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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELAM STORM, THE WOLFER; OR, THE LOST NUGGET ***

ELAM STORM, THE WOLFER

OR

THE LOST NUGGET

BY HARRY CASTLEMON

**AUTHOR OF "GUNBOAT SERIES," "FOREST AND STREAM SERIES," "WAR SERIES,"
ETC., ETC.**

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THE RED GHOST.

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ELAM STORM, THE WOLFER;

OR,

THE LOST NUGGET.

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE NUGGET.

"Yes, sir; it's just like I tell you. Every coyote on this here ranch, mean and sneaking as he is, is worth forty dollars to the man who can catch him."

"Then what is the reason Carlos and I can't make some money this winter?"

"You mout, and then again you moutn't. It aint everybody who can coax one of them smart prowlers to stick his foot in a trap. If that was the case, my neighbors would have had more sheep, and Elam Storm would be worth a bushel of dollars."

"And you are going to grub-stake him again this winter, are you, Uncle Ezra?"

"Sure. I always do."

"What is the reason you won't let us go with him to the mountains?"

"'Cause I know that your folks aint so tired of you that they are ready to lose you yet awhile; that's why."

"Only just a few days. We'll come back at the end of the week if you say so, won't we, Carlos?"

"'Taint no use of talking, Ben; not a bit. Man alive! what would I say to the major if anything should happen to you? And going off with Elam Storm! That would be the worst yet."

"But Elam is honest and reliable. You have said so more than once, Uncle Ezra."

"Oh, he's honest enough, as far as that goes, but shiftless—mighty shiftless. And I never said he

was reliable except in one way. He's reliable enough to go to the mountains every fall and come back every spring with a hoss-back load of peltries, and that's all he is reliable for. I did make out to hold him down to the business of sheep-herding for a couple of years, but then the roaming fever took him again and nobody couldn't do nothing with him. He just had to go, and so he asked for a grub-stake and lit out."

"You think that while he is in the mountains he looks for something besides wolf-skins, don't you?"

"I know he does. He's got a fool notion that will some day be the death of him, just as it has been the death of a dozen other men who tried to follow out the same notion."

"You promised to tell me all about it some day, and about Elam, too; and what better time can we have than the present? We are here by ourselves, and there is no one to break in on your story."

"Well, then, I'll tell you if it will ease your minds any. It won't be long, so you needn't go to settling yourself as though you had an all-night's job before you to listen. And perhaps when I am done you will know why I don't want you to go piking about the country with such a fellow as Elam Storm."

It was just the night for story-telling and pipes. The blizzard, which had been brewing for a week or more, had burst forth in all its fury, and the elements were in frightful commotion. The wind howled mournfully through the branches of the evergreens that covered the bluff behind the cabin; the rain and sleet, freezing as they fell, rattled harshly upon the bark roof over our heads; and the whole aspect of nature, as I caught a momentary glimpse of it when I went out to gather our evening's supply of fire-wood, was cheerless and desolate in the extreme. Our party consisted of three (or I should say four, for the Elam Storm whose name has so often been mentioned was to have shown up two days before)—Uncle Ezra Norton, who was a sheep-herder in a small way during the summer, and an untiring hunter and trapper in winter; Ben Hastings, whose father, an officer of rank in the regular army, was stationed at the fort fifty miles away; and myself, Carlos Burton, a ne'er-do-well, who—but I will say no more on that point, as perhaps you will find out what sort of a fellow I am as my story progresses. We were comfortably sheltered in our valley home, but we heard all the noise of the tempest and felt a good deal of its force; and accustomed as I had become to such things during my wild life in the far West, I did not forget to breathe a silent but heart-felt prayer for any unfortunate who might be overtaken by the storm before he had time to reach the shelter of his cabin.

Under our humble roof there were warmth, comfort, and supreme contentment. The single room of which the cabin could boast was brilliantly lighted by the fire on the hearth, which roared back a defiance to the storm outside; its rough walls of unhewn logs were heavily draped with the skins of the elk, blacktail, and mountain sheep that had fallen to our rifles during the hunt, completely shutting out all the cold and damp and darkness; and Ben and I, with our moccasoned feet thrust toward the cheerful blaze, reclined luxuriously upon a pile of genuine Navajo blankets, while our guide, friend, and mentor, Uncle Ezra Norton, sat upon his couch of balsam sending up from his pipe clouds of tobacco incense that broke in fleecy folds against the low roof over our heads. Our minds were in the dreamy, tranquil state that comes after a good dinner and a brief season of repose following a period of toil and hard tramping that had been rewarded beyond our hopes.

Uncle Ezra was a typical borderman, strong as one of his own mules, and grizzly as any of the numerous specimens of *Ursus ferox* that had fallen before his big-bored Henry. Although he took no little pride in recounting Ben's exploits to the officers of the garrison, he was very strict with the boy when the latter was under his care, and never permitted him to wander far out of his sight if he could help it.

Uncle Ezra was my particular friend, and had won my undying gratitude by his kindness to me. I was in trouble and he helped me out of the deepest hole I ever was in. When I struck his ranch one dreary day, two years before this story begins, afoot and alone, almost ready to drop with fatigue, and told him that every hoof and horn I had in the world had been rounded up by a gang of cattle thieves who had driven them into the Bad Lands to be slaughtered for their hides—when I told him this he not only expressed the profoundest sympathy for my forlorn condition, but grub-staked me and sent me into the foot-hills to find a gold mine.

Judging from what I know now there was about as much chance of finding gold in the region to which he sent me as there was of being struck by lightning, and, more than that, I couldn't have distinguished the precious metal from iron pyrites; but I had to do something to pay for my outfit, and so I went, glad to get away by myself and brood over my great loss. For I had been pretty well off for a boy of fifteen, I want you to remember, and every dollar I had made was made by the hardest kind of knocks.

When I first came out West, I began working on a ranch, taking my pay in stock at twelve dollars a month. My wages soon grew as my services increased in value, and as I took to riding like an old timer, I learned rapidly, because I liked the business; and it was not long before I was the proud possessor of a herd of cattle worth six thousand dollars. But it was precarious property in those days,—as uncertain as the weather. You might be fairly well off when you rolled yourself up in your blanket at night, and as poor as Job's turkey when you awoke in the morning; and that's the way it was with me. I was moving my herd to another section of the country in search of better pasturage, and was passing through a narrow canyon within two days' journey of the new

range that one of my cowboys had selected for me, when all on a sudden there was a yell of charging men, whom I at first thought to be Indians, a rifle shot which killed my horse and injured my leg so badly that I could scarcely crawl into the nearest thicket out of sight, a hurried stampede of frightened cattle, and I was a beggar or the next thing to it. My three cowboys disappeared when the cattle did, and that was all the evidence I wanted to satisfy me that they were in league with the robbers. Ever since that time I had lived in hopes that it might be my good fortune to meet them again under different circumstances. When I learned that two of their number had been hanged somewhere in Arizona for horse-stealing, I was sorry to hear it, and hoped the other would mend his ways and so escape lynching, for I wanted to settle with him myself.

At the time my story begins, however, I was on my feet again, as anyone can be in that Western country who is suffering from reverses. I had a home ranch and perhaps ten thousand dollars' worth of cattle ranging near the Bad Lands, into which my small herd had been driven to be killed for their hides; but I was poor enough and miserable enough when Uncle Ezra sent me off to hunt up a gold mine. I didn't find it, of course, but I took back to old Norton's ranch some specimens of quartz that made him open his eyes. They looked like chunks of granite, with little pieces of different-colored glass scattered through them. I had no idea of the value of my find, but so certain was Uncle Ezra that I had struck it rich that he took the specimens to Denver himself, and some expert there assured him that he was a millionaire. But he wasn't, by a long shot, and neither was I. Uncle Ezra knew no more about business outside of sheep-herding and trapping than an Apache knows about astronomy, and the fifteen-year-old boy who was his only counsellor knew less, and the usual results followed. We were euchred out of our find, which meant the loss of bushels of dollars to us. During my prospecting tour I camped on the banks of a little stream, following through a secluded valley a hundred miles deep in the mountains, and stumbled upon a rich deposit of rubies and sapphires. Although there were no true red rubies nor true blue sapphires among them, they were beautiful gems and worth money. The Denver expert told Uncle Ezra that there was a sprinkling of fire opals among them, but this I am inclined to doubt, for I never heard of those stones being found together. Anyhow, that deposit, whose wealth was first presented to my inexperienced eyes, covered sixteen acres of ground, and is being worked by a syndicate with a cash capital of two million dollars. Uncle Ezra and I saved a small stake for old age; but you bet I will know a good thing the next time I see it.

Ben Hastings, as I have said, was the son of an army officer who was stationed at the fort a few miles away, and this was the first time he had ever been west of the Mississippi. He had the good sense to acknowledge that he was a tender-foot, and perhaps that made me take to him from the start. He could ride and shoot a little, and had camped in small patches of timber like to Adirondacks and up about Moosehead Lake; but he did not pretend to know it all, as the majority of Eastern men do when they come out here, and so he had plenty of friends among men who were willing to assist him. He fairly overflowed with delight when I took him an invitation from Uncle Ezra to spend a month on his sheep-ranch. His father was glad to let him accept, for old Ezra was a particular friend of his, and often acted as guide when the major went scouting. This hunt to Wind River Mountains had been undertaken for Ben's especial benefit, and as we pushed him to the front as often as the opportunity was presented, he shot more elk and blacktail than we did.

I have spoken of Elam Storm, a particular friend of all of us. He was somewhere in the mountains now and ought to have joined us two days ago, but, seeing that it was Elam, we did not pay any attention to it. He was a professional wolfer whom Uncle Ezra had befriended. Old Ezra said he was shiftless; but he certainly was not lazy, for he would work harder at doing nothing than any fellow I ever saw. He was game, too. He had some sort of a notion in his head that governed all his actions, and although I was as intimate with him as anybody in the country, I never could find out what it was. But I did not push my enquiries, I want you to understand, for Elam had a sharp tongue, which he did not hesitate to use when he thought occasion demanded it, and, besides, he was handy with his gun. I had often asked Uncle Ezra to tell me what he knew of Elam's history, but could never get him started on the subject; so I was glad to hear him say in response to Ben's importunities that he would tell the story.

"How long ago was it since Elam came to you?" enquired Ben Hastings, with a view of hurrying Uncle Ezra, who was refilling his pipe, gazing with great deliberation the while into the fire, as if he there saw the incidents he was about to describe.

"He never came to me at all," replied the old man. "I fetched him to my ranch, and he's been there off and on ever since. He's a different boy from Carlos, here,"—with a nod in my direction,— "the most improvidentest fellow you ever saw, and always dead broke, so that I have to grub-stake him every fall. I have offered more than once to take him right along and give him his pay in stock, so that he could get a start with some sheep of his own, but he won't hear to it. That's what makes me mad at Elam. It's all along of that fool notion that will some day be the death of him like I told you."

"But what is that fool notion?" asked Ben, as Uncle Ezra paused to light his pipe with a brand from the fire.

"Wait till I tell you. You see, Elam's history, so far as I know anything about it, begins with that treasure train that was lost up the country years ago. An army paymaster started for Grayson with three government wagons, a guard of twelve soldiers, and thirty thousand dollars that was to be paid to the garrison at that place. Report says and always did say that there was one private

wagon with the train, and Elam Storm he sticks to it that that there wagon was his father's. I don't dispute that part of his history, but I do dispute all the rest, for it won't hold water. He allows that there was a nugget into that there wagon, and that it was worth eight thousand dollars; and that's right where the history of Elam begins.

"Well, sir, none of them men that went out with them wagons was ever seen or heard of after they left Martin's. When the time came for them to show up at Grayson and they didn't do it, scouting parties were sent out to look for them, and I was with the party that found the wreck of one of the wagons. And there's where I found Elam; but not a live man or critter or a cent of money did we discover."

"What do you suppose became of them?" enquired Ben.

"Carried off by the robbers that jumped down on the train," replied Uncle Ezra. "But whether they was Injuns or white men aint known for certain to this day. There wasn't nothing except hoof-prints and a few dried spots of blood to show where the attack was made on the train; but there was a dim trail leading from it, and by following that trail through the chaparral and down a rocky canyon that was hemmed in on all sides by mountains we found the wrecked wagon I spoke of. When one of the axles broke and let the wagon down so that it could not be hauled any further, the robbers took every blessed thing out of it and went on, and we never did catch up with them—everything, I say, except Elam. He was no doubt left in the wagon for dead, for when we came up he was just alive and that was all. He hadn't been hurt at all. He was scared and starved almost to the bounds of endurance, but with such care as we rough men could give him, and being naturally tough and strong, he managed to worry through. After he got so that he could talk he had sense enough to remember that his name was the same as his father's, Elam Storm, and that was everything he did know. He couldn't tell the first thing about the soldiers who composed the escort, or whether the men who made the attack were whites or Injuns, or what went with the money; and the worst of it was when he grew older none of these things didn't come into his mind, like we hoped and believed they would.

"Seeing that the little waif was friendless and alone, and none of us didn't know whether he had kith or kin in the world, I offered to take him and bring him up as if he were my own son, and the rest of the boys they agreed to it. Although he has always been known around these diggin's as 'Ezra Norton's kid,' he aint no more relation to me than you be, and no more use neither, I might say, so far as helping on the ranch is concerned. He always was a shiftless sort of chap, and liked best to get away by himself and 'mope,' as I called it, though I believe now that he was doing a power of thinking, and trying to remember who he was, where he had once lived, and what happened to him before the train was lost. I wasn't much surprised when he took to wolfing as a means of getting his grub and clothes, for that solitary business just suited his solitary disposition; but I was teetotally dumfounded and mad, too, when he told me that his father was alive, and that he would some day find him and his big nugget together. Mind you, he didn't say this as though he hoped and believed it might be true, but as positive as though he knew it was true."

"Where do you suppose they—I mean his father and the nugget—are now?" asked Ben.

"Pshaw! His father is dead long ago," replied Uncle Ezra, in a very decided tone. "Leastwise the men who went with the wagons are dead, and so old Elam must be dead, too. Don't stand to reason that only one man out of the whole outfit should turn up alive, does it? These things happened thirteen year ago, and Elam is nigh about twenty now, I should say. As for his nugget—well, I don't know what to think about that. When I first come to this country, there was a nugget of that description in existence, which had been dug up somewhere in those very mountains, and the finding of it created a rush that reminded old timers of California and Deadwood. I jined in with the rest, but never dug out more than enough to pay my expenses; and that's what set me to raising sheep."

When Uncle Ezra said this, he tipped me a wink, and settled back on his couch of fragrant boughs, nursing his left leg for company.

CHAPTER II.

TOM MASON AGAIN.

"Well," said Ben interrogatively, "the nugget that Elam had to do with wasn't any relation to this one, was it?"

"Wait till I tell you. I don't reckon there is any one thing in the world that has been the cause of so much misery and mischief of all kinds as that there nugget," continued Uncle Ezra reflectively. "The man who found it, whose name was Morgan, and who was working with two pardners, share and share alike, was about as honest as a man ever gets to be, but the sight of the small fortune which he unearthed one day by a single stroke of his pick, while working a little apart from the others, was too much for him. He was as poor as a man ever gets to be, and, worse than all, he had a sweetheart off in the States who was waiting for him to raise a stake and come home and marry her. He didn't like the idea of dividing with his two pardners, who would drop their roll at

the faro table as soon as they got the chance, and so he took and buried his find and worked on as if nothing had happened. That is to say, he tried to; but with a big chunk of gold within easy reach of his hand it don't stand to reason that he could act just as he did before. He was uneasy all the time, and his pardners noticed it and suspected something. He took to visiting his nugget's hiding-place every night, to make sure that no one had dug it up, and his pardners found it out on him; and when at last he grew desperate and tried to carry it away secretly, there was some shooting done, and Morgan and one of his pardners were killed."

"That left the survivor a rich man!" exclaimed Ben, who was deeply interested.

"Now, just wait till I tell you. That left the survivor a tolerable rich man, but his sudden accession of wealth scared him so badly that he buried the nugget in a new place and put for 'Frisco, where he took sick and died. When the medical sharps warned him that he had not long to live, he told one of the nurses about the nugget, and gave him a map of the locality in which it was hidden. A month or so afterward the nurse organized a small expedition and went to the mountains to hunt for the treasure; but he hired for a guide a treacherous Greaser, who went ahead, dug up the nugget, and brought it to Brazos City, a small mining town in which I was located at the time.

"Pierto—that was the Greaser's name—hadn't any more than got his nugget into the Gold Dollar saloon, which was kept by a countryman of hisn, and put it into a glass case and set it up on the table so that everybody could see and admire it, before he was offered eight thousand dollars for his find; but Pierto wouldn't sell. He thought he could make more money by putting it up at a raffle, and when the raffle was over, he would go back to the mountains and try for another nugget, taking some of us along if we wanted to go. Three thousand shares at ten dollars a share was what he thought would be about right, and I put my name down for ten shares then and there.

"The Gold Dollar did a custom-house business after that. Crowds of miners from every camp for miles around came there to look at Pierto's find, take shares in the raffle, and drink forty-rod whiskey. Pierto and the eight countrymen of hisn whom he employed to guard the nugget night and day were armed with pepper-boxes and machetes, and were as sassy and stuck up as so many bantam chickens, and the lordly way in which they ordered us Gringos to stand back and not crowd the nugget too close was laughable to see. They were a surly gang and looked able to whip their weight in wild-cats; but in reality they were the most harmless lot of cowards that Pierto could have got together.

"Like all mining towns, Brazos City could boast of some tough citizens, and among them was Red Jimmy Murphy, a noted desperado, and as smart a rough as ever pulled a gun. He and two of his pals were in the Gold Dollar every day and night, and after looking the ground over they concluded that the plant could be raised. No sooner had this been settled to their satisfaction than they set to work to get things ready.

"The night before the raffle was to come off the Gold Dollar was packed as full as it could hold,—so full that there was scarcely room for the fiddlers to work their elbows,—and Pierto's guard had to use some little muscular strength to keep the crowd from pushing over the table on which lay the nugget in its glass case. Red Jimmy's gang was there, ready to grab the chunk at the critical moment, and finally Jimmy himself rode into the saloon on a kicking, plunging bronco. The closely packed men cursed and threatened and ordered him out, but gave way all the same, and when the bronco heard the squawking of the fiddles and felt the jab of his rider's spurs, he slewed around and backed toward the table. Pierto saw the danger, and made a desperate rush to save his nugget, but was just a second too late. Jimmy raised a yell to put his pals on the watch, and spurred up the bronco, which at once sent his heels into the air as high as the ceiling. Down went the table, and the glass flew into a thousand pieces. The nugget went sailing over the heads of the crowd and into the hands of one of the gang, who, in spite of every effort that was made to stop him, succeeded in tossing it to Jimmy; and Jimmy he headed for the door, riding over everybody that got in his way. Then there was fun, I tell you. I never saw lead fly so thickly before nor since. Everybody had a gun out, and Red Jimmy ought by rights to have been riddled like a sieve."

"Uncle Ezra, did you shoot?" asked Ben.

"I presume to say that I made as much noise as the rest," answered the old man, with a chuckle. "You know, I held some chances in that chunk, and didn't want to lose them. Of course Pierto had to shell out the money we paid him for the tickets, for the raffle could not now be brought off; we kept him right there under our guns till he gave back the last dollar, but he never set eyes on his nugget, and neither did we. Red Jimmy, desperately wounded as he was, got away to the mountains with his prize, and although a strong posse headed by the sheriff followed on his trail and finished him the next day, they did not find the nugget. One of his gang made off with it."

"And you lost it all?"

"Cer'n'y," said the old man.

"And never got a chance to raffle for any of it?" asked Ben. "It has probably been fixed up into ornaments of some description by this time. An article worth eight thousand dollars isn't going to be left around loose."

"It wasn't so two years ago."

"Two years?"

"Wait till I tell you. That nugget has travelled as much as five hundred miles from here, but somehow it always manages to come back. Here it was born, and right here it is going to stay until it has its rights. Mind you, that is Elam's way of looking at it, but it aint mine, by a long shot. We didn't none of us hear of the nugget again for nearly a year, and then one of the boys happened to strike a pardner who had got dissatisfied with the money he was making and went off to Pike's Peak, and there he learned that two of the gang who had stolen it were seen and killed for the part they had taken in the enterprise; for you will remember that several miners in the country had knocked off work and come in to catch a glimpse of Pierto's find, and of course they didn't feel very friendly toward the robbers.

"Well, everybody for miles around kept open eyes for that nugget for years, until at last I forgot all about it until I heard that a couple of worthless Greasers had somehow got hold of it, and had been found done to death with that nugget by their side. Then I gave up all hopes, for if the nugget had fallen into the hands of honest men, that was the last of it; but it seems it hadn't, and that gave me another show," said Ezra, tipping me another wink, which was as near to a laugh as he ever got. "The two Greasers were about as tough specimens as you see, and they finally got into a fight to see which was the better man. When they were found, the victor had the nugget hugged closely to his breast, as if he did not want to part with it even in death. Not only that, but these two had scarcely found the nugget till they got into a row over who should carry it, and one of them got so badly whipped that he dropped and fainted right there. The other had strength enough to travel ten miles nearer the fort, and there he hid the nugget; but where he hid it he don't know. He raved about it while he was sick, and somebody told Elam of it (you see, everybody around here knows the history of that nugget), and every fall and winter he asks for a grub-stake and lights out, and I don't see any more of him till I drive my sheep down on the prairie. That happened two years ago, and every fall you'll see three or four fellows in the edge of Death Valley, saying nothing to each other, but ostensibly hunting coyotes, and all the while looking for that nugget, which is the thing they most want to find."

"Then the nugget is really here?" exclaimed Ben.

"It's here or hereabouts. It may be within ten miles of this place or it may be a hundred; for nobody knows where that fellow hid it. Mind you, I shouldn't like to be the fellow that finds it."

"Why not?"

"Because Elam will go for him. It's his nugget, and he knows it and he's bound to have it. Mind you, Elam doesn't say nothing about it, and he can't imagine what it is that sends the fellows prowling around Death Valley. But, laws! they may as well give it up. There have been a good many landslides in the canyon here the last fall, and if the nugget is under them, we may as well bid it good-bye. I don't know that this nugget is any relation to Elam's, but it looks to me that way; don't it to you? And it seems so strange that it should come back here when it gets off a certain distance. The poor fellow is out there now hunting for it, and he may not show up this trip."

"That won't be anything new for Elam, will it?"

Uncle Ezra thought it would not. He might be a longer or shorter distance from there, and if he didn't put in an appearance, it was no matter; and, having got through with his talk, Uncle Ezra knocked the ashes from his pipe and settled himself in an attitude of rest, while Ben and I listened to the noise of the storm and thought of Elam's strange history. The nugget belonged to him, and we hoped from the bottom of our hearts that he would get it, although we made up our minds that he would have a strange time in getting back to the fort with it while there were so many desperate men waiting for him to recover it. Suddenly Ben thought of something.

"Uncle Ezra, you didn't tell us how Elam's father came into possession of that nugget in the first place," said he.

"Ask me something hard," replied the old frontiersman.

"Don't you know?"

"Nobody knows. We don't know whether it was hisn or he was just carrying it for somebody. We only know it was there—at least Elam says so. We only know that the robbers had it for years. There is a hiatus in the history of the nugget, and nobody don't seem to know what became of it in that time. We only know that them two Greasers had it and fought over it, and that brings it up to two years ago. It's my opinion that there will be another hiatus lasting for all time. At any rate it is worth eight thousand dollars, and I believe it is the same one I took ten chances on."

Uncle Ezra rolled over as if he intended to go to sleep, and once more silence reigned in the cabin. Presently a deep snore coming from Ben's way told me that he was fast losing consciousness, and I was left to keep watch of the fire and listen to the howling of the storm outside. While I was thinking how foolish Elam was to go on searching for that nugget, when he might just as well have turned an honest sheep-herder, and laid out a little of his strength in taking care of his woolly companions instead of spending it all in wolfing, I, too, passed into the land of dreams.

The next morning's sun (for the storm ceased shortly after midnight) found us still upon our blankets, for Uncle Ezra did not intend to go hunting that day, and it was nine o'clock when we got breakfast off our hands and the dishes washed and put away. We were just settling ourselves

for another long story—a good one we knew it was going to be, for Uncle Ezra had promised to tell us about the first bear he ever killed—when a far-away and lonely howl came to our ears. It was so lonely that it seemed as if a single wolf was left, and that he was mourning over those who had fallen before the hunter's traps and rifle; but we knew it was not that. We listened, and when the sound was repeated, I threw open the door, and stepped out and set up an answering howl.

"That's Elam," said Ezra, in response to Ben's enquiring look. "It is his way of announcing his whereabouts. I expect he will come along with a hoss-back load of peltries, so that I won't have to grub-stake him again this winter. Elam is pretty sharp, if I did raise him."

The blizzard had swept the mountain free of snow, and it was only in the valley, where the fury of the storm had spent itself; consequently the new-comer had little difficulty in making his appearance. In the course of twenty minutes he came up, and then we knew he was not alone. We could hear him carrying on a conversation in a loud tone with someone near him, but could not catch the stranger's reply. Presently he came out of the scrub oaks leading his horse, followed immediately by a boy on foot; but where was the horseback load of peltries that Uncle Ezra so confidently expected?

"Howdy, boys?" said Elam.

"How do you do?" responded Ben. "Where's the rest of your furs?"

"Gone—all gone!" replied Elam cheerfully. "One hundred dollars' worth of wolf-skins and fifty dollars' worth of other furs all gone up in smoke."

"Were they burned?"

"Burned? no. Some travelling trappers came to camp while I was absent, and Tom, here, wasn't man enough to stop 'em. They took everything I had down to the fort, and although I went there and did some of the best talking I knew how to do, I came pretty near getting myself in trouble by it. I want to see Uncle Ezra, though I suppose it is too late to do anything. This fellow is Tom Mason, and I want you to know him and treat him right. He got into a little trouble down in Mississippi, where he used to live, and came out here to get clear of it. Know him, boys."

We shook hands heartily with Tom Mason, and although we were considerably surprised at Elam's statement that his outfit had been broken up by thieves, we were a good deal more surprised to learn that the youth at his side had got into "trouble" in Mississippi. After hitching their horse where he could graze we went into the cabin with them, and gathered about them with the idea of hearing an exciting story; for although I had been in the far West nearly all my life, I had not got over my fondness for a story yet.

"Howdy, Elam?" said Uncle Ezra, removing his pipe from his mouth with one hand and extending the other. "You got into trouble, I hear, all on account of your furs. How did it happen? And you, too, Tommy." You will remember that the door of the cabin was open, and that Uncle Ezra heard every word of our conversation. "You didn't steer clear of all trouble by coming out here, did you? Well, never mind. Troubles will come to everybody, no matter what they do. Sit down and tell me all about it. Haven't had any breakfast, have you?"

Elam declared that they had had enough left for breakfast, and produced his pipe and got ready for a smoke, while Tom sat by with his gaze fastened on the fire. I will tell both stories together, for Elam did not touch upon Tom's tale of sorrow at all. But, in the first place, you remember something about Tom Mason, don't you? You recall that he got Jerry Lamar into serious trouble by stealing a grip-sack that belonged to his uncle, General Mason, which contained five thousand dollars, that Jerry was arrested and put into prison on account of it, and that the only thing that turned Tom Mason in favor of the boys who were working to help him was the fact that Luke Redman was going to take the money across the river into Texas. Mark Coleman came near getting the money, when his skiff was stranded at Dead Man's Elbow, but had to go away without it; and from that time the history of the five thousand begins. Tom Mason fell in with Joe Coleman, who was Mark's twin brother, and he told him everything he had done; and when the last moment arrived, when the horns of the settlers announced that they were fast closing in upon the robbers, he told Joe to take charge of the money and dived into a canebrake and disappeared. No one would have thought of prosecuting Tom Mason if he had stayed there, but that was not the thing. He had been guilty, he had never done such a thing before, and he couldn't bear to stand up in that community and have people point at him and whisper:

"There goes Tom Mason, the boy that robbed his uncle of five thousand dollars!"

He would go West, to Texas, and when he had lived over a good portion of his life, he would write to his uncle and ask him if he might return.

Now, bear in mind that this is what I heard from Tom's lips, after I became so well acquainted with him that he thought it advisable to tell me his story. I don't say that I advised him to stay out there in that lawless country among those lawless folks, for I didn't. I advised him to go home and "live it down"; but Tom was plucky and wouldn't budge an inch. Perhaps you will wonder, too, how it came about that a cowboy who never heard of Mark Coleman, Duke Hampton, and the rest should come upon Tom Mason in time to write the continuation of his story—a sequel that the boys in Mississippi knew nothing about until long after it occurred. All I can say is it just happened so.

CHAPTER III.

TOM BEGINS HIS WANDERINGS.

"Joe, I will give this valise and gun into your care, and will thank you to see that they are restored to their owners. I know you will do this much for me, for it is the last favor I shall ask of you."

"I took the articles in question as Tom handed them to me, and when I raised my eyes to look at him, he was gone. He had jumped past me, dashed out of the passage, and disappeared into the bushes before I could say a word to him."

And that was the last that Joe Coleman ever saw of Tom Mason for long years to come. He was friendless and alone—how very much alone he never knew until by skilful dodging he managed to get on the outskirts of the body of settlers that were closing up around Luke Redman and his gang, and found himself beyond the reach of capture. His face was very pale, but he went about his business as though he knew what he was doing. It was very strange that a boy who had servants to wait on him at every turn—one to saddle his horse, another to black his boots, and still another to serve up his lunch when he got hungry—should have been willing to set off on an expedition by himself, but it showed that he knew nothing of the world before him.

Having satisfied himself by the sound of the horns and the baying of the dogs that he was out of danger, Tom paused long enough to transfer his roll of money from his trousers pocket to his boot-leg. He had about fifty dollars that was all his own, and as he did not wish to lose it, he put it where he thought it would be safe, then straightened up, listened for a moment to a faint, far-off note that came to his ears, drew his hands swiftly across his eyes, and made the best of his way toward the Mississippi River.

"That is my hound, and I'll bet it will be a long time before I shall hear him give tongue in that fashion again," soliloquized Tom, as he emerged from the cane and took a survey of the prospect before him. "I may never hear him, but I shall always remember him."

As Tom came out of the cane he found himself on the verge of that swamp over which, one short week previous, the water had stood to the depth of fifteen feet; but Our Fellows had already ridden over it, with Sandy Todd for a leader,—the boy who admitted that he "might be slow a-walkin' an' a-talkin', but was not slow a-ridin',"—in their wild chase after the Indians and after Luke Redman, the man who had stolen Black Bess, and had managed in some way, they could not tell how, to secure possession of the valise which contained General Mason's five thousand dollars. The ridges were high and dry, and by following them one could enjoy a pleasant ride, avoiding the water altogether; but the trouble in Tom's case was the ridges ended either in the swamp at Dead Man's Elbow, the place where they afterward captured Luke Redman, or veered around until they ended in the very spot Tom did not want to go, the town of Burton, which was the only place in the county that could boast of a jail. It was dangerous to attempt to pass from one ridge to another, for the bottom was covered with a bed of mud in which a horseman would sink out of sight. Tom speculated upon this as he walked along, and although he was positive that no very desperate attempt would be made to capture him when it was found out that he was the guilty one, he would have felt safer if he had left all sights and sounds of his first wrong-doing far behind. How his uncle would scorn him when first he found it out! And the negroes! Why, it wouldn't be long till it would be all over the State.

"This is what comes of a rash attempt to have revenge on a boy who never did me a thought of harm. Because I couldn't be the leader among Our Fellows I had to go to work and get myself into worse trouble by it. Why couldn't I have rested easy when I had nothing to worry about? But I mustn't allow my thoughts to get the start of me right at the beginning, for if I do, I shall come out at the little end of the horn. I wish I had an axe, for I would soon get across. I shall never find my way to the Mississippi as long as I stay on this side the bayou."

While Tom was talking to himself in this way, he stood upon the bluffs, which, by drawing near to one another, had gradually left the low lands behind and brought the two banks of the stream within twenty feet—a bad-looking place, for it went far to remind Tom of Dead Man's Elbow. It was his only chance to cross the stream. While he stood there, looking at the dark, muddy water that flowed between him and liberty, that is, between him and the Mississippi, and trying hard to determine what his chances were of passing the night in his wet clothes with no means of starting a fire, his attention was attracted by the very sound he wanted to hear. He listened, and when the blows began to fall in regular order, as if the woodman was warming at his work, he left the bluffs behind him and turned and went into the woods.

"That's an axe," thought Tom, "and as nobody but negroes can be chopping out here, I'll go up and get a bite to eat; for, now that I think of it, I'm hungry. I must be ten miles from my uncle's now, and of course no one down here has heard of that grip-sack business. To-morrow morning I will make him cut a tree across the bayou."

Guided by the sound of the woodman's axe, Tom felt his way through the cane (for by this time it was so dark in there that feeling was the only sense he could go by), and presently came within sight of the chopper. He was a jolly, good-natured negro, who seemed a little startled on discovering Tom's approach, but speedily recovered himself when the boy addressed him by saying:

"Hallo, Snowball! What are you doing so far out of the world?"

"Sarvent, sar. Well, sar, you see all dis timber here? My moster is needin' some rail timber mighty bad, so he sends me out here every Monday and I stays here until Saturday. Say, boss, what you doin' out here? Ise you los'?"

"You haven't seen a gray horse, with saddle and bridle on, going by here, have you?" asked Tom in reply.

"No, sar, I aint. Did he threw you?"

"Nor any hounds giving tongue?"

"No, sar, I aint. Ise dey de ones you is lookin' for, boss?"

"They're gone, and the best thing I can do is to follow after them on foot," said Tom, looking around for a handy log to sit down on; for, now that his tramp for the day was ended and he had somebody to talk to, he began to realize that he was tired. "I believe I'll camp with you to-night."

"Sarvent, sar. Cert'n'y, sar. Whar might you uns come from?"

"I came from the country about General Mason's place. Have you got anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, sar. Plenty of it, sar," said the negro, sticking his axe into the log he was chopping and leading the way off through the bushes. "Dis way, sar. I's often heard of folks up your way. Somebody up that a-way been a-stealin' five thousand dollars."

Tom was thunderstruck. "Who brought that news here?" he asked.

"De niggers, dey brung it. You can't keep anything away from de darkies."

"How far is General Mason's place from here?"

"Fifteen miles, or sich a matter."

"And did the darkies say who stole it?"

"Oh, yes, sar. Dey say that a youngster named Tom Mason—he's just about your size, but you aint no thief, be ye?"

"Do I look like a thief?" enquired Tom.

"I aint a-sayin' you did, sar. I only say he was just about your size. Then this Luke Redman,—you've heard of him, aint ye?—he got hold of the money and tried to run away to Texas."

"Well, the old gentleman has got it now," said Tom, who plainly saw that it wouldn't do to talk too freely with the darky on this subject, because he knew too much. "They organized a big expedition and hunted the man down and captured him."

"I am mighty glad to hear it, and I hope dey will throw dem as 'as got it in jail so tight that dey won't never have time to think of five thousand dollars. Now, sit down on that block of wood and I'll soon get you something to eat. You see, there is two bunks here? One belongs to my pardner, who is home now, sick with the rheumatiz. Moster is mighty keerful of his niggers, and he don't like to have Pomp come down here dat a-way, so he told him he must stay about the house and do light chores until next week, when he will come down here to help me split rails. Dere's a slice of bacon and some johnny cake for you. If you can wait till I fix up the fire I will give you a cup of coffee."

