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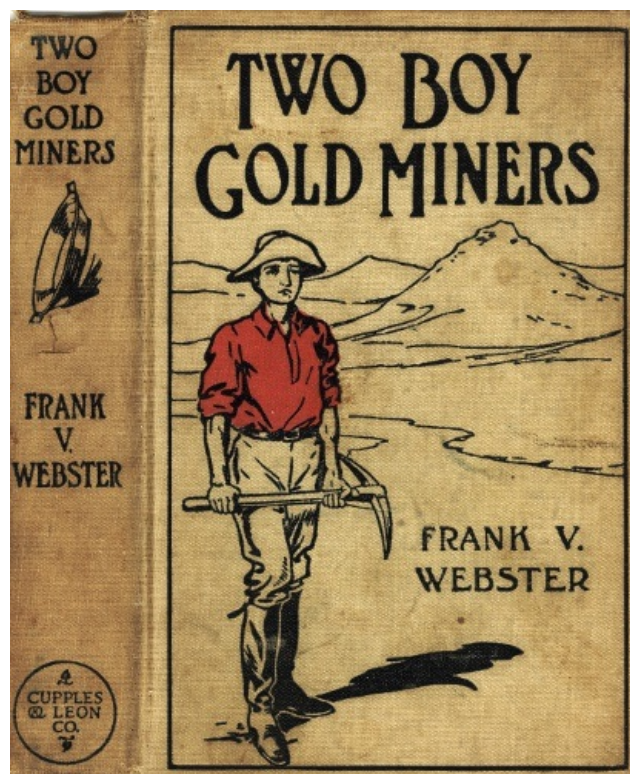
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO BOY GOLD MINERS; OR, LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS ***



Two Boy Gold Miners

Or, Lost in the Mountains

BY FRANK V. WEBSTER

**AUTHOR OF "THE BOY FROM THE RANCH," "BOB THE CASTAWAY,"
"THE NEWSBOY PARTNERS," "ONLY A FARM BOY," ETC.**

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"It was burning fiercely, in spite of the drenching rain"

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TWO BOY GOLD MINERS

CHAPTER I

HARD TIMES

"What's the matter, Enos?" asked a rather elderly and careworn looking woman, as she stood in the kitchen door of a small farmhouse.

The man to whom she had spoken was gazing up at the sky. His clothes were patched in places, the trousers so much so that there seemed to be very little of the original material left. He did not appear to hear his wife's question, so she repeated it.

"What's the matter, Enos? What are you looking up at the sky that way for?"

"I was looking for a sign of rain, Debby. We need some terribly bad."

"Do you see any?"

"Nope. There isn't a cloud in sight, and the wind has hung in the east for nigh on to a week. Seems so it ought to bring a shower, but it don't come."

"Things are pretty dry around here, aren't they, Enos?"

"That's what they are, Debby, and if they don't get wet soon I don't know what we're going to do."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It's liable to be. The potatoes won't amount to much, and the corn is just shriveling up with the heat. There'll be a short crop of everything but weeds, I'm thinking."

"I wouldn't worry, Enos, if I was you. Maybe things will come out all right."

"How can they, Debby, if we don't get rain? Things can't grow unless they get some moisture, and we haven't had a drop going on four weeks now. I declare, farming is the hardest kind of a life, I don't care what the books say!"

"Well, we'll have to do the best we can, I suppose," said the woman, with a sigh, as she went back into the house.

"What's the matter, mother?" asked a tall, pretty girl, who was washing the breakfast dishes. "You look worried."

"I am, Nettie."

"What about?"

"Everything; but your father in particular."

"Is he sick, mother?"

"No; but he's fretting himself to death because there isn't any rain, and he's afraid the crops will be ruined."

"That would be too bad."

"Yes; times are hard enough as it is, without having a short crop of everything. We depended on a good season this year to finish paying off the mortgage, but the way it looks now we'll be deeper in debt than ever. I declare! it's too bad, just as your father was getting on his feet, after a lot of bad luck, to have this dry spell come."

The girl did not reply, but there came a more serious look on her pretty face. She was a farmer's daughter, and she knew what it meant if there was a long period without rain.

Enos Crosby, with his wife, his daughter Nettie and his two sons, Jed and Will, had a small farm near the town of Lockport, in one of the middle Western States. Jed was the elder son, a good-humored lad, always inclined to look on the bright sides of things. Will, the younger brother, was somewhat prone to be melancholy. His mother said it was because he grew so fast; that he was always looking ahead and seeing how things came out before they really happened. Though he was two years younger than Jed, he was half a head taller, though not so strong.

Mr. Crosby had tried for many years to make a living off the farm for himself and his family. He had barely succeeded. Some years he saved a little money, but, as soon as he did so, it went to help pay off the mortgage, with which nearly every farm in that locality was saddled. Some years he fell behind, and had to borrow money to carry him through the winter.

As Mr. Crosby stood in the little garden, at the side of the house, and continued to gaze up at the sky, he murmured:

"Well, if we don't get rain by to-morrow night I don't know what we'll do. Have to borrow some

more money to get along with, I guess, for the crops are practically ruined now. Still, a good soaking shower would do a world of good. I wonder how the boys are making out with their cultivating? Guess I'll take a walk over and see."

In dry spells it is a practice of farmers to cultivate, or frequently dig up, the soil around their corn, potatoes or such other crops as admit of it. This pulverizing of the earth, in a measure, makes up for the lack of rain.

That morning Jed and Will had been sent to the big corn patch, which was in a distant field, to work over the ground, and let a little air get to the roots, so that the lack of rain might be offset. As Mr. Crosby strolled over to the corn patch his mind was filled with many thoughts.

"I wish I could find something else to do besides farming," he murmured to himself. "It's a very uncertain way of making a living. Still, I suppose it's all I'm fitted for. I don't know much about business, and my folks have been farmers all their lives. But I never saw such hard times as we're having now. I wouldn't mind so much if it was me alone, but there's Nettie. She does want a piano terribly bad, so she can learn to play. She's real quick to learn. And Debby"—as he called his wife, Deborah—"she needs some new clothes, though she never complains about the old ones."

"I need some new ones myself, by the looks of these," he went on, glancing down at his much-patched trousers. "I guess Debby will be hard put to find any of the original pattern left to fasten a patch on. But I don't mind. I wish I could give my boys a better education, though. What little schooling they get here in the winter ain't never going to put them ahead very far. Well, I suppose there's no help for it."

He trudged on despondently, now and again casting anxious glances upward, to see if there was not in the sky some little cloud that bore a promise of the much-needed rain. But the sun shone down hotter than ever.

Meanwhile, Jed and Will were proceeding with their cultivating. Each one was driving a horse attached to a small machine, the sharp teeth of which cut through the dry, caked soil. The horses moved slowly along the rows of corn, a cloud of dust hovering over them and the young farmers.

"Hey, Will!" called Jed to his brother, whose head was some distance above the stunted cornstalks, "don't you feel like having an ice-cream soda?"

"Don't I, though? Say, Jed, quit talking like that, will you! My throat is all dry down inside, and my tongue is getting twice as thick as it ought to be. Whew! But this dust is fierce! I guess it's forgotten how to rain."

"Looks like it. But I'm going to have a drink, anyhow. Whoa, Tabasco Sauce! Stand still!"

"Who you talking to?" asked Will, looking through the corn to where his brother was.

"My horse, of course."

"That's a queer name for him."

"Well, Tabasco Sauce is the hottest stuff I know about, and I reckon my horse is about the hottest thing around here, unless it's me. But don't you want a drink?"

"What of? I don't care for creek water, and it's too far to go back to the house."

"Here's where I stand treat, and surprise you," went on Jed. "Come on. Your horse will stand without hitching."

"I don't know about that. He's been acting queer, lately. He was quite frisky when I started off ahead of you this morning, and tried to run away."

"You don't say so? Fancy Pete running away! Maybe you'd better tie him."

"I will. There's a big stone here. But what are you going to drink? I tell you I won't touch that creek water. I don't believe it's good, the creek's so low."

"That's all right. Come on with me."

Jed, whose horse showed no signs of straying away, left his steed standing in the middle of a row of corn, while Will fastened Pete to a big boulder, by wrapping the reins around the stone. The elder brother then led the way to the creek, which bordered the corn field, and striding to a spot where some weeping willow trees cast a cool shade, he plunged his hand down in a little pool, and drew up an earthen jug.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

"Switchel?" inquired Will

"That's what. I made a jug of it this morning when I knew we were coming over to this hot place. That's what made me late, and you got here ahead of me."

"Well, pass it over. I'm as dry as a powder horn."

"I'll take it first, if you don't mind," remarked Jed, with a smile. "You're so tall, Lanky, that if you got to drinking, all there is in the jug might run down to your feet, and I'd get left."

He laughed and, tilting up the jug, drank from the uncorked opening. Switchel, I may explain to my young readers, is a drink much used by farmers, and those who have to work in hot fields often take a jug of it along, especially if they are far from good drinking water. It is composed of molasses, water and ginger, and has a pleasant taste.

"Um! I feel better," remarked Jed as he passed the jug to his brother. "Now, Bean-pole, don't take it all. That's got to last until noon, and the day has only begun."

"Don't worry. I won't take any more than you did."

After the refreshing draught the two brothers rested for a moment in the shade of the willow trees.

"Do you know, Will, I'm not much stuck on farming," remarked Jed slowly.

"Me either. I don't mind hard work, but there doesn't seem to be much of a prospect here."

"You're right. Dad and all of us work hard, but it does not seem to amount to anything. Times are getting harder all the while and even the weather is against us."

"It does seem so. But I suppose it would be just as bad if we were in some other business."

"Maybe. I wish I could get out of here. I'd like to do something else than farm."

"What would be your choice?"

"Well," remarked Jed, slowly, while a smile appeared on his face that had grown a bit serious, "I read about a tramp once that was looking for a contract to gather the blossoms on a century plant, that bloomed once in a hundred years. I don't care for anything quite as slow as that, but I would like a job where I could make a bit of money, instead of always paying up back debts."

"Yes, poor dad has had bad luck. But maybe better times are coming."

"I'm afraid not. But this isn't cultivating the corn, and, if we don't do that, I know there won't be any crop coming this fall. Let's get back to work."

"Suppose we give the horses a drink," suggested Will.

"They can't take switchel out of the jug. Besides, I don't believe they'd care for it."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" exclaimed Will, who was not as fond of a joke as was his older brother. "Let's lead 'em to the creek."

They unhitched the animals, putting halters on them, and led the eager steeds toward the inviting water. Whether it was the heat, or whether he decided he had done enough work for one day was not made clear, but, no sooner did Will's horse, Pete, take one sip of the water, than he jerked the halter rope from the boy's hand, kicked up his heels and, with a shrill whinny, dashed away through the corn.

CHAPTER II

AFTER THE RUNAWAY

"There he goes!" cried Will.

"So I see," remarked Jed, rather calmly. "You didn't need to tell me that. But he'll not run far. It's too hot. Now hold on, Tabasco Sauce. You needn't think you're going, too," for Jed's horse showed a disposition to follow its mate.

"I'll have to catch him!" cried Will. "He'll trample a lot of corn down. I might have known he'd be up to some trick. He acted queer all the morning."

"Maybe it's a touch of sunstroke," suggested Jed. "Wait a minute and I'll help you. I'll have to fasten this two-twenty trotter of mine, or he may take a notion to start a race against time."

He fastened his horse to a tree, in a shady place near the creek, and then the two brothers started off after the runaway. As they ran through the rows of corn Will uttered an exclamation.

"There he goes!" he shouted, pointing to the road, which ran along one side of the corn field. "He's going toward Fentonville like a blue streak!"

"The rascal!" exclaimed Jed. "He must have headed for the bars. We forgot to put them up when we came in, and he got out. I wonder what ails him, anyhow? Never knew him to act this way before."

"Me either. But it was you who left the bars down. You came in last."

"So I did. That's too bad. But, come on. We'll cut across to the road, and see if we can't catch him."

The two brothers changed their direction, and raced toward the fence that separated the field

from the dusty highway. Meanwhile the horse was galloping along it, in the midst of a white cloud which his hoofs kicked up. The animal seemed to be rejoicing in a long-sought freedom.

Just as the boys reached the fence their father came along.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Crosby, surprised to see his two sons leaving their work.

"Old Pete ran away," explained Will. "There he goes," and he pointed to the moving cloud of dust.

"Old Pete ran away?" repeated the farmer.

"Yep. I was giving him some water at the creek, when he kicked up his heels and bolted."

"That's too bad," spoke Mr. Crosby, seriously. "He may run into something, and get hurt, or he may get lost and it will be a week before we can trace him. Or maybe some one may steal him. I heard there was a band of gypsies over near Fentonville, and they're great hands to steal horses. Better take after him, boys."

"We will, dad," said Jed. "Will you go over there and look after my nag? He's tied, but he may take a notion to go off."

"Oh, I guess Ned is safe," remarked Mr. Crosby. "But I would hate to have anything happen to Pete. We need both horses very much at this season, when there's so much cultivating to do, and if he gets stolen, or injured so he can't work, it will be quite a loss to me."

"We'll get him, dad," spoke Will.

"I'll go over and do some cultivating until you get back," went on the boys' father. "Land sakes! But I wish it would rain!" and, with the worried look still on his face, the farmer climbed the fence and walked through the rows of corn.

Meanwhile the two brothers started on an easy run down the highway. They knew they might have a long chase after the runaway, and they wanted to save their energies.

"Suppose he runs into a carriage, or something, and gets all cut and bruised and lame, so he can't work," spoke Will.

"What's the use of supposing any such thing as that?" asked Jed. "Probably he'll run until he gets tired, and we'll find him along the road, waiting for us."

"I'm afraid something will happen," went on Will, rather gloomily. "Maybe, as dad said, the gypsies will steal him."

"Nonsense!" retorted Jed, taking a more hopeful view. "What's the use of worrying until you have to?"

"But if we lose that horse it will be a serious blow to dad. He's only got these two, and there's no money left to hire or buy another."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him and mother talking about it the other night. She asked him why he didn't hire Joe Wright's horse, to help with the cultivating, and he said he couldn't afford it."

"Well, of course it would be serious if we only had one horse left to do the farm work with," admitted Jed. "But Pete isn't lost yet."

"It will be my fault if he is," said his brother. "I suppose I shouldn't have unharnessed him from the cultivator. He couldn't have run very far, dragging that."

"I guess not. But we'll find him, all right."

"I can't see any more of him."

"No, he's gone around the bend in the road. We'll make some inquiries when we get there."

The two lads went on at a dog-trot. In spite of the calm way in which he took it, Jed was not a little worried over the running away of the horse. A number of things might happen to the animal, and even the loss of its services meant a serious handicap at the farm in those hard times. Both boys felt that they simply must recover the animal, before it had run too far.

As they reached the turn of the road, around which the horse had disappeared, they looked ahead, hoping to get a sight of the runaway. But the road twisted and turned so that it was impossible to see very far.

"Hello, Mr. Johnson!" called Jed to a man who was hoeing some cabbages in a field near the highway. "Did you see our brown horse pass here a while ago?"

"Was that your hoss?" asked the man, straightening up, and wiping his head with a big, red handkerchief.

"Yep."

"Waal, I couldn't tell whether it was a hoss or a cow, it were goin' so fast, and th' dust was so thick. I never see it so dry, not since seventy-three. I guess——"

"Then the horse went on toward Fentonville?" asked Jed, interrupting the farmer, who was one of the greatest talkers in that locality.

"Yep, he did that. But, as I was sayin', I ain't seen it so dry since seventy-three. That was th' year I——"

"Come on, Will," spoke Jed, in a low voice. "I've heard that story a dozen times. Much obliged," he called to Mr. Johnson. "We want to catch him before the gypsies nab him," and with that the two boys ran on.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mr. Johnson, as he looked after the disappearing lads. "They're in a turrrible hurry. I ain't never seen it so dry since seventy-three, and that year I——" Then he seemed to realize that he had no audience, and he began to hoe the cabbages again.

Meanwhile Jed and Will ran on. When they came to a straight stretch of road, they looked eagerly down it, but they were not rewarded by a sight of the horse.

"I didn't think he would run so long," remarked Will.

"Especially on a hot day like this," added Jed. "I'm going to slow down a bit. You're so thin, Will, the heat doesn't have a good chance to get at you." Jed was inclined to fleshiness.

"We'd ought to have taken the other horse to chase after Pete on," said Will.

"Ned couldn't carry both of us."

"I didn't mean we were both to ride him."

"Oh, I suppose I could walk, and you'd ride."

"I'm not particular. But it's too late to think of that now. I wonder why we can't see him? He must have turned off somewhere."

"Very likely. Here comes a man. We'll ask him."

Down the road the boys saw approaching a rather elderly man. He walked slowly, leaning heavily on a cane, and over his shoulder was a bundle.

"Looks like a pedler," commented Jed.

"Maybe he's one of the gypsy gang," suggested Will.

"Guess not. They very seldom travel alone. No, he's a white man, but he's tanned enough to be a gypsy," went on Jed, as the stranger approached closer.

"Morning, boys," said the man, pleasantly. "Hot, ain't it? My, you look all played out! Is the sheriff after you?"

"The sheriff?" repeated Jed, for the words were somewhat puzzling to him.

"Yes. Out West, where I hail from, a man doesn't run the way you have unless the sheriff gets after him. And then usually he does his running on a horse."

"Well, we happen to be doing our running after a horse," replied Jed, with a smile. "You didn't happen to see a brown horse with only a bridle on, as you came along, did you?"

"Did he have a white spot on the breast?"

"Yes," said Will, eagerly.

"Then I guess I saw him. I was walking along, a way back, going slow because my corn hurts me, and I see a cloud of dust coming toward me, lickity-split. I thought it was a drove of steers on a stampede at first, and I got out of the way. Then I see it was only one horse. Queer how much dust he did kick up, but then it's terrible dry in these parts. Worse than the Nevada desert in midsummer."

"Where did the horse go?" asked Jed, a little impatiently, for he did not care for all those details.

"I'm coming to that, my lad. Just after he passed me the horse seemed to think he'd run enough, and he jumped over a fence, into a pasture, and began to eat. Pretty good jump it was, too, after the way he'd been running."

"Come on, Will!" cried Jed. "We'll catch him."

"Hold on, and I'll help you," exclaimed the man, as he followed the two boys down the road.

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD MINER

"Shall we let him help us?" asked Will, in a low tone, of his brother.

"I guess so. I don't see why we shouldn't. He was kind enough to tell us about the horse."

"I know; but he seems like a queer character."

"Oh, I guess he's all right. He said he was from out West, and the folks there are a little different from those in this part of the country. We'll wait for him."

The boys, who had started off at a fast pace, on hearing where their horse was, now slackened their gait, to allow the man to catch up to them.

"You seem to be in pretty much of a hurry, boys," remarked the stranger.

"Well, it means quite a loss to us if that horse gets away," replied Jed. "We were cultivating corn, my brother and I, and Pete took a notion he wanted a vacation. We're afraid he'll get hurt, or stolen, and we only have one other horse."

"Where might you boys live?"

"About a mile back," replied Will.

"And what might your names be?"

Jed told him, wondering the while at the man's rather queer manner.

"And what might be the name of the place where you live?"

"Well, it might be almost anything," responded Jed, unable to withstand the chance to make a little joke, "but it happens to be Lockport."

"Lockport. That's a queer name. If it was out West, where I come from, they'd probably call it 'Dead Man's Gulch,' or 'Red Horseville,' or 'Eagle Pass,' or some such common-sense name as that. But Lockport——"

"They call it that because when you're there you're as good as locked up," spoke Jed. "You can't get away from it; that is, if you're poor."

"Are you poor?" inquired the man, with a quick look from under his shaggy brows at the two boys.

"Well, we don't throw any gold dollars over our left shoulder," replied Jed. "My father is a farmer, and I never knew any rich ones."

"That's so," admitted the man. "They generally have to work hard for their money."

"Say, if we're going to catch that horse, we'd better hurry," remarked Will, who was anxious lest the animal might again take a notion to run away.

"That's so, boys. I didn't mean to detain you. Step along lively. I guess you'll find that Gabe Harrison can keep up to you. I'm pretty lively, if I am old."

"Is your name Gabe Harrison?" asked Jed.

"That's it. Gabe—short for Gabriel—only I'm no relation to the trumpet blower, so don't think the end of the world is coming. Now trot along, and we'll catch the horse. Then we can talk afterward."

It was good advice, and the boys followed it. When they hurried on, for a quarter of a mile further, they saw, in a field near the highway, old Pete calmly browsing on what little grass was left after the dry spell.

"There he is!" exclaimed Will. "I'll catch him. I can run faster than you, Jed."

"Better go easy," advised Gabe Harrison. "Once a horse finds out what fun it is to run away, he's liable to want to do some more of it."

"He never did it before," observed Jed.

"There's always a first time. Here, I'll tell you what to do. It's the way I used to catch my mule when he took a notion to be contrary, and would stray away when I was prospecting."

"Prospecting for what?" asked Jed, who was beginning to be interested in the stranger.

"For gold, of course. I'm an old gold miner, but I'm down on my luck now. Here, take some of this salt, and hold it out in your hat. Horses will do almost anything for a bit of salt, and I guess you won't have any trouble catching him."

While he was speaking the old miner had put his bundle down on the ground, and opened it. The boys saw he had a regular outfit such as a man might use to camp out with along the road in the summer. There were some tin and sheet iron dishes and utensils, some food, and the head of a pickaxe.

"I can't get out of the habit of traveling just as I used to do when I was prospecting," said the man. "I don't have to ask any odds of anybody then, but it's not so easy packing this stuff on my back. I ought to have a mule or a pony, but I can't afford to. There, take this salt," and he gave Will some from a sack. "I guess that will fetch the horse."

Will put it in his hat, jumped the fence, and approached the animal, which ceased cropping the grass, and looked up as the boy entered the field. Probably old Pete was debating in his equine mind, if he had one, whether it was better to see what it was that Will had in his hat, or whether he would kick up his heels, and enjoy a little more freedom.

Meanwhile Jed, who had remained with the old miner, looked curiously at the bundle, which Mr. Harrison was tying up again.

"What's the pickaxe for?" inquired the boy.

"That's my old pick that I used when I was a miner."

"What are you carrying it with you for?"

"Because that's a lucky pickaxe. Many a hundred dollars' worth of gold has that pick dug for me. I broke the handle, and from then on I had bad luck. But I kept the pick, and some day I may put a new handle on it, and start to mining again."

"Where did you dig gold?" asked Jed, while a curious longing came into his heart to get away from the tiresome farm work and embark upon the free and fascinating life of a prospector. He knew little of such life, or, perhaps, he would not have desired to undertake it, for it is full of hardships and dangers, compared to which farming is easy and simple.

But the meeting that day of the old miner and the two boys was destined to have a far-reaching effect, and the head of the pick, which Gabe Harrison carried mainly for sentimental reasons, played quite a part in the adventures that were soon to follow.

"Where did I dig gold?" repeated Gabe, as he finished tying up his pack. "Well, young man—Jed, I mean, if you'll allow me to call you that—I've dug gold 'most every place there was gold to dig. I'm not particular that way. I've prospected all over the Western part of the United States, and I've even been in Alaska, where I nearly froze to death, but I got a lot of gold there."

"What made you give it up?" asked Jed, becoming more and more interested.

"I didn't. I had bad luck, though it was as much my fault as it was anything else."

"Did some one rob you?"

"Yes, but for the matter of that I gave them the chance. It was mostly my own fault. I'm my own worst enemy, my lad, but I think I've turned over a new leaf, and when Gabe Harrison does the foolish things he used to do, I hope you'll send him a special-delivery letter and tell him so."

"I will, if he leaves me his address," replied Jed, entering into the spirit of the occasion.

"I'll do that. There, your brother has caught the horse. I thought that salt would fetch the critter. I had a mule once—but that's a long while ago. Maybe I'll tell you about it some day."

