied Joe, "and my opinion is that Phil and I ought to go up at once, see if we can't find the spot where that big tree was rooted out, and stake the claim for Tom Connor. If we lose a whole day by going up to Sulphide to notify Tom, it would give Long John a chance to get in ahead of us and perhaps beat us after all."

The bare idea of such a catastrophe was too much for me. I sprang out of my chair, crying, "We'll go, Joe! And we'll start at once! How are we to get up there, Peter? There must be any amount of snow; and we are neither of us any good on skis, even if we had them."

"Yes, there's plenty of snow,"replied Peter promptly, entering with heartiness into the spirit of the enterprise, "lots of snow, but you can avoid most of it by taking the ridge on the right of the creek and following along its summit to where it connects with the saddle. You'll find a little cliff up there, barring your way, but by turning to your left and keeping along the foot of the precipice you will come presently to the upper end of the slide, and then, by coming down the slide, you will be able to reach the place where the line of trees used to stand, which is the place you want to reach."

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"Is it at all dangerous?"asked Joe.

"Why, yes,"replied Peter, "it is a bit dangerous, especially on the slide itself now that the trees are gone; though if you are ordinarily careful you ought to be able to make it all right, there being two of you. For a man by himself it would be risky—a very small accident might strand him high and dry on the mountain—but where there are two together it is reasonably safe."

"Come on, then, Joe,"said I. "Let's be off."

"Wait a bit!"cried our guest, holding up his hand. "You talk of staking a claim for Tom Connor; well, suppose you *should* find the spot where the big tree was rooted out, and *should* find a vein there—do you know how to write a location-notice?"

"No,"said I, blankly. "We don't."

"Well, I'll write you out the form,"said Peter. "I've read hundreds of them and I remember it well enough, and you can just copy the wording when you set up your stake—if you have occasion to set one up at all."

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He sat down and quickly wrote out the form for us, when, pocketing the paper, we went over to the stable, saddled up, and leaving Peter in charge, away we rode, armed with a pick, a shovel, an ax and a coil of rope.

According to the hermit's directions, instead of following up the bed of the creek which led to his house, we took to the spur on the right, the top of which being treeless, had been swept bare of snow by the winds and presented no serious obstacle to our sure-footed ponies. We were able, therefore, to ride up the mountain so far that we presently found ourselves looking down upon Peter's house, or, rather, upon the mountain of snow which covered it. But here the character of the spur changed, or, to speak more accurately, here the spur ended and another one began. Between the two, half-filled with well-packed snow, lay a deep crevice, which, bearing away down hill to our right, was presently lost among the trees.

"From the lay of the land,"said Joe, "I should judge that this is the head of the creek which runs through Big Reuben's gorge—Peter told us it started up here, you remember. And from the look of it,"he continued, "I should suppose that the shortest way of getting over to the slide would be to cut right across here to the left through the trees. But that is out of the question: the snow would be ten feet over our heads; so our only way is to cross this gulch and go on up as far as we can along the top of the next ridge, as Peter said."

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"Then we shall have to leave the ponies here,"I remarked, "and do the rest on foot: there's no getting them across this place."

Accordingly, we abandoned our ponies at this point, and having with some difficulty scrambled across the gulch ourselves, we ascended to the ridge of the next spur and continued our way upward. This spur was crowned by an outcrop of rock, which being much broken up and the cracks being filled with snow, made the walking not only difficult but dangerous. By taking care, however, we avoided any accident, and, after a pretty stiff climb arrived at the foot of a perpendicular ledge of rocks which cut across our course at right angles—the little cliff Peter had told us we should find barring our way.

Here, turning to the left, as directed, we skirted along the base of the cliff, sometimes on the rocks and sometimes on the edge of the snow which rested against them, until at last we reached a point whence we could look right down the steep slope of the slide.

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Covered with loose shale, the slope for its whole length appeared to be smooth and of uniform pitch, except that about three-quarters of the way down we could see a line of snow hummocks stretching all across its course, indicating pretty surely that here had grown a strip of trees, which being most of them broken off short had caught and held a little snow against the stumps.

"There's where we want to get, Joe!" I cried, eagerly. "Down there to that row of stumps! This is a limestone country—all this shale, you see, is composed of limestone chips—but that tree-root in which we found the chunk of galena held two or three bits of porphyry as well, you remember, and if it did come from down there, there's a good chance that that line of stumps indicates the course of a porphyry outcrop, as Peter guessed, cutting across the limestone formation."

"Well, what of that?" asked Joe. "Is a porphyry outcrop a desirable thing to find? Is it an 'indication'?" [Pg 279]

"It's plain you're no prospector, Joe," said I, laughing; "and though I don't set up to know much about it myself, I've learned enough from hearing Tom Connor talk of 'contact veins' to know that if there's a vein in the neighborhood the most promising place to look for it is where the limestone and the porphyry come in contact."

"Is that so?" cried Joe, beginning to get excited. "Then let us get down there at once; for, ten to one, that's where our big tree came from."

"That's all very well," said I. "The row of stumps is our goal, all right, but how are we going to get down there? I don't feel at all inclined to trust myself on this loose shale. The pitch is so steep that I should be afraid of its starting to slide and carrying us with it, when I don't see anything to stop us from going down to the bottom and over the precipice at the lower end."

"That's true," Joe assented. "No, it won't do to trust ourselves on this treacherous shale; it's too dangerous. What we must do, Phil, is to get across to that long spur of rocks over there and climb down that. It will bring us close down to the line of stumps." [Pg 280]

The spur to which Joe referred, connecting at its upper end with the cliff at the foot of which we were then standing, reached downward like a great claw to within a short distance of the chain of snow hummocks, and undoubtedly our safest course would be to follow it to its lowest extremity and begin our descent from there. It was near the further edge of the slide, however, and to get over to it we had to take a course close under the cliff, holding on to the rocks with our right hands as we skirted along the upper edge of the shaly slope. It was rather slow work, for we had to be careful, but at length we reached our destination, when, turning once more to our left, we scrambled down the spur to its lowest point.

"Now, Phil," cried Joe, "you stay where you are while I go down. No use to take unnecessary risks by both going down together. You sit here, if you don't mind, and wait for me; I won't be any longer than I can help."

"All right," said I; "but take the end of the rope in your hand, Joe. No use for *you* to take unnecessary risks, either." [Pg 281]



**“HE SHOT DOWNWARD LIKE
AN ARROW”**

“That’s a fact,”replied my companion. “Yes, I’ll take the rope.”

With a shovel in one hand and the end of the rope in the other, Joe started downward, but presently, having advanced as far as the rope extended, he dropped it and went cautiously on, using the shovel-handle as a staff. Down to this point he had had little difficulty, but a few steps further on, reaching presumably the change of formation we had expected to find, where the smooth, icy rock beneath the shale was covered only by an inch or so of the loose material, the moment he stepped upon it Joe’s feet slipped from under him and falling on his back he shot downward like an arrow.