"Does your master give you coffee?" asked Tom in surprise, for he could not remember that his uncle ever so far forgot himself.

"'Course he does, sar, when we are splittin' rails; and sometimes"—here the darky leaned over and whispered the words to Tom, as if he feared that somebody would overhear them—"we take a handful now and then to do the old woman. Hy-ya!"

Tom laughed as heartily as the negro did,—his laugh was catching,—but said he would wait until the darky had his supper.

"Very well, den. You eat your lunch and I will go back to my rail-splittin'. When you get through, just lay down in Pomp's bunk and go to sleep. I'll have you up at seven o'clock."

The darky went out, and Tom, being left to himself, proceeded to look about him. The cabin, which was built of rails, was barely large enough to seat two men at the table; but it was tight, and as the most the darkies had to do was to eat and sleep under it, it had plenty of room in it. Besides, there was a bench beside the door, and when the darkies were tired of working, that was the place for them to "loaf." By the time he had made these observations his bacon and johnny cake were gone, and he got up and crept into Pomp's bunk.

By the time he awoke it was pitch dark, save where the faint light from the dying fire which the negro had kindled to cook his supper shone through the open doorway. The terrific snores which came from the bunk at his feet told him that the darky had long ago retired to rest, but he was hungry, and he crept out of bed to see if anything had been left for him. He found a pot of coffee and a huge chunk of bacon and johnny cake waiting for him on the coals, and as the fire had not had time to burn itself out, they were as warm as when they first were cooked. But by certain

signs which he discovered while disposing of the good things the darky had provided for him, he found that he had been asleep longer than he had thought, and that daylight was not far off, and finally the negro started up from an apparently sound sleep, threw aside the blankets with a frantic sweep of his arm, and sat up and looked about him.

"Hi! dere you is," said he. "I fix up dat fire fo' times during de night, but you was sleepin' so soundly that I couldn't b'ar to waken you up. Has you got plenty?"

"Plenty, thank you. It's about four o'clock, isn't it?"

The negro pulled himself entirely out of bed, put on his shoes, and went out and looked about him. After looking in vain for several stars which he ought to have found, but could not, he announced that his guest had struck the hour pretty closely.

"Well, then, while you are cooking your own breakfast, couldn't you put on a little mess for me? You see, I am not bound for my uncle's house just now. I have to go down to the landing to meet the steamer *John Clark* there, and get a trifling sum of money that one of the passengers will have ready for me."

"Why, boss, how is you going to get across de bayou?" asked the darky, in surprise.

"If my horse had not thrown me, I could have ridden him across," replied Tom. "But he had to start off on his own hook, and I shall have to do the best I can on foot. For that money I must have."

"Dat's all right, sar. But I don't see how you are going to get across de bayou."

"Don't you? Well, you just go ahead and cook me some breakfast and then I'll show you. If you had lived in these woods as long as I have, you would know that it is an easy matter to cut a tree across some parts of the bayou."

Tom washed his hands and face in some muddy water he dipped up from the stream that ran a short distance from the camp, dried them on his handkerchief, and watched the negro as he went about his work. Now and then, when he thought Tom was not looking at him, he would roll up his eyes, taking in at one swift glance all the clothing he wore, from his hat down to his boots. Tom was well enough acquainted with the negro character to know that he had excited his suspicions in some way.

"If I keep on in this way, I shall excite the mistrust of everyone I chance to meet," thought Tom, who wondered what he could have said that had caused this sudden change in the darky's behavior. "I have shut him up like an oyster, and not another thing can I get out of him. I shall be with him over half an hour longer, and then he can do what he pleases with his suspicions."

"Dat's a mighty slick rascal, dat feller," muttered the darky, as he fished the bacon out of the frying-pan and placed it on to a clean chip. "Dere's your breakfast, sar. I'll eat mine out here by this stump."

"Give me a cup of coffee," said Tom. "It is all I want."

The steaming beverage was placed before him. Tom thought of the great world into which he was so soon to enter, and wondered if everybody in it was going to treat him as this obscure darky had done. Texas was a pretty good-sized empire, he had heard them say, and he believed it was made up mostly of men who had gone there to get clear of the law, and who had enough to think of to keep themselves out of trouble; consequently they wouldn't bother their heads about a boy who had been suspected of stealing five thousand dollars. When Tom had reached this point in his meditations, the darky, who had evidently swallowed his breakfast whole and rolled up in a piece of old gunny sack the supply he intended Tom should take with him, handed the bundle to him with one hand, and reached out for the axe with the other.

"Ise ready now if you is, sar."

This was all that passed between them. Tom got up, pointed out the path he wished the negro to follow in order to reach the narrowest part of the stream, which he had examined the day before, and fell in behind him; and it is a noticeable fact that he kept the black in front of him all the way to the stream. It is true that the man had no weapon but his axe, but with such an article, if he could only get the start with it, he could easily march him before his master, and that was the very place he didn't want to go. Such things had been done, and Tom did not see why they could not be done again. In a few minutes they reached the bank of the bayou, and when the negro saw it, he leaned on his axe and shook his head.

"You knows what you want to do, don't you, sar?" he asked.

"Yes, I know just what I want to do," replied Tom. "Cut down this tree first."

The negro glanced at the top of the tree in order to see which way it would fall, cut a few bushes out of his way, and went to work. A few blows with the axe brought the tree down and it lodged on the opposite bank. Two more trees were cut down and the bridge was completed.

"Good-by, Snowball," said Tom, extending his closed hand toward the negro. "I don't want you to do this for nothing. Here's a dollar to pay you for your trouble."

"I—I don't want it, sar," replied the darky, drawing back. "I hope dat money won't sink you afore

you get across de river, but I'm mighty jubus about it."

"What money?"

"General Mason's five thousand dollars, sar."

"Do you suppose I have got that amount of money stowed away about me? Why, man, it's a valiseful. This money is all honest."

"I can't help dat, sar. I can't shake hands with you, either. I would be afraid it would take all the strength out of my arms so't I couldn't split more rails."

"All right, then. You stand here on the bank and see me work my way across. I bet you that all the money I have about my clothes will not sink me if I do fall overboard."

As Tom spoke he stepped recklessly upon the bridge. We say "recklessly," because had he taken more pains to examine the fastenings on the opposite bank he would have been more careful. He had nearly crossed the bayou when the log on which he was walking tipped a little, and although Tom made frantic efforts to save himself by seizing all the branches within his reach, it set the whole structure in motion. There was a "swish" of tree-tops, and in a moment more the bridge and Tom went into the water together. The negro looked, but did not see him come up.

"Dar, now!" said he. "The money he had about his clothes was too heavy for him to walk the bridge with."

CHAPTER IV.

THE WRONG BOAT.

The negro, almost overwhelmed with surprise, watched the surface of the water to see Tom reappear, but it was only for a moment, and then with a rush one of the trees, which had broken loose from its moorings, swept over the very place where the head was seen, and the negro fairly danced with consternation when he saw one of the limbs catch Tom and carry him under water with it.

"Dar, now!" he exclaimed. "If I go home and tell moster about this thief being drowned here, he will think I did it. What's dat?"

When Tom arose to the surface, it was only just long enough to clear the water from his face, settle his hat firmly on his head, and take a fresh hold of the bundle containing his lunch, and then he saw the tree sweeping down upon him. To take in one long breath and go down again before it got to him was barely the work of a moment, so that when the tree passed Tom came up a second time, and this time he was much nearer to the bank he wanted to reach than he was before. A few lusty strokes brought him to it, and by the aid of trailing roots and vines he made his way to the top with the agility of a sailor, so that by the time the darky had got over wondering at his narrow escape, he was high upon the bank opposite to him, and pulling off his boot to see if his money was safe.

"Is dat you, sar?" said he, scarcely raising his voice above a whisper.

"Of course it is I," replied Tom, who did not know whether to get angry over the effects of his unfortunate plunge or to laugh outright at the darky's exhibition of astonishment. "You thought you had seen the last of me, didn't you? It takes a bigger stream than this to drown me. There is all the money I have got," he went on, taking his roll from his boot and holding it out to the view of the negro. "It don't amount to five thousand dollars, by a long shot."

The darky did not know what else to say. He watched Tom as he pulled off his coat and vest and wrung the water from them, examined his bundle to see that his lunch was safe, said he thought the steamboat landing was about ten miles distant and there wasn't any more creeks to cross before he got there, and then saw him disappear in the woods. He stood for some moments gazing at the place where he had last been seen, and then shouldered his axe and turned away.

"Dat's a mighty slick little rascal," said he, as he wended his course back to his camp—"a mighty slick little rascal. I don't reckon I'd best say anything to moster about it; and as for Pomp—I won't say anything to him, either. He'll leave me to cut rails alone if I do dat."

"My first adventure," muttered Tom, as he hastened along the narrow ridge that led him toward the Mississippi. "That old darky believes, as much as he believes anything, that the little money I had in my boot was the cause of my being spilled into the drink; but it is all honest money, every bit of it."

The sun grew hot as he went along, and by changing his coat and vest from one arm to the other, and by turning his money over in his hands to keep the wet bills on the outside, he gradually removed the effects of his cold plunge, so that long before he arrived at the point where the negroes were chopping he could tell them that he had started for the landing on horseback, but that his nag had thrown him and he was obliged to continue his journey on foot. He also tried to eat a little of the lunch with which the darky had provided him, but the johnny cake and bacon

were wet, and after a few mouthfuls he dropped the remainder behind the log on which he was sitting.

The negroes who were cutting wood for the supply of steamers that were plying up and down the river belonged to the man who owned the yard. As there were probably a dozen of them in all engaged in chopping wood all the time, their employer could afford a white man to oversee their work and the teams, but he seemed to have nothing to do but to sit on a log and whittle a stick. He listened good-naturedly to Tom's story, and told him where he could go to find the camp. The largest house in it was his, and he would probably find books and papers enough to amuse him until he came in from his work. The *Jennie June* would probably be the next steamer that would stop at the landing for wood, and she would be along some time during the night.

"I think that books and papers occupy the most of your time," said Tom to himself, as he started away in obedience to these instructions. "If I were a negro, I don't know any better job than having you for an overseer. Did you see how those negroes clustered around him to hear my story? If I had been their overseer, I should have started them back to their work in a hurry."

Tom found the camp deserted by all save an old darky who was sitting on a bench outside one of the doors sunning himself. He was the cook, he said. He pointed out the overseer's house and told Tom to go in there and make himself at home, and Tom went; but he did not make himself very much at home after he got there. He found several books scattered about, but they were all old; and it was hard to tell where the overseer hung his clothes, for the back of the solitary chair of which the cabin could boast was liberally supplied with them. His trunk was open and the contents were littered about, and on the bare table, on which the overseer had left some signs of his breakfast which were still untouched, were articles that ought long ago to have been in the wash. A glance about the cabin showed Tom that there was at least one article of which the overseer was choice—his rifle. That, together with the powder-horn, bullet-pouch, and hunting-knife, was hung upon pegs over the door. Whatever accident might befall his other traps, his hunting outfit would always be safe.

Tom took a seat on the bench outside the door, looked up at the sun to see how near twelve o'clock it was, and then looked at the negro. The latter made no signs of getting dinner, and Tom finally made up his mind that the men had taken their dinner to the woods with them; but his own stomach clamored loudly for something nourishing, and Tom finally accosted the negro.

"I say, uncle, are you not going to get some dinner?"

"Not before fo' o'clock, sar," replied the darky. "I blow de horn den and all hands come in."

Tom was uneasy after that, and wished now when it was too late that he had reserved a portion of the johnny cake and bacon that had been furnished him. Wet as it was, it was much better than nothing. He found a book and made out to interest himself in a story for five mortal hours, when suddenly the long shrill notes of a horn rang in his ears. He would soon have something to eat, at all events. Presently a thought occurred to him.

"Say, uncle, how do you tell the time? You haven't got any clock, have you?"

"Oh, no, sar," said the negro. "Ise got something better than a clock. You see that ar peak of dat building hyar? Well, every time it's fo' o'clock the p'int of that peak is right hyar."

"Summer and winter?" asked Tom.

"Summer and winter dat peak is right hyar. Den I knows it is fo' o'clock and den I blows de horn."

Tom wanted to ask him whether or not the sun was always in the same place summer and winter, but gave it up when he heard the sound of the negroes' voices raised in a rude sort of a plantation melody coming from the woods, for he knew that supper was close at hand. Nearer came the strains, and in the short space of half an hour the cavalcade streamed into view. What a lively set they were then! One would have thought that cutting wood was the happiest part of a darky's life. Keeping up their song, they slipped off the wagon, leaving the teamsters to take care of the mules. The overseer came into the cabin, and after exchanging a merry salutation with Tom, remarking that he and the darkies had performed a task that day that would have done credit to a bigger force than his, he cleared the table in readiness for supper. The articles that adorned the back of the chair were cast upon the trunk, the unwashed apparel on the table was swept off and thrown on the top of them, and then the overseer was ready for a smoke.

"Yes, sir, me and the niggers have done a heap of work," said the man, seating himself on the threshold by Tom's side. "They were taking it easy when you came along, just as I mean that all black ones shall who work under me, but perked up a bit and went to work right smart. Aint they happy now? Every one singing at the top of his voice."

Supper being over, which consisted of corn bread, bacon, and tea, Tom spent two hours in conversation with the overseer, until, as he was relating a story of his personal experience, an audible snore came from his direction, and, facing about, he found that his auditor had gone fast asleep, stretched out on the floor, and using the back of his chair for a pillow. It wasn't dark yet, by a long ways, and the sounds that came from the camp of the negroes told him that there was a heap of fun going on there; but as it seemed to be the rule to go to slumber whenever he was ready, Tom went to the overseer's bed and climbed into it.

It seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes when someone laid a hand upon his

shoulder and shouted in his ear that the *Jennie June* was at the landing and taking on a load of wood. That was enough for Tom, who wanted to get into a bed where he could take his clothes off. When he got his eyes fairly open, there was no one in sight, but he heard the sound of a steamer's bell, followed by the hoarse commands of the mate, and when he reached the door, he found the whole yard lighted up by a torch which the steamer had placed in her bow. The boat was made fast to the levee when he got there, and her crew were making ready to carry on her load of wood, but Tom paid no attention to them. More than half asleep, he made his way on deck and into the saloon, which he found deserted by all save a party of men who were engaged in playing cards. They never looked up as Tom entered, being deeply interested in the piles of money before them, and he passed on to the desk and made application for a room to a man with a pen behind his ear. Without saying a word he took down a key from a board by the side of his desk and led Tom along the cabin and unlocked a door and showed him two bunks. The lower one had evidently been occupied during the afternoon.

"Take the upper bunk," said the clerk. "The lower one belongs to a man who is playing cards, but I guess he won't care. Good-night."

Tom was much too sleepy to know or care who owned the lower bunk; he pulled off his clothes and with a mingled sigh of satisfaction and comfort climbed into the upper one, and composed himself to sleep. He awoke once during the night, only to find that the steamer had finished taking on her load of wood, and was now ploughing her way along the river; and, having satisfied himself on this point, Tom rolled over and went to sleep again.

The next time he awoke it was broad daylight, and the boat was rocking as boats always do when they have nothing to do but to make their way to their destination as soon as possible. The stool (there were no chairs in the state-room) which he had left unoccupied had been drawn close to the door, and a man's coat and vest lay over it; but it was not that that attracted Tom's attention, and caused his eyes to open to their widest extent. It was a revolver, a murderous-looking thing, and carrying a ball as big as an army musket. Tom thought it would be a good plan to get out of the way of that thing, and, holding in his breath, he slipped out of his bunk; but cautious as he was in his movements, the man heard him. He opened his eyes and gazed fixedly at Tom, then caught up his revolver and thrust it under his pillow, seized his coat and vest and threw them between the bulkhead and himself, and then rolled over and prepared to go to sleep again.

"Morning," said he.

"Good-morning, sir," said Tom.

He thought it a wise thing to be civil, although the man's face did not look like one belonging to one who would use a revolver on slight provocation. The long silken whiskers which fell down upon his breast might cover up the expression of the lower part of his countenance, but they could not conceal the merry twinkle of the mild blue eyes which had looked at Tom for a moment. Considerably relieved, Tom slipped into his clothes and went out, closing the door behind him, and made the best of his way toward the barber shop; for be it known that up to this time Tom had not touched his hair at all. There was just one barber there, and he was as anxious to make money as anyone he ever saw.

"Shave, sir?" said the negro, as Tom came in and pulled off his hat. "I declare if dat aint the worst-looking head I ever set my peepers on. A shampoo will just about set you right."

"Don't want it," said Tom shortly.

"I reckon dat you was playing cards last night," said the barber, as he deftly tucked the towel around Tom's chin and began brushing up his hair.

"No, I wasn't," said Tom.

"Den you missed the purtiest sight you ever see. Dere was one man dere,—he was a cattle-raiser, —and he raked in thirty thousand dollars from the two sharpers who were trying to gouge him out of his money! I wouldn't like to be in his boots, I tell you. Dey mean to kill him afore dey get done with this trip! I declare, I believe he bunks with you—room No. 19."

"By gracious!" exclaimed Tom, starting up. And to himself he added: "I don't wonder that he had his revolver handy. He had his pants on and that was the reason I didn't see them."

"Did you say something, sir?" asked the ducky.

"No, I didn't," replied Tom.

"Yes, sar, dat was the purtiest sight I ever saw. De man dealt himself fo' aces, and one of the sharpers, the one that was hottest after his money, fo' kings. De best of it was he drew fo' cards, so he knew right where de cards were stocked. The sharper thought there had been a mistake somewhere, and went down in his jeans and pulled out his money, fifteen thousand dollars' wuth. De man saw him,—he had more bills where dem came from,—and de sharper showed fo' kings; but when he went to take de money—I declare, your head is awful dirty. I think a shampoo will set you just about right."

"I don't want it. Go on. When he went to take the money—then what?"

"Well, he put down de fo' aces with one hand and drew his revolver with the other. De sharper concluded he would let the money stay; and dat broke up de game. You ought to have seen dat

sharper's face. He's a mighty slick rogue, and I bet you he'll put a ball into dat sheep-herder before we gets up to Fort Gibson."

"Why don't you tell him of it?"

"Shucks! What do I want to go and get myself into trouble for? He goes up and down dis road every year and he knows it already. It aint none of my business."

The reader will remember that we are describing things that happened a good many years ago. At that time the cotton-planters, and the cattle-and sheep-herders who lived far back in the country, made use of the steamboats, which were the only means of communication they had. Gambling was much in vogue, and if the sharpers who met them at New Orleans couldn't find any means of inducing them to play there, they would take passage in these boats and try them again when every other influence except reading was at a discount. It was a dangerous thing to pick up a stranger on these trips, especially if one had money with him, or anything that could be changed into money. For instance, there was a contractor who started from New Orleans to do some government business at Little Rock. He had half a dozen teams and everything he wanted to make his enterprise successful, with the exception of the men. Those he was going to hire of the planters, and of course he had to have some money to do it with. On the way up he fell in with a very modest stranger who didn't know anything about playing cards, and the consequence was before he reached his destination he was penniless. And the beauty of it was the modest stranger was dead broke, too! Every cent of his little hundred dollars had been won by the two strangers whom the contractor had invited to join in their game, as well as the last mule which the latter had to pull his wagons. The contractor made out a bill of sale of everything he had, and the next morning he was missing. He had jumped overboard, and everybody thought he was drowned accidentally. The modest stranger and his two confederates took the mules ashore and sold them at a big figure, and went back to New Orleans well satisfied with their trip. It seems that in the case of this stranger the sharpers had picked up the wrong man. He had "stocked" the cards on them, and won everything they had, and the darky knew, from certain little signs he had seen, that his life was not safe so long as he remained on board that steamer. Tom had a horror of everything that related to gambling, and he wanted to talk about something else.

"This boat is making pretty good time, isn't she?" he said, during a pause in which the darky went back to his bench after his comb and brush.

"Yes, sar. We don't touch anywhere till we get to Memphis, and we shall reach there about——"

"What?" exclaimed Tom.

"Eh? Did you speak, sar?"

"Why, I want to go down the river," gasped Tom, who couldn't believe that his ears were not deceiving him. "Memphis! That's up the river."

"Course it is, sar. And you are going dere as fast as you kin."

"Memphis!" exclaimed Tom.

He couldn't wait for the barber to get through with him, but, jumping out from his hands, with the apron floating all about him, he ran to the nearest window and looked out. He saw the trees dancing swiftly by, but it was not to them that he devoted the most of his attention. The current of the river was what drew his gaze. He took one look at it, at the trees and stumps that covered the surface of the water which the river managed to pick up in the low lands when it was high, and then returned disconsolately to his chair. He didn't want to go to Memphis. It was two thousand miles out of his way, and, besides, there were any number of business men that knew him on the levee.

"You wanted to go to New Orleans, I take it," said the barber.

But Tom was done talking. He wanted to have his hair brushed as quickly as possible, so that he might go to the office and settle with the clerk; so the darky speedily put the finishing touches to it, received twenty cents for his trouble, and Tom hurried out and in a few seconds more was standing in front of the desk. He did not see much room when he got there, for there was a big broad-shouldered man standing in front of the desk, with his arms spread out over it, talking with the clerk; but he stepped back to make space for Tom, and smiled so good-naturedly at him over his bushy whiskers that the boy was satisfied that he had one friend on the boat, if he didn't have another.

"Morning," said he. "Did the sight of that revolver scare you?"

"No, sir. But I got up just in time to find that I am bound up the river. I didn't say which way I wanted to go, and the overseer at the landing called me for the wrong boat."

"Well, you've got to go now that you are started," said the clerk, pulling a book toward him that contained a list of the passengers, "and it will take just five dollars to pay your fare to Memphis."

Very reluctantly Tom pulled out his roll of bills and counted out the five dollars. Then he turned and went out on the guard and seated himself, almost ready to cry with vexation. Presently his room-mate appeared, and without saying so much as "By your leave" he drew a chair close to Tom's side and sat down.

CHAPTER V.

TOM'S LUCK.

"I say, my young friend, what have you been doing that is contrary to Scribner?"

"I don't understand you, sir," said Tom, starting involuntarily.

"I mean," said the stranger, bending over and whispering the words to Tom, "what have you been doing that is contrary to law?"

This was a question that Tom never expected to have asked him by strangers. Did he carry the marks of the cruel wrong he had done his uncle and Jerry Lamar upon his face so that anybody could read them? The next time he passed a mirror he would look into it and see.

"What is your name?" asked the stranger suddenly.

"Tom Mason."

"Mine is Bolton—Jasper Bolton; and, Tom, I am glad to see you. Put it there. What have you been doing?"

"Not a thing, sir. My uncle has got the money back all right before this time."

"Ah! Money, was it? How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"*Five thousand dollars! W-h-e-w!* You didn't try to kill anybody in order to get away with it?"

"No, sir. I shot a couple of nigger dogs that were on my trail, but if you knew the circumstances, you would say I did right," said Tom, who had suddenly made up his mind to make a confidant of Mr. Bolton. "It was just this way."

And then Tom straightened around on his seat and faced his new friend and told him his story, being interrupted occasionally with such expressions as "Ah! yes," and "I see," which led him to believe that he was making out a better case against his uncle than he was against himself.

"I don't want you to think that my uncle is in any way to blame for all this," said Tom, in conclusion. "I wanted money, I wanted to be revenged on Jerry Lamar, and so I took it."

"Of course. You ought to have had better sense, seeing that the money would all be your own some day. Do you know what I think you had better do?"

Tom replied that he did not.

"I think you had better go home, tell your uncle just what you have told me, and abide the consequences."

"You don't know my uncle, or you would not advise any such step as that," said Tom, with a sigh which showed that he knew him, and that he was bound to stick to his course. "I am the only relative he has got in the world, but that won't hinder him from saying every time he gets mad at me: 'So you are the lad that tried to reduce me to poverty by stealing five thousand dollars from me!' He will get all over that when he finds that I am not coming home, and then I will go back to him."

"How long do you think it will take him?"

"About a year, maybe two."

"Do you think you can stand it among all these lawless men for that length of time?"

"I've got to. I don't see any other way out of it."

"And you were going to Texas to get another start? Texas is a country in which all men bring up who have made a failure, and you were bound that way."

"Yes, sir. I think I could make another start there."

"Have you any relatives or friends living there?"

"Not a soul," replied Tom, straightening about on his chair and looking down at the river. "By the way," he added, "I want to give you a piece of advice. Those men of whom you won the money last night have threatened to have it all back if they have to kill you."

"Who told you that story?" said Mr. Bolton, with a smile.

"The barber."

"Well, they will have plenty of time to try their hands at it between here and Cincinnati. I told them a funny story about being a cattle-grower somewhere out West. If they try anything with me, they will have their hands full. There are three of them, and I know them all. The clerk has

got the money now under lock and key. There goes the breakfast-bell. I will talk to you again after we go in."

Tom was disappointed in more respects than one when he found that his new friend was to leave him at Memphis. With a view of gaining a little time he did not follow him into the dining-hall, but went into the barber shop and proceeded to wash his hands. When they had been dried to his satisfaction, he went out and drew up before the desk.

"Who is that man who talked to me a little while ago?" he asked.

"He's a gambler," was the reply, "and a mighty good one, too. He got into those fellows last night, didn't he?"

That was just what Tom was afraid of. He went out and took his seat at the table, saw Bolton exchange courtesies with the three sharpers who had tried to fleece him the night before, watched him all through the meal, and told himself that if that was the style that men of his class were made of he had a great deal to learn before he could become a gambler. There wasn't a thing about him that could have been found fault with in any circle of gentlemen. In spite of his calling he had given Tom what he regarded as good advice, and he did not know what else he had to say to him.

"There's one thing about it," thought Tom. "He has been around the world a good deal, is sometimes flush to-day and strapped to-morrow, but I'll bet if he was in my fix he would not go back to my uncle. If I am there to take all his abuse, my uncle never will get over flinging his gibes at me; but if I am away where I can't hear them, it won't take him so long to get over it. He can advise me all he's a mind to, but I won't go home."

Breakfast being over, Tom pushed back his chair and went out and seated himself on the guard. The gambler did not put in an appearance for fifteen minutes, for he was not the one to allow his good fortune to take away his appetite. He came at length and bore in his hand a couple of cigars, one of which he offered to Tom. But the latter did not smoke.

"You'll need an overcoat, Tom," said Mr. Bolton, after he had lighted his cigar and placed his heels upon the railing. "The country you have just come from is a summer's day compared to the one where you are going. It's only the latter part of December, and you'll find blizzards out there, I bet you."

"But I can't afford an overcoat, Mr. Bolton. I have only fifty dollars, and it is all my own, too."

"I'll get it for you. I haven't forgotten that I have been in trouble—I may be that way next week; and when I do get that way, I'd feel mighty glad for the simple gift of an overcoat. I'll get you one in Memphis, and at the same time I will tell the clerk to hand you two hundred dollars for your own."

"I can't take it, Mr. Bolton," said Tom, astonished at the proposition.

"Oh, yes, you can. You never may be able to return it to me, but if you ever find one who is suffering, and you have enough and to spare, I want you to hand it to him. That's all the pay I ask. I've owed this for a year, and this is the first chance I have had to square up with the fellow who gave it to me."

"Where is the fellow now?"

"I don't know whether he is living or dead. He was a good fellow, and when I told him what my circumstances were, how I had got in with a party of roughs and been cleaned out of my pile, he put his hand into his pocket and pulled out two hundred dollars. I told him I never could pay him back, and he said if I ever found some other fellow in need just to give him a lift. I've done it, and it squares me. But it's a mean business anyway."

"Why don't you go on with me instead of going up the Ohio River to Cincinnati?"

"To Fort Gibson?" exclaimed Bolton in astonishment.

"I suppose that's where I am going, aint it?"

"Well, you see, Bub, they've got a little document against me up there," said the gambler, with a laugh. "It is a document which the sheriff doesn't hold against me, but which the people do."

"Are they going to lynch you?"

"Anyway, that is what they call it."

"Well, by gracious!" said Tom, settling back in his chair and watching the clouds of smoke that ascended from the gambler's lips. "What sort of men have I become associated with? This man lynched! I would as soon think of my uncle's being lynched."

"So now, you see, I naturally keep away from there," continued Bolton. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. If you will go on to Fort Hamilton, which is as far as navigation is open now, I will give you something that will introduce you to Black Dan. He's a gambler, you know."

"Oh, I can't do anything to assist him in gambling," said Tom. "I don't know one card from another."

"Why, bless you, I don't want you to do anything to assist him in his work. I want you to keep just as far away from cards as you know how," said Mr. Bolton, fumbling with his neck-handkerchief. "Do you see that? It's a kinder pretty pin, isn't it?"

Tom took the ornament and looked it over. It was rather large for a pin, the body of it being formed of some metal which Tom did not recognize, but the diamonds in the middle of it, six of them in all, were what made it so valuable.

"That pin is worth five hundred dollars," said Mr. Bolton. "Put it on; I want to see how it looks on you."

"But what do you want me to do with it?" enquired Tom.

"I want you to take it up and give it to Black Dan when you see him. You are bound to meet him if you go to Fort Hamilton."

"I can't take it. You have already done more for me than I had any right to expect."

"Never mind that," said the gambler, taking the pin from Tom's hand and fixing it in his neck-handkerchief. "You see, he got into a little rucuss a few nights before I came away, and the fellow grabbed him in there and tore three of the diamonds out, and he gave it to me with the request that I would take it to New Orleans and have it repaired for him. There, now, you look like a sport."

"I wish you would take it out," said Tom. "I don't like to have it in there. Somebody might see it and rob me."

"You haven't got any baggage, have you?"

Tom replied that all the clothes he had with him were those he stood in at that moment.

"It won't take long to fix that. Just tell Dan, when you see him, that that thing has been in pawn more times than I can remember, but somehow I always managed to work around and get the money. By the way, he owes me ten dollars. He didn't give me money enough. What those diamonds are set in I don't know. Dan won the mine in which the stuff was found and had the pin made from some of the quartz; but the diamonds didn't suit him, and so he sent them by me to New Orleans. But, bless you, in two months from that time he was as poor as Job's turkey."

"Did he lose the mine?"

"Yes, and all the money he had besides. Perhaps that pin will hit him again. Dan is a good fellow. He never went back on a man who was down on his luck."

"I don't see why you don't go back to him," ventured Tom.

"Well, you see, there's that document that the people hold against me," said the gambler, with a laugh. "I think I had better stay here until that has had time to wear off. Yes, you go on to Fort Hamilton, and there you will make a strike. I don't know anybody in Fort Gibson."

"What do you suppose they will set me to doing?"

"Oh, perhaps they will grub-stake you and send you into the mountains to hunt up a gold mine. Many a nice fellow has got a start in that way, and is now numbered among the millionnaires. You'll get a start if you strike Black Dan."

"I hope you will take this pin and wear it while you are on the boat," said Tom; for he had already made up his mind to go on to Fort Hamilton and seek an interview with Black Dan if he were still alive. "I wish I had some baggage in which I could hide it away."

Without saying a word Mr. Bolton took the pin, adjusted it into his shirt-front, and once more placed his heels on the railing. The longer Tom talked with him the more he admired him, and the more he detested his avocation. The idea that such a man as that should deliberately prey upon the cupidity of his neighbors! But, then, if he was a gambler, he was the only man in the whole lot of passengers who had taken to him. There were a number of finely dressed planters who sat at the table with him, but not one had had a word to say to him, and would have allowed him to go on his way to ruin if it had not been for this solitary man. And how he had trusted him! Was there a planter on the boat who would have given him so large an amount of money on so short an acquaintance?

"There's one thing about it," said Tom, as he thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "If I make a success of this thing, I shall not have any planters, who have already made their mark in the world, to thank for my salvation."

The sight of the revolver that was placed upon the stool at the head of his bed did not startle Tom as it had done on a former occasion. Answering the cheerful "Morning" of the sleepy gambler he made a trip to the barber shop to get a "shake up," for Tom had not yet had opportunity to buy a brush and comb, and then went out and seated himself on the guards. He felt more lonely now than he had at any time since leaving home. Memphis was only forty miles away,—he had heard one of the customers in the barber shop make that remark,—and he knew that when he got there the last friend he had on earth was to take leave of him.

"How will I ever get along without him?" was the question he kept constantly asking himself.

"Two hundred dollars and a good overcoat besides. I think I shall need the overcoat, for if the weather is as cold as it is this morning, I should prefer to hug the fire."

While he was thinking about it, Mr. Bolton came out and beckoned to him. Tom followed him into the office, and when the blinds had all been closed, the clerk unlocked his safe and took out three official envelopes; for the thirty thousand made so large a roll of money that he could not get the bills all into one. Selecting one of the envelopes, he tore it open, counted out two hundred dollars from it, placed it in a second envelope, sealed it with a blow of his fist upon the counter, and placed Tom's name upon it.

"That's yours, Tom," said he. "I need hardly tell you to be careful of it. When you leave the boat at Fort Gibson, the clerk will give it to you."

"Must I change boats again?" asked Tom.

"Yes, for this boat draws so much water that she can't run any farther," said the clerk. "I'll keep an eye on you and see that you get through all right."

Mr. Bolton then proceeded to count out fifty dollars, which he pushed over toward the clerk, after which he put the envelopes in the inside pocket of his vest and buttoned his coat over them.

"What's this for?" enquired the clerk.

"That's to pay you for your trouble," said the gambler. "Now, the less I hear about this money the better I shall like it. Let us out."

"What have you been doing to him?" enquired the clerk, after he had let Mr. Bolton out of the side door on to the guards, locked Tom's money in the safe, and raised the blind which gave entrance into the cabin. "Are you any relative of his?"

"No. I never saw him until I came on board this boat. I told him my story and that led him to give me some money. The barber says he has travelled over this road a good many times."

"Oh, I know him. This isn't the first fifty dollars I have made out of him. He has a different name every time. This time it is Jasper Bolton. Why, two years ago he came aboard of us, clean shaved as any farmer and dressed like one, and had charge of twenty-five barrels of dried apples which he was taking to Memphis. Of course he got on to a game before he had been here a great while, and cleaned everyone out."

"I wish he wouldn't gamble," said Tom. "He has the manners of a gentleman."

"Oh, everyone has to make his living at something," said the clerk, with a laugh. "And if he can't make his any easier than at gambling, why, I say let him keep at it. But you ought to have seen him with those dried apples! He talked them up so big among the passengers that he sold them for double the sum that I could have bought the same apples for. Oh, he's a good one!"

"I shouldn't think he would want to carry that money in his vest pocket," said Tom. "How easy it would be for somebody to knock him down and take it away from him."

"He's got a big revolver in his pocket," said the clerk.

During the rest of the trip to Memphis Tom stuck as close to Mr. Bolton's side as if he had grown there, and listened to some good advice, which, had he seen fit to follow it, would have made his progress through life a comparatively smooth one; but Tom could not get over the "gibes" which he knew his uncle would throw at him as often as he got angry. He said that was all that kept him from going back, and the gambler finally gave it up in despair.

On arriving at Memphis Mr. Bolton picked up his valise, bade good-by to some of the officers whose acquaintance he had made on the way up, and stepped ashore with Tom at his heels. The latter kept a close watch over the sharpers, and was not a little annoyed to find that they were going ashore, too. He called Mr. Bolton's attention to it, but all he got was a smile in return; and now, when Tom got a good view of it, he told himself that there was more self-confidence in that smile than he had given him credit for. Indeed, Mr. Bolton, with his overcoat on and a valise in his hand, and the free, swinging stride with which he stepped off, looked more like a prosperous business man than he did like anything else.