Will had caught old Pete, and the horse was eagerly licking up the salt from the lad's hat.

"I'll open the bars for you," called Jed, hurrying forward to help his brother. "Is he hurt any?"

"Not a scratch on him."

"That's good. You'd better ride him home, so dad won't be worrying. I'll walk."

"You can ride if you want to," said Will, generously.

"No, you're lighter weight, and it's a hot day. Besides, Pete must be pretty well tired out. Look out he doesn't run away with you again."

"I will. Wish I had a bridle instead of this halter."

"Hold on. I've got one!" exclaimed Mr. Harrison. "It's one that belonged to my mule, but I lost the mule and you might as well take the bridle."

The old miner opened another part of his pack, and took out a strong bridle, that showed some signs of wear. It was quickly slipped on Pete, and then Will, mounting the animal's back, rode off.

"If you'll stop at our house on your way past," he called back to Mr. Harrison, "you can get your bridle."

"All right, I will. Might as well go that way as any other," the man added to Jed, as they started along the highway.

"Haven't you any particular place to go?"

"No, I'm just sort of waiting for something to turn up. I've about made up my mind to get back to the gold country. I heard of some new strikes they were making in Montana, and I've a sort of fever in my blood to get there."

With Jed asking questions, and the old miner giving in answer considerable information about the Western mining country, the two trudged along until they reached the Crosby farm.

"Won't you come in, and have some dinner?" asked Jed, as Will came out to the gate with the bridle. "It's 'most twelve o'clock, and you'll be very welcome. You did us quite a service in helping

us to get the horse back. It would have meant a lot to dad to lose him."

"Oh, pshaw! I didn't do anything. But, if you don't mind, I'll sit down and have a bite. It's sort of lonesome, eating all alone beside the road."

"And you promised to tell me how you lost your gold that you dug," said Jed.

"Did I? Well, I don't remember that I did. Still, if you'd like to hear what a foolish man I was, I won't mind telling you."

CHAPTER IV

A CURIOUS STORY

While the old miner was standing at the gate, with the two brothers, Mr. Crosby came out of the house.

"Here is the man who helped us find Pete, father," said Will.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir," responded the farmer heartily, extending his hand. "Won't you come in?"

"I just invited him to dinner, dad," spoke Jed.

"That's right. Come in, Mr.—er——"

"Harrison, Gabriel Harrison, though my pardners and the boys used to call me Gabe. I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure, for your invitation."

"We don't often see strangers out this way," went on the farmer. "I understand you are a miner."

"I used to be, but I'm not much of anything now. I've been prospecting around here lately, looking for something to turn up, but it doesn't seem to be going to. Pretty dry around here, isn't it, Mr. Crosby?"

"Entirely too much so. I don't know what I'm going to do about my crops if we don't get rain soon."

Gabe Harrison looked up at the sky. The sun seemed to be blazing down as hot as ever. The old miner glanced to the various points of the compass. Then he leaned over and gravely felt of his left foot.

"What's the matter? Got a stone bruise?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No, but I've got a very sensitive corn. It's as good as a barometer. It's beginning to hurt like all possessed, and I shouldn't be surprised if we had a rain storm soon. It always aches as it does now, just before a storm."

"Doesn't it bother you at other times?" asked Jed with a smile.

"Not at all. I think we're going to have rain."

"I certainly hope so," remarked Mr. Crosby. "But you'd better come in now. My wife and daughter have dinner all ready, and I know the women folks don't like to be kept waiting when everything's on the table."

"You're right there, stranger—I mean Mr. Crosby," said Gabe. "I'll come in. Can I wash up a bit? I've got considerable of the dirt of this county spread over my face and hands, only it isn't 'pay dirt.'"

"What's 'pay dirt'?" asked Will

"That, my boy, is what miners call dirt that has gold in it. Many a rocker full I've washed up. Sometimes I'd get a lot of the yellow dust, and, again I wouldn't make enough to buy my bacon. But it's all in the day's work."

Mr. Crosby led his rather queer guest to a shed, where in the summer time the male members of the family washed in preparation for their meals. Mr. Harrison gave himself a vigorous scrubbing with the yellow soap, and polished his face on the coarse towel until his countenance fairly shone. He was a well preserved old man, with a ruddy complexion, that showed through his coating of tan.

"Do you find gold mining pays?" asked Mr. Crosby, after the meal, when the gold-hunter had done full justice to the cooking of Mrs. Crosby and Nettie.

"Yes, about as well as anything—farming, for instance. I suppose your business has its ups and downs."

"Mostly downs. I declare, I never knew such hard times as we're having now! Not only me, but every farmer I know. This long dry spell is likely to have a bad effect on the country."

"I believe you. We miners don't have it all our own way, either."

"I thought you said you had dug plenty of gold," put in Jed, who, with his brother, was an interested listener.

"So I did. But digging it and keeping it are two different things, young man."

"Did you lose what you had?" asked Mr. Crosby, who had heard from his sons something of their guest's history.

"I lost it—yes—in a way. I might as well tell you the story. It's not a very pleasant one. It goes to show that a man can be a pretty big fool when he tries real hard. That's not a very nice thing to say, but it's the truth."

"How did it happen?" asked Will.

"Well, as I've told you, I've been a gold miner for a number of years. I've prospected, or looked for gold, in many places in this country. And I've found my share of yellow nuggets in my time.

"I made my last strike in Nevada. Where I was, nobody thought there was much but silver, but I was lucky enough to come upon a good gold lead, and the vein got bigger the farther I dug. Well, to make a long story short, I took out several thousand dollars in pure gold. Then I lost it."

"Couldn't you find it again?" asked Nettie, who, with her brothers, was eagerly listening to the miner's story.

"No, little miss, I couldn't, for I lost it by gambling."

"Gambling!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby, for he and his wife were strict church people, and did not know much about the vices of the world.

"That's the plain truth. Everybody out West gambles—that is, nearly everybody. There are some exceptions, of course, but I wasn't one. Very foolishly thought I could get something for nothing, and put up my money in a card game."

"And you lost?" inquired Mrs. Crosby.

"Every one but the man running the game loses sooner or later, ma'am," replied the miner. "It's run that way. I lost over a thousand dollars before I had sense enough to quit."

"Oh, then you stopped in time. I'm glad to hear that," said the farmer.

"No, I didn't. I stopped gambling, but I didn't get out of the company of the gamblers, as I should have done. I stayed right there, for I thought I knew it all. Ah, that's a true saying, that there's 'no fool like an old fool,' if you'll excuse me using such language, but I want you boys to take a lesson from me."

"Then how did you lose the rest of your fortune?" asked Jed.

"I was swindled out of it," replied Gabe Harrison. "It was partly my own fault, though. If I had had sense enough to keep away from the gamblers it wouldn't have happened. But one of them proposed a certain deal to me, and I went in with him. When it was all over I found I knew a great deal more than I did at first, but I hadn't any money left."

"They took it all?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"One man got the most of it."

"How?"

"Well, it was an old-time swindle, but I don't believe you'd understand if I told you. Such things aren't good for young people to hear about, anyhow. But I woke up one morning without a cent in my pocket, whereas the night before I had over five thousand dollars in pure gold."

"Five thousand dollars!" murmured Mr. Crosby, to whom such a sum seemed a large fortune.

"Yes. Oh, we didn't think much of that amount in the West. Money was easily made and easily spent there."

"Who got it?" asked Jed, leaning forward in his intense interest in the miner's curious story.

"One man got the most of it."

"Who was he?" inquired Will.

"He went by the name of Con Morton, but I guess he had half a dozen other titles he used whenever it was convenient. Yes, he got most of my fortune by a swindle, and then he lit out. I haven't seen him since. I wish I had. I think I could have made him give me back at least a part of it."

"Where was this?" asked Mrs. Crosby.

"Out in Nevada. Now, I'm afraid I've taken up too much of your time with my foolish story. But maybe it will be a lesson to the boys," and he looked at Jed and Will. "I don't suppose you'll ever go hunting gold, and gambling, but if you do, steer clear of any one by the name of Con Morton."

"I don't believe we'll ever get the chance to hunt gold, Mr. Harrison," replied Jed, "and we certainly won't gamble."

"Stranger things have happened—I mean about hunting gold—but I'm pretty sure if you do find any of the yellow lumps you won't be as foolish as I was, and let a swindler get them away from you. Well, I reckon I'd better be traveling along."

"Are you going to any place in particular?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No. As I told your boys when I met them looking for the runaway horse, I'm just waiting for something to turn up. I may go back West again, or I may settle down in the East. I'm looking for a job, to tell you the truth. My money is 'most gone, and I need a little to keep me going, though I don't require much to live on."

"Then why don't you stay here?" asked the farmer. "I need a man to help me with the cultivating. I can't pay much—no farmer can these times—but I'll do the best I can. If I had a man to help with the cultivating I could stir the dirt up around the crops, and it wouldn't matter quite so much about the rain. Did you ever work on a farm?"

"Once, when I was a young lad. But if my corn keeps on hurting the way it does, I know we'll have rain."

"I hope so. But would you like to stay here a few days?"

"I think so. In fact, I will. I don't care so much about the money, but I like it here, and it will give me a chance to rest. Yes, Mr. Crosby, I'll stay and help you cultivate. Maybe it will rain, and I can then help you in other ways."

"Perhaps. Then if you'll come with me I'll show you a room you can use."

And so it was settled that the old miner should remain, for the time being, at the Crosby farm.

CHAPTER V

MORE HARD LUCK

That afternoon the two boys went back to the cornfield to resume the cultivating that had been interrupted by the runaway. It seemed hotter than ever, and there was scarcely a breath of wind.

"Whew! This is fierce!" exclaimed Will. "I can't stand it!" and he mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Oh, it might be worse," observed Jed.

"Worse? I don't see how."

"You might be out on the Nevada desert that Mr. Harrison was telling about."

"That's so. Well, I'm glad I'm not. But, what do you think of him, anyhow, Jed?"

"I think he's quite a character."

"So do I. I wish I had some of the gold he dug."

"Same here. If we had that we wouldn't have to be working in this hot cornfield. Maybe we'll find some, by and by, Will."

"Find some? How?"

"Why, go after it, to be sure. Do you know, I have an idea I'd like to be a gold miner."

"A heap you know about gold mining!"

"That's all right. Every one has to learn. I guess he didn't know anything about it at first," said the stout youth.

"Perhaps not. But what chance have we to go out West in the mining country?"

"None, I guess, Will, but I can't help thinking of it. I certainly would like to go West and be a gold miner. Think of digging gold instead of potatoes."

"There's only one thing about that," replied his brother, who was not so inclined to look on the rosy side of things, "when you're digging for potatoes you go to a field where potatoes have been planted, and when you dig, you know you're going to get some."

"Well?"

"Well, when you dig for gold you have to go it blind. It may be there and it may not. Oftener not, and you have all your digging for nothing."

"So you do here, sometimes, when the droutht or too much rain has ruined the potato crop,"

retorted Jed. "I guess it's about an even thing, Will."

"Maybe so. But I guess dad wouldn't let us go West."

"Probably not. Come on, we'll do ten more rows each, and then it will be time to go home to supper. My! But I'm glad this day will soon be over! It's been a scorcher!"

It had been very hot, and the unclouded sun, beating down on the two lads in the cornfield, seemed to fairly be trying to shrivel them up.

"I'm done!" exclaimed Jed at length, as he reached the end of the tenth row, which he had set as his "stent."

"So'm I," added his brother a minute later. "Come on, Pete. You're moving slow on account of the run you had this morning. Hark! What's that, Jed?"

"Sounded like thunder."

The two brothers listened a moment. Off in the west there was a dull rumble, where some copper-colored clouds had gathered.

"It is thunder!" exclaimed Will. "Say, I do believe it's going to rain. Won't dad be glad!"

"He sure will," spoke Jed.

"But I'm afraid it's too late to do any good," went on Will.

"Nonsense! There you go again. Always looking on the dark side of things. Why don't you say the rain will do all sorts of good?"

"I suppose I'm not built that way. But I hope it does."

"Of course it will. Come on. Let's hurry up. I don't want to get wet."

"I'll be glad to," declared Will. "Seems as if I never was so hot. I'd like to get in a tubful of ice water and stay there an hour or so."

As the lads unhitched the horses from the cultivators, leaving the machines in the field, in readiness for the work on the next day, and started homeward with the steeds, the rumble of thunder became louder, and there were flashes of lightning in the western sky.

"She's a-coming!" cried Jed. "It'll be a corker, too, after this long dry spell."

The boys had scarcely reached home before it began to rain. First there were only a few large drops, each the size of a half dollar. There was no wind, and the crack of thunder seemed like the discharge of heavy guns.

Then the trees began to bend before the blast. The wind howled through their branches. The dust from parched fields and long dry highways rose in big clouds, making a yellow haze as the sun shone through it. Then the sky was quickly overcast with a yellow cloud. The wind blew harder. Louder crashed the thunder and then, with a rushing, hissing sound, the rain fell in torrents.

"Just in time!" cried Gabe Harrison, as the boys, having put the horses in the barn, rushed up on the side porch of the farm house. "This is going to be a great shower. I knew my old corn wasn't aching for nothing."

"I guess your corn isn't any gladder of the rain than the corn we've been cultivating all day," retorted Jed. "It was almost parched with the heat."

"This will be a godsend to us farmers," spoke Mr. Crosby, as he came out to see the storm. "It would have been worth a lot more had it come sooner, but it will save part of my crops for me."

There was another crash of thunder, and it seemed as if several clouds, right overhead, opened and let out their flood of rain, so fiercely did the big drops dash down.

"Nettie, are all the windows shut?" asked Mrs. Crosby of her daughter.

"Yes, ma. I looked to 'em when I saw the shower coming up. They're all closed."

"Are you sure you shut the one in my bedroom?"

"Yep."

"I'm afraid you didn't. I'm going to look, and make certain."

If there was one worry Mrs. Crosby had, it was that the windows were not shut when a storm came up. She was afraid of the rain coming in, and she was also afraid of lightning, for, like many country women, she believed the electrical current only waited for the chance of darting in an open window to wreak damage. So she hurried off to oversee the work her daughter had said was already done.

The storm became worse. The farmer and his two sons, who, with the old miner, were watching it from the side porch, had to go in, as a shift of the wind sent the rain into their shelter.

"Now if this will keep up all night, we'll have water enough," commented Mr. Crosby.

"Do you need as much as that?" asked Gabe.

"Yes, and more too. Half the springs around here are dried up. Our well didn't have much more water in it, and the creek was lower than I ever saw it before."

They went inside the house. Mrs. Crosby finished her supervision of the windows, and came into the sitting-room, where the others were gathered.

"Jed," she called to her eldest son, "don't sit so close to the window."

"Why not?"

"You might be struck. Lightning always comes in a window."

"But this one is closed."

"That doesn't matter. Come away, do, please."

Not wanting to worry his mother, Jed obeyed. Hardly had he moved back when there came a terrific crash. It was so loud, and sounded so close, that, for a moment, every one in the room was stunned.

"That struck somewhere around here!" cried Mr. Crosby, as soon as the rolling thunder sound had died away.

"I should say so!" added Will. "You can smell the sulphur."

There was a noticeable odor in the room, like when an old-fashioned match is lighted.

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid it hit the house!" cried Mrs. Crosby. "We'll all be killed!"

"If it struck the house we wouldn't be sitting here," replied Jed. "We'd be knocked off our chairs. Come on, Will, we'll go see what damage it did."

Following that one terrible clap the storm seemed to let up a bit, though it rained harder than ever. The two boys, taking heavy coats, from nails in the kitchen, went out. No sooner had they reached the porch than Jed cried:

"It struck our cow barn! The place is on fire! Come on and get the cow out!"

His cry was heard in the sitting-room, and his father and the miner ran out. They did not need to be told what had happened. The cow shed, a small structure, near the barn, but not attached to it, was in flames.

"We must save the cow!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby. "She's worth fifty dollars!"

The men and boys rushed to the little stable. The lightning had torn out one complete side, and it was burning fiercely in spite of the drenching rain. But one look inside showed Mr. Crosby that more bad luck had come to him. Though the rain had arrived in time to save part of his crops, the lightning had struck the cow, and the poor creature was stretched out dead on the floor of the small stable.

CHAPTER VI

THE GOLD STRIKE

"You can't save that cow, Mr. Crosby!" cried Gabe Harrison. "Come on, boys, get pails and we'll see if we can't put out the fire! Where's there a well or a cistern?"

"Right over this way," replied Jed.

"More trouble!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby bitterly, as he saw his property being consumed by the flames, and thought of the dead cow.

Soon the two boys and the old miner had secured buckets and were dashing water on the flames. They might have saved themselves the trouble, however, for there came such a deluge of rain a few minutes later that the fire was extinguished.

"Well, I guess we can't do any more good out here," observed Mr. Harrison.

"No, nothing more can burn in this storm," added Will. "Lucky it didn't strike the barn."

"That's so," agreed Jed. "This is as close as I want lightning to come to me."

"It's too bad about your cow, friend Crosby," spoke the miner, as the four splashed through the water and mud back to the house.

"Indeed it is," admitted the farmer. "She was a valuable animal, and supplied us with all our milk and butter. Now I'll have to buy a new one, and I don't see where I'm going to get the money these hard times."

The boys felt their father's loss keenly, and they wished they could do something to aid him. When they reached the house they found Mrs. Crosby on the verge of hysterics, with her daughter vainly trying to quiet her.

"Some one is killed! I know there is!" exclaimed the nervous woman. "I'm sure some one is killed!"

"Only the cow, mother," replied Jed. "It might have been worse. We still have the pigs left. They seemed to like this rain, for they're out in the open part of their pen, getting a good soaking."

"Oh, Jed! How can you joke at such a serious time as this?" asked Nettie, reproachfully.

"Might as well joke as cry," answered her brother.

"That's the right view to take of it," put in old Gabe. "Always look on the bright side of things. Of course, it's too bad to lose a valuable cow, but it might have been worse. I had a partner prospecting with me once. He got careless with some dynamite, and it blowed our shanty to pieces. We had narrow escapes. But do you think my partner worried over it? Not a bit. He said he was thinking of building a new shanty, anyhow, and the dynamite blast saved him the trouble of tearing the old one down."

"That must be a dreadful country, out in the mining region," remarked Mrs. Crosby, who had somewhat recovered her composure.

"Oh, it's no worse than lots of other places, ma'am. If a man, or a boy either, for that matter, behaves himself and minds his own business, he'll get along all right. I wish I was back there, that's what I do. But listen to that rain! It's a regular cloudburst. I guess you'll get all you want, Mr. Crosby."

"Yes, the rain will do all sorts of good."

"That'll make up for the cow, dad," put in Jed, determined to look on the less gloomy side. "Then we can sell the hide to the butcher, so it won't be a total loss."

But when, a day or so later, the dead cow was sold for the hide, only a small sum was realized. As Mr. Crosby could not afford money for another animal, the family had to buy milk and butter of a neighbor.

Gabe Harrison remained at the farm, for there was plenty of work to do, as, following the rain, a big crop of weeds sprang up, and had to be hoed down. This labor the old miner could do very well, and for a week Mr. Crosby, his two sons, and Mr. Harrison were kept very busy.

But even the rain could not make up for the long dry spell, and it did not need a very expert farmer to see that only about three-quarters of the usual crop could be harvested from the Crosby place.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a hard time this winter," remarked the farmer to his wife one night, after the others had gone to bed. "Pork is going to be high, and so is feed, as there was a short crop of hay, and the horses eat an awful lot."

"It's too bad. What can we do?"

"I don't know, Debby. Sometimes I'm tempted to sell out and go to some other place."

"Where do you mean?"

"Well, down South or farther West. I've been struggling along for several years now, working hard, and barely making a living. I can't get a dollar ahead, try with all my might."

"Yes, you do work terribly hard, Enos. I wish you didn't have to."

"Oh, I don't mind the work. It's the lack of returns that I'm dissatisfied with. You work hard for that matter, and so do the boys."

"And Nettie does her share. Poor girl, she wants a new dress very much to wear to the Sunday-school picnic next week."

"I wish I could get it for her, but I don't see how I can. Money is dreadfully scarce, and I can't borrow any more. I suppose I could sell one of the pigs——"

"No, I wouldn't think of that," objected his wife. "We'll need them for pork this winter. Nothing like pork to see you through a hard winter. Nettie will have to wear the old dress. Maybe I can turn it again, though the land knows I've done that twice already. But she'll not complain."

"No, she's a good girl, and my boys are good boys. If they don't have all that lads of their age should, they don't make long faces over it. Maybe times will be better soon."

"Are you going to keep Mr. Harrison much longer?"

"No. I think I'll have to let him go next week. I need his help, but I can't afford to pay him. He works for less than a younger man would, and he does almost as much. But the boys and I will have to get along as best we can."

Though the dry spell was broken there came other troubles for Mr. Crosby. Some of the corn

became affected with a fungous disease called "smut," and part of that crop was worthless. The potatoes too began to rot in the ground, and things looked very gloomy indeed. Mr. Harrison took his dismissal good-naturedly. He said he expected to travel on, anyhow, and he was not particular where he stayed.

The week he was to leave, things were rather dull on the farm. All the work it was possible to do had been attended to, and it was only necessary to wait for the maturing of the various crops before harvesting them.

There was one spot of brightness in all this gloom. A big field of barley, which Mr. Crosby had not thought would amount to much, turned out a much larger crop than he expected. Then there happened to be a short supply of that particular grain in that section of the country, and the price went up, unexpectedly.

"Maybe things won't be so bad, after all," said the farmer, on hearing this news. "I was to the city to-day, and I had an offer from a big dealer for my barley. I was about to take it when another man offered me much more. This shows there is going to be a big demand for it, and I'm going to hold on to mine. If I can get a little more per bushel than the last offer, it will see me through the winter nicely, and leave a bit over."

"Well, that certainly is good news," said Mr. Harrison. "I'm glad I heard it before I left, for I'll be thinking of you people often this winter."

"Oh, I almost forgot about it," spoke Mr. Crosby. "I stopped at the post-office on my way home, and here's a letter for you."

"For me?" inquired the old miner in some surprise. "I wonder who can be writing to me?"

"The best way is to open it and then you can tell," said Jed, with a smile.

"Oh, I know now. It's from Ted Jordan. I know his writing. It's like a hen that stepped in an ink bottle and then tried to do a dance. Wonder what he's writing to me for from away out in Montana?"

He tore open the envelope.

"How did he know your address?" asked Will.

"Oh, I sent him one of them souvenir postcards as soon as I got here. I done it more for a joke. Sent him one with a picture of a farmer on it, and told him I'd gone to tilling land for a living. But let's see what he says I'll read you the letter. Guess there's nothing very private in it, and Ted is a jolly chap.

"Dear Gabe," read the old miner. "'Sorry to hear you got so down on your luck you had to turn farmer. Your picture don't look a bit like you, but I suppose the crows have been picking at you. Say, I have great news for you. Old Sim Butterfield, the fellow that had one ear bit off in a fight, got into trouble with a gambler out here the other day, and now the other ear is gone.'"

"How terrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Crosby.

"Oh, jest as like as not 'tain't true, ma'am. Ted is a terrible joker. But what's this?"

Mr. Harrison had turned to the last page of the letter and was earnestly reading it.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "'There has been a big strike made near Dizzy Gulch. I'm going there, and so are a lot of the boys. Better chuck up your farming and join us. The new diggings are as rich as butter. Shall I stake out a claim for you?'"

No one said anything for a few seconds. This unexpected news from the West, coming into that quiet farmhouse, was like a glimpse into another world. Jed was staring curiously at Gabe. Will's eyes were big with wonder at hearing of men who were about to set off in a quest for gold.

"Do you suppose that's a joke?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No, sir!" exclaimed Gabe, firmly. "Ted Jordan don't joke about such a serious subject as prospecting for gold. This settles it. I'm going out there as fast as I can make tracks for the West. I'm glad I saved my old pick now. It'll come in handy. Yes, sir, I'm off for Dizzy Gulch!"