I held my breath as I watched him, horribly scared lest he should go flying down the whole remaining length of the slope and over the precipice; but my suspense lasted only a few seconds, for presently a great jet of snow flew into the air, in the midst of which Joe vanished. The next moment, however, he appeared again, hooking the snow out of his neck with his finger, and called out to me:

“All right, Phil! I fell into a hole where a tree came out. I’m going to shovel out the snow now. Don’t let go of that rope whatever you do.” [Pg 282]

So saying he set to work with the shovel, making the snow fly, while I sat on the rocks a hundred feet above, watching him. In about a quarter of an hour he looked up and called out to me:

“I’ve found it, Phil. Right in this hole. It’s the hole our big tree came out of, I believe. Can’t tell how much of a vein, though, the ground is frozen too hard. Bring down the pick, will you? Come down to the end of the rope and throw it to me.”

In response to this request, having first tied a knot in the end of the rope and fixed it firmly in a crack in the rocks, I went carefully down as far as it reached, when, with a back-handed fling, I sent the pick sliding down to my partner.

“Don’t you think I might venture down and help you, Joe?”I called out.

“No!”replied Joe with much emphasis. “You stay where you are, Phil. It would be too risky. I can do the work by myself all right.”

Still keeping my hold on the rope, therefore, I sat myself down on the shale, while Joe, pick in hand, went to work again. Pretty soon he straightened up and said: [Pg 283]

“I’ve found the vein all right, Phil; I don’t think there can be a doubt of it. Good strong vein, too, I should say.”

“How wide is it?”I asked.

“Can’t tell how wide it is. I’ve found what I suppose to be the porphyry hanging-wall, right here”—tapping the rock with his pick—“and I’ve been trying to trench across the vein to find the foot-wall, but the shale runs in on me faster than I can dig it out.”

“What do you propose to do, then, Joe?”

“Try one of those other holes further along and see if I can’t find the vein again and get its direction. You sit still there, Phil. I shall want you to give me a hand out of here soon.”

With extreme caution he made his way along the line of stumps, helping himself with the pick in one hand and the shovel in the other, until, about a hundred yards distant, he arrived at another hole where a tree had been rooted out, and here he went to work again. This time he kept at it for a good half hour, but at length he laid down his tools, and for a few minutes occupied himself by building with loose pieces of rock a little pillar about eighteen inches high. [Pg 284]

“Can you see that, Phil?”he shouted.

“Yes, I can see it,”I called back.

This seemed to be all Joe wanted, for he at once picked up his tools again, and with the same caution made his way back to the first hole.

“What’s your pile of stones for, Joe?”I asked.

“Why, I found the vein again, hanging-wall and all, and I set up that little monument so as to get the line of the vein from here.”

Taking out of his pocket a little compass we had brought for the purpose, he laid it on the

rock, and sighting back over his "monument," he found that the vein ran northeast and southwest.

"Phil," said he, "do you see that dead pine, broken off at the top, with a hawk's nest in it, away back there on the upper side of the gulch where we left the ponies?"

"Yes," I replied, "I see it. What of it?"

"The line of the vein runs right to that tree, and I propose we get back and hunt for it there. I don't want to set up the location-stake here: this place is too difficult to get at and too dangerous to work in. So I vote we get back to the dead tree and try again there. What do you say?"

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"All right," I replied. "We'll do so."

"Very well, then I'll come up now."

But this was more easily said than done. Do what he would, Joe could not get up to where I sat, holding out to him first a hand and then a foot. He tried walking and he tried crawling, but in vain; the rock beneath the shale was too steep and too smooth and too slippery. At length, at my suggestion, Joe threw the shovel up to me, when, on my lying flat and reaching downward as far as I could stretch, he succeeded in hooking the pick over the shoulder of the shovel-blade, after which he had no more difficulty.

"Well, Joe," said I, when we had safely reached the rocks again, "it's just as well we didn't both go down together after all, isn't it?"

"That's what it is," replied my partner, heartily. "If you had tried to come down with me we should both probably have tumbled into that hole together, and there we should have had to stay till somebody came up to look for us; and there'd have been precious little fun in that. Did it scare you when I went scooting down the slide on my back?"

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"It certainly did," I replied. "I expected to have to go down to Peter's house and lug *you* home next—if there was any of you left."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was a bit scared myself. It was a great piece of luck my falling into that hole. It's a dangerous place, this, and the sooner we get out of it the better; so, let us start back, at once."

Making our way up the spur, we again skirted along between the upper edge of the slide and the foot of the cliff, and ascending once more to the ridge, we retraced our steps down it until we presently arrived at the dead tree with the hawk's nest in it.

Here, after a careful inspection of the ground, we went to work, Joe with the pick, and I, following behind him, throwing out the loose stuff with the shovel and searching through each shovelful for bits of galena. In this way we worked, cutting a narrow trench across the line where we supposed the vein ought to run, until presently Joe himself gave a great shout which brought me to his side in an instant.

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With the point of his pick he had hooked out a lump of galena as big as his head!

My! How excited we were! And how we did work! We just flew at it, tooth and nail—or, rather, pick and shovel. If our lives had depended on it we could not have worked any harder, I firmly believe. The consequence was that at the end of an hour we had uncovered a vein fifteen feet wide, disclosing a porphyry wall on one side and a limestone wall on the other.

The vein was not, of course, a solid body of ore. Very far from it. Though there were bits of galena scattered pretty thickly all across it, the bulk of the vein-matter was composed of scraps of quartz mixed with yellow earth—the latter, as we afterwards learned, being itself decomposed lead-ore—to say nothing of grass-roots, tree-roots and other rubbish which helped to make up the mass.

But that we had found a real, genuine vein, even we, novices as we were at the business, could not doubt, and very heartily we shook hands with each other when our trenching at length brought us up against the limestone foot-wall. With the discovery of this foot-wall, Joe called a halt.

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"Enough!" he cried. "Enough, Phil! Let's stop now. We've got the vein, all right, and a staving good vein it is, and all we have to do for the present is to set up our location-stake. To-morrow Tom will come up here, when he can make his camp and get to work at it regularly, sinking his ten-foot prospect-hole. What are we going to name it? The 'Hermit'? The 'Raven'? The 'Socrates'?"

"Call it the 'Big Reuben,'"I suggested.

"Good!"exclaimed Joe. "That's it! The 'Big Reuben' it shall be."

This, therefore, was the title we wrote upon our location-notice, by which we claimed for Tom Connor a strip of ground fifteen hundred feet in length along the course of the vein and one hundred and fifty feet wide on either side of it; and thus did our old enemy, Big Reuben, lend his name to a "prospect"which was destined later to take its place among the foremost mines of our district.