Mr. Bolton was evidently acquainted in Memphis, for he passed three or four clothing-houses, and finally turned into an extra fine one, where he said he wanted to see the longest and thickest overcoat they had. His boy was going away into a country where blizzards were plenty, and he desired to see him well protected before he went. The first garment that was handed down was a fit, and Tom stood by with it on, and saw Mr. Bolton buy another valise, an extra suit of sheep's-gray clothing, a couple of blue flannel shirts, and a number of other little things which Tom would not have thought of. When the articles had been paid for, Mr. Bolton took off his pin, wrapped it in a little piece of paper, and thrust it into one corner of the valise, then locked it and handed the key to Tom. Then he turned and walked out.

"Mr. Bolton," said Tom, hurrying after him, "I never can repay——"

"Oh, yes, you can. Whenever you meet a fellow that is hard up, and you can afford it, just hand him a dollar or two, and that will make it all right. Now, be careful of yourself on the way up. You'll find some lawless men there who won't hesitate to take the last cent you've got. Remember me to Black Dan, and don't forget what I have told you. Put it there. So long."

Tom wanted to say something else, but before he could form the words his hand had been squeezed for a moment and he was alone. He watched the man and then saw him disappear among the crowd.

"I wonder if anybody ever had such luck as this," said Tom, as he turned his face slowly toward the levee. "I almost dread to think of it, for fear that there is worse luck in store for me."

He was alone now, at all events.

CHAPTER VI.

TOM ADMIRES THE COWBOYS.

Tom Mason slowly made his way back to Wolf River, the place where the *Jennie June* was discharging her cargo, locked his baggage in his state room, and seated himself on the guard to watch the deck-hands and think of Mr. Bolton, if that was his name. Several passengers got off at Memphis, and several more got on to take their places, but from the time the boat rounded to go up the Arkansas River there was no one who had anything to say to him, if we except the clerk and the barber.

Tom thought he had never seen so lonely and desolate a country as that through which the Arkansas flowed. Woods were to be seen in every direction, and here and there a small clearing with a negro or two scattered about to show that somebody lived there. The boat stopped a few times to let off a passenger where there was not the sign of a fence anywhere around, but she never got out a line for them. She awoke the echoes far and near with her hoarse whistle, shoved out a gang-plank, a couple of deck-hands ran ashore with the passenger's baggage, and then she went on her way up the river. The town of Little Rock was situated in the woods, and above that it was all wilderness until Fort Gibson was reached. The *Jennie June* did not tie up alongside the levee, but ran on till she came to a little boat with steam up, the only boat there was at the landing, and made fast alongside of her, keeping her wheels moving all the while, so as not to pull her away from her moorings.

"Have I got to change to that thing?" said Tom.

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk, who hurried past him with a book in his hands and a pencil behind his ear. "She's the only one who can go above here at all. Plenty of room on her. I'll be ready to go with you in ten minutes."

With his baggage between his feet Tom sat down to await the return of the clerk, and to make a mental estimate of the vessel that was to take him 150 miles further on his journey. He saw that she had no Texas on board of her, her pilot-house being seated on the roof of the cabin. Her engines were small, being no doubt reduced in weight to make her carrying capacity equal to passing over the shoal places she would find before her, her spars were ready for use, and she had no roof over her main-deck. She could get along very well in dry weather, but what would she do when a rain-storm came up? Tom noticed that a good portion of baggage was laid out on the boiler deck, and no doubt some of the passengers slept there; and consequently it would be a dangerous piece of business for any of the wakeful parties to attempt to promenade the main-deck with a cigar, as he had often seen done on the *Jennie June*.

"I hope we shall have pleasant weather all the way to Fort Hamilton," thought Tom, as he rested his elbows on the railing and proceeded to size up the passengers. "I don't see how they can get all those men into the cabin."

Almost the first thing Tom saw, curled up before some luggage they were watching, were a couple of Indians, taking good care to keep out of the way of the swiftly moving deck-hands. But Indians he could see any day by simply riding into his uncle's woods; but who were those long-legged, lank fellows who took just as much care of their rifles and knapsacks as the Indians did? They were hunters, and Tom could not resist the temptation to turn his eyes away from the fore-castle back to the main-deck to take a second survey of the motley group of men he had seen there. They were cowboys all of them, and their clothing, especially their hats and boots, were as nearly perfect as money could buy. They were all young fellows, from twenty to twenty-five years of age, and wore their six-shooters strapped around them with as much ease as though they had been born with them on. The hunters were a lazy set, and were willing to work for the furs they captured, while the cowboys were willing to work for a salary, and they earned every dollar of it, too.

"That's what I am going to be," thought Tom. "I'll have a horse and lariat, and I'll soon learn to ride with the best of them. I don't see what Mr. Bolton could have been thinking of when he bought me this sheep's-gray suit. None of the cowboys has them on."

While Tom was busy in watching the cowboys and telling himself that almost any one of them looked ready for a fight, the clerk came up, and, following a motion of his hand, Tom stepped after him into the office. He unlocked the safe and, taking out Tom's roll of money, handed it to him, saying:

"I have spoken to the clerk about you, and he promises that he will give you a nice room with a lower bunk. Good luck to you."

Tom immediately tore open the end of the envelope and began running his fingers over the bills. He wanted to see if they were all there.

"I don't want anything," said the clerk. "I wouldn't take anything if you were to offer it to me. Come on and let's go and see the clerk. I'm awful busy when we are making a landing."

Tom at once picked up his valise and fell in behind the clerk, who led the way on board the *Ivanhoe*. By dodging in the rear of some of the deck-hands he managed to get on board without being knocked overboard, and soon found himself standing beside a man who was shouting out some orders to which nobody paid the least attention. He changed his pencil from his hand into his mouth long enough to shake Tom by the hand.

"Go up on the boiler deck and set down there till I come," said he. "I'll attend to your case in just no time at all."

Seeing that no one else paid any attention to him, Tom ascended the stairs and entered the cabin. He wanted to see what sort of a looking place it was, but almost recoiled when he opened the door, for it was filled so full of stale tobacco smoke that he did not see how anybody could live in it. But he knew that he would have to become accustomed to that smell before he was on the prairie very long, so he kept on and finally found a chair at the further end of the cabin. There was no one near him except a man whose arms were outstretched on the table and his face buried in his hands; and when Tom approached, he raised his head and exhibited a countenance that was literally burning up with fever. He was dressed like a cowboy, but there didn't seem to be anyone to attend to his wants.

"I say," said he, in a faint voice, "I wish you would be good enough to bring me a glass of water."

"Certainly I will," replied Tom, rising and placing his valise in the chair.

He did not know where to go to get it, but as he turned into a little gangway which he thought ought to lead to the galley he encountered a darky, and to him he made known his wants—not for a glass, but for a whole pitcher of ice-water. With these in his hand he went back to the sick man, who, waving away the glass of water which Tom poured out for him, seized the pitcher and drained it nearly dry. Then he set it down, and with a sigh of relief settled back in his chair.

"I have been waiting for an hour for someone to hand me a drink of water, but I didn't have strength enough to go after it," said he, with a smile. "I knew where it was—well, it stayed there."

"Fever and ague?" said Tom.

"Buck ague," responded the man. "I always get it whenever I come to this country."

"I should think you would keep away from it, then."

"Well, I had to come with a herd of cattle my employer was getting up for the government, and that's the way I got it. Ah! here comes one of those lazy kids that ought to have been here and tended to me," added the man, as one of those handsome cowboys that Tom had noticed on the main-deck rapidly approached the table. When he saw the pitcher of ice-water, he stopped and gazed in consternation.

"Somebody's been fixing you!" said he. "He's been taking calomel," he explained to Tom.

"He never said a word to me about it," faltered Tom, who thought he was in a fair prospect of getting himself into trouble.

"You know the doctor said you must be careful not to drink any water after taking that powder," continued the cowboy, looking at Tom as if he had a mind to throw the pitcher at his head.

"The kid is all right," said the sick man, "and I'll stay by him. Now, if you will go away and let me alone, I'll go to sleep."

He stretched himself out on the table once more, and the cowboy went off to consult with his chum. In a few minutes he came back with him, and all they could do was to try to arouse the man to ask him what he thought they had better do for him; but to such interruptions he always replied: "No, no, boys! I'm going to sleep now."

"You ought not to have given that man so much water," said one of the cowboys. "But after all it's our own fault, Hank. One of us ought to have stayed here with him."

Tom Mason did not know what to say, and neither was he able to account for so much forbearance on the part of the cowboys. He looked to see them pull their revolvers; but instead of doing that they drew chairs up beside their sick comrade and waited to see what was going to happen to him, and Tom, filled with remorse, went out on the boiler-deck. Just then the *Jennie June's* bell rang, the lines and gang-planks were hauled in, and she backed down the river to her moorings. Then the *Ivanhoe's* bell was struck, and instantly a great hubbub arose among the passengers. Hands were shaken, farewells were said, and in ten minutes more the little boat was ploughing her way up the river. Tom had an opportunity to sit down after that. He pulled a chair up to the railing and sat there for ten minutes awaiting the arrival of the clerk, and wondering how calomel would operate on that man after he had drunk ice-water on top of it; and

consequently he did not feel very safe when he saw the two cowboys approaching him. He had left them to watch over the sick man, and he did not like to have them follow him up.

"Look here, pard," said the foremost. "You've got the only lower bunk there is in the cabin, and we want to see if you won't give it up to that sick boss of ours. The man now occupying the upper bunk has offered to give it up, but we don't want it."

"You can have it and welcome," said Tom. "I assure you that my giving him a drink was all a mistake. I offered him a glass of water, but he wouldn't take it."

Having given up his bed, Tom considered that he had done all that a boy could do to make amends for what he had done. He gave the clerk his money to lock in the safe, and when night came found a pallet made up for him in a remote corner of the cabin. All the report he could get regarding the sick man was that he was sleeping soundly, and had fought his attendants so hard that it was all they could do to take his clothes off.

"I really believe he is coming around all right," said one of the cowboys. "When he gets mad and reaches for his revolver, it's a mighty good sign."

"Did he draw it on either of you?" asked Tom, in alarm.

"Oh, no; for we took good pains to keep it out of his way."

When Tom got up the next morning (there was no barber shop on this boat, and so he had to comb his hair in the wash-room), and went out on the boiler-deck to get his breath of fresh air, he found three men out there sitting in their chairs, and paying no heed to the cold wind that was blowing. The men who slept there had gone into a warmer climate, down in the neighborhood of the boilers, but their baggage was scattered around just as they had left it. Tom took just one look around, and, seeing how desolate things were, was about to retreat to the cabin, when one of the men happened to spy him.

"My gracious, there's my doctor!" said he cheerfully. "Come here, old man, and give us your flipper."

"Why, I didn't expect to find you out here to-day," said Tom, walking up and taking the outstretched hand of his sick man. "My medicine did you some good, didn't it? But you ought not to sit out here without something around you. You will take cold."

The sick man laughed heartily.

"Why, doctor, I am as sound as a dollar. That water you gave me hit the spot, for it set me to perspiring like a trip-hammer. I knew I was all right as soon as I could sleep. Draw a chair up and sit down. You won't take cold while you have that overcoat on."

Tom drew a chair up alongside the sick man, one of the cowboys moving aside to make room for him, and deposited his feet on the railing. The wind cut severely, and he would have felt a good deal more cheerful beside the cabin fire.

"Where be you a-travelling to, doctor?" said the sick man; for Tom didn't know what else to call him. "If you are going out our way, we may be able to be of some use to you."

"I am going to Fort Hamilton," said Tom. "How much farther I don't know until I have seen Black Dan."

It was curious what a sensation that name occasioned in that little company. They simply looked at each other and smiled, and then settled down and sought new places for their feet on the railing. It was evident that they took Black Dan for a relative of his.

"Have you got much to do with him?" asked one of the cowboys.

"I never saw him," Tom hastened to say. "I got his name from a Mr. Bolton, who gave me a very valuable pin to return to him. He got into a fight once and had some diamonds torn out of it."

"Yes, Dan has been in a good many fights," said the sick man. "He aint the fellow he used to be."

"I—I hope he didn't get the worst of any of them."

"Well—yes. He rather got the worst of the last fight he was in. He got into a row with three fellows,—cowboys, I knew them well,—and although he managed to get away with all of them, one shot him through the arm above the elbow, and it had to be taken off."

"Amputated?" said Tom.

"Yes, I suppose that's what you call it. Then Dan took to drink and lost everything he had."

"Why should the loss of his arm send him to drink?"

"He couldn't shuffle the cards any more. He doesn't do anything now but get drunk in the morning and then crawl into some hole and sleep it off; and he has seen the time when he was worth a million."

Tom Mason was sorry to hear all this. He did not know what he was going to do now that Black Dan was in no condition to help him. Who was he going to get to grub-stake him and send him into the mountains to find a gold mine? He knew that things were pretty high in Fort Hamilton,

and his two hundred dollars would not last him a great while.

"For a fellow who has never seen Black Dan you appear to take his downfall very much to heart," said the sick man.

"Yes, I do. I was depending on him to see me through. I have a very nice pin which is his own private property, and which I have been commissioned to give into his keeping."

"Have you got it with you?"

Tom replied that the pin was in his baggage, and arose and went after it. In a few minutes he returned with it in his hand, and was not a little surprised at the exclamations of astonishment that arose from his three friends when they handled the ornament, and passed it from one to the other and speculated upon its merits.

"Five hundred dollars!" said "Boss" Kelley, who by virtue of his position took it upon himself to act as judge when matters came before them that were somewhat hard to be decided. Tom had noticed one thing: that his word was law to the two cowboys, and that when he spoke the other two remained silent. "That's a heap of money to go into Dan's hands. How long do you suppose it will last him?"

"Until he can get to Cale's bar," said Hank Monroe.

"And no longer," chimed in Frank Stanley.

"It's his and he ought to have it, if we can find him when he is sober," said Kelley. "Now, doctor, how came you by it in the first place?"

"I am plain Tom Mason, and I don't like to answer to any other name," said the latter; and with the words he settled back in his chair and told the history of his meeting with Mr. Bolton. He kept back nothing. He knew he could tell it just as it happened, for these men had more or less to do with gamblers, and knew the motives which influenced them. When he got through, he found that he had them very much interested.

"Why, you haven't done anything," said Stanley. "Go home and tell your uncle just what you have told us, and take the racket."

"Boys, I know my uncle," said Tom, shaking his head.

"Perhaps he had better go on," said Kelley. "His uncle will throw things at him whenever he gets mad, and it's better to go away and let him get over that. Now, Tom, if you are willing to take help from us——"

"I am willing to take help from anybody," said Tom. "I am a stranger in a strange place, and don't know what move to make first."

"Very good," said Kelley, extending his hand to be shaken by Tom, a proceeding in which he was imitated by both his friends. "That is a cowboy's grip, and whenever you get it out here, you may know that you are among friends. Tom is one of our party now."

Tom Mason told himself that never had a runaway been blessed with such luck. No sooner did one man on whom he was depending for assistance turn out to be unreliable than another one came to take his place. For once he had forgotten himself and told the truth, and the truth was mighty and would prevail. After that he had nothing to do during the rest of his trip but sit alongside one of his companions and talk of cattle-herding and speculate concerning the future of Black Dan. All he could learn regarding the latter was that he was going to the bad as rapidly as he could.

"All gamblers come to that sooner or later," said Kelley. "All the money I have got was made honestly. I don't know one card from another."

All this was very encouraging. If a man of Kelley's stamp—Tom knew he was well off, for he had heard him talk of the thousand head of cattle which he was holding fast to until the government came up to his price—could live all these years on the prairie and never learn one card from another, it was certain that another might do so.

At last, after innumerable discouragements, during which her spurs had been used until they were all mud, and it seemed impossible for her to proceed a foot farther, the *Ivanhoe* whistled for Fort Hamilton. Then Tom saw what had given it that name. A short distance above the little circle of houses that always spring up around a fortification, crowning a hill, was a stockade from which floated the Stars and Stripes, and among the crowd of loungers who assembled to see the boat come in were several men dressed in the uniform of the army.

As soon as the landing was made Tom went to the clerk to get the money he had locked in the safe, and made his way down the stairs to find Kelley and Stanley waiting for him. They all had horses, with their extra wardrobe tied up in ponchos behind their saddles, but they had given them over to one of their number with orders to take them to the Eldorado, the hotel which all the best men in that country patronized.

"Now, we want to find out what's left of Black Dan," said Kelley. "I think we will get on his trail somewhere up here."

CHAPTER VII.

A TEMPERANCE LECTURE.

It was a muddy, miry place in which Tom Mason now found himself, for it had been raining some there and Fort Hamilton was not blessed with a system of drainage. There were no sidewalks except in front of the various saloons and stores they passed, and half the way they walked through mud that was more than ankle deep. It was astonishing to him to notice how many people there were on the streets who recognized his companions. It was "Howdy, Mr. Kelley?" and "Hello, Stanley!" or "Hello, Arrow-foot!" until Tom might be pardoned for thinking that his two friends were raised right in town instead of coming from a country a hundred miles away.

"Arrow-foot?" said he. "That's one thing I do not understand."

"Well, you see that when my employer first came to this country and wanted a name for his cattle, he picked up on his piece of land, close by the spot where his dugout is now located, a small piece of clay plainly marked with an arrow-foot. There was the stem of the arrow all complete, and so he named his cattle 'Arrow-foot.' Almost everybody out here is known by the brand his cattle wears."

"But how do they come to call you 'Mr.' Kelley?"

"I don't know, unless it is because I don't drink or gamble with them, and have a happy faculty for settling all the rows."

Presently Mr. Kelley made his way into a spacious saloon that occupied one end of the block. It had evidently been built by someone who had an idea of refinement about him, for its verandas were spacious, the windows came down to the floor, and there was a gilded sign over the door. Inside the room was large and airy, with a bar on one side and a number of tables extending away to the other end. It was quiet enough now in the daytime, but when Tom heard the noise that came from it after the lamps were lighted, he thought pandemonium had broken loose.

"Howdy, Mr. Kelley? Denominate your poison," said the man behind the counter, extending a bottle toward him with one hand and reaching out the other to be shaken. "Got back safe and sound, didn't you?"

"I don't take any of that stuff, and you ought to know better than to ask me. I got back all right with the exception of the dumb ague, which took me just as I got ready to leave Fort Gibson. Have you seen Black Dan lately?"

"You're right, I have," said the man, frowning fiercely. "Do you see that?" he added, taking out from under his counter a revolver which was cocked and ready to be used when it was drawn. "I am going to keep that just as it is and show it to him when he wakes up. Because he used to own this house is no reason why he should pull a pistol on me!"

"Did he draw it on you?" asked Tom, forgetting where he was in the excitement of the moment.

"I should say he did, kid, and Mose, there, was just in time to stop him. I hope you have come to take him East, for I don't want him around here any longer. It is all I can do to keep him from getting into a fight with somebody, and the first thing you know he will pick up the wrong man. You took him out, Mose. Do you know where he is?"

"Yes; he's out there," said Mose, motioning one way with his thumb and another way with his head. "I can find him."

Mose made an effort to get on his feet, but reeled considerably, and would have fallen back in his chair if Mr. Kelley had not caught him and placed him steadily on his feet. When he was fairly up, he was all right, and made his way out of the house and around the corner, closely followed by Mr. Kelley and Tom. Presently he stopped, and curled up behind a water-butt, the mud spattered thick on his torn clothing, his empty holster and the stump of his crippled arm thrown out recklessly by his side, lay all that was left of Black Dan. Tom saw in a minute where he had got his cognomen. His complexion was swarthy and his hair and whiskers were as black as midnight, but for all that he had been a very handsome man. He was dead drunk, and Mr. Kelley saw that all attempts to arouse him would be useless.

"Why didn't you put him in a bed?" asked Tom, in accents of disgust.

"He wouldn't stay there," replied Mose. "That is the only place he will stay, and there is where we take him as soon as he shows any desire to go to sleep."

"Let's go away," said Tom. "I'll never drink a drop of whiskey as long as I live."

"It would be useless to try to awake him," said Mr. Kelley. "Mose, you tell him that as soon as he wakes up we want to see him down to the Eldorado, where we are stopping. We want to see him particularly. You can remember that much, can't you?"

"I can, sir," replied Mose, hastily pocketing the dollar which Kelley thrust out to him. "I'll send him down as soon as he comes to himself."

"It always comes hard for one to see a man done up in that style," said Mr. Kelley, as he and Tom bent their steps toward the Eldorado. "It makes me hate whiskey worse than I did before."

Tom had seen so much of the little town of Fort Hamilton that he had some doubts about going to the Eldorado. Their little interview with Black Dan, if such it could be called, had taken all the conversation out of them; but when they entered the living-room of the hotel, and saw no semblance of a bar, and the men who were playing cards were doing it for fun, and not for money, and there was no sign of a drunken man around, his spirits rose wonderfully, and he walked up and placed his valise on the counter.

"Ah! here you are," exclaimed Stanley, coming up at that moment. "I wasn't able to get a room with four beds in it, but I have engaged one end of the dining-room, so that we can all be together to-night."

"Full up to the top notch," said the clerk. "Put it there, Mr. Kelley. How are you, Arrow-foot? This young man I don't remember to have seen before, but all the same I am glad to meet him."

"Yes, he's a tender-foot, and we are taking him out to have the boss grub-stake him."

"Ah! that's your business, is it? Fine business that. You may make a strike some day and come back and buy us all out. You're going right in the country for one, for there's a nugget worth eight thousand dollars for you to pitch on to."

"Yes, Elam Storm's nugget," said Stanley. "I hope to goodness you'll get it, for then we shall quit hearing so much about it."

"Oh, it's there, for one with such a reputation as that—why, man alive, it extends through twenty years! And the Red Ghost, too; you want to steer clear of him."

Tom laughed and said he would do his best to follow the clerk's advice. He had heard of Elam Storm's nugget, had even found himself thinking of it when awake, and dreaming about it when asleep. He knew that his chances for digging it up were rather slim, for he did not suppose that the man who had hid it had any idea that it would be unearthed by anyone save himself; but if he should happen to strike it with one blow of his pick! Wouldn't he be in town? He could then write back to his uncle that he had made more than the sum he had temporarily lost, made it by the sweat of his brow, and he was sure that the next letter he received from his uncle would be one telling him to come back home, and all would be forgiven. But the Red Ghost! Tom did not know what to think about him. He had been seen, never in broad daylight, and he was a terrible thing to look at. He roamed about after nightfall, tearing the mules and trampling the teamsters to death, and the worst of it was he was always to be found somewhere near the place where the nugget was supposed to be hid. Stanley once had a partner that had been done to death, and even Mr. Kelley's face grew solemn whenever he spoke of him. That was the only thing that made Tom doubtful about taking a grub-stake.

The dinner-bell rang while they were talking, and when the meal was ended Tom went out with the two cowboys to look at a horse that Stanley had found for him in the morning. They were gone about two hours, and when they came back, Tom told himself that he was a cowboy at last; a horse, saddle, and bridle were waiting for him at the stable, and the poncho which he carried slung over his arm was roomy enough for his extra baggage. The first thing that attracted Stanley's notice was a strange man talking to Mr. Kelley. The stump of his arm proclaimed who he was.

"It's Black Dan," said he. "Now, Tom, let's see how much your temperance principles will amount to."

Tom was startled, as well he might be, to know that he had it in his power to help a man who, in his palmy days, held an influence in Fort Hamilton second only to the commander of the station. He gazed steadily at him a moment, then threw his poncho on the table, asked the clerk for his valise, and took from it the pin Mr. Bolton had given him, and with this in his hand he approached Black Dan, while with a delicacy of feeling that some people who occupy prouder stations might have envied the cowboys turned toward the window. Hearing from the barkeeper that the man who wanted to see him was a "top-notch fellow," Dan had washed his face and brushed his hair, and made other efforts to improve himself. His holster was filled this time, so it showed that he was in a situation to defend himself. Mr. Kelley introduced Tom, and then moved away.

"How do you do, sir?" said Dan, gazing hard at Tom's face and trying to recollect where he had seen him before. "You have got the advantage of me."

"I never saw you before, and I am sorry to find you this way," said Tom, trying to keep up his courage. "I want you to look at this pin and tell me if you ever saw it before."

Tom unwrapped the pin and placed it in Dan's hands. The latter took it in surprise, and finally the wondering scowl his face had assumed gave way to an entirely different expression, and he sat for five minutes, turning the pin over in his hand, and doubtless harassed by gloomy reflections. When he gave that pin to the one from whom Tom had received it, he was worth half a million dollars.

"What was Bradshaw doing when he gave you the pin?" said he.

"He told me his name was Bolton," said Tom. "He had been doing some gambling, and, finding

out from me that I was coming up here, he gave me the pin with a request that I should give it to you."

"You haven't come out here with any intention of going into this business, have you?"

"What, gambling? Not much I haven't. I think I have seen enough to keep me away from gambling forever. I'm going to get a grub-stake and go into the mountains. I think I can do better there."

"You are an honest boy, and I wish I could give you something for it. One short year ago I could have sent you to the mountains with some prospects of success; but now——" Dan held up his crippled arm.

"I should think that would drive you from gambling forever," said Tom earnestly. "You have taken to drink, and that is just as bad."

"Well, seeing that you are going to preach, I guess I'll go. Shake. So long."

Before Tom could think of another word to say Dan had squeezed his hand and was on his way to the door, walking along with his hat pulled over his eyes, as if he didn't want to see anybody. When he reached the street, he simply touched his forehead to some people he met, and kept on his way to the saloon. Tom stepped to the window and saw him go in at the door.

"Well, what success did you meet with?" said Stanley.

"I didn't meet with any success at all," said Tom, gazing helplessly out at the muddy street. "He said if I was going to preach he'd go. He seemed to think I had come out here to go into his business, but I told him I had seen enough to keep me away from cards forever."

"Well, I declare!" said Mr. Kelley. "It is the greatest wonder in the world he didn't knock you down. He never lets anybody say anything against cards in his hearing. You have had a narrow escape."

As Tom sat there with his three friends and talked over the incidents of Dan's past life he grew more frightened than ever, and thanked his lucky stars that he didn't know more about it before he held his interview with the gambler. Tom had told him that he had taken to drink, which was as bad as gambling, and Dan had been known to floor a man who had said as much to him. That night, while Tom was lying on his bed and trying to go to sleep, he heard something more of the pin. High and loud above all the hubbub that arose on the streets came the chorus of a song in which one voice far outled the others. It was Dan's voice, and proved that the pin had been pawned for something besides water. He looked over toward Monroe, and saw that the latter was wide awake and looking at him.

"They're going it, aint they?" Tom whispered.

"You're right, they are. Poor Dan! You have done what you could for him." And with the words he rolled over and prepared to go to sleep.

The next morning everything was quiet enough. The drunkards had been put into the calaboose by the soldiers, and the others had gone to bed to sleep it off. Tom wanted to know what had become of Dan, but nobody said anything about him, and from that time his name was dropped. They ate their breakfast in haste, paid their bills, and in ten minutes more Tom was on his way in search of a grub-stake.

"Oh, certainly you'll get it," said Monroe, who rode beside him. "That is the way the bosses always treat a tender-foot when they haven't anything in particular for him to do. Some of our best known men have got their start that way."

"I should think that some of the men you trust that way would run off when they find something good," said Tom.

"Why, bless you, they can't take their find with them. They've got to stay and work it. I did hear of a fellow who found a lot of iron pyrites, and filled his pockets with them. He ran away, making the best course he could for Denver, and when he was found, his pockets might just as well have been filled with clay."

"Dead?" said Tom.

"Yes; and he was two hundred miles from where he belonged."

"And his find didn't amount to anything?"

"No. It is a brassy substance and looks very much like the precious metal, but you need a mine to work it."

"What do you suppose killed him?"

"Don't know. Some people suppose that his mule got away from him, and ran away with his outfit. At any rate, there was nothing near him, and the fellow got desperate and died from exhaustion. Oh, it's one of the things that will happen out here."

"That's a queer way to do," said Tom musingly. "By the way, I haven't got any revolver."

"Oh, the old man will give you a pop. You will get everything you need to last you two or three

months. While that lasts, you are expected to do some hunting; when it begins to give out, you want to come home."

"But how will I know the way?"

"The mule will bring you. He will stay there about two months,—that is, if he doesn't get frightened,—and when he gets tired of staying, he will come home, and you had better come, too."

It was by such talks as this that Tom learned a great deal about the business upon which he was soon to embark. It never occurred to him that he was to engage in any other business. Cowboys—or, as they were called in those days, "vaqueros"—were not as plenty as they became a few years later, and if a ranchman could be found who thought him able to make his living by riding for a stake, well and good. He certainly would not run away with his pockets filled with pyrites. He expected to make a good many blunders, but Tom told himself he was used to that. What he thought of more than anything else was that nugget worth eight thousand dollars.

They camped that night with a party of emigrants, and for the first time Tom had the luxury of sleeping out of doors; but the appetite he brought to the breakfast-table with him amply made amends for that. In all the hunting excursions he had enjoyed for a week or more on his uncle's plantation he always had a darky along to build a shelter for him, cook his breakfast for him, and do any other work that happened to be necessary, and all he had to do was to ride to and from his hunting-grounds and shoot the turkeys after he got there. The next night they drew up before a dugout, the first one he had ever seen. The only thing that pointed out its place of location were a couple of hay-racks, which had been torn to pieces by mules. There was not a human being in sight, not even standing in the door to bid them welcome.

"Boys, I am glad my trip is done," said Mr. Kelley, as he threw himself from his horse, relieving him of his bridle as he did so. "Tom, what do you think of your new home?"

"Why, there is nobody around here," said Tom, gazing on all sides of him.

"Oh, they are around here somewhere. It isn't dark yet, and we'll get in and light a fire for them. They are out somewhere, looking for some lost cattle. We left two hundred head here when we went to the mountains."

"To the mountains?" repeated Tom.

"Yes. I tell you we want to get away from here when the blizzards fly, for there isn't a thing to shelter us. I don't expect we shall find more than fifty head of those cattle, if we do that."

"What do you suppose will become of them?"

"They will be dead, of course. You see, when cattle are loose on the prairie and a storm comes up, and they can't stand it any longer, they start and travel in the same way the storm is going; and as the storm lasts from three to four days, you can readily imagine that they must get exhausted before they stop. When the hailstones come down as large as hens' eggs, you can——"

"Haw, haw!" laughed Monroe.

"Well, as large as pigeons' eggs," said Kelley, "and I won't come down another grain in weight. Why, an army officer went by here two years ago hunting for his thirty-five mules that had been stampeded by a storm, and when he found them, there were only four that were able to stand alone. Oh, you get out, Monroe! You haven't seen any blizzard yet. Now, let's go in and get some supper."

"But what makes the mules run so? Why don't they go under shelter?" added Tom, as he picked up his poncho and saddle and followed the man inside the house.

"There was just where they were going—for shelter. There aint a piece of timber within twenty-five miles of this place to shelter a rabbit."

"Then what do you use for fuel?"

"Buffalo chips. There, Tom, put your plunder in there and set down and look around you. You wouldn't think the man who owns this place was worth two hundred thousand, but it is a fact."

"Why doesn't he buy a better piece of ground, then? I wouldn't be so far from shelter if I were in his place."

"Buy it? He doesn't own this property. Every acre of ground that he occupies is Congress land."

"But I'll bet you he wouldn't give it up," said Stanley. "I'd like to see somebody come here and say this is his."

"Then you will never see it. Mr. Parsons says that all this property will be thrown open to settlement some day, and then he and the rest of the squatters will have to go farther West. But, laws! he's got money enough, and he began life, Tom, just as you are going to—by taking a grub-stake and starting for the mountains. But come on, boys, and let's get supper. Stanley, just roll out the rest of that bacon and hard-tack, and, Monroe, you go outside and throw in some buffalo chips."

Tom, weary with his long ride, made up his bunk, then threw himself upon it and looked about

him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HOME RANCH.

Tom was surprised at the interior of the dugout. From the outside it didn't look large enough to accommodate more than three or four men, but there were bunks for eight, and there was ample room for the cooking stove, a dilapidated affair which looked as though it might have come from somebody's scrap-pile and left one of its legs behind it. But there was plenty of "draw" to it, as Monroe came in with his arms full of buffalo chips, filled the stove full, and touched a match to them. On each side of the stove was a blanket, which on being raised proved to conceal little cupboards devoted to various odds and ends. One contained books and magazines, a whip or two, and several pairs of spurs, and in the other were to be found the dishes from which the inmates had eaten breakfast, all neatly washed and put away. Tom was surprised at the air of neatness that everywhere prevailed.

"Oh, you won't find all dugouts like this one," said Monroe. "Some of them are so dirty that you can't find a place to spread your blanket. Mr. Parsons' cook did this work, and all the ole man does is to sit outside and smoke."

"Here comes the ole man now," said Stanley, who had ascended to the top of the stairs and was looking out over the prairie. "He has got a small drove of cattle with him, so we shall have some corral duty to do to-night."

"And I believe he has more than twenty-five head with him," said Mr. Kelley, who dropped everything and came to Stanley's side. "He's got fifty if he's got one. Boys, I guess you had better go out there. They are tired most to death, and we might let them come in and get some supper."

Although the two cowboys had ridden all of fifty miles that day, there was no objection raised to this arrangement. Without saying a word they buckled on their belts containing their revolvers, shouldered their saddles and bridles, and went out behind the hay racks. When they came within sight a few minutes later, they were going at full speed to meet their employer and his cattle.

"Now, maybe you are able to see something off there, but I can't," said Tom, after he had run his eyes in vain over the horizon. "I can't see a single thing."

"Can't you see that long line that looks like a pencil-mark off there?" said Mr. Kelley, trying in vain to make Tom see the object at which he was looking. "Well, it's there plain enough. When you have been on the plains as long as I have, you'll notice all little objects like that one, and, furthermore, you will want to know what makes them. It will be two hours before they come up, and you sit down here on the bench and watch it. I will go down and get some supper."

Tom seated himself on the bench beside the door and tried hard to make out the approaching line of cattle, but could not do it. Finally he was called to supper, and went down saying that he would give his eyes a little rest and then maybe he could see them; but he couldn't do it now.

"Supposing you were in a line of march and had a scout out there where those men are, and he should begin riding in a circle, what would you say?" asked Mr. Kelley.

"I wouldn't say anything," exclaimed Tom. "I wouldn't know what he meant."

"He would mean that there was danger close at hand, and you had better be gathering your cattle up," said Mr. Kelley. "And if they were scattered as far apart as those cattle are, you would want a small battalion of men to answer your orders."

"What would be the danger?"

"From Cheyennes, of course."

"Good gracious! Do they ever come out and threaten a whole ranchful of cattle?"

"Certainly they do. But they are all right now. They haven't had any grievance for a long time, and they are as trustworthy as Indians ever get to be. I wouldn't put any faith in them, however. I'd have been worth half a million dollars if it hadn't been for those pesky redskins."

"Did they steal from you?" asked Tom.

"Yes, they stole me flat, but I got away with my life, and that is something to be thankful for. Now, go out and see if you can find those cattle."

Tom obediently went, and whether it was from the long rest his eyes had had or from some other reason, he distinctly made out a long "pencil line" on the horizon. By watching it closely he finally made out that in certain places the line was interrupted, and finally decided that that was the place where some of the cattle had strayed more than they ought to; and he was confirmed in this idea when he saw a solitary figure move up and turn them in toward the centre. As Mr. Kelley, having finished his dishes, came out and sat down on the bench to enjoy his smoke, he finally made out the two horsemen who rode around the outskirts of the herd and gradually

disappeared.

"It won't be long now before the old man will be along," said he. "You will see that he won't ride through the drove, but will come around it. If he should try riding through it, he would have a stampede on his hands that would do your heart good to see."

