

# Buffalo Roost eBook

## Buffalo Roost

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# Page 1

## CHAPTER I

### Willis Thornton Displays His Pluck

Train No. 6 on the D. & P.W., two hours late at Limon, was rushing and jolting along over its rickety roadbed. The rain fell in torrents, the heavy peals of thunder seemed about to tear the car to pieces, the black and threatening clouds blotted out the landscape, and the passengers could hear nothing but the roar of the thunder and the rattle of the train. The brakeman, shaking the water from his hat as he passed through the aisle, dropped something about it being a "mighty tough day for railroadin'."

Suddenly there was a creaking, a cracking, and then a series of awful jolts. Window glass broke and flew in every direction. Like a mighty monster that had suddenly been frightened by an unseen foe, the train lurched forward, tipped a little, and slowly came to an uncertain stop. People were hurled from their seats with a great violence as the emergency brake was set. A baby cried out from a seat near the front of the car, and a woman screamed as a satchel from the luggage rack above her head dropped down upon her. Willis Thornton raised his arms above his head just in time to save a heavy leather suitcase from striking his mother full in the face. Through the broken windows was heard the shrill warning notes of the engine's trouble whistle, but so intense was the storm that the sound seemed rather a part of the raging gale. The brakeman rushed through the car, and as he passed Willis heard him exclaim half-aloud, "The freight!" Then in a loud, shaky voice, not meant to betray excitement, he shouted, "All out; train off the track!"

He need not have spoken, however, for the people who had not already gotten out were close upon him. First in the rush was the mother of the babe that had screamed when the first jolts came. She was wild-eyed and hysterical. A piece of flying glass had struck her on the face, and the warm, trickling blood had frightened her. She rushed up to the nearest man and shouted, "Is my husband safe?" Just then a sickly, dudish little man, with a lighted cigar in his mouth, rushed toward her.

"Ba Jove, my dear, you are 'urt," he said as she hurried toward him and fainted in his arms.

The word had been passed around that a heavy freight was expected at any moment. The passenger whistle blew in long, shrill tones, while the brakeman hurried up the hill in the direction of the expected freight to give the danger signal. Hardly had he reached the top when there came the faint sound of a whistle. He heard the three blasts. The train had left Eastonville! Could he save a wreck? Lantern in hand, he hurried down the track as fast as he could with the wind and rain beating him back. Suddenly a black form loomed up in the mist ahead. Full blast she came, the black smoke from her stack running ahead as if to coax her on to greater speed. The brakeman waved his red

lantern frantically in the air. There was a screeching sound of brake-shoes on the wheels, a long, shrill whistle, and the train sped past him, a misty dull serpent in the storm. He turned and followed as fast as he could.

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Women with disheveled hair stood and wrung their hands. Men cursed and swore as they ran back and forth about the derailed passenger. The wind lulled for a second, and in the momentary silence there came the half-smothered cry of a little child from one direction, answered from somewhere in the fog by the rushing of wheels and the faint, weird sigh of a whistle.

Willis's head went up, his eyes flashed, his muscles tightened; then, turning to his mother, he cried, "The baby!" and in an instant was gone. It all happened so quickly there was no time for Mrs. Thornton to think. She saw Willis hasten away and enter the front door of the car they had been occupying; at the same instant she became aware of the approaching train. There was a shrill, angry hiss, and the freight swung into the cut with a terrible roar, then came a crashing of glass and breaking of timbers. The engineer had opened the whistle valve with such a jerk that it had stuck fast, and the whistle did its utmost. It was a doleful sound, pulsating its strange, sharp cry into the storm.

Mrs. Thornton sank to her knees in an attitude of prayer, her head dropped to her breast. The mother that had fainted roused a little and called for her child.

The passengers rushed back and forth in a perfect frenzy, shouting, "The baby! the baby!" Women cried and begged and implored some one to save it; but it was all over before any one could act or before the Englishman realized that it was his child that was in danger. The engines had telescoped. The freight was derailed and the first three cars completely demolished. The crew had all jumped and were uninjured, except the fireman, who had a badly-broken leg and some bruises. Two men came around the end of the Pullman with a boy supported between them. His head hung limp and the blood trickled slowly from nasty cuts on his head and face. Following them came the brakeman with a very frightened but unharmed baby, wrapped in an overcoat. Every one made a rush for the little group. The Englishman was first in line. His eyes opened wide and his cigar fell from his lips. "By Jove, Chauncey!" he exclaimed, "they came near getting you that time," then began to cry like a child.

The danger was past. There was no one killed, and only a few injured. Several people were cut by broken glass and bruised by bumps. The fireman of the freight had broken his leg and cut his shoulder badly in his jump. Willis had reached the opposite platform, with the baby in his arms, just as the trains collided. The jar had thrown him from his feet and broken the glass in the door behind him. The jolt threw him, baby and all, out against the side of the cut into the wet sand. Outside of the ugly cuts and bad bruises he was unharmed, but was the hero of the day.

Mrs. Thornton sat by her boy, tenderly caring for his every need. He had swooned at the sight of his own blood and had not yet returned to consciousness. In the next seat the injured fireman was propped up on pillows, watching the boy.



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“There’s a piece of real stuff,” he said to the engineer as they sat talking together. “Looks just like my old pard. It took real pluck to go after that baby. If Bill’d a been here he would have gotten enthusiastic over that lad.”

### CHAPTER II

#### A Story Is Told and a Promise Made

An open fire had always been tremendously fascinating to Willis Thornton, and on winter evenings, when his chores were done and supper over, he would pile the big fireplace high with maple logs, then sit and dream as the flames danced and the fire roared. He was a sturdy lad, healthy, cheerful, wholesome, and tonight he was thinking.

The snow-laden wind was sweeping across the “Flat Bush.” At every fresh gust the fire would crackle and the little blue flames start up along the none-too-well seasoned logs. Outside the old farmhouse the great dead limb of a monstrous white oak moaned and sighed, while the usual sounds from the barnyard were lost in the patter of the icy snowflakes that rattled against the window pane. From the open door of the kitchen came faint odors of freshly-popped corn and the monotonous hum of the old sewing-machine. Willis was hardly aware of any presence in the room save his own until a warm hand was laid gently on his and a dish of snowy popcorn set in his lap. He had been so engrossed with his own fancies that he had not seen his mother enter the firelit room and come toward him.

“Well, my boy; what are you dreaming of tonight?” she asked, as she seated herself in her accustomed place on the arm of his chair and placed her arm gently on his shoulder.

“O, I’ve just been planning a bit, mother,” he said with a smile. “Sometimes when I sit here by this old fire I forget myself. I travel to the strangest lands and think the strangest thoughts. Still, they all seem so very real to me that when I try not to think of them a peculiar restlessness comes over me. I can hardly wait for summer and the great big out-of-doors. Did you ever think, mother, what life would be if we didn’t have the birds and the bees and the flowers? Are people in the cities happy and contented without them? I’ve often wondered. I suppose some day I’ll be going to the city to live, as all the other boys have done; but when I think of it it makes me sad. I don’t believe I’d ever be happy in the city, mother, unless—”

He paused long enough to stir up the fire and put on another log.

“Unless what, Willis?” his mother inquired.

“Unless—” he hesitated as if thinking. “I could go West to where father was.”



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His mother listened as he went on. "The schoolmaster was telling us today about the wonderful Rocky Mountains. He was there last summer on his vacation, you know. We were studying about Pike's Peak and the Garden of the Gods, so he told us all about his trip there. He went from Colorado Springs to somewhere away up in the mountains to a great gold camp. He told us of the queer little shanties the people live in, and of the great piles of waste ore outside of each mine. He went through one mine, the Independence, I think he called it, or the Portland—I don't remember which now; but he said the machinery used in hoisting the ore was wonderful. It all set me to thinking of father—I've been thinking of him all day. Mother, it's mighty hard for a fellow like me not to have any father, only just a dead one."

He arose a second time to replenish the fire, but remained standing, facing his mother. He was too deeply interested in his own thoughts just then to notice the tears that were slowly stealing down his mother's face, and the light was too dim for him to see her sad, care-worn expression. She was not old, but fate had not been kind to her. She was a slender little woman, with a heavy mass of what had once been brown hair, but it was now streaked with gray. Her eyes were large and brown, and the intermingled expression of love and sadness made her face one of tender beauty, lighted as it was by the rosy tints from the open fire. As the boy talked on in his manly way she suddenly became aware of a change in him. She noticed the well-built and symmetrically developed body, the broad shoulders, the short, stocky neck, and the head covered with brown ringlets. She could not see the face, but she knew only too well of whom it reminded her, for of late she had often found herself saying, "Just like the father—just like the father."

It was during such winter evenings as this that she had come to know her son best, as she sat on the arm of his chair and listened with tactful sympathy to his stories of the big black bass that kept house in the pool at the end of the lake, or of the downy woodpecker's nest in the old hickory, or, perhaps, of the big hoot owl that perched on the granary warm nights to watch for mice. It was with a certain feeling of sadness, as well as of pride, that she watched him grow older, lose his boyhood ways, and become more and more of a man—a man just like his father!

"I get so lonely for some one to teach me things, and go with me into the big woods, and help me skin my rats in season," he was saying, "and to teach me to use tools and to understand the books and—"

"Yes, my son," she replied. "But haven't you me? Won't I do to read with you and help you find new wild flowers and gather strange caterpillars in the spring?"

"Yes, mother, of course you will, and you know how I do care for you. I couldn't begin to do without you even for a day; but somehow you don't understand. It's because you are a woman. Sometimes I feel as if I would be the happiest boy in the Clear Creek School if I just had a father I could look up to and be proud of and—"



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“O, but Willis, be careful.” Her voice was low and full of feeling. “You can do all that, my boy, and more. I know you miss him, but you must not forget we had him once, both of us, and that he was the very best father in all the world.” She stopped, for now the tears were coming fast. “The only trouble is that he was taken away before you were lad enough to know him and love him as you would if we had him now. But that is all the more reason why you should grow into a worthy man, my boy—for his sake and mine. He loved you dearly, and I’ve often thought it was that love and ambition for you that made him determine to make money, so that you might have the future he planned for you. He left you, my boy, something better than money—a heritage of clean, noble blood and character. You aren’t old enough just yet to know all that that means, but some day you will be truly thankful.”

“You are right—always right; but you know what I mean, don’t you? You have never told me all about him, have you, mother? Won’t you tell me now? I never wanted to know so badly as I do tonight. He seems to come near to me sometimes, even if I can’t see him, and I want to know more about him.”

The fire burned low; the storm had increased in its fury; it seemed as if each gust would lift the house from its foundations. Still, to these two, opening their hearts to each other in the kindly glow of the firelight, the storm was forgotten.

After a pause she began softly and very slowly to tell the story.

“Your father was a noble man, Willis, such as I am sure you will be if you are spared to live. His boyhood I do not know much about, only that it was spent on his father’s farm. He went to Kalamazoo for his schooling, and it was there that I first met him. He worked hard, saved his money, and went to Ann Arbor for his college work. He was ambitious to become a great engineer, and was always tinkering at some kind of a machine. He used to joke with me about becoming a great inventor, and after we were married he did try his hand at a patent coupler and a back-firing device for a gas engine. He was just like you, my boy, always dreaming and seeing things in the out-of-doors. I can remember the delight he found in rising early on summer mornings to search for caterpillars, moths, and worms in the nearby woods, and he would put a strange bug in every bottle I had in the house.

“After our marriage we moved to Lansing, and he became superintendent in an electrical manufacturing company. He had a little shop of his own in the basement at home, and during the long winter evenings of the first year that we were there he built furniture for our little home. The chair we are sitting in, Willis, is one of his first pieces. We were very happy together there, and it wasn’t long before you came. The summer before you were born his company sent him West to install mine machinery. It was then that he became interested in the great



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gold mines of Colorado. Everybody seemed to be prospecting and staking gold claims. He thought he saw his chance to get rich quickly, so he, too, began prospecting. He very soon developed a great love for the mountains, and while you were a baby he used to go to Colorado Springs for his vacations. His mind was very active, and as he became more closely acquainted with the mines he conceived an idea for a machine to roast gold ore by electricity. In the winter evenings he would sit sketching its parts and dreaming over his plans. Sometimes in his boyish enthusiasm he would assure me that he would yet be a rich man.”

“And what about his mine, mother; doesn’t that come into the story pretty soon?” “Yes, yes, but don’t hurry me, son. It seems so very strange to be sitting here telling you all about him, for it seems to have happened so long, long ago.

“On one of his trips west he fell in with an old mountaineer named Kieser, Tad Kieser. Tad became interested in his roasting machine, and they decided to locate claims together. Tad was to put up the ‘grub stakes,’ as they called it, for your father had no money except his salary. All one fall, when he was not installing machinery, they explored the mountains south of Colorado Springs, especially along the old Stage Road to Cripple Creek, looking for suitable claims. The old Stage Road was a steep, rocky mountain road over which they hauled provisions and passengers into the Cripple Creek district.

“Several miles from the city there was an old log hostelry—‘Wright’s Road House’ they called it. Here lived a strange old man, a mountaineer of the oldest type. Daddy Wright, they called him. He and Tad were old friends, so your father became very well acquainted with him. The stages to and from the gold camp always stopped at Dad’s; sometimes for a meal and sometimes for all night. It was one of the delights of your father’s business trips to spend an evening with this old man in his rough mountain cabin, sitting before his crude stone fireplace smoking and listening to stories of the days of ‘forty-nine,’ when Dad had hunted for gold in the mountains of California. Your father and Tad were both in the old road house the night it was burned and barely escaped with their lives. He didn’t tell me about it until long afterwards.