CHAPTER XVI

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THE WOLF WITH WET FEET

We had been so expeditious, thanks largely to Joe's good judgment in tumbling into the right hole at the start when he slid down the shale, that we reached home well before sunset, when, according to the arrangement we had made as we rode down, Joe started again that same evening for Sulphide. This time he made the trip without interruption, and when at eight o'clock next morning he drove up to our house, Tom Connor was with him.

"How are you, old man?"cried the latter, springing to the ground and shaking hands very heartily with our guest. "That was a pretty narrow squeak you had."

"It certainly was,"replied Peter. "And if it hadn't been for these boys, I'd have been up there yet. What's the news, Connor? Any clue to your ore-thieves?"

"Not much but what you and the boys have furnished. But ask Joe, he'll tell you."

"Well,"said Joe, "in the first place, Long John has disappeared. He has not been seen since the evening before the robbery. No one knows what's become of him."

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"Is that so?"I cried. "Then I suppose the robbery is laid to him."

"Yes, to him and another man. I'll tell you all about it. After I had been to the mine and given Tom our news, I went down town to Yetmore's and had a long talk with him. That was a good idea of your father's, Phil, that we should go and tell Yetmore: he took it very kindly, and repeated several times how much obliged he felt. He seems most anxious to be friendly."

"It's my opinion,"Tom Connor cut in, "that he got such a thorough scare that night of the explosion, and is so desperate thankful he didn't blow you two sky-high, that he can't do enough to make amends."

"That's it, I think,"said Joe. "And I believe it is a great relief to him also to find that we are not trying to lay the blame on him. Anyhow, he couldn't have been more friendly than he was; and he told me things which seem to throw some light on the matter of the ore-theft. There *was* seemingly a second man concerned in it; a man with a club-foot, Peter."

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"Ah, ha!"said Peter. "Is that so?"

"Yes. There used to be a man about town known as 'Clubfoot,' a crony of Long John's,"Joe continued. "He was convicted of ore-stealing about three years ago, and was sent to the penitentiary. A few days ago he escaped, and it is Yetmore's opinion that he ran straight to Long John for shelter. On the night after the explosion he—Yetmore, I mean, you know—went to John's house 'to give the blundering numskull a piece of his mind,' as he said—we can guess what about—and John wouldn't let him in; so they held their interview outside in the dark. I gathered that there was a pretty lively quarrel, which ended in Yetmore telling Long John that he had done with him, and that he needn't expect him to grub-stake him this spring.

"It is Yetmore's belief that the reason John wouldn't let him into his house—it's only a one-roomed shanty, you know—was that Clubfoot was then inside; and he further believes that John, finding himself deprived of his expected summer's work, and no doubt incensed besides at Yetmore's going back on him, as he would consider it, then and there planned with Clubfoot the robbery of the ore; both of them being familiar with the workings of the Pelican."

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"That sounds reasonable,"remarked Peter; "though, when all is said and done, it amounts to no more than a guess on Yetmore's part. But, look here!"he went on, as the thought suddenly occurred to him. "If Long John is not prospecting for Yetmore or himself either,

being supposedly in hiding, what was he doing on the 'bubble' yesterday?"

"But perhaps he is prospecting for himself," Tom Connor broke in. "Here we are, theorizing away like a house afire on the idea that he is the thief, when maybe he had nothing to do with it. And if he is prospecting for himself, the sooner I get up to that claim the better if I don't want to be interfered with. I reckon I'll dig out right away. If you boys," turning to us, "can spare the time and the buckboard you can help me a good bit by carrying up my things for me."

"All right, Tom," said I. "We can do so."

Starting at once, therefore, with a load of provisions, tools and bedding, we carried them up the mountain as far as we could on wheels, and then packed them the rest of the way on horseback, when, having seen Tom comfortably established in camp near the Big Reuben—with the look of which he expressed himself as immensely pleased—Joe and I turned homeward again about four in the afternoon.

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We were driving along, skirting the rim of our cañon, and were passing between the stream and the little treeless "bubble" upon which Joe had, as he believed, seen Long John standing the day before, when my companion remarked:

"I should very much like to know, Phil, what Long John was doing up there. Do you suppose —Whoa! Whoa, there, Josephus! What's the matter with you?"

This exclamation was addressed to the horse; for at this moment the ordinarily well-behaved Josephus shied, snorted, and standing up on his hind feet struck out with his fore hoofs at a big timber-wolf, which, springing out from the shelter of some boulders on the margin of the cañon and passing almost under his nose, ran off and disappeared among the rocks.

"He must have been down to the stream to get a drink," suggested Joe.

"He couldn't," said I; "the cañon-wall is too steep; no wolf could scramble up."

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"Well, if he didn't," remarked my companion, "how did he get his feet wet? Look here at his tracks."

As he said this, Joe pointed to the bare stone before us, where the wolf's wet tracks were plainly visible.

"Well," said I, "then I suppose there must be a way up after all. Wait a moment, Joe, while I take a look."

Jumping from the buckboard, I stepped over to the boulders whence the wolf had appeared, where, to my surprise, I found a pool, or, rather, a big puddle of water, which, overflowing, dripped into the cañon.

Where the water came from I could not at first detect, but on a more careful inspection I found that it ran, a tiny thread, along a crack in the lava not more than a couple of inches wide, which, on tracing it back, I found we had driven over without noticing. Apparently the water came down from the "bubble" through a rift in the crater-wall.

As I have stated before, several of the little craters contributed small streams of water to our creek, but this was not one of them, so, turning to my companion, I said:

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"Joe, this is the first time I have ever seen any water come down from that 'bubble.' Let us climb up to the top and take a look inside."

Away we went, therefore, scrambling up the rocky slope, when, having reached the rim, we looked down into the little crater. The area of its floor was only about an acre in extent, but instead of being grown over with grass and sagebrush, as was the case with most of them, this one was covered with blocks of stone of all sizes, some of them weighing several tons. It was evident that the walls, which were only about thirty feet in height, had at one time been much higher, but that in the course of ages they had broken down and thus littered the little bowl-shaped depression with the fragments.

The thread of water which had drawn us up there came trickling out from among these blocks of stone, and we set out at once to trace it up to its source while we still had daylight. But this, we found, was by no means easy, for, though the stream did not dodge about much, but ran pretty directly down to the crack in the wall, its course was so much impeded by rocks, under and around which it had to make its way—while over and around them we had to make *our* way—that it was ten or fifteen minutes before we discovered where it came from.

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We had expected to find a pool of rain-water, more or less extensive, seeping through the sand and slowly draining away. What we actually did find was something very different: something which filled us with wonder and excitement!