"Are they as wild as that?" asked Tom, who told himself that he was learning something about the cowboy's business the longer he talked with Mr. Kelley.

"You just bet they are. If you should go among them on foot, you would either stampede them or else they would charge upon you and gore you to death. That's the reason we always use horses in tending cattle."

In about half an hour two horsemen were seen riding around the outskirts of the herd. They took a wide circle, so as not to frighten the cattle, and finally drew a bee-line for the dugout. Mr. Kelley remarked that they were the ones he was expecting, dived down the stairs, and in a few minutes the rattling of dishes was heard as he proceeded with his preparations for a second supper. The horsemen were hungry, or else their animals were, for they occupied much less time in coming in than the cowboys who relieved them, and in short order they were near enough for Tom to distinguish their faces. Tom took a long look at the man who was going to befriend him. He knew who he was, for there was the cut of a leader about him; and when the man rode up and swung himself from his horse with a "How are you, Tom?" it proved to him that Stanley and Monroe had told him something about him.

"Howdy?" shouted a voice from the dugout; and Mr. Kelley stuck his head up through the door. "We're still on hand, like a bad dollar bill. How many cattle have you got out there?"

"Sixty-five; and pretty good luck, too, seeing that they have been stampeded more than forty miles. Where did you pick up this youngster?" added Mr. Parsons, giving Tom's hand a hearty squeeze. "I certainly do not remember seeing him before."

"No, he's a tender-foot. As he didn't know what else to do, he came out here for somebody to grub-stake him."

"Ah!"

"Everyone who knows him has gone back on him," continued Mr. Kelley, "and so he has come out here to see if you won't stake him for a gold mine."

"M-m-m!"

"And as he cured me of the dumb ague by giving me a pitcher of ice-water, I thought I would bring him along."

"Aha!" said the ranchman, who had kept a firm hold of Tom while his right-hand man was speaking. "You claim to be a doctor, do you? Well, we must do something for you. I was a little older than you are when I went into the mountains to seek for a gold mine, and, unfortunately for me, I found it. I smell bacon. Is supper ready yet?"

Mr. Kelley made some sort of incoherent reply which Mr. Parsons and his man understood, for they dived down the doorway, leaving Tom standing alone.

"Unfortunately he got it," Tom kept repeating to himself. "I don't see what there was unfortunate about it, unless he was cheated out of it. If I had as many cattle as he has got out there, and as many men to obey my orders, I should look upon myself as remarkably fortunate."

Tom did not have any opportunity to talk further with Mr. Parsons that night, for as soon as he had eaten supper he went to bed and was soon sleeping soundly. Tom felt the need of slumber, and when he thought he could do so without disturbing anybody, he slipped quietly down the stairs. There sat Mr. Kelley fast asleep on his dry-goods box, holding in his hand the copy of a newspaper about a fortnight old, and which he had been trying to read by the aid of the smoky candle that gave out just light enough to show how dark it was; and as everybody else felt the need of slumber, and gave over to the influence of it wherever they happened to be, Tom threw off his boots and tumbled into his bunk. Once during the night he was aroused by somebody coming in and informing Mr. Kelley that it was twelve o'clock; then there was a stir of changing watches and the camp became silent again. Or no; it wasn't silent. Just after the watches had been changed (for men had to keep track of the cattle during the night and see that nothing happened to stampede them) Tom was treated to a wolf serenade. It began faint and far off, and then all on a sudden broke out so fiercely that it seemed as if the pack had surrounded the cabin and were about to make an assault upon it.

"What was that?" asked Tom, starting up in alarm.

"It's the pesky coyotes," said Monroe, who was taking off his boots. "We're always glad to hear them, for then we know that there is nothing else about."

"What else do you think might be about?" said Tom, wondering how any lone hunter could find any consolation in such a dismal serenade.

"Indians," said the cowboy shortly. "Good-night."

After that Tom did not sleep very soundly, for at times it seemed to him that some of the fierce

animals had come to the door, which stood wide open all this while, and were about to come in. Once he was sure he heard them on top of the cabin, but the others slept on and paid no attention to it, and finally Tom became somewhat accustomed to it. He did not think he had closed his eyes at all in slumber, but when he awoke to a full sense of what was going on, he found that there were only two men left in the cabin, Mr. Parsons and his cook. The former sat on the edge of his bunk pulling on his boots, and the cook was busy with his frying-pan.

"Hallo, youngster!" said Mr. Parsons cheerfully. "You'll have to get up earlier than this if you're going to strike a gold mine. Why, it must be close on to six o'clock."

"I was awfully tired last night, and the wolves kept me awake," said Tom. "I don't see how anybody can sleep with such a din in his ears."

"The time may come when you will be glad to hear them. If there are any Indians around, you won't hear them; just the minute the Indians break loose the wolves all seem to go into their holes; but when the Indians are whipped, they are out in full force."

Tom noticed that the men seemed to be in a hurry, and he lost no time in packing his outfit. He ate breakfast when Mr. Parsons did, sitting down to it without any invitation from anybody, swallowed his coffee and pancakes scalding hot, saddled his horse, and rode away, leaving the cook to straighten affairs in the dugout; and all the while it seemed to him that he hadn't had any breakfast at all. He couldn't see anything of the cattle; but Mr. Parsons put his horse into a lope and proceeded to fill his pipe as he went.

"I suppose you know your cattle have gone this way, don't you?" said Tom.

"Of course I do," answered Mr. Parsons, taking a long pull at his pipe to make sure it was well lighted. "They are ten miles on the way nearer home than we are, and we have got to make that up."

"Do you always drive your cattle into the mountains in winter?"

"Yes, sir. We have had some blizzards here that would make your eyes bung out if you could have seen them, and I would be penniless to-day if my cattle had been caught in them. Some of the cattle ahead of us have been driven forty miles by a blizzard that struck us last fall, and I have just succeeded in finding them. If my neighbor hadn't been as honest as they make them, I wouldn't have got them at all. It would be very easy for him to round them up and brand them over again, and then tell me that if I could find an arrow brand in his herd I could have them."

"How far does your nearest neighbor live from you?"

"Just a jump—fifteen or twenty miles, maybe."

Fifteen or twenty miles! None nearer than that! Tom had found out by experience that distances didn't count for anything on the prairie.

"You said last night, in speaking of your gold find, that, unfortunately for you, you got it," Tom reminded him. "I would like to know what you meant by that. Were you cheated out of it?"

Mr. Parsons replied, with a laugh, that he was not cheated out of it, but, on the whole, it didn't much matter. He took a party of experts up there, and, after working over the mine for a week or more, they gave him twenty thousand dollars for it, of which five thousand went to him and the balance to his employer. That made him lazy—too lazy to go to work. He spent three thousand dollars in grub-staking men to look up claims for him until the end of the year, when he found out that he wasn't making anything by it, so he took the balance of his money and went into the cattle business.

"That gave me my start," said Mr. Parsons in conclusion. "In four years I had made up the money I had spent, and vowed I never would go into it again; but here I am talking of sending you to the mountains."

"Do you think you are not going to make anything by it?"

"Well, yes," said Mr. Parsons, with another laugh. "But I have got to do something to help you. You ride pretty well, and I should think you ought to go into the cattle business."

"Who will take me? Will you?"

"Well, no; I can't. I have had to discharge some parties, not having work for them to attend to, and I don't know how I could use you. I will tell you this much: when you come back in the spring, I will give you a show."

"Thank you," replied Tom. "That's the first encouragement I have had. But you say it took you four years to make up the money you had spent. I'm not going to stay here four years."

"You aint? What are you going to do?"

"I am going to look for that nugget that Elam Storm has lost."

"Oh, ah!" said Mr. Parsons, the expression on his face giving way to one of intense disgust. "Well, you'll never find it."

"Why not? The edge of Death Valley is just crowded with men who haven't given up all hopes of

finding it."

"Crowded! Young man, I wonder if you know how big Death Valley is? Crowded! Now and then you'll find a man who still has that nugget on the brain, but if the man who hid it himself, not more than two years ago, can't find it, I think it is useless for others to try. There have been landslides in all the canyons that run through there till you can't rest. I'll tell you what I'll do: if you will find that nugget, I will give you ten thousand dollars for it. That's a better offer than I made you a while ago. And you may keep the nugget besides. If you are around when anybody else digs it up, I will give you five thousand dollars."

There was something in this offer that completely shut off all discussion of the finding of Elam Storm's nugget. Mr. Parsons did not refer to the matter again, and neither did Tom; but the latter still clung to the hope of finding the gold. The nugget was there, or why should so large a number of men be on the lookout for it? And if he *should* happen to strike it, he would be a rich man. During all his rides he kept that one thought in his mind, and nothing could shake it out. There was one thing that ought to have opened Tom's eyes, and that was that no nugget of gold had been struck in that country for miles around. The nearest place at which any had been found was at Pike's Peak, and that was over two hundred miles away. But Tom didn't know that, and the only thing that kept the cowboys from telling him of it was the fact that when he was in the mountains he would think he was doing something, but if he knew there was no gold to reward his search, he would give up in despair.

It took our party five days to make the journey between the dugout and headquarters, for the cattle were slow of movement, and, besides, they were allowed to graze on the way. About ten o'clock a fierce winter wind, which made Tom bundle his overcoat closer about him and pull his collar up about his ears, sprung up from over the prairie, and the cattle ceased feeding and struck out for a canyon about a mile wide which opened close in front of them. Along this they held their way for five miles and better, until it finally emerged into a broad natural prairie, large enough, Tom thought, to pasture all the cattle in the country, and went to feeding with one of the herds. The air was soft and balmy, and Tom's overcoat was resting across the horn of his saddle. Mr. Parsons pulled up his horse and gazed around him with a smile of satisfaction.

"These cattle are all mine, Tom," said he. "Every horn and hoof you see here has been paid for, and if you want to get in the same way, I will give you a chance when you come back to me in the spring. Monroe, you and Stanley might as well go out and see if you can find anything of that bronco. Tom wants to go away, and we must fit him out early in the morning."

This was bringing the matter squarely home to Tom. He was to go away in the morning! He looked up at the mountains, and they seemed so large and he so small by comparison that he shuddered while he thought of getting bewildered in some of those canyons, and lying down and dying there and nobody would know what had become of him. But Mr. Parsons didn't discourage him. He was made of sterner stuff. He looked up and said with an air of determination:

"Yes, I want to get off. The sooner I get to work the sooner I shall be doing something to earn my living."

"That's the idea," said Mr. Parsons. "Stick to that and you will come out all right. Now, let's go home."

Tom waved his hand to the two cowboys, who galloped away in one direction, while he and Mr. Parsons held down the valley, making a wide circuit to get out of reach of the grazing cattle. After going in a lope Mr. Parsons drew up his horse and began to talk seriously to Tom. He told him plainly of the dangers and sufferings which would fall to his lot if he endeavored to carry out his plan, but he did not try to turn him from his purpose. On the contrary, he tried to warn him so that when the dangers came he would be prepared to meet them half-way. He kept this up until the home ranch appeared in view, and then he stopped, for he didn't want the cowboys to hear what he was saying.

This home ranch was not a dugout. There was a neat cabin to take the place of it, and Tom thought some of the cowboys had used an axe pretty well by the way they fashioned the logs and put them together. There were half a dozen hay-racks out behind the house, protected from wandering cattle by rail fences, and there wasn't a thing on the porch, no saddles, bridles, and riding whips, all such things having been put into a cubby-hole in the rear of the house. But it so happened that the cook, who had got there first, had peeled off his coat, and was engaged in straightening things out.

"I never did see such a mess as these fellows leave when I go away for five minutes," said he. "I can't find a thing where it ought to be, though I have hunted high and low for that carving-knife."

Tom took his seat at Mr. Parsons' side while he filled up preparatory to a smoke. There were one or two little things that he wanted to speak to him about.

CHAPTER IX.

LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS.

When Mr. Parsons had fairly settled himself, filled his pipe, lighted it, and fell to nursing his leg as a man might who felt at peace with himself and all the world, Tom said:

"You didn't say anything about my horse in telling me what I should have to get through with. Did you mean that I should leave him at home, and go on foot?"

"I did, certainly," said Mr. Parsons. "You will find that the bronco will go through some places that you will not care to ride, and, besides, you will have one horse less to take care of, and one less to watch."

"Have I got to watch him all the time?"

"Well, yes. You must keep the halter on him all the time, and tie him fast to a tree when you go into camp. If you don't, he will run away and leave you. He'll turn around and take the back track as soon as your pack grows light, and you had better come, too."

"That's what one of the cowboys told me," said Tom. "Now, I have got some money here. I don't suppose it will be of the least use to me in the mountains, and I should like to leave it with somebody."

"All right. Leave your horse and your money with me, and I will take care of them."

"If I don't come back, they are yours," continued Tom. "Now, I should like to have a gun of some sort."

Without saying a word Mr. Parsons went into the house and brought out a rifle and a revolver. Tom took them and examined them, and the way he drew the rifle to his face rather astonished Mr. Parsons. He remarked that he had handled guns before in his day, and Tom told him that he could not remember the time when he did not have a horse and shotgun for his own. His uncle furnished him with all these things.

"Then right there is where you ought to have stayed," said Mr. Parsons, throwing more energy into his tones than he usually did. "I hope you're not going to be sick of your bargain, but I'm afraid you are. Here comes the bronco. Do you think you can manage that fellow?"

The bronco which came up at that moment, with Stanley's lariat fastened about his neck, was like any other horse, only he seemed to be tired. When they stopped him, he lowered his head and drew up one of his hind feet, and closed his eyes as if he were fast asleep. But Tom knew better than to fool with him. He had read enough to know that the word came from the Spanish and meant "wild," and he had got his name from his persistent efforts to keep wild cowboys off his back. He couldn't be ridden, that was the matter with him; but he would carry a pack-saddle all day, and never had been known to leave a man he had accompanied to the mountains. Tom said he thought he could manage him, and patted him all over; but the horse never opened his eyes to look at him.

Preparations were made for getting Tom off as soon as it was light, and by the time darkness fell all was ready. A pack-saddle was brought out which looked as though it had been through two or three wars, and the cook, following the instructions of his master, began to fill it full of provisions, giving no heed to Tom to ask him whether the supplies he furnished suited him or not. He had provided so many men with provender that he thought anything that would do for one would do for another. With darkness came three more cowboys, who listened to what Mr. Parsons had to say, and then greeted Tom very cordially, and wished him unbounded success in his efforts to find Elam Storm's nugget. One man, especially, was particularly interested in Tom's fortunes. He advised him to dig wherever he saw a landslide, and if he happened to hit upon the right place he would strike it sure. The spot where the man hid it was obliterated, but that wouldn't hinder the proper person from unearthing the nugget if he only chanced to dig where it was.

"I have looked for that nugget a good many times, and that is the only thing that has kept me from finding it; I didn't dig where it was," said the man, with something like a sigh of regret. "I know it is somewhere in the mountains, else why should so many persons be looking for it?"

Morning came at last, and after Tom had eaten a hasty breakfast he saw the pack strapped on his bronco; and the whole thing was done so easily, with two experienced cowboys at work, that he regarded it as the least difficult part of his undertaking. He had been told repeatedly to get the pack on right, and not to unhitch his horse until he did it, or the bronco would knock him and his burden into the middle of next week and come home, leaving him to follow after as best he could. But Tom was sure he had it "down fine," and with a cheerful good-by to the cowboys who had assembled to see him off, and a hasty slap on the bronco's flank to help him along, he started gayly for the mountains. When he saw that camp again, he hoped to have the eight thousand dollar nugget stowed away in his pack-saddle.

The first day's work Tom could not complain of. The bronco kept up a lively walk, swinging his head from side to side and turning first into one canyon and then into another, and did not think it necessary to stop for anything to eat until he made his way to a little grove of trees, drew a long breath as he stopped under the shade, and looked around at Tom as if asking him why he didn't take his pack off. Tom leaned his rifle against a log and took his pack off very easily, and the horse immediately began taking his supper. Then Tom picked up his rifle and looked about him.

"I declare! I believe the whole canyon is full of landslides," said he, as he gazed at one pile of rubbish after another filled with logs, rocks, and brush which nature had thrown into the valley, some new and of recent origin, and others bearing the marks of age upon them. "Hold on. Isn't that the mark of a spade over there?"

Tom walked over and looked at it. It was the mark of a spade, sure enough, where a man had commenced digging where the landslide ended, and had thrown out just earth enough to prove that he had been there, and that was all. There were other openings of like character, until Tom counted ten in number. Then he looked up at the huge mass above him, and made an estimate that it would take an army of men, each armed with a spade and pick, to work it all away. These were probably the marks of the elderly man among the cowboys, who told him that the reason he didn't find the nugget was because he didn't dig in the right place. Tom shouldered his rifle, walked back to his log, and sat down.

"I really believe I have been duped," said he disconsolately. "If the landslides are all like that, I am certainly not going to work to throw them all away just to make eight thousand dollars. Besides, what use will it be to me to work where he has been? I'll go on a little further."

If Tom had any idea of a landslide, it was a little piece of ground which could be thrown away in half a day's time; but the sight of a *real* landslide was what took his breath away. He didn't eat a very hearty supper after that, for the thought that was uppermost in his mind was that the men who had stood by him, and of whom he had a right to expect something better, had completely fooled him in regard to Elam Storm's nugget. Instead of telling him that there wasn't any show at all of his success, they had fitted him out and sent him away to put in a month of his time. There was one thing about it: he would not go back until every mouthful in the pack-saddle had been eaten. That much he was determined on.

"I had an idea that cowboys were above suspicion, but now I know they are not," said Tom spitefully. "I can waste a month of their grub as well as anybody, and I won't put a spade in the ground until I see some prospects of success."

At the end of a week Tom was still of the same determination, although he saw much to discourage him. It was landslides everywhere, and the mark of a man's spade was on every one; so it showed that the bronco had been over that same ground before. The way was getting lonely, they were getting deeper and deeper into the mountains, and somehow Tom felt very disconsolate. A deep silence brooded over everything—a silence so utterly mysterious that he was not accustomed to it. How gladly he would have welcomed Jerry Lamar and listened to news from home and from the uncle he had deserted. Another week and Tom found himself hopelessly in a pocket. Turn which way he would, there was no chance for him to get out. The man had been there before him—indeed, he seemed to have gone into all the places and thrown out just earth enough to prove that he had been there, but not enough to accomplish anything. It was just enough to let Tom see how useless it was to dig there.

Tom's two weeks of tramping in the mountains had given him a ravenous appetite; his bronco was hitched so that he could not take to his heels and leave his master to find his own way home; and as he sat there on his blanket, dividing his attention between his cup of coffee, hard-tack, and bacon, he thought seriously of going back to headquarters. This was undoubtedly the remotest point reached by the man, and if one of his experience should be frightened out by a few shovelfuls of earth, or scared at finding himself in a pocket, Tom thought himself entitled to follow his lead. It had taken him two weeks to reach the pocket (he had managed to keep close run of the days); it would probably take him fully as long to return, and so he would fill Mr. Parsons' contract anyway. And so it was settled that he was to go home; but there's many a slip between determining upon a thing and doing it. He finished his coffee and bacon, led the horse down to the spring, from which he had scraped the leaves, to give him a drink, and rolled himself up in his blanket to go to sleep with his ready rifle safe beside him.

How long he slept he did not know, but he was awakened about midnight by a sound he had never heard before. It came from his horse, but it wasn't a neigh: it was the sound of fear, and made the cold chills creep all over him. He started up with his rifle in his hand, but did not have time to get off the blanket. Another shriek, which sounded like somebody in fearful bodily agony, came from the bushes, and the next minute the horse was on the ground and struggling in the grasp of some animal or thing which Tom could not remember to have seen or heard of before. It had a long neck, long legs, and a wonderfully high body which was increased materially by a hump on its back. The horse was as nothing in its grasp, and the struggle took place not over ten feet from the blanket on which Tom was sitting.

"Great Moses!" was Tom's mental ejaculation.

He sat for an instant as if spellbound, and then his rifle arose to his face. He was sure he had a good shot at it and expected to see it drop; but instead of that it gave another shriek, tossed the horse away from it, breaking like thread the lariat with which he was confined, and with a single jump disappeared in the bushes. Tom listened, but could hear no sound coming from it to tell what sort of a beast it was. Then he got upon his feet and turned his attention to the wounded horse. He was past the doctor's aid, for he was dead.

"Well, that beats me," said he, going back to the fire and starting it up, so that he could see what sort of wounds the beast had made. "I never heard of an animal like that before."

A good many boys would have been startled pretty near to death by the sudden appearance of an

apparition like that. It must be possessed of tremendous power to toss the broncho about as it did, and break the lariat with which he was fastened. No ghost could do that, and neither could a ghost have made that wide and fearful rent that Tom found when he had punched up the fire. Tom thought it best to build up a bright blaze, for he did not know how long it would be before the animal would come back to finish its work. He loaded the rifle carefully and placed the revolver where he could get his hands upon it at a moment's warning. He thought of grizzly bears, but had never heard of them taking to the bushes on account of a single bullet.

"It couldn't have been a panther or a bear, unless my eyes were deceiving me, for it was at least four times as big as the horse," said Tom, picking up a brand from the fire and once more approaching the specimen of the apparition's handiwork. He hadn't been in sight more than a minute, and yet the horse was as dead as a door-nail. "He must have been a flesh-eater, for nothing else that I know of could have made such wounds. I am beat. Now, how am I going to find my way home?"

If Tom had been frightened at first, he was doubly so now. He was so confused he couldn't think. From that hour he sat there on his blanket, and by the time that daylight fell so that he could distinguish objects near him he had made up his mind what he was going to do. He would take everything out of the pack-saddle that he could carry on his back, and make his way out of the pocket the same way he came in. He had remembered enough of his skill in woodcraft to turn and take a survey of his back track, so that it would not appear odd to him when he came to go that way again, and he had no doubt that he would be able to find it. More than that, the bronco had left the prints of his hoofs and had continually browsed on the way, and, taking all these things together, Tom was certain that he could strike the trail.

"It is going to be a tight squawk," he soliloquized, "but I am not lost yet. I only wish I knew what that animal was. It would take a big load off my shoulders if I did."

Tom did not waste any time in forming his bundle, for there were some things about the pocket that he did not care to see. He wanted to get out of sight of every thing that reminded him of his terrible fright. He put all his bacon, hard-tack, and coffee into his blanket, strapped his pot to his belt behind, set his pick, spade, and pack-saddle up where they could be easily found, shouldered his rifle, and, with a farewell glance at the bronco, which had carried his pack so faithfully for him so many miles, he plunged into the bushes and left the pocket behind.

For that one single day everything went well. He found the bronco's hoof prints in the sand, and easily discovered the places where he had been browsing on the way, and as long as these signs remained he couldn't get lost. He even found, too, the place where they had stopped the night before, but going into camp without the presence of the horse was lonesome to him. He saw the place where he had scraped away the leaves from the side of the stream to give him a spot to drink, and found the sapling to which he had hitched him, and the place where he had spread his blanket—but there was little sleep for him that night.

"I wish I knew what that animal was," thought Tom, as he sat on his blanket with his rifle in readiness on his knees. "The more I think of him the more frightened I become. I wish I was safe at headquarters."

Remember that the signs Tom had been following were only one day old, and on the morning of the second day he could not find the place where he had entered the camp. Turn which way he would he could not discover any footprints. He finally concluded that the middle canyon looked more familiar to him than the rest, and, with his heart in his mouth, he struck into it. At the spot where the canyon branched into another he found a little stream which ran in the direction he thought he ought to go, and close beside the stream was a footprint which he took to be his own. He was all right now, and with every mile he travelled the faster he went, in the hope of finding something else that was encouraging, but that solitary footprint was the only thing he saw. There was one thing about it that kept up his spirits, and that was he was following a stream that ran toward the prairie, and he would continue to follow it until the stream or his provisions gave out, and then—Well, that hadn't happened yet, and wouldn't happen till he was where he could get more provisions. He must reach the house or he would lose his horse and \$150 in money. He went into camp at a solitary place that night, and, for a wonder, slept soundly.

The next morning he was up bright and early, but he did not seem to have much appetite for breakfast. And it was so every day until a week had passed, and still no change for the better. He was so impatient that he could scarcely go into camp. He was impatient to be journeying along that little stream that seemed to lead him toward the prairie, but every time he looked up and tried to wonder where he was, there were the same gloomy mountains stretched away before him that he had at first seen in the pocket where he had lost his horse. Tom took no note of the fact that his wearing apparel was getting the worse for wear, or that he had left his blanket back at his last camping-place, but he did take notice that his mind was filled with gloomy forebodings. Why could he not climb that mountain on his left and see what was ahead of him? The thought no sooner came into his mind than he banished it, took a drink of fresh water, and started out at a more moderate pace.

"I'm lost," said he, with a sinking at his heart to which he was an entire stranger; "and if I give way to those thoughts, I shall be lost utterly. Why did I not think of my gun?"

Tom dropped his pack by his side and fired and loaded three times as fast as he could make his fingers move. Then he waited again and fired three more; and scarcely had the echoes of the last

report died away among the mountains when he heard a faint reply, though it came from so many directions that he couldn't tell from which way it sounded. But he took it to come from down the stream, and, leaving his bundle behind, he started in that direction, raising a shout which, to save his life, he could not utter above a whisper. He ran until he thought he ought to be about where the sound came from, then stopped and fired his gun again, and this time met with an immediate response. It was down the stream, and there was no doubt about it.

"Who-whoop! Where are you?" shouted Tom, so impatient he could scarcely stand still. "I am lost!"

"Follow the stream and you'll strike me," said a voice, and Tom noticed that for a backwoods fellow he talked remarkably plain.

It was three weeks since Tom had seen anybody or heard anyone speak, and his eagerness to see where the voice came from was desperate. Throwing his gun upon the rocks, he broke into another run, and there, just as he turned around an abrupt bend in the canyon, he saw the person to whom it belonged. The speaker stood with his hat and coat off; his pick lay against a stone near by, and the shovel which he had been in the act of using when Tom's rifle shots fell upon his ears was standing upright in the ground; but he had taken precautions for any emergency, for he held his rifle in the hollow of his arm. Beyond a doubt somebody had been grub-staking him for gold, or for something else which he was equally anxious to find. Tom had just wind enough to take note of these things, and then he staggered to a rock near by and seated himself upon it.

"You won't find any gold here," said Tom, resting his elbows on his knees and looking down at the ground.



TOM'S NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

The stranger uncocked his gun, and, bringing the piece to an order arms, leaned upon it. He looked hard at Tom, but had nothing to say.

"I have been all over this country, but not a cent's worth of gold could I find in it," continued Tom, taking off his hat and drawing his hand across his forehead. "Somebody has duped you just the same as they duped me."

"Where's your gun?" asked the stranger.

"I left it in the bend up there," said Tom, anxious to hear the sound of the voice again. "I was so impatient to get to you that I left it up there. I haven't heard a stranger speak for three weeks."

"Where did you come from?"

"Wait till I get my breath and I will answer all your questions. I came from a pocket back here in the mountains, where I lost my horse. I wish you could have seen that animal, for I don't know what it was: long neck, long head, and a body that looked twice as big as my horse. And then how strong it was! It broke my lariat—"

"What color was it?" said the stranger, beginning to take a deep interest in what his guest had to say.

"I didn't see that it was any other color when compared with my horse. It looked just the same—a

dark brown. It had a hump on its back——"

"The Red Ghost, by George!"

Tom started and looked at him in amazement.

CHAPTER X.

THE CAMP OF ELAM, THE WOLFER.

"I aint got any business to be digging around here," said the stranger, laying down his rifle and picking up his coat. "We'll go back and get your gun, Tender-foot. How far is that pocket from here?"

"Why, it is a two-weeks' journey," said Tom, who suddenly became aware that he would have to go over that long tramp again. "I never could find my way back there in the world."

"Who sent you into the mountains to dig for my nugget?"

"Your nugget?"

"Them's my very words, stranger."

"Why, who are you?"

"I am Elam Storm, the man who lost the nugget twenty years ago, and who intends to have it back if he has to kill every man this side of the country you came from; and where's that?"

Tom, who had arisen from his rock at the same time the stranger began to put on his coat, stared fixedly at the speaker, and then sat down again. So this was Elam Storm, the man who had a better right to the nugget than anybody else in the world! He was a boy, not more than nineteen or twenty years of age, but he had a face on him which expressed the utmost resolution. And he had the physical power, too, to carry out his determination, for, as he moved around his camp, putting away his tools where he could readily find them, he showed muscles which said that it would not be a safe piece of business for anyone to interfere with that nugget.

"Where did you come from, I asked you?"

"I came from down in Mississippi, where my uncle owns a plantation and a heap of niggers," answered Tom, who did not like the way the boy eyed him when he spoke.

"And right there is where you ought to have stayed," said Elam. "Did you hear anything about the nugget down there?"

"Of course not," replied Tom, surprised at the proposition. "I started to go to Texas, but got on the wrong boat and was brought up here. I couldn't do anything else, and so Mr. Parsons grub-staked me and sent me into the mountains. He lives out that way a short distance."

"How far do you call a short distance?"

"Fifteen or twenty miles, maybe."

"Haw-ha! Man, you're just about a hundred miles from where he lives."

Tom caught his breath, but could say nothing in reply.

"You have been going further and further away from him ever since you lost your horse," continued Elam. "Come on; let's go and get your rifle."

"You say that nugget of yours was lost twenty years ago," said Tom, as he fell in behind Elam, being afraid to do anything else. "You are not that old, are you?"

"Well, not so long as that!" laughed Elam. "It is a long story and will take you a good portion of the evening to listen to it. I will tell it to you to-night. Now, then, which canyon did you come down?"

Tom looked up and found himself confronted by three gullies, which came down and met at that one point. He said he didn't know, but Elam, after looking around a little, started up one with as much confidence as though he had seen Tom when he came out. After some questioning from Tom he showed him a little twig, not larger than a needle, which he had brushed off in his hurried flight after he had thrown down his gun; and a short distance farther on he found the weapon, which Tom, in his excitement, had tossed clear across the creek. Tom was surprised when Elam stepped across the stream and picked up the weapon, and relieved when it was handed over to him with the assurance that it had suffered no injury in its collision with the rocks.

"Now, we will let the bundle go," said he. "There is nothing in it that will pay us to go back after it, and I am too tired to go a step farther. I hope your camp isn't a great ways from here."

Elam replied that for him it was "just a jump," but he would walk slowly so as not to tire the

pilgrim. He stopped at his camp where he had been digging, and gave Tom a small supply of the corn bread and bacon which he had left over from his dinner, and while Tom was eating it he sat by on a rock with his elbows resting on his knees. Tom ate as though he hadn't had anything for a month, and when his repast was ended, Elam took his spade and pick under one arm, shouldered his rifle with the other, and set off in a way that was calculated to tire any man, no matter how well equipped he might be for travelling. But Tom did not care for that. He wanted to get home,—any place was better than the bare canyon,—where he could lie down and sleep with nothing to bother him. Once in a while Elam turned around and said to him:

"To think that I have been wasting my time for the last month in digging in such places as this! I ought to have been fifty miles from here, for I know about where that canyon of yours is."

"Do you think that that Red Ghost, or whatever you call it——"

Tom happened to look up and saw that Elam was facing him, and was astonished at the expression that came upon his countenance. He would not have believed that one who was so sensible on every other point should be willing to admit that the apparition that had visited him in the pocket and robbed him of his horse was not due to superhuman agency.

"I know how you, Tender-foot, feel about this, but wait until you have a chance to shoot it plumb through the head, and it gets away with it all, and then tell me what you would think," said Elam sullenly. "You probably don't have such things in the settlements, but that's no sign that they aint found out here."

"I had as fair a shot at it as anybody could have," said Tom, "and it wasn't over ten feet from me. I saw the blood spurt out from a hole in its neck, and it flung the horse away from it, broke the lariat, and went into the bushes. But do you think it is guarding that treasure?"

"I know it, and nobody can't make me believe differently. I have seen it often enough, and it has got the mark of three of my bullets on it."

Elam faced about and went on his way at a faster gait than before, and Tom let him go. As eager as he was to learn something about the Red Ghost, he was still more eager to reach a permanent camp where he could lie down and rest. He found that he was pretty nearly barefooted. His sheep's-gray pants hung in tatters about his worn shoes, and Elam had a way of jumping from one stone to another and coming down on top of a log in a manner that he did not like. At length, when the sun began to go down, and Tom experienced some difficulty in finding a place for his feet, Elam stopped on the edge of a natural prairie, and pointed out something a short distance off.

"There's my horse," said he. "And yonder, where that little grove of trees comes down into the prairie, is where my shanty is located. Can you stand it till we get there?"

Oh, yes, Tom could stand it that far. He fell in behind Elam, paying no attention to the horse, which came up and followed along in their rear, pushed his way along the evergreens, and was finally brought to a stand by a door in a substantial log house. It was fastened by a bolt on the inside, but as the string was out, Elam easily opened it.

"You are welcome to the cabin of Elam, the wolfer," said he, leading the way in and pointing to a pile of skins which served him for a bed. "Tumble in there, and don't get up till you get ready."

"Thank you," said Tom, handing his rifle to Elam and throwing himself at length on the couch. "I never was so tired in my life."

Elam had hardly time to set the rifle up in a corner and shut the door before Tom was fast asleep. How long he slept he did not know, but during the whole of it he felt that he was under the care of somebody who could protect him. If there were any ghosts to visit that camp, they would have to strike Elam first.

The first thing he became aware of when he got his eyes fairly opened was that he was so full of aches and pains that he could scarcely move, and the next, that he did not recognize a thing about the establishment. Gradually he raised himself on his elbow, and then Elam Storm came into his mind. He could not remember much of what he had said to Elam during their first meeting,—he must have been about half crazy, he thought, when he talked to him,—but he had said enough to bring him a good bed and a sound sleep besides. He found that his feet had been interfered with—that they felt easier than they did before; and on removing the blanket that had been thrown over them he discovered that his tattered shoes and stockings had been removed; that they had been wiped dry and moved closer to the fire, which had evidently been going at a great rate before it died down to its present bed of ashes. There was plenty of wood right there, and with much extra exertion Tom managed to crawl to it, and by the persistent blowing of a coal into flame he succeeded in starting a fair blaze. Then he contrived to get up. There was a big hunk of johnny cake on the table, a slice of bacon with a knife handy to cut it, and a bag which proved to contain coffee. A further examination showed him that Elam had not gone about his business without leaving a letter behind him to tell where he was. The first was a chunk of bark on which was rudely traced a picture of a man gathering traps. He knew that he was taking the game in, for there was a representation of game in the trap. A second piece of bark lay under the first, and Tom could not for a long time make sense of what it contained. It was blurred, and was intended to represent a man going into camp. In other words, if Elam did not get home by daylight, Tom need not worry about it. The pictures were rudely traced in charcoal, but the

drawing was perfect.

"If I had not been tolerably well posted in backwoods lore, I could not have made head or tail out of these pictures," said Tom; and as he spoke he thought over all the lessons he had learned from the Indians and darkies in the swamp. "Elam is going out to gather his traps, and if he does not come home before to-morrow, I need not bother my head about it. What is he going to gather up his traps for? I shall have to wait till he comes home to have that explained, and now I'll go to work and get some breakfast."

Tom had used up nearly all the wood to replenish the fire, and he began casting his eyes about the shanty to see if Elam had another pair of shoes in waiting to be put on when his own boots became wet, and found some moccasins with a pair of stockings neatly folded and hung beside them. Elam had worn them once, but that did not matter. He put them on, and, seeing Elam's axe resting in one corner, caught it up and went out to renew his supply of fire-wood. Hearing the blows of the axe, the horse came up and snorted at him, but could not be induced to come near. This made it plain that the man who attempted to rob Elam would have to leave his horse behind.