Jed had risen to his feet. He was strangely excited.

"Do you suppose there'd be gold enough out there for any other persons, Mr. Harrison?" he asked.

"Enough? Of course there'll be! If it's any kind of a strike at all, it's a good one, or Ted Jordan wouldn't be going. But why do you ask?"

"Because I want to go!" exclaimed the lad quickly. "I've been thinking of it. Times are dull on the farm, and now that fall is coming on, there won't be work enough for us boys. Dad, can't Will and I go gold mining?"

"Gold mining?"

"Yes. With Mr. Harrison. Will you take us?" and the youth turned to Gabe.

"Take you? Why, of course I will, and welcome. That's a fine idea, Mr. Crosby. The two boys and I will go prospecting for gold, and when we find a good claim we'll send for you. Let 'em go. It'll pay better than farming, take my word for it. We can start in a couple of days."

"Hurrah for the gold mines of Dizzy Gulch!" exclaimed Jed, grabbing Will by the hand, and jumping around the room. "That's the stuff! Let the crops fail, we'll dig a new one—a yellow one of gold nuggets!"

CHAPTER VII

OFF FOR THE WEST

Never before, save, perhaps, when the lightning struck, had there been such excitement in the Crosby home. The farmer and his wife stared in amazement at the sight of their two sons doing a good imitation of a Highland fling, for Will had caught Jed's enthusiasm, and the two boys were singing and leaping about, "as if they were circus performers," as their mother said afterward.

"Come on, Nettie, have a waltz!" exclaimed Jed. "We'll send you back enough gold for a pair of earrings and a bracelet!"

"Jed! Jed!" exclaimed his mother. "Do behave yourself. You're not going to let them undertake that crazy plan, are you?" she asked of her husband.

Mr. Crosby did not answer. He, too, was thinking of the golden West, and his poor farm that hardly supported him.

"Of course we can go. Can't we, dad?" asked Jed. "Why, it will be the best thing that ever happened!"

"It will—if we get the gold," added his brother, more soberly, for his first enthusiasm had begun to cool.

"Find the gold? Of course we'll find the gold. Won't we, Mr. Harrison?"

"Well, I always have been pretty lucky," replied the miner. "I always got gold when I went after it, but I didn't always keep it. If I had the money the gambler swindled me out of I'd be in good shape now."

"Maybe that gambler your friend wrote about is the same one who swindled you," suggested Jed.

"No. I guess Con Morton knows enough to keep away from Ted Jordan. He's looking for him, too. But I'll come across Con some day, and then I'll wager I'll make him shell out what he stole from me. But, Mr. Crosby, seriously speaking, why can't these two boys go with me? It will do them good. As Jed says, you won't need them on the farm now, and they may strike it rich. Stranger things have happened."

"I don't know that I would object to having them go, in your company," said the farmer, "for I know they are good boys, and can take care of themselves. But I'm afraid I couldn't spare the money for railroad fares, and for the outfits."

"Don't let that worry you," advised Gabe.

"But it does worry me. You can't do anything in this world without money."

"It doesn't take much to get an outfit for a gold prospector," replied the miner. "For that matter I'll undertake to see that they get what they need. I have friends enough out there to make that part easy."

"But the railroad fares?"

"We won't need any railroad fares."

"How are you going to get out to that place with the queer name, then?" asked Mrs. Crosby.

"Dizzy Gulch, you mean? That is a queer name, but it's a good one. It makes you dizzy when you stand on the edge and look down. But we'll get there all right. It's not more than eight hundred miles from here."

"You can't walk that far," objected Nettie.

"I know that," replied the miner. "We could, but we don't want to. We'll go on horseback."

"Horseback?" repeated Jed.

"Yes. I've got money enough to purchase a good nag, and I guess your father would be willing for you boys to take the animals here. He'll not need them much longer. How about it, Mr. Crosby?"

The farmer looked thoughtful.

"You seem to get over most of the difficulties," he remarked.

"Then we can go, can't we, dad?" exclaimed Jed.

"I don't know. I must consider it further. I suppose you could take the horses. They'll only be eating their heads off in the barn, after the crops are in."

"That's the way I figured it," resumed Gabe. "Now I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll write to Ted and ask him to send me word where is the best place to strike for. Then I'll get my outfit together, such as there's left of it, look around for a horse that can travel a long distance, and we'll set out for the gold regions."

"That's the way to talk!" cried Jed. "We'll all be millionaires soon!"

"Now hold on!" remonstrated Gabe. "Don't get the idea that you can go out there and pick up gold off the ground. There are some places, I admit, where the nuggets are close to the surface, but they're few and far between. If we get any gold we'll probably have to dig for it, and digging for the yellow boys is as hard as cultivating corn or hoeing potatoes. I know, for I've tried both. But, at the same time, I don't see why we haven't as good a chance as lots of others. We'll try, anyhow—that is, if your father gives his consent."

"I suppose I might as well," said Mr. Crosby slowly. "You three seem to have it all planned out, anyhow. But I can't spare the horses for a week or two."

"That will be time enough," replied the miner. "I want to hear from Ted again." And there the conversation, for the time being, came to an end.

"It hardly seems possible; does it, Will?" asked Jed, when they were going to bed that night. "To think that we're going to become real gold miners!"

"Maybe we won't get any gold after all our trouble," suggested his less hopeful brother.

"Oh, cheer up!" advised Jed. "Wait until Gabe gets to grubbing around with that lucky pick of his, and the nuggets will just roll out, they'll be so glad we've come."

Will laughed. There was no withstanding the jolly good nature of his elder brother.

Enthusiasm for the proposed gold hunt had not waned the next day. Mr. Crosby had talked the matter over with his wife and, though she was naturally timid and nervous, she made no objections to letting the boys go. Mr. Harrison seemed quite confident that in the new diggings there was a good chance of making a moderate fortune.

"Then you can pay off the mortgage on the farm," said Mrs. Crosby to her husband.

"If the boys get money enough for that out of their gold mining, I think I'll give up farming, and become a prospector myself," said Mr. Crosby, with a smile.

Fortunately for the plan, the barley crop turned out better than any one expected, and the price was very high. Mr. Crosby received enough money to insure them against hardships that winter, and even enough to buy another horse, as he might need one if the boys took the two. He secured an animal at a low price. It was not as good as the two he had, but Jed and Will would have to have steeds that could stand a certain amount of hard life, if they were to go to the gold regions.

In the meanwhile Mr. Harrison had another letter from Ted Jordan, and this confirmed the first rumors of rich strikes. There was quite a rush of miners and others to the new fields, Jordan wrote, and he advised Gabe and the boys to hurry.

So, one morning, with their simple outfits on the saddles back of them, the boys and Gabe Harrison mounted their horses, and started off for the golden West.

"Don't you boys go to gambling," cautioned Mrs. Crosby, as she waved a farewell to her sons.

"Now, mother, you know they won't do that," said Nettie.

"I know it—but—but I—I just had to say something," replied her mother, as she tried to hide the tears that would persist in coming into her eyes.

"Look out for a bagful of gold nuggets!" called back Jed. "I'll send them by the first mail."

"All right," answered his father with a laugh. "Good luck, boys, and write when you get a chance."

"Good-by!" they chorused, and Gabe Harrison waved his broad-brimmed hat at the little group standing in front of the farmhouse. Soon they were out of sight down the road.

"It's—it's lonesome—without the boys," said Mrs. Crosby softly, as she went in the house and closed the door.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BUCKING BRONCO

"How long do you think it will take us to get to the gold fields?" asked Jed, of the old miner, as

they jogged forward.

"It's hard to say," was the answer. "You mustn't be in too much of a hurry. It's a good rule, in this business, to make haste slowly. You can't make a fortune gold-hunting in one day, and you've got to save your own strength, and that of your horse. A horse is a man's best friend in this country."

The route to the West had been carefully laid out by Mr. Harrison, who knew the land well. He had selected a line of march that, while it was not the shortest, would bring them to the Montana gold fields in good shape to start in at once with their prospecting.

For a week the travelers made fair time, stopping at night in various small towns, where living would be cheaper than in large cities, for their capital was limited. Nothing of note occurred, the weather was good, and Jed and Will began to think that gold hunting, or at least the preliminary part of it, was very much easier than farming.

"Say, I'd hate to go back now, cultivating corn in that hot field, wouldn't you?" Jed asked his brother one afternoon, as they were jogging slowly along.

"I certainly would, but I wouldn't mind now, if I had a drink of nice, cold switchel."

"Me either. You don't see any signs of a spring along the road anywhere, do you, Mr. Harrison?"

"No, and I wish I did, for the horses are pretty thirsty. But we ought to strike one soon."

"With all that, this is easier than farming," went on Jed.

"Don't be too sure of that," cautioned the old miner. "You haven't half begun yet."

And it was not long after this that Jed changed his mind about thinking it was easy to hunt for gold.

"That looks like a place where there was a spring," said Will, a little later, as they advanced around a turn in the road, and saw several horses, with men standing beside them, halted in the shade of a big tree.

"Guess you're right," admitted Gabe, "We're in luck."

It was a wayside spring, and the thirsty horses, scenting the water, hastened their pace. The gold-seekers found five men gathered around the drinking trough, into which the spring emptied through a wooden pipe. Four of the men were middle-aged, and one was quite young. They were all smoking, the older men using pipes, while the younger was rolling a cigarette with one hand, an operation at which he seemed quite adept.

"Howdy, strangers," greeted Mr. Harrison genially, as he alighted from his horse. "How's the water?"

"Nice and sweet," replied one of the men. "Come far?"

"We've done forty miles to-day."

"That's pretty good. Going far?"

"Montana."

"Montana?" exclaimed another man. "Why, that's where me and my pardner are bound. Going to the new fields?"

Mr. Harrison nodded. There was no object in concealing their destination, for they would soon be in the midst of the rush that always takes place when new gold fields are discovered.

"My name's Fred Hurd," went on the man who had last spoken. "This is my partner, John Curtin. We were in Nevada, but we went East to spend some of our money, and managed to get rid of most of it. Now we're going to new fields."

"My name's Gabe Harrison," said the old miner, and he introduced the two boys, in the hearty and easy fashion that prevails in the West. The other three men also told their names. They were Ade Bryant, the young man who smoked cigarettes, and Tim Walsh and Bill Case.

"Are you miners, too?" asked Jed, of the latter three.

"Nope," replied Ade Bryant, with a pleasant smile. "We just got rid of a bunch of steers, and we're going back to our ranch in Montana. My father owns it. It's the Diamond T Ranch," he went on, giving the name of the brand marked on all the cattle from that ranch. "Probably you've heard of it?"

The boys shook their heads. They had not heard much of outside matters in the quiet country village where they had lived nearly all their lives.

"Is your father Colonel Jack Bryant?" asked Gabe suddenly.

"That's him," replied the young man eagerly. "Do you know him?"

"No, but I've heard lots about him. There ain't a finer cattleman in these parts than Colonel Jack Bryant, and I'm glad to meet his son. Put her there, my boy!" and the old miner extended his hand to greet the young man.

When the horses had been watered and rested, the five men found that they were traveling in the same direction as was Gabe and the boys.

"Well, we'll keep company, if it's agreeable to you," proposed Mr. Hurd. "We've got plenty of grub, and we can camp together to-night."

"That suits me right down to the ground," replied Harrison, and the boys were also pleased to have company.

As the five men remounted, to continue their journey, Will noticed that Bill Case, the oldest of the cattlemen, was leading a small horse, tied by a long rope to the saddle horn of his own pony.

"Do you take turns riding those horses?" asked Will, for he was fond of animals, and a very good rider.

"No," replied Mr. Case, with a wink at his companions, which Will did not see, "that horse is a new one I bought. He's one of the fastest in this section, but the trouble is no one can ride him."

"Why not?" asked Will.

"Because he's got such a temper. Not exactly bad, you understand, but as soon as any one gets on his back, he doesn't do as a decent horse should, and carry his rider along the right way."

"I believe I could ride him," went on Will, who liked the looks of the steed.

"Are you much of a rider?" asked the man, and again he winked at his companions.

"Pretty fair," replied Will, who did not like to boast. The truth was, he was the best rider around Lockport, but he did not know what was in store for him from the innocent-looking animal that trailed along so meekly at the saddle horn of Bill Case.

"You can try this one, if you like," went on the cattleman. "I've no objection. In fact I'd like to see some one ride him. Maybe he'd be more valuable then. He needs training, but I can't seem to do anything with him."

The truth of the matter was that the horse was one of the very worst types of "bucking broncos." That is, whenever a person got on his back he would jump up into the air, and come down on four feet stiffly, almost jarring the rider out of the saddle. In fact he usually did jar him off, or, if he could not get rid of the man on his back in that way, he had other tricks as bad as bucking.

Bill Case had bought the horse at the town where he had been with his employer's cattle, and he was taking the animal back to the ranch, mainly to use in cowboy sports, for a bucking bronco is not much use as a riding steed. Bill had tried, unsuccessfully, to ride the steed, that was all right, and gentle, as long as no one tried to get on its back.

By this time Mr. Harrison and Jed were some distance ahead. They were interested in talking about gold strikes to the two miners, and had, with Hurd and Curtin, unconsciously drawn away from Will, and the three cattlemen.

"Will you let me try him?" asked the boy, as he looked at the horse. He knew nothing of bucking broncos, though he had read about them. Still, there was no way of telling one by merely looking at it.

"Sure thing," replied Mr. Case. "Here's a nice level stretch. You can try him here," and he stopped, and unfastened the long rope. At the same time he whispered to his companions: "Watch the fun now."

Will, all unaware of what was in store for him, dismounted from his own patient, plodding horse, and approached the bronco.

"Jump right on his back," advised Bill Case. "You don't need a saddle."

He knew that the moment a saddle touched the animal's back it would begin to buck, and that would give the "joke" away.

Will took hold of the animal's bridle, and patted the horse on the muzzle. Then, with a quick motion, he leaped on the bronco's back.

So suddenly was it done that the animal hardly knew what to make of it. On other occasions there had been a great fight to get a saddle on him, and this prepared him for what was to follow. But this was a new one on him. Still, he made up his mind, did that bronco, that he was not going to submit to the indignity of having a person on his back. He stood still a moment.

"Well done!" cried Bill. Then he added, in a lower tone: "Watch the fun now, boys!"

"Get up!" exclaimed Will, striking the bronco lightly on the flank.

Instantly something happened. Gathering himself together, as if he had wire springs in his legs, the bronco shot up into the air. Will was taken completely by surprise, but he managed to stay on. Then the horse came down stiffly, jarring the boy so that he thought he would shake to pieces.

But he did not fall off. Instinctively, he gripped his legs around the horse, and drew the reins tighter. The bronco was surprised. Usually one "buck" was enough to unseat any rider. He would

try a new plan.

Suddenly he started off at a fast gallop. By this time Will knew he was in for it, but he was not going to give up. Gathering headway for another leap into the air, the animal rushed on toward where Mr. Harrison, Jed and the two miners were. Then, coming to a sudden stop, the animal launched himself upward. This time, when he came down stiffly, with his head between his fore legs, Will lost his grip. He was jarred off, and fell to the ground, his head striking heavily, and rendering him unconscious.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER BIG GAME

Attracted by the noise of Will's fall, and the sound of the bucking bronco, Mr. Harrison turned quickly. He leaped from his horse and hurried to where the lad was stretched out near the bronco. The steed, now that it had gotten rid of the person on his back, was quiet.

"What happened? What's the matter, Will?" asked Gabe.

"That bronco threw him," explained Mr. Hurd. "I just caught a glimpse of it. A nasty fall, too. Is he badly hurt?"

"There don't seem to be any bones broken," replied Mr. Harrison, as he began feeling of Will's arms and legs.

"Oh, Will! Are you killed?" cried Jed, jumping from the saddle and kneeling beside his brother.

At that moment the boy on the ground opened his eyes.

"Did I—did I stay on?" he asked, as he put his hand to his head.

"Not very long," replied Mr. Hurd. "How do you feel?"

"Somewhat dizzy. I guess I'm not hurt much."

"How did it happen?" asked Jed. "Where's your horse? How did you come to get on this one?"

"They said I couldn't ride him," explained Will, nodding in the direction of the cattlemen, who were slowly approaching.

"I thought so," murmured John Curtin. "It was a trick of that big cowboy. He knew this was a bucking bronco, yet he let this lad mount it, knowing the beast would throw him off."

"So, that's the kind of men they are, eh?" spoke Gabe Harrison. "Then I guess the less we have to do with them the better. Jed, you look after Will a bit. Get him some water. There's a spring just ahead."

"Where are you going?" asked Mr. Hurd of the old miner, as he saw him turn back on the trail, and walk toward the cattlemen.

"I'm going to have a talk with that big cowboy," replied Gabe.

Bill Case and his chum, Tim Walsh, were laughing heartily as Gabe approached.

"It's a good joke, isn't it?" asked Gabe sternly. "I suppose you think you did a smart thing, Bill Case, when you got that tenderfoot to ride that bucking bronco."

"He sure is a tenderfoot," replied the cowboy, who did not exactly catch Gabe's sarcasm.

"He wanted to ride," put in Tim Walsh.

"Well, if a baby wanted to play with a loaded gun, would you let him?" asked Gabe scornfully.

"How was I to know he didn't know the difference between a bucking bronco and a cow pony?" asked Bill Case.

"You knew well enough," declared Gabe. "I think it was a mean, cowardly act, and the sooner we part company, the better I'll like it. There's the trail. We'll wait until you get far enough ahead on it so we can't see your dust. I have no use for such fellows as you."

"Hold on there!" exclaimed Bill Case, an ugly look coming over his face. "Maybe you don't know who you're talking to."

"I know I'm talking to a coward who'll take advantage of a tenderfoot's ignorance to let him ride a dangerous horse," replied Gabe.

"Say, old man," began the cowboy, preparing to dismount from his horse, "me and you is going to have trouble, right now, unless you take back them words. Bill Case is a hard case when it comes to that, and I ain't used to such talk from nobody."

"Well, you'll listen to it from me," retorted the fearless miner. "I say you're a coward, and I'm not

afraid of you."

In an instant the cowboy was off his steed and was striding toward the old man, who, nothing daunted, awaited his approach. Tim Walsh moved up closer, as if he, too, would take a hand in the affair.

Gabe looked back to where the two miners and Jed were taking care of Will. Mr. Hurd and Mr. Curtin were aware that something unusual was taking place, and they made ready to go to the aid of Gabe.

There was an ugly air about Bill Case, and he had the appearance of a man who would resort to desperate measures in a fight, such as now seemed imminent. Gabe was unarmed, having left his revolver and rifle in his saddle pack, but the cowboy wore in a belt two large revolvers. He made no motion to draw one, however, but, with clenched fists, strode closer to Gabe.

"Are you going to take back what you said about me?" he asked.

"No, I'm not," replied the old miner. "I'm not afraid of you, even if you are a hard case."

Bill raised his hand, as if to strike Gabe, but, at that instant, Ade Bryant, for whose father the two cattlemen worked, exclaimed:

"Don't, Bill. I'm sure dad wouldn't like it. Besides, you were in the wrong to let that boy ride that bronco, without telling him he bucked. Don't get into a fight."

"Well, of all things!" murmured Bill. "Am I going to stand still and be called a coward? I guess not!"

"Don't you hit him!" cried Ade. "It was your own fault, for trying to play a joke on a tenderfoot. I'm sorry it happened," the young cowboy went on to Gabe. "I shouldn't have allowed it. But I didn't think it would result so seriously. Is he much hurt?"

"No, just shaken up, I guess. But I'm glad you didn't really have a hand in this. I should hate to think Colonel Bryant's son would do such a thing."

"It was thoughtlessness," went on young Bryant. "I don't suppose you'll care to travel with us after this. We'll take the lower trail. Bill, go and get the bronco, and here's Will's horse," he added to Gabe Harrison. "Tell him I'm sorry it happened, and don't let him think we intended to injure him."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," responded Gabe. "I didn't think you looked like that kind of a lad. You're right; I guess there wouldn't be the best feelings if we traveled together."

He turned back to meet the two miners, to whom he explained matters, and then the three men returned to where Jed was caring for Will. The latter was speedily recovering.

"Was he going to show fight?" asked Mr. Hurd.

"He was, but he couldn't scare me," answered Gabe, as he explained the outcome of the interview. One of the miners led the bronco back to the cattlemen, receiving Will's horse in exchange, and then the three from the Diamond T Ranch turned off on another trail, and were soon lost to sight.

"Cowboys are all right," said Mr. Harrison, "but they're too much up to tricks to suit me. Hereafter, we'll be more careful who we travel with. How are you feeling, Will?"

"Pretty fair, now, Mr. Harrison, but that was certainly a shock to my system."

"Yes, a bucking bronco is about as bad a proposition as anything I want to tackle. I got fooled with one once, and later on I got kicked by a mule. I still prefer the mule."

"Suppose we stop here for grub?" proposed John Curtin. "That will give Will a chance to rest."

"Oh, I'm all right," protested the boy, who did not want to put others to trouble on his account.

"You're all right, except for what happened to you," remarked Jed, with just the suspicion of a smile. He had been quite alarmed at his brother's fall, but he was now relieved, when he found there was nothing serious the matter with him.

"Well, we'll stop here a few hours," decided Gabe. "Jed, if you'll make a fire, I'll get ready to fry some bacon."

"Say, I've eaten so much bacon lately," remarked Jed, "that I'm ashamed to look a pig in the face."

"Some fresh meat wouldn't go bad," added Fred Hurd.

"Well, maybe we can get some soon," said his partner. "We'll soon be in the elk country, and I don't see why we can't knock over a good fat buck."

"Do you think we'll have a chance to shoot such big game?" asked Jed, who had never hunted anything larger than foxes or rabbits.

"I'm pretty sure we will. I have hunted around here."

This was good news to the two boys. Mr. Harrison was not so much interested, as he was anxious

to push on to the mines, but he well knew the camp larder could stand a little addition in the way of fresh meat, and he agreed to go hunting with the others.

It was two days after this, when, having traveled several miles further along the northwest trail, that Mr. Curtin announced that they might now get their rifles ready for elk, or any other big game that crossed their path.

The two boys had brought with them serviceable rifles, and they were fair shots. As they knew nothing of trailing after big game they had to be guided by the advice of the two mining partners.

It was decided, when they reached a good spot, they would establish a camp, and remain there a day or so, meanwhile hunting in the surrounding country. Gabe announced that he would stay in camp, and that afternoon, having found a suitable spot, a lean-to was erected, a fire built, and preparations made to stay there that night.

"In the morning we'll try our luck hunting," said Mr. Hurd.

Every one was up early, before the sun in fact, and all ate heartily of the breakfast which Gabe had prepared. The two boys, and the miners, leaving Mr. Harrison in camp, then set off in search of an elk or a deer, of which there were signs, according to Mr. Curtin.

CHAPTER X

IN THE RAPIDS

They left their horses in camp, in charge of Gabe, since the hunting ground was in a wild region, stretches of woodland being interspersed with rocky tracks, over which a steed would find it dangerous to travel.

"Now, don't make any more noise than you can help," cautioned Mr. Curtin. "No use telling the elk we're coming. Have you your guns loaded?"

"Yes," replied Jed. "I'm afraid mine's a pretty light rifle, though, to stop an elk."

"A small bullet, in the right place, is just as good as a large one," replied Mr. Hurd. "Now, don't talk any more than is necessary."

They proceeded with caution for two or three miles, but their most careful observation failed to disclose any elk, or smaller deer. The two boys were beginning to feel a bit disappointed, as they had set their hearts on at least getting a shot at big game.

Another mile brought no results, though Mr. Hurd said the signs of elk were growing better.

"There's been a herd here in the last few days," he said. "A big one, too, by the looks of things."

"I guess they got word we were coming," remarked his partner. "They know we have two mighty hunters with us," and he glanced at the lads.

"I can only speak for myself," replied Jed, in low tones, which they all used. "I'm a crack shot, but my brother has hard work hitting the broadside of a barn door."