About the middle of the little crater there came boiling out of the ground a strong spring, which, running along a deep, narrow channel it had in the course of many centuries worn in the solid stone floor of the crater, disappeared in turn beneath the litter of rocks. A short distance below the spring the channel was half filled for some distance with fragments of stone of no great size, which, checking the rush of the water, caused it to lap over the edge. It was this slight overflow which supplied the dribble we had followed up from the cañon below.

"Joe!" I exclaimed, greatly excited. "Do you know what I think?"

"Yes, I do," my companion answered like a flash. "I think so, too. Come on! Let's find out at once!" [Pg 297]

Following the channel, we went clambering over the rocks, which just here were not quite so plentiful, until, at a distance from the spring of about fifty yards, we came upon a large circular pool in which the water flowed continuously round and round as though stirred with a gigantic spoon, while in the centre it spun round violently, a perfect little whirlpool, and sank with a gurgle into the earth.

For a moment we stood gazing spellbound at this natural phenomenon, hardly realizing what it meant, and then, with one impulse, we both threw our hats into the air with a shout, seized each other's hands, and danced a wild and unconventional dance, with no witness but a solitary eagle, which, passing high overhead, paused for an instant in his flight to wonder, probably, what those crazy, unaccountable human beings were up to now.

At length, out of breath, we stopped, when Joe, clapping his hands together to emphasize his words, cried:

"At last we've found it, Phil! This, *surely*, is the water-supply that keeps the 'forty rods' wet!" [Pg 298]

"It must be," I replied, no less excited than my partner. "It must be; it can't be anything else. But how are we going to prove it, Joe?"

"The only way I see is to divert the flow here; then, if our underground stream stops, we shall know this is it."

"Yes, but how are we to divert it?"

"Why, look here," Joe answered. "The spring, I suppose, is a little extra-strong just now, causing that slight overflow up above here. Well, what we must do is to take the line marked out for us by the overflow, and following it from the channel down to the crack in the crater-wall, break up and throw aside all the rocks that get in the way; then cut a new channel and send the whole stream off through the crack, when it will pour into the cañon, run across the ranch on the surface, and the 'forty rods' will dry up!"

He gazed at me eagerly, with his fists shut tight, as though he were all ready to spring upon the impeding rocks and fling them out of the way at once.

"That's all right, Joe," I replied. "It's a good programme. But it's a tremendous piece of work, all the same. There are scores of rocks to be broken up and moved; and when that is done, there is still the new channel to be cut in the solid stone bed of the crater. The present channel is about eighteen inches deep; we shall have to make the new one six inches deeper, and something like a hundred feet long: a big job by itself, Joe." [Pg 299]

"I know that," Joe answered. "It's a big job, sure enough, and will take time and lots of hard work. Still, we can do it—"

"And what's more we will do it!" I cried. "What's the best way of setting about it?"

"We shall have to blast out the channel and blow to pieces all the bigger rocks," Joe replied. "It would take forever to do it with pick and sledge—in fact, it couldn't be done. We shall have to use powder and drill."

"Well, then," said I, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll borrow the tools from Tom Connor. He left a number of drills, you know, stored in our blacksmith-shop, and he'll lend 'em to us I'm sure. One of us had better drive back to the Big Reuben to-morrow morning and ask him."

"All right, Phil, we'll do so. My! I wish—it doesn't sound very complimentary—but I wish your father would stay away another week. I believe we can do this work in a week, and [Pg 300]

wouldn't it be grand if we could have the stream headed off before he got home! But how about the plowing, Phil? I was forgetting that."

"Why, the only plowing left," I replied, "is the potato land, and that, fortunately, is not urgent; whereas the turning of this stream is urgent—extremely urgent—and my opinion is that we ought to get at it. Anyhow, we'll begin on it, and if my father thinks proper to set us to plowing instead when he gets home—all right."

"Well, then, we'll begin on this work as soon as we can. And now, Phil, let us get along home."

We had been seated on a big stone while this discussion was going on, and were just about to rise, when Joe, suddenly laying his hand on my arm, held up a warning finger. "Sh!" he whispered. "Don't speak. Don't stir. I hear some one moving about!"

Squatting behind the rocks, I held my breath and listened, and presently I heard distinctly, somewhere close by, the tinkle of two or three chips of stone as they rolled down into the crater. Some one was softly approaching the place where we sat.

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Though to move was to risk detection, our anxiety to see who was there was too strong to resist, so Joe, taking off his hat, slowly arose until he was able to peep through a chink between two of the big fragments which sheltered us. For a moment he stood there motionless, and then, tapping me on the shoulder, he signed to me to stand up too.

Peeping between the stones, I saw, not fifty yards away, a man coming carefully down the crater-wall on the side opposite from that by which we ourselves had entered. In spite of his care, however, he every now and then dislodged a little fragment of stone, which came clattering down the steep slope. It was one of these that had given us notice of his approach.

There was no mistaking the tall, gaunt figure, even though the light of the sunset sky behind him made him look a veritable giant. It was Long John Butterfield.

He was headed straight for our hiding-place, and it was with some uneasiness that I observed he had a revolver strapped about his waist. In appearance he looked wilder and more unkempt than ever, while the sharp, suspicious manner in which he would every now and then stop short and glance quickly all around, showed him to be nervous and ill at ease.

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While Joe and I stood there silent and rigid as statues, Long John came on down the slope, until presently he stopped scarce ten steps from us beside a big, flat stone. There, for a moment, he stood, his hand on his revolver, his body bent and his head thrust forward, his ears cocked and his little eyes roving all about the crater—the picture of a watchful wild animal—when, satisfied apparently that he was alone and unobserved, he went down upon his knees, threw aside several pieces of rock, and thrusting his arm under the flat stone, he pulled out—a sack!

So close to us was he, that even in that uncertain light we could distinguish the word, "Pelican," stenciled upon it in big black letters.

Laying this sack upon the flat stone, John reached into the hole again, and, one after another, brought out four others. Apparently there were no more in there, for, having done this, he rose to his feet again, looked all about him once more, and then walked off a short distance up-stream. At the point where the channel overflowed he stopped again, when, to our wonderment he pulled off his coat, rolled up one sleeve, and going down upon his knees, began scratching around in the water. In a few seconds he fished out one at a time five dripping sacks, all of which he carried over and set down beside the first five.

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Evidently he was working with some set purpose; though to us watchers it was all a perfectly mysterious proceeding.

A few steps from where the sacks were piled was a little ledge of rock less than a foot high, above which was a steep slope covered with loose fragments of stone. Taking up the sacks, two at a time, John carried them over to this spot, laid them all, end to end, close under the little ledge, and then, climbing up above them, he sat down, and with his big, flat feet sent the loose shale running down until the row of sacks was completely buried.

This seemed to be all he wanted, for, having examined the result of his work and satisfied himself apparently that the sacks were perfectly concealed, he turned and went straight off up the crater-wall again, pausing at the crest for a minute to inspect the country ahead of him, and then, stepping over the rim, in another moment he had vanished.