Tom chopped until his appetite began to get the better of him, and then went in and busied himself about his breakfast. He left the door open (for all the light that was admitted to the cabin came through a space in the roof over the fireplace through which the smoke escaped), and told himself that for one who had never seen the comforts of civilized life Elam was able to copy pretty close to them. There was a table whose top was made of boards hewed out of a log and smoothed with an axe, and one or two three-legged stools without any backs, which proved that Elam sometimes had company. The clothing he had worn was neatly hung up at one corner of the cabin, and underneath was something which Tom had not noticed before: two bundles of skins, nicely tied up and waiting to be shipped. They were wolf-skins, and close by them lay half a dozen skins of the beaver and otter, not enough to be tied up.

"I know what he meant when he said that I was welcome to the cabin of Elam, the wolfer," said Tom. "Somebody has either grub-staked him and sent him out here to catch wolves or else he is working for himself. Now, where's the spring? I must have some water for my coffee."

Tom easily found the pail of which he was in search, and, going out behind the cabin, he followed the path he had noticed while cutting wood. It ran through a quiet grove of evergreens, and finally ended in a little pool in which Elam found his water. Coming back to the cabin, he could not find any coffee-pot, but he found a pan which seemed to have been used for nothing but coffee, filled it with water, placed it on coals he had raked off to one side, and covered it with one of Elam's pictures. With his breakfast fairly going, with his coffee and bacon on the coals, and his johnny cake and clean dishes on the table by his elbow, he settled back on his stool as complacently as though he had never known anything better.

"I don't know what sort of a conscience Elam's got, but if he's got a tolerably fair one, it seems to me that he ought to be well contented with this life," said Tom. "He was born to this thing, and, consequently, don't know anything better; but as for me, there isn't money enough in it. But, then, he thinks he is going to find that nugget. Well, I'd like to find it myself, but I am not going to bother with it with such a fellow as Elam in the way. I don't want to test those muscles."

Tom had come to that country to make money; he wasn't going to test anybody's muscle in order to make it, but he was going to make it. In spite of all the obstacles that were thrown in his way—and he met with no greater loss than any tender-foot is likely to meet—he carried back to his uncle half as much money as he stole from him, and his uncle was glad to see him, too. This was all in the future, and Tom knew nothing of it. He ate his breakfast with great satisfaction, getting up from the table once in a while to examine something new in Elam's outfit, and when it was done, he washed the dishes and put everything back just as he had found it. Then there was nothing left for him to do but to cut wood until Elam came. The latter would be cold and wet from handling those muddy traps, and there would be nothing wanting but a fire for him to get up to. Every once in a while he dropped his axe and went out to the edge of the evergreens to see if he could discover Elam returning, but always came away disappointed. One thing he continually marvelled at, and that was the scarcity of game. If anyone had told him that he could leave his gun and wander away by himself, he would have thought him foolish; and here he had been alone in the mountains nearly a month and had not seen anything—not even a jack-rabbit—to shoot at. Had it not been for that Red Ghost, or whatever it was, that visited him the night he stayed in the pocket, his gun would have been as clean when he took it back as when he came out with it. At last, when everything began to grow indistinct, and Tom had put away his axe and piled up the wood, he looked for Elam again, resolved if he could not see him to go into the cabin, haul in the string, and get his supper; but there was Elam half-way across the prairie, and, furthermore, he was struggling under a weight about as heavy as he could well carry.

"They are wolf-skins," said he, as Tom hurried up to him and took his rifle from his grasp. "I've got eighteen, and two otters. How are you, Tender-foot? Got over your sleep yet?"

Tom replied that he had got all the slumber he wanted, and then went on to tell Elam that he knew where he had gone, and if he did not return that night, he would not have been at all worried about it, and that he had got the knowledge from the pictures he had left on the table, and Elam seemed very much pleased.

"You can't read or write, can you?" asked Tom. "I thought not, but you drew those pictures as though you had taken lessons in drawing. I have got a good warm fire for you."

Although there were many things that he was anxious to question Elam about, Tom did not trouble him until he had had his supper and had shaken up the skins preparatory to enjoying his after-supper smoke. Tom followed his example and stretched himself out beside him, pulling off his moccasins so that he could have the full benefit of the fire.

"Now, Tender-foot, what brought you out to this country?" said Elam, pulling up a bundle of wolf-skins so that he could rest his head upon it. "Tell me the truth and don't stick at nothing."

Tom replied that there wasn't very much to tell, and went on and revealed to Elam as much of his story as he was willing that a stranger should know; but he didn't tell him a word about his fuss with Our Fellows, or of his stealing five thousand dollars, or of his association with gamblers. In short, he gave him to understand that he was hard up, that he wanted to go to Texas and had got on to the wrong boat and been brought up there. He told him the truth about his meeting with Mr. Kelley and his two cowboys, for he did not know but that Elam might see them some day.

"I didn't know a thing about this country," said Tom, in conclusion, "and Mr. Parsons grub-staked me and sent me out to find a gold mine."

"Haw-ha! You had about as much chance of finding gold here as you would in New Orleans," said Elam, as soon as his merriment would allow him to speak. "The only gold here is my nugget, and that was buried two years ago. Didn't he tell you about that?"

"Yes, he told me about the nugget, but he also told me that by digging after it I might strike another gold mine, as some others had done before me. But if I ever go again, I don't want to follow such a man as went before me."

"Who was it? Was it somebody who was working on Parsons' place?"

"Yes. He was an elderly man, who seemed to take more interest in me than anybody else. He told me that the only reason he didn't strike the nugget was because he didn't dig in the right place."

"Haw-ha!" laughed Elam.

"And the only reason he didn't dig in the right place was because the nugget couldn't be thrown out with two or three spadefuls of earth," continued Tom. "I followed along after him for two weeks, and in every camping-place there were two shovelfuls of dirt flung out. If a hen had been scratching for that nugget, she would have made better headway."

"He was on the right track, anyhow," said Elam. "If he had kept on till he came to that pocket, he would have found it. That would have given me a job, for I would a heap sooner find it in the dirt than take it out of a man's pack."

"If a man was to find that nugget——"

"Yes, sir, I would," said Elam savagely. "It is mine, and I'm a-going to have it, I don't care who unearths it. Do you suppose you could find your way back to that pocket?"

"No, sir; I couldn't," said Tom, drawing a long breath of dismay. "In the first place, there's the Red Ghost. If you had seen it——"

"Haven't I seen it?" demanded Elam. "It has got the marks of some of my bullets."

"It must bear the marks of a good many bullets, and I don't see why some of them did not hit it in the proper place. What do you suppose it is, anyway?"

"Why, it's a ghost, I tell you. If it wasn't, some of those bullets would have struck it in the proper spot, I bet you."

"If it's a ghost, you can't kill it."

"Can't, hey? I'll bet you that I can."

"It looked to me just like a camel," said Tom, who did not like the way Elam glared at him every time he struck on this subject.

"A camel! What's them?"

"An animal they make use of in foreign countries to carry heavy burdens for them. But, Elam, how came it to appear to you? It don't show itself to anybody else who hunts in these mountains, does it?"

"Certainly it does. The history of this nugget is known all over the country, and if any man has it on his mind, he may be a hundred miles from here, but that makes no difference; it appears to that fellow and scares him off. Now, wait till I tell you."

This brought Elam to his story, and he entered upon it a good deal as Uncle Ezra did, beginning with the massacre of the soldiers who were sent out to pay the garrison at Grayson, and ending with the fight between the two miners in the mountains. He seemed to know right where the nugget had been ever since it was unearthed. At any rate, he told a pretty straight story, and when it was ended filled up his pipe and looked at Tom to see what he thought about it.

CHAPTER XI.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

"I did think for a time that I should find my father and the nugget together, and even gave it out among the sheep-and cattle-growers who would listen to me," continued Elam, taking a few long pulls at his pipe. "But I have since given that idea up. I didn't say anything to the men hereabouts, for it kinder ran in my head after a while that they thought I was lunny on the subject; so I just kept my ideas to myself. You see, the thing couldn't have gone through so many hands without my hearing something of my father, but, search high or low, I never heard a word about him. The old man is dead. He was killed when the robbers made their assault on the train, and the nugget has been doing all this of itself."

"All what of itself?" asked Tom.

"Why, it has been bobbing up and bobbing down," replied Elam. "One day you know where it is, and by the time you get on the track of it it has gone up, nobody knows where."

For a long time Tom did not say anything. The story seemed so real—as real as that he was sitting on his couch of furs, with his feet tucked under him, gazing hard into the fire. It did not seem possible that the story could get abroad, and so many men believe it, and here this one was known two hundred miles away. There must be something in it.

"Well," said Elam, "do you think I am crazy?"

"I don't know what to think," said Tom. "Such a story never got wind in the settlements."

"Of course it didn't. There's a heap more things that happen out here than you think for. There isn't one man in ten who would believe about that ghost."

"No, sir," said Tom emphatically. "And I don't know what to believe about it, either, and I have seen it. Are you going up there to that pocket?"

"I am going to start day after to-morrow if you will show me the way. When I strike the nugget, I will give you half."

The proposition almost took Tom's breath away. All that amount of money for facing the Red Ghost! Now that he had got safely out of reach of it and had heard so much about its going everywhere it pleased, here to-day and a hundred miles away to-morrow, Tom was obliged to confess that there was more of a ghost about it than he was at first willing to suppose. But there was his horse with the broken lariat! No ghost could do a thing like that.

"You see, I shall spend to-morrow in gathering in my traps," said Elam. "I may not come back, you know, and I don't want to leave them out where everybody can steal them, and when they are all in, I shall be ready to start."

When Elam said this, Tom picked up a burned chunk, threw it on the fire, and laid down again. If Elam thought he wasn't going to come back, what was the use of his visiting the pocket? Tom had about concluded that he would not go.

"No, I may not come back," said Elam, anxious that Tom should learn just how desperate the undertaking was, "and while I don't want to have my traps stolen, I want to leave them where someone can use them. Then I will pack my spelter on my horse and go to the nighest post—it is just a jump from here—and trade it off for provisions. We can easy get them as far as here."

"Yes; but what will you do from here on? You won't have any bronco to carry them for you."

"We will pack it on our backs. It's a poor hunter who can't go into the woods and carry provisions enough for two weeks."

"And what if the Red Ghost appears? The first thing it will pitch into will be ourselves. I don't think I will go. I have got all over prospecting for gold, and wish that summer might come so that I can go to work herding cattle."

"Well, I know what will happen to you then," said Elam.

"Well, what will happen to me then?" said Tom, after waiting for his companion to finish what he had on his mind.

"You'll go plumb crazy; that's what will happen to you. You will be set to riding the line——"

"What's that?" interrupted Tom.

"Why, riding up and down a fence, or rather where the fence ought to be, to see that none of your cattle break away. It will take you two days to make a trip, and you will get so tired of it that you will finally skip out and leave the line to take care of itself. But all right. You go to bed and sleep on it, and if it doesn't look better in the morning, I'll say no more about it. I will go by myself."

With something like a sigh of regret Elam turned over and prepared to go to sleep. There was no undressing, no handling of blankets, but just as he was he was all ready to go to slumber. Tom felt sorry for him, and, besides, he knew how Mr. Parsons and the cowboys would look upon such a proceeding if it should once get to their ears. And he didn't see any way to prevent it. If Elam's

story was able to travel for two hundred miles, the idea that he was afraid to face the Red Ghost would travel, too, and then what would be his prospect of getting employment with Mr. Parsons? And, besides, there was a chance for him to go "plumb crazy" while riding the line and seeing that the cattle did not break through. That was another thing that was against Tom.

"I am afraid I am unlucky, after all," thought he, once more arranging his bunch of furs. "I am sent out into the mountains to prospect for gold, when there isn't any gold in sight except what belongs to Elam, here, and have the promise that when summer comes I shall be given a chance." Then aloud: "Say, Elam, does a fellow have to ride this line at first, and before he can call himself a full-fledged cowboy?"

"Sure," said Elam; "he must get used to everything that is done on the ranch. He must begin at the lowest round of the ladder and work his way up."

"Well," said Tom to himself, "I just aint a-going to do it. I'll just go to sleep on it now, and if the thing looks better to me to-morrow than it does to-night, I'll stick to your heels."

While Tom was thinking about it, he fell asleep. When he awoke the next morning, it was broad daylight, but he was alone. Elam must have moved with stealthy footsteps while he was getting breakfast; but there was everything on the table just as he found it on the previous morning, and the pictures which Elam had drawn, and which Tom had placed on the wall so that they could be easily seen, had been taken down and put where he had seen them the day before.

"I hope to goodness that I will get through with my sleep after a while," thought Tom, as he proceeded to put on his moccasins. "He has gone out to gather the rest of his traps, and I am left to decide whether or not I will go with him. Well, I will go. If that fellow is not afraid of the ghost, I'm not, either. I know it isn't a ghost, but he thinks it is, and we'll see who will show the most pluck."

Tom went about his business with alacrity, and in an hour the breakfast was eaten and the dishes put away. Then he had nothing to do but to cut a supply of wood for Elam, though he didn't know how it was going to be of any use to him, seeing that he was going to the mountains; but it was better than sitting idle all day, and so Tom went at it, throwing the wood as fast as he cut it in under the eaves of the cabin, where it would be protected from the weather. At last the wood that was down was all cut, and Tom, leaning on his axe with one hand, and scratching his head with the other, was looking around to determine what tree ought to come down next, when he happened to glance toward the path where it emerged from the evergreens and ran up to the door of the house, and discovered two men standing there with their arms at a ready. If they had tried to come up under cover of his chopping they had succeeded admirably. They might have approached close to him, and even laid hold upon him, and Tom never would have known it until he found himself in their grasp.

Of all the sorry-looking specimens that Tom had ever seen since he came West these were the beat. Elam would have been ashamed to be seen in their company. His clothes were whole and clean, while these men had scarcely an article between them that was not in need of repairs. Their hats, coats, and trousers ought long ago to have gone to the ragman; and as for their boots—they had none, wearing moccasins instead. Tom felt that something was going to happen. He knew he was growing pale, but leaned with both hands upon his axe and tried not to show it.

"Howdy, pard?" said one of the men, looking all around.

"How are you?" said Tom.

He would have been glad to step into the cabin and get his rifle, but he noticed that the men stood between him and the doorway.

"Whar's your pardner?" asked the man.

"He is around here somewhere," said Tom, shouldering his axe and starting for the door. "What do you want?"

"I want to know if you have anything to eat? We have been out looking for some steers that have broke away, and we've got kinder out of our reckonin'."

"Who are you working for?"

"For ole man Parsons. Our horses got away from us, too, and didn't leave us so much as a hunk of bacon."

"I don't believe a word of your story," said Tom, who knew from the start that the man was lying. "But come in. I reckon Elam would give you something if he was here, though, to tell you the truth, we haven't got much."

"So Elam is your pardner, is he?"

"You seem to know him pretty well."

"Oh, yes. Elam and I have been hunting many a time."

"He's liable to come back at any minute," returned Tom, who wished there was some truth in what he was saying. "He has just stepped out to look at some traps. I don't see what keeps him so long, for of course you will be glad to see him."

Tom had by this time got inside the cabin, closely followed by the two men, who, he noticed, did not go very far from the door. One of them hauled a stool up beside it and sat down where he could keep a close watch on everything that went on outside, and the other kept so close to Tom that the latter could not have used his axe if he had tried it. Tom wanted to get his hands on his rifle, but one of the men had placed himself directly in front of it so that his broad shoulders were between him and the weapon. The men pushed back their hats and took a survey of the interior of the cabin while Tom was getting down the side of bacon, and finally one of them discovered the pile of wolf-skins which Elam had tied up and left in the corner. With a smile and a muttered ejaculation he walked over and examined it.

"Elam's at his ole tricks, aint he?" said he, after he had tested the skins and tried to determine by the weight of them how many there were in the package. "How many do you reckon he's got here? So many skins at forty-five dollars apiece would be—how much would it be, Tender-foot?"

Tom was rather taken aback by this style of address. He had tried to play himself off on the men as one to the manor born, but his language, his dress, or something had given him away entirely. The man spoke to him as if he was as well acquainted with his history as Elam was.

"I don't reckon we want anything to eat do we, Aleck?" continued the man, lifting the bundle and carrying it back to the door with him. "If you see anybody else coming along here that's hard up for grub——"

"Here—you!" exclaimed Tom, throwing down his axe and making an effort to take the bundle from the man. "Put that down, if you know when you are well off."

"If you know when you are well off, you will keep your hands to yourself and sit down thar," said the man, and at the same time the one who had been addressed as Aleck arose to his feet, cocking his rifle as he did so. "Oh, you needn't call for Elam, 'cause we know where he is as well as you do," he continued, as Tom thrust both men aside and started post haste for the door. "Now, Tender-foot, just go and behave yourself. We know that Elam has gone out to attend to his traps and won't be back before night, and so we've got all the time we want. Sit down."

Tom saw it all now. The men had evidently watched Elam from the time he started out, until they saw him pick up one trap and set out for another, and had then made up their minds to rob him. They little expected to find a tender-foot behind to watch his cabin, and had consequently made up their story on the spur of the moment.

"Aleck, you will find your bundle over thar," said the man, "and there are some otter-skins you can take, too. This rifle I will just take with me and leave it agin some rocks out here whar you can easy find it. Mind you, we haint done you no harm so far, but don't come nigh this rifle under an hour. You hear me?"

Tom said nothing in reply. He watched Aleck as he picked up the other bundle and otter-skins (he left the eighteen Elam had brought in the night before, because they were not cured), flung them over his shoulder, and joined his companion at the door, where the latter had already taken charge of the rifle.

"You haint disremembered what I've told you?" he said, in savage tones. "You come out in one hour and you can find the rifle; but you come out before that time expires and ten to one but you will get a ball through your head."

Tom still made no reply, and the robbers went out as noiselessly as they had come in. He listened, but did not hear the snapping of a twig or the swishing of bushes to prove that they had worked their way through the thicket of evergreens to the natural prairie along which Elam was to come.

"Well, now, I am beat," drawing a long breath of relief, thrusting his feet out in front of him, and putting his hands into his pockets. "So it seems that Elam isn't so very happy, after all, and that, no matter where one gets, he's going to have trouble. Here he's been working like a nailer for—I don't know how long he's been out here—until it seems to me——What's that?" he added, as his feet came in contact with a small buckskin bag which one of the robbers had dropped.

Tom bent over and saw that one side of the string was broken. The bag had been tied around the man's neck, and had worked its way down until it found an opening at the bottom of his trousers above his moccasins. The man had never noticed it, and this was the first Tom had seen of it. It was small, but it was well filled, and Tom began to look about for a place to hide it.

"Let him take the skins if he wants to, and I'll take this," said he, getting up and looking first into one place and then into another, and making up his mind each time that that was a poor spot to hide things. "He may miss it before he has gone a great ways, and I don't want him to know that he has left that much behind. Just as soon as he goes away I'll take it out and examine it."

Tom, who was not so badly frightened as some boys would have been, made his way toward the door and finally went out, but could hear no signs of the robbers. He removed some sticks from the pile of wood he had cut and there placed the bag, covering it over as if nothing had been disturbed, and then struck up a lively whistle and started down the path. The robbers were not in sight, but there was Elam's horse just quenching his thirst at the brook, and that proved that his companion had not been stolen afoot, anyway.

"I'll be perfectly safe if I try to find the rifle now," said Tom, as he began beating around through

the bushes. "By George! I hope they haven't carried the gun off with them. They couldn't, for their packs were too heavy."

Here was a new apprehension, and it started Tom to work with increased speed; and it was only after an hour's steady search that he found the gun hidden where nobody would have thought of looking for it. It was uninjured, and this made it plain that the only object the robbers had in view was to rob Elam.

"They've got just sixteen skins or I'm mistaken," said Tom, shouldering his recovered rifle and retracing his steps to camp. "Sixteen skins at forty-five dollars would be worth seven hundred dollars and better. That's quite a nice little sum to rake out before dinner. Now, my next care is to examine that bag."

Arriving at the wood-pile, the bag was taken out and carried into the cabin. Tom caught it by the bottom and emptied its contents on the table, first taking care, however, to place his rifle across his knees, where it could be seized in case of emergency. He was surprised at the contents of the little bag. In the first place there was some money tightly wrapped up in folds of buckskin, and when Tom unfolded it to see how much there was, two yellow-boys rolled out.

"Hurrah! Here's something to pay for the stolen skins," said Tom, and, hastily putting the money into his pocket, he caught up his rifle and hastened out of doors to listen for some sounds of the returning robbers. Everything was silent. The men were gone, and Tom had nothing to do but to examine the bag in peace.

"I am glad they didn't do anything more," thought he, as he went in and seated himself at the table. "If they had wanted to do mischief, they might have pulled a chunk from the fire and set the whole thing to going, but instead of doing that they just contented themselves with robbing us. Forty dollars. Where did they get it? Two gold eagles and bills enough to make up the balance. Here's tobacco enough to last both of them a week; needles and thread, so it don't seem to me that they ought to have been satisfied to go around with their jackets full of holes, as I saw them, and—What's this? It's something pretty precious, I guess, because it is wrapped up tightly."

It was a small parcel tied up in buckskin that caught Tom's eye just then. It was so neatly wrapped up in numerous folds that by the time Tom got them unfolded he fully expected to find some quartz or some more gold pieces; but when he brought it to light, there was nothing but a little piece of paper, with ordinary lines drawn upon it. Did he throw it away? He spread it out upon the table as smoothly as he could, and set to work to study out the problem presented to him. One thing was plain to him: the line which ran up the middle, paying no attention to other lines which came into it at intervals, was a gully. Right ahead it went until it branched off in two places, and there it stopped. What did it mean?

"It means something, as sure as I am a foot high," said Tom, settling back in his chair and holding the paper up before him. "There is something buried there, and how did these people come by it? I guess that Elam had better see that."

Filled with excitement, Tom bundled the things back into the bag, and put the bag into his pocket, wondering what sort of history those two men had passed through. Did they know anything about the nugget? The idea was ridiculous, simply because there were some marks on a paper which he did not understand.

"There was only one of them who escaped with the nugget, and he buried it within ten miles of the fort," said Tom. "And Elam says, further, that he was so sick and tired when he was relieved that he could not draw a map to lead anyone to it. No matter; there's something there, and I am in hopes it will—By George! they are coming back."

There was no doubt about it, and he might have heard them before if he had not been so busy with his reflections. He listened and could hear them tramping through the bushes, and all on a sudden one raised his voice and called out to the other, who was evidently behind him:

"I tell you he's got it. If I don't get it back, I am ruined!"

"That means me," thought Tom.

For an instant Tom stood irresolute, and then the idea came upon him that he wasn't going to be imposed upon in this way any longer. He moved across the floor with long strides, took down his revolver and put it into his pocket and moved out of the door, pulling it to after him. The men were close upon him. He heard them coming along the path as he slipped around the corner of the cabin and into the bushes.

CHAPTER XII.

TOM FINDS SOMETHING.

"Oh, Aleck, he is gone!" shouted the man who was the first to come within sight of the cabin. "The lock-string is out, and he's cut stick and gone, with that bag safe upon him; dog-gone the

luck!"

"Push open the door," said Aleck. "Mebbe he is there."

The man placed the muzzle of his rifle against the door and thrust it so far open that his companion, who stood with cocked piece close at his side, would have had no difficulty in getting a shot at Tom if he had been on the inside. It was plain that they were afraid of the consequences, for as the door swung open they both drew back out of sight. If he knew anything of the prairie at all, it wasn't so certain that he was going to give up that bag after what he had seen of it.

"Hey, there!" shouted Aleck. "We know you have got it; you might as well come out and give up that thing I dropped in here a while ago. By gum, he haint in there!"

A little more peeping and looking (you will remember that the inside of the cabin was as dark as a pocket) resulted in the astounding discovery that there was nobody there. In fact, Tom lay about ten feet from them,—the bushes were so thick that he did not think it safe to retreat any farther,—and from his hiding-place he could distinctly hear everything that passed. He would have been glad to retreat farther, but the bushes made such a noise that he was afraid to try it.



TOM IN HIDING.

"He's gone," said Aleck, hauling a stool out from the cabin and throwing himself upon it. "Now, what am I to do?"

"Perhaps you didn't drop it in there," said his companion. "You travelled a good ways——"

"Yes, I did," said Aleck, whose rage was fearful to behold. "I felt of it when I was coming through the bushes, and I am as certain as I want to be that I felt the bag, and nothing else."

"And do you suppose he found it and went to examine it?" said the other man, who hadn't done much of the talking. "If I thought that was the case—you have got us in a pretty box!"

"I don't suppose nothing else. And just think, it is in Elam's hands. Dog-gone the luck! I'd like to shoot myself."

"Aha!" thought Tom. "Now, go on and tell us what it is that's in Elam's hands. It's the nugget, and I'll bet my life on it."

"I never did have much faith in it, anyhow," said Aleck's companion, who, holding his rifle in the hollow of his arm, kicked a few chips out of his way; "but you seemed so eager for it that you had to go and shoot a man in order to get it. It's nothing more than I expected."

"I believe I can work my way up there alone," said Aleck.

"With all them gullies coming down? You're crazy. But you don't want to sit here a great while. Elam will have it; that feller's gone to find him——"

"If I thought Elam would have it, I'd lay around on purpose to shoot him," said Aleck, rising from his stool and kicking it out of his way. "He aint no more than anybody else, Elam aint."

"Well, if you are going to stay here, you can stay alone. I'll go back and take my bundle of skins to

the fort, and raise some money on them. Then I'll light out, and you won't catch me around where Elam is again."

"By gum! I'll go, too," said Aleck. "But I'll bet you that Elam will sleep cold to-night."

"By George! he is going to burn the house," said Tom, drawing a long breath. "Well, I have done what I could, and as soon as they go away I'll go in and save what I can from the wreck."

The very first words that Aleck uttered after he had set fire to the cabin seemed to put a stop to this resolution. He made a great show of setting the shanty a-going, entering into it and kicking the burning brands about and piling stools and other things upon them, and when he came out and closed the door behind him, he was well satisfied with his work.

"There, dog-gone you!" sputtered Aleck, shouldering his rifle. "If you don't burn, I'll give up. Now, we'll just wait and see if some of 'em don't come back here to save things. You'll wait that long, won't you?"

"I won't, if you are going to raise a hand against Elam. I tell you it aint safe for anybody to touch him. You have had more pulls at him than anybody I know, and you have always said the same."

"And right here in these mountains, too," said Aleck. "I guess she will burn well enough without us, so we had better go on."

It may have been the fire that operated on Aleck's superstition in this way, for Tom listened and could hear them going headlong along the path. He did not think it quite safe to venture near the burning cabin until he had seen what had become of the robbers, so he left his rifle where it had fallen and, with his revolver for company, pursued the men toward the natural prairie. He did not feel the least fear of meeting the robbers in the evergreens, for his ears had informed him of their passage through them; so when he stopped behind one of the trees and took a survey of the ground before him, he was delighted to discover them far away, and going along as if all the demons in the woods were behind them. His next business was to go back and save what he could. The fire was already burning brightly, but, knowing where everything was, he succeeded in saving Elam's saddle and bridle, all the provisions, his clothing, and a few of the skins which served him for a bed. Then he sat down, drew his hands across his heated face, and waited as patiently as he could for the rest to burn up. As Elam had occupied the cabin for three or four winters, it burned like so much tinder. The principal thing that occupied his attention now was what he had heard the men say regarding Elam.

"Elam has been shot at three or four times right here in these mountains," soliloquized Tom. "He didn't say a word to me about that, and I reckon it was something he did not want to speak of. Now, I will leave the things right here and go and find Elam."

This would have been a task beyond him had he not seen the way Elam went the day before. He went up the prairie to gather in his traps, and of course all he had out must have been up that way, too. He didn't know anything about the theory of setting traps for wolves, but Elam understood it, and he was sure he was going the right way to find him. At any rate, he wouldn't go far out of sight of the smoke of the burning cabin, and with that resolution he cast his eye over the wreck to see if there was anything else that he could save, and struck into the path.

"I'll leave my revolver there where it is," said Tom. "There can't be more than one set of thieves around here at once. And I've got what has ruined that fellow. If I haven't got the secret of Elam's nugget here in my pocket, I'll give up. I'll go with you now, Elam. I'll face a dozen Red Ghosts for the sake of getting my hands on this pile of gold. It isn't a ghost, anyway. It is a camel, and I don't see how in the name of sense any of his tribe managed to get stranded out here. I'll shoot at it as quick as I did before."

Filled with such thoughts as these Tom reached the edge of the evergreens, but there was no sign of the robbers in sight. Elam's horse was there, and he seemed to think there was something wrong by sight and smell of the smoke, for he tossed his head and snorted, and when he saw Tom approaching took to his heels. Tom was glad of that, for Elam thought a good deal of that horse; he would come up at night, and Elam would go out to give him a piece of bread and speak friendly words to him. He had hardly left the horse behind before he saw Elam approaching. He had a few skins thrown over his shoulder, but he was going at a rapid rate, as if he knew there was something amiss. Discovering Tom, he threw off his skins, laid down his rifle, and seated himself on a rock to rest.

"Burned out?" said he cheerfully, when Tom came within speaking distance.

"Yes," said Tom. "How did you know it?"

"Oh, I saw it back there in the mountains. How did it catch?"

Tom had by this time come up. He seated himself beside Elam and drew the little bag from his pocket. He was in hopes that Elam would recognize the bag, but all he did was to look at it and wait for Tom to go on.

"I've had visitors since you left this morning," said Tom. "Two men with ragged and torn clothing came there and got into the cabin before I knew it, and when they got in, they made a haul of your two bundles of skins you had tied up."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Elam. "Seven hundred dollars gone to the bugs. Tell me how it happened."

To Tom's astonishment Elam did not seem at all surprised at the robbery, but when it came to the discovery of the bag and the description of the man who had lost it, Elam sprang to his feet with a wild war-whoop. Tom began to see that there was a good deal in Elam, but it wanted danger to bring it out.

"I know that fellow," said he, reseating himself after his paroxysm of rage had subsided.

"You ought to," responded Tom. "He has had three or four shots at you right here in the mountains."

"I know it, and that's my bag you have got there," replied Elam. "Go on and tell me the rest."

Tom was more astonished than Elam was to find that the bag belonged to him, and it was some little time before he could get his wits to work again; but when he did, he gave a full description of the burning of the cabin, and told of the direction the men had gone when they got through. Elam said they had gone to the fort, and the only way to head them off was to get there in advance of them. They intended to raise some money on those skins, and after that go to the mountains; but he was certain if he could see the commandant or the sutler he would knock their expedition into a cocked hat. He dropped these remarks as Tom went along, so that by the time he got through he knew pretty nearly what Elam was going to do. He was more surprised when he got through than Elam was.

"You seem to look upon this robbery as something that ought to have happened," said Tom. "I tell you that if I had worked as long as you have, and had seven hundred dollars' worth, I would be mad."

"Young man, if you had been out here as long as I have, and been in my circumstances, you would have learned to look upon these things as a matter of course," answered Elam. "This is the fourth time I have been robbed, and I never go to the mountains without expecting it."

"But you never told me about that man shooting at you so many times," answered Tom.

"Well, he did; and once he came so close to me that he laid me on the ground," said Elam, baring his brawny chest and showing Tom the ragged mark of a bullet there.

"By George!" exclaimed Tom.

"That was the time he stole that bag you have there," continued Elam. "He looked at me and thought me to be dead, and so made no bones about taking it. But he got fooled for once in his life. He thought I had a map there telling him where to look for the nugget."

"Did you have a map of any kind with you?"

"Nary a map," said Elam, with a laugh.

"Well, there's one here now, and I should like to have you look at it. The loss of that map made Aleck think he was ruined."

Elam became all attention now, and watched Tom as he took out the piece of buckskin and carefully unfolded it. Finally he took out the paper and handed it to Elam, taking pains to smooth it out as he did so.

"He said he had to shoot a man in order to get it," said Tom.

"What man was it?"

"I don't know. He didn't describe him."

Elam had been fooled so many times in regard to that nugget that he took the paper with a smile, but he had scarcely glanced at it before a look of intense earnestness took the place of the smile. He laid down his rifle, rested his hands upon his knees, and studied the paper long and earnestly.

"Do you make anything out of it?" asked Tom.

"It's the very thing I want," declared Elam. "I have waited and looked for a thing like this, and have never found it. The nugget is mine—mine, and, Tom, I will give you half if you will stand by me till I handle it."

"It's a bargain," replied Tom, and to show how very much in earnest he was he offered to shake hands with Elam; but he resolved that he would never do it again. All the years of waiting Elam had infused into that grip; Tom didn't say anything, but it was all he could do to stand it.

"There is only one thing I can't see into," said he, when he had recovered his power of speech, "and that is where that line begins. You don't know where in the world it is."

"Do you see all these little dots here at the beginning of the line? Well, those are springs. There's a dozen springs break out inside of half an acre, and there's only one place in the country where you can find them."

"How far is it from here?"

"It is forty miles in a straight line."

"Then what were those men doing here?"

"I give it up."

"And here's some money, too, with the thing," said Tom, undoing the piece of buckskin that contained it. "There's forty dollars here."

"I am sure I don't know what brought them in here, unless they came after somebody that had the map. I'd like mighty well to find him, but I can't stop now to hunt him up. I must have the nugget in the first place."

"Well, you had better keep this map," said Tom, as Elam got up and threw the skins over his shoulder and picked up his rifle.

"No, you keep it until I come back. I've got to face a couple of rough men, and there's no knowing what may happen to me. If I shouldn't come back, find Uncle Ezra Norton and give it to him. He will go with you and help you hunt it up."

"What have you got to face those rough men for?" said Tom anxiously. "Those men who were here were afraid of their lives."

"Yes; but you take them out in the mountains and see if they are afraid of their lives. They would shoot you as quickly as they would look at you. One of them has more to answer for than he will care to. Uncle Ezra Norton. Don't forget him. Now, I am going to leave you here while I go on to the fort. I shall be gone three days. You can stand it that long, can't you?"

"I can stand it for a week if you will keep those fellows from trading off those wolf-skins for provisions," said Tom. "I hope you'll catch them right there among our soldiers, and make them give up the skins. They've got a heap of cheek to take those skins to the fort."

"The people out here have cheek enough for anything," said Elam, with a frown. "This Aleck you speak of took some money off that dead man, and yet I'll bet you he would go right to the fort and spend it."

Elam became all activity, and it was all Tom could do to keep pace with him as he walked along carrying the skins to the site of the cabin. It was a "site," sure enough, for the fire had made rapid headway, and now there was nothing but the smouldering remains to be seen. Elam looked at the smoking ruins and then at the numerous articles Tom had saved, and then said:

"If I had known as much on the day I built this cabin as I do now, I could have enjoyed myself better here than the ones who burned it. You have saved your boots, haven't you? Well, the things that went up are comparatively of little value. Now, if you will punch together some of the coals and get me a big dinner, I'll be off. There's a blizzard coming up, and as they generally come from the south-west, I would advise you to put up a lean-to with its back that way," said Elam, motioning with his hand.

"I would really enjoy a blizzard, but not if you are going to be out in it," replied Tom, who, for some reason or other, could not bear that anything should happen to Elam. "I have never seen one in my life."