"I'll punch you for that, when we get back to camp!" exclaimed Will in a tense whisper.

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Curtin.

They were silent in an instant. Then, through the quiet woods, came a sound of underbrush being trampled under feet.

"Here's something coming," whispered Mr. Hurd. He raised his rifle in readiness, the others following his example. Hardly had they done so, ere, from the bushes, there stepped out a magnificent elk. It looked so big and imposing, as it stood there in the forest, that Jed and Will forgot that they were hunting and stood staring at the creature, that was so surprised at the sudden appearance of human beings on its preserves that it did not instantly flee from danger.

An instant later Mr. Hurd fired, and, at the same moment, the elk bounded off through the trees.

"Shoot, somebody!" cried the man who had fired. His companion's gun spoke, but too late.

"After him!" shouted Mr. Hurd. "I only wounded him. We've got to come up with him quickly, or he'll be miles away. But I think I crippled him. I don't want him to go off in the woods and die in misery."

Jed and Will were off on a run, their nimble legs carrying them ahead faster than did the limbs of the two miners.

"I see him!" cried Jed, as he caught a glimpse of the big creature through the trees. The elk had stopped to lick a wound on the left fore quarter, where the bullet had gone in and from which blood was flowing.

The elk heard the boys coming. Up went its head, and once more it was off like a shot. Just as it

gathered itself for a leap, Jed fired. He heard the thud of the bullet, and knew he had sent it into a vital spot.

"Did you get him?" cried Will.

"I think so! Come on!"

Forward rushed the two brothers. They emerged into a little clearing, and, at the farther side of it, was a sight that caused Jed's heart to throb.

On the ground, kicking its last, was the big elk. His bullet had quickly put it out of its misery.

"Hurrah! You did it!" yelled Will.

"I told you I was a good shot," said Jed. "But if Mr. Hurd hadn't wounded it, I doubt very much if I could have killed it."

"Any luck, boys?" asked Mr. Curtin, as he and his partner emerged from the woods into the little clearing. "I should say so!" he exclaimed a moment later, as he saw the big elk on the ground. "Who did it?"

"Jed did," answered Will, proud of his brother's success. "I'll get the next one, though."

"I don't believe we'd better hunt any more," spoke Mr. Hurd. "We have more meat now than we can eat, and it would only be wasteful to kill more game. We're not on a hunting excursion. You shall have a chance later, Will."

"All right," was the answer, though the boy could not help feeling a little disappointed at not having an opportunity to kill some big game. But he saw the force of the miner's reasoning.

"We'll take the best part of this back to camp," said Mr. Hurd. "I'll cut it up, as I understand such things."

"Can I have the horns?" asked Jed.

"Of course, but you'll have a hard job carting them out to the mines with you. I'd leave 'em here. You can get a pair on your way back East."

Jed decided this was good advice, though the antlers were a fine pair, and he hated to leave them.

Laden with choice pieces of the elk meat, the four hunters returned to camp, where they found Gabe peacefully smoking his pipe. In a little while they were sitting down to a meal of elk steaks, while recounting the adventures of the day.

It was so pleasant in camp, that, as the horses were a trifle tired with the journey so far, especially those from the farm, for they were not used to going so steadily, it was decided to remain there a few days. In that time Jed and Will went out hunting again, and this time luck was with the younger brother, for he bowled over a fine buck deer.

"Well," remarked Gabe one morning, when they had finished breakfast, "I don't know how you folks feel about it, but I seem to want to be getting on toward the gold mines. I'm afraid Ted Jordan and his crowd will get all the nuggets."

"Yes, I guess we've had an easy time long enough," admitted Mr. Hurd. "We'll travel on a bit further with you, if you don't mind, Mr. Harrison. I don't just know where me and my partner will begin to prospect yet. Maybe we'll go to Dizzy Gulch."

"Come along," invited Gabe heartily. "I reckon there's room for all, and I'm sure me and the boys are glad of your company."

"That's what we are," said Jed, and Will agreed with him.

So, having struck camp, they placed their packs on their horses, and, having smoked some of the elk and deer meat for future use, they set off.

They were now getting into the mountain region, and it was not as easy traveling as it had been. The way became rougher and wilder, and the horses, especially those of Jed, Will and Mr. Harrison, felt the pace very much.

"Guess you don't find this much easier than cultivating corn, do you?" asked the old miner one day, after a particularly hard bit of travel up a mountain side, and an equally difficult passage down the corresponding slope.

"It isn't as easy as I thought it was," admitted Jed. "Still, it's more exciting. Farming is pretty dull."

"Oh, you haven't begun to see excitement yet," put in Mr. Hurd. "Wait until you get to the new diggings, where the miners and gamblers are congregated."

"Speaking of gamblers reminds me that I wish I could set eyes on Con Morton," said Mr. Harrison. "The more I get to thinking of how he swindled me out of the biggest part of my fortune, the angrier I am."

"Do you think you'll ever see him again?" asked Jed.

"I certainly hope so. I shouldn't be surprised if he was out at the new diggings. He generally hustles to where the miners have plenty of money for him to swindle them out of. Once I get sight of him——"

Mr. Harrison did not finish, but the look on his face showed it would not be good for Con Morton if the old miner met him.

When the travelers got down into the valley, after climbing one chain of mountains, they found their further progress barred by a swift stream.

"Shall we ford it, or travel toward the head, where it isn't so wide?" asked Mr. Hurd.

"I'm in favor of crossing here," returned Gabe. "We've lost considerable time as it is, and I don't fancy going fifty or a hundred miles out of my way because of a brook."

"This is a pretty good-sized brook," said Mr. Curtin. "It looks dangerous. Suppose we wait until morning?"

It was then getting dusk, and they were anxious to make camp.

"Never stop on the near side of a stream, when night is coming on, is my motto," went on Gabe. "Can't tell but there'll be a big rain in the night, and the stream will be so risen that it will delay us a week. No, let's cross now, and camp on the other side. If it's too deep for wading, the horses can swim it."

They prepared to follow his advice. Their camp outfits were tightly tied in water-proof bags, and securely fastened to the saddles of the steeds. When this had been done it was quite dark, but they thought the crossing of the stream would not take long, so they urged the rather unwilling beasts into the water.

The horses proceeded cautiously, stepping slowly. Suddenly the animal on which rode the old miner got beyond its depth, and the next instant was swimming.

"No ford here," cried Gabe. "Look out for yourselves, everybody! Don't lean too far forward so's the horses' heads will go under. Hold your guns over your heads."

By this time the five horses were swimming for the other side of the stream, with the travelers on their backs. As they advanced the current became swifter and stronger. What had seemed like an ordinary mountain river was a dangerous one.

For some reason Jed's horse seemed to be headed more down stream than did any of its companions. Gabe noticed this and called:

"Head him up this way, Jed. It sounds like rapids below there, and maybe there's a waterfall."

Jed tried to, but it is no easy matter to guide a horse in the water, especially when the animal is frightened. In vain did the lad tug at the reins. The horse was now swimming right down the middle of the river.

An instant later, as the stream made a bend, Jed could look ahead through the fast-gathering darkness. The river was a mass of white foam.

"The rapids!" he cried. "I'm in the rapids!"

Almost as he spoke his horse was stumbling over stones and boulders in the shallow part of the stream, where the waters lashed themselves into foam as they rushed over the rocky bed.

CHAPTER XI

CAUGHT IN A STORM

Gabe heard the boy's cry. He realized what it meant to be caught in such a place in a dangerous stream.

"Head on to the other side!" he shouted to his companions. "Here, Will, take my gun! I'm going to help Jed!"

Then, having handed over his weapon, the brave old miner turned his horse's head down stream. By this time Jed and his animal were in the midst of the swirling waters. The horse was stumbling and slipping, several times almost losing its footing, but recovering it after a desperate struggle. It was growing darker, and Jed feared his animal would slip into some deep pool where both would be drowned.

"I'm coming, Jed! I'm coming!" cried Gabe. "Stick it out as long as you can."

His horse was now on the edge of the rapids. The steed snorted with terror, fearful of venturing into the mass of foam and waves. Just ahead of him Gabe could see the boy, who was striving to guide his horse toward the bank for which they had started.

Then, with a snort, as if making the best of a bad bargain, Gabe's horse ceased swimming and began to struggle, as had Jed's animal, to retain its footing on the uncertain bed of the stream.

The current was so swift that both animals were carried along without much effort on their part. Vainly they tried to brace back, and, under the urging of their riders, to work over toward the farther shore.

Just as Gabe reached Jed's side, the latter's horse stepped on a round stone, floundered about in a desperate endeavor to keep its footing, and then, with a whinny of terror, it went down, carrying the boy with it.

"Jump off!" yelled Gabe. "Don't get tangled in the stirrups or bridle!"

It is doubtful if Jed heard him, so great was the noise of the rushing water, but, instinctively, the boy followed this advice. As soon as he felt the horse falling, he kicked his feet free from the stirrups, and, throwing one leg over the saddle, leaped off, holding his precious rifle high above his head. The horse, with the pack on the saddle, was swept on down the river.

"Grab my horse's tail, or get hold of the stirrup!" yelled Gabe. "I'm going to try and turn him toward shore!"

The advice came just in time. Jed, who was slipping and stumbling along, with the water up to his shoulders, managed to grasp the left stirrup leather.

"Give me your gun!" called the miner, and the boy held it up.



"Give me your gun!" called the miner

Then, fortunately, Gabe's horse managed to get a footing on a comparatively smooth place, where the river was not so deep. The miner held the steed there a moment, to give Jed a chance to get a better hold.

"I'm going to head him toward the shore," the old miner said, after a moment's pause. "Hold on tight now. It may be deeper as we go to the side."

It was, and Jed found himself swept off his feet in an instant. However, Gabe's horse was a strong swimmer, and managed to make some headway, diagonally against the current. It was a hard struggle against the powerful stream, but at length the steed managed to get beyond the pull of the rapids, and into a shallow place close to shore.

"I can stand up, now," said Jed, as he let his feet down, and touched bottom. "I'm all right. Go ahead!"

An instant later Gabe's horse scrambled up the bank, and the boy followed.

"I guess my horse is gone!" he cried. The loss was a serious one to him, for all his possessions

were on the saddle, in the pack.

"Maybe he'll go ashore lower down," said Gabe. "We'll have to look. Hello!" he shouted, wishing to attract the attention of the others. Back came a yell.

"That's Will's voice," declared Jed. "They're coming down this way."

So it proved, and a little while later the two miners, and Will, having safely crossed the stream, joined Gabe and Jed. They were all more or less wet, but none had had the misfortune that attended Jed.

"We'll have a look for your horse," said the old miner to Jed. "Will, suppose you build a fire, and Mr. Curtin and Mr. Hurd will help make camp. Jed and I will see if we can't find that contrary nag. If he'd been content to swim straight across, instead of wanting to shoot the rapids, we'd have been all right."

"Suppose he's on the other side of the river?" suggested Will.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jed with a laugh. "Don't go to suggesting such things now, Will. I've had trouble enough."

In the darkness Jed and the miner set off down the stream. It broadened out as it flowed on, the banks stretching away into level plains.

"There's something moving, straight ahead!" exclaimed the boy, pointing to where a darker blotch of blackness was visible in the night.

"Yes, and it's a horse grazing. I hope it's yours," spoke Gabe.

"I can't see any pack on its back," went on Jed, as they came nearer.

"Must be a horse from some camp then."

They came nearer. The horse ceased grazing and looked at them curiously.

"Hey, Pete!" called Jed, for he had been riding the old cultivator horse that once ran away. At the sound of his voice the animal whinnied.

"That's Pete, but where's the pack?" inquired Jed. "I hope it didn't get lost in the river."

"No, it's there, but it's slipped around on his side," replied Gabe, as he came closer and saw what had happened. The saddle girths had slipped, and the pack, though soaking wet, was intact. Pete allowed himself to be caught without difficulty. Probably he had had enough of adventures for one night. He was led back to the camp, where a big fire was burning. Here the gold hunters dried themselves, and were soon partaking of a bountiful meal.

"This beats farming all to pieces!" declared Jed, with his mouth half full of some broiled elk meat.

"Even getting into the rapids?" asked his brother.

"Sure. After the first scare was over, it was like being back in the old swimming hole at our creek. The water was nice and warm."

"Yes, it's quite hot to-night," observed Mr. Hurd. "I shouldn't be surprised if we got a thunder storm."

"Then we'd better rig up some sort of a shelter," advised Gabe.

This was done, a lean-to being built with branches, and their rubber blankets spread on top, and well fastened down. Jed's pack had been opened out to dry, and when the horses had been safely tethered, and the camp made as snug as possible for the night, the travelers stretched out to sleep, tired out with the day's travel.

It was hot, entirely too hot for that time of year, and it was almost stifling under the improvised shelter. Still, after vainly wishing it would cool off, Jed and Will, with their older companions, fell asleep.

Jed had a vivid dream that night. He thought he was again in the rapids, and that his horse was pulling him into a deep hole of the stream. So vivid was it that he awoke with a start, to find himself in water, while something seemed wrapped about his neck, dragging him forward.

"What's the matter?" he cried.

"Fierce storm!" replied Gabe. "Our lean-to has blown away, and it's raining cats and dogs!"

An instant later there came an intensely bright flash of lightning, and a peal of thunder that seemed to shake the ground.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE GOLD FIELDS

Confusion reigned in the camp. The storm had come up with such suddenness that no one had been aware of it. Every one had been sleeping soundly, after a hard day, and the first intimation of the outburst of the elements was when the deluge of rain came, and the lean-to was blown over.

"Somebody catch me!" cried Jed, who, wrapped up as he was, in several rubber blankets, was being blown along like a ship under sail.

Will grabbed his brother, and helped to unwrap the coverings. While he was doing this the lightning seemed to be constant, and the roar of thunder was like the firing of heavy guns.

"Whew! This is fierce!" cried Jed, when he got his breath. The horses were huddled together, trying to find some shelter from the pelting rain beneath the trees.

"Fierce?" repeated old Gabe. "How about farming now? This rain beats the one when the cow was killed."

"That's right!" exclaimed Will. "Can't we get under some shelter?"

Hardly had he spoken when, with a terrific crash, lightning struck a tree not far away. The shock stunned the travelers for a few seconds.

"We're safer in the open," said Mr. Hurd. "We'd better get out of this grove," and he moved out of the shelter of the clump of trees where the camp had been pitched.

The rain then seemed to come down harder than ever. It wet them through, and the rubber blankets, which they grabbed up from the wreck of the lean-to, afforded small protection from the pelting downpour.

"I guess you wish you were back in the snug farmhouse, don't you, boys?" called Mr. Harrison above the roar of the storm.

"I do," replied Will, frankly.

"Oh, I can stand it," answered Jed. "We may get worse than this."

"That's right, my boy," added Mr. Curtin. "This is a bad storm, but there's lots of worse things in the gold fields where you're going. Bad men are worse than bad storms."

"Right you are," murmured Gabe. "But if I'm not mistaken, this seems to be letting up a bit."

The rain did not appear to be coming down quite so hard, and there were longer pauses between the flashes of lightning. But if the storm did cease in its violence, it did not stop altogether, for it rained all night, and, though the travelers did manage to make a rude sort of shelter of the blankets, they spent several miserable hours until morning.

"Oh, for some hot coffee and crisp bacon!" exclaimed Will, as he crawled out from under his blanket, and surveyed the wet scene all about. "It wouldn't be so bad then."

"Hot coffee! Crisp bacon!" exclaimed Gabe. "Say, young man, you ought to be glad the sun is shining. There'll be no hot coffee this morning. Wood's too wet to make a fire. Cold grub for ours, until noon, when we may strike a place where we can get some dry tinder. But the sun will soon make our clothes look less as if we'd paid a visit to the washwoman. Up, everybody, and straighten out camp!"

No one cared to linger in the wet blankets, and though it was not a very cheerful company that gathered around to eat a cold breakfast, they all felt that matters might have been much worse.

The packs were soon strapped on the horses, and, mounting their steeds, the travelers set off again. On every side were evidences of the storm. The river they had crossed was swollen to twice its former size, and they were glad that they had forded it the previous evening, instead of delaying, as they would have been held up several days waiting for the flood to subside.

That noon they arrived at a settler's cabin, where they were made welcome, and glad enough they were of it, too, for they were doubtful about finding any dry wood to make a fire, and had the prospect of a cold dinner before them. The settler, who had a small sheep ranch, greeted them cordially, and set out before them the best that he had. However, hot coffee was the most desirable thing he could provide.

From this man Gabe made some inquiries as to the best road to follow, for they were now approaching the gold fields, and they wanted to know the nearest trail to Dizzy Gulch.

"It's not far now," said the old miner to his companions, after a talk with the sheep-herder. "Three days more ought to bring us there."

"Then for the golden nuggets!" exclaimed Jed. "I hope we can send some back to dad soon."

"Don't be too hopeful," cautioned Will, with his usual ability for looking on the dark side of things.

"Yes, I'm going to be hopeful," responded Jed. "Half the fun of a thing is looking forward to it, and I'm going to imagine that I'm going to pick up plenty of the yellow boys. Then, if I'm disappointed, I've had the satisfaction of some good thinking, anyhow."

"That's the right idea," declared Gabe.

They remained that night at the sheep-herder's cabin, and in the morning pressed forward again. The weather was fine after the storm, and that night they camped amid the mountains, near a trail that showed it was well traveled.

"Hark! What's that!" exclaimed Will, in the middle of the night, as he was awakened by hearing voices, and a noise of horses traveling over the rocky path, not far from where they had pitched their camp.

"Sounds like a lot of men," observed Jed.

"It is," replied Gabe, who had also been awakened by the talk of the boys. "They're miners, too," he added, after listening a moment. "They're on their way to new diggings. Boys, we're near our destination. This is where the main trail strikes in. The rush is on, and we're only just in time!"

In the morning, when they started forward, they found they were only one party among a number. The rush was indeed on, and two days later the two boys and their companions were on the edge of the gold fields of Montana, and Dizzy Gulch, of which Ted Jordan had written, was less than a hundred miles away.

CHAPTER XIII

ON A NEW TRAIL

Had the boys not been told by their companions, during their journey, of what they might expect in a new gold field, they would have been much surprised by the scenes which met their eyes on every side. They arrived at a small settlement that night. It rejoiced in the rather thrilling name of Bloody Canyon, but as one of the storekeepers there remarked, it was not half as bloody as it had been.

"For you see, strangers," he said, pushing his big, broad-brimmed hat as far back on his head as it would go, "there was a powerful lot of shooting-up around these diggings for the past few weeks. Lots of 'em was killed, and the rest lit out for new strikes, so we old settlers has it sort of peaceful now."

"How long have you been here?" asked Gabe.

"Me? Oh, nigh on to a month. I'm one of the oldest settlers. My store was one of the first started, next to the bank," and he waved his hand toward a couple of rough board structures, that showed signs of having been hastily erected.

"How about the strikes at Dizzy Gulch?" asked Mr. Hurd.

"I don't take much stock in 'em myself," replied the "oldest settler," who gave his name as Tom Judson. "Bloody Canyon is good enough for me. I've got a couple of nice claims staked out, and I've struck pay dirt."

At that moment there was the sound of several pistol shots.

"What's that?" asked Jed, looking around.

"Now take it easy! Take it easy, son," advised Mr. Judson. "That's probably only a gambler being rustled out of camp."

"Gamblers? Are there gamblers here?" asked Gabe.

"Gamblers? Well, I should swallow my grub-stake!" exclaimed the genial Mr. Judson, who seemed given to violent expressions. "We was overrun with 'em one spell. Shot two, hung one, and rid a dozen more out of camp on a rail, with a coat of tar and feathers. But they still pester us occasional like."

"Did one named Con Morton show up around here?" asked the old miner.

"Con Morton? No, I don't recollect any such high-sounding name as that. But you never can tell. They go by any name that suits their fancy, them gamblers."

"I'd like to see that Morton," murmured Gabe.

"Why for would you like to meet up with him?" asked Mr. Judson. "If you're looking for a straight gambling game I can show you one. I'm the United States marshal for these diggings, and I don't stand for no crooked work."

"No, thank you, I had enough of gambling," replied Gabe. "That Morton fellow swindled me out of a fortune, and I'd like a chance to get it back."

"Too bad, stranger," replied the marshal, "but I don't believe you have much show. Them gamblers is pretty tricky. There, I guess they must be shooting up another one," he added quickly, as more pistol shots were heard.

The disturbance, whatever it was, did not last long, and though the two boys looked about

anxiously, fearing the fight might turn in their direction, they saw nothing alarming, and the mining camp soon became quiet again.

"Was you-all thinking of striking out for Dizzy Gulch?" asked Mr. Judson.

"Myself and these two boys are," replied Gabe. "I can't say what my two companions are going to do," and he looked at the miners who had traveled with them for several days.

"I think we'll strike further south," said Mr. Hurd. "I don't like the winters in Montana, and we'll soon be having cold weather. California suits me better. My partner and I will look for a place to stay. Maybe we'll see you in the morning, before you start out. If we don't, we're glad to have met you, and we've enjoyed your company very much."

"We sure have," added Mr. Curtin.

"Same here," added Gabe. "We'd like first-rate for you two to come with us, but if you feel the call the other way, don't let us stop you."

Inquiring of the marshal where was the best place to stay over night, and being directed to what passed for a hotel in the little settlement, Gabe and the boys made their way there. Mr. Curtin and Mr. Hurd met some former associates, and went off with them, so the little party was separated.

In spite of a few shooting affrays during the night, there was not much disturbance in Bloody Canyon. Mr. Judson had spoken truly when he said a large part of the population had left for other diggings, and midnight, which is usually the most exciting time in a mining settlement, was so quiet that the boys and Gabe were able to go to sleep.

"Well, it feels good to sit down to a table again," remarked Jed the next morning, when they were having breakfast in the "hotel."

"Make the most of it," said Gabe. "We'll soon be striking out on a new trail, and we'll have to camp out again."

"Don't you think it would be better to have a tent?" proposed Will.

"I certainly do, and I'm going to get one," replied Gabe. "I've got to get some other supplies, too—blasting powder, a new handle for my lucky pickaxe, and some grub. This is the cheapest place to get 'em, as prices will be high near good diggings."

Most of that day was spent in getting the tent and other supplies. It was so late when they finished that Gabe decided they would stay another night in the hotel at Bloody Canyon, and push forward in the morning.

That evening, as the three were strolling down the main and only street of the town, a couple of men, who came from a saloon, approached Gabe and the two boys.

"Excuse us, strangers," said one. "But is it true you are going prospecting up at Dizzy Gulch?"

"We calc'late on it," replied Gabe civilly, though the manner of the man was insolent.

"Well, that's a pretty good joke!" exclaimed the other stranger, laughing heartily.

"What is?" asked Gabe, for he was sensitive about being made fun of.

"Going to Dizzy Gulch? Why, you're foolish to go there. It's petered out. There was only some outcroppings, and the boys that went there had their trouble for their pains."

"I have reliable information that there have been some good strikes made at Dizzy Gulch," responded Gabe, while Jed and Will wondered what could be the object of the two men in ridiculing their plan.

"Well, you're foolish, that's all I've got to say," went on the man who had first spoken. "Ha! ha! It's a good joke. You'll be asking some one to grub-stake you next! Eh, Jim?"

"Sure thing! Dizzy Gulch didn't pan out!"

"I guess I know my own business best," responded Gabe.

"Oh, that's all right, stranger," responded one of the men quickly, for Gabe's manner was rather one of anger. "No offense, you understand, only I have to laugh when I see an old-timer making a spectacle of himself."

"It'll be time enough for you to talk when I make a clean-up, and don't get a yellow showing," went on Gabe. "Come on, boys. They may think it's a joke, but I guess Ted Jordan knew what he was writing about."

Leaving the two miners, who, with several companions, seemed to be quite amused at the idea of Gabe and the two lads going to Dizzy Gulch, the latter reached their boarding place.