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"Come on, Phil!" whispered my companion, eagerly. "Let us see which direction he takes."

"Wait a bit," I replied. "Give him five minutes: he might come back."

We waited a short time, therefore, when, feeling pretty sure that John had gone for good, we scrambled to the summit of the ridge and looked out over the mesa. There we could see Long John striding away at a great pace, apparently making straight for Big Reuben's gorge.

"Then Yetmore was right," said Joe. "Those fellows were the ore-thieves after all. I wonder if they haven't taken up their quarters in Big Reuben's old cave. It would be a pretty good place for their purpose."

"Quite likely," I assented. "But what do you suppose, Joe, can have been Long John's object in coming down here and moving those ore-sacks?—for, of course, they are the Pelican ore-sacks. They were well enough concealed before."

"It does look mysterious at first sight," replied Joe, "but I expect the explanation is simple enough. I think it is probable that when they brought the ore up here the two men divided the spoils on the spot, each hiding his own share in a place of his own choosing; and our respected friend, John, thinking to get ahead of the other thief, has just come and stolen his partner's share." [Pg 305]

"That would be a pretty shabby trick, but I expect it is just what he has done. He'll be a bit surprised when he finds that some one has played a similar trick on him. For, of course, we can't leave the sacks there, to be moved again if Long John should take the notion that the hiding place is not safe enough. How shall we manage it, Joe? If we are going to do anything this evening we must do it quickly: there won't be daylight much longer."

After a moment's consideration, Joe replied: "Let us go down and carry those sacks outside the crater. Then get along home, and come back here with the wagon and team by daylight to-morrow and haul them off. It is too much of a load for the buckboard, even if we walked ourselves, so it won't do to take them with us now."

"All right," said I. "Then we'll do that; and afterwards you can ride up to see Tom Connor about those tools, while I drive to Sulphide with the ore. Won't Yetmore be glad to see me!" [Pg 306]

There was no time to lose, and even as it was, the waning light made it pretty difficult to pick our way across the rock-strewn bottom of the crater with a fifty-pound sack under each arm, but at length we had them all safely laid away in a crack in the rocks just outside the crater, whence it would be handy to remove them in the morning.

By the time we had finished it was dark, and we hurriedly drove off home, contemplating with some reluctance the chores which were still to be done. From this duty, however, we had a happy relief, for our good friend, Peter, anxious to make himself of some use, and taking his time about it, had managed to feed the horses and pigs, milk the cows, shut up the chickens and start the fire for supper—a service on his part which we very thoroughly appreciated.

We had just sat down to our evening meal, and were telling Peter all about our two great finds of the afternoon, when our guest, whose long and solitary life as a hunter had made his hearing preternaturally sharp, straightened himself in his chair, and holding up one finger, said: [Pg 307]

"Hark! I hear a horse coming up the valley at a gallop!"

At first Joe and I could hear nothing, but presently we detected the rhythmical beat of the hoofs of a horse approaching at a smart canter. Somebody was coming up from San Remo—for though a wheeled vehicle could not pass over the "forty rods," a horseman could pick his way—and knowing that nobody ever came that way in the "soft" season unless our house was his destination, I stepped to the door, wondering who our visitor could be. Great was my surprise when the horseman, riding into the streak of light thrown through the open doorway, proved to be Yetmore!

"Why, Mr. Yetmore!" I cried. "Is it you? Come in! You're just in time for supper."

"Thank you, Phil," replied the storekeeper, "but I won't stop. I was down at San Remo this afternoon, and it occurred to me to ride home this way and inquire of you if you'd seen or heard anything more of those ore-thieves. By the way, before I forget it: I brought your mail for you;" at the same time handing me one letter and two or three newspapers. [Pg 308]

"Thank you," said I, thrusting the letter into my pocket. "And as to the ore-thieves, Mr. Yetmore, we've seen one of them; but we've done something a good deal better than that—we've found the ore."

"What!" shouted Yetmore, so loudly that Joe came running out, thinking there must be something the matter. "What! You've found the ore!"

So saying, he leaped from his horse and seizing me by the arm, cried: "You're not joking, are you, Phil? For goodness' sake, don't fool me, boys. It's a matter of life and death to me, almost!"

His anxiety was plainly expressed in his eager eyes and trembling hand, and I was glad to note the look of relief which came over his face when I replied:

"I'm not fooling, Mr. Yetmore. We've found it all right—this evening. Come in and have some supper, and we'll tell you all about it."

Yetmore did not decline a second time, but forgetting even to tie up his horse, which Joe did for him, he followed me at once into the kitchen, where, hardly noticing Peter, to whom I introduced him, and neglecting entirely the food placed before him, he sat down and instantly exclaimed:

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"Now, Phil! Quick! Go ahead! Go ahead! Don't keep me waiting, there's a good fellow! How did you find the ore? Where is it? What have you done with it?"

Not to prolong his suspense, I at once related to him as briefly as possible the whole incident, winding up with the statement that we proposed to go and bring in the sacks by daylight on the morrow.

At this conclusion Yetmore sprang to his feet.

"Boys," said he, in a tremulous voice, "you've done me an immense service; now do me one more favor: lend me your big gun. I'll ride right up to the 'bubble' and stand guard over the ore till morning. If I should lose it a second time I believe it would turn my head."

That he was desperately in earnest was plain to be seen: his voice was shaky, and his hand, I noticed, was shaky, too, when he held it out entreating us to lend him our big gun.

I was about to say he might take it, and welcome, when Joe pulled me by the sleeve and whispered in my ear; I nodded my acquiescence; upon which my companion, turning to Yetmore, said:

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"We can do better than that, Mr. Yetmore. We'll hitch up the little mules and go and bring away the ore to-night."

I have no doubt that to our anxious visitor the time seemed interminable while Joe and I were finishing our supper, but at length we rose from the table, and within a few minutes thereafter we were off; Yetmore himself sitting in the bed of the wagon with the big shotgun across his knees.

As it was then quite dark, and as we did not wish to attract any possible notice by carrying a light, we were obliged to take it very slowly, one or other of us now and then descending from the wagon and walking ahead as a pilot. In due time, however, we reached the foot of the "bubble," when, leaving Yetmore to take care of the mules, Joe and I climbed up to the crevice, and having presently, by feeling around with our hands, found the hiding-place of the sacks, we pulled them out and carried them, one at a time down to the wagon. All this, being done in the dark, took a long time, and it was pretty late when we drew up again at our own door.

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Here, for the first time, Yetmore, striking a match, examined the ten little sacks.