For an hour or two the boys were busy, Elam in catching and saddling his horse and doing up his blankets to be carried with him, and Tom employed with his cooking, and all the while the former was going on with some instructions which were destined to make things easier for Tom. He didn't want to neglect that lean-to, he said, for in less than three days there would be a blizzard that would make him open his eyes. If he didn't come back in three days, all Tom would have to do would be to take that map to Uncle Ezra Norton (anybody at the fort would show him where he lived), and he would know what to do under the circumstances. Having said this much, Elam wrapped what was left of his dinner in his blankets, so as to carry it with him, shook Tom warmly by the hand (he did not put as much vim into it as he did before), mounted his horse, and rode down the path out of sight. When he thought a sufficient length of time had passed, Tom wandered down to the edge of the evergreens and looked out. There was Elam on his horse, skurrying along; not going fast, for he had nearly a hundred miles to ride, but taking it easy, as though he could stand it. Elam didn't know it, but he was to travel twenty miles at as fast a gait as he had ever ridden it before.

"There goes my luck again," said Tom, as he turned about and returned through the evergreens. "If anything should happen to him, I don't know what I should do. I feel drawn toward the fellow. I will pay attention to what he told me, and in order to put it out of the power of those men to carry off this map and money I will just chuck the bag in here, where I know it is safe."

The place where Tom hid the bag was in a hollow tree. He pushed it in, put some leaves and brush over it, and turned away, satisfied, to begin work on his lean-to. He could not see any signs of the approaching blizzard, but Elam could, and he worked hard. That day he had the frame up, and the next day it was all done and the things carried under it.

"There," said Tom, with a smile of satisfaction. "We are all ready for what comes. Now, if Elam was only here, I'd be content. One more day, or at least I will give him two, and then he will have to show up."

The third day passed without bringing any signs of the missing boy, but Tom paid little attention to it. On the fourth he began making trips to the edge of the evergreens, and then he saw that the sun was hazy and that it began to look stormy. It grew worse on the fifth day, and Tom really

began to be alarmed. Toward evening a horseman suddenly made his appearance on the edge of the prairie, walking slowly along, as if his nag was tired almost to death. But it was Elam, for after he had made many steps he discovered Tom, and pulled off his hat and waved it to him.

"Something has gone wrong," muttered Tom, vigorously returning the salute. "Why don't he whip up? If I was as close to home as he is, I would go faster than that."

Tom waited in the margin of the woods for him to come up, and when he drew nearer saw that his face was pale, and that he carried his arm in a sling, as if he had been wounded. When Tom saw that, he began to grow pale, too.

"Oh, it's all over," said Elam. "Look there."

"What! Is your horse wounded, too?"

"Yes, and was hardly able to move when I rode him into the fort. Say, you told me that soldiers always wanted to see the fair thing done, didn't you? They're a mean set. But I got the start of them. Do you know what became of those two men who were here? Well, the Cheyennes have got them."

"The Cheyennes!" exclaimed Tom.

Elam looked at him and nodded, and got off his horse with difficulty. Tom looked at the long ragged streak in his neck, and did not wonder that he was glad to be rid of his rider.

CHAPTER XIII.

ELAM INTERVIEWS THE MAJOR.

When Elam mounted his horse and set out for the fort that morning, it was with the secret determination to confront Aleck and his companion, or, failing in that, he would push on ahead, and by seeing the colonel or the sutler he would render their attempts at disposing of the furs of no account. He had already borne enough from one of these men to put him pretty well out of patience. Although Elam said nothing about it, Aleck had been at the bottom of three desperate attempts upon his life, as well as of four efforts that had been made to rob him, and Elam thought he couldn't stand it any longer. He rode along just outside of the willows that skirted the foothills, so that he could not be picked off by a stray rifle shot, and keeping a close watch of the prairie on all sides of him, and when night came he hadn't seen anything of the robbers. When darkness fell, he allowed his horse to browse around him while he ate some of the lunch that was wrapped up in his blanket, and then put out again. He was satisfied that by this time he had got beyond the men, and now he wanted to get to the fort and put the people there on their guard. Was Elam flustered while he was doing all this? Not a bit of it. He went about his work as he would have tried to compass the death of some wild animal that had escaped him. When the first gray streaks of dawn were seen in the east, he camped in a sheep-herder's dugout, but it was empty. Beyond a doubt the men had gone into the mountains to escape the blizzards. There was a small stack of hay behind the cabin, and to this Elam staked out his horse, and went in and tumbled into an empty bunk. He was within twenty miles of the fort.

Elam slept the sleep of the weary, and when he was aroused to consciousness, it was by a note of warning from his horse. Elam was wide awake in an instant. He caught up his rifle and hurried to the door of the cabin, and the summit of the hills over which he had come the night before was crowded with horsemen. They were so far off that he could not distinguish anything, but he knew by certain signs they exhibited that they were not the men he wanted to see. They were too much scattered.

"I believe those are the Cheyennes," said he, lost in wonder. "I never heard of their breaking loose before."

As if in corroboration of his words, a single long-drawn yell arose on the air, followed by a chorus that must have been deafening to those that were close at hand. That was enough for Elam. With muttered ejaculations addressed to the men who were supposed to be near enough to the Indians to keep watch of their movements, he rushed to his horse, severed the lariat with which he was confined, mounted without saddle or bridle, and was off like the wind.

"I tell you now I am whipped," said Elam, gazing back at his line of foes, and trying to estimate how many warriors there were in the lot. "It's the Cheyennes, and they belong two hundred miles from here. Some ruffian has stolen their back pay, and they are going to have revenge for it. Keep close, there, or I'll down some of you."

Then followed a chase such as we don't read of in these days. It was long and untiring, and all the way Elam looked in vain for assistance. His first care was to make out that there were no Cheyennes in advance of him, and he concluded that their discovery of him was as much of a surprise to them as it was to him; otherwise they would have sent some warriors out to surround him. That was all that saved him. He was mounted on a mustang, and such an one could not be tired out in a twenty-mile race. He seemed to hate the Indians as bad as his master did, and put in his best licks from the time he started, but that wouldn't do at all. Some of the cool heads

behind him were holding in their horses, calculating that when the race was nearly finished they would come up and settle the matter. Other warriors, carried away by their military ardor, or perhaps having some private wrongs to avenge, easily outstripped the others, and finally Elam had his attention drawn to two who seemed bent on coming up with him. He couldn't hold his horse well in hand with nothing but a noose around his neck, but by talking to him he finally got him settled down to good solid work.



ELAM'S FIGHT WITH THE CHEYENNES.

For one hour the chase continued, and then the whitewashed stockade of the fort came into view. He could see that there was a commotion in it, for the soldiers were running about in obedience to some orders, but nearer than all came the two warriors, who seemed determined to run him down and take his scalp within reach of the fort. At last they thought they were near enough to fire. One of them drew up his rifle, and Elam threw himself flat upon his horse's neck. The rifle cracked, and in an instant afterward his horse bounded into the air and came to his knees. But he didn't carry Elam with him. The moment he felt his horse going he bounded to his feet, struck the ground on the opposite side, and when the animal staggered to his feet, as he did a second later, he stood perfectly still and Elam's deadly rifle was covering the savage's head. He dropped, but he was too late. The ball from the rifle which never missed sped on its way, and the warrior threw up his hands and measured his length on the ground. An instant afterward Elam was mounted on his horse again and going toward the fort as fast as ever. At this feat loud yells came from the Indians. The death of the warrior and Elam's fair chance for escape filled them with rage. The nearest savage fired, and this time the bullet found a mark in Elam's body. It struck him near the wrist and came out of his hand, but Elam never winced. He changed his rifle into his other hand and broke out into a loud yell, for he saw a squadron of cavalry come pouring from the fort. The chase was over after that. Elam galloped into the fort, swinging his rifle as he went, and got off just as his horse came to his knees again.

Of course all was excitement in there. The balance of the soldiers, which consisted of a small regiment of infantry, were drawn up outside the fort ready to help the cavalry in case the Indians dodged them, the teamsters climbing upon the stockade ready to use their rifles, and Elam was left to take his horse out of the way and examine his injuries and his own. For himself he decided that it was no matter. He could open and shut his hand, although it bled profusely, and that proved that the bullet had not touched a cord; but his horse—that was a different matter. The ball had not gone in, but had cut its way around the neck, leaving a mark as broad as his finger. He must have a bucket of water at once. While he was looking around for it, he ran against an officer who had been busy stationing the men in their proper places.

"Hallo! You're wounded, aint you?" said he, taking Elam's hand. "Come with me."

"I've got a horse here that's worse off than I am," said Elam. "I'd like to see him fixed in the first place, and then I'll go with you."

"A horse! Well, he belongs to the veterinary surgeon. You come with me."

But Elam insisted that he could not go with the officer until his horse had been taken care of, and asked for a bucket of water; and the officer, seeing that he was determined, hastened out to find the surgeon who had charge of the stock. He presently discovered him, standing on the stockade

and yelling until he was red in the face over a charge that the cavalry had made, but he ceased his demonstrations and jumped down when he was told that an officer wanted him.

"Give me one cavalryman against ten Indians," said he, saluting the officer. "The savages are gone, sir."

"Did they stand?" asked the officer.

"No, sir. It was every man for himself, sir. A horse, sir? Yes, sir. I saw this fellow come down on his knees when those Indians fired at him. A pretty bad cut, sir."

Elam, having seen his horse provided for, resigned himself to the officer's care, and went with him to the office of the surgeon. The latter had got out all his tools and seemed to be waiting for any wounded that might be brought in, but Elam was the first to claim his attention. The surgeon jumped up briskly, examined Elam's hand, made some remark about the bullet not having touched a bone, said that all the patient would have to do would be to take good care of it for a few days, and by the time he got through talking he had it done up. The officer had left by this time, and Elam began to feel quite at his ease in the surgeon's presence. In answer to his enquiries he went on to explain how he had been surprised in a sheep-herder's cabin, when he didn't know that there was a Cheyenne within a hundred miles of him, and had depended entirely on the speed of his horse to save him, and asked, with some show of hesitation, which he had not exhibited before:

"Do you reckon I could have a word with the major this fine morning? I suppose he is pretty busy now."

To tell the truth, Elam stood more in fear of a stranger than he did of a grizzly bear, and he felt awed and abashed when he found himself in the soldier's presence. The regular, with his snow-white belts, bright buttons, and neatly fitting clothes, presented a great contrast to the visitor in his well-worn suit of buckskin, and, backwoodsman as he was, Elam noticed the difference and felt it keenly. Now, when the excitement was all over, he felt sadly out of place there, and he wished that he had let the wolf-skins go and stayed at home with Tom. But the surgeon's first words reassured him.

"Of course the major will see you," said he cheerfully. "He will want to see you the minute he comes back. He has gone out after the hostiles now. You can sit here till he comes back."

"I have got a horse out here that is badly hurt, and if you don't object, I'll go out and look at him," said Elam.

"Eh? Objections? Certainly not," said the surgeon, in surprise. "I hope you will get along as nicely as he will. Only be careful of that hand of yours."

Elam had never been to the fort before, and he felt like a cat in a strange garret while he loitered about looking at things. He first went to see his horse, and found that, under the skilful hands of the veterinary surgeon, he had fared as well as he did, for his neck was bound up, and he was engaged in munching some hay that had been provided for him. Then he went out of the stockade to see how the hostiles were getting on, but found that they and the cavalymen had long ago disappeared. An occasional report of a carabine, followed by an answering yell, came faintly to his ears, thus proving beyond a doubt that the savages had "scattered," thus making it a matter of impossibility to hunt them. After that Elam came back and loafed around the stockade to see what he could find that was worth looking at. The doors of the officers' apartments were wide open, and, although they were very plainly furnished, Elam looked upon it as a scene of enchantment. He had never seen anything like it before. He had heard of carpets, sofas, and pictures, but he had never dreamed that they were such beautiful things as he now saw before him.

"I tell you, I wish I was a soldier," whispered Elam, going from one room to the other, and stopping every time he saw anything to attract his attention. "This is a heap better than I've got at home. Uncle Ezra Norton is rich, but he hasn't got anything to compare with this. Wait until I get my nugget, and I will have something to go by. I do wish the major would hurry up."

But Elam had a long time to wait before he could see the major, for the latter did not return until nearly nightfall. When they came, they looked more like whipped soldiers than victorious ones. They had two dead men with them, three that had been wounded, and half a dozen Indians that they had taken prisoners. Elam looked for an execution at once, but what was his surprise to see the Indians thrust into the guard-house.

"When are they going to shoot those fellows?" whispered Elam to a soldier who happened to be near him.

"Shoot whom?" asked the soldier.

"Why, those Indians. They aint a-going to let them shoot white folks and have nothing done to them?"

"Oh, yes, they will," said the soldier, with a laugh. "They can shoot all they please, and we'll take 'em prisoners and let 'em go. Did you think they was going to kill 'em right at once?"

Elam confessed that he did.

"Well, no doubt that would be the proper way to deal with them. Dog-gone 'em! if I had any dealings with 'em, I'd 'a' left 'em out there."

Elam did not remain long before he saw the major, for an orderly approached in full uniform, and saluted him as he would a lieutenant-general, and told him that the commandant was at leisure now, and would see him. Elam's heart was in his mouth. He did not know what to say to the major about his furs, and so he concluded he would let the matter go until morning.

"Say," said Elam, "he must be tired now, and you just tell him I'll wait until he has had a chance to sleep on it."

"Why, you must see him," said the orderly, who was rather surprised at this civilian's way of putting off the major. "What good can he do by sleeping on it? Come on."

Elam reluctantly fell in behind the orderly, and allowed himself to be conducted into the presence of the major. The table was all set, the officers were seated at it, and seemed ready to begin work upon it. He was surprised at the actions of the major, a tall, soldierly looking man, with gray hair and whiskers, who sat at the head of the table, and who arose and advanced with outstretched palm to meet him.

"I am overjoyed to see you," said he, holding fast to the boy's hand after shaking it cordially. "You got hurt, didn't you? But I see you have been well taken care of. Is the news you bring me good or bad?"

Elam was too bewildered to speak. He looked closely at the major, trying hard to remember when and under what circumstances he had seen him before, for that this was not their first meeting was evident. If they had been strangers, the major would not have greeted him in so cordial and friendly a manner. This was what Elam told himself, but he had shot wide of the mark.

In order to explain the major's conduct it will be necessary to say that these discontented Cheyennes had not broken away from the neighborhood of this fort, but had come from a point at least a hundred miles away. It was the source of great uneasiness and anxiety to the veteran major, who was afraid that his superiors might charge him with being remiss in his duty. He had sent three detachments of cavalry in pursuit, but only one of them had been heard from, and the news concerning it, which had been brought in by a friendly Indian, was most discouraging. The savages had eluded his pursuing columns in a way that was perfectly bewildering, and the fear that they might surprise and annihilate his men troubled the major to such a degree that he could neither eat nor sleep. He was glad to see anybody who could give him any information regarding the soldiers or the runaways, and he took it for granted that, as Elam had come in since the Indians broke away, and had had a running fight with them, he must know all about them.

"Where do you reckon you saw me before?" asked Elam.

"I never met you before in my life," answered the major, who saw that his visitor did not understand the feelings which prompted him to extend so hearty a greeting. "You can tell me about the Cheyennes, and that is why I am so glad to welcome you."

"Oh!" said Elam, quite disappointed.

"Talk fast, for I am all impatience," exclaimed the major. "When did you see the hostiles last, and where were they? I know that you brought them up here to the fort, but where did you meet them in the first place?"

"I found them back here about twenty miles in a sheep-herder's cabin where I stopped for the night," said Elam. "The first thing I heard of them was a note of warning from my horse, and when I got up, there they were."

"Well?" said the major.

"Well, I got on to my horse and lit out. That's the way I brought them up here."

"And that's all you know about them?"

"Yes, everything. I didn't know the Cheyennes had broken out before."

The major released the boy's hand and walked back to his seat at the table. The expression on his face showed that he was disappointed.

"That aint all I have to tell, major," said Elam quickly. "When I got back to my shanty after taking in my traps, I found that two men had been there stealing my spelter that I have worked hard for."

The major, who probably knew what was coming next, turned away his head and waved his hand up and down in the air to indicate that he did not care to hear any more of the story; but Elam, having an object to accomplish, went on with dogged perseverance:

"Now, major, those two fellows are coming to this fort, calculating to sell them furs,—my furs, mind you,—and I came here to ask you not to let them do it."

"I can't interfere in any private quarrels," said the officer. "I have something else to think of."

"But, major, it is mine and not theirs," persisted Elam.

"I don't care whose it is," was the impatient reply. "I shan't have anything to do with it."

"Won't you keep them from selling it?"

"No, I won't. I shan't bother my head about it. I have enough on my mind already, and I can't neglect important government matters for the sake of attending to private affairs. Did you say those men were afoot when they came to your shanty? Probably the Cheyennes have got them before this time. Orderly!"

The door opened, and when the soldier who had shown Elam into the room made his appearance, the major commanded him to show the visitor out.

"Now, just one word, major——" began Elam.

"Show him out!" repeated the commandant.

The orderly laid hold of the young hunter's arm and tried to pull him toward the door, but couldn't budge him an inch. Elam stood as firmly as one of the pickets that composed the stockade.

"Just one word, major, and then I'll leave off and quit a-pestering you," he exclaimed. "If you won't make them two fellows give back the plunder they have stolen from me, you won't raise any row if I go to work and get it back in my own way, will you?"

"No, I don't care how you get it, or whether you get it at all or not," the major almost shouted.

"Oh, I'll get it, you can bet your bottom dollar on it. And if you hear of somebody getting hurt while I am getting of it, you mustn't blame me."

"Put him out!" roared the major.

The orderly laid hold of Elam's arm with both hands and finally succeeded in forcing him into the hall and closing the door after him, but the closing of the door did not shut out the sound of his voice. Elam had set out to relieve his mind, and he did it; and as there was no one else to talk to, he addressed his remarks to the orderly.

"The major needn't blame me if some of them fellows gets hurt," said he. "I tried to set the law to going and couldn't do it. I'll never ask a soldier to do anything for me again. I can take care of myself. I don't see what you fellows come out here for anyway, except it is to wear out good clothes and keep grub from spoiling. That's all the use you be."

"Well, go on now, and don't bother any more," said the orderly good-naturedly. "The old man said he didn't care how you got the things back, and what more do you want?"

"I wanted him to set the law a-going, but he won't do it," said Elam. "I'll just set it to going myself."

The young hunter walked off and directed his course toward the sutler's store. He knew it was the sutler's store, for when he was loitering about the fort he had seen the sutler come in from the stockade with a rifle in his hands, and sell a plug of tobacco to one of the teamsters. He found the store empty and the sutler leaning against the counter with his arms folded. The latter recognized Elam at once, for he had seen him come in on that wounded horse.

"Halloa," he exclaimed. "You have got your wound fixed all right. Did you have a long race with them?"

Elam in a few words described his adventures, running his eye over the goods the sutler had to sell, and wound up by telling of the furs he had lost.

"I have got a good many skins," said he, "and I see some things here that I should like to have, but I aint got them now."

"How is that? I don't understand you."

"Well, you see, I have done right smart of trapping and shooting since I have been out, but while I was gathering up my traps some fellows came to my shanty and stole everything I had," said Elam.

"That's bad," said the sutler; and he really thought it was, for no doubt he had lost an opportunity to make some good bargains.

"Yes, and they are coming to this post now, those two fellows are, to sell those furs," continued Elam earnestly.

"Ah!" exclaimed the sutler, in a very different tone of voice.

If that was the case, perhaps he could make something out of the boy's work after all.

CHAPTER XIV.

ELAM UNDER FIRE.

"Yes, that's bad business," the sutler continued. "They steal furs and pass them off as their own. I couldn't do that."

"But this is the fourth time they have robbed me," Elam went on. "You have handled skins that they took from me last winter. They'll try to sell them at this store, most likely. There aint no traders here, are they? I aint seen any of them hanging around."

"No; they have been scarce of late," answered the sutler, who would have been glad to know that none of the fraternity would ever show their faces in that country again. He wanted to do all the trading that was done at that post himself.

"Then they will be sure to sell them to you, if they sell them to anybody; but I don't want you to buy them," said Elam. "They belong to me, and I've worked hard for them."

The sutler leaned his elbows on the counter, placed his chin on his hands, and looked out at the door, whistling softly to himself. Elam waited for him to say something, but as he did not, the boy continued:

"I don't want you to buy them skins. You heard what I said to you, I reckon?"

"Oh, yes, I heard you," said the sutler, straightening up and jingling a bunch of keys in his pocket; "but I don't see how I can help you. When hunters come here with furs to sell, I never ask where they got them, for it is none of my business. Besides, I don't know these men who you say robbed you."

"I will be here to point them out to you," said Elam quickly. "I would know them anywhere."

"But I couldn't take your unsupported word against the word of two men," continued the sutler. "If they told me that the property belonged to them, I should have to believe them."

"But I will be here," said Elam indignantly.

"Well, you must get somebody to prove that the skins are yours."

Elam looked down at the counter, turning these words over in his mind, and when he had grasped their full import, it became clear to him that he had no one to depend on but himself. It became evident to him that the arm of the law was not extensive enough to reach from the States away out there to the fort, and, as the sutler would not lend him assistance, he must either take the matter into his own hands or stand idly by and see the proceeds of his work go into the pockets of rascals. That he resolved he would never do. The very thought enraged him.

"Look a-here, Mr.—Mr. Bluenose," said Elam—Elam did not know the sutler's name, and this cognomen was suggested to him by the most prominent feature on the man's face, which was a dark purple, telling of frequent visits to a private demijohn he kept in the back room—"you shan't never make a cent out of that plunder of mine, because it will not come into this fort!"

"Don't get excited," said the sutler.

"I aint. I'm only just a-telling of you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, the major wouldn't make them two fellows give back my furs, and so I asked him if he would raise a furse in case I got them back in my own way, and he said he wouldn't," said Elam. "That's all I've got to say."

"I'll tell you what's the matter," said the sutler, a bright idea striking him; "the Cheyennes have got them. Were they afoot?"

"Yes, they were. I don't know whether they tried to steal my horse or not, but anyway they didn't get him."

"Then the Cheyennes have got them beyond a doubt. They could never travel through the country you came through."

"Then what's become of my furs? Do you reckon the savages have got them, too?"

"I certainly do. I'll tell you what I could do: If the Cheyennes came here to sell their furs, I could easily tell your furs from their own, and I could throw them out. But, you see, the Indians don't come here. They take all their furs to Fort Mitchell."

"Maybe you would throw them out and maybe you wouldn't," said Elam emphatically. "I guess I had better take the matter into my own hands. When I get my grip on to them furs, you'll know it."

The sutler merely nodded and gazed after Elam, who marched out as if he intended to do something.

"That boy is going to be killed," said he to himself. "He thinks more of those furs than he does of so much gold. If I was commander of this fort, I wouldn't let him go out."

Elam directed his course toward the barn in which he had left his horse and rifle when he went in

to visit the surgeon. He found them there yet, and it was but the work of a moment to shoulder the one and unhitch the other, who greeted him with a whinny of recognition, and lead him out to the gate. As he expected, there was a sentry there, and he stepped in front of him with his musket at "arms port."

"You can't go out," said he.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Elam innocently.

"Too many Indians," was the reply.

"Oh, well, I just want to let my horse have some grass. He don't think much of the hay you have here."

"You don't want your rifle if you're just going out to get grass," said the soldier, with a smile.

"No, but I like to have it handy when the pinch comes. If I hadn't had it and been able to use it, you wouldn't have seen me here now."

"That's so," said the sentry. "I don't suppose you care enough about them as to go among them again. But we'll have to see the corporal about that." Then, raising his voice, he called out:

"Corporal of the guard No. 1!"

In process of time the officer of the guard came up, and the sentry made known Elam's request in a few words. He looked at Elam and said:

"Oh, let him go. It aint likely that he will go far away with the Indians all around him. You don't want to get too far away," he added, turning to the young hunter, "because the men on post have orders to fire on people that are going out of range."

"Do you see this rifle?" said Elam. "Well, when they come, I will let you know. You will never see me inside that fort again," said Elam to himself, as the sentry brought his musket to his shoulder and stepped out of the way, leaving the road clear for him. "I am going to get my furs the first thing, and then I am going down to trade them off to Uncle Ezra for a grub-stake for three months. That's what I'll do, and I bet you that those two fellows will get hurt."

Elam passed through the gate, and the horse began to crop the grass as he went out, thus doing what he could to prove that it was grass he wanted, and not the hay that was served up to him in the stable. Being continually urged by his master, he kept getting further and further away from the stockade. The sentries on guard looked at him, but supposing that, as he had got by post No. 1, he was all right, although one sentinel did shake his head and warn him that he was going further off than the law allowed; so Elam turned and went back.

"I don't like the looks of that fellow, for he handles his gun as though he might shoot tolerable straight," said Elam. "We will go more in this direction, for here's where the stock was when the Indians came up. We'll be a little cautious at first, but we are bound to get away in the end."

By keeping his horse on the opposite side from him, and paying no attention to the warning gestures of the sentries, he succeeded in reaching a point beyond which he was certain that the guards could not hit him, and, with a word and a jump, he landed fairly on his nag's back.

"Now, old fellow, show them what you can do," he whispered, digging his heels into his horse's sides.

He looked back and saw that the sentry he feared most was already levelling his gun, and a moment later the bullet ploughed up the grass a little beyond him. Had he remained fairly in his seat, it would have taken him out of it; but he did just as he had seen the Cheyennes do—he threw himself on the side of his horse opposite the marksman, and so he had nothing to shoot at save the swiftly running steed. Another musket popped, and still another, but Elam did not hear the whistle of their bullets. That was all the guards on that side of the stockade, and Elam knew he was safe. Before they could load again he would be far out of range. He raised himself to a sitting posture, took off his hat and waved it at the guards, and then settled down and kept on his way, taking care, however, to watch against all chances of pursuit. The fact was that his escape had been reported to the major, who, out of all patience, exclaimed: "Let him go!"

Elam was now a free man once more, and he resolved that it would be a long time before he would again trust himself in the power of the soldiers. His first care must be to go back to the sheep-herder's cabin in which he had camped the night before he reached the fort, and get his saddle and bridle, for he rightly concluded that the savages had been so anxious to capture him that they had not time to go in and see if he had left anything behind him. It required considerable nerve to do this, but Elam had already shown that he had a good share of it. He had not gone many miles on his way until he began to meet some sheep-herders and cattle-men who were fleeing from their homes and going to the fort for protection. The men were generally riding on ahead, and the women came after them in wagons drawn by mules. He waved his hat whenever he came within sight, for fear that the men might shoot at him, and he knew by experience that they could handle their rifles with greater skill than the soldiers could handle their muskets.

"Where you going?" demanded one of the men, as he galloped up to meet Elam. "Seen any Indians around here?"

"There were plenty of them here this morning," said Elam. "Did they come near you?"

"Well, I should say so. They've jumped down on us when we wasn't looking for them, and I've got one brother in the wagon that's been laid out. You must have been in a rucus with them, judging by the looks of your hand and the horse."

"Yes, I got into a fight with them right along here somewhere, and I didn't go to the fort without sending one of them up. There was no need of my going there at all, but I went to shut off some trade that wasn't exactly square. There are no Indians between here and the fort."

"Well, I wish you would ride by the wagon and tell that to my old woman, will you? She is scared half to death. Where are you going?"

Elam replied that he was going to the sheep-herder's ranch to get a saddle and bridle that he had left there, and after that he was going back to the mountains. He had a partner there, and he didn't know whether he was alive or dead. He had had enough of depending on the soldiers for help, for they had declined to assist him, and, furthermore, had shot at him when he attempted to leave the fort.

"Well, I say!" exclaimed the frontiersman, giving Elam a good looking over, "you are a brave lad, and I know you will come out all right."

Elam carried the news to the wagon that there were no Indians between them and the fort, and afterward continued on his lonely way to the sheep-herder's ranch. He came within sight of it about eleven o'clock that night, and, dismounting from his horse and leaving him on the open prairie, he proceeded to stalk it as he would an antelope, being careful that not a glimpse of him should be seen. It was a bright moonlight night, and for that reason he was doubly careful. There was something more than the saddle and bridle he wanted, and that was his blankets. There was some of the lunch left in there. He had eaten but one meal that day, and he had nearly a hundred miles to go before he could get any more.

Elam was nearly an hour in coming up to that ranch, and he was sure that anyone who might be on the lookout would have been deceived for once in his life. He crawled all around the hay-racks without seeing anybody, and finally went in at the open door without seeing or hearing anybody. He found all the articles of which he was in search—the saddle tucked away in one corner of a bunk to serve as a pillow, the blankets spread over them, and the bridle and lunch placed on a box near the head of the bed, and, quickly shouldering them, he made his way out of the cabin in the direction in which he had left his horse.

"Now," said Elam, as he strapped the saddle on the animal's back and slipped the bridle into his mouth, "the next thing is something else, and it's going to be far more dangerous than this. I am going to have those furs. I need them more than they do. I have got the map of the hiding-place of that nugget at my shanty, and some of them are going to get hurt if I don't get it."

Elam kept out a portion of his lunch (the rest was strapped up in the blankets, which were stowed away behind the saddle), eating it as he galloped along, and this time he directed his course toward the willows that lined the base of the foot-hills. At daylight he discovered something—the track of an unshod pony. He looked all around, but there was no one in sight. He dismounted and saw that the horse had been going at full jump, and as there was dew on the ground, the tracks must have been made before it fell. A little further on he found another, and by comparing the two he made up his mind that they must have been made the day before. They were going the same way that he was, and appeared to be holding the direction of a long line of willows a few miles off. Elam's hair seemed to rise on end. He could imagine how those painted warriors had yelled and plied their whips in the endeavor to hunt down their victims; for that they were in plain view of someone Elam could readily affirm. He thought he could hear the yells, "Hi yah! yip, yip, yip!" which the exultant savages sent up as a forerunner of what was coming.

"They got them in there as sure as the world," muttered Elam. "It's all right so far, and I can go on without running the risk of seeing any of them. I just know I shall see something after I get up there."

Elam put his horse into a lope and followed along after the trail as boldly as though he had a right to be there. He didn't feel any fear, for he knew that he was on the trail of the Indians instead of having them upon his, and he knew they would not be likely to come back without the prospect of some gain. Presently he came to the place where some of the savages had dismounted and gone into the willows to fight their victims on foot, and then something told him that if he got in there he would find the bodies of the men who had robbed him of his furs. How that little piece of woods must have rung to the savages' war-whoops! But all was silent now. He led his horse a short distance into the bushes and dismounted, following the trail of an Indian who had crept up on all fours toward the place where the doomed men were concealed, and presently came into a valley in which the undergrowth had been trampled in every direction. Near the middle of the valley were two men who were stretched out on the ground, dead. There was nothing on them to indicate who they were, but Elam had no difficulty in recognizing them.

"Well, it is better so," said he sorrowfully. "The Indians have got you, and that's all there is of it. Now my furs have gone, and I shall have to go to Uncle Ezra's to get a grub-stake."

There were no signs of mutilation about them, as there would have been if the men had fallen into the hands of the Indians when alive. The Cheyennes had evidently been in a hurry, for all

they had done was to see that the men were dead, after which they had stripped them of their clothes, stolen their guns and ammunition and furs, and gone off to hunt new booty. In this case it promised to be Elam, who made a desperate fight of it. The young hunter resolved that he would go into camp, and he did, too, hitching his horse near the stream that ran through the valley, just out of sight of the massacred men. He saw no ghosts, but slept as placidly as if the field on which the savages had vented their spite was a hundred miles away.

When he awoke, it was dark, and the peaceful moon was shining down upon him through the tree-tops. He watered his horse, ate what was left of the lunch, and began to work his way out of the valley, when he discovered that both his nag and himself were sore from the effects of their long run. He had gone a long distance out of his way to see what the Cheyennes had done, and he didn't feel like bracing up to face the eighty miles before him. His horse didn't feel like it either, for when he stopped and allowed him to have his own way, he hung his head down and went to sleep. The horse seemed to be rendered uneasy by the bandage he wore round his neck, and when it was taken off he was more at his ease.

It took Elam two days to make the journey to the camp where he had left Tom Mason, for he did all of his travelling during the daytime, and stopped over at some convenient place for the night. He was getting hungry, but his horse was growing stronger everyday. He dared not shoot at any of the numerous specimens of the jack-rabbit which constantly dodged across his path, for fear that he would betray himself to some marauding band of Indians, and not until he got within sight of Tom Mason standing in the edge of the willows did he feel comparatively safe. Tom gazed in astonishment while he told his story, and it was a long time before he could get dinner enough to satisfy him.

"Thank goodness they have left you all right," said Elam, settling back on his blanket with a hunk of corn bread and bacon in his uninjured hand and a cup of steaming coffee in front of him. "Do you know that I have worried about you more than I have about myself?"

"Well, how did those Indians look when they were following you?" asked Tom, who had not yet recovered himself. His hand trembled when he poured out the coffee so that one would think that he was the one who had had a narrow escape from the savages. "Did they yell?"

"Yell? Of course it came faintly to my ears because they were so far away, but if I had been close to them, I tell you I wouldn't have had any courage left," said Elam, with a laugh. "I've got my saddle and bridle, and that's something I did not expect to get."

"Was there no one in the sheep-herder's ranch to look for you?"

"If there had been, I wouldn't 'a' been here. There was nobody there at all. I just went in and got my saddle, and that's all there was to it. You see, I was on their trail, and they had passed over that ground once and thought they had got everybody."

"Well, I am beaten. I never heard a whisper of an Indian since you went away. It is lucky for me that they didn't know I was here. How did those men look that were killed?"

"They were dead, of course. There was no mutilation about them, only just enough to show who killed them. If the Indians had got hold of them before they were dead, then you might have expected something. They would have just thrown themselves to show how much agony they could put them to. I never want to fall into the hands of the Indians alive. Do you know that the soldiers always carry a derringer in their pockets? Yes, they do, and that last shot is intended for themselves."

"By George!" said Tom, drawing a long breath. "Let us get out of here."

"Where will we go?"

"Let's go back to the States. I never was made to live out here."

"Hi yah! I couldn't make a living there."

"But you talk well enough to make a living anywhere. You won't find one man in ten out here who talks as plainly as you do."

"That's all owing to my way of bring up. Ever since I was a little kid I have been under the care of Uncle Ezra, who talks about as plain as most men do."

"Well, let's go and see him."

"We'll go just as soon as this blizzard is over. It is coming now, and in a few minutes you will see my horse coming in here."

"Is that the blizzard? Why, I thought it was snow."

"You go to sleep and see if you don't find snow on the ground in the morning. There is one thing that you can bless your lucky stars for: the Indians are safely housed up. They'll not think of going out plundering while this blizzard lasts."

"They know when it is coming, I suppose?"

Elam replied that they did, and wrapped himself up in his blanket, while Tom went out to throw more wood on the fire and to make an estimate of the weather. The sky was clouded over, not

making it so very difficult to travel by night, the wind was in the south, and the rain was quietly descending, as though it threatened a warm spring shower. It beat the world how Elam could tell that this storm was three days off, that before it got through everything would be "holded up," and that the snow would be six inches deep. The horse came in about that time and took up a position on the leeward side of the fire, where he settled himself preparatory to going to sleep. Then Tom thought he had better go, too, but the thrilling story to which he had listened took all the sleep out of him. What a dreadful fate it would be for him to be killed out there in the mountains, as those men were who stole Elam's furs, and no one find his body until long after the thing had been forgotten! He fell asleep while he was thinking about it, and when he awoke it was with a chill, and a feeling that the storm had come sure enough. The wind was in the north, and he could not see anything on account of the snow. He didn't have as many blankets now as he did when he first struck the mountains, for he had left a good portion of them in the gully. All he had was his overcoat, and, wrapping himself up in it, he went to sleep and forgot all about the blizzard.

CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE EZRA PUTS HIS FOOT DOWN.

Tom slept warm and comfortable that night, and perhaps the simple presence of Elam had something to do with it. A boy who could go through a twenty-mile race with Cheyennes, and have no more to say about it than he did, would be a good fellow to have at his back in case trouble arose. A person would not think he had been through such an encounter, and had seen the bodies of two murdered men besides, for, when he awoke, Elam was sitting up on his blanket and looking at his horse. He lay in such a position that the threatening streak on the animal's neck, which had come so near ending the race then and there and resulting in Elam's capture, could be plainly seen.

"Halloa!" exclaimed Elam. "The Indians didn't get you last night, after all. I tell you, if our soldiers could strike them now, they would have an easy job of it. Now, there's that horse of mine. He has got a worse hurt than I have, but he makes no fuss over it. I am anxious to find Uncle Ezra, for he has some medicine that will cure it."

"But you can't go where he is—where is he, anyway?" said Tom.

"He is just about two days' journey over the mountains. I know where he is, and I ought to have been there before. But, laws! he's quit looking for me. If I don't show up at all, he won't worry."

"This storm is just fearful, isn't it?" said Tom, pulling his coat up around his ears. "What do you suppose the soldiers are doing that were sent out by the commander of that fort? Why, they will freeze to death."

"Do you think we are getting the full benefit of it here?" said Elam, with a look of astonishment. "You just go out to the edge of the evergreens and look around a bit. You see, we haven't got much snow here, for your lean-to keeps it off; but go out where it has a fair chance at you. By the way, where is my map?"

Tom replied that it was in the hollow tree, and speedily fished it out for him; and while Elam fastened his eyes upon it, Tom went out to the edge of the woods to see what the storm looked like on the plains. He had been there scarcely a moment when he was glad to turn around and go back. Their little grove of evergreens was just the spot for homeless wanderers like themselves. The wind was cutting, and blew so hard that Tom could not face it for an instant, and he dared not let go his hold upon the branches at his side for fear that he would get lost. When he got back to the fire, he was glad to heap more wood upon it, and get as close to it as possible.

"I don't see how anybody can live out there," said Tom, with a shudder. "I should think it would be their death."

"They don't live," said Elam. "They just camp somewhere and stay until it blows over. I have been out in a storm that was worse than this, and came through all right. You can just imagine what it must be out there on the prairie."

All that day the boys remained idle in their lean-to, not daring to go out after traps, and before they went to bed that night Elam decided that, early the next morning, they would make an effort to reach Uncle Ezra's. Their food was getting scarce, and they had no way to replenish their stock. A part of the day was spent in hiding the things which they could not take with them, for fear that somebody would come along and steal them, and the rest of the time was devoted to Elam's stories. It was a wonder to Tom how the boy had managed to get through so many things and live. He didn't relate his adventures as though there was anything great in them, but told them as a mere matter of fact. Anybody could pass through such scenes if he only had the courage, but there was the point. For the first time in his life Tom wished himself back in Mississippi. Anyone might get into scrapes there, as Our Fellows got into with Pete, the half-breed, or with Luke Redman of the Swamp Dragoons, but there was always a prospect of their coming out alive.

On the morning of the next day a start was made as early as it was light enough to see, Elam leading the horse and Tom following close behind him. The most of their way led through the gully, and to Tom's delight there was hardly any snow on the way; nor was there any game, although they kept a bright lookout for it. They camped for two nights in the foot-hills, Elam working his way in and out of the gullies, never once stopping and never once getting into a pocket. On the last morning they ate every bit of the corn bread and bacon.

"They aint far off now," said Elam. "About noon we'll be among friends. You will find two boys there just about your size who will give you more insight into this life than I ever could. You see they know what you want to talk about."

After proceeding about a mile of their journey Elam stopped, placed his hand to his mouth, and gave a perfect imitation of a coyote's yell. If Tom had not seen him do it he would have thought there was a wolf close upon them. A little further on he gave another, and this time there was an answer, faint and far off, but still there was something about it that did not sound just like a coyote.

"They're there," said Elam. "I would know that yell among a thousand. It's Carlos Burton."

"Who is he? You never mentioned him before."

"Well, he is a sharp one. He came out here long after I did, and had sense enough to go to herding cattle, while here I am and haven't got anything except the clothes I stand in. It's all on account of that nugget, too. If the robbers had stolen it and got well away with it I might have been in the same fix. Well, it's all in a lifetime."

"I should think you would give it up," said Tom. "You go working after it day after day—why, you must have been after it fourteen years."

"Shall I give it up when I've got the map of it right here?" said Elam, tapping his ditty-bag, which was hung across his chest under his shirt. "I am nearer to it now than I have been before, and you had better talk to those who have made fun of me all these years. 'Oh, Elam's a crank; let him alone, and when he gets tired looking for the nugget he'll come to his senses and go to herding cattle.' That's what the folks around here have had to say about me ever since I can remember; but I'll get the start of all of them, you see if I don't."

Elam began to look wild when he began to talk about the nugget, and Tom was glad to change the subject of the conversation.

"Who is the other fellow?" said he. "You said there were two of them."

"The other fellow is a tender-foot; he don't claim to be anything else. I'll bet you, now that I have got over my excitement, that I have been talking about his father. His father commands a post within forty miles of the place where he is now visiting, but I don't know one soldier from another. They all look alike to me, and I didn't think of the relationship they bore to each other. No matter; he treated me mighty shabby, and I shall always think hard of soldiers after that."

At the end of half an hour they came out of the scrub oaks and found themselves in front of a neat little cabin which reminded Tom of the negro quarters he had seen in Mississippi. There were two boys standing in front of the cabin, and Tom had no trouble in picking out Carlos Burton. There was an independent air about him that somehow did not belong to the tender-foot, and when Elam introduced him in his off-hand way, this boy was the first to welcome him.

"This fellow is Tom Mason, and I want you to know him and treat him right. He got into a little trouble down in Mississippi where he used to live, and came out here to get clear of it. Know him, boys."

The boys, surprised as they were, were glad to shake hands with Tom, because he was Elam's friend; but they were still more anxious to know how Elam had come among them for the fourth time robbed of his furs, and what he had to say about it. There were some things about him that didn't look exactly right. There was his hand, which was still done up the way the doctor left it, and the mark on his horse's neck, both of which proclaimed that Elam had been in something of a fight; but they didn't push him, for they knew they would hear the whole of his story when he got inside of the cabin.

What I have written here is the true history of what happened to Tom Mason after he gave Joe Coleman the valise, containing the five thousand dollars, and the double-barrel shotgun; and I have told the truth, too, in regard to Elam and his last attempt at grub-staking. It took him pretty near all day to finish the story, and now I can drop the third person and go on with my narrative just as it happened. Of course we were all amazed at what Elam had to tell, and especially were we hurt to hear him speak so of Ben's father; for he it was who was in command of the post. It would have done no good to talk to Elam, for very likely he had worse things than that to say about the major. We let him go on and tell his story in any way he thought proper, calculating to make it all right with Ben afterward.

"Now, Tom [he always addressed everybody by his Christian name], tell us something more of your story," said Uncle Ezra, who had the map of the hiding-place of the nugget spread out on his knee. "You haven't done anything to make you a fugitive from home, and I see that Elam has been letting you down kinder easy. What have you done?"

It did not take Tom more than fifteen minutes to narrate as much of his history as he was willing that strangers should know, and Elam never let on that he knew more; he was the closest-mouthed fellow I ever saw. Tom told all about the story of the five thousand dollars, and declared that he had sent it back to the uncle of whom he had stolen it, but said he could not bear the "jibes" that would be thrown at him every time his uncle got mad at him. There were men out there who had done worse than that.

"That's very true," said Uncle Ezra, looking down at the map he held on his knee. "But you haven't done anything so very bad, and I would advise you to go home and live it down."

"No, sir, I shan't do it," said Tom emphatically. "I'll stay here until he gets over his pet and then I'll go back. Besides, I can't go. I am under promise to stand by Elam until he finds his nugget."

"And do you imagine that this paper will tell you where it is?"

"That's what we are depending on."

"You will go, Carlos?" said Elam, addressing me.

"Yes, sir," I answered. "When you dig up that nugget I shall be right within reach of you."

"Now, uncle," began Ben, who was in a high state of commotion, "I just know you will let me——"

"Now, now!" interrupted Uncle Ezra, waving his hands up and down in the air as the major had done when he refused to interfere with the stolen furs. "Now, just wait till I tell you. You shan't go!"

"I just know, if my father was here——" began Ben.

"Now, wait till I tell you. Your father would say, No! Here's Indians all around you, and you want to go right into the midst of them. And going off with Elam Storm! That's the worst yet. Why, your father has sent out a squad of cavalry to drive these fellows back where they came from, and what would I say to him if I should let you go philandering off there? No, sir, you can't go. I shall send word to him in the morning and let him know you are all right. I suppose you will need a horse, Tom, seeing that the Red Ghost has spoilt your bronco for you."

"I should like to have one," replied Tom. "What do you think that Red Ghost is, anyway?"

"Now, wait till I tell you. I don't know."

As it was almost supper time and we had not had anything to eat since Elam and Tom came to the cabin, and Uncle Ezra wanted to change the subject of the conversation into another channel, he gave me a nod which I understood, and I went about preparing the eatables. It was surprising how quickly everybody became acquainted with Tom. He and Elam had passed through several scenes which were familiar enough to me, but which sounded like romance when recounted for Ben's benefit, and it was no wonder that the latter looked upon Tom as a person well worth listening to. He carried on a lengthy conversation with him while I was getting supper, while Elam smoked and talked with Uncle Ezra. He was trying to make Uncle Ezra see that after waiting for so many years chance had thrown into his power the very thing for which he was looking, and sometimes he got so interesting that I was tempted to let the supper go and sit down and listen to him.

"There is something hidden there, and that's all there is about it," said Elam emphatically. "You can't make me believe that a man would carry around a map of that kind when there was nothing to it, and he would say he was ruined if he didn't get it."

"But where did he get it in the first place?" asked Uncle Ezra.

"If I could see the man he shot I could answer that question."

"But how did he know that the man had it at all?"

"Ask me something hard," said Elam. "The man may have told him that he had it and refused to give it up; or he may have gone into partnership, just the same as Tom has gone into partnership with me. That is something I don't know anything about, but I just know there is something hidden there, and I'll dig the whole place over but I shall find it. If three months' supply of grub won't do me, I'll come back and get another. You will stake me, of course?"

"Sure. I'll stake you if it takes the last thing I've got. But I'll tell you one thing, Elam, and that aint two, that you won't make anything by it. You had better stay at home and go to herding cattle."

Just as long as they talked the hard-headed old frontiersman always came to this advice, and Elam always dismissed it with a laugh. Finally he said, with more seriousness than I had ever seen him assume before:

"I will tell you what I'll do, Uncle Ezra: I will follow this thing up, and if nothing comes of it, I will take your advice. But I will go to Texas. I can't stay around where that nugget is without making an effort to find it. If you had had it dinged at you for years, you would feel the same way."

And I could swear that that was the truth, for Uncle Ezra had often said to me that if he had had the nugget preached at him from the time he was old enough to remember anything, he would have been as hot after it as Elam was. Nothing would have turned him away from it. Uncle Ezra knew that Elam was in earnest when he said this, and reached over and shook hands with him;

and after that the subject was dropped. In the meantime Ben and Tom were getting acquainted, and especially was Ben deeply interested whenever the other spoke of the Red Ghost. Tom had seen it, had a fair shot at it, and could not imagine what had taken it off in such a hurry, if it had been a flesh-eating animal; but it was not, and so it uttered a scream and went into the bushes. It must have been a camel, because that was the only thing that Tom knew of that had a hump on its back.

"But camels don't run wild in this country," said Ben.

"Now, wait till I tell you," put in Uncle Ezra, who had got through talking with Elam. "A good many years ago the government brought over some camels thinking that they could make them useful in carrying supplies across the desert; but, somehow or other, it turned out a failure, and, seeing that they couldn't sell them, they turned them loose to shift for themselves. And that's the way they come to be wild here."

"Well, that bangs me!" exclaimed Ben, who was profoundly astonished. "But supposing they did turn them out to become wild, they wouldn't pitch into horses, would they?"

"I don't know anything about that," returned Uncle Ezra. "I do know that there is a camel around here, that he is red in color, that he has frightened the lives out of half a dozen people, and that he has been shot at numberless times. He does pitch into every horse and mule that he gets a chance at, and I don't know what makes him."

"Well, I never heard of a camel doing that before," said Ben, settling back on his blanket. "If you get another show at it, Tom, make a sure shot, so that you can tell us what it is."

You may be sure that I was glad to hear the old frontiersman talk in this way. He had not seen the camel, but he had seen some scientific men who had seen him, and he was glad to accept what they had to say in regard to the Red Ghost. I, for one, resolved that I would never let it get away, if I once got a shot at it.

The evening was passed in much the same way, with talks on various subjects, and it was a late hour when we sought our blankets. We all slept soundly, all except Tom, who awoke about midnight, and, to save his life, could not go to sleep again. He rolled and tossed on his blankets, and then, for fear that he might awaken some of us, concluded that he would go out and look at the weather. He pulled on his moccasins, opened the door, and went out, but on the threshold he stopped, for every drop of blood in him seemed to rush back upon his heart, leaving his face as pale as death itself. He was not frightened, but there, within less than twenty-five yards of him, stood the Red Ghost. He stood with his head forward, as if he were listening to some sounds that came to him from the horses' quarters, which, you will remember, were in the scrub-oaks behind the cabin. It was no wonder that Tom was excited, for there it was as plain as daylight. It looked as big as three or four horses.

"By George! I wish it would stay there just a minute longer. If I make out to get my rifle——"

With a step that would not have awakened a cricket, Tom stepped back into the cabin and laid hold of the first rifle he came to. It was not his own; it was Uncle Ezra's Henry—a rifle that would shoot sixteen times without being reloaded. With this in his hands he walked quietly back, and there stood the object just as he had left it. It did not seem to hear Tom at all. Fearful of being seen, Tom raised his gun with a very slow and steady aim, and covered the spot just where he thought the heart ought to be. One second he stood thus, but it was long enough for Tom, who pressed the trigger.

"There!" said Tom, drawing a long breath. "If I didn't make a good shot that time I never did. Hold on! It is coming right for me!"

The animal was fatally hurt, and the long bounds it made, and the shrill screams it uttered, would have taxed Tom's nerves, if he had had any. To throw out the empty shell and insert another one was slowly and deliberately done, and the second ball struck it in the breast, when Tom thought that another bound would land it squarely on the top of him. That settled it. It stayed right there, and all he could see of the Red Ghost was the twigs and leaves which it threw up during its struggles. In the meantime there was a terrific commotion in the cabin, and his three friends came rushing out to see what was the matter.

"Who's got my rifle!" exclaimed Uncle Ezra. "Now, wait till I tell you," he shouted, while lost in astonishment. "He's got the Red Ghost; by gum, if he aint!"

They drew as near the struggling animal as they could, while Uncle Ezra went in to bring out a brand from the fire to examine it, and Tom stood by, not a little elated. It was the first desperate adventure he had had, and he had stood up to the mark like a man. When the animal had ceased its contortions, and the firebrands were brought out so that we could examine it closely, it was curious to see what different views the hunters took of their prize. Elam could hardly be made to believe that it was not a ghost. He stood at a distance while the others were inspecting it, and when he saw they were handling it, he remarked that the bullet he had sent into its neck ought to have finished it when he got it. Ben examined its legs and Tom felt of its hump. He said that when an Arab had a long journey to make he always examined the hump to see if his camel was in good condition, while an American always looked to his horse's hoofs. He did not think this animal was in a fit condition to travel, although it had come seventy-five miles since Tom had last seen it, picking up its living on the way.

"Tom, you will do to tie to," said Elam, when he became satisfied that the animal was dead. "Shake!"

"Thank you," said Tom, seeing that his hands were safely out of reach. "If it's all the same to you I'll not shake hands with you. I did it once back there in the mountains, and I haven't got over it."

"Well, Tom, you certainly have done something to be proud of," said Ezra. "Let's go in and take a smoke. We'll finish our examination by daylight."

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW EXPEDITION.

There wasn't much sleeping done in the cabin that night, there was so much to talk about. To say that the hunters were very much pleased over the success of Tom's lucky shots would be putting it very mildly. Elam was much elated to know it was a camel, an animal he had never seen before, and not a genuine ghost, who had stood between him and the finding of the nugget. He was not satisfied until he had burned up three or four brands in going out to see the object to make sure it was there yet. To tell the truth, this Red Ghost had often stood between Elam and the accomplishment of his hopes; and as much as he desired to possess the nugget he did not dare face it alone.

"It is there yet," said Elam, coming in once more and throwing a half-burned chunk upon the fire. "Tom, you have made me your everlasting debtor. Now I hope the finding of the nugget will go the same way."

"I hope I can have the same effect upon your other work," said Tom modestly. "If I do, you will call me a lucky omen."

"What is an 'omen'?" asked Elam, who had never heard the word before.

"Why, it is an occurrence supposed to show the character of some future event. That is about as near as I can come to it. If I am with you, you will find the nugget without the least trouble: if I am not, you won't."

"Well, I'll see that you don't get very far from me till I find out what this map means. There is something hidden there, and I know it."

It was while we were talking in this way that daylight came, and I began getting breakfast while Elam and Uncle Ezra smoked, and Ben and Tom were packing up the skins which had fallen to Ben's rifle during the hunt. I could see that Ben was sadly disappointed in not being permitted to accompany Elam on his search for the nugget, but like the soldier he was, he gave right up. He knew that his father did not believe in such things anyway, and very likely his refusal would have been more pointed than Uncle Ezra's. When the breakfast was over all hands turned to and washed the dishes and put them away. We calculated to visit the camp again during the winter, and, if we did, we wanted to know what we had to go on. Then we went out to saddle our horses and take a last look at the Red Ghost.

"Are we going to leave this thing here?" asked Ben.

"Sure!" replied Uncle Ezra. "We can't carry it with us."

"I'll bet I don't leave it all here," said Elam, going into the cabin and returning with an axe in his hand. "The folks down there won't believe that we killed anything, and I am going to have one of the feet."

The thing was hideous when we came to look at it by daylight, and especially the great hoofs with which it had tramped so far. They were lacerated in every direction, and one cut had hardly had time to heal before it got another. Elam plied the axe vigorously, and in a few moments each boy had a foot which he was to take along to show to the people "down there." Finally Uncle Ezra said he would take the head. It was scarred and seamed all over, but he thought that anyone who had seen a camel would be sure to recognize it. Then we brought up the horses, but I tell you it took two men to saddle them. They couldn't bear the scent of the camel; I had to take my nag out of sight of it, and it was a long time before he quit snorting. With a good deal of merriment we got them all saddled at last, and with Tom and Ben riding my horse and Elam's, we bid good-by to our camp in the mountains. We had twenty miles to go and then we were among friends again.

"Say," said Elam, when he had allowed the others to get so far ahead that there was no danger of their overhearing our conversation, "I don't think I am crazy; do you?"

"I never thought so," said I, although I knew there had been some talk of it in the settlement. "I was sure if that nugget was there you would find it. I shouldn't have offered to go with you if I had thought you were crazy."

"You have seen the map and know just what there is onto it?" continued Elam.

"I certainly have."

"And you know the place where it starts is over there by those springs?"

"I do certainly."

"And do you think that those men would carry around a map of that kind unless there was something on it?" said Elam, going over the argument he had used the night before with Uncle Ezra.

"No, I don't think they would. And it's your ditty-bag that they took from you when you were shot."

"I know it; and many's the time I have thought of it, too, and never expected to see it again. Thank goodness, I have two men with me who don't think I am crazy! I have told Uncle Ezra that I never would give it up again until I have that nugget in my hands. I know that gully up there, and it is a pretty big place. Now, that is all I have to say. If you want to know anything more, now is the time to ask me."

"Don't you think that there are other parties up there, hunting for it?" I asked, knowing that his story had been noised abroad. "Just think; you have been looking for it fourteen years."

"Longer than that; and I ought to get it, for they say that perseverance conquers all things. As for other parties looking for it, why, they can get it if they want it. But where's the map?"

"That's so. I think you have got the only one there is in existence."

"I only hope there are other fellows looking for the nugget," said Elam, shifting his rifle from one shoulder to the other, "because we won't have to work where they have been. It will make matters so much easier for us."

After that Elam kept still about the nugget, and during the whole of the twenty miles I never heard him speak of it again. We accomplished the journey just about dark, Elam and I walking all the way, and Tom I know was glad to get back among civilized people once more. My headquarters were right there with Uncle Ezra, for I had only four men to take care of my small herd, and didn't think it best to get too far away from him. We rode up to the shanty and began to dismount, when the door flew open and the foreman of the ranch appeared on the threshold.

"Well, I declare, if there aint Uncle Ezra!" he exclaimed in a stentorian voice. "What you got? Enough furs to load one horse with?"

While the foreman was speaking he untied the bundle of skins and laid it upon the porch, when he happened to discover Tom Mason. He did not say anything, but nodded to Tom, and then turned his attention to his employer's horse, whom he had unsaddled while one was thinking about it.

"Are you here all alone?" asked Uncle Ezra.

"All alone!" replied the foreman. "You see, there has been a blizzard lately, and we thought we had better look up the sheep. I have just got in. What have you got in that bag?"

"Something that will make your eyes bulge out," replied Uncle Ezra. "Wait till we get in, and we will show it to you."

The horses, being unsaddled, were turned loose to go where they chose; the foreman carried Ben's bundle of skins into the cabin, and Uncle Ezra brought up the rear with the bag containing what was left of the prize. There was a fire burning brightly at one end of the room, and Tom and Ben drew camp-stools up in front of it to get some heat, while Elam and I took our overcoats off and waited for Uncle Ezra to turn out the contents of the bag. We waited until the old frontiersman had hung up his coat and hat where they belonged and seated himself on a camp-stool before the fire, and then the head and four feet of the camel were tumbled out on the floor.

"What in the name of common sense are those?" cried the foreman in astonishment.

"They are part of the Red Ghost," said Uncle Ezra; and then he went on to tell the story much as I have told it, although he put in some additions of his own. The foreman was profoundly amazed. Not daring to use his hands, he used a poker to move the things about, so that he could see on all sides of them. The antics he went through were enough to make the hunters laugh.

"What do you think now about my being crazy?" demanded Elam. "I've shot at that thing, and I don't see why I didn't get him; but I can see now why it was. He was so big that a bullet had to be put in the right place to get him."

"That's about the case with everything I have shot, Elam," said the foreman. "I had to put the ball in the right place, or I didn't get him. But you have removed a heap from my mind. Who shot him?"

"Here's the man, right here."

Seeing that the foreman began to take a deeper interest in Tom after that, Uncle Ezra introduced him, and he failed to say that Tom had got into a "little trouble" down in Mississippi where he used to live, and had come out West to get clear of it. Uncle Ezra didn't think that was any of his business. He said that Tom wanted to see new sights, and he reckoned he had already had his fill of them, having been lost in the mountains and shot the Red Ghost besides. Now, he was going

into partnership with Elam after the nugget, and Uncle Ezra thought he had a boy who could be depended upon. The foreman shook hands with Tom, and said he was glad to see him. Then he wanted to know whether they had eaten supper yet.

"Well, no," replied Uncle Ezra. "You see, we started from our camp up there sooner than we expected. Elam has got a map telling him where to look to find his nugget."

"Ah, get out!" said the foreman. He had heard so many things about a "map" that he did not believe a word of it.

"Well, he has, sure enough. It came from the man who tried to rob him. And you haven't heard anything about the Indians, have you?"

"Indians!" exclaimed the foreman. "Have they broken out?"

"Just give your knife to Elam and sit down," said Uncle Ezra. "It appears to me that we have heard of a heap of things that you don't know anything about."

The man gave Elam his knife, which he had in his hand to begin work with upon the ham he had laid upon the table, and sat down.

"I wondered all the time what was the matter with Elam's hand," said he. "I hope the Indians didn't shoot him."

"Didn't they, though?" said Elam. "You just wait and hear Uncle Ezra tell the story."

It was a long narrative that the old frontiersman had to tell, and I saw that Elam was so much interested in it that he forgot all about the supper, and I got up and assisted him; and that was all he wanted. He left me to do the work, and sat down. The foreman heard Uncle Ezra through without interruption, and then turned and gave Elam a good looking over. After that he got up and assisted me with the supper.

"So Elam has really got a map of the place where that nugget is hid?" were the first words he uttered. He didn't seem to care a straw about the Indians, but he did care about the gold. "I wish I knew the man he shot to get it."

After that the evening was just what you would expect of one spent in a hunter's camp, or one passed in a sheep-herder's ranch, which was the same thing. We ate supper; then those who were inclined to the weed enjoyed their good-night smoke, and talked of ghosts, Indians, and sheep-herder's life until we were all tired out and went to bed. We had regular bunks to sleep in, and could thrash around all we had a mind to without fear of disturbing anyone else. The foreman got up once to replenish the fire and take a look at the weather, and I heard him say, when he crawled back into his bunk, that it was a clear, cold night—just the one that sheep enjoy.

When I awoke I found the foreman busy in the storeroom in putting up our three months' supplies and Uncle Ezra engaged in cooking breakfast. Ben was seated at one end of the table, engaged in writing a letter to his father, and Elam had gone out after a certain stockman to carry it to the fort for him. It was dark, and you couldn't see a thing.

"I think it best to let the boy's father know when he is well off," said Uncle Ezra, returning my greeting. "It aint everybody who would go to that trouble, I confess—sending a lone man off in a country that has been infested with Indians. But I know how it is myself. If I had a boy——"

"You have got one," I said. "There's Elam."

"Elam!" said the frontiersman in a tone of contempt. "Elam went to work and got himself into a fuss without saying a word to me about it. Elam! now he's got a map that he thinks will show him where the gold is hidden."

"But don't you think there is something hidden there?" asked Ben.

"Now, wait till I tell you. I don't know; but every scrap he gets hold of he thinks it is a map. That's what makes me mad at Elam. And you, dog-gone you! You have got better sense than that."

I had heard all I wanted to out of Uncle Ezra. It was plain that he didn't think there was anything in that map. Well, as Elam said, it was all in a lifetime. My time wasn't worth anything to me, for I had men to do the work, and if I made a botch of it, if there wasn't anything to be made by digging up that gully, there was one thing out of the way. Elam was bound to become a cattle-herder in case this thing failed. He was determined to go to Texas, for he couldn't live there and have that nugget thrown at him by every man he met, and I would go with him. Uncle Ezra had often made offers for my cattle, intending to leave sheep-herding on account of the wolves, and invest all his extra money in steers, and if this thing turned out a failure he could have them and welcome. I would be as deep in the mud as Elam was, and I didn't care to have the thing thrown up at me all the time. Texas was the land of promise with us fellows, any way. The fellows there had got into the way of driving cattle to northern markets and selling them, and in that way we could at least see our friends once every year. So I didn't care what Uncle Ezra said about it.

In about an hour Elam came back with the stockman of whom he had been in search. His name was Sandy; I never heard him called by any other name, and if his pluck only equalled his red hair and whiskers he certainly had lots of it. Of course we had to go through with the Red Ghost and Tom's being lost, the discovery of the map and Elam's escape from the Indians, but Sandy never said a word about it. He just sat on his camp-stool with his elbows resting on his knees, and

looked up at Uncle Ezra. When the latter got through with his story he simply said:

"Where's the letter?"

Of course it was arranged that Sandy should go with us as far as the canyon that led to the springs, and beyond that he was to take care of himself. With his letter tucked away in his pocket, he shook Ben by the hand, and told him that his father would receive what he had written by noon the next day; and then we all mounted and rode off. Tom had been supplied with a pair of boots to take the place of his moccasins, and rode a horse that belonged to Uncle Ezra. We had two mules with us, Elam leading the one and I the other, which carried our supplies and also our digging tools; for we intended to dig as no people had ever dug before for that nugget.

"I hope you will get it, boys," said Sandy, as he lifted his hat to us when we reached the canyon that branched off from his trail. "But I have my doubts."

"Oh, of course we're cranks!" said Elam.

"I never said that of you," said Sandy reproachfully. "I always said that if the nugget was there you'd get it."

"And how am I going to find out where the nugget is unless I have a map?" demanded Elam. "I've got one now, and if I make a failure of this thing, I am going to Texas. When you see me again I'll have the nugget. Good-by."

We saw no Indians, although we kept a bright lookout for them, and about three o'clock in the afternoon arrived at the springs, for I do not know what else to call them. We had had no dinner, intending to leave it until we got to our camping place, and while Tom and I unsaddled and staked out the horses, Elam strolled away with his rifle on his shoulder to look up the springs. He was gone fully an hour, and when he came back he set his rifle down and never said a word. I knew that something was the matter, but I thought I would wait until he got ready to tell it. He ate his dinner; he ate a good hearty one, too, so that the news he had brought did not interfere with his appetite, and filled his pipe; and then I knew that something was coming.

"Carlos," said he, as he stretched his legs out in front of him, "those springs have all been tampered with."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They have been tampered with the same as this one has," continued Elam, pointing to the spring at which our horses had drank. "All the stuff and leaves have been pulled out of them."

"Well, what of it?"

"What of it? It means that somebody has been going in on our trail."

"All right; let it be so. You found all the springs, didn't you? We're on their trail, and if we overtake them at the end of a week we will see what we can do with them. You said yourself that it would make things easier for us."

"Yes, I know I said it, but I don't like to see that people are so hot after that nugget."

It did seem to me that everyone had got wind of that nugget, and were going after it at the same time. How it came about I did not know. Here they had gone on for two years and let Elam dig where he had a mind to, and now when he knew where the gold was, other people knew it too and were determined to have it. I suggested that it might be those men who had robbed him, but Elam laughed at it.

"Those men never came near here," said Elam. "Otherwise, how did they strike my camp fifty miles away? It has been done by somebody nearer than that, and has been done by somebody within three weeks, too."

From this time out (we were all of two weeks on the trail) Elam was moody. He would ride all day and wouldn't say a word to either of us, and when we made camp at night he would go off and stay until dark. And the worst of it was, we camped every single night right where the men had slept. I began to shake in my boots, and did not wonder at Elam's contrary mood. In fact we were all that way. It was very seldom that we exchanged an opinion with one another. Elam kept his map constantly at hand and referred to it at every turn in the road. Sometimes he would be gone all day, and we would hear nothing of him until night, when he would come in, ask for supper, and roll himself up in his blanket and go to sleep. Things went on in this way for two weeks, as I said, and then one day, as we were watering our horses at the brook that ran through the canyon, we were suddenly surprised by the appearance of two men who stood on the opposite bank. They were a hard-looking set, but then that was to be expected in a country where all men lived out of doors. To show that they were friendly they threw their rifles into the hollow of their arms.

"Howdy, pard?" said one.

"Howdy?" replied Elam. As he was the chief man we allowed him to do all the talking.

"You're just the men we wanted to see," said the man in a delighted tone. "We haven't had anything to eat since yisterday. Will ye give us a bite?"

"Sure!" replied Elam. "What are you doing so far away in the mountains?"

"We got lost, and are now trying to find our way out. This stream leads to some water on the prairie, I reckon? How far is the fort from here?"

Elam made some reply, I didn't know what it was, while I began to look the men over to see if I could discover any signs of their being lost. Their moccasins were whole, or as much so as could be expected, and the wear and tear of their buckskin shirts was no more than our own. They were strangers to me, and I confess that I was not at all pleased to see them. The talk about their being lost was one thing that did the business for me. The men were hunters or trappers on the face of them; they never would be taken for anything else, and the idea of their getting bewildered in the mountains that they had probably passed over a dozen times was a little too far fetched. I caught a glimpse of Elam's face as he was leading his horse up the opposite bank, and there was a look on it that boded mischief.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NUGGET IS FOUND.

"Where are your horses?" I demanded.

"Horses? We aint got none," replied the man.

"Somebody must have grub-staked you," I continued. "They never sent you into the mountains to get lost."

"We grub-staked ourselves," answered the man impatiently. "But I'll tell you what's the matter with you. Somebody has grub-staked you, and sent you in here to search for gold, and I want to know which one of you is Elam Storm. Speak quick!"

The next thing that happened was a little short of bewildering. In less time than it takes to tell it, Elam and I were covered with the muzzles of two cocked rifles, thus making it plain to me that the men had seen us, and hastily made up their plans what to do with us. They couldn't have moved so quickly if they hadn't. They paid no attention to Tom, but covered Elam and me. All they said was:

"Don't you move, Tender-foot. You may save the life of one, but you will be a goner in the end. Now, drop your guns right where you stand."

In an instant Elam and I laid down our rifles, and Tom did the same. It was too close a call to do otherwise, for a suspicious move on the part of one of us would have sent us to kingdom come in short order. There was "shoot" in the men's eyes, and we saw it plain enough.

"Now," said the leader, "go over there and set down, away from your guns. Which one of you is Elam Storm?"

"My name is Toby Johnson," replied Elam, speaking before anybody else had a chance to open his mouth. "I don't deny that I am sent up here to prospect for gold; but I don't see much chance of finding any."

"And what's your name?" demanded the leader, turning to me.

It was a little time before I could speak. Elam's plan for throwing them off the scent was a good one, but it came so sudden that it fairly took my breath away.

"I am Carlos Burton," I replied.

"Burton! I know you," said the man, who hardly knew whether to be delighted or otherwise at the discovery he had made; and then all of a sudden it flashed upon me that here was the man who had stolen my cattle. How I wished I had my rifle in my hands! There would have been one cattle-thief less in the world, I bet you; but, then, what good would it have done? I would have been gone up, too, for the other man still held his cocked rifle in his hands.

"Ah, yes! Burton," continued the leader, "Do you remember one of the fellows who took some cattle away from you once?"

"I didn't see the men, but I have heard what sort of looking fellows they were. I should like to see you under different circumstances."

"Well, I don't know but you will, but I doubt it. What sort of appearing fellow is that Elam Storm? Seen him, either of you?"

"I don't know him," said Elam. "I never heard of him. I am a stranger in these parts."

"Seeing that neither of you is Elam Storm, perhaps you may have something about you that tells you where to go to find his nugget. Stand up and put your hands above your head. You have got a ditty-bag about you?"

"Yes, sir, and there it is," said Elam, rising to his feet and throwing his bag outside his shirt, so that the man could examine it.

Well, there! the turning point had been reached at last, and Elam was the one who helped it along. Tom was utterly confounded, and I was so amazed and provoked that I hid my face from the men by resting my elbows on my knees and looking down at the ground. Of course Elam's map was found, there was no doubt about that. I saw him have it in his hand not half an hour before, and was positive that he put it in the bag out of sight. With that gone we were as powerless as the two men were. I listened, but could not hear him say anything about the map. He took the bag off Elam's neck and up-ended it on the ground. There were a pipe, some tobacco, and some matches, and that was all there was in it. He put them all back, after helping himself to a generous chew of the weed, and turned to Tom and myself; but as we didn't have any bags he let us go.

"You have been duped, fellows," said the leader. "Who sent you here, anyway?"

"Uncle Ezra," said Elam.

"Ah, yes! He's a great chap for such things. And you'll meet Elam somewhere up there, and you want to look out that he doesn't put a bullet into you. He thinks he's got a dead sure thing on that gold."

"Were you sent out here to hunt for it?" asked Elam, and I held my breath in suspense, waiting for his answer. I wanted to find out who was at the bottom of this matter.