As they entered the barroom, which was the only way to get into the place, they saw it was well filled with men who were standing about, drinking. Several of them were talking loudly, and the conversation ran to topics connected with cards and mines.

At the entrance of Gabe and the two lads, several of the men glanced at them.

"Hi! Here's some strangers that haven't had a drink with me!" exclaimed a man, much the worse for liquor. "Step right up, strangers, and name your poison! Set 'em up, Bill. Give my unknown friends the best in the house."

"Don't have anything to do with him," advised Gabe in a low voice.

The man, however, walked up to Jed, and, placing his hand familiarly on the lad's shoulder said:

"Come on up, youngster, and have a drink with old Ned Haverhill! I like your looks! Name your poison!"

"Thank you," said Jed, quietly, "but I don't drink."

There was a moment of silence. The boy's remark seemed to be a novelty in that place.

"What's that?" cried Haverhill, as if he had not heard aright.

"I don't drink, thank you," said Jed again.

"Not drink! What! Not when Ned Haverhill asks you! Why, dynamite and copper-heads! You've got to drink! What! Why, what do you think of that?" and he turned to the men lined up in front of the bar.

There were anxious faces in the saloon then, and several men quietly made their way to the door. For Ned Haverhill was known as one of the worst men of the West, and to annoy him, especially in his present condition, was no small matter. He looked at Jed with bloodshot eyes, but the lad quietly returned the stare. Old Gabe, with a worried look, drew nearer to the lad whom he considered under his protection.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MARSHAL INTERFERES

"Excuse me," said the loud-spoken man, as he made Jed a mocking bow, "but perhaps you did not understand me. I asked for the honor of your company in partaking of a little of the liquid refreshment which they serve in this palatial hotel," and with his big hat he swept the floor. "Once more, stranger, a tenderfoot by your looks, what will you have?"

The last words were sternly spoken, and there was a general movement, on the part of those nearest Haverhill, to get out of range of the gun which they momentarily expected him to draw.

"I understood you perfectly," replied Jed, "but I can only repeat what I said. I don't drink."

"Why—why!" spluttered Haverhill, for he considered himself insulted such was his peculiar code of "honor." "You've got to drink with me, or take the consequences!"

He reached toward his revolver, which was in plain sight in his belt. But Jed never quailed. Will, with a white face, started forward to his brother's aid, but Gabe pulled him back.

"That'll do!" exclaimed the old miner, as he took a step in advance, and stood beside Jed. "I'm with this lad, and what he says I'll back up."

"Oh, you will, eh?" asked Haverhill, with a sneer. "And who are you?"

"No tenderfoot, if that's what you mean. I was out in California in '49, when you were eating bread and milk, and you can't bluff me. Don't you draw that gun!" suddenly exclaimed the brave miner, as he saw Haverhill's hand stealing toward the revolver.

"You dare give me orders!" exclaimed the other. "Why—why—dynamite and rattlesnakes—I'll—I'll eat you alive!"

"You will, eh?" exclaimed Gabe, taking a step closer to the man. Every one expected to see some "gun-play," but, for some reason, the man who had invited Jed to drink seemed so astonished at Gabe's defiance that he did not know what to say.

"Yes, and I'll—I'll——" spluttered the man, in his rage.

"That'll do you now!" replied Gabe quietly. "If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of here."

"I will? What for, I'd like to know?"

"Because, Sam Small, *alias* Ned Haverhill, *alias* Short-card Ike, I know who you are, and if you don't leave at once I'll report you to the United States marshal. I know you well, but you fooled me at first. You were Con Morton's partner when he swindled me out of the best part of my fortune, and you can tell Con, when you see him, that I'm looking for him. Now clear out!"

"Why—why—you dare order me——" began the gambler, as if he could not believe what he heard.

"Yes, you'd better go, Ned," advised the bar-keeper in a low voice. Gabe's quiet manner, and the

way he spoke, convinced the hotel keeper that the old miner had spoken the truth, and the saloon man did not want trouble with the authorities.

"I'll not go!" cried the angry man. "I'll—I'll—"

"Hold on there!" exclaimed a new voice, and every one turned to see Marshal Judson standing in the door. He was armed with a rifle, and, though he did not aim it at any one, the manner in which he looked at Haverhill, the cause of the disturbance, argued anything but peaceable intentions toward that individual.

"Clear out of here," added the marshal, "and don't you show up in these diggings again. I heard what Mr. Harrison said about you, and I believe him. Get out!" and his blue eyes blazed in a convincing manner.

"I—I was—was just goin' to," answered the man, who had been so bold a little while ago. "I'm going," and he sneaked out of the door, while several, who a few minutes before were afraid of him, laughed openly.

"Tenderfoot, you're all right!" exclaimed a man, extending his hand to Jed. "There aren't many who would refuse to drink with Haverhill."

Others also spoke of Jed's nery stand, for, it was said, Haverhill was known to be a bad man in a quarrel, and dangerous when angered. Evidently, however, he feared the marshal.

Matters were rather quiet about the hotel the rest of the night, for the marshal remained in that vicinity. In the morning Gabe and the two boys, having completed their outfits, set off on their horses in the direction of Dizzy Gulch. Several old miners tried, with the best of intentions, to dissuade Gabe from going to those diggings, saying he would only meet with failure.

"I don't care. I'm going," he said. "I'll trust Ted Jordan."

They traveled all that day, and reached a small mining camp that evening. It appeared to be a prosperous one, for there were several saloons and dance halls in full operation, and, usually, this is the surest sign of such prosperity. When the miners are digging plenty of gold they are spending it, and every one in the place seemed to have a good-sized bag of yellow dust, or else several nuggets in his pockets.

Though the boys had seen these evidences of the earth's richness at the town where they first stopped, they did not lose interest in watching the men pay for what they bought with gold dust or nuggets, instead of money.

"That's what we'll be doing soon, eh, Will?" suggested Jed.

"I hope so, but maybe we'll be fooled when we get to Dizzy Gulch. Every one seems to think there is no gold there."

"Don't let that worry you," replied Jed. "We'll get gold, I'm sure. Old Gabe knows what he is about. Don't believe what those old miners say."

"I hope you're right, but it doesn't seem so," added Will, with his usual habit of looking on the dark side of things.

The travelers found that the hotel they stopped at was somewhat better patronized than the former one, though it had been hastily constructed. There was the same quality of customers, however—miners and gamblers. After supper Gabe left the two boys alone, as he wanted to go about and make some inquiries of an old friend of his, who was somewhere about the diggings.

As Jed and Will were passing out of the hotel through the barroom, for there were no other egress, they were stopped by a flashily dressed man, who, with several others, was playing cards at a table in a corner.

"Hello, sports!" he greeted the lads. "Take a hand in the game. We're short."

"We don't gamble!" exclaimed Jed quickly. He was an outspoken lad, and never beat about the bush.

"You don't gamble? I reckon you're afraid of losing a dollar or so," sneered the man.

"No, but we don't believe in it," replied Jed, good-naturedly, and preparing to pass on.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the man. "Do you mean to insult me?"

"Not at all," answered the boy.

"But I consider you have insulted me, when you don't think I'm good enough for you to play cards with!"

"I did not say that," was Jed's reply. "I said I didn't believe in gambling or card playing. I don't consider that it's right."

"Then you think I'm doing wrong?"

"I don't think anything about you. I'm simply speaking for myself."

"Aw, you're a tenderfoot! A milksop! Why didn't you stay back East, tied to your mother's apron

string? Does she know you're out? Give her my regards!"

That was too much for Jed. That any one should speak disrespectfully of his dear mother was more than he could stand. Without stopping to think of the consequences of his act, he shot out his left arm, his fist caught the gambler squarely on the chin, and the fellow fell flat on his back, after a desperate effort to retain his footing.

There were murmurs of astonishment from all in the room. The boy's act was so sudden it took every one by surprise. Instinctively Will moved nearer to his brother to protect him, for he felt there would be a fight.

The gambler was on his feet in an instant. With a quick motion he drew a revolver and leveled it at Jed.

"Put up that gun!" yelled a sudden voice, and every one turned to see who had spoken. Old Gabe was entering the room. At the sight of him, the gambler's hand shook, and he lowered the weapon.

"Ah! I've found you, have I!" exclaimed Gabe, as he pushed his way through the crowd. "Now I've got you!"

"No, you haven't!" yelled the gambler, and, with a quick motion, he jumped to one side, and out of an open window near the table, disappearing in the darkness outside.

CHAPTER XV

THEIR FIRST GOLD

Gabe Harrison turned quickly and ran out of the door. The boys, and those in the room, caught a glimpse of the old miner as he hurried past the window after the gambler.

"He'll never catch him," observed a man. "Can't run fast enough."

This seemed to be the general verdict, and it was borne out by the fact, for, in a minute or two, Gabe returned, rather out of breath.

"Did you get him?" asked the bartender.

"Nope," replied Gabe. "It was too dark, and I can't run as fast as I could once. How did it happen he pulled a gun on you, Jed?"

"I knocked him down for insulting my mother."

"Whew!" whistled Gabe. "You're getting right into the swim of things out here. I can't leave you alone but what something happens."

"Who was he? What did you want of him?" asked Will.

"That fellow was Con Morton, the gambler who robbed me of nearly all my fortune," replied Gabe, to the surprise of the boys. "I've been looking for him for some time, but he was too slick for me. How long has he been here?" he asked, turning to the proprietor of the hotel.

"Just came in a little while ago, and tried to start a card game. I didn't know him, and no one else seemed to; did you fellows?" and he appealed to the men. There was a general dissent, so far as having an acquaintance with Con was concerned.

"I wouldn't have a word to say if he'd won my money when I gambled with him," went on the miner. "I've been fool enough to do that in my time, but I've sworn off from cards and drink. These boys are friends of mine. Their father did me a good turn, and they don't drink or gamble either. I say that for the benefit of all who hear it. If any one makes trouble for them they've got to reckon with me."

"That one lad seems able to take care of himself," remarked a man, nodding at Jed. "He sent that gambling chap on his back as neat as I ever saw."

"I'm glad he did," replied Gabe. "I wish I could have caught him. But I'm still after him, and if he shows up around here again, you can tell him I'll have back the money he practically stole from me, or my name's not Gabe Harrison."

"I heard him say he'd been over to the Dizzy Gulch diggings before he drifted in here," volunteered a miner with a very red mustache.

"He did, eh?" replied Gabe. "Did he say how things were going there? That's where I'm headed for."

"Said he cleaned up a pile."

"In his own way, I suppose, with cards. Well, if he got some, the miners must have struck pay dirt. I guess we're on the right road, boys."

This was better news than they yet had heard concerning Dizzy Gulch, and the three gold seekers felt better over it. They soon retired to their rooms, where they slept undisturbed, though Jed had uneasy dreams of fights with mountain lions, and a band of gamblers who had revolvers as large as cannons.

With the first gleam of daylight Gabe was up, and roused the boys.

"We must make an early start for the mountains," he said. "Our real trail begins now, and for some time we'll have to depend on ourselves, for we aren't going to strike any camps."

"Aren't we going to Dizzy Gulch?" asked Jed. "I thought there was a camp there."

"I've made a little change in our plans," replied the old miner. "I had a talk with a friend when I was away from the hotel last night, when you so nearly got into trouble. He told me there had been some good strikes made at the Gulch, where Ted Jordan is, but nothing remarkable. Now I've had enough of ordinary mining. I want to get at something big. So I think we'll strike off into the mountains back of the Gulch."

"Do you think there's gold there?" asked Will.

"I think so. I've made some inquiries about the lay of the land around Dizzy Gulch, and, from what I know about gold mining, I'm convinced that we'll stand a better chance in the mountains than we will in the Gulch. If I'm wrong, and we don't strike some rich pay dirt, we can drift on to the Gulch, and try our luck there. But I'd like to try my way first, if you have no objections."

"We're with you," responded Jed. "We'll follow your lead. You know all about it, and we—well, we're tenderfeet of the tenderest kind, I guess."

"You'll get over that. Now then, if you're ready we'll start on the trail, and bid good-by to such civilization as they have out in these camps. I'll not be sorry, either. I'm not afraid of any man, and I'll take my chances with most of 'em, but I like a peaceable life, and this business of drinking and playing cards I don't like. I've gotten over it."

They made their departure from the town quietly, few persons being up to see them go, for the miners and gamblers, who made up most of the population, kept late hours, and, in consequence, were late risers.

The trail led up the mountain, for the town was situated at the foot of a big range. As they got higher and higher the boys had a view of a big stretch of country. It was different from any they had yet seen, and the great masses of mountain ranges, the deep valleys, the towering peaks, were a strange contrast to the scenery back in the quiet little country town of Lockport.

"Isn't this great!" exclaimed Jed, as he halted his horse on a ledge of rock and looked at the scene below him.

"The mountains for mine! Every time!" exclaimed Gabe, fervently. "Farming is all right, but it's too low down. You can't see enough. Look at this view! It makes a man grow big in spite of himself!"

"Then Will had better look out," advised Jed, with a smile. "If he grows any taller his legs will reach the ground on either side of his horse, and he won't be able to get in ordinary rooms."

"Yes, and if you keep on getting stout, you'll have to get two horses to carry you," retorted his brother.

The little party was in jolly humor. It was a fine day, they had a good supply of food with them, a comfortable tent, and best of all, they were actually about to begin their hunt for gold.

The boys were anxious to start digging at every place they made a halt, but Gabe pointed out that it would be foolish, as the nature of the ground was such that no gold could be expected there.

"I'll tell you when to get out the picks and washing pans," he said. "We're getting closer, and I shouldn't wonder but by night we'd get to a place where we can make a try clean-up."

How anxiously the boys wanted that time to come! They closely scanned the trail on either side, for Gabe had told them some methods of recognizing when they were near pay dirt, and they wanted to test their new knowledge.

"Just think! We're actually going to dig gold!" exclaimed Jed. "I used to think it was wonderful to dig potatoes, but when I turn out a few yellow nuggets I'll think I've really begun to live."

"Digging potatoes is a heap sight surer, sometimes, than digging gold," remarked Gabe, "only it isn't so exciting."

The trail became wilder now, for it was one seldom traveled. The horses had to proceed slowly, and, as it was getting well on in the afternoon, Gabe decided they would make a camp.

"Is this—do you think it would be any good to dig for gold here?" asked Jed eagerly.

"Well, you might try a little surface or placer mining," replied Gabe. "That looks like a good place to dig," he went on, pointing to a gravelly spot, about a hundred feet from where he had decided to pitch the tent. "You boys can be miners for a while until I get camp in shape. But don't be disappointed."

Eagerly unpacking their picks, shovels and washing pans, the boys hurried over to where the old miner had indicated. As the method they were about to use may not be familiar to all of my readers I will briefly describe it.

The kind of gold they hoped to find is known as free gold—that is, it exists in little grains, sometimes only as large as a pin point or a pin head, and, again, the size of a walnut. It is mixed in with the dirt or gravel, and is usually washed to its resting place by some flood. Other gold is held in ores, or hard rocks, which must be crushed and specially treated before the precious metal can be extracted.

The kind of mining the boys were about to undertake is very simple. Acting under Gabe's advice, they first loosened the top soil with their picks. This they threw aside, as it was not very likely to contain gold, which, being quite heavy, would be washed by the rains below the surface.

After digging down a little way, the boys came to some fine gravel. This, Gabe had told them, might contain fine grains of gold, but to determine that point they had to wash the dirt. For this purpose the simplest means are common iron pans, circular and rather shallow. Another method is by a wooden "rocker," which will be explained later.

Filling their pans half full of the gravel, the boys let water run in from a near-by mountain stream. They now had a mixture of very moist mud. This they agitated in the pans by a peculiar circular motion, the object of it being to cause the heavier grains of gold to sink to the bottom of the pan. Repeated applications of water, and shakings of their pans, soon washed out most of the gravel in the pans, which were tilted at a slight angle to permit this. At length there was only a little fine dirt left in the bottom of the pan.

"I think I see something yellow!" exclaimed Jed, greatly excited.

"Don't think—make sure," called Gabe. "Here, I'll do it for you."

He was almost as excited as the boys. The gold fever was on him again. Taking Jed's pan, he let some more water run in it. Then with a gentle whirling motion he threw this water out by degrees, the fine sand and gravel going with it. Then there remained in the bottom of the pan a little heap of glittering yellow grains.

"Gold! It's gold!" murmured Gabe. "Boys, we've struck our first pay dirt!"



"Gold! It's gold!" murmured Gabe

CHAPTER XVI

LOST

"Hurrah!" yelled Jed, capering about. "We're in luck! Gold, Will! What'd I tell you? I knew we'd

find it!" and he began dancing about like an Indian, or a cowboy celebrating a holiday.

"Oh, it's not such an awful lot," replied Gabe, more calmly, as he scooped up the yellow grains. "You'll have to wash out a good many panfuls before you'll be rich at this rate. Let's see how Will's is going to pan out."

He repeated the operation, and got more of the gold. The eyes of the two brothers shone with excitement, nor was Gabe altogether free from excitement, though it was an old story to him.

"Come on, Will, let's clean up another panful," suggested Jed.

"Hold on!" called Gabe. "Help me get camp in shape first. It'll soon be dark. That pay dirt will keep. It's been there a good many hundred years, and it isn't going to run away in the night."

"Hadn't we better stake out a claim?" suggested Jed, who was rapidly becoming familiar with mining terms.

"We'll prospect a bit more first," replied Gabe. "It may not pay us to remain here. No use cleaning up a little bit like this, when we can get big nuggets a bit further on."

"But we're sure there's gold here," objected Jed, "and we don't know whether or not there's any further on."

"Go slow," advised the old miner. "Come on, now, help me fix up the tent."

The boys knew that Gabe's advice was good, and, though they felt a wild desire to remain digging gold, they realized that they must have a place to sleep, for it was getting cool at night, now that they were well up in the mountains.

The boys were up early the next morning, and each one had washed a pan of gravel before breakfast. They obtained about a quarter of an ounce of gold each.

"How much is it worth?" asked Jed eagerly.

"Well," replied Gabe critically, "you've made about ten dollars between you this morning."

"And last night?"

"A little more. Say twenty-five dollars altogether."

"Why, we'll soon be rich!" exclaimed Jed.

"Maybe, if this gravel holds out," admitted Gabe. "But don't be too sure. I think it's only a surface mine, the gold having been washed down from some place higher up. Now get your breakfast and then we'll do some mining, until I can see what sort of a place we've struck."

They washed several panfuls of dirt that morning. To Jed's disappointment on several occasions the result, after a careful washing and shaking, was only a few grains of the precious yellow stuff. Again they would get nearly half an ounce.

"I think I'll make a rocker," said Gabe, at length. "We can do it faster then, and find out if this is going to pay."

"What's a rocker?" asked Will.

"I'll show you."

From some pieces of a box, in which some of their camp stuff was packed, Gabe constructed a sort of rude cradle, on rockers. The bottom of the box, which was rather shallow, was covered with a number of cross sticks, nailed to it like the cleats on a gangplank.

The box was filled with gravel and water. The water ran out of the lower end, carrying most of the dirt and gravel with it. The gold, being heavier, settled to the bottom, and was prevented from flowing away by the cleats. After about two hours of this work or "rocking," so called because the cradle is rocked from side to side, Gabe gathered from the box nearly a handful of pure gold grains.

"There! What do you think of that?" exclaimed Jed. "Have we struck a bonanza or not?"

"I can't tell yet," replied Mr. Harrison cautiously. "It may peter out any minute, but it's good so far."

The miner's fears were realized. As the day wore on the result of the various "clean-ups" was less and less, until, after the cradle had been filled several times, the result was only a mere pinch of gold.

"Let's dig over a wider space," suggested Jed.

"No," said the miner, "it's just as I thought, there was only a small deposit of gold there, and we've cleaned it up."

"Then there isn't any use in staying here?"

"Not unless we can find another deposit."

They hunted for it without success, remaining for several days in the place of their first strike.

Then the miner decided they should continue on up into the mountains.

"The gold is above us," he said. "We've got to climb up to it."

They broke camp, packed their supplies on the backs of the horses, and started forward.

"Well, we made some money, anyhow," said Jed. "Our first attempt wasn't so bad."

"Yes, we cleaned up a few hundred dollars," admitted Gabe, "but that's hardly enough to pay our expenses for the time we spent. We'll have to have better luck than that, and I believe we will."

"I wish we could send word to dad," added Will.

"Better wait until we make a real strike," suggested Mr. Harrison. "No use raising false hopes."

They journeyed on for several days in a lonely part of the mountain, meeting no one. They had some luck, but not much, and the boys began to fear they would never reach a place where they could make a permanent camp, and dig gold in quantities sufficient to make it pay. But Gabe was not discouraged. He was too old a hand at the game of gold hunting.

"Boys," said the old miner one morning, as they were preparing to break camp, and travel on, "suppose you stay here for a few hours? I want to take a little side trip, and as it's rather dangerous I'd rather you'd stay here. I want to go up that mountain," pointing to one, off to one side, "and see if I can't see some new signs. I'll be back in a little while, so wait here for me."

Removing the pack from his horse, and with only his rifle, pick and pan, the old miner set off. The boys, for want of something better to do, dug up some gravel and washed it in their pans, but with no success. It served, however, to pass the time.

"Say, don't you think it's about time Gabe came back?" asked Will, as he looked up at the sun, and noted it was nearly noon.

"That's so. He has been gone longer than he said he would be," answered Jed. "But he'll come back. Let's try digging over here," and he went to a new spot.

He was encouraged by finding a few grains of gold, and then he and Will set feverishly to work, but they had no great success.

"My! But I'm hungry!" exclaimed Jed, several hours later. "Why!" he exclaimed, as he looked at his watch, "it's three o'clock, and Gabe isn't back yet!"

"Let's get grub," proposed Will. "Maybe he's struck good pay dirt, and he hates to leave."

They ate their meal, and again went back to their gold pans, but they found no yellow metal. The sun sank lower and lower. It was getting dark, and there were no signs of the old miner. The boys looked anxiously at each other.

"Maybe he's hurt," suggested Will.

"Maybe," admitted Jed, accepting his brother's rather gloomy view, which was something new for him.

"Had we better go look for him?"

"I don't know. He told us to stay here until he came back."

"But if he's fallen, and can't move, he'd want us to go for him."

"That's so. Let's go. Get your gun, Will, and put plenty of matches in your pockets. We may want to light a torch. Tie the horses so they won't stray."

The two boys were soon walking up the mountain path that Gabe had taken earlier in the day. It was fast getting dusk, and they were very anxious. The trail was a winding one, and twisted and turned in every direction. At first they could see the marks made by Gabe's horse, but the hoof-prints soon disappeared.

"Guess we'd better go back," suggested Will, after they had tramped for an hour. "There's no sign of him. Maybe he went on another trail, and is back at camp now. Anyhow, we can't see any more," for it was now quite dark.

"All right," agreed Jed. "Back to camp it is."

They turned, and thought they were taking the same path they had used in coming up. But they had not traveled far before they were made aware that it was not the right one.

"I don't remember that we passed this big rock before," said Jed, pausing near one, which, even in the darkness, they could see was perched on the edge of a deep gully.

"Me either. I wonder if we're on the right trail?"

They paused and, lighting matches, looked about them. They were observing lads, and it did not take them long to arrive at the conclusion that they were on a totally different path.

"Will," said Jed solemnly, "we're lost on the mountain, that's all there is to it."

"Lost! What are we going to do?"

"Stay here until morning, I guess. See if you can find some wood, and we'll build a fire. This rock will make a good shelter."

CHAPTER XVII

CORNERED BY A BEAR

The boys passed a dreary, miserable night. There was a heavy dew, and they were wet, almost as if by a rain. Their fire went out, for in the darkness they could not find wood enough to keep it going.

How glad they were when morning came! The sun warmed them, and took the stiffness from their limbs.

"Oh, for something to eat!" cried Will.

"Same here," replied Jed. "But, listen! What's that?"

"Sounds like water running. Queer we didn't hear it before."