"It's all right, boys," said he, with a great sigh of relief. "These are the sacks; and none of them has been opened, either." He paused for a moment, and then, with much earnestness of manner, went on: "How am I to thank you, boys? You've done me a service of infinite importance. The loss of that ore almost distracted me: I needed the money so badly. But now, thanks to you, I shall be all right again. You don't know how great a service you have done me. I shan't forget it. We've not always been on the best of terms, I'm sorry to say—my fault, though, my fault entirely—but I should be very glad, if it suits you, to start fresh to-night and begin again as friends."

He was so evidently in earnest, that Joe and I by one impulse shook hands with him and declared that nothing would suit us better.

"And how about the ore, Mr. Yetmore?" I asked. "What will you do now?"

"If you don't mind," he replied, "I should like to drive straight up to Sulphide at once. If you will lend me the mules and wagon, I'll set right off. I'll return them to-morrow."

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"Very well," said I. "And you can leave your own horse in the stable, so that whoever brings down the team will have a horse to ride home on."

Yetmore, accordingly, climbed up to the seat and drove off at once, calling back over his

shoulder: "Good-night, boys; and thank you again. I feel ten years younger than I did this morning!"

CHAPTER XVII

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THE DRAINING OF THE "FORTY RODS"

As soon as Yetmore was out of sight, Joe and I turned into the house, where we found that Peter, wise man, had gone to bed; an example we speedily followed. But, tired though we were, we could neither of us go to sleep. For a long time we lay talking over the exciting events of the day, and going over the probable consequences, if, as now seemed certain, we had indeed discovered the source of our underground stream. First and foremost, by diverting it we should dry up the "forty rods" and render productive a large piece of land which at present was more bane than benefit; we should bring the county road past our door; we should more than double our supply of water for irrigation purposes—a fact which, by itself, would be of immense advantage to us.

At present we had no more than enough water—sometimes hardly enough—to irrigate our crops, but by doubling the supply we could bring into use another hundred acres or more. On either side of our present cultivated area, and only three feet above it, spread the first of the old lake-benches, a fine, level tract of land, capable of growing any crop, but which, for lack of water, we had hitherto utilized only as a dry pasture for our stock. By a test we had once made of a little patch of it, we had found that it was well adapted to the cultivation of wheat; and as I lay there thinking—Joe having by this time departed to the land of dreams—I pictured in my mind the whole area converted into one flourishing wheat-field; I built a castle in the air in the shape of a flour-mill which I ran by power derived from our waterfall; and with a two-ton load of flour I was in imagination driving down to San Remo over the splendid road which traversed the now solid "forty rods," when a light shining in my face disturbed me.

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It was the sun pouring in at our east window!

Half-past seven! And we still in bed! Such a thing had not happened to me since that time when, a rebellious infant, I had been kept in bed perforce with a light attack of the measles.

Needless to say, we were up and dressed in next to no time, when, on descending to the kitchen, we found another surprise in store for us. Peter was gone! He must have been gone some hours, too, for the fire in the range had burned out. He had not deserted us, however, for on the table was a bit of paper upon which he had written, "Back pretty soon. Wait for me"—a behest we duly obeyed, not knowing what else to do.

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About an hour later I heard the trampling of horses outside the front door, and going out, there I saw Peter stiffly descending from the back of our gray pony; while beside him, with a broad grin on his jolly face, stood Tom Connor.

"Why, Tom!" I cried. "What brings you here?"

Tom laughed. "Didn't expect to see me, eh, Phil," said he. "It's Peter's doing. While you two lazy young rascals were snoring away in bed, he started out at four-thirty this morning and rode all the way up to my camp to borrow my tools for you. And when he told me what you wanted 'em for, I decided to come down, too. You did me a good turn in finding the Big Reuben for me—and 'big' is the word for it, Phil, I can tell you—and so I thought I couldn't do less than come down here for a day or two and give you a hand. It's probable I can help you a good bit with your trench-cutting."

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"There's no doubt about that, Tom," I replied. "We shall be mighty glad of your help. You can give us a starter, anyhow. But you, Peter, we couldn't think what had become of you. Don't you think it was a bit risky to go galloping about the country with that game leg of yours?"

"I couldn't very well go without it," replied our guest, laughing. "No, I don't think so," he added, more seriously. "It was easy enough, all except the mounting and dismounting. In fact, Phil, I'm so nearly all right again that I should have no excuse to be hanging around here any longer if it were not that I can be of use to you by taking all the chores off your hands, thus leaving you and Joe free to get about your work in the crater."

"That will be a great help," I replied. "Though as to letting you go, Peter, we don't intend to do that, at least till my father and mother get home."

"When *do* they get home?" asked Tom. "Have you heard from them since they left?"

"Why!" I cried, suddenly remembering the letter Yetmore had brought up from San Remo the previous evening. "I have a letter from my father in my pocket now. I'd forgotten all about it."

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Quickly tearing it open, I read it through. It was very short, being written mainly with the object of informing me that he was delayed and would not be home until the afternoon of the following Wednesday. This was Friday.

"Joe!" I shouted; and Joe, who was in the stable, came running at the call. "Joe," I cried, "we have till Wednesday afternoon to turn that stream. Four full days. Tom is going to help us. Peter will take the chores. Can we make it?"

"Good!" cried Joe. "Great! Make it? I should think so. We'll do it if we have to work night and day. My! But this is fine!"

He rubbed his hands in anticipation of the task ahead of him. I never did know a fellow who took such delight in tackling a job which had every appearance of being just a little too big for him.

We did not waste any time, you may be sure. Having picked out the necessary tools, we went off at once, taking our dinners with us, and arriving at the foot of the "bubble," we carried up into the crater the drills, hammers and other munitions of war we had brought with us.

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"I thought you said there was a dribble of water running out at the crevice," remarked Tom. "I don't see it."

"There was yesterday," I replied, "but it seems to have stopped. I wonder why."

"That's easily accounted for," said Joe. "It was those sacks lying in the channel which backed up the water and made it overflow, and when Long John cleared the course by pulling out the sacks it didn't overflow any more."

"Then it's to Long John you owe this discovery!" cried Tom. "If 'The Wolf' hadn't blocked that channel the water would not have run down to the cañon, and the other wolf would not have got his feet wet; and if the other wolf had not got his feet wet, you would never have thought of coming up here."

"That's all true," I assented. "In fact, you may go further than that and say that if John had not stolen the ore he would not have blocked the channel with it, and we should not have found the spring; if Yetmore had not given John leave to blow up your house, John would not have stolen the ore; if you had not bored a hole in Yetmore's oil-barrel, Yetmore would not have given John leave—it's like the story of 'The House that Jack Built.' And so, after all, it is to you we owe this discovery, Tom."

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"Well, that's one way of getting at it," said Tom, laughing. "But, come on! Let's pick out our line and get to work."