"Well, that's neither here nor there," said the man. "We're here, and that's enough for anybody to know. Here's Burton, now. I did steal some cattle from him because I was hard up, but I don't want him to go on and get fooled in this way. And you'll get fooled as sure as you live. Now, we don't want anything to eat. We have got everything we want out here in the rocks to last us to the fort; and if you'll say you won't shoot at us, we'll give you your guns."

"I won't shoot at you," said Elam. "You have given me a point to go on, and I don't know but I had better turn around and go back. Here's a tender-foot come out here to see the country——"

"All right. Go on, and let him dig away some of the landslides until he gets sick of them. He won't get nothing, I bet you. Now, suppose you take your creeters and go on your way. We can have a fair view of you for a quarter of a mile, and that's all we want."

Elam at once picked up his gun, mounted his horse and rode away, leading one of the mules, leaving Tom and I to follow at our leisure. I noticed that the two men eyed me rather sharply. They didn't know how I felt at being reduced to poverty, and they were ready to nip in the bud any move that I took to be even with them. I didn't feel very good over it, you may imagine, and when I got on my horse I couldn't resist an inclination to say a word to them.

"I hear that two of the men who engaged with you in that cattle-thieving business were hanged for horse-stealing," I said.

"Has that story got around down here?" said one of the men.

"Yes; and I am very sorry that they were dealt with in that way. I wanted to get even with them myself. It seems as though those six thousand dollars didn't go very far with you."

"Well, go on now, for we don't want to take this matter into our own hands. We will wait until you get up to the turn in the canyon, and then you had better look out."

I rode on up the gully after Tom and Elam, and when I got up to the turn I looked back. The men were not in sight. Elam rode a little way further and then dismounted, preparatory to going into camp.

"There were two things that happened to-day that I did not think possible," said I, throwing myself out of my saddle in a disgusted humor. "One was that Elam would give up when he saw himself cornered."

"I saw at the start that they did not want to hurt anything," said Elam. "Suppose we had resisted them; where would we be now?"

"And another thing, I did not think it possible for me to stand near the man who stole my cattle without putting a chunk of lead into him. He didn't say who he was until after he had charge of my rifle, did he?"

"No, but I tell you you wouldn't have made anything by trying to shoot him. If we had made the least attempt to cock a gun, it would have been good-by. Those fellows were not fools."

"And what made Elam deny his identity?" said Tom. "You said you were Toby Johnson."

"And what became of his map?" I chimed in. "I saw him have it a short time before they came up. What did you do with it, Elam?"

"It's there, close to where I was sitting on the rock. When we think we have given them time to get away, I'll go back there and get it. I didn't want them to find it on me."

"And do you say that you took it out of your bag and threw it on the rocks?" said Tom in utter amazement. "I sat close to you all the while, and I never saw you do anything like it."

"No; I took it out of my pocket," said Elam. "The name I gave, Toby Johnson, saved them from handling me mighty rough."

"Well, now I am beaten!" I exclaimed.

"You see, if I had told them what my name was, they would have said at the start that I had some sort of a map with me, and would have hazed till I give it up. But they would never have got it," said Elam quietly, and there was deep determination in his words. "But I know one thing, and that aint two. Those fellows have left their picks and spades up here. They got tired of them and didn't mean to take them back."

"Who were they, anyway?" asked Tom. "They were not the men who stole the skins."

"Now, wait until I tell you; I don't know."

"One of them might have been the man who got shot," I suggested.

"There are a good many things connected with this nugget that we will never find out," said Elam. "And that's one of them. We'll stay here until we get dinner, and then I will go back after my map. It is all in a lifetime. So long as I get my nugget I don't care."

"I never heard of men turning out so friendly after doing their best to rob us," said Tom, pulling the saddle off his horse. "And you met them half-way."

"Who? Me? I will always be friendly with a man who never tries to do me dirt," said Elam. "If they had had the nugget you would have seen more."

I was very glad indeed that they did not have the nugget. So long as they let us off without being hurt I was abundantly satisfied; but if they had had gold stowed away in their blankets, we probably should never have seen them. They would have slunk away among the rocks and tried to hide their booty for fear that we should try to take it away from them. Would Elam try to hide his nugget after he got it? Well, he had not got it yet by a long ways. We ate dinner where we were, and Elam shouldered his rifle, lighted his pipe, and started back after his map. He told us that we had better stay where we were, and this gave me an idea that Elam was afraid he might be shot. He was gone half an hour, and when he came back his face wore his old-time expression again.

"Have you got it?" asked Tom, who always wanted to make sure that he was in the right.

"Course I have," said Elam. "Catch up, and we'll go on. There is one thing about this map business that I don't exactly like. You see this nugget is hid in a pocket."

Of course, I was thunderstruck, but then Elam had been all over that country, and of course knew where every pocket went to. He knew which canyons ran back into the mountains and which did not.

"You see this man had a fight before he got the nugget, and he was too badly hurt to get off his course to find a pocket to bury his find," Elam hastened to explain. "Now, this canyon that we are in goes back into the mountains I don't know how far, and it was in this gully that the fight took place; consequently the find is buried right here alongside of this little stream."

"Who do you suppose that man was, anyway?" Tom remarked. "You have never heard of him since, have you?"

"Now, wait until I tell you. I don't know. But let us go ahead, and I will tell you what I mean in a day or two."

"What do you look for anyway, when you go off by yourself?" asked Tom. "If you would give us a pointer on that subject we might be able to help you."

"I don't mind telling you that I am looking for a trail," said Elam. "And it is so old that no one but myself would notice it. When I find that trail I'm a-going to follow it up. It isn't over ten feet long, for a man as badly hurt as that one was, aint a-going to go a great ways to hide a nugget."

"Do you mean to tell me that we are on his trail now?" exclaimed Tom in amazement.

"Certainly I do. I have found two or three places where he slept."

"Why didn't you speak about it?"

"Do you suppose I have come in here this far without following some trail? Of course not. Some of the marks he made are so badly obliterated by the wind and the rain, that you can't make head nor tail of them, unless you know what had been there in the first place. Why, I have found blood on the rocks where he slept."

"You're beaten, aint you, Tom?" I asked, when he gazed at me, lost in wonder.

"I should say I was. I wish you had showed me that spot."

"Well, I will the next time I come across one. Good gracious! if I didn't know any more about trailing than you do, I would never find that nugget."

"How do you suppose your father came by it in the first place? He must have got it in some honest way or he wouldn't have had it in his wagon."

"That is one thing that I don't know," answered Elam solemnly. "He got it, and how it ever came noised abroad that it belonged to me beats my time. I wish the man that started that story had it crammed down his throat."

Elam was getting excited again, and we thought it best to leave him alone until he got over thinking about the nugget. We didn't raise any objections when he spurred up his horse and got out of sight of us in the bushes. When we were certain that he had passed out of hearing, Tom said:

"Why, it is two years since that man, whoever he was, made that trail through here, and to think he can find some traces of it now! It bangs me completely."

"There are two things which must be taken into consideration," said I. "In the first place that man didn't know what he left of a trail; he hoped nobody would ever find it. A twig may have been broken down and he left it so, certain it would lead him back to the place where he had buried his find. In the next place there is some little sign for which Elam is looking that will lead him directly to the place he wants to find; some branch of a tree that has been broken down and looks as though somebody had been browsing there, and it will tell Elam that he is hot on the trail. Do you see?"

"Yes, I see; but I don't see how a man can follow a trail two years old. I wish you would show me his next camping ground. If I am a lucky omen, I may be able to find the nugget."

I laughed and promised Tom that I would show him the next place I found; but it was a long time before I found any. You could not have told that a man had passed through there in one year or ten, the weather had so completely done away with all his work. But it did not make any difference to Elam. Sometimes he would be gone before we were up, but he always came back to supper, which we took pains to have good and hot for him. We never made any enquiries, for he knew just how impatient we were, and he would not keep us waiting a moment longer than was necessary. We had been in the canyon six weeks, and, to tell you the truth, Tom and I were getting pretty tired of the search. It was the same thing over and over every day, and I was glad that nobody had connected my name with a lost nugget. Elam would go along on foot, leaving his horse to follow or not as he pleased; and if he found a little pile of stones on the bank that didn't look as though it had been thrown up by nature, he would go into the bushes and perhaps be gone for an hour. We had long ago passed the pocket, and were continuing on our way slowly and laboriously up the canyon, and one day Elam startled Tom by calling out:

"I reckon you will think I am all right now. Here is the place where that fellow camped."

In less than two seconds Tom and I were by Elam's side. Cautioning us not to go too far so as to disturb things, he plainly pointed out to us the marks of a person's figure on the leaves. Some of the bushes had been broken down, and the leaves had blown over where he lay, but by carefully brushing these aside the impress of a person's form could be seen. There was no doubt about it, and I told Elam so in a way that made him all right again.

"Where do you suppose that fellow is now?" said Tom.

"I don't know," said Elam. "My impression is that he died."

"But he wouldn't have given this map to a man when he knew it to be wrong, would he?"

"I tell you that there's a heap of things connected with this nugget that we shall never find out. We are on the right trail yet. I tell you I feel encouraged."

We all did for that matter, and every day we searched both sides of the stream to find that man's camping place, and when we found it we would call the others up; but one day Tom came into camp, and his face was full of news.

"I don't want to raise any false hopes," said he, "but if I have not found something I will give it up. It's on the left-hand side of the creek. In the first place there were four stones laid up the bank, and the bush at whose foot they lay had been broken down and leaned away from the bank. And further than that, it was held in position by two of the branches, which were firmly tied about it."

"Tom, I believe you have found it," said I.

"It is too far away to find it before dark, but I will go there the first thing in the morning," continued Tom, who was so excited that he could scarcely speak plainly. "We want to take along our picks and shovels, too."

We both glanced at Elam, but he didn't say anything. He was lying back on his blanket, with his pipe between his teeth and his hands under his head. He smiled all over, but said nothing.

"Go on," said he to Tom. "What else did you find?"

"And right there is where the fun comes in," said Tom. "The passage was about twenty feet long—he was too badly hurt to go further—and with every step of the way he had broken down a piece of the bushes, first on one side and then on the other, to enable him to keep a straight course. Right under the head of a rock that the passage brings up against, you will find something buried. It may not be the nugget, but there is something there."

"Why didn't you dig down and see what it was?" said I.

"It was pretty near night when I found it, and besides I wanted Elam to see it. I will go with you now, if you say so."

"No," said Elam, filling up his pipe for a fresh smoke. "I'll be happy for once in my life for twelve

hours, and if at the end of that time I find that there is nothing there——"

"But I tell you there is something there," ejaculated Tom.

"I will go back and go to herding cattle," added Elam, paying no attention to Tom's interruption. "I will give it up as a bad job."

There wasn't much sleeping done in that camp that night, and although we stayed awake till toward morning, we had little to say to each other. We all wanted to see what was hidden up there. I had seen Elam become wonderfully excited whenever anyone spoke of the nugget and hinted that it wasn't there, but I had never seen him come so near finding it before. When daylight came Tom declared he couldn't wait any longer, so we got up and saddled our horses and followed along after him. We did not stop to cook breakfast, for in case we did not find the nugget nobody would want any. After going about a quarter of a mile, Tom stopped and dismounted from his horse.

"There are the stones," said Elam.

"You go along a little further and you will find everything just as I described it to you," said Tom. "Elam is about half wild," he added in a low tone to me, "so you and I had better take a pick along. Mind, I don't say it is the nugget, but there is something hidden in there."

Talk about Elam's being half wild! Tom and I were in that fix also. We saw Elam examine the broken bush, the one that was held in place by two limbs that were tied about it, and his face grew as white as a sheet. He worked his way into the bushes, making his way all too slowly to suit us who were following close at his heels, and finally stopped under the hanging rock, where there was a clear space about two feet in diameter. The bushes grew as thick here as they did anywhere else, but they had been cut with a knife to give the digger a chance to work. Not one of us said a word, because we were too highly excited. Elam reached his hand behind him, and I, knowing what he wanted, placed a spade within it; but you might as well have set a child to scraping it out with a teaspoon. His hand trembled so that it was scarcely any use to him.

"Here, Elam, give me that spade," I cried. "You will never get it up in the world. Now, stand back beside Tom, out of the way."

I did not think Elam would agree to this, but he did, and in two minutes I had the leaves and brush all out of the way, faster than it was put in, I'll bet. But what was this I struck against before I had gone down three inches? It was not as hard as a rock, because, when I placed my shovel against it and tried to pry it up, the instrument slipped from it and showed me the color of the pure gold.

"Elam, Elam, there's something here!" I shouted, so nearly beside myself that I did not know what I was saying. "Stand out of the way and let me handle it myself. When I get it out where the horses are, you can examine it till your head is as white as Uncle Ezra's."

I have since learned that the nugget weighed 130 pounds, but it did not seem half that weight as I pulled it out of the hole and started through the bushes with it. I paid no attention to the others, who followed along after me, lost in wonder. I carried it out to where the bushes ended, and then laid it down, hunted up a rock, and sat down and examined it.

"Elam, there's your nugget!" I said.

"By gum, I believe it is!" said Elam.

One would have thought by the way Elam went about it that he did not know whether it was or not. For fifteen minutes we sat there and watched him as he passed his hands carefully over it, brushing away a little particle of dirt here and pecking with his knife there to see if it was really gold, until he was satisfied; then he put up his knife and thrust out his hand to Tom.

"Tender-foot, I never would have found this if it hadn't been for you," said he, with something like a tremor in his voice. "Shake!"

"Thank you," said Tom, taking particular pains to keep his hands out of the way. "I'll take your word for it."

"I won't squeeze you, honor bright!" said Elam.

That was as good as though Elam had sworn to it, and Tom gave him his hand. He didn't squeeze it, but he shook it very warmly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

I had often heard Tom Mason speak of his "luck" when telling his stories, but I believe he was utterly confounded by the turn his "luck" had taken in this particular instance. He was too amazed, so much so that he couldn't speak, while Elam, it was plain to be seen, looked upon him as a lucky omen. In these days he would have been called a "mascot." I was completely

thunderstruck, and if Tom had told me that there was a nugget hidden under the biggest mountain in the valley, and I could have it for the mere fun of digging after it, I believe I should have put faith in his story.

"I wish that nugget could speak," said Elam, bringing his examination to a stop and sitting down with his arm thrown over his find. "I would like to hear it tell of all the places it has been in. After so many years of waiting I have at last secured the object of my ambition, thanks to you, Tom Mason. Nobody supposed you were going to make yourself rich out here, did they?"

"No, and I don't suppose they know it now," replied Tom. "Do you really imagine this is the nugget your father had?"

"What is the reason they don't know it now?" demanded Elam.

"Because the find isn't mine."

"Didn't I say that I would give you half of it the moment we dug it up? You will find that I am a man of my word, Tom."

"How much do you suppose the thing will pan out?" I said, seizing the nugget with both hands and trying to lift it from the ground. "It is heavier than it was a while ago."

"That nugget will pan out between five and eight thousand dollars," said Elam. "That's the price that Spaniard put upon it."

"Do you think this is the same find your father had?" continued Tom. "A good many people have been searching for gold since then, and a great many nuggets of the size of this one have been dug up."

"That's the reason I wish it could speak," said Elam. "Until I know differently I shall believe it is the same nugget. Anyway it is mine. Now, boys, I am going to Texas as soon as I can get there. You will go with me, of course."

"What are you going down there for?" asked Tom.

"To buy some cattle. You can get them down there for half what they are worth up here, and bringing them home across the plains will leave them in good order for next winter."

"I don't know whether I will go or not. There may be some lawless men down there, and you will have money on your person."

"Well, what of it? A man that will stand up the way you did against the Red Ghost is not going to be afraid of lawless men! You must go, Tom. You are a lucky omen."

As for myself, I did some thinking, too. There was my herd, for instance; a small one to be sure, but large enough to keep me in that country. If Uncle Ezra would sell his sheep and buy the herd, I would be a free man and willing to go to Texas, or any other place to see some fun. And that there was fun there I could readily believe. All men who had got into a "little trouble" in the more settled portions of the community came there to get out of reach of the law, and in a new country they did pretty near as they had a mind to. It would not be a safe thing for Elam to go down there with one or two thousand dollars in his pocket, but I for one was not unwilling to back him up.

"Well, boys, go to sleep on it, and tell me how it looks in the morning," said Elam, jumping to his feet and making a place for his nugget in one of the pack-saddles. "I wish one of you boys would go back and get that pick and shovel that we used to dig this thing up, for we want to have them all with us. They will say we were so excited over finding the gold that we couldn't think of anything else."

In due time a place had been made in the pack-saddle for the nugget, and we were on the back track. We travelled a good deal faster in going than we did in coming, for we didn't have to stop to examine signs on the way, and one day, to Tom's intense surprise, we found the springs close before us. Of course we had talked about Elam's new idea of going to Texas to buy his cattle, and we were pretty well decided that if he went we should go too. We could see that Elam was greatly pleased over our decision, but he did not have much to say about it.

"We must stay here long enough to help Uncle Ezra down with his sheep," said Elam, "and then we'll put out. I wish he would lend me a thousand or two on this, and take it up to Denver and get it panned out himself. I will take just what he says it's worth; wouldn't you, Tom?"

"Why of course I would."

"Well, you have got a say so in it, and I shan't do a thing with it unless you say the word," said Elam. "You might as well give up and take your half."

"Perhaps Tom would rather take his share and send it home," said I.

"No, I wouldn't," said Tom. "My uncle has not yet had time to get over his pet. It will take him a year to do that, and then I will write to him."

On the third night after we camped at the springs we drew up before the door of Uncle Ezra's sheep ranch. Boy-like, we had already made up our minds that we would not acknowledge to anything; if Uncle Ezra wanted to look into our pack-saddles and see what sort of luck we had had, he could examine them himself. Uncle Ezra was alone. When he was in the woods a more

devoted follower of the gun could not be found; but he always liked the heat of the fire and preferred a comfortable bunk to sleep in, when he was within reach of the home ranch. Ben Hastings had gone back to the fort. His father always liked to have him around when there was danger in the air, and he had sent a sergeant and two men after him.

"Halloa, boys!" said Uncle Ezra, "what sort of luck have you met with? I think the last time I saw you, you told me that the next time I saw your smiling faces you would have the nugget with you. I don't see any nugget."

"We haven't had any luck at all," said Elam. "We ate up the grub, and now I am going to cattle-herding."

"Elam," said Uncle Ezra severely, "you are not telling me the truth! There is something back of this."

"All right. Come out and see for yourself."

Tom and I removed the saddles from our horses, and at the same time Uncle Ezra came out and began his examination. With the very first move he made he hit the nugget. I never saw a man more completely taken aback than he was.

"Hoop-pe!" was the yell he sent up which awoke the echoes far and near. "By gum, if you haven't got it. I don't want a cent!"

In less time than it takes to tell it Uncle Ezra had lifted out the nugget and carried it into the cabin beside the fire, so that he could have a light to see by. When we got in there he had the nugget on the floor, and was pawing it over to see if it was that or something else which we had tried to palm off on him. When he saw Elam he got up and gave his hand a good hearty shake. I looked at Tom and I saw him put his hands into his pocket. I will bet you he would not have had that shake for his share of the nugget.

"Well, sir, you got it," said Uncle Ezra. "I declare if it don't beat the world!"

"Now, while you are shaking me up you don't want to forget Tom," said Elam. "If it hadn't been for him I shouldn't have found it at all."

"Do you mean to say that Tom found it?"

"Certainly, for he found the trail that led to it," replied Elam; and then he went on to give Uncle Ezra a brief sketch of the manner in which Tom had got at the bottom of things. He added that if he hadn't shown Tom the place where the man camped, the nugget would have been up there now. Uncle Ezra listened in amazement, and when Elam stopped speaking he thrust out his hand to Tom.

"Where in the world did you learn to trail?" said he. "Shake."

"Thank you," said Tom, retreating a step or two. "I'll take your word for it. I wouldn't have such a shaking up as you gave Elam a minute ago for anything."

Uncle Ezra laughed, and pulled a camp-stool near to the fire and sat down upon it. He couldn't get the nugget out of his head. He kept saying "By gum!" every time he looked at it, and now and then he glanced at Elam and pinched himself to see if he was wide awake or dreaming.

"Now, I will give you something to chew on while Carlos is getting supper for us," said Elam; and as that was a gentle hint that he was hungry, I got up and went to work. "We three boys are going to Texas."

"Going to Texas?" asked Uncle Ezra. "Now, wait till I tell you——"

"And another thing," said Elam, paying no attention to the interruption; "we don't want to stay here until this thing is panned out; so can't you lend us a thousand dollars on that nugget?"

"I know what you want," replied Uncle Ezra. "You want me to lend you a thousand dollars apiece."

"Well, yes. That's about the way the thing stands."

"Now, wait till I tell you. You will go away with all that money in your good clothes, and the first thing you know I will never see you again. Somebody will say 'Where's them three fellows that used to hang around your place?' and I will say 'Why, they went down to Texas to buy cattle, and those Texans found out that they had a lot of money about them and shot them.' That's what I'll say. Now, wait till I tell you. You can't go!"

That was just about what I expected to hear from Uncle Ezra at the start, but I knew it would turn out otherwise. I knew if he had the money we would get it, and so I kept still. Tom was very much disappointed, but I gave him a wink and nod which told him that our circumstances were not as bad as they appeared to be, and that everything would come out all right in the end. I didn't blame Uncle Ezra for not wanting to let us go away with so much money in our pockets, but I did not see any other way out of it. If we wanted to get our cattle for about half what they would cost us right there, Texas was the place for us to go. The Indians were bad, and we would have to go right across the country inhabited by the Comanches, and they were about the worst cattle-thieves I ever heard of. Those lawless men—those who did not think that they were bound

by any legal or moral restraint unless it was right there to punish them—were found everywhere, and it was going to be a matter of some difficulty to evade them. I had been there once, and I had seen just enough of it to want to go again. I wished now that I had not had quite so much to say in regard to those Regulators and Moderators who seemed to turn up when you least expected them.

I got supper ready after a while and we all sat down to it—all except Uncle Ezra, who sat on his camp-stool with his eyes fastened on the nugget. He turned it first on one side and then on the other so that he could view it from all sides, said, "By gum!" every time he looked at it, and told us many stories connected with it that we had never heard before. To Elam's request that he would take charge of it he readily assented. He would keep it out until all the sheep-herders had seen it, and then he would hide it somewhere so that nobody would ever think of looking for it. It was in the hands of the rightful owner at last, and no one need think he was going to handle it again.

"But you have a long way to take it to Denver," said I. "What will you do if somebody demands it of you!"

"Now, wait until I tell you," said Uncle Ezra, while a look of determination came into his face. "Uncle Ezra has been there."

"Now while you are talking about that nugget you are forgetting about me," said Tom. "I've got to go back to Mr. Parsons' cabin, and make some amends for that bronco. I didn't agree to let him be torn up. I have left money enough in his hands to settle for him."

"That horse won't cost you a cent," said I.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he was kept for the purpose of sending tender-feet into the mountains when Parsons didn't have anything else for them to do. The next one that comes along he will have to set him to herding cattle. Still I will go with you."

"Thank you. What's the reason Elam can't go with you?"

"Why, he's got to stay here and watch the nugget!"

"By George! Have you got to watch it now that you have found it?"

"Yes, sir. There are ten men employed on this ranch and four on mine, and you may be sure that all of them are not first-class."

"Well, let them come," said Elam, getting up and stretching himself. He stood more than six feet in his stockings, and when he brought his arms back to show his biceps he fairly made the cabin tremble.

"Yes, you, dog-gone you," said Uncle Ezra, getting up and shaking a fist in Elam's face. "You want to go off and lose a thousand dollars of it and your life besides. Now, wait until I tell you. I'll sleep on it. I'll see how it looks in the morning."

But in the morning there was not a word said about it. We ate breakfast by the firelight, and then Tom's horse and mine were brought to the door and saddled, preparatory to our ride to Mr. Parsons' ranch. In a pair of saddle-bags which I carried I had cooked provisions enough to last four days. As we were ready to start, Uncle Ezra came to the door and took a look at the weather.

"How long do you think you will be gone, Carlos?" said he. "Two weeks? Then you needn't mind coming back here. We shall probably get the sheep out some time before that, and you had better come to our dugout on the plains. I'll see to your cattle. Good-by."

In process of time we rode up to Mr. Parsons' cabin, and if I am any judge of the exclamations that arose from all sides they found it difficult to recognize Tom. It seemed that his two months in the mountains had changed him wonderfully. When he spoke of the bronco and repeated some words of advice that Mr. Parsons had given him, the latter remembered him at once.

"Why, Tom, I am glad to see you," said he. "Alight and hitch. The bronco didn't get away from you, I suppose. And you found the nugget, too?"

"Yes, sir; I did," replied Tom quietly.

"Gold sticking out all over it, I suppose. Well, how much do I owe you?"

"I've come here to see how much I owe you," said Tom. "That bronco has gone up. The Red Ghost finished him."

Mr. Parsons began to get interested now. He looked at me and I nodded assent.

"Do you mean to say that the Red Ghost finished him? And did you find the nugget?" he exclaimed, hardly believing he had heard aright.

"It's all true, every bit of it," I said. "He found Elam in a canyon where he got lost, and afterward found a map. He used that map, which started in at the springs, and afterward found the nugget."

"There now!" exclaimed the elderly man, the one who had been in the mountains just ahead of

Tom, and whose camp the latter slept in every night. "I told you that I did not think there was gold hidden there, and you thought me crazy."

"Well—I—I—come in, come in," cried Mr. Parsons. "I must hear that story from beginning to end. And are you sure he found the nugget? Wasn't it something else that he found?"

There were five men standing around who had been ordered to go away on some work or another, but they all quit and came into the cabin to hear the story. I took the part of spokesman upon myself, for I did not think that Tom would care to dwell too minutely on his meeting with the Red Ghost or his getting lost in the mountains, and I do not think I left out anything. I never saw a lot of men so confounded as they were. To suppose that a lot of gold had been hidden there in the mountains, which had come from some place a hundred miles away from there, and that Mr. Parsons had sent a dozen tender-feet into the hills to find it, was more than they could understand. When I got through they looked upon Tom with a trifle more of respect than they did before. They couldn't find words with which to express their astonishment.

"Now, perhaps, you are willing to talk to me about that bronco," said Tom. "How much do I owe you for him?"

"Not a red cent," said Mr. Parsons. "Not a single, solitary copper. I kept him for the sake of such fellows as you are, and now that he has got through with his business, I say let him rest. I shall never have any more chances to send him into the mountains with tender-feet. But, Tom, I owe you more than I can pay you."

"You let up on one debt and I will let up on the other," said Tom, with a laugh. "If Elam wasn't such a hot-headed fellow, I should be glad of it. He wants me to take half that nugget, and I don't want to do it."

"Take it and say nothing to nobody," said Mr. Parsons. "You will find means to make it up. How much will it pan out?"

"Between \$5000 and \$8000," I answered. "But it is my opinion it will be nearer \$5000. Elam has got that story in his head about the sum of money that Spaniard put upon it, and he kinder leans to that sum."

"That's a larger amount of money than most of us can make. Now, I hope that nobody will knock him in the head for it."

That was just what I was afraid of, and I made all haste to get back to Elam. I went up to Denver with him and Uncle Ezra, and there we sold the nugget for \$6500. The money was all placed in the bank, with the exception of \$2000, \$1000 of which he took back to give to Tom. I sold my stock for \$5000, and also took \$1000 with me to purchase cattle. We were gone a month, and when we got back there was nothing to hinder us from starting for Texas. We had a long and fearful journey before us, more trouble than it is in these times, and we were a long while in saying good-bye to the friends we left behind. We had something, too, that we didn't count on, and what it was and how we got around it shall be told in "THE MISSING POCKET-BOOK; OR, TOM MASON'S LUCK."

THE END.

FAMOUS STANDARD JUVENILE LIBRARIES.

HORATIO ALGER, JR.

The enormous sales of the books of Horatio Alger, Jr., show the greatness of his popularity among the boys, and prove that he is one of their most favored writers. I am told that more than half a million copies altogether have been sold, and that all the large circulating libraries in the country have several complete sets, of which only two or three volumes are ever on the shelves at one time. If this is true, what thousands and thousands of boys have read and are reading Mr. Alger's books! His peculiar style of stories, often imitated but never equaled, have taken a hold upon the young people, and, despite their similarity, are eagerly read as soon as they appear.

Mr. Alger became famous with the publication of that undying book, "Ragged Dick, or Street Life in New York." It was his first book for young people, and its success was so great that he immediately devoted himself to that kind of writing. It was a new and fertile field for a writer then, and Mr. Alger's treatment of it at once caught the fancy of the boys. "Ragged Dick" first appeared in 1868, and ever since then it has been selling steadily, until now it is estimated that about 200,000 copies of the series have been sold.

—*Pleasant Hours for Boys and Girls.*

A writer for boys should have an abundant sympathy with them. He should be able to enter into their plans, hopes, and aspirations. He should learn to look upon life as they do. Boys object to be written down to. A boy's heart opens to the man or writer who understands him.

—From *Writing Stories for Boys*, by Horatio Alger, Jr.

RAGGED DICK SERIES.

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Rough and Ready.
Ben the Luggage Boy.
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Phil the Fiddler.
Slow and Sure.

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The Telegraph Boy.

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Adrift in the City.

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The Young Salesman.
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The Young Bank Messenger.
A Boy's Fortune.

RUPERT'S AMBITION.

JED, THE POOR-HOUSE BOY.

HARRY CASTLEMON.

HOW I CAME TO WRITE MY FIRST BOOK.

When I was sixteen years old I belonged to a composition class. It was our custom to go on the recitation seat every day with clean slates, and we were allowed ten minutes to write seventy words on any subject the teacher thought suited to our capacity. One day he gave out "What a Man Would See if He Went to Greenland." My heart was in the matter, and before the ten minutes were up I had one side of my slate filled. The teacher listened to the reading of our compositions, and when they were all over he simply said: "Some of you will make your living by writing one of these days." That gave me something to ponder upon. I did not say so out loud, but I knew that my composition was as good as the best of them. By the way, there was another thing that came in my way just then. I was reading at that time one of Mayne Reid's works which I had drawn from the library, and I pondered upon it as much as I did upon what the teacher said to me. In introducing Swartboy to his readers he made use of this expression: "No visible change was observable in Swartboy's countenance." Now, it occurred to me that if a man of his education could make such a blunder as that and still write a book, I ought to be able to do it, too. I went home that very day and began a story, "The Old Guide's Narrative," which was sent to the *New York Weekly*, and came back, respectfully declined. It was written on both sides of the sheets but I didn't know that this was against the rules. Nothing abashed, I began another, and receiving some instruction, from a friend of mine who was a clerk in a book store, I wrote it on only one side of the paper. But mind you, he didn't know what I was doing. Nobody knew it; but one day, after a hard Saturday's work—the other boys had been out skating on the brick-pond—I shyly broached the subject to my mother. I felt the need of some sympathy. She listened in amazement, and then said: "Why, do you think you could write a book like that?" That settled the matter, and from that day no one knew what I was up to until I sent the first four volumes of Gunboat Series to my father. Was it work? Well, yes; it was hard work, but each week I had the satisfaction of seeing the manuscript grow until the "Young Naturalist" was all complete.

—*Harry Castlemon in the Writer.*

GUNBOAT SERIES.

Frank the Young Naturalist.
Frank on a Gunboat.
Frank in the Woods.
Frank before Vicksburg.
Frank on the Lower Mississippi.
Frank on the Prairie.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN SERIES.

Frank Among the Rancheros.
Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho.
Frank in the Mountains.

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The Sportsman's Club in the Saddle.
The Sportsman's Club Afloat.
The Sportsman's Club Among the Trappers.

FRANK NELSON SERIES.

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Frank in the Forecastle.
The Boy Traders.

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The Buried Treasure.
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The Young Game Warden.
The Mystery of Lost River Cañon.

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Rebellion in Dixie.
The Ten-Ton Cutter.
A Sailor in Spite of Himself.

THE PONY EXPRESS SERIES.

The Pony Express Rider.
Carl, The Trailer.
The White Beaver.

EDWARD S. ELLIS.

Edward S. Ellis, the popular writer of boys' books, is a native of Ohio, where he was born somewhat more than a half-century ago. His father was a famous hunter and rifle shot, and it was doubtless his exploits and those of his associates, with their tales of adventure which gave the son his taste for the breezy backwoods and for depicting the stirring life of the early settlers on the frontier.

Mr. Ellis began writing at an early age and his work was acceptable from the first. His parents removed to New Jersey while he was a boy and he was graduated from the State Normal School and became a member of the faculty while still in his teens. He was afterward principal of the Trenton High School, a trustee and then superintendent of schools. By that time his services as a writer had become so pronounced that he gave his entire attention to literature. He was an exceptionally successful teacher and wrote a number of text-books for schools, all of which met with high favor. For these and his historical productions, Princeton College conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts.

The high moral character, the clean, manly tendencies and the admirable literary style of Mr. Ellis' stories have made him as popular on the other side of the Atlantic as in this country. A leading paper remarked some time since, that no mother need hesitate to place in the hands of her boy any book written by Mr. Ellis. They are found in the leading Sunday-school libraries, where, as may well be believed, they are in wide demand and do much good by their sound, wholesome lessons which render them as acceptable to parents as to their children. All of his books published by Henry T. Coates & Co. are re-issued in London, and many have been translated into other languages. Mr. Ellis is a writer of varied accomplishments, and, in addition to his stories, is the author of historical works, of a number of pieces of popular music and has made several valuable inventions. Mr. Ellis is in the prime of his mental and physical powers, and great as have been the merits of his past achievements, there is reason to look for more brilliant productions from his pen in the near future.

DEERFOOT SERIES.

Hunters of the Ozark.
The Last War Trail.
Camp in the Mountains

LOG CABIN SERIES.

Lost Trail.
Footprints in the Forest.
Camp-Fire and Wigwam.

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BOONE AND KENTON SERIES.

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In the Days of the Pioneers.
Phantom of the River.

IRON HEART, WAR CHIEF OF THE IROQUOIS.

THE SECRET OF COFFIN ISLAND.

THE BLAZING ARROW.

J. T. TROWBRIDGE.

Neither as a writer does he stand apart from the great currents of life and select some exceptional phase or odd combination of circumstances. He stands on the common level and appeals to the universal heart, and all that he suggests or achieves is on the plane and in the line of march of the great body of humanity.

The Jack Hazard series of stories, published in the late *Our Young Folks*, and continued in the first volume of *St. Nicholas*, under the title of "Fast Friends," is no doubt destined to hold a high place in this class of literature. The delight of the boys in them (and of their seniors, too) is well founded. They go to the right spot every time. Trowbridge knows the heart of a boy like a book, and the heart of a man, too, and he has laid them both open in these books in a most successful manner. Apart from the qualities that render the series so attractive to all young readers, they have great value on account of their portrayures of American country life and character. The drawing is wonderfully accurate, and as spirited as it is true. The constable, Sellick, is an original character, and as minor figures where will we find anything better than Miss Wansey, and Mr. P. Pipkin, Esq. The picture of Mr. Dink's school, too, is capital, and where else in fiction is there a better nick-name than that the boys gave to poor little Stephen Treadwell, "Step Hen," as he himself pronounced his name in an unfortunate moment when he saw it in print for the first time in his lesson in school.

On the whole, these books are very satisfactory, and afford the critical reader the rare pleasure of the works that are just adequate, that easily fulfill themselves and accomplish all they set out to do.—*Scribner's Monthly*.

JACK HAZARD SERIES.

Jack Hazard and His Fortunes.
Doing His Best.
The Young Surveyor.
A Chance for Himself.
Fast Friends.
Lawrence's Adventures.

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