"We were too excited, I guess. There must be a stream around here, and maybe there are fish in it."

They found just below where they had spent the night a swift mountain stream foaming along over a rocky bed. Jed and Will had not gotten over the habit, formed while on the farm, of carrying hooks and lines in their pockets. It was short work to cut poles, adjust their tackle, and, with bait of worms, dug with their pocket knives, they were soon casting in. The fish of that stream must have been very hungry, for they took the bait at once, and soon the lads had several beauties. These they cleaned, and broiled by holding them in front of the fire on sharp sticks.

"They'd be better if we had salt," said Will.

"Use gunpowder," suggested Jed, and they did not find it a bad substitute, when they had taken some of the black grains from a cartridge, for salt-peter is the principal ingredient of some powders, and it is very salty.

"Now suppose we get back to camp," suggested Will, after their simple breakfast. "I suppose Gabe is back by this time, thinking how foolish we were to disobey him."

"Well, we did it for the best," said Jed. "He can't blame us."

"Of course not. Do you think we can find the way back?"

Jed did not answer. He was looking about him. They were on a totally unfamiliar trail, and he did not know which way to go. He admitted as much to his brother.

"But we came up the mountain," said Will, "and naturally, to get to camp we ought to go down. That's easy."

"Yes, it's easy enough to go down the slope, but where will we come out? I'm in favor of going up."

"What for?"

"Well, the higher we go the better view we'll have. Then we can size up the country, and decide which way we'd better travel. No use simply going down, for we may come out miles and miles from our camp."

Will agreed in this view, and the boys started up the trail again. But luck was against them. They did not know it, but they were on one of the wildest mountain ranges in that section of the country. Many travelers had been lost on it, for the trails, made by wild animals, were confusing, and there were a number of them.

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere," said Will, at length.

"That's so," admitted Jed. "I'm hungry; aren't you? Those fish weren't very filling."

"No, indeed, but I don't see how we're going to get anything to eat."

For several hours more the boys wandered on. They were tired, and their stomachs craved more food. They saw no game, or they might have provided themselves with food, and they came across no more streams from whence they could take fish. They were in a sad plight, for night was coming on, and they were farther than ever from camp—lost in the mountains.

As Jed, who was in the lead, was turning around a big rock, that marked a shift in the trail, he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Will eagerly. "See anything to eat?"

"No; but I see a good place to stay to-night. Here's a big cave."

Before them, opening off from the trail, was the mouth of a large cavern. It looked inviting, after their night spent in the open, with the heavy dews soaking them through.

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Will. "Now if we only had something to eat!"

"Maybe we will strike another stream around——" began Jed, when his words were suddenly interrupted by a whirr of wings.

"Partridges!" exclaimed Will, as a number of birds flew up from the bushes in front of them.

"I don't know whether they're partridges or not," said Jed, "but they look good to eat. Got any shot cartridges?"

Will had some, and Jed, inserting one in his rifle, which in an emergency would shoot those shells, hurried forward. He was lucky enough to kill a couple of the birds, and in a short time the two hungry lads were roasting them over a fire they quickly kindled at the mouth of the cave.

As they intended to spend the night in the cavern they decided to explore it a bit, and, taking several torches, which they made from white birch bark, that is most excellent for that purpose, they set forward. They found the cave was a large one, and, having selected a secluded place, that was nice and dry, and far enough away from the entrance to insure of their being warm, they stretched out, and went to sleep, for they were utterly tired out with the day's fruitless tramp.

"Hello, it's morning!" suddenly announced Jed, as he awoke and looked at his watch, by the light of a match. "It's seven o'clock. Get up, Will."

"Oh, I'm as stiff as a man with the rheumatism. How are you?"

"Well, I have felt better."

"Morning? Did you say it was morning?" asked Will. "Why, it's as black as midnight."

"I know it. We're quite a way into the cave. The light doesn't come this far. I'll light a torch, and we'll see if we can't get out and shoot some more of those birds. They were fine."

He ignited a roll of the birch bark, and leading the way started toward what he thought was the mouth of the cave. But he was soon convinced that he was mistaken.

"We didn't come in this far," said Will.

"I guess you're right," admitted his brother. "I must have taken a wrong turning. Come on back."

They retraced their steps. They came to the place where they had slept, and an investigation showed them several passageways leading from it.

"I didn't imagine there was more than one," said Jed in bewilderment.

"Me either. Say, Jed, we're lost again!"

"Looks like it, and this is a big cave."

There was no doubt about it. Frantically the boys tried passage after passage. Some ended at blank walls, and others led so far into the blackness that they were afraid, and turned back. They could not find the passage by which they had entered.

"Well, we certainly are up against it," sighed Will despondently, as he sat down on a rock, and watched his torch slowly burn. "What can we do?"

"Keep on hunting," replied Jed. "I wish we'd stayed in camp, then we wouldn't have had all this trouble. I wonder where Gabe is?"

"No telling. Maybe he's lost, too. I wish we'd stayed on the farm."

"Oh, don't say that. We'll be all right yet."

"I hope so. What's that?"

Will sprang to his feet. There came a noise from a dark corner of the cave. It sounded like some one shuffling along. Jed raised his torch and peered forward into the blackness. As he did so there came a menacing growl.

"It's a bear! A big bear!" he cried.

At the same moment the savage creature rushed at the two boys, who did not know which way to run.

CHAPTER XVIII

FINDING THE NUGGETS

"Quick with your gun, Will!" yelled Jed. "I laid mine down back there!"

"So did I," replied his brother. "What'll we do?"

The present position of the brothers was perilous in the extreme. They were some distance away from their weapons, which they had rested against the side of the cave, while they debated what they had better do. The bear was rushing straight at them, growling savagely.

"Get behind me, Will!" bravely cried Jed. "I'll try to stand him off with my knife," and at that he drew his knife, which had one big blade.



"Get behind me, Will!" bravely cried Ted

"I'll get the guns!" cried Will, as he turned to run. But he slipped on a stone, and fell. Jed turned to see what had happened to his brother, and the bear, taking advantage of the lack of attention of the foremost of the lads, gave a lunge forward, placing himself close to Jed.

"Look out!" yelled Will, who, from his position on the floor of the cave, saw what was about to happen—that his brother was likely to be clawed by the shaggy brute.

Jed turned, but only just in time. Then he did the only thing possible under the circumstances. He hurled his burning torch, which he had caught up, after opening his knife, right into the face of the bear.

With a growl of mingled terror and rage the brute halted. It dropped to all-fours. Then, as the blazing mass of bark was on the floor of the cave, right under its nose, bruin turned tail and fled back up the dark recesses of the cave.

"Quick!" cried Jed. "The guns, Will! We'll try a shot at him!"

Will leaped to his feet and managed to reach the rifles, which were loaded. He handed one to Jed, who took as good aim as he could at the black, shaggy form, which was almost out of sight, the torch giving but a faint light now.

The report of the gun nearly deafened the boys, and Jed felt certain that he had missed. But a new plan came into his mind.

"Come on, Will!" he cried.

"Where?"

"Let's follow the brute! He came into the cave, and he must know the way out. That's where he's making for now. Come on, it's our only chance!"

Will comprehended. Grabbing up the other gun and lighting another torch, the two boys prepared to follow bruin. They could hear the beast scrambling over the floor of the cavern, though they could not see it, but Jed had watched in what direction it fled.

"Come on!" he called back to Will. "We'll get out of this place!"

The bear, which at first seemed likely to do them serious harm, proved a friend instead of an enemy, for the frightened creature took the shortest route out of the cave, to get away from those queer creatures, who, instead of allowing themselves to be eaten up, threw blazing chunks of fire in the face of peaceable bears.

Bruin scrambled out of a hole, some distance in advance of the boys, but they could still hear the creature, and followed, lighting their way with the torches. In a few minutes they were outside of the cave, on a sort of rocky plateau, while, running as fast as it could, the bear could be seen disappearing down the side of the mountain.

"Take a shot at him," suggested Will.

"No, it's too far. Besides, he did us a good turn. But for him we'd be in the cave yet. Now to look about and see where we are."

The place was unfamiliar to the boys. They might have passed it before, in their wanderings, but they did not recognize it.

"We're not much better off," murmured Will, despondently.

"Yes, we are," said Jed. "We're out of the cave, and it's only a question of time before we'll be back at camp where Gabe is probably waiting for us."

"If he isn't dead."

"Oh, quit it!" advised Jed, a trifle impatiently.

"Well, I'm hungry."

"So am I, but finding fault isn't going to do any good. Come on, let's walk in some direction. Let's go down. That looks like the place where we camped," and Jed pointed off to the left.

"Say, I believe you're right," admitted Will, after a moment's inspection. "It does seem to be the spot. No, it isn't, either," he added, after looking again. "There's a stream near that place, and there wasn't any so close to our camp."

"You're right," agreed Jed. "But say, Will, am I mistaken, or are those horses down there?" and he pointed toward the other side. "They look just like two horses, with packs on their backs. I wonder if they can be our nags, or from some other camp? Anyhow, we can get something to eat now, for there must be persons near there."

Will, who had a little better eyesight than his brother, looked long and earnestly in the direction indicated. Then he gave a great shout.

"They're our horses!" he cried. "I'm sure of it. I can tell old Pete two miles off! Hurrah, Jed! We're all right. Probably Gabe has come up to meet us."

The boys, their hearts beating high with hope, hurried down the mountain side. As they came nearer to the horses they could see that there was no one with the steeds. Gabe was not in sight, and when they reached the animals, they saw that they had broken their tether ropes, and had evidently strayed from the camp.

"Then Gabe isn't here," said Will, quickly.

"Looks that way," agreed Jed.

"Something must have happened to him."

"I'm afraid so. Still, the horses are all right. So are the packs on their backs. They may have broken loose right after we went to look for Gabe, and he may be hunting around for us. Anyhow, we can get something to eat. I'm nearly starved."

There was food in the packs, and the boys made a hasty meal. They held a brief consultation, and decided they would walk along, leading the horses, as the trail was rough, and try to reach the camp, though they had no idea in which direction it lay.

As they were about to start off, Jed, who picked up from the ground the end of the broken tether rope, uttered a cry of surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Will.

"Look here. See what I've found!"

He held out in his hand something of a dull yellow color. There was no need to say what it was. The boys knew the color of gold by this time.

"It's a nugget! A big nugget!" whispered Will, for the discovery seemed to awe him.

"Yes, and here's another, and a third!" exclaimed Jed, as he dropped the rope, and picked up from among the stones two more irregular chunks of the precious metal—the gold they had come so far to seek.

CHAPTER XIX

CON MORTON APPEARS

For a moment the sudden discovery so surprised the boys that they could only stare at the golden nuggets. Jed was the first to recover his composure, yet he was still greatly excited.

"Look around, Will," he directed. "There must be more of them. These haven't been dropped by some one, they must have cropped out from a regular bonanza. Feel how heavy they are! Oh, if Gabe was only here!"

"I've found one!" cried Will. "Yes, and here's another! Hurrah! Jed, we're rich!"

"Not yet, but we may be. Keep on looking. Wait, I'll tie the horses so they won't stray away, and we'll start to dig. Lucky we left the packs on the animals, or we wouldn't have anything now."

It was the work of but a moment to fasten the patient steeds, that were only too glad to stay there and crop the rich grass. Then the boys resumed their hunt.

The nuggets they had found were only partly imbedded in the earth. There was a quantity of gravel around them, and they appeared to have been washed into sight by the recent rain.

"I've got another!" cried Jed joyfully. "It's the biggest yet! Oh, Will! What good news we'll have to send home to dad! He'll not have to worry about bad crops, and dry spells any more!"

"That's right!" admitted Will. "Here's another, Jed!"

The boys could hardly believe their good fortune. In a short time they had picked up eleven nuggets, of good size. The gold amounted to far more than that which they had washed out by hard work in their first diggings.

"How much do you reckon it is?" asked Will.

"I don't know. I'm too excited. We have eleven. Let's make it an even dozen! Keep on looking. Oh, if Gabe was only here! There must be a rich mine in this section, where these nuggets came from. We must make it a dozen, Will, and then we'll go look for Gabe."

"All right. There—I thought that was one, but it was only a yellow stone. We'll find one more and then——"

Suddenly, the attention of the boys was attracted by a noise on the rocky trail above them, for they were down in a sort of valley. The noise was that of the iron-shod hoofs of horses on the hard ground.

"Maybe that's Gabe," suggested Will. "Oh, if it only is, all our troubles will be over."

They could not yet see the horseman, for he was hidden behind a ledge of rock. But, a moment later, a steed came into sight. To the amazement of the boys they saw, riding toward them, a group of men. And the foremost was Con Morton, the gambler who had threatened Jed, and who had robbed Gabe Harrison of nearly all his fortune. Behind him rode another person they also recognized. It was Ned Haverhill, with whom Jed had had an encounter in the saloon, and there was a third man they did not know.

"Quick!" cried Jed. "Hide the nuggets! If he sees we have gold he'll rob us! Don't tell him what we have found, nor what we are doing here. Leave it to me. Bring the horses over here, and get your gun ready! Those are desperate men!"

No sooner did Morton and his companions catch sight of the two boys, than they hastened their pace, and soon had descended the trail to where the lads were. Meanwhile, Jed had hidden the nuggets among the things on the back of his horse.

"So, tenderfoot, we meet again," said Con Morton, in sneering tones, as he rode close to Jed. "Oh, you needn't be afraid I'll hurt you," he went on. "You're safe enough."

"I'm not afraid of you," said the lad boldly.

"You might better be. I'm a dangerous man when I'm aroused."

"I guess you're dangerous for any one who has money," replied Jed. "But we haven't any fortune for you to steal, as you did that of Mr. Harrison."

"Who says I stole his fortune?" demanded the gambler sharply.

"He does, and I believe him."

"Well, he wants to be careful what he says about me. Do you know these tenderfeet, Ned?" and Morton turned to Haverhill.

"Sure. That one there," indicating Jed, "refused to drink with me. I've a good notion to make him dance to the tune of my revolver," and he made a motion as if to draw his weapon.

"None of that, now," said Morton in a low tone. "It isn't safe. Leave me to deal with them. What are you two lads doing here?" he went on, turning back to Jed.

"I don't know that it's your affair."

"Well, I'll make it so. What have you got there? I saw you putting something in the pack."

"It's none of your business!"

"Be careful! Don't get me riled! I want to know what you're doing here."

"Well, we're prospecting; my brother and I."

"Where's your camp? You've just gotten here, for there are no signs of a camp."

"Back there!" replied Jed, with an indefinite wave of his hand. He would have been only too glad to point to where the camp was.

"Hum! Did you see any signs of gold?"

Now Jed had never told a lie, and he did not want to begin now, though the gambler asked a question he had no right to have answered.

Jed hesitated. He resolved he would not utter an untruth; yet to defy the man, and refuse to tell, would practically be to confess the truth. And he knew what that meant. The reckless men would overpower him and Will, and rob them of their nuggets, and the other gold, which was hidden in the saddles. Worse than this, the bad men would become aware of the existence of a rich nugget mine, and they would claim it for their own.

Then, as he hesitated, a flash of inspiration came to the lad. He looked around, and saw that Will was ready with the guns. If his trick failed, and worst came to worst, the two farmer boys could defend themselves.

With a sudden start, Jed peered up the trail, as if he had caught sight of some one approaching. Then, placing his fingers to his lips, he gave vent to a shrill whistle.

"Come on, Gabe!" he yelled. "Right this way. Here we are! Right down the trail! Come on!"

"Who you yelling to?" asked Con Morton quickly.

"To Gabe," replied Jed, truthfully enough, though he knew Gabe was too far off to hear him.

"Gabe Harrison coming here!" murmured Haverhill. "We'd better light out, Morton. I don't want to meet him. Probably he's got his gang with him! Come on!"

He spurred his horse forward. Con Morton, with a look of baffled hate at the two boys, did likewise, and their companion followed them. Jed's ruse had succeeded.

"I'll see you again!" shouted back the gambler in threatening tones, as he disappeared down the trail.

CHAPTER XX

PURSUED

Jed and Will could hardly believe their good luck. But the mention of the name of the man he had robbed was too much for Morton. He dared not stand and face him. Probably he imagined the United States marshal was with the sturdy old gold miner.

"Say, that was a good idea—a fine one, Jed!" cried Will. "How did you happen to think of it? You actually fooled me for a moment. I really thought you saw Gabe."

"I only wish I had."

"Do you s'pose they're gone for good?"

"I don't know. I think we'd better get out of here. But first let's cover up the places where we took out the nuggets. I was afraid those scoundrels would see the holes."

"Good thing they didn't. They'd have robbed us, sure pop. What shall we do next?" Will went on, as he carefully stamped with his feet on the places where the gold had been found.

"Both of us had better look at this location carefully, so we'll know how to find it again. It looks like a good place for gold, according to what Gabe told us. I'll bet there's a rich mine around here. Now we must find our way back to camp, and tell Gabe. Then we can come here and stake out three claims—one for each of us."

"It's easy enough to say 'go back to camp,'" remarked Will, "but how are we going to do it?"

"We've simply got to," responded his brother. "The horses may know their way back. We must trust to them. Let's see, I should say they must have come up that valley. They'd naturally travel the easiest way, when there was no one to drive 'em. Suppose we start down that valley a way, and see if the horses won't do the rest?"

There seemed nothing better to do, so they put this plan into operation. Making sure that their precious nuggets were safe, and seeing that the packs were securely strapped on the backs of the steeds, the two boys started down the valley, that was near the trail on which they had found the gold. They walked a little way behind each horse, keeping hold of the tether ropes.

The animals went willingly enough, though they stopped every now and then for a mouthful of the sweet grass that grew quite luxuriantly on the slopes of the fertile valley.

They traveled several miles in a rather leisurely fashion, and, as it was beginning to get late in the afternoon, they decided to halt and have a meal before it got too dark. They wanted to go as far as possible before making camp, and they hoped they would come upon the one where Gabe had left them, ere nightfall.

"Here's a good place to camp," remarked Jed as he came to a halt. "This will do all right."

"Suits me," replied his brother.

They made a hasty meal, and looked about them for a good place to spend the night.

"That looks like a sheltered place over there," remarked Jed, pointing to an overhanging ledge, screened about with low bushes and fir trees. "Suppose we take a look."

They walked over, and were just on the edge of the fringe of little trees when something happened. Jed, who was a little in advance, suddenly disappeared from his brother's sight. The thing happened so quickly that Will thought Jed had jumped down some little declivity, but an instant later he knew this was not so, for Jed's voice came back to him, sounding far off and muffled:

"Keep back! Don't come down here. I'm in a hole. Keep away!"

Even with that warning Will pressed on. He was not going to desert his brother in the hour of need. He was almost at the place where Jed had vanished, when a slipping and sliding of the earth, a movement of several boulders, and a trembling of the surface of the ground, convinced him that to go farther would be dangerous, not only for himself, but perhaps for his brother. He leaped back, and just in time, for a yawning cavern opened at his very feet.

"Jed! Jed! Where are you?" he cried.

"Down here. In a big hole."

"Are you hurt?"

"Not much. Only bruised a bit. But keep back, or you'll be down here too. You'll have to stay up there to get me out."

"But how can I do it? Can't you climb out?"

"No. I'm in a regular hole, and the sides are so slippery that I daren't try to climb out. This place is a regular cave, and I got too close to the entrance. You'd better get the tether-ropes from the horses, tie them together, and let 'em down to me. Then you can pull me up."

"All right. I'll do it."

Will turned back from the edge of the hole down which Jed had fallen, and into which a considerable portion of earth and stones and several trees had disappeared. Luckily they had toppled to one side, instead of upon Jed, or he might have been seriously hurt.

Will could not see Jed, though he could hear him, for he dared not approach close enough to the edge of the hole to look directly into it, as, if he did, he might cause more of a cave-in. How he was going to come near enough to lower his brother the rope he did not stop to think about.

"Keep still until I come back," he called to Jed. "Don't go to trying any tricks, or you may get buried under a lot of dirt."

It seemed a little odd for Will, the younger brother, to be giving the advice which usually fell to Jed's part, but he was in a better position to advise the imprisoned one than was Jed himself.

Will found the two horses where he had left them, quietly browsing on the rich grass. He took the rope from one, cut off a small piece to be used for a halter, and tied the animal to a tree. He then started to do likewise to the other animal, the same steed which had run away at the farm and caused them such a chase.

"Steady now, old boy," said Will, as he approached the animal, which began to prance about for no particular reason. "Why, what's the matter with you?" he asked, as the horse swung about and pulled violently on the tether-rope, which was, as yet, fast to a tree. "You're getting skittish in your old age."

Will untied the rope, and was coiling it up in his hand as he walked toward the animal, intending to fasten it as he had done the first one, when the horse, with a shrill neigh, threw up his head, yanked the rope from Will's hand, and started off at a smart trot.

"Whoa! Hold on there! Come back here!" cried Will. "I must catch him," he added, "if only to get that rope from him. Without it I can't rescue Jed."

He started to run after the steed, but the horse, evidently not wanting to be caught, or else urged on by a mere spirit of mischief, kicked up its heels again like a colt, and dashed away down the mountain-side.

Poor Will did not know what to do. He knew he must catch the horse, yet to go after him meant that he would have to leave Jed for some time alone in the cave. His brother would fear he had been deserted, and might try to get out unaided. In that case there might be another small landslide, and he would be buried.

"I've just got to catch him," said Will to himself. "This is worse than when he ran away the other time."

He was about to place the rope he had already removed from the other horse down near where the packs were, in order to have both his hands free, when he happened to think that perhaps he could use it as a lasso and capture the other steed, though he had had very little practice with the lariat, and was doubtful as to his success.

The runaway animal had now come to a stop and was gazing back at the boy, as much as if to say: "Come on, let's have a game of tag."

The long tether-rope, trailing out behind the horse, Will thought would give him a good chance to capture the animal. Accordingly, he bent his attention on that, resolving if he could get hold of it that he would quickly take a hitch with it around a tree, and so "snub" the horse as one checks the progress of a boat.

"I believe that will be a better plan than trying to lasso him," he said to himself. "Why didn't I think of that first? But worrying about Jed has made me so I can't think straight."

He hung the other rope upon a low branch of a tree, where he would see it on his way back, and then he crept cautiously forward, crouching down low, so that the horse would not see him, intending to sneak up and grab the end of the rope.

He tried it, but it would not work. The horse saw him coming, or guessed his intention, and galloped away just as Will was about to grasp the trailing rope. This happened several times. It was getting dusk now, and every second was precious. The chase had led in a sort of irregular circle about the place where the packs had been lifted off the animals, the horse sometimes going up the trail, and sometimes down. He did not seem to want to leave his equine companion, who remained quietly tied.

"I know what I'll do," exclaimed Will at length. "I'll do as we used to at home, when we want to catch a frisky horse in a big pasture. I'll give him some sugar."

He hurried to one of the packs, took out a quantity of the sweetstuff, and placed it in his cap. This he held out to the steed, at the same time calling persuasively.

The horse was not proof against this. He sniffed the air and came closer. Then, as he only wanted to get hold of the end of the rope, and did not need to actually catch the horse, Will turned the sugar out on the ground where the steed could see it. The boy then backed away, and a little later the horse was eagerly licking up the sugar. Another moment and Will had secured the rope, and though the animal started to run, when it found itself caught, it was too late.

"There, I hope you're satisfied!" exclaimed Will. "You've made me lose nearly an hour. I wonder if Jed's all right?"

He cut off all but a small piece of that rope, tying the horse to a tree, and then, with the two lengths, he started back to where he had left his brother. It was fast getting dark, and he doubted very much if the rescue could be attempted that night.

"Here I am, Jed," he called as soon as he came within hearing distance. "Were you wondering what happened to me?"

"Yes, I was beginning to get anxious. What happened?"

Will explained.

"Now how am I going to get you out?" asked the younger brother. "Shall I throw the rope down to you?"