"This won't be so much of a job," he remarked, when we had gone over the ground. "You ought to make quick work of it. We'll follow the wet mark left by the overflow, throw all these rocks out of the way, and then pitch in and cut our trench. Come on, now; let's begin at once. Phil, you throw aside all the rocks you can lift; Joe, take the sledge and crack all those too heavy to handle; I'll take the single-hand drill and hammer and put some shots into the big ones. Now, boys, blaze away, and let's see how much of a mark we can make before sunset."

Blaze away we did! Never before had Joe and I worked so hard for so long a stretch; not a minute did we lose, except on those four or five occasions when Tom, having put down a hole into one of the large pieces, called out to us to get to cover, when, running for shelter, we crouched behind some friendly rock until a sharp, cracking explosion told us that another of the big obstructions was out of the way.

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So hard did we work, in fact, and so systematically, that by sunset we had cleared a path six feet wide. There remained only one more of the big rocks to break up, and into this Tom put a three-foot hole, which he charged and tamped, when, sending us ahead to hitch up the horse, he touched off the fuse, the explosion following just as we started homeward.

"A great day's work, boys!" cried Tom. "If it wasn't for the training you've had all winter handling rocks, you never could have done it. There is a good chance now, I think, of getting the trench cut before Wednesday evening. I'll work with you all day to-morrow—I must get back to my camp then—and that will leave you two days and a half to finish up the job. You ought to do it if you keep hard at it."

By sunrise next morning we were at it again, working under Tom's direction, in the same systematic manner.

"Take the sledge, Joe," said he, "and crack up the fragments of that big rock we shot to pieces last night. Phil, you and I will put down our first hole, beginning here at the crevice and working upward. Now! Let's get to work!" [Pg 321]

Tom and I, therefore, went to work with drill and hammer, Tom taking the larger share of the striking; for though the swinging of the seven-pound hammer is the harder part of the work, the turning of the drill is the more particular, and as our instructor justly remarked, it was as well I should have all the practice I could get while he was on hand to superintend.

The hole being deep enough, Tom made me load and tamp it with my own hands, using black powder, which, though perhaps less effective for this particular kind of work than giant powder would have been, he regarded as safer for novices like ourselves to handle.

Our first shot broke out the rock in very good style, and then, while I busied myself cracking up the big pieces and throwing them aside, Joe took my place.

The second hole was loaded and tamped by Joe, under Tom's supervision; after which my partner once more took the sledge, while I turned drill again.

In this order we worked all day, making, before quitting time, such encouraging progress that we felt very hopeful of getting the task completed before my father's return. [Pg 322]

Tom having fairly started us, went back to his camp on Lincoln, leaving Joe and me to continue the work by ourselves; and sorely did we miss our expert miner when, on the Monday morning, we returned to the crater. Though we kept steadily at it all day, our progress was noticeably slower than it had been the first day, for, besides the fact that there were only two of us, and those the least skilful, as we ascended towards the stream each hole was a little deeper than the last, each charge a little stronger, and each shot blew out a greater amount of rock to be broken up and cast aside.

Nevertheless, we made very satisfactory headway, and continuing our work the next two days with unabated energy and some increase of skill with every hole we put down, we made such progress that by two o'clock on the Wednesday afternoon there remained but three feet of rock to be shot out to make connection with the channel.

I was for blasting this out forthwith, but Joe on the other hand suggested that we trim up our trench a little before turning in the water; for, hitherto, we had merely thrown out the loose pieces, and there were in consequence many projections and jagged corners both in the sides and bottom of our proposed water-course. These we attacked with sledge and crowbar, and in two hours or so had them pretty well cleared out of the way, when we went to work putting down our last hole. [Pg 323]

As we wanted to make a sure thing of it, we sank this hole rather deeper than any of the others, charging it with an extra allowance of powder. Then, the tools having been removed, I touched off the fuse and ran for shelter behind the big rock where Joe was already crouching, making himself as small as possible. Presently there was a tremendous bang! Rocks of every size and shape were flung broadcast all over the crater—some of them coming down uncomfortably close to our hiding-place—but as soon as the clatter ceased, up we both jumped and ran to see the result.

Nothing could have been better. Our last shot had torn a great hole, extending across almost the whole width of the old channel, and our trench being six inches or more below the original level, the whole stream at once rushed into it, leaving its former bed high and dry. [Pg 324]

"Hooray, for us!" shouted Joe. "Come on, Phil! Let us run down and see it go into the cañon."

Away we went; but as the crater-side was pretty steep we had to descend with some caution; whereas the water, having no neck to break, went down headlong. The consequence was that the stream beat us to the cañon by a hundred yards, and by the time we arrived it was pouring over the edge in a sixty-foot cascade.

We were in time, however, to see a wall of foam flying down the cañon; a sight which, while it delighted us, at the same time gave us something of a start.

"Joe!" I cried. "How about our bridge?"

"Pht!" Joe whistled. "I never thought of it. It will go out, I'm afraid. Let us get down there at once."

Off we ran to where our horse was standing, eating hay out of the back of the buckboard, threw on the harness, hitched him up, and scrambling in, one on either side, away we went as fast as we dared over the uneven, rocky stretch of the mesa which lay between us and home.

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The course of the stream being more circuitous than the one we took across country, we beat the water down to the ranch; but only by a few seconds. We had hardly reached the bridge when the swollen stream leaped into the pool in such volume that I felt convinced it would sweep it clear of all the sand in it whether black or yellow; rushed under the bridge, and went tearing down the valley—a sight to see! Luckily the creek-bed was fairly wide and straight, so that the banks did not suffer much.

As to the bridge, the stringers being very long and well set, and the floor being composed of stout poles roughly squared and firmly spiked down, it did not go out, though the water came squirting up between the poles in a way which made us fear it might tear them loose at any moment.

To prevent this, we ran quickly to the stable, harnessed up the mules to the wood-sled, loaded the sled with some of our big flat lava-rocks, and driving back to the bridge, we laid these rocks upon the ends of the poles, leaving a causeway between them wide enough for the passage of a wagon.

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We had just finished this piece of work, when we heard a rattle of wheels, and looking up the road we saw coming down the hill an express-wagon, driven by Sam Tobin, a San Remo liveryman, and in the wagon sat my father and mother.

“Why, what’s all this?” cried the former, as the driver pulled up on the far side of the bridge. “Where does all this water come from?”

Then did the pent-up excitement of the past week burst forth. The flood of water going under the bridge was a trifle compared with the flood of words we poured out upon my bewildered parents; both of us talking at the same time, interrupting each other at every turn, explaining each other’s explanations, and tumbling over each other, as it were, in our eagerness. All the details of the strenuous days since the snow-slide came down—the discovery of the Big Reuben, the recovery of the stolen ore, and above all the heading-off of the underground stream—were set forth with breathless volubility; so that if the hearers were a little dazed by the recital and a trifle confused as to the particulars, it was not to be wondered at. One thing, at least, was clear to them: we had found and turned the underground stream; and when he understood that, my father leaped from the wagon, and shaking hands with both of us at once, he cried:

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“Boys, you certainly *have* done a stroke of work! If it had taken you a year instead of a week it would have been more than worth the labor. As to its actual money value, it is hard to judge yet; but whether that shall turn out to be much or little, there is one thing sure:—we have our work cut out for us for years to come—a grand thing by itself for all of us. And now, let us go on up to the house: Sam Tobin wants to get back home as soon as possible.”