“Tad and your father finally filed on two claims. One was on Cheyenne Mountain, near Dad’s claims, and the other was somewhere near a mountain called Cookstove. Your father thought that valley was the most beautiful spot he had ever seen. He used to write me long letters describing the beautiful canyon and the falls, which was just a ribbon of water that trickled down the face of a monstrous granite boulder hundreds of feet in height. He called it St. Marys Falls. Here, somewhere in a hidden spot of this canyon, they found a strange outcropping of black rock which your father believed would lead to an extensive gold vein in the interior of the mountain.



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I remember he called the vein an 'iron dyke,' and said that a compass revolted when placed on it. His great desire was to mine that strata by means of a tunnel, but he had no money, so he and Tad decided that they would work during the winter months and save what money they could, then both work on the tunnel in warm weather. They chose a spot down in the canyon that was high, but still near the stream, and there built a log shanty to live in while they worked the claim. He wrote me how they cut the great spruce on the side of the mountain far above the chosen spot and rolled them in. Dad let them use his team of donkeys to pack in the necessary lumber and shingles for the 'shack.' Father came home, and Tad, with some hired help, erected the first log cabin in the canyon. My, but he was proud of it.

"The next spring saw them at work on the tunnel. I did so hate to let father go, for I was afraid some harm would befall him; but he reassured me and seemed so positive that all our future hopes lay hidden in that hole that I let him go. The first season they went in thirty feet, and things looked better every foot. It was very hard for him to close up the hole and come home to his winter's work. His company in Lansing had inspected the drawings of his proposed machine and had promised him a goodly sum for the patent if he proved that it would work. The only question was the securing of the proper ore for flux. I remember his hopes ran high when one day they came upon a narrow vein of this necessary flux stone. He was so sure that they would find more, and the gold, too, that he made plans to build a great reducing plant, using the falls for motor power. He had it all worked out on paper, even to details.

"Meanwhile my sister, your Aunt Lucy, and Uncle Joe went West for her health, and settled in Colorado Springs. Uncle Joe became a real estate dealer and also interested in mines and mining properties. He was greatly interested in the tunnel, and predicted great things for its future. About this time all the land around the canyon, both north and south, became a part of the Pike's Peak Forest Reserve, so that your father had to refile on his claim and prove to the land office that he was working a real mineral vein. In refiling, his claim was not big enough to include the shanty, but anticipating no trouble on account of it he neglected to lease his cabin from the Forest Reserve officials. The news leaked out that gold had been discovered in Cookstove Gulch, and in a few days the entire stream was staked from one end of the canyon to the other as placer claims. Of course the cabin site became the property of another man, and with it the cabin, as it could not be moved. The new owner was a little, short, pudgy man with an ever-ready eye for business, so father and Tad were forced to rent the cabin they had built and paid for. That winter was the one your sister Mabel was taken from us, and the last year we were all together."



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She stopped and gazed into the fire, seemingly forgetting the boy who sat by her side. Then she reached forward and placed the last stick on the slowly-dying embers. As it caught, and the flames leaped into the chimney in response to the wind outside, she continued:

“The next summer was the last. I never knew just how it happened exactly; but some way, while making a new side drift in the tunnel, a blast went off prematurely, and he was caught in the falling rocks and crushed to death. Uncle Joe wrote me the particulars—all that I ever had.

“He was too badly mangled to be recognized, so even before I knew of the accident his poor, broken body was laid to rest under the pines in Evergreen Cemetery. The tunnel was closed and locked, and your uncle packed father’s few belongings in the little old trunk I gave you last spring for your own and sent it home—all that I ever saw again of your father.

“Then followed the terrible fever that nearly took my life. How I prayed, my boy, that I might die, so great was my sorrow and utter loneliness; but the Great Father saw fit to keep me here, and now I am thankful. He needed me to help you become a man. When I was so sick grandfather came and brought us home, and here we have been ever since.”

“But, mother, have you never wanted to go to Colorado?”

“Yes, son, I’ve often thought I would be happier there, but father has never thought so. I’ve often promised Aunt Lucy we’d come. I’m afraid she won’t be long for this world, for she has a very serious tubercular trouble. You must never mention it, son, but your grandfather never had any use for Uncle Joe, and was very much opposed to Lucy’s marrying him, so they slipped off and were married secretly. She has never felt like coming home since—not even for a visit. Father gets very lonely for her, for she was the life of the old home. I would not be surprised, son, if I should be called to her bedside any time now, for she is very low.”

“Mother, if such a thing should happen, you’d take me with you, wouldn’t you?” eagerly asked Willis.

“Of course I would, my son.”

“And perhaps I could find father’s tunnel. Say, mother, did you ever hear what became of that Tad Kieser after father’s death?” he inquired.

“No, son, I never heard. He wrote me one letter, expressing his sympathy, and in that letter I remember he said he had abandoned the tunnel because he was convinced that



it was not a safe place to work, and probably it never would have amounted to anything, anyway.”

“Do you suppose he is still prospecting somewhere in the mountains, mother?”

“I don’t know, Willis. Probably not, for that was ten years ago, you know.”

The remains of the last log dropped between the andirons and rolled over. Mrs. Thornton rose.

“It’s time we were in bed, son, long ago.” With that she gently bent, kissed him on the forehead, and slipped off to her own room, leaving him with the dying fire. He sat still a long time, his eyes wide open and his fists clenched.

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“If I only could,” he was saying. “If I only could.”

### CHAPTER III

#### In Which Willis Is Honored

“You’re always trying to get in a new fellow, Chuck. We never would have a new member if you didn’t do your scouting around. You know more about the fellows in this town than any half-dozen of the rest of us. How do you get next to them?”

These remarks came from Robert Dennis, the splendid captain of the High School Basket Ball Team. He had met a few of his companions at the Young Men’s Christian Association that evening.

The Association was a very handsome, four-story brick that stood some distance back from the street. Of all the places in the community for young fellows to “hang out” the Association was the most popular. At any hour after school, until closing time in the evening, small groups of fellows of every age might be found in the various departments, talking athletics, planning an all-day hike into the mountains, discussing an amateur theatrical, a debating club, a Bible study supper, or some other of the many activities carried on by these fellows with the Association as a basis of operations and a partner. It appealed to the best fellows in the school, and even in the entire community, for it had very early in its history made itself known as a clean, broad-minded, sympathetic, and constructive agency in the lives of boys and young men. It appealed to the fellows because they could have a hand in its operations and a voice in its government; because it stood for clean sport, clean bodies, clean minds, healthy spirits, and a type of social life that had all the appearances of being powerfully masculine, and yet clean and gentlemanly. It stood for a three-sided manhood—spirit, mind, and body.

Chuck seated himself. “No, Dennis, not always getting a new member, but I’ll tell you one thing, I always do have an eye open for a first-class fellow for our bunch. You know as well as I do that if we are going to keep things right, here in our old Y.M., and give the ‘Chief’ the help he needs, we’ll have to keep adding every strong, clean, congenial fellow we can lay our hands on. You don’t need to worry about our getting too many. O.F.F. has been doing stunts for two years now, and in that time we have just taken in five new men. We have room for at least three more. I know sometimes I make a mistake, but I’ll bet my hat on this fellow. He’s no ordinary kid, I’ll tell you that. I saw him in the swimming tank with his uncle, Mr. Williams, yesterday, and a cleaner-cut, better-built fellow you never saw. Swim like a fish, and dive—why, there’s nothing to it. If he takes a membership in this Department he’ll be in the Leaders’ Corps in less than a jiffy, and, what’s more, he’ll be a leader in everything else, too, when he gets acquainted.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” said “Shorty” Wier, who had thus far kept silent, “Let’s all look him over and get better acquainted with him Wednesday night on the hike. The ‘Chief’ told me he had invited him to go along with the bunch.”

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“What’s the bunch going to do on Wednesday night?” inquired “Sleepy” Smith, who was always preoccupied when anything of real importance was going on.

“Why, you ought to wake up occasionally and you wouldn’t be so far behind the times,” replied Chuck, rather dryly. “The class is going to Sweet Potato Gulch for a business meeting and wiener-bake. Be sure to be on hand, every man of you.”

“O well, I don’t like wieners, anyway,” replied Smith, and he returned to his own thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday night was perfect—not a cloud in the sky, and a great half-moon to help them find their way. There was a spring breeze in the air, the kind that makes a great wood-fire of dry logs and pine needles about the most attractive thing on earth to a crowd of young savages. Far away to the westward Pike’s Peak’s hoary head was lifted into the sky, dimly lighted by the yellow rays of the moon. There was a faint odor of spring in the air, while the little mountain stream had not as yet given up its icy prattle. Little patches of snow still dotted the sides of the canyon, and here and there a crystal icicle sparkled from the end of a pine bough.

It was a night of wonders for Willis. He had never felt the “call of the wild” so strongly and irresistibly as on that night. Every mountain crag seemed to be calling him, and in his fancy he thought the fir trees reached their gently-waving branches, beckoning him to come into the darkness and solitude. In spite of himself, his thoughts would wander to the Michigan homeland. He wondered if the ice had broken on the lake yet, and if the blossoms had begun to come in the old orchard, and if his grandmother had filled the incubator. He felt queer with so many strangers, yet not at all ill-at-ease, for he had lived a wholesome life in the out-of-doors, and the meaning of fear was almost unknown to him. As the fire was lighted and the wieners set to bake on the end of long, green willow sticks, he began to enter more completely into the merriment of the crowd.

It was an exceptional group of older fellows—the clean fun and wholesome chat was above the ordinary, yet was spontaneous and real. The “Chief,” whose name was Allen, stood at one side of the fire with a note-book in his hand, while the fellows were seated upon a dead log that had been dragged close to the fire. Allen was a young man of medium height, well-built, and clean-cut. His hair was black and his eyes were dark and very bright. A merry smile played over his features. Every fellow in the group knew that that smile meant “good will toward men.” His hiking trousers bagged about the tops of his high mountain boots, and his sweater bore the marks of many a camping trip. He always wore on such occasions as this an old felt hat, which had the initials of many a stanch, good, out-of-door companion printed on it. There was the color and vigor of health in his face, and his

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movements were swift and powerful. He was a splendid specimen of a clean, unselfish college man who loved God, His out-of-doors, and all his fellow-men. There was not a man in the community who had such an influence, or for whom the boys felt such profound respect, as Allen. He was a “square deal” personified. Many were the personal differences of the fellows that were submitted to him free-willed for arbitration. His Department was his kingdom, and these fellows his staunch and loyal supporters. Where he led they followed, always knowing it was for some good purpose. Meanness, like a wolf in the night, slunk away when he came upon it. Smut and slander knew they had no chance in his presence. To these fellows, and many more who knew him, he stood as a confidential friend and counselor, and was as a father to many a boy in the time of trouble. Many were the fathers who would have given a good deal to have held the place in their sons’ estimations that Mr. Allen did.

The trip that night did several things for Willis. It told him plainly that he was going to be an ardent lover of the mountains and life in them, just as he had dreamed and hoped he might.

Several weeks later, when Willis came home one evening, he found his mother waiting for him at the door with an envelope in her hand. Willis had told his mother all about his trip to the “Gulch,” and had confessed to her how proud he would be to become a member of “O.F.F.” A warm friendship had sprung up between Chuck and himself, and he was learning to be happy in the companionship of that crowd. He eagerly reached for the envelope, and, opening it, read aloud:

“Next Friday evening ‘O.F.F.’ will hold an outing meeting in Williams Canyon. We will first take you through Huccacode Cave, then we will have supper on Pinion Crag. We will hold our meeting about the council fire, at which time we will be very pleased to extend to you the right hand of fellowship, and make you a full-fledged member of ‘O.F.F.’

“*Robt. Dennis,*  
President.”

“Isn’t that great, mother! I’m really to be a member of the very best Bible group at the Association. It’s a club, too, you know, and holds every member to a clean standard of life in work and play. Every Saturday night they meet at the Association for supper and a half-hour of Bible study. Mr. Allen is teacher, but they all do a lot of talking. O, it’s great! I’m tickled to death! I want you to know every one of those fellows, mother. Sleepy is the poorest man—besides me, of course. I can’t say I like him so well. He’s a little sneaky, I think. Chuck told me they took him in because Mr. Allen wanted them to. The ‘Chief’ says he has a pile of good in him, if we can just get it out. He has been awfully nice to me, though. He talks camera to me almost every time I see him. I



showed him the pictures I made last spring of the thrush's nest, and he was crazy over them. I'm going

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to teach him how to photograph flowers and birds and nature. I'm glad I can do something that's worth while, or I'd feel unhappy in that bunch. Sleepy has a wireless outfit and knows all about electricity. Shorty Wier works in the Strang Garage. He is a shark in school and a fiend at basket ball. He doesn't say much, but he is a dandy. Chuck is interested in debates, and will represent the school in the interscholastic contest next fall. He can talk about anything, and has 'pep,' I tell you. And Mr. Allen is a nature student. Gee! won't we have a circus talking bugs and flowers and birds. Fat draws and does lettering. O yes, and Ham—I mustn't leave out Ham—he is the Billikin of the crowd. When you feel down in the mouth or blue, just look at Ham and it makes you laugh. He likes everybody except the girls, and everybody likes him. He knows more funny stories than all the rest put together. Ham's the one that always gets the fire ready to light and passes the 'eats,' he's—"

"Well, son, I think you are fortunate in being able to find such companions, and in having such a place as the Association to spend your leisure time. I think it is a great thing. I hope you will make the most of the opportunity. I have about decided we had better stay here through the winter, for I am very sure Aunt Lucy can not last until spring. I feel so sorry for Uncle."