"Guess you'll have to. Only don't come too close. I'll tell you what you'd better do. Go up on that little ledge opposite here, on the other side. Fasten the rope to a tree or stump, and throw one end down here. Then I can pull myself up. If I put any strain on the rope on the side where you are now, there may be another cave-in."

Will started to do as his brother had directed, but he had not gone far before there came another rumble of the earth, and more dirt slid down into the hole where Jed was hidden from sight.

"Jed! Jed! Are you hurt?" cried Will. "Did it fall on you?"

But there was no answer, and, waiting in the fast gathering blackness, Will felt a great fear in his heart. What if Jed had been killed, and he was left all alone there in the mountains, with that band of unprincipled men close after him?

"Jed! Jed!" he cried again, but no answer came back.

Will started forward, and then he recollected that if he went too close the landslide might be made worse than it now was. He tried to see some path by which he might get nearer, but it was too dark.

"I must kindle a fire so as to have light," he said.

He gathered some dry wood, and soon had a little blaze. By the glare of it he went as close as he dared and peered down into the place where Jed was imprisoned. All he could see was bare earth and piles of rocks.

"Jed! Jed!" he shouted in a frenzy of fear. "Where are you? Are you alive? Speak to me!"

Was it an echo, or was that a voice replying to him? At first he could not be sure what it was, then, as he listened, he made sure that it was some one answering.

"Where are you?" he cried.

"Farther down," came the faint reply. "I'm all the way in under now, and can't see any way out. Your voice sounds right over my head."

"Can you hear me now?" asked Will eagerly.

"Yes. You're right over my head. Knock on the ground so I can hear it."

Will stamped his feet, and at once his brother cried:

"Hold on! That's enough. You nearly brought the whole ceiling down on me. You're right above me, that's sure enough."

"How can I get you out?"

"You'll have to dig a hole—sink a shaft, I suppose, so you can lower a rope through. But be careful how you do it. You'd better wait until morning."

"And leave you there all night—buried in a cave!"

Back came the faint answer:

"I don't mind. This is a big place, and there's plenty of fresh air. Stand by until morning, and then see what you can do."

This seemed the only advice possible under the circumstances. The light of the fire was too uncertain to permit of the rescue work going on. It was a dreary night. Occasionally Will called to Jed, who answered, and the younger lad sat by the campfire, which he kept up, anxiously waiting for the dawn. He dozed off toward morning, and awoke with a start to see a streak of light in the east. Then, calling to his imprisoned brother that he was going to begin soon, he brought up his pick and shovel from the packs.

"Stand back as far as you can toward the sides of the cave," advised Will. "I may shake down a lot of dirt. But first, are you sure there's no other way out?"

"I can't see any," was the faint reply, and with that Will set to work.

He located the place where he could hear Jed's voice the plainest, rightly judging that to be the thinnest part of the top of the cave—the earth-crust that held his brother a prisoner. Cautiously he began to dig, using the pick lightly, and slowly shoveling out the dirt he loosened.

As he got down with his shaft he found that the soil was a sort of clay, which was firmer than the loose earth on top, and not so likely to break through with a rush when he had nearly finished his work.

"How are you now, Jed?" he asked when he was down about three feet.

"Pretty fair," was the reply, and the answer was plainly heard, showing that there was not much more earth to be taken out.

"Better go slow now," advised Jed, who could distinguish his brother's tones more audibly now. "Don't you come tumbling down here, or neither of us'll get up. Better get out of the hole now, and punch the rest of the dirt with a long tree branch."

Will concluded that this was good advice, and got out to cut a sort of crowbar, which he fashioned from a sapling, the end of which he chopped quite sharp with a small hatchet. Then, standing on the edge of the hole, he began to jab the pole into the bottom.

"Hold on! You're through!" yelled Jed suddenly. "I can see the end of the pole now."

Will thereupon began to punch it through more cautiously. In a little while he had an opening over a foot in diameter, and he could hear Jed almost as plainly as if he stood beside him.

"Now for your ropes, Will!" cried Jed. "I'm all ready to climb out. Better fasten one end to a tree, and I'll come up hand-over-hand."

Will did as directed, and soon saw the rope beginning to become taut as Jed put a strain on it.

"Is it going to hold?" asked Jed.

"Yes. Come on."

A little later Jed was out of the cave. Will clasped him in his arms.

"Poor old Jed!" he exclaimed. "You did have a time of it!"

Jed plainly showed the effects of his terrible night. He was pale, and his clothes were covered with dirt. There was also a long cut on his forehead, where a rock had grazed him, and his arms and legs were bruised.

"Come on, I'll get you something to eat, and you can tell me about it after that," said Will, and soon he was handing Jed a cup of hot coffee.

"That cave extended back quite a way under the earth, from the face of rock where we were going to camp. I fell into it, and must have rested on a sort of shelf, until the second landslide came. Then I was rolled right back into the main part of the cavern, and the outlet was closed up. I tell you I was scared there, one spell."

"I should think you would be," commented Will. "But I'm glad it was no worse. Can you travel?"

"I'm afraid not. I think we'll have to rest a bit to-day. I may be able to start late in the afternoon. I'd like to get some sleep. I didn't have any down in that hole."

They spent the best part of the day, after Jed had slept some, in talking over what had happened, and wondering what had become of their pursuers.

"Oh, they'll keep after us," said Jed. "We can't shake 'em off so easily. I think we'd better move our camp away. I don't like this place. Let's move on a few miles and spend the night there. I think it will be safer."

"Do you think you can travel?"

"Sure. I'm much better now. Let's pack up, get some supper and move our camp."

They did not waste much time over "grub," merely making coffee and eating some bread and cold meat. They were just strapping the packs together again preparatory to fastening them on the backs of the animals, when, from down below them, sounded the footfalls of several horses.

"Some one's coming!" exclaimed Will.

"Maybe it's Gabe," spoke Jed hopefully. "Shall I give a yell?"

"Wait a minute. Perhaps it isn't him. If it is, he has some one with him."

"Probably he's brought some of his friends to help look for us. I suppose we are to blame for all this. Never mind, when he hears what we have to tell him, he'll not scold us. I guess we'd better ___"

But the sentence was never finished. At that moment there appeared, coming around the trail, three horsemen. And it needed but a glance to show that they were the same bad men who, early the day before, had retreated after Jed had given his warning whistle.

"Here they are!" cried Con Morton. "We've got 'em now!"

"Not yet!" cried Jed. "Come on, Will! Jump on your horse! The animals are rested and can carry us and the packs!"

With a quick motion he was in the saddle. Will followed his brother's example.

"Now, Pete!" cried Jed to the horse. "Let's see what sort of stuff you're made of!"

"Hold on there!" cried Con Morton, as he saw the two lads were about to escape him.

"Haven't time!" shouted back Jed.

"I want to speak to you!" went on the gambler.

"No, you don't!" said Will to himself. "I know what that means!"

He kicked his heels on his horse's sides, and the good old plow horse increased its pace. Owing to the fact that the steeds of the boys were fresh, and to the circumstance that the animals of the gamblers had quite a slope to climb, the boys secured a good lead. They did not ride back up the valley, but down it, though they turned into another trail, as it divided just where they had halted for their meal. To get on this trail Morton and his cronies would have to breast a slope, and then swing over to the left. The boys lost sight of them for a moment.

"I wonder why he came back after us?" asked Will.

"Probably they were hanging around. They saw that no one came to join us, and they imagined it was safe to tackle us. But I'm not going to give up."

"Me either. I'll fight first!"

With set faces the brothers urged their horses on. But now their pursuers had gained the turn, and were thundering down the second valley after them.

"Stop! stop!" yelled Morton.

Jed and Will returned no answer.

"If you don't halt we'll shoot!" added Haverhill.

"Do you suppose they will?" asked Jed's brother anxiously. "One of them has a revolver out," he added, as he gave a hasty backward glance.

"I don't believe so. They can't shoot very straight anyhow, with the way their horses and ours are going."

"Are you going to stop?" yelled Morton again.

"No!" cried Jed, as he urged his horse on down the mountain slope, while the pursuers came galloping on behind them.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT HAPPENED TO GABE

When Gabe Harrison started up the mountain, with the intention of prospecting around a bit, seeking for indications of gold, he fully expected to be back within two hours. It was his idea that he might see signs of a lead which would be better than the one he and the boys were on.

Now if Gabe had had a horse that was used to mountain climbing several things in this story would not have happened. For a steed accustomed to scrambling over loose rocks, up steep slopes and down others still steeper, would have kept its footing, and not stumbled, as did Gabe's animal.

The old miner had ridden a few miles, and was convinced that no gold could be found in that direction. He was on the point of returning when something happened.

The horse stepped on a loose rock, on the edge of a gully, tried to recover its balance, in obedience to the frantic calls of Gabe, and his yankings on the bridle, and then pitched forward, throwing the old man off its back.

When Gabe recovered his senses, after many hours of unconsciousness, he found himself lying on the cold ground. He was quite wet with the dew, and lame and stiff. It was dark, and when he tried to move such a pain shot through his left leg that he had to lie quietly.

"Well, I wonder what in the world happened to me," said Gabe, speaking aloud. Then it came back to him, how his horse had stumbled with him, and how he had fallen into the gully, the last thing he remembered being when his head hit a stone.

"And I reckon I didn't hurt that rock as much as it hurt me," mused the old man, feeling of a large lump on the back of his head. "This is tough luck. My leg must be broken by the way it feels. Here I am, all alone in these mountains, and nobody knows where I am. Even the boys can't find me in this place."

He managed to get to a sitting position, moving cautiously because of his leg. Then he felt in his pocket and got a match, which he struck. By the glare of it he looked around. He saw nothing but a boulder-strewn expanse. Then something moving, about a hundred feet away from him, attracted his attention.

"It's my horse!" he exclaimed. "If I can only get the animal over here, maybe I can crawl on his back and he'll take me to camp."

He called to the steed, but the animal gave no sign that it heard him. It continued to crop what scanty herbage there was.

"I've got to crawl over to it," mused poor Gabe, "and how I'm going to do it with a busted leg is more than I know. But it's got to be done. Something may happen to the boys. Here goes."

He started to crawl, but such an intense pain shot through his leg that it made him sick and faint. He leaned back against a big rock with a groan.

"No use!" he murmured. "I'm done for, I guess. Old Gabe Harrison has done his last prospecting. I'll die here—all alone. If I only knew the boys were safe!"

Then the pain and exhaustion brought a merciful insensibility. When Gabe opened his eyes again it was morning, and the sun was shining brightly. The horse he had ridden, and which had been the innocent cause of his misfortune, was now farther off, having gone to a little stream to drink.

"Oh, how I wish I had some of that water," thought poor Gabe. "My throat is parched. I wonder if the horse won't come to me now?"

He called, but the animal only raised its head, looked at him, and went on feeding.

"I'm going to crawl and get a drink of water if it kills me!" exclaimed the miner. "Might as well die in comfort if I've got to go."

He moved his leg cautiously. To his surprise the pain was not so great as it had been. Then he felt of it. Though the limb was sore and tender no bones seemed to be broken.

"Guess it's only a bad strain," he said. "There's some chance for me, after all. I'll try to catch the horse."

It was hard work, crawling along a few feet at a time, stopping to rest every now and then, to ease the pain, but Gabe accomplished it. He reached the little mountain stream, and drank the cold water. That made him feel better, and a little later he managed to catch the horse, and pull himself up into the saddle. Fortunately the animal seemed to know that the man was wounded, and kept still until the miner was mounted.

"Now it isn't so bad," said Gabe, "though my leg does hurt like all possessed. But I guess I can get to camp, and the boys will take care of me for a while. I'll be as good as ever in a few days, as long as nothing's broken."

Cautiously guiding his horse, Gabe made his way down the mountain trail. It took him twice as long to reach the camp as it had to make the journey the night before, but finally he came to where he had left the boys and their horses.

To his surprise neither of the lads were there, nor were their horses. There was only some of the camp stuff, and the pack which Gabe had removed from his steed's back before setting off into the mountains.

"Well, this gets me!" he exclaimed. "Where can they have gone? I told them to stay here until I came back, and I'm sure they would, for they don't know the trail. Their horses are gone too. I wonder——"

A sudden idea coming to him, he slowly dismounted from his horse, and crawled to the stakes to which had been fastened the steeds of the two lads. The short ends of the ropes that remained showed they had been broken.

"Something's happened!" exclaimed Gabe. "Those horses have got loose while the boys were away. But why did Jed and Will go away? Could it have been to look for me? If so, why aren't they here now? It's too much for me. Lucky my pack is left. I'm half starved."

By slowly crawling about he managed to get himself a meal. He felt better after that, and, having made a closer examination of his injured leg, and finding there was only a strain, which was rapidly getting better, he prepared to make himself as comfortable as possible in camp.

But he was sorely puzzled at the absence of the boys, and he made up his mind, as soon as he could travel with more safety, that he would set off after them, if they did not return that night, which he hoped they would do. But night came, and Jed and Will did not come back. Much worried, Gabe prepared to spend the lonely dark hours in the deserted camp.

Meanwhile, Jed and Will were flying from the pursuing gamblers. As they went on along the valley, they found that the trail turned and went up the mountain.

"Shall we take it?" asked Will.

"Nothing else to do," replied Jed. "We can't stand and fight those scoundrels. The only thing to do is to keep on."

"But we may get lost in the mountains."

"That's happened already. We can't be much worse off that way. Neither of us know where we are, nor how to get back to camp. The only thing to do is to keep on. We may distance them, and we may strike a mining camp, where we can get help."

Still behind them came the desperate men who half guessed at the truth—that the boys had gold—and this gold the gamblers were determined to obtain.

"I think we're leaving them behind," remarked Will, after a pause, during which they rode hard.

"Seems as if we couldn't hear them quite so plainly," agreed Jed. "But don't stop. It'll soon be dark, and maybe we can give them the slip."

Whether this happened, or whether the pursuers knew the boys could not escape them, the lads did not know. Certainly when it got too dark to travel any more in safety on the uncertain mountain trail, there was no longer the echo of hoofbeats behind them.

"Let's stop and make a sort of camp," proposed Jed. "We can't go on like this all night. We'll eat a bit, rest, and start the first thing in the morning."

But in the morning they had hardly made a hurried breakfast, and started along the trail again, ere from behind came the sounds of pursuit.

"They're after us!" said Jed grimly.

"They want that gold," added Will, "but they're not going to get it!"

CHAPTER XXII

STAKING THEIR CLAIMS

Once more the pursuit was on, but the boys were determined never to give up as long as their horses could go. On their part the bad men were equally relentless. Urged on by the greed of Con Morton, the three kept up the chase.

"What's the good of it?" asked Haverhill, when after the second day the boys were still in the lead. "They'll get away from us."

"No, they'll not," said Morton fiercely. "I'll catch 'em if it takes a week!"

"What makes you think they have gold?"

"I'm sure of it. The way they acted convinces me of that. And I'm going to make 'em tell where they got it."

On they kept. The steeds of the boys were getting weary, for though they kept up a good lead they could only stop at short intervals for feed and water. This could not last, and Jed knew it. But with grim determination he and Will kept on.

It was toward the close of the fourth day of the pursuit amid the mountains. Only the fact that there were a number of trails, which wound in and out, had, up to this, prevented the capture of the boys. They doubled on their track several times, and thus fooled the gamblers, who knew as little of the mountains as did Will and Jed. And, in darkness, it was equally impossible for either party to advance, so uncertain was the travel.

But the bad men had this advantage—their horses were used to the mountains, and those of the boys were not. The pace was too rough and was being kept up too long for the farm steeds. They began to go slower.

"They're getting closer," announced Will, as they trotted along a ledge which skirted a dizzy canyon. "I can hear them more plainly."

"Guess you're right," admitted Jed. "Suppose we hide the gold somewhere, and let them catch us?"

"No, there's no telling what such desperate men would do to us. Let's keep on."

They urged their tired horses to a gallop. As they turned into a broader part of the trail, they could hear the rattle of stones dislodged by the horses of their pursuers.

"They're closing in," spoke Jed, "and I can't get any more speed out of Pete. I guess it's all up with us."

"Better give up!" called a voice behind them. "We've got you, and the longer we have to chase you, the worse it will be. Hold on now, or I'll shoot!"

They had a glimpse of Morton, with a revolver in his hand.

"Think he'll shoot?" asked Will.

Before Jed had a chance to answer there came the sharp crack of the weapon, and a bullet sang through the air over the boys' heads. Morton had purposely fired high, as he only wanted to scare the lads, but the shot had an unexpected effect. It so startled the horses of Jed and Will that they galloped forward as no urging by voice or whip could have made them.

"Shoot again!" cried Jed softly. "That's what we need. We'll leave 'em behind again!"

They were coming out on a shoulder of the mountain now, and could look down into the valley below them. There seemed to be something familiar about it. Both lads noted that at once.

"Isn't that where we were encamped?" asked Jed.

"It certainly looks like it," added Will.

"And there's a horse there, and a man who looks like Gabe!"

"It is Gabe!" cried Jed. "Hurrah! We're back at our old camp! Now let Morton and his gang come after us if they dare!"

The trail led downward, and the horses of the lads, finding going easier, or, perhaps, recognizing the place where they had strayed from, and desiring to get back to it, did not drop back into the slow pace that had characterized their gait before the shot was fired.

"Hello, Gabe!" yelled Jed, waving his hat at the old man.

Mr. Harrison looked up. He recognized Jed and Will. He swung his hat in answer and shouted a welcome.

At that moment the pursuers came in sight around the bend in the trail. They, too, saw the camp,

and noted Gabe. But they also saw that he walked with a limp. Instead of turning back, as the boys expected the gamblers would, they kept on.

"Are you going up against Gabe?" asked Haverhill of Morton. "He's a good fighter."

"I'm not afraid. He's been hurt. See him limp. I've come too far to back out now. I'm going to get that gold!"

"I'm with you," said the third gambler, whose name was Sim Sanders. "We three are more than a match for them."

On they galloped toward the camp, where Gabe in wonder awaited the arrival of the boys. He saw the men in pursuit, and knew who they were. Hobbling to where he had left his rifle, he secured the weapon.

Into the camp rushed Jed and Will, their tired horses barely able to carry them. After them came the three gamblers.

"What do you want here?" demanded Gabe.

"We want the gold those tenderfeet found, and we're going to have it even if we have to fight!" answered Morton savagely.

"Then you'll have to fight," replied Gabe grimly. "I don't know anything about any gold they have, for we haven't struck any luck yet, but if they have any they're going to keep it, and you know what kind of a man I am, when it comes to a fight."

"Ride 'em down!" exclaimed Haverhill.

Gabe was about to raise his rifle, when an unexpected diversion occurred.

There was heard a sound of galloping. Every one turned to see what it was, and then into the camp rode five horsemen, each one with a pack on the saddle before him, and a rifle in his hand. At the sight of the foremost rider Gabe cried:

"Ted! Ted Jordan! You're just in time! I'm hurt and these scoundrels are trying to rob us!"

"Whoop!" yelled Ted. "If it ain't my old partner, Gabe Harrison! Who's trying to rob you? Those chaps? Go for 'em, boys! Show 'em how the lads from Dizzy Gulch can handle a crowd of gamblers and thieves!"

But Morton and his cronies did not wait for this. Wheeling their horses, they rode back the way they had come, while to hasten their speed the members of Ted Jordan's party fired several shots over the heads of the scoundrels.

"Well! well!" exclaimed Ted, when quietness had been restored. "How in the world did you get here, Gabe?"

"Prospecting with these two lads," indicating Jed and Will. "But what takes you away from Dizzy Gulch?"

"Dizzy Gulch has petered out. It's no good. There was only outcropping gold, and that's all gone. So I made up a party, left the place, and we're prospecting. Have you had any luck?"

"Not much."

"But we have!" exclaimed Jed, as he pulled some of the nuggets from their hiding place, and showed them to the astonished miners.

"What! Where did you get those?" asked Gabe.

Jed and Will quickly explained, telling where their wonderful find was located. They also gave an account of the pursuit, and how they had, by great luck, managed to get on the trail that led back to camp. Gabe explained what had happened to him, and said that his leg was getting better every hour.

"I'm all right to travel now, if you go slow," he said.

"Travel? Travel where?" asked Ted Jordan.

"To where the boys made the lucky strike, of course. We'll all go there and stake out claims. If Dizzy Gulch is no good we've found something better."

They started off, not making especially fast progress on account of Gabe. They calculated to take two days in getting to the place, and they had no fear now that Con Morton's gang would interfere with them.

It was toward the evening of the first day, when as they were looking for a good place to camp, that Gabe Harrison remarked, as he looked up toward the sky:

"I think we're in for a bad storm."

"What makes you think so?" asked Ted Jordan.

"The way my leg hurts. It always hurts when there's a storm coming."

"It doesn't look so," remarked one of the men. "The sky's as pretty as a picture."

"You wait," said old Gabe, slowly shaking his head.

In spite of the fact that no one else took much stock in Gabe's prophecy, it was noticed that the camp was made more snug than usual, and the men looked well to the fastenings of their horses.

After supper, when they were all seated about the campfire, the men smoking and telling stories, to which the two boy gold miners listened eagerly, one of the men remarked:

"I believe it is going to blow up a little rain."

The evening sky was beginning to be overcast with clouds, and there was a moaning and sighing to the wind, as if it bemoaned the fact that the pleasant scene was so soon to be spoiled by a storm.

"Better look to our tent-ropes, boys," suggested Gabe, for he and the two lads from the farm bunked together in a small tent that had been brought along. "I don't want it blown away in the night, and have us all get soaking wet."

The darkness increased more rapidly, now that the sky was becoming thickly covered with clouds, and the wind grew stronger.

"Say, do you notice anything queer?" asked Jed of Will, as they stood together on a little jutting point of rock and looked over the valley spread out below them, a valley now shrouded in gloom.

"Something queer? How do you mean?"

"I mean like when your foot goes to sleep, and you try to walk on it."

"As if pins and needles were all over you?" asked Will.

"Yes, that's it."

"I did notice something like that," admitted his brother, "but I didn't think it was anything. It's growing worse, though."

"You're right, it is. Let's ask the men and old Gabe if they feel it. Why, it's just like an electric battery now."

The boys looked at each other curiously and in some alarm. They were both now conscious of a very peculiar sensation. Their flesh all over was tingling as if tiny needles were being brushed against them.

"Do you notice anything queer, Gabe?" asked Will.

"Queer!" exclaimed the miner. "I should say I did. It feels like ginger ale tastes."

"That's it," remarked one of the men. "I was wondering what was the matter with me."

The miners and the boys were ill at ease. There seemed to be something strange in the air about them—some unseen influence at work. They looked all around. The storm was evidently coming closer. The wind was now blowing quite a gale, and there were occasional mutterings of thunder.

"The horses feel it, too," observed Ted. "I don't like it here. I wish we'd kept on, or else stopped down below."

Hardly had he spoken than there came a vivid flash of lightning, followed an instant later by a startling clap of thunder. But it was not the lightning which caused every one in the camp to jump sharply. Nor was it the thunder.

"Did you feel that?" cried Jed.

"I should say I did," answered Will. "A regular electric shock, that's what it was. Felt as if I had hold of the business-end of a battery."

There came another flash of lightning, a far-off one, for the forked tongues of it shot down behind a distant, towering peak, but the effect on the little party of gold-seekers was even more pronounced than before. Gabe fairly leaped into the air, in spite of his injured leg.

"Tarantulas and centipedes!" he cried. "Something's the matter!"

"We're on top of a natural electric battery!" shouted Ted Jordan.

"No, we're not, but it's almost as bad," spoke one of the men. "I know what it is."

"What then?" cried several.

"We're on a part of the mountain that's filled with iron ore. The electricity is attracted to it, and we're getting shocks from it. I was in a place like this once before, out in Australia, and a lot of natives were killed during a storm. The iron ore acts just like a live wire."

"Then we'd better get off," said Will. "I don't want to be electrified any more."

"Move's the word, and we can't be any too quick," spoke Gabe.