This the driver was able to do at once, for the livery horses, frightened by the water which came spurting up through the floor of the bridge, declined to cross, so Joe and I, taking out the trunk, placed it on the wood-sled and thus drew it up to the house.

As we walked along, my mother said:

“So the hermit has been staying with you, has he? And what sort of a man *is* your wild man now you’ve caught him?”

“He isn’t a wild man at all,” cried Joe, somewhat indignantly. “He’s a fine fellow—isn’t he, Phil? He has been of great help to us these last few days. We could never have finished our trench in time if he hadn’t taken the chores off our hands. He is in the kitchen now, getting the supper ready. I’ll run and bring him out.”

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So saying, Joe ran forward—we others walking on more leisurely—and as we approached the house the pair came out of the front door side by side.

In spite of Joe’s assurance to the contrary, my parents still had in their minds the idea that any one going by the name of “Peter, the Hermit” must be a rough, hirsute, unkempt specimen of humanity. Great was their surprise, therefore, when Peter, always clean and tidy, his hair and beard neatly trimmed in honor of their return, issued from the doorway, looking, with his clear gray eyes, his ruddy complexion and his spare, erect figure, remarkably young and alert.

There was an added heartiness in their welcome, therefore, when Joe proudly introduced him; and though Peter threw out hints about sleeping in the hay-loft that night and taking

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himself off the first thing in the morning, my mother scouted the idea, telling him how she had long desired to make his acquaintance, and intimating that she should take it as a very poor compliment to herself if he should run off the moment she got home.

So Peter, set quite at his ease, said no more about it, but went back into the kitchen, whence he presently issued again to announce that supper was ready.

A very hearty and a very merry supper it was, too, and long and animated was the talk which followed, as we sat before the open fire that evening.

"I feel almost bewildered," said my father, "when I think of the amount and the variety of the work we have before us; it is astonishing that the turning of that stream should carry with it so many consequences, as I foresee it will—that and Tom Connor's strike."

"There's no end to it!" cried Joe, jumping out of his chair, striding up and down the room, and, for the last time in this history, rumpling his hair in his excitement. "There's no end to it! There's the hay-corral to enlarge—rock hauling all winter for you and me, Phil! We shall need a new ice-pond; for this new water-supply won't freeze up in winter like the old one did! Then, when the 'forty rods' dries up, there will be the extension of our ditches down there; besides making a first-class road to bring all the travel our way—plenty of work in that, too! Then, when we bring the old lake-benches under cultivation, there will be new headgates needed and two new ditches to lay out, besides breaking the ground! Then—Oh, what's the use? There's no end to it—just no end to it!"

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Joe was quite right. There was, and there still seems to be, no end to it.

The effect of Tom Connor's strike on Mount Lincoln was just what my father had predicted: our whole district took a great stride forward; the mountains swarmed with prospectors; the town of Sulphide hummed with business; our new friend, Yetmore, doing a thriving trade, while our old friend, Mrs. Appleby, followed close behind, a good second.

As for Tom, himself, he is one of our local capitalists now, but he is the same old Tom for all that. Just as he used to do when he was poor, so he continues to do now he is rich: any tale of distress will empty his pocket on the spot. Though my father remonstrates with him sometimes, Tom only laughs and remarks that it is no use trying to teach old dogs new tricks; and moreover he does not see why he should not spend his money to suit himself. And so he goes his own way, more than satisfied with the knowledge that every man, woman and child in the district counts Tom Connor as a friend.

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The fate of those two poor ore-thieves was so horrible that I hesitate to mention it. It was six months later that a prospector on one of the northern spurs of Lincoln came upon two dead bodies. One, a club-footed man, had been shot through the head; the other, unmistakably Long John, was lying on his back, an empty revolver beside him, and one foot caught in a bear-trap. Though the truth will never be known, the presumption is that, setting the stolen trap in a deer run in the hope of catching a deer, they had got into a quarrel; Clubfoot, striking at his companion, had caused him to step backward into the trap, when, in his pain and rage, Long John had whipped out his revolver and shot the other. What his own fate must have been is too dreadful to contemplate.

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And the Crawford ranch? Well, the Crawford ranch is the busiest place in the county.

Peter, for whom my parents, like ourselves, took a great liking, quickly thawed out under my mother's influence, and related to us briefly the reason for his having taken to his solitary life. He had been a school-teacher in Denver, but losing his wife and two children in an accident, he had fled from the place and had hidden himself up in our mountains, where for several years he had spent a lonely existence with no company but old Socrates. Now, however, his house destroyed and his mountain overrun with prospectors, he needed little inducement to abandon his old hermit-life; and accepting gladly my father's suggestion that he stay and work on the ranch, he built for himself a good log cabin up near the waterfall, and there he and Socrates took up their residence.

There was plenty of work for him and for all of us—indeed, for the first two years there was almost more than we could do. It took that length of time for the "forty rods" to drain off thoroughly, but by the middle of the third summer we were cutting hay upon it; the ore wagons from Sulphide and from the Big Reuben were passing through in a continuous stream; the stage-coach was coming our way; the old hill road was abandoned.

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In fact, everybody is busy, and more than busy—with one single exception.

The only loafer on the place is old Sox—tolerated on account of his advanced age. That

veteran, whose love of mischief and whose unfailing impudence would lead any stranger to suppose he had but just come out of the egg, spends most of his time strutting about the ranch, stealing the food of the dogs and chickens; awing them into submission by his supernatural gift of speech. And as though that were not enough, his crop distended with his pilferings to the point of bursting, he comes unabashed to the kitchen door and blandly requests my mother, of all people, to give him a chew of tobacco!

But the mail-coach has just gone through, and I hear Joe shouting for me; I must run.

"Yetmore wants fifty-hundred of oats, Phil," he calls out. "You and I are to take it up. We must dig out at once if we are to get back to-night. To-morrow we break ground on our new ditches. A month or more of good stiff work for us, old chap!"

[Pg 334]

He rubs his hands in anticipation; for the bigger he grows—and he has grown into a tremendous fellow now—the more work he wants. There is no satisfying him.

We have been very fortunate, wonderfully fortunate; but I am inclined to set apart as pre-eminently our lucky day that one in the summer of '79, when young Joe Garnier, the blacksmith's apprentice, stopped at our stable-door to ask for work!

THE END

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