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday came at last, and was one of those grand June evenings when everything seemed to be bursting with the love of life. The new green leaves danced in the breeze, as if saying, "See, I'm back again!" Here and there a fragrant fruit tree gave forth its odor from snowy blossoms, and innumerable spring insects flocked to the arc lights at the corners.

It was a happy, healthy crowd of boys that boarded the street car for Manitou. High-boots, sweaters, slouch hats, cameras, and a plentiful supply of good food. From the hip-pockets of the trousers tallow candles showed, and one fellow carried a good supply of mason's cord, wound upon a paddle. Then there was the coffee-pot, which was really an honorary member of the club, and numerous packages done up in paper.

The fellows loved Williams just at twilight, for it was then that the fantastic shapes and high pinnacles of white limestone made their best impression. The long, irregular shadows that were thrown across the canyon by the setting sun, the cool pine-scented breeze that carried every sound down the narrow crevice, the echoing of every laugh and halloo added much to the enjoyment and comradeship of the little group. Who could be unhappy or unfriendly on such a night and in such a place?

The road led on and up, winding back and forth zigzag fashion on the south wall, until it reached that wonderful cavern of fairyland, the Grand Caverns. Thousands of tourists



annually come to see its wonders, but to the boys there were other caves more magic in their spell, for they had not yet become “civilized,” as the fellows said, by being lighted with electricity and “engraved” by human hands.

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As they passed through the Narrows they began to climb up the east wall, at a point where an immense pile of broken stone from the ledges above had collected. This is the doorway to Huccacode. The entrance to the cave is a mere crack in a mighty white wall that rises a hundred feet.

Bundles and boxes were placed on a convenient ledge, candles lighted, and all made ready. The end of the string was fastened to a shoot of sagebrush just outside the opening; and the group passed in, Shorty in the lead with an electric flashlight, and Phil bringing up the rear, trailing the string. Far back in this wonderful cave there is a joining of passages, and parties entering without a string have often become lost, and have traveled several times around in a great circle before finding the lead out.

The cave is a series of chambers connected by what appears to be an overlapping of rooms. The voices of the boys sounded hollow and far away, while the candles cast long, grotesque shadows on the walls. As the column advanced, the leader shouted back now and then to "watch out to the left" or "to be careful to the right" or "to mind your footing." As the trail led off on the side of the Bottomless Pit they halted, and the usual ceremony was gone through. They twisted several newspapers together into a torch and, lighting them, dropped them into the pit. They watched as the torch went down and down and down, lighting the way for a fleeting instant into the very depths of the earth; past ugly, jagged rocks, past flat shelves of limestone, past straight, smooth walls of rock till, at last, it burned itself out, still going down into the vast, mysterious crevice.

"It's a strange sight, to be sure," remarked Mr. Allen. "I have seen it a good many times now, and I have no trouble in believing the old Indian legend about it."

"I have never heard it," said Willis. "Won't you tell it to us? This would be such a good time. Let's put out all the lights except mine; I'll stick it here on this projection and we'll sit in the end of this big room while you talk."

The crowd suited the action to the word. Mr. Allen pulled his hat far down over his eyes, picked up several little white pebbles from the ground and put them into his mouth to disguise his voice, then began:

"Eagle-Foot had been for many years the mighty medicine man of the great Ute Indians, who were probably the strongest and most warlike of all the mountain tribes. Their home was in the Middle Park at the north base of Pike's Peak, shut in from the other tribes in a fertile and absolutely safe valley, which could be guarded by a few men at a certain point. Here in this mountain valley the Utes grew into a strong Indian state. During the hunting season large parties of them would ride to the plains to hunt buffalo, returning after several weeks with immense supplies of jerked meat, which is the choice steaks sun-cured, and with a goodly number of buffalo hides. Now, Eagle-Foot was a great doctor. He knew all about the mountain herbs and the medicinal properties of

certain mineral waters as well as of the ancient sweating of disease out of the body by mud baths—a method used by the Indians of the South. He was so successful that the Indians began to believe him infallible as a doctor and medicine man.

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“Well, one season, following a great buffalo hunt on the plains, a strange itching skin disease broke out among the hunters, causing a great number of them to die. Eagle-Foot could not find a satisfactory remedy, although he tried many mixtures. At last they held long fasts, and prayed the Great Spirit to remove the curse from them. But the next season it was worse than ever. The big Chief himself lost his favorite son, Megaleep, and Eagle-Foot began to lose his influence among the people.

“Some thought the Great Spirit was punishing them for stealing the buffalo from their brothers of the plains; others said that the Evil Spirit had come back from the great desert to haunt them with disease and famine. Eagle-Foot remained silent and downcast, spending much time alone in the mountains fasting. One day as the warriors returned from the burying ground they found Eagle-Foot awaiting them at the camp, decked in his full regalia, his face painted as if for a great occasion, all his feathers hanging from his belt. He told the chief that the Great Spirit had at last spoken to him, and that he was going on a long quest into the limestone canyons. There the Great Spirit would reveal to him a cure for the dread disease. He called for the swiftest runner to go with him. Huckween, the Night Voice, volunteered, and so they started, all the warriors accompanying them to Sentinel Point, chanting prayers to the Great Spirit.

“Several days later Huckween returned to camp, haggard and weak and hungry, bearing the medicine wand of Eagle-Foot. He took it straight to the Chief, and on bended knee told him the strange tale. How Eagle-Foot had left him in the morning at the entrance to a mighty cavern and told him to follow in at ‘high sun.’ This he did, and when he reached this spot, the Bottomless Pit, he found Eagle-Foot’s sacred medicine wand stuck in the mud, his belt of sacred feathers fastened to the end of it, dangling down into the mouth of the pit. From the depths he heard strange sounds, but Eagle-Foot was gone. As he lay looking into the blackness, he seemed to realize suddenly that the wand was the promised cure, and that Eagle-Foot had given his own life in the Bottomless Pit that the sacred feathers might become a saving potion for his people. It was the old idea of a blood sacrifice.

“Every season since that the great medicine man of the Utes came here to receive the mystic cure, bringing with him Eagle-Foot’s staff and belt. Long strips of cedar bark were bound together into a rope. This was soaked in deer’s grease, one end lighted, and dropped into the Pit, the other fastened to the staff, which was stuck into the ground near the edge. The spirit of Eagle-Foot thus returned, using the flaming bark rope as a ladder, to bless the feathers of his brother, the medicine man of the Utes.”

“Do you suppose there are really bodies there at the bottom?” asked Sleepy, as the candles were relighted and the group passed on into the depths of the cave.



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"I wouldn't be surprised," replied the Chief.

Finally the first flight of rickety wooden steps was reached, and the boys descended, one at a time. Then came the "Fat man's misery," where the ceiling of the cave almost met the floor, leaving only a small opening. There was much laughing as Fat squeezed his body through. In the "Bridal Chamber" every fellow traced his initials on the white stone with his smoking candle. Then came the "Auger Hole," which is a round opening, not more than twenty inches in diameter and about fifteen feet long, through a solid wall of rock. About the middle of the passage there is a sharp turn, and the remainder of the passage slopes down into the next room. Each one stretched himself out at full length, taking hold of the leg of the man in front of him. In this way they worked themselves through, like a great serpent.

A very peculiar sensation came to Willis, who was second in the line, as he worked himself along the dark passage. "If the roof should cave in just a little, what a death!" He was busy with such thoughts when Chuck, who was just ahead of him, suddenly backed into him and whispered, "Look!" He looked ahead, and there, somewhere in the darkness he saw two small, yellow-green lights. Willis clutched Chuck by the arm and whispered hoarsely, "It's an animal!" Word was passed from one to the other as they emerged from the Auger Hole that there was a wild-cat in the Mud Room.

Mr. Allen always carried a gun on these trips, unknown to the fellows. As he took in the situation he quietly drew the revolver from his pocket and took a few steps forward. He began to think what the possible results of shooting might be. He had often heard of mines caving in as the result of a loud report, and of the vibrations from shouts closing the entrance to caves. It would be unwise to shoot, but perhaps more unwise to go away and leave the animal there. Some unarmed party might fall upon it. Many things were suggested, many possibilities talked over; but there seemed to be some objection to all. The eyes seemed to go out now and then, and occasionally there was a sad, low whine that made the cold chills run up and down each fellow's back. Sleepy had made sure of his safety by returning through the Auger Hole. Mr. Allen made no reply to their many inquiries—he seemed to have lost his power of speech. He stood with muscles taut and gun ready. He despised indecision, yet—what should he do? He thought of the mountain lion that had been killed on the carriage road to the Peak the spring before. Could this be its mate? He tried to think what the characteristics of a bob-cat were. He wondered if perhaps it had already attacked some one; perhaps killed him, and even now was guarding the dead body—perhaps not dead yet. His arm twitched nervously. He was losing his self-control. There was absolute silence now except for the whine of the beast. Did a lion whine? He could not think.



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They could not have told how long they stood there silent. Presently Shorty Wier pushed himself to the head of the group and, without a moment's warning, flashed his electric spotlight and began advancing slowly toward the animal. Allen caught him by the sleeve and followed, gun in hand. The eyes seemed to dilate, and there was a low growl that seemed to be a warning. In an instant it flashed into Allen's mind, "A mad dog!" A bobcat could not growl, and a lion did not sound like a dog. Shorty turned and looked Allen in the eye, "Don't be a fool. Put up your gun and get out your pocket ax," he said in a low, steady voice. Then he began talking in a coaxing tone.

"There, dog, there, poor fellow, no one will hurt you, nice pup; what's the matter, dog." His light he cast straight at the eyes. "Don't strike till I say," he whispered to Mr. Allen.

In a moment they were close enough to see that it was a dog, a Collie pup, wild-eyed and half-starved. Shorty stepped nearer and put his hand out to pat the dog's head; but the animal only trembled and shrank back, then whined a pitiful whine. They could see now that the dog was fast in a steel trap, held securely by his hind leg. Shorty reached down and released the bruised and swollen leg from the trap, and as the dog felt himself free he gave a cry of relief. If ever a dog expressed his gratitude in actions it was that pup. When they reached the mouth of the cave the dog collar was carefully examined, bringing to light the fact that the dog belonged to a Beverly H. Pembroke. Shorty would have the reward. Their lunch boxes and coffee-pot were gathered up, and the climb to the cliff began. The great moon was just lifting her yellow head above a rift of clouds in the eastern sky. Soon the flat top of the crag was reached, and in a moment a roaring fire was kindled. They had filled the coffee-pot with water before leaving the stream in the canyon, and it was now swung on a cross-pole over the fire. Each fellow put his share of the steak to fry by fastening it to the forked end of a stick and holding it over the coals. The red-cedar sticks made an ideal cooking fire, and the odor from the burning wood was enough to make any one hungry. The dog lay upon Shorty's sweater, against the side of the cliff, and watched the broiling meat with eager eyes. It is hardly necessary to say that he received a generous share of the meal.

Mr. Allen stood with his back to the fire, looking off over the tops of the mountains and down into the moonlit spots of the canyon below, absorbing as much as he could of its beauty and inspiration. Far away to the west was the same old peak that he had seen from every conceivable angle and he had learned to love so well. It was a scene like this that he loved better than anything else in the world, and it was at such times that he almost wished that he was one of God's wild things living a care-free life, looking to Mother Earth and his own wits to care for all his needs.



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Willis came around the fire and stood by his side, silently taking in the beauties of the picture. Mr. Allen turned, and placing his arm on the boy's shoulder, said, "It's great, isn't it, boy? It takes a night like this to make a man realize what the psalmist meant when he said, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills whence cometh my help.' Do you ever think of it when you look at these old mountains?"

After supper was finished the group gathered about the fire, and the business meeting, for which the trip had been planned, began. More cedar sticks were piled upon the fire, while the fellows settled themselves comfortably.

"The meeting will please come to order." Dennis had taken his place at the head of the little company. "The secretary will please read the minutes of the last meeting." Chuck jumped to his feet and made his report.

"Any objections to these minutes? If not, they will stand approved as read. Mr. Allen, will you explain to Thornton what 'O.F.F.' means and give him the oath of membership?"

Mr. Allen stepped to the side of the fire.

"Fellows, it is with an ever-increasing satisfaction that I meet with 'O.F.F.,' and I think it would not be out of place to-night to say just a few words that have been in my mind these last few days. I am proud to be a member of such a club. I am proud to call every fellow gathered here my brother. I am proud to have a voice in so clean and democratic a government. I am proud to be able to find my social amusement and social fellowship in such ways as this club employs—in hiking and tramping in the woods and learning Nature's secrets. We will not always be together in this most happy and congenial group. Fate will soon separate us. Some will grow old; some will die before their time; some will perhaps be rich in this world's goods; possibly some will experience poverty's sting. Yet none of us, fellows, need ever want for real friendship; and, after all, it's that which makes life glad and beautiful for us, or sad and unhappy if we do not have it. I have often warned my memory never to lose the picture of a single one of these simple meals, about the open fire together, so that in days to come I may go back and refresh myself at these springs of pure contentment. It's a beautiful thing in a fellow's life to just be living for the welfare of others, as we are trying to do. I'm wishing one thing to-night for you all, and that is, that there may never come a time in your busy lives when you will find it to your liking to follow any other standard than the one we have set for ourselves here in this little group. I am hoping that we will never find any type of social fellowship any more attractive to us than this clean, wholesome, out-of-door life that we have learned to love so well. The time will come, fellows—did you ever think of it?—the time must come when we will not be able to gather at these fires and chat together of our mutual interests and common woes. But I hope the time will never come when we can forget the good things for which we stand, day by day, in our living.



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“Willis, stand up here by the fire. I want to say to you, my boy, that we are proud to have you as a brother and that we feel confident that you are a real addition to our number. We want you to be a real, live member—to enter into the spirit of our organization. Our letters, O.F.F., stand for a very simple slogan, one that has meant great things in the lives of every one of us fellows, and one that will mean great things to you if you take it into your life and let it work. It means that from this night on you will be more interested in the welfare of others than of yourself. O.F.F.—Other Fellow First. Give me your hand. Do you promise that you will live a clean life, physically, mentally, and morally? Do you promise that you will forget your own interests in helping others, that selfishness will have no place in your life? Do you promise that you will not give your support for any reason to anything that to your mind is beneath the honor of a gentleman? If so, say, ‘I do.’”

Willis lifted his eyes to Mr. Allen’s, and, with a pressure of his hand, he answered in a clear voice, “I do!”

“I take great pleasure,” continued Mr. Allen, “in welcoming you as a brother.”

The other fellows arose, and there was a general handshaking, followed by cries of “Speech!” “Speech!”

“All I have to say, fellows, is that I, too, am proud of every one of you and of everything for which you stand, and that I’ll do my best to be a worthy member. Thank you for the honor you have shown me by asking me to be one of you.”

They sat a long time that evening, talking and exchanging ideas, for there was something nearly bewitching in the fire and the view and the friendship.

## CHAPTER IV

### Willis Becomes Interested in Gold Mines

The next four weeks passed by very slowly to Willis. Mr. Allen had gone to the annual summer camp with a large number of the Association boys. It was a State encampment, held in that very odd and interesting part of the second range known as Cathedral Park. Willis had been very anxious to go, for he knew it would be a very new and profitable experience for him. Mr. Allen had asked him to go as a Leader, to have charge of one tent of seven boys. He had never been to a camp of any kind, to say nothing of a mountain camp, so it was a great disappointment to him when his mother had told him that he had better not go this time. His aunt had grown worse as the hot weather came on, and his mother explained that she could not do without him in case his aunt should pass away.



He understood perfectly and knew that his mother's request was reasonable, so had contented himself by offering to help out at the Association in Mr. Allen's absence. He was anxious to give something in return for all Mr. Allen was giving him. Then, too, it gave him an opportunity to watch the development of a good many of the cocoons and chrysalides that the nature study club had placed in glasses in a window of the reading room.

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He had been making sketches of the development of several butterflies. This kind of work he dearly loved. He would spend hours, sometimes, watching a delicate insect emerge from its cocoon and slowly dry its dainty, crumpled wings until it was able to fly.

One day he sat sketching an immense Ichneumon fly that had just emerged from a Tawny Admiral chrysalis.

“You can’t always tell,” he was saying to the little group that were watching him. “Nature fools you sometimes. Mr. Caterpillar, who built that clean, cozy little house, and he was a fine, big, healthy fellow, too, expected to be somebody one of these days—a beautiful butterfly like the frontispiece of that nature book—but he got into bad company and got ‘stung.’ Now, instead of hatching a butterfly, out comes this robber fly, a long, lean, sleek-looking fellow that has been living for weeks on the body of that poor caterpillar, and we didn’t know it. You want to watch out who you run with, fellows, or you’re liable to turn out ‘Ichneumon men’ instead of gentlemen.” He laughed as he returned the glass to the shelf and closed his sketch book.

“What in the world!”

“Pots and kettles, frying pans,  
French toast, hot cakes, Chef’s the man;  
We’ll wash our hair and comb our face,  
Camp Tech—ump—sa, that’s the place.”

The crowd made a break for the door, and in a moment more they were inside, laughing and shouting. Five minutes later they might all have been found splashing around in the swimming-pool, making up for the lost swims of the past few days, their bodies brown as berries, and as healthy as free, camp-life in mountain air could make them. Mr. Allen shook Willis by the hand.

“I never had a better time in my life; and such a gang of royal good fellows! Willis, old man, I always want to be a boy if age takes such real pleasures away from man. I missed you, boy, every day, and needed you so often. How’s the aunt, and how’s the Department? Say, Willis, while I take a little swim, will you ‘phone to all the Cabinet members and tell them it’s Bruin Inn for supper on Saturday night?—a very important meeting! Meet here at five o’clock. And say, I want you to go along with us. I have decided to add an out-of-door committee to the Cabinet, and I want you to represent that phase of the work, will you?”

Camp was the favorite topic of conversation on Saturday night as the little group of older fellows walked up the canyon road. Mr. Allen was telling one group about some of the funny things fond mothers had sent to camp with their boys, while just behind another group were listening to an exciting tale of how the only night-shirt in camp,

together with the Leader's razor-strop, were hung on the topmost branch of a great spike-topped pine that stood just in the middle of the camp.



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So the talk ran on, from one thing to another. The stars twinkled in countless numbers above, giving just enough light so that they could see the mighty column of granite on either side, and to silhouette the gently-murmuring pines against the canyon wall. The air was chill and faintly scented by the bursting wild-cherry blossoms that grew in great profusion along the stream. Here and there, in a moist crevice, a glow-worm shed forth its greenish-yellow glow, to let you know it was night time and summer. Far away in the distance Phantom Falls was tumbling and splashing over a great pile of drift logs.

As the little company crossed the bridge and rounded a turn in the road, a campfire, built in a little sheltered nook back from the road, came into view. It cast long beams of light and grotesque shadows in every direction, while the odor of cherry blossoms changed to the aroma of good coffee.

"I hope Old Ben has as good a pot of coffee on the fire at the Inn," said one.

Presently "Old Night Cap" loomed up against the sky.

"This is as far as we could come a year or two ago," said Mr. Allen to Willis. "Before the railroad and the inn were built we used to think it was a long way even up here to the old mine."

"Did I ever tell you about the old Negro that owned this mine? Well, he came herein the early days and found a strange yellow outcropping here. He built himself a funny little shanty on the hillside, which he thatched with spruce boughs. Here he spent a good many years of his life, digging. His tunnel caved in soon after he left it, but he did find a little gold for his work. When his provisions gave out, he would take his old mule, which was his only companion, tramp into the city, sell his little bag of gold dust, and buy bacon, flour, and beans. After a little spree he would return to the mine, always sure that he would find the gold in larger quantities. Often I've stopped to talk with him as he brought a wheelbarrow load of dirt out of the tunnel to the edge of the little old dump.

"'Yep, I'se 'bout to fin' heaps an' heaps o' gol', he'd say as he pulled at his stubby gray whiskers. 'Marse Spruce-tree, yondah, he done tole me to jes' keep a diggin' an' I'd sho fin' gol'. When I 'se jes' 'bout to gib up, an' I does sometimes, yes, sah, I does, ole Marse Spruce-tree he jes' stan' up yondah on de hillside an' laff an' say, "Why, Rufus, yuse is altogedder wufless." Ole Brer Rabbit, he nod he haid an' 'spress heself same way. "Jes keep a diggin', Unc' Rufus," he say, "Jes' keep a diggin'." They sho is gol' in this yere ole world if ye jes' keeps a diggin'.'



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“He’d sing all day as he worked, and never seemed to lose faith; but when the canyon road was extended, and the inn built, it took away the quiet and solitude from the place. The old man just picked up his belongings and went farther back into the mountains—no one knew where; but somewhere, I suspect, he is still talking aloud to the trees and making friends with the wild things, still giving his life to digging up dreams and living for hopes that will never be realized. It’s a strange disease, this gold fever. I’ve never had it, but I’ve heard Old Ben at the Inn tell how it’s nearly impossible for a man to go back to his work in the city after he has once seen the golden glitter and dug the precious metal from the earth.”

Willis had remained very quiet all through the story. A strange sadness seemed to have settled upon his spirit. Several times Mr. Allen addressed him, but upon receiving no reply turned and looked closely into the boy’s face. His head was thrown back, and he seemed to be lost in the beauty of the starry night. In a very quiet tone Mr. Allen said, “A penny for your thoughts, boy.”

Willis laughed a dry little laugh, and, turning to him, replied:

“O, I was just thinking. I hardly know what, exactly. I was thinking of how that old darky’s tunnel caved in. Do all tunnels cave in? I was thinking of my father.” He linked his arm through the “Chief’s” as they walked on up the canyon. “My father was a miner, you know. That’s how he lost his life.” Mr. Allen understood the mood now.

“You must tell me more of him some time, Willis. Was he like you?”

“Not very much, but I’m going to be like him, if I can,” replied Willis. “Sometimes, since I’ve been here in Colorado, especially here in the mountains, I’ve fancied that he was near me again, watching and guiding and keeping me company. It’s hard for a fellow like me not to have a father. Mr. Allen, I don’t believe the fellows who have them half appreciate them, do you?”

A long, loud shout came from ahead, which was answered by a dog’s bark.

“O you supper!” shouted Chuck.

“Ben, remember me,” cried another.

The inn was a one-story log building, built of rough spruce trees, just as they had been cut from the mountain. On the side next to the stream was a rustic porch. On the down-canyon end was built an immense old, stone fireplace. From the chimney top there was a procession of tiny sparks making their way upwards from the roaring wood-fire within. Here and there on the wall hung the hides of denizens of the woods. Behind the pine door stood an old-fashioned, double-barreled shotgun and a later model Winchester rifle. In the opposite corner stood two short-handled shovels and a miner’s



pick, while on the wall just above the fireplace hung the head of a great buck that had one time roamed those very hills.

The fireplace, which occupied the center of the east wall, was large and very attractive. An old hand-made crane had been built into the firebox, and from it hung an old iron pot. The andirons were long, narrow slabs of granite, set on edge, upon which were piled logs of pine wood, burning merrily—not because it was a cold night, but because of its cheerfulness.

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The hearth at once became the center of attraction. It was the mysterious fairy that bound all hearts together and welded all types of personality into a sympathetic friendship that gathered round it. It was the stern and fiery monarch, ordering all assembled to be quiet that it might sing and moan and whisper the messages that it had gathered from the winter storms or from the falling leaves.

At one side of the old fireplace, leaning back in his rickety old arm-chair, sat Ben, Old Ben the innkeeper, his long-stemmed cob pipe held quietly in one hand, while the other rested on the head of a huge Russian hound that lay on the floor in front of the fire. Ben's hair was long and gray, and on his nose rested a pair of large, old—fashioned, silver—rimmed spectacles. His head was partly bald, and his small, gray eyes were set well back under shaggy eyebrows. His face was covered with a generous growth of dirty-gray whiskers, stained darkly about the mouth from his pipe. He was a typical old mountain prospector who had seen better days.

As the boys entered Old Ben rose, stretched his large, gaunt frame, and cried, "Howdy, fellers, must o' started day afore yestedy, didn't ye? Took ye tarnal long to git here, anyhow. Supper's ben ready these two hours. Me'n the critter 'n Tad is most starved a waitin'. Hello, Mr. Allen, where'd ye git this lively bunch o' fellers, anyhow? D' they all b'long to ye? Come along, Tad, er these dratted youngsters 'll eat all yer grub fer ye." This as the fellows seated themselves about the table.

Tad, by the aid of a crutch, hobbled from the lean-to kitchen and took his seat at the table nearest the fire. Old Ben served the meal—beefsteak, baked potatoes, hot corn muffins, and gravy, apple sauce, pickles, and coffee that fairly filled the room with its fragrance.

"Drat me for a young squirrel if you fellers ain't the hungriest bunch o' yearlin's I ever set eyes on," muttered Ben as he hurried back and forth from table to kitchen supplying the urgent demand.

After the last drop of coffee had disappeared, the meeting was called to order around the table and the business of the evening was gotten under way. Willis, for the first time, found it difficult to pay attention to what Allen had to say. He was watching Old Ben and his friend as they sat by the fire, chatting and smoking, the very picture of contentment. Now and then a little of their conversation would reach him, but he could not make head nor tail of it. At the supper table the man with the crutch had eyed Willis many times. In his manner there was something that seemed to be so very familiar, yet his face, which was covered with a several weeks' beard, was strange to Willis.

"I never saw a face so like my old pard's," the stranger was saying to Ben. "And you know, Ben, I often wonder if some day I won't hear something from Bill's family. There was a wee boy, but what others, if any, I don't know. The day of the wreck I saw a lad

that did a brave deed, and ever since I've been wondering if he might be Bill's boy—he looked so like him.”



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“Tad, what became of that tarnal critter, Williams, that ye told me about? The feller that jumped that placer claim up’n the gulch—do you ever see him any more?”

“Yes, Ben, he is still in the city. Has a mighty sick wife—tuberculosis, they say. He’s crookeder than a cork-screw, they tell me; but he’ll get caught yet, that kind always does. You know his wife is a sister to Bill’s wife. If it hadn’t been for that relationship to Bill, I’d have had it out with him long ago. But what’s the use, anyway. The mine’s no good and the ground’s no good, and I haven’t any money to fight him.”

“Yep, but s’posin’ the tunnel was good; what then?”

“I don’t know, Ben. Old Williams has a good name, generally speaking, in the city, and he has money—I couldn’t fight him. Dad Wright used to say he was a ‘snake in the grass,’ and Dad doesn’t often misjudge a man.”

“Who holds the key to that tarnal hole, anyway, Tad?”

“Williams was the last man in the tunnel, Ben, and I suppose he holds the keys. I’ve never been inside since I carried out poor Bill’s broken body.”

“Well, Tad, I was a pesterin’ around there not long ago, an’ I seed whar some tarnal critter hed tried to pry the lock off. You know, Tad, I b’lieve they is pay rock in that gulch, if the likes o’ you an’ me could jist light onto it. Ye can pan color anywhere around the shanty, if ye know how. I picked up some o’ that quartz formation by the dump, an’ drat it, Tad, it’s fine lookin’ stuff.”

“Yes, Ben, I often think I’ll go back and work a little longer on the old hole. Bill was certain we had struck it—talked in his fever before he died. But I haven’t got the nerve.

“Ben, I’m going to tell you something. Just before Bill met his end, he had a letter from the firm that he installed machinery for concerning the final drawings of an ore-roaster that he had been working on for years. I have often wondered if he sent those drawings to the firm before his death, or if Williams got them and the letters. I’ve never seen a roaster like his was to be. Some way, I’ve thought Williams sold those drawings. If he did, Ben, I’d kill him, I believe. That’s what makes me keep a thinking of the boy. Those drawings would have brought enough then to have educated him, and perhaps he’s poor—poor like you and me, and can’t go to school, while that rascal, Williams, rides around in an automobile. Some way, I feel like I’ll find out, and then I’ll—”

“Is that a fact! Well, that tarnal critter!” Ben puffed meditatively at his pipe and gazed into the fire.

“I have decided to go back, Ben, and work the other claim up in the gulch by Dad’s. If I could get enough money ahead I’d get a detective and put him on the case. I’m kind of a father to that boy, Ben, wherever he is, and I ought to be finding him.”

The meeting at the table was over, and the fellows crowded around the fire before starting home, and, perhaps, to hear one of Ben's stories of the early days. The stranger watched Willis closely for some minutes, then he called to him.



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“Lad, ain’t you the boy that was in the wreck of the Rocky Mountain Limited, early in the spring? I’ve been watching you, and you sure remind me of him.” Willis’s face brightened. In a flash he recognized the fireman. He advanced with extended hand.

“Why, yes, sir, I am the boy, and you are the fireman. I have been looking at you all evening and wondering where I had ever seen you before. It’s the whiskers that threw me off. How is the broken leg?”

The stranger held the boy’s hand in his own and looked into his face.

“We got out lucky, didn’t we, lad? Have you ever seen the little Englishman since that day? He was a dandy, wasn’t he?”

Chuck had been listening to the foregoing conversation.

“What wreck? What Englishman? Who is your friend?” he questioned.

The stranger spoke. “Why, don’t you know about the wreck? Has he never told any of you?” In answer to a chorus of “No’s,” the stranger drew his chair closer to the fire and began to tell the story.

“So the lad has never told you, eh? He is a splendid fellow, this lad. I want to tell you boys there is no yellow in his system. He has cool, true nerve, like my old friend, that never thought of himself if there was trouble, always of the other folks that might suffer. That’s the reason he slid off this mortal globe so soon. The lad here came near doing the same thing. Then he never told you about it. Well, well.”

“I’ll see you again,” called the stranger as Willis passed out into the night.

## CHAPTER V

### A Plan Is Evolved

“Well, by the Great Horn Spoon, you are the laziest bunch of fellows I’ve seen in many a long day. What’s all this scheming and planning about that’s going on here? Are one of you fellows trying to get a Presidential nomination?” Ham seated himself on a chair facing the fellows. They were lounging on a big window-seat in a corner of the game-room, talking earnestly in low tones.

“Come, now, let’s hear about it. What’s the game? Say, fellows, I just heard a rattling good story.” “Well, now, Ham, let up on your stories for about two shakes and give us your attention. We have an idea, a real, first-class scheme, if you please, and we want you to give us your expert opinion on it,” said Shorty Wier, as he went and closed the door.



“All aboard; let her go! What do you want me to do? When are you going to do it? Hurry, I’m getting awfully excited.”

“Well,” continued Shorty, “Fat originated this idea, or at least he suggested it, and we have just been talking it over. How fine it would be if we owned a cabin, a good-sized log cabin, big enough to take care of at least twenty fellows over night. A place far enough from the city to keep it from being continually broken into by rowdies, and still within a couple of hours’ walking distance from the car-line. With all of this great string of mountains

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and canyons, so well-forested and filled with streams, it ought to be an easy matter to find some such a place. Of course it would be ideal if we could find a cabin already built; then all we would have to do would be to rig it up. But we are game sports, every man of us, and if we can't find any such cabin built, let's locate an ideal spot and build one. Nothing real fancy or expensive, but just a typical mountain house that's weather-tight and warm. Of course we'd want a big fireplace like the one at Bruin Inn. It would be a great big job, but we could take our time to it. We'd have all winter, and more, if we needed it. Now, what we want is your suggestion, understand; we are just talking and planning about it yet."

"Gee, it would be an awful pile of work," complained Sleepy Smith, and he yawned and stretched himself. "Work! of course it would be work, you dub; but what do you ever get in this world that's worth while without real work, I'd like to know."

"Work! that's the best part of it; nothing in the world could bind us fellows together so tight as to do a big piece of real work together. We would show each other what we're made of. I always have wanted to build a cabin in the mountains. It would be a great deal better to build one than to get an old, tumbled-down shack. Besides, we don't want to work out a stunt that's just going to last for a year or two, and then be abandoned. We want to build a real, permanent mountain camp. See?" added Chuck.

"What's the matter with the old Y.M. cabin up in Bear Creek, Shorty?"

"O rats, boys, we are not talking about a pill box now. We want a cabin."

"I think it would be a great thing to do, fellows; but we must go awfully careful. We'll have to finance the thing some other way than from our own pockets, and we don't know yet what Mr. Allen will say about it. He may think it's a big mistake and a waste of time and energy. Then, too, where would we camp while working on the new cabin?" said Willis. Then he slipped off to talk the plan over with Mr. Allen, and in a few moments brought the "Chief" back with him. Willis was talking.

"Now we are on the right track for sure, fellows. Mr. Allen has the proper suggestions about this matter. No telling what fool stunts we fellows would do if we didn't have Mr. Allen to keep our feet on the earth."

"Listen, fellows," said Shorty. "We have talked this thing all over from A to Z, and we believe Mr. Allen's advice is the thing; only before we decide to do anything definite we ought to have Mr. Dean's opinion. He has been in the army, you know."

"Mr. Dean, the physical director, been in the army? Why, I didn't know that," said Sleepy.



“Yes, and he’s a mighty practical fellow. Fat, go out to his office and ask him to come in here a few minutes, will you?”

In a moment they came in together, Fat explaining their plans for a cabin. When every one was seated, Shorty continued:



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“This is a very serious matter, fellows, and we don’t want to make a mistake by being in too big a hurry. There are a few things that seem very clear after talking with Mr. Allen

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“First, we must make our cabin stunt an Association enterprise, so we can have their help and backing. Let’s make it a high school boys’ enterprise. Next, we must find an ideal place, where the work will have all the natural advantages possible—not too far away, not too close, near good water and a good supply of dead wood. It would be best to get somewhere on the old Cripple Creek Stage Road. Mr. Allen has suggested that we might help finance it in two ways: Organize a cabin company and sell stock at so much a share, all stockholders being privileged to use the shack, or we might give a circus in the gymnasium and use the money thus earned. He thinks the latter the better plan. The greatest trouble seems to be to find the ideal place. Mr. Dean, what do you think of the whole plan?”

“It’s a capital idea, fellows; only it means real business. If you tackle a job like that, you want to finish it. I’d sure be in with you on any such a deal. Here’s a suggestion. Why don’t six or seven of you fellows take a week just before school opens, pack your grub and blankets, take a gun or two and a good camera, and make a trip on foot, looking over the possible locations? For instance—start up the old Stage Road, go as far as Daddy Wright’s, then to the top of Cheyenne Mountain through that valley. There is a beautiful park there that might be suitable; then down Rock Creek, up around Black Mountain, back around St. Peter’s Dome, then study the canyons along the railroad. They say there is a good cabin somewhere near Daniel’s Pass, and several around Fairview. Get into all of those canyons that run into North Cheyenne, because that would be the handiest location for us to get to. It would be great if we could find an old prospector’s cabin that we could remodel and add to. You see, we’d have a place to camp as we worked that way. Then, too, it would have this decided advantage—it would be a staked claim and not the open forest reserve. You would have to pay for all lumber you cut on the reserve, but on a claim you are entitled to a certain amount for building purposes. You see, we could probably show mineral anywhere near a prospector’s cabin. I am convinced there are many such cabins that would be almost ideal, if we could only find them.”

“My father built a cabin in these mountains years ago,” said Willis. “A miner’s cabin; but I’ve never seen it. I don’t know where it is, but it’s near Cookstove Mountain. Some one has jumped the claim, though, now, so mother said.”

“Wouldn’t it be funny, Willis, if we should find that old cabin of your father’s?” asked Mr. Allen. Ideas came thick and fast. Even “Sleepy” Smith woke up to the fact that something unusual was going on, and roused himself so as not to miss it. After an hour’s planning and discussion they decided what to do. A route was to be laid out and an investigation trip made under the direction of Mr. Allen. The party was to be limited

to six fellows: Ham, Phil, Fat, Chuck, and Willis were the ones chosen to go. Definite plans were laid out, and the following Tuesday set as the day for starting.

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As Willis was explaining the plans to his mother the next morning his Uncle Joe came into the room. He had seen an article in the morning paper to the effect that the Y.M.C.A. boys were to build a cabin, including the names and the probable route to be taken by the investigating party.

“What’s all this nonsense about a cabin in the mountains, Willis? I saw an article in the *Gazette* this morning concerning it. Now listen to me, boy. I don’t want any relation of mine getting mixed up in any such a crazy, wild-goose chase. Do you hear? About the first thing you kids will do is to trespass on some one’s mining claims, and then you’ll be getting yourselves and some of the rest of us into trouble. It’s a lot of foolish nonsense, such doings, anyway. Isn’t home good enough for you?”

“Well, it seems to me you’re kind of mad about nothing, Uncle. We’re not going to carry off any one’s gold mines,” replied Willis. “Have you a few you are afraid we will steal?”

Mr. Williams flew into a fit of anger, saying something about, “If he was mine, I’ll bet I’d see if he’d insult his superiors in that way. The next thing we know you will be off on a mountain picnic on Sunday, bringing disgrace on your respectable relatives,” snapped Mr. Williams. “There are enough enemies now to a man’s good name, without adding any more by foolish kids like you, with heads full of nonsense.”

Mr. Williams stalked angrily out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Of all the strange men on earth, I think he is the strangest of them all,” remarked Mrs. Thornton. “Something has upset him, and he has an ugly streak to-day. I heard him at the telephone, storming about some old prospector that has come back to the city to make life miserable for him. He had seen him on the street, talking with a man he said was a detective. Lucy told me just the other day that Uncle Joe took awful chances on mining stock very often, and that she believed he would sell his very soul for a gold mine. It seems so strange—he has been angry at me every time I have let you go into the mountains. He works hard, and I suppose he thinks you ought to be doing something, too, and if we stay here through the winter, my boy, I think it would be well for you to look about for something to do after school.”

As Willis left the house the next morning and started for the Association to complete plans for the trip, he met two men coming in at his front gate. They asked for Mr. Williams. Willis directed them, then hurried on, rejoicing in his heart that he was to have a real gipsy trip in the mountains with his gang.



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He spent the day getting his things together for the trip. He was to carry a small individual frying pan, a small granite bucket, knife, fork, and spoon, eight small cans of condensed milk, a little cloth sack of tea, one of sugar, one of oatmeal, and one of rice, two boxes of raisins, a loaf of rye bread, and butter packed in a small tin can with a cover. He was to wrap these things, and whatever else he wanted to take along, including a first-aid packet, in his blanket, army style. His pack must not exceed twenty pounds in weight, not counting gun or camera. His tincup was to be fastened to his belt, and his safety ax carried in his hip-pocket. They would sleep on spruce boughs at night, and each man would cook his own meals from his own store. The mountain raspberries were just ripe, and there were great quantities of them. They would have them with cream, and count on killing a few squirrels now and then, or perhaps some turtle doves for a change. Mr. Allen took a trout line and a few flies, in case they had a chance to have mountain trout to break the monotony of the diet.

By Monday evening all was in readiness for the start. The news of the proposed cabin scheme had spread all through the Department, and many were the suggestions offered by interested fellows for making the trip an entire success in every way.

“Remember, shelter and drainage and wood supply, along with good water and big trees, are what you are looking for, boys,” was the advice of Mr. Dean, as he left them. “I wish I were going along with you. Here’s hoping you’ll find the very best spot, and that soon.”

## CHAPTER VI

### A Stage Road Journey

“Well, if you haven’t any more brains than to be starting out on a mountain trip on a wet, stormy day like this, why I haven’t anything more to say to you; but remember, I’m not one whit responsible for you,” said Mr. Williams, as he arose from the breakfast table and passed out into the hall.

It had been a stormy night. The rainfall had been heavy and the lightning sharp. It had been a typical electric storm of the mountains. Old Sol had tried in vain to force his way through the heavy rain-clouds earlier in the morning, but by breakfast time he seemed to have given up entirely, and to have withdrawn from the contest. At any rate, he was nowhere to be seen. Willis was visibly disappointed. He pushed his chair back restlessly and went to the window. The heavy, black clouds hung low on the ridge, and Pike’s Peak was entirely hidden in the mists. Willis was thinking of the conversation he had had with his uncle that morning at the breakfast table.

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“Mother,” he turned to Mrs. Thornton, who was still seated at the breakfast table, “why is Uncle Joe so positive about it being a mistake for me to take this trip? Either he just wants to show his authority or he has some special reason. According to his talk, there isn’t a more dangerous place on this earth of ours than around an old prospector’s cabin. Rats! I don’t believe a word of it. It’s all bosh and, as far as cabins go, how could disease live in an old, open mountain shanty? Anyhow, you might go for weeks in the mountains without even seeing a cabin. He thinks I’m a child and haven’t any judgment of my own. My! I’m glad he isn’t my father. He’s just a blamed old hypocrite, that’s what I think about him, anyway.”

“Well, you won’t be going if it stays so stormy, will you?” asked his mother.

“No, but it’s going to clear up, mother; this is just a little summer shower—we weren’t counting on starting until after dinner, though, anyway,” replied Willis. Toward noon the clouds broke and melted away as if by magic. Their lifting was like the raising of some majestic curtain on a wonderful stage. The moisture from the recent storm still glistened on every twig and leaf, and the fresh-bathed air was as clear as crystal. The summit of Pike’s Peak was decked in a new covering of snow which sparkled like beautiful gems. The robins chirped gayly as they fed on the worms that had come to the surface during the night’s rain.

Was there ever such a happy crowd of fellows’ setting forth on any expedition? High boots, slouch hats, soft shirts, a rifle, a shotgun, two cameras, and a plenteous supply of food. Each fellow was equipped with a haversack, in which were his eating tools and other necessary articles, such as bachelor buttons, cartridges, films, and other things. They carried their frying-pans, small buckets, and tincups suspended from their belts. The handles of their safety axes extended from hip-pockets, making their pockets bulge suspiciously.

Mr. Allen took the lead through Stratton Park, and headed for the short cut that joined the old Stage Road just as it sneaked around the base of Cheyenne Mountain on its way to the top of the Continental Divide; then downward through mountain passes and clinging close to canyon walls until it reached that most wonderful of all gold camps, the Cripple Creek District.

“It’s just two o’clock,” said Chuck, in answer to an inquiry as to the time. “And we will have to do some rapid walking if we are to get on top of Cheyenne Mountain to-night. We ought to make three miles an hour from here to the old road house. We’ll have to rest there a little and have a drink from Daddy Wright’s spring. That’s the best spring in the Rocky Mountains, I do believe.”



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“Hope Dad’s home to-day,” said Mr. Allen. “I haven’t seen him since early spring. I certainly do enjoy getting the old gentleman to telling some of his stories. You know he is an old, old timer in these parts. He came here years before gold was first discovered in Cripple Creek, and he has lived up in his little gulch ever since. In the early days, when the only outside connection the gold camp had was this old wagon road, there were a great many interesting happenings at Dad’s little inn. It was really the only road house on the Stage Road, and was burned down years ago. Haven’t you ever heard that story? I’ll tell it to you some time. They used to say that Dad had any quantity of money—I don’t know how true it was. At any rate, he hasn’t much now. After the old inn burned, he built himself a log cabin down by the spring, and there has lived ever since. He can tell some great old tales, too. You can’t name a single prospector of the Rocky Mountain region but what Dad can tell you all about him. He lives a lonely life up here all by himself, shut in all winter by heavy snows. In the summer he sees a few people passing by, and that helps some. He’s a very friendly old man, and if you treat him right there isn’t anything in the world he won’t tell you or do for you if he can. He loves to talk politics, and can tell you about every Presidential election back as far as the war. He was a Confederate soldier in his day, and if there is one thing above another that he loves to talk about, it’s the ‘Gov’ment,’ as he calls it. ‘Uncle Sammy an’ me ain’t jest zackly the best o’ pards yit, by crackey,’ he says, with a twinkle in his eye.”

“That certainly is a great view,” explained Ham. “I’m going to unload my cargo and rest here a bit, for I like this spot. Right up yonder in that heavy belt of timber is where we used to come so often to stay all night. There is a great granite boulder up there in the ‘Graveyard,’ as we used to call it, that’s just as good as a house any day. It leans away out on one side, and we built a big bed of balsam boughs under it. Right behind the great rock, to the west, we found a tiny spring, hardly big enough to be called a spring; but we dug it out and stoned up a small reservoir to catch the water. We used to come up in the evening, cook our supper, get our beds ready for the night, then climb on the big rock and watch the lights of the city come on. When they were all lighted it looked like a big, illuminated checker board out there on the plain. We’d get up early in the morning, then, and climb to the Devil’s Horn to see the sunrise. My! but it’s a gorgeous sight on a cloudy morning. The last time we were there we sure did have a mighty queer experience—”

“Come on, fellows, let’s travel along, or we’ll not get anywhere to-night. Ham, you can tell us your story while we are walking. We’ve got to reach Dad’s by four o’clock, or we’ll never get to the Park by night,” said Phil, as he arose and adjusted his blanket roll preparatory to starting.



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“Go on, Ham,” urged Fat, who was always ready for a story, especially a mountain story. “Let’s have that tale of yours. I expect we’ll need a little salt with it won’t we?”

“There isn’t much to it, after all, when you tell it, for it was the night and the surroundings that made it so impressive. We had just finished supper and were all sitting up on the big rock looking out over the lighted city. As we sat there, every now and then we would hear the strangest sound. It came from the timber away up behind the camp. At first it sounded like a human voice—a kind of a long, sad sob. The night was as dark as pitch, and as we sat listening the cold shivers began to run up and down our backs. Sometimes the sound seemed to be answered from far out in the dark valley. We speculated a good deal as to what it could be, for it was such a sad, wailing call. Then suddenly way down the valley a light appeared, not a large one, just a tiny, flickering, ever-moving light. It seemed to me to be in the air just over the center of the canyon, but the rest declared it was on the road below us. Then the sad call came again and again. It seemed to be nearer this time. Then came a far-away, dull, muffled sound, such as a horse would make on stony road. The light came directly toward us, now, up the canyon. It resembled a lantern being swung by some one, as if to give signals. We sat and watched it for a long time, everybody talking in low whispers; and many were the opinions as to what it really was. No one noticed just when, but some time, without a second’s notice, the light disappeared. We heard the faraway sound of rolling stones, then all was quiet for a long time. Two of us sat and listened far into the night. Several times we heard that long, sad wail—a sort of hoo-oo-oo. A night breeze had risen, and you fellows know how the wind moans in these pines. It was a mighty lonesome night—just sitting there with your every nerve alert and as wide-awake as you could ever get, just listening and watching. As soon as it was light enough to see, we started for the summit of Cheyenne, up through that mountain of granite boulders and mighty crags. I think we were about half-way up, when some one noticed an immense black bird, swinging in great circles, high in the air. Soon we smelled smoke, so hurried on. The first long rays of light began to streak the sky, and we knew we would have to hustle if we reached the summit by sunrise. The crowd was pretty well strung out down the side of the mountain. Keller and I were in the lead. The smell of smoke grew stronger and stronger. The air was heavy that morning, and so forced the smoke down to us, from somewhere on the summit. At last we came to a little plot of ground surrounded on three sides with great rocks. From this pit-like nook the smoke was slowly rising into the morning air. We climbed one side of the great crags, then cautiously peered over. I was pretty excited, for I was thinking

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just then of the awful tragedy that had occurred on Mount Cutler the year before. What if we should find a dead man? Well, what do you suppose we did find? I was dumbfounded. There below us were the dying embers of a log-fire. The flames had long since died, and now it was just smoldering and smoking. On either side of the fire lay a man, well-wrapped in his blanket. A gun that for some reason looked very familiar to me was leaning against the rock near their heads. We could not see their faces from where we were, but like a flash I remembered the gun by the leather-covered stock. The two men were Old Ben and a young fellow who often went with him into the mountains. I never shall forget how they looked when we waked them by dropping small pebbles from above. As soon as they would stir a little, we would drop back out of sight and listen. At last the young fellow muttered something and reached for his gun. Then Old Ben awoke, sat up, and asked what was the trouble.

“I’d bet a dollar that rock just dropped on me from above.’ Then he turned his head and looked up into the sky. ‘Great Scott, man, what a place to sleep! A stone might have tumbled on us any minute.’ Then he scrambled to his feet and cried out, ‘Man alive! take a look at that eagle; what an immense bird!’ We boys had forgotten the eagle on finding the men, but we, too, looked upward, and there, not more than a hundred feet in the air, directly over us, was the biggest bird I ever hope to see. He seemed to be fixed, motionless, in the air, with wings outstretched. Just then some of the rest of the boys came shouting up to where we were. Ben heard them and shouted back. In a few minutes we were all up on the rocks watching the bird. Ben wanted to shoot, but the other man wouldn’t let him, for he declared he was going to find the nest. It must have been the smoke from the fire that first attracted the bird, for it seemed to keep circling directly above the column of smoke. To this day we never told who dropped the stones—I suppose they think the eagle did it.

“Well, as we sat there watching the eagle, the sun came up. There never was such a sunrise before, I don’t believe. There was a layer of fluffy, fuzzy clouds, stretched out over the city as far as we could see. Then the sun came slowly up—a great crimson ball of fire, the long, yellow rays lighting up that sea of clouds and the pale-blue sky above, until the scene looked like a great, boiling pot of gold. Then, far above us, that immense black bird, wings still outstretched, just winging itself round and round in great, even circles. I’ve seen many a choice bit of mountain scenery, and many a sunrise and sunset, but never one just like that. It isn’t at all strange to me why the savages were nature worshipers. How could they help it?



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“As we sat watching the ever-changing panorama of colored clouds, there came to our ears, faintly but surely, that same sad call of the night before. The great eagle paused a moment in his circling—then my heart came into my mouth, for as we watched he folded his great wings, tipped his head forward, and began to drop. I held my breath. Down, down he came. I thought he must surely be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. He was falling directly toward the great dead spruce, and it seemed that nothing could save him from being torn to pieces. As suddenly as he had begun to drop he spread his mighty black wings and swooped down to the very tree we thought must be his death. He perched for a second on a dead limb, then flew into a Douglas spruce, emerging in a second with something in his talons. As he began to rise again, in long, spiral flights, we heard the cry of distress from the unfortunate bird in his claws. It was the same cry that we had heard in the night.”

“What was the light in the night? Did you ever find out?” ventured Phil.

“O yes, I forgot to tell you. It was Daddy Wright on horseback, swinging a lantern. He had been to the city, and was returning home. He passed Ben and his friend and nearly frightened them to death. He was singing as he came up the road, and was keeping time to his song with the lighted lantern.”

“Twenty-five minutes to reach Dad’s! Come, you fellows—loosen up your joints. The climb up the gulch to the Park is a real one, and there isn’t a place in the canyon to camp,” called Mr. Allen, as he started forward at a more rapid gait.

When they reached the farthest point of the big Horseshoe Bend, they stopped to rest a moment before starting up the last long incline to Daddy Wright’s.

“Isn’t it really wonderful when you think of the obstacles men have overcome just to accomplish their desired ends?” asked Mr. Allen as he stood gazing out over the mountains. “Men have risked their very lives just for the privilege of climbing into these old hills to look for gold. Many were the narrow escapes from death by starvation or wild beasts that these hills could tell of if they could speak. Did you ever stop to think that if it hadn’t been for the gold that God hid away here in this Continental Divide, that perhaps the men in the old Eastern colonies would never have crossed over and taken possession of the wonderful Westland. It was the gold that was hidden under the snow and ice of Alaska that beckoned men northward. This has always been true. The prospectors of the Nation have always been its best explorers—certainly they were its real frontiersmen. They led and civilization followed. Think of the thousands of people who endured hardships of which we can not even imagine just to follow westward that trail, blazed by such sturdy old men as Dad Wright and others like him. I’ve heard Dad tell many a time of that caravan of forty-niners, all their earthly possessions



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packed in one of those old prairie schooners, drawn by slow, patient oxen. I've heard him tell of the time gold was discovered in Cripple Creek. Cripple Creek was just a part of the great wilderness, and was only accessible by a series of uncertain trails. Yes, gold is a precious metal, to be sure; but it is magical, too, for no sooner is it discovered than a wave of industry is created. Upon a bleak and barren spot a city is built in a week—a miracle of human energy. The Midland Railroad kept great gangs of men working day and night, in order to connect that great gold field with the outer world. Before long there was a tremendous demand for a common wagon road 'to civilization,' as they put it; and this very road that we are walking on came into being—an outlet, if you please—for some of that wonderful, teeming, bubbling life and industry created by the mere discovery of gold.

“Soon this very road became the most important highway in the State. Great wagon loads of food and tools went up, and bags of precious ore came back. Stores were opened, schools were built, churches erected, and homes founded. Civilization had found another desolate mountain wilderness, and with her magic wand added it to her ever-widening domain—all because some one had discovered gold.

“Then came the first stage-coach. Daddy has often told me all about it. A great, cumbersome affair, rolling and pitching on its leathers as it came lunging and bumping along the rough, stony, mountain road. The driver was seated high above the dashboard, nearly buried in boxes, bags, and bundles, while the baggage till behind resembled a railroad truck piled high with every kind and description of trunks. As it came to a sudden stop in front of the little postoffice, its great, swinging side-doors opened and the passengers scrambled out, each one handing the jovial and loquacious driver a five-dollar note.

“Soon it took four stages to satisfy the demand, one going each way night and morning. It was at this stage of the game that Daddy built the famous Road House. Here the horses were relayed, and here the passengers stepped out to stretch their cramped limbs or, perhaps, to drink at Dad's spring. Sometimes, on stormy nights, both stages, the one going up and the one coming down, would be tied up for the night at Dad's. Then such times as there would be in that old log house! Prospectors from every gold camp on earth, promoters and mining brokers, surveyors and engineers, old-timers and tenderfeet—all brought together by one single impulse—the craze for gold.

“Many were the mining claims that passed over the poker table there; many were the conspiracies that were talked over and determined upon. Many were the stories of the old Sante Fe trail and of the Pony Express, or perhaps strange tales of Kit Carson as he roamed the great Westland from Texas to Wyoming, trapping for fur and killing every treacherous Indian that crossed his trail. You know Old Ben at Bruin Inn was for many years a stage driver for Dad on this very road, and he is chuck full of stories.”



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"When are you going to tell us the story of the burning of the Road House?" interrupted Ham.

"Well," replied Mr. Allen, "if I don't succeed in getting Dad to tell it to you himself, I'll tell it when we stop on top of that hogsback to rest," pointing to a great, round hill in the canyon.

"Do you think Dad will really tell us any of his stories?" queried Willis. "My father used to know him, and he has stopped at this very place. I'm sure he made many trips to Cripple Creek in those old stages." Turning to Mr. Allen, he continued, "Wouldn't father think it awfully strange if he knew I was tramping over the very road he used to travel so often?"

Mr. Allen and Willis dropped to the rear of the line, and Willis went on:

"I've been thinking I'd ask Daddy Wright if he remembered my father, and he might know where the mine is; and O, I'd so like to see it. I never want to be a miner, but I'd just like to know all about mines, so I could understand father better."

"Well, it all depends on how Dad is feeling," returned Mr. Allen. "If he is well he will be as glad to see us and as loquacious as a happy child; but if not, he will hardly notice us at all. Leave the talking all to me. He and I are old friends, and I always have some little treat in my pocket for him. He will be looking for it if he is home, but sometimes he is up at the mine."

"O, he doesn't work a mine now, does he?" exclaimed Willis.

"No, he doesn't exactly work it, but he owns one up in the gulch here behind his cabin, and sometimes there is a man up there at work. I don't know who he is."

As they rounded a great boulder that jutted out into the road, the little cabin of Daddy Wright came into view. A dog began to bark loudly, and somewhere up in the canyon that runs at right angles to the road there came the deep, muffled boom of a mine blast.

"Guess they must be working the mine, after all; still, it might be one of the others. There are half a dozen in this canyon, all of which have been worked more or less. The owners work in the city until they can get enough money to buy powder and grub stakes, then they work the mine for a season on their earnings," remarked Mr. Allen. He was carefully surveying the cabin and hill behind it. The dog had now come out from its shelter and stood in the middle of the road, doing his utmost to wake the dead. He evidently disliked visitors.

"Dad can't be very far away, for Knepp is always at his heels. He is nearly as old a timer as Dad himself, and as harmless. Hold on there, you fellows up ahead," called Mr. Allen. "Let me do the introducing of this party."



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The cabin was a little log affair, well-banked around the base with dirt and moss to keep out the cold. To all appearances the only two openings in it were the front door and a double window. One of the window panes was covered over with the end of an old egg crate, and another, which was not so badly shattered, was repaired by a burlap sack, wadded into the opening. A big pine stood just outside the door and cast its shade over the roofless veranda. At one side of the house stood an ancient, moss-covered, hollow pine log, into which a pipe ran from the spring, a few paces back in the gulch. This was the old stage watering-trough, made by Dad himself when the big cabin was built. Directly up the road a hundred paces stood the old stone chimney, a famous landmark of the region.

Mr. Allen went to the watering-trough and, filling his cup, called out:

“Here, you fellows, do you want a drink of the greatest ale in the world? It’s the purest of Mother Nature’s brews.”

The old pine door squeaked on its rusty hinges as it slowly opened.

“Well, sir, I’ll be dummed. Howdy, young ‘uns! Whar d’ ye hail frum? Huntin’ bar, er jist a roundin’ up a bunch o’ jay-birds? Haw, haw, haw! Yer ‘bout the fightin’est bunch o’ young dandies I’ve seen sence the war.”

Daddy Wright stood in the doorway, taking in every detail of the group. He was a little, shriveled-up man, with small, watery eyes set well back under shaggy white eyebrows. His head was protected by a very disreputable and time-worn black hat that looked as if it might have been in active service for at least a half a century. His clothes were shabby and dirty, and his feet were bare. It was one of the peculiarities of the old man that he rarely ever wore shoes, except in the coldest of winter; then he preferred his old, home-made moccasins. His straggly, gray whiskers were badly stained with tobacco from his constant companion—an old, corncob pipe. He was short and stout, and had of late years become very feeble, being just able to hobble about a little each day with the aid of a cane.

“Yew fellers with all yer fixin’s remind me a heap o’ some o’ the gangs o’ green city fellers I used to see when I was freightin’ on the old Spanish Trail—all guns an’ blankets an’ fixin’s, but not much real explorin’ blood in ye. Hain’t that ‘bout so? Say, Hallen, jist explain to me what yer ca’clatin’ to do with these yere young roosters. Explorin’, huh—jist as I thought. Kick me fer a stick o’ dynamite if ye hain’t the beatenest bunch o’ explorers I’ve seed in many a moon. Lookin’ fer gold mines? Suthin’ bigger, I s’pose? I’d give half my grub stakes if Tad could see ye. Explorin’, eh? Yew remind me o’ the time me an’ Old Ben went explorin’ on Beaver Creek. We had ‘nough truck ‘long t’ start a gold camp, an’ we walked an’ explored an’ explored. We must o’ walked fer well nigh onto three weeks, an’ all we ever seed in all that time was a pole-cat—an’ we wished we hadn’t o’ seed him, fer Ben had t’ bury every livin’ last stitch o’ his duds an’ walk home in



his bare hide. Haw, haw! I wisht Tad 'ud come 'long now an' take a squint at yew fellers —he'd bust a bein' tickled!"



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“Dad, how is your good health these days?” inquired Mr. Allen, as he handed the old man a little package he had taken from his haversack. Dad took it, smelled it through the paper; then a pleased smile spread over his face.

“Smells like grains o’ gold, Mr. Hallen. Thank ye. As fer me health, never was no better sence I been here. A man can’t git sick a livin’ out in this yere country all his life. I’ll be ninety-five now, in jist a few weeks, an’ I’m as spry now as most any o’ yew fellers. I’ll live longer’n some o’ ye yit. Yep, I’m feelin’ mighty spry agin sence Tad’s got back. Kind o’ seems like the old days afore the shanty was burned. I ca’calate them there devils must o’ enjoyed that performance.”

The fellows all stood at attention. Was the Road House story really coming, and from Dad’s very own lips?

“It must have been a sad sight, wasn’t it, Dad, to see your home demolished in that fashion?” quietly suggested Mr. Allen, by way of encouragement.

“T wan’t near as sad a sight as some I have seed,” replied the old man. “Bout the saddest sight I ever seed was of an old pard o’ mine a wanderin’ over these almighty hills a sorrowin’ out his life after he’d lost his right down best friend in a mine cave-in. Poor old boy, he took it mighty serious. He used to be the happiest prospector I ever swapped lies with, till that devilish old tunnel caved in an’ crushed the life out o’ the feller’s pardner. He hain’t never ben no ’count sence, till lately. Now an’ then he’d take a long, wanderin’ trip back into these yere gloomy ol’ gulches, an’ I’ve seed them as say they’ve heerd him away off in the hills at night a callin’ his pardner’s name, an’ a sobbin’ an’ a carryin’ on. He’s a strong man—that’s why he gits out into God Almighty’s hills to open his troubled heart, ‘stead o’ tellin’ his lonesomeness to men as would make fun o’ him. That’s ‘bout the sorriest sight I ever seed, an’ I’ve seed ‘bout my share on ‘em—Indian killin’s, dynamite explosions, an’ sech like. ’T ain’t many fellers ever has as real a friend as that!”

“What finally happened to your friend, Dad—did he get over his sorrow after a while?”

“No, no, my boy, he never got over it. He got on top of it. I mind now how he was gone a long spell in the timber; no grub, no duffel, no nothin’—only his ol’ gun. He lived off’n the bounty o’ these yere wooded hills, an’ he let the spell o’ God Almighty’s woods an’ crags an’ streams heal up his broken heart. Then he came back. I remember one mornin’ he come to my shanty, and a hungrier, starveder, wild-eyed feller ye never seed in yer born days than him; but shoot me fer a pole-cat if he didn’t come back a smilin’. I was skeered he’d lost his mind. I was a pannin’ mud in the gulch up back o’ the shanty when he come ‘long the trail. I jist looked, then I knowed what had happened. He had licked that awful sorrow. He’s ben off down in civilization now fer these ten years, but now he’s back agin. The silent company is callin’ him, he says, an’ he jist has to have a free breath an’ a little more pasture, an’ this is the only place he can git it.”



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“He must have had an extraordinary companion, if he had learned to care for him in that way,” remarked Mr. Allen.

“Extraordinary, yew say,” began Dad in a low, measured tone. “Bet the last button on your britches, he was that an’ more. He was a youngish feller, an’ quick as scat. Knowed more ’bout machinery ’n all the other fellers I ever knowed. Seems to me he growed up in Kankakee, or suthin’ like that, an’ he was a—”

“Where did you say he came from, Mr. Wright?” asked Willis in a voice that betrayed his excitement. Willis had been thinking very rapidly as Dad told his story. What was there in this strange tale that so fascinated him, and made him want to cry aloud? He had never felt so strange before.

“Why, I don’t ’zackly recollect,” replied Dad. “It was Kankakee or Kangaroo, er some sech name. Many’s the night he’s stopped with me in the big cabin an’ told me about all kinds o’ machinery. The night the big cabin burned he was here a showin’ me a lot o’ plans of machinery he had got up himself. They were ’bout all he saved out o’ the fire, ’cept his hide, an’ that was some scorched.

“I never seed a man ’at went so plumb dumb crazy over a few gold nuggets as him. ‘T was here at the old cabin he met his pard, an’ they made plans fer a great minin’ company. Of all the fellers they was settin’ up machinery in the mines a dozen years ago, this feller was the best o’ the lot. Why, oncet he rigged up a—”

“O, Mr. Wright, were there lots of different men installing mine machinery here in the early days?” inquired Willis. A note of anxiety had crept into his voice.

“More’n one, do ye mean, lad? Well, I should snicker. I mind oncet they was five o’ them at the cabin one night, an’ every feller could prove that his machinery was the best. Sech a jamborees o’ arguatin’ I never heerd. I had to send ’em all t’ their bunks t’ keep ’em frum fightin’. Laws, yes, plenty o’ ’em, boy; but this one feller, I forgit his name, now—my pard could say it quicker’n scat—was wuth all the rest o’ the bunch put together. He was a reg’lar genius with machinery.”

Dad had been filling his pipe from the package Mr. Allen had given him. He now lighted it and began to smoke. Mr. Allen knew that there would be no more stories that day, so, bidding good-bye to the old man, he suggested to the boys that they make a start for the Park. After a last drink from the cool, bubbling spring, they turned up the gulch, and were soon lost from view.

“Well, I hope you’ll find explorin’ a plenty, young fellers,” called Dad. “Keep yer eye peeled fer pole-cats. They’s powerful friendly to strangers in these parts.”

## CHAPTER VII

### A Wilderness Camp

As the little party climbed upward on the gulch trail, they were discussing Dad and what they knew of his life. Each boy telling little stories and incidents that he had heard concerning the old man. Willis lagged behind, and did not seem to be particularly interested in the conversation.

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“Well, old man, what are you so glum about?” inquired Ham. “One would think you had been to a funeral instead of chatting with the most humorous of old mountaineers. You aren’t getting weak in the knees already, are you?”

Mr. Allen came to the rescue.

“No, Ham, he’s just like me—busy thinking of the really admirable qualities of the old man. You would have to hunt a long, long time these days before you would find another such old timer as Dad. He has lived a rough life all his days. He has been knocked about from pillar to post for ninety long years. Just think of the store of experience that is gathered into that one life—frontiersman, cattle man, freighter, prospector, business man, soldier, and philosopher. Through all his disappointments, hardships, and discouragements he has still remained a decided optimist, always happy and cheerful, and is a veritable sage when it comes to good, common horse-sense. I’d rather take Dad’s opinion of a man than any one’s I know of in this world. It wouldn’t be in polished English, but it would be shrewd and just.”

From up the valley there came several long, heavy thuds. They soon reached the point where the valley widened out and the underbrush disappeared to give place to a splendid growth of tall, clean Douglas spruce. Somewhere back in the timber a woodsman was chopping.

As the trail wound in and out among the great tree trunks, the party soon came to a little clearing on which was pitched a small tent. Close beside it a little spring trickled out of a fissure in the rocks. At the far side of the tent, with his back to the approaching group, worked a man. He was engaged in chopping young spruce logs into lengths for mine props. Fat called out in his cheeriest voice, “Hello, there; must be going to build a cabin!” The man turned and a broad smile crossed his face.

“Yes, an underground one,” he said. Then, in a surprised tone, he continued, “Well, well, aren’t you the fellows I saw over at Ben’s place the other evening?” Without waiting for a reply, he went on: “Why, yes, there is my friend of the wreck! How do you do, lad? It looks like you fellows are going to make somewhat of a journey, from the appearance of your traps. Where to, may I inquire? Looking for something definite, or just out, like myself, to get a little of the wilderness spirit into your systems?”

“Well, I hardly expected to see you up here in the mountains,” said Willis. “It seems we have met a good many times since spring. What are you doing up here, anyway?” He turned and surveyed the valley.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” replied the man, as he leaned on his ax-handle. “It’s like this. When I was a young man, like yourself, I developed a great love for life in the wilderness. My father was a mountain ranchman in the Sierra Nevadas, so I had ample opportunity to

satisfy my greatest desire—to roam the hills and valleys and to learn first-hand the art of getting along well



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in the wilderness by utilizing Nature's storehouse. As I have grown older, I have found out that it is the only place where I am permanently happy. Years ago my partner and myself located this mine, along with some others; but because of lack of capital, this one was never developed." He pointed his finger to a pile of loose, freshly-mined rock just up the hill from his tent. "I've been railroading for the last ten years, but was awfully unlucky; so after the last smash-up I decided I would come back and see what this old mine held for me. It's a funny thing about mines, boys—you can dig and work, work and dig, and be more or less contented as long as you find nothing but prospects. But when you dig up a little of the real gold, you get terribly impatient until you find it in paying quantities. I've had the gold fever for twenty years."

"Do you think there is anything in any of these mines on Cheyenne Mountain?" inquired Willis. "My father owned a mine somewhere on this mountain; but I expect that it was a good deal like your mine—never developed. I'd love to find it, though, just because it was his. He was killed in a mine accident, somewhere in these hills, when I was a small boy."

The miner's face went suddenly white. His eyes partially closed and his hands shook, as he muttered something about, "Just as I thought," then continued, "Well, I—" He changed his mind, and, turning to his woodpile, chopped vigorously for some moments. When he spoke again Mr. Allen noticed that his voice was husky and that he was scrutinizing Willis with special care.

"I can't tell you to whom all these holes belong, but some of them I know. That one over there was located by Old Ben at Bruin Inn. That one with a dump of black rock," pointing up the opposite side of the canyon, "belongs to a real estate firm in Colorado Springs—Williams and somebody." He never took his eyes from the boy's face as he spoke.

"Williams, why—why, my Uncle, Williams, is a real estate man, but I didn't know that he —"

The miner, still eyeing the boy carefully, interrupted him by adding, "And the hole directly to one side, and on the same property, belonged to a young engineer, and was located many years ago. The Williams shaft has been sunk in the last few years. That hole has the very best prospects of being something of any on the mountain. The Williams outfit restaked the claim because the assessment work had not been kept up by the original owner."

"What was the original owner's name? Do you know? You say he was a young engineer?"



“Yes, his name was Thornton.” The man dropped his head and worked the heel of his boot nervously in the dirt. “I used to know him quite well, years ago.” Then he added, in a slow, hesitating tone, “I haven’t seen anything of him for nearly a dozen years.”

The corners of Willis’s mouth twitched nervously. He tried to speak, but couldn’t. He came a couple of paces nearer to the miner, stopped, picked up a slender twig, and began to whittle it thoughtfully.



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“Would you mind telling me all about him—all you know?” asked Willis. The miner looked at him curiously a minute, then asked, in a quiet, well-controlled voice, “Did you know the man, lad?”

“Not so well as I would like to have known him, sir; but perhaps I may get better acquainted with him now. He was my father, but I hardly remember him, except for the stories and pictures that mother has told me about. I’ve always wanted to know more about him.”

“I can’t tell you much, my boy,” returned the miner in a kind, friendly voice, “only that he was the best man that ever set a hoisting plant in this region, and the finest, cleanest young fellow that ever came into these hills. Every man was his friend.”

“Did you ever know a Mr. Kieser who was a friend of my father’s?” asked Willis, after a moment’s thought.

“Seems like I did,” replied the miner, “a great many years ago, but he disappeared from this region long since.”

“Did you say the mine which once belonged to my father seemed to be the best in the canyon?” broke in Willis.

“Yes, it did, the last I knew of it; but nothing ever came of it, except that there have been two men there to-day, preparing to do this season’s assessment work. You can never tell, you know, about a gold mine, for most of them have just been ‘holes full of hope,’ and the hope usually leaked out sooner or later.”

Chuck halloed from up the trail to get under way, or they would never reach the top by dark.

“Going to camp up in the Park to-night, I presume?” asked the miner.

“Yes, if we can make it,” replied Mr. Allen. “Have you been up to the top lately?” “Yes, I was up yesterday, and it’s a grand sight at this season of the year. The Maraposa lilies are blooming in great profusion, and the spring is running a fine little stream. I had a very pleasant surprise up there, too. Years ago there was a large herd of deer which lived in that park, but they were supposedly all killed off. Yesterday, about this time, as I sat on a dead log just back from the spring, quietly thinking over some of the memories of old times when I had hunted on that very ground, I heard the dry twigs snap, and, turning, I saw a doe and two tiny, spotted fawns cross the park and enter the timber at the other side. If you build a fire to-night you may get a glimpse of them.”

“I’m coming to have a long talk with you some of these days,” called Willis as they started off.



At last the entrance to the Park was reached, and they came upon a stretch of level ground. The entire country changed. Instead of the stony tallus of the canyon, there was soft, black soil under foot. Instead of the great spruces and firs scenting the air, there were only tall, stately aspens on every side, their leafy tops lost in the deepening shadows. Instead of the ground cedar and berry bushes, wild grass grew in rank profusion. The air was tinged with a faint fragrance, and somewhere in the distance came the sound of gently-splashing waters, "Like a voice half-sobbing and half-laughing under the shadows."



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The party halted and turned to the right of the trail, where a great, lone pine tree stood on a little rise of ground, directly above the tiny spring. This was to be the camping spot for the night. Packs were quickly removed and unfolded, dry sticks gathered for the fire, and sweet-scented balsam boughs were cut and brought to the tree. One generous bed was made, big enough for all, close in front of the camp-fire. Mr. Allen cleaned and filled his small acetylene lamp—"In case of need," he said. The guns were stacked in a handy place and supper operations gotten under way.

"It sure does smell awfully good up here," began Phil. "I wish we had gotten here before dark—I'd like to have had a little look around before I went to sleep. Who knows but we may be sleeping ten yards from a bear's den. We are up in a real wilderness, now!"

"Bears, your grandmother!" snorted Ham, as he deftly opened a can of baked beans with his pocket knife. "A lot of great big bare spots is about all you could find. Say, Phil, on the dead square, what would you do, now, if a black bear would sneak down here to-night and crawl into bed with you?" "I'd say, 'Mr. Bear, if you want a real sweet, tender morsel that's easily digested, just help yourself to that little imported Ham over there.'" A roar of laughter went up from the others.

Chuck was philosophizing about the value of gathering food while it was yet day, as he sat stowing away his quart of fresh raspberries.

"You can have all you want of them," retorted Mr. Allen. "I'm seedy enough now, without eating those things."

"What's the matter, Willis? Did we walk you too hard?" inquired Fat.

"No, I could walk a hundred miles yet to-night," replied Willis, as he sliced up his bacon preparatory to frying it. "But this has been a very wonderful day for me. It's all so new, you know, and I'm green, too. Besides, it all has a very special significance to me, some way. I love it. I like it better than anything in the world. I could live this way forever. I'm sure I could write poetry to-night, or paint a great picture, or even sing. It's a wonderful feeling. Did you ever feel that way? It's the charm of the great out-of-doors."

"I think we had better picket Willis to-night," dryly remarked Ham. "He's liable to be floating off in his enthusiasm. But if he happens to be fortunate enough to lie on a friendly pine knot all night, he'll feel differently in the morning."

So the merry talk went on. After supper bigger logs were laid on the fire. A collapsible canvas bucket, filled with drinking water, was hung on a low limb of the tree, and the supply of night wood was conveniently placed near Mr. Allen's end of the bed.

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Then Ham got a long, cotton bag, from which he produced several handfuls of pinion nuts. They were always the introduction to the camp-fire stories. He seated himself, drew his knees up close to his body, leaned back against the great tree trunk, and shouted: "All aboard, let her flicker. What's first? Mr. Allen, let's have that promised story you didn't get out of Dad. I believe you just side-tracked him on purpose, so you could tell it yourself. Come, now, wasn't that it?" He began to whistle in a low tone as he waited for the story. Fat stretched himself at full length before the fire, his head resting on his blanket roll. Phil had backed up on one side of Mr. Allen and Willis on the other. Everybody was waiting.

"Well, once upon a time, long, long ago, there lived a little fairy," began Mr. Allen.

"You don't say so," interrupted Ham, as he tossed a stick into the fire in a disgusted manner. "Was it fairy long ago? I can recite Mother Goose rhymes myself. You'll have to do better than that."

Phil nudged Mr. Allen in the ribs and chuckled to himself.

"Well, then, how's this: Not many years ago, in a wonderful little village, there—"

"Was a wooden wedding at which two Poles were married," interrupted Ham, with a mischievous grin on his face.

"You're kind of hard to please, Ham," suggested Fat, as he rolled over to warm his other side.

"How's this? The night was dark and stormy," started in Mr. Allen. Ham settled back contentedly. "That's something like it. 'The night was dark and stormy,' and what else?"

"Well, if you must have it. I have heard a good many stories of how the Old Road House was burned, but they are all different. Which one shall I tell you? I'll tell you the one that Daddy tells himself, because it probably comes nearest the truth. As a matter of fact, though, I don't believe any one knows just how it burned down.

"You know Dad spent his boyhood on a great southwestern cattle ranch, and knew at first hand a great many things about Indians and tramping and mining and 'explorin',' as he calls it. Just why he left this ranch life he never told me exactly, but I know he had his first case of real gold fever in forty-nine, and has never gotten over it. His father was a United States marshal, and was instrumental in gathering in a number of the most notorious criminals of his day. One of Dad's favorite stories is of the capture of a gang of Mississippi River pirates.

"It was Dad's father that finally cleaned out this great nuisance when he captured Mason, their leader, through the treachery of his fellows. When the final raid was made, Dad, who was then a young man, was one of the party. It seems that there was a



certain boy in this pirate gang who escaped, after having been arrested with the others. Several years later Dad had occasion to remember the threats this boy had made to him at the time of the raid.



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“Dad was out on a trapping trip with a group of professional trappers, and, as was the custom, each man had taken with him two good horses, one to carry his share of the hides and his food supply, the other to be used in case of emergency. They were trapping in the Arkansas valley, and after a few weeks out they began to suspect that their camp was being watched by a large band of hostile Indians. They understood the situation perfectly. The Indians were not following them for murder or for a mere fight, but for their horses and furs. They would not attack, however, until they were reasonably sure of getting away with the desired booty without loss of life to their own party.

“The trappers’ hunt had been a very successful one, and a large amount of money was already represented in the heavy packs of fur. Each night these packs of fur were carefully arranged in a big circle, forming a crude rampart for the party. The furs gave the men reasonable safety as they slept, for no arrow, however swift, could penetrate a roll of green hides. The horses were always securely fastened not far from the camp, and guards posted at night.

“Finally the ideal night for attack came. It was dark as pitch, not even a star showing in the cloudy sky. As night fell, it was so stormy that the usual night guard was not deemed necessary. Instead, every man went to sleep. Sometime in the night Dad was suddenly awakened by the pounding of many hoofs on the hard gravel of the valley. In less than a second the entire camp was awake, and every man gripped his rifle in readiness. No one dared to leave the rampart. Safety lay in being all together. The pounding of hoofs grew louder and louder, the picketed horses whinnied, then there was a wild gallop past the little camp, accompanied by fiendish yells. Not a man dared to investigate, for fear of ambush. All that they could do was to patiently await the coming of morning.

“With the first rays of light all looked anxiously toward where the horses had been picketed so carelessly. They were gone, every one of them. A hasty examination told the tale. Under the cover of the intense darkness, the hobbles and the picket ropes had been cut at the pins, so as not to disturb the horses or waken the sleeping trappers. After the ropes were cut, the Indians had ridden pell-mell past the free animals, and they, finding their fastenings gone, had joined the stampede. It was a clever game, and the trappers had lost. What were they to do—fifteen days’ journey from any assistance, and not a horse within a hundred miles?

“As they climbed a hill on the far side of the river, to take a look at the surrounding country, they heard a faint whinny, and there, in the bottom of the gulch, lay one of their horses, stretched at full length. His feet had become entangled in the long picket rope, and he had fallen at the edge of the washout with a badly-broken leg. The party gathered about the unfortunate animal, lamenting the fact that he must be shot to relieve him of his suffering.



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“As they stood talking, Dad noticed a movement in a nearby clump of bushes. Was he mistaken? He quietly told his partner what he had seen, and, with rifles leveled, the two cautiously approached the spot. There was, however, no need of fear, for it turned out to be only a young Indian boy, and he badly injured. He had probably been riding the horse before its fall. Everybody was for instantly shooting the lad except Dad, who protested, explaining that the boy might be able to give them valuable information as to the number of Indians in the war party, and something of their future plans. This seemed to be reasonably wise, so the wounded Indian was taken back to the trappers’ camp.

“For many days he kept silence, never once speaking to any one, growing weaker and weaker every day from his injuries. Finally he was taken with an awful fever, and every man in the party knew that nothing could possibly save him. Dad nursed him and cared for him as patiently as if he had been one of their own party. When the Indian learned that he was to be treated kindly for the present, at least, he called for Dad, making feeble signs that he wanted to talk to him secretly. After a long and painful effort he made Dad understand who was with the band of Indians, and why they had watched the trappers so long and so closely. There was a certain pale face with them who was their leader and who had been a ‘heap big robber’ on the big river. He had offered a reward for Dad’s life to every Indian in the party. He had invented the stampede, and when the men were faint with hunger and watching, they would be back to kill them all. Dad was to be hung in honor of the occasion, to celebrate the day the pirate had made his escape from Dad’s father. In a few hours the Indian died. Dad