There came another flash, and once more the gold-hunters felt the sensation of pins and needles. They noted, too, that the storm seemed coming more rapidly toward them.

"Up stakes and vamoose!" shouted one of the men, who had been living on a ranch. "Let's get away from here before it's too late."

"It'll be worse when the rain comes," stated the man who had explained about the iron ore causing the trouble. That his theory was right was admitted by all the miners, when they had examined the character of the ground on which they stood. They lost no time in breaking camp, and they had only gotten the tents down and re-arranged the packs on the horses, when the storm broke in a fury of wind and rain.

Fortunately, this outburst seemed to take the edge off the electrical outburst, and they were hoping they would escape without any more shocks. But it was a vain hope. When the ground was thoroughly wet there came such a sudden glare of lightning that it nearly blinded every one. The crash of thunder was not an instant in following, and such an electrical shock resulted that one of the men was knocked down. As for the horses, they were so frightened that it was with difficulty that they could be controlled.

"Hurry up!" cried Ted Jordan. "We're likely to be killed if we stay here. Hurry, every one!"

The man who had been knocked down arose with a curious look on his face. He ran at top speed until he came to a spot about five hundred yards from where the others were.

"It's all right here," he cried. "No iron ore here. You'll be safe when you get here."

They made all haste to join him, slipping, stumbling and leaping over the rough way. The rain was falling in torrents, and even the slight discharges of electricity that followed the one big flash set their flesh to tingling, and made them fear that worse was to follow.

But they got safely across that patch of ore, and were soon on neutral ground. There they tried to establish a camp, but it was hard work in the storm. The boys helped as best they could, and so did Gabe, but his leg pained him too much to allow him to do a great deal.

At length, however, something like order was brought out of chaos. It was out of the question to get tents up, so strong did the wind blow, but the men used the canvas to shelter them somewhat from the downpour. The horses were tethered to trees in the open.

"Look there!" cried Jed suddenly, pointing to the spot of ore which they had left. They all looked and beheld a curious sight. Right on the place where they had first camped the ground seemed covered with tiny blue and green spots. They leaped about here and there, and some seemed like tiny flames.

"It's the electricity," called the man who had explained about the effect of the lightning on the iron ore. "A connection has been made because of the rain, and that place is now charged like a battery. It's a good thing we got away from there."

They all congratulated themselves on this score, and watched with curiosity, not unmixed with fear, the curious play of the lightning and the tiny flames seeming to come up from the earth.

The rain kept up for an hour more, and then ceased. By that time it was impossible to light a fire, so they had to eat cold victuals; but they did manage to get up the tents, though it was as bad inside them as it was out, for they were soaking wet.

But they all accepted it as part of the game they were playing, and as part of the price they had to pay for gold. The night seemed as if it would never end, but morning came at last, and with the advent of daylight every one felt better. The old miners knew how to get dry wood from the inside of hollow logs, and soon, over cups of steaming coffee, the terrors and discomforts of the night were forgotten.

"Forward!" cried Gabe when breakfast was over and the packs adjusted. "Now for the place of the nuggets. You boys will have to show us the way soon."

"We can do that, all right," declared Jed. "We'll show you where we hid the nuggets."

They traveled on all the rest of that day. Jed and Will were able to direct the men along the same trail they had taken in retreating from Con Morton and his gang. As they advanced the various landmarks were pointed out by the lads.

"We're 'most there now," said Will as they turned around a shoulder of the mountain and set off at right angles to the way they had been going. "We'll be there in half an hour now."

"Just in time to dig out about a thousand dollars' worth of the yellow boys and have grub," remarked Ted Jordan. "Well, it can't happen any too soon for me, boys. I've been down on my luck lately, and I need a change."

They pressed on more eagerly, the two boys in the lead, as they alone knew where the secret spot was.

"Here's the place!" cried Will at length.

"No, it isn't," declared Jed. "It's farther on."

"It's here," insisted Will. "Don't you remember this big rock? I said at the time that the nuggets were about five hundred feet from it."

"Which way?" asked Gabe quickly. "That's important to know."

"Right in line with that dead tree," answered Will. "I'll show you."

He walked confidently to the spot.

"Yes, that's it," spoke Jed, convinced that his brother was right.

Will began to dig, while the men gathered about him, with eager eyes watching him. It meant a lot to them, for some of them were down to their last dollar, and a rich strike would prove a fortune to them.

"Did we put 'em as deep as that?" asked Jed, when Will had removed considerable dirt and had not come upon any of the precious yellow nuggets.

"Must have, but I don't remember that we went very deep."

"Let me have a try," suggested Ted. "I'll soon turn 'em out."

He took the pick from Will and began to dig. He went quite deeply into the ground, and turned it up for some distance in a circle. But there were no nuggets.

"They're—they're gone!" gasped Will at length.

"Somebody's taken them! Morton and his gang!" came from Jed. "He saw where we hid them!"

"He couldn't," insisted Will.

"Are you sure this is the place?" asked Gabe anxiously. "Take a good look, boys."

Much depended on the two young gold-hunters. The men gazed at them anxiously.

"I'm sure that's the rock," said Will. "Aren't you, Jed?"

"It certainly looks like it."

"Is that the only mark you went by when you uncovered and then hid the nuggets?" went on the old miner. "Now, think carefully."

"No, there was another stone near the big rock," said Jed suddenly. "I remember now. It looked like a man's face. I thought at the time that it looked like Con Morton. There were two rocks close together, a big one and a little one."

"Where's the little one?" asked Gabe.

"It's gone."

"Maybe it's the big one that's gone," suggested the old miner.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe the big stone got displaced by reason of the storm last night. It might have rolled several hundred feet out of the way. In that case you'd be all out of your calculations. Suppose you look for the little rock?"

"That's it!" cried Jed. "I thought this place didn't look just right. It's farther up."

They ran up the trail a little way, and Jed gave a shout of delight.

"There's the little rock!" he cried. "Now for the nuggets!"

They knew just where to dig now, and five minutes later Jed and Will had uncovered their store of gold. Such a shout as went up from the men, old Gabe joining in!

"We've struck a bonanza!" cried Ted.

And so they had; for when they came to stake out their claims, they found the indications were of such richness that the mines bid fair to be regular bonanzas. At Gabe's suggestion they formed a sort of company, taking in the men who had come with Ted at such an opportune time. Because they were the discoverers of the gold mine, Jed and Will were given larger shares than any of the others, though there was enough for all.

"Now we must write and tell dad of our good luck," proposed Jed one night, in the new camp that had been formed near the place where the nuggets were found.

"And I'll mail the letter," promised Ted. "I've got to ride to the town to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII

CHEERLESS PROSPECTS

While Jed and his brother were having such exciting times in the West, matters at the Crosby farm were going along in their usual slow fashion.

The first few days after Jed and Will, in company with Gabe Harrison, had departed, Mrs. Crosby and her daughter Nettie were very lonesome.

"It does seem just as if I'd never see my boys again," said the mother, wiping away some tears gathered in her eyes.

"You mustn't think that way, ma," said Nettie. "First thing you know they'll come back as rich—well, rich enough to have an automobile, maybe."

"I'm afraid not. I haven't much faith in this gold-mining scheme, though I believe Mr. Harrison meant all right. I wish the boys had stuck to farming."

"But, mother, they could hardly make a living at it. Look at father, how hard he has to work, and how little we can save."

"I know it, but it's sure. We have our hens, and we get some eggs. We can go out in the garden and dig potatoes, and we have fruit."

"Yes, but we can't live on eggs, potatoes and fruit," objected Nettie with a laugh. "Now, don't worry, mother. I'm sure the boys will make out all right, though it may take some time. It will be a month before they are in the gold region. I hope they send me some souvenir postals."

"Do they have souvenir postals out in the mines?"

"I guess so, mother. They have 'em most every place, and I've got quite a collection."

Mrs. Crosby eagerly watched the mails for the next few days, and she was rewarded by receiving brief notes from the boys, written on their route, telling of the incidents of the way.

As for Mr. Crosby, he was so busy preparing for winter and arranging to pay the interest on the mortgage, that he gave little thought, at first, to the two young gold miners. Of course, he was interested in them, and he hoped for their success, but he was worried about how he would get along without their help on the farm, though most of the fall work was done.

The money received from the barley crop, together with some from the sale of other farm products, was, after part had been taken out for the boys' outfits, placed in the bank at Rossmore, which was the nearest large town to Lockport. Mr. Crosby wanted to keep the cash there until he had enough to meet the payment of interest on the mortgage, which would be due in a few weeks.

He had not quite enough, and he did not see how he was going to complete the sum in time, but he trusted the man who held the mortgage would wait for the balance. He determined, however, to make it up if he could, and, for that reason, he was busier than usual, gathering in all the products he could afford to sell off.

"You look worried, Enos," remarked Mrs. Crosby one evening, when her husband came in from the village. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing special. I saw Jimson this afternoon."

"The man who holds the mortgage on this place?"

"Yes. I told him I was afraid I'd be a few dollars short in the interest, and I asked him if he'd wait a few weeks."

"What did he say?"

"He said he wouldn't. Told me I had to have it all or he'd foreclose."

"And take the farm away from us?"

"That's what it would mean. He's been wanting it ever since he heard what a fine barley crop I raised."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. I've tried my best to get the whole sum together, but I don't see how I can rake up another dollar. We have to live, and I can't touch the money I have put away for winter."

"Maybe we could get along on less than usual," suggested Mrs. Crosby.

"No, it's little enough as it is. I've calculated very closely, and the sum I have saved for winter is barely enough as it is. If anything happens, or one of us gets sick, there'll not be enough. I was thinking I might get something to do in the village, or over in Rossmore, but I can't leave you and Nettie here alone to look after the farm. I might sell the horse, but it would not bring much now. Nobody wants to keep a horse through the winter. I declare, I don't know what to do. Prospects are pretty dismal."

"If we had the boys home now, maybe they could get work somewhere, and help out."

"No, on the whole I'm glad the boys have gone out West. Their gold hunting may not amount to much—likely it won't—but it will be a good thing for them. They needed a little change from the

drudgery of always working on a farm. Of course, if they were here they'd help, but they're not, and I'll not wish them back before they've had a fair chance, though I'd like to see them, for I miss them considerably."

"So do I," added his wife.

"And I wish they were home," added Nettie. "I haven't had a good game of checkers since Will went away."

"I reckon they've got other things besides checkers to think about now," said her father.

Two or three weeks passed. Mr. Crosby did his best to raise the additional money needed toward the interest on the mortgage, and as a last resort he had to sell his mowing machine. How he would get along the following summer, without it, he did not know, but he hoped better times would come. At any rate it was imperative that he have the interest, or he might lose his farm.

It was coming on cool weather. The last of the crops had been gathered in, though in this work the farmer sadly missed the help of his two sturdy boys.

One frosty morning, he got up early to go out and feed the pigs, on which he depended for his own pork, and which he hoped he would have enough of to sell at a profit. There was a curious silence in the pen, for, usually, the porkers were squealing from the first show of daylight until they received their breakfast.

"That's rather queer," said Mr. Crosby to himself, as he neared the pig-pen, with a pail of warm sour milk, which the porkers usually got first. "I wonder why they aren't squealing their heads off as they always are?"

When he got to the pen he saw the cause for the silence. Stretched out on the ground were six fine pigs, all dead.

"Well, if this isn't hard luck!" exclaimed the farmer, setting down the pail he had carried out. "And I counted on them to help us through the winter!"

He got over into the pen. There was no doubt about it. The pigs were dead, and valueless, as far as any use he could make of them was concerned.

He called in a neighbor, who knew something of animals, and this man said the pigs had probably eaten something that had not agreed with them, as there were no signs that they had been hurt. This view was generally accepted, when it became known what misfortune had visited Mr. Crosby, though no one could tell what had caused the death of the animals.

"Another heavy loss," mused Mr. Crosby that afternoon, as he got up from the dinner table. "I declare, I don't know what's going to happen! I've got the interest money, but I'm afraid I'll have to use part of that to live on, now that we won't have any pork to put away for the winter."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Crosby, "troubles never come singly! We certainly are in hard luck, Enos."

"That's right," he admitted gloomily. "I don't know what to do. But there, Debby," he added, as he saw how badly his wife felt. "We'll make out somehow. We always have. I can let the interest go, and we can sell out the farm."

"No, don't do that," exclaimed his wife quickly. "We must hold on to that. It's the only way we can make a living. I don't know anything except farming, and you don't either."

"That's right, unless I could learn gold mining," admitted Mr. Crosby with a sad smile. "But we'll get along somehow."

How he didn't know, but he knew he must not let his wife worry, as she was not strong, and had only recently gotten over a severe illness.

"Maybe I could help you, papa," spoke Nettie, who had listened with some worry to the talk of her parents.

"You, my dear girl? How could you help us?"

"Why, I hear they want girls to work at the machines in the mill over at Rossmore."

"I'll never consent to let you go there," said her father. "We'll sell the farm first. Not that there's anything wrong about a girl working in a mill, but I want you to get a good education. No, Nettie, I'll find a way, somehow."

"Whoa!" exclaimed a voice out in the driveway, and, looking out, the farmer saw a man in a carriage.

"Are you there, Mr. Crosby?" the man called.

"Oh, yes! How d'ye do, Mr. Jimson?" replied the farmer, as he recognized the man who held the mortgage on the farm. "I see you've come for the interest."

"Yes. I hope you have it ready."

"Yes, it's all together. But I guess I'll have to ask you to drive me over to the bank in Rossmore."

My pigs all died this morning, and I was so put out I didn't get a chance to go over. The money's there in the bank."

"Is your interest money in the bank at Rossmore?" asked Mr. Jimson, in a curious voice.

"Yes. Why?"

"That bank failed yesterday," was the startling answer. "The depositors won't get a cent!"

CHAPTER XXIV

LOSING THE FARM

Hardly able to believe what he heard, Mr. Crosby stared at his informant.

"Wha—what's that you said?" he asked.

"I said the bank at Rossmore failed yesterday, and that none of the depositors will get a cent. If you had your money there it's all gone."

"Gone! Failed! I—I don't understand."

"Well, it's just as I'm telling you. The cashier skipped off with the money."

"With my money?"

"With everybody's money. But I got ahead of them. I heard the bank was shaky and I drew out every cent I had there a couple of days ago. You see, the cashier took the cash about a week back, but he concealed his theft. Then, when the bank officials discovered it, they kept it quiet for a time, hoping to make it up. But, it seems, one of the vice-presidents was in with the cashier, and what the fellow didn't steal the vice-president had used in bad speculations, so the bank's wrecked."

"And my money's gone," repeated Mr. Crosby, in a dazed voice.

"I'm afraid so."

"What's happened? What's the matter, Enos?" asked Mrs. Crosby, who came out on the porch where Mr. Jimson was. She had not heard all he said, but she gathered that there was some trouble.

"We're ruined, Debby!" exclaimed the farmer. "All our money in the bank is gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, the bank has failed. I'm sorry, Mr. Jimson, but I can't pay you the interest," went on Mr. Crosby. "I intended going to Rossmore to-day to get it for you. Now I can't."

"I don't know about that," replied the holder of the mortgage on the Crosby farm. "I don't see what the failure of the bank has to do with you not paying me my interest."

"Why, I can't pay it if there isn't any money in the bank."

"I have nothing to do with that. I loaned you a certain sum on this farm. You signed a paper agreeing to pay me my interest at a certain time. That time has come and I want my money."

"But I can't pay you if the bank has failed."

"I tell you that has nothing to do with me!" exclaimed Mr. Jimson angrily. "I want my money—that's all. How am I to know you had the interest in the bank?"

"But I tell you I did!"

"Humph! A man's word isn't good for much nowadays. I want my interest, and I intend to have it."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Jimson," said Mr. Crosby in a strained voice, "but I haven't got it."

"Then you'll have to get it. Take it from some other bank."

"Do I look like a man who had money in two banks?" demanded the poor farmer. "I guess not! It takes all I can rake and scrape to make a living and pay the interest. I put the money for the mortgage in the bank where it would be safe. I didn't know the bank would fail."

"Well, you'll have to get it somewhere," went on the mortgage holder. "Sell some of your things, or—or something."

"I haven't much left to sell—unless I sell myself, and I'm pretty much of a slave the way it is."

"Huh! Any man who can afford to send his sons out West on a pleasure trip ought to have the money to pay his interest," retorted Mr. Jimson.

"My sons did not go on a pleasure trip," answered Mr. Crosby. "They went to hunt for gold."

"And a mighty foolish excursion it was, too. Why didn't you send them to hunt for the fairy bag of gold at the foot of the rainbow? There would have been about as much sense in it."

"They went with an experienced miner, Mr. Jimson. Besides, my boys had earned a vacation."

"Oh, they had, eh? Then why don't they send back some gold nuggets? Why don't they pay the interest?"

"They would if they could. Can't you wait a few weeks? I may be able to get it together again. Or the officers may catch that cashier and get some of the money back."

"I'll not wait one day. As for catching that cashier, I don't believe they'll do it. The money is gone. You know what the agreement is in the mortgage. Either you pay up my interest the day it is due, or take the consequences."

"And what are the consequences?" asked Mrs. Crosby, who had been an anxious listener to this conversation.

"The farm will be sold," replied Mr. Jimson. "That is my right and privilege. All I get above the amount of the mortgage and the sheriff's fee will go to you, of course, but I don't imagine it will be much. Now I haven't any time to stand here talking to you. Have you my interest? Yes or no. To-day is the day it's due."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't got it," replied Mr. Crosby.

"All right; then I'll instruct the sheriff to sell the farm."

"Oh, you wouldn't do that, would you?" exclaimed Mrs. Crosby.

"Of course I will. Why not? That's business. I don't lend money for fun. You'd better get ready to move. Maybe you can go out West and dig gold." And with that mean reminder Mr. Jimson drove off.

The misfortune was such a terrible one that at first the Crosby family could hardly realize it. They were stunned. But it was not long before they awoke to a realization of what it meant.

Mr. Crosby tried in vain to raise the money, so unexpectedly lost, to pay the interest. He could borrow from no one, as he had nothing he could offer as security. He had a small sum put away for the needs of the winter, but this he knew it would be unsafe to touch.

So a few days after the visit of Mr. Jimson, notices were put up on the house, barn and other buildings of the farm, stating that they would be sold at public auction, under foreclosure proceedings, because the interest on the mortgage was unpaid.

And some time later that sad event happened. Quite a crowd of farmers gathered at the Crosby farm to bid on it. It was a good piece of land, but times were dull, and when all expenses had been met, including the mortgage, interest and sheriff's fees, there was only a few hundred dollars left for Mr. Crosby, his wife and daughter. Most of their possessions had been sold, as a chattel mortgage had been given as a last resort to raise the cash for the interest.

"And this is what I have left after twenty years of hard work," said Mr. Crosby sadly when the auction was over and he had received the few hundred dollars.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WELCOME LETTER—CONCLUSION

"Well, what are we going to do now?" asked Mrs. Crosby as a little later she, with her husband and daughter, sat in their desolate home.

"We've got to do something," replied Mr. Crosby. "I've got to make a new start, I suppose, and it comes hard at my time of life."

"Let me help, daddy," said Nettie, putting her arm around her father's neck. "I heard of a good place in the woolen mill. I can earn four dollars a week."

"Not while I have health and strength," replied Mr. Crosby. "We'll manage to make out somehow," he added more cheerfully, for now that the worst had happened, he was ready to face anything.

"The boys ought to know about this," said Mrs. Crosby. "Maybe they have found a gold mine and can help us."

"Not much chance of that," responded her husband. "But I would like to hear from them. We haven't had a letter since they got to the mountains, and the last time they wrote they were about to start for Dizzy Gulch. We can't expect any help from them, but perhaps they will want to come back, now that we have lost our farm. Probably we three can get work on some place—enough to

earn a living, anyhow."

"It will seem strange to be working for some one else, when you have had your own farm so many years," said Mrs. Crosby.

"A man's farm isn't very much his when there's a mortgage on it. Never again will I try to live under such conditions. Why, I feel almost happy, now that I know there is no interest to meet. We will go somewhere else and begin life over again."

"Yes, and we've got to go somewhere to-night," added Nettie with a laugh, the first real one since their misfortune. "We have no beds here—nearly everything was sold. What are we going to do, daddy—sleep in the barn, in the hay? Do you suppose the sheriff would let us?"

"No need for that," replied her father. "We'll go to the hotel to-night. In the morning I will consider matters, and decide what is best to do. But I think I'll write a letter to the boys and tell them the bad news as gently as possible. Have you their address, Nettie?"

"Yes, father, but I imagine they must be in the mountains now."

"Well, mail will probably be forwarded. I'll ask them if they made out any worse with their gold hunting than I did with my farming."

But though he made light of it, Mr. Crosby was a man broken in spirit. Through no fault of his own he found himself, in the decline of life, with hardly enough to live on half a year, and no prospects of anything better. Still he did not despair.

The little family went to the village hotel that evening. Many of their neighbors, who sympathized with them, invited them to share their homes, but Mr. Crosby thought it would be less embarrassing for his wife and daughter if they went to the hotel.

It was on the way there that Mr. Hayson, the village postmaster, stopped Mr. Crosby on the street.

"Sorry to hear of your bad luck," he said.

"It might have been worse," replied Mr. Crosby.

"Yes, but not much. I was on my way over to your place. I got a special-delivery letter for you, but as I didn't have anybody I could send with it, and as you didn't call, I had to keep it until I closed the office up. Here it is," and he drew from his pocket a rather soiled envelope with a blue stamp thereon.

"Must have come a good way," remarked the postmaster. "I couldn't make out where, the marks were so blurred."

"Why, it's Jed's writing!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby.

"Jed? Your son?"

"Yes. He and his brother are in the West looking for gold, but I don't suppose they'll find any."

Mr. Crosby opened the letter and rapidly read it. As he did so the expression on his face changed. The look of care seemed to disappear, and his eyes brightened.

"Looks as if it was good news," observed Mr. Hayson, who was an old acquaintance.

"It is. Read that."

Mr. Hayson rapidly glanced down the page. Some of the news which Jed wrote was unimportant, but this much seemed to stand out in bold relief:

"We have struck a bonanza! One of the richest mines in the West! Will and I are rich! Sell out and come on. We have staked claims for the whole family!"

"JED."

"Well, of all things! Who'd have believed it! A bonanza! Gold mines! Them boys rich!" exclaimed Mr. Hayson. "What are you going to do, neighbor Crosby?"

"Do? Why, I'm going out there as fast as a train can take me. Sell out! I don't have to wait to sell out. I'm sold out already. But I must hurry and tell my wife and daughter. This is the best news I've had in many a year. The boys have struck it rich. Things looked pretty black a little while ago, but this welcome letter has changed everything. God bless Gabe Harrison! I guess he must have had a hand in this."

Three weeks later, when Mr. Crosby, his wife and daughter reached the new diggings where Jed, Will and the old miner were, they learned all the details of the wonderful strike.

For the mine, or rather mines, as there were several of them, were indeed bonanzas. The good luck of Jed and Will, which began when they found the nuggets, continued, and every claim staked out was a rich one.

A regular gold-mining company was formed, taking over the temporary one started by Jed and the other miners, and the Crosby family were the principal holders of the stock. Machinery was

installed, and at last accounts the concern was paying better than ever.

One day Gabe, who made his home with the Crosby family, came in looking quite pleased over something.

"What's the matter?" asked Jed. "Have you found some more nuggets?"

"No, but almost as good. That gambler, Con Morton, has been arrested, and I understand I am likely to get back most of the property out of which he swindled me."

A few weeks later this occurred, and though Gabe did not regain all of his fortune, he had enough to live on in comfort. Morton was sentenced to a long term in prison. His two cronies disappeared, and were never heard of in that region again.

As for Jed and Will, those plucky lads who graduated from a farm to a gold claim, they are now among the most prosperous and best known miners of the West, and if you are ever out that way I advise you to call on them. Perhaps they will show you where to pick up a small nugget or two as a souvenir of your visit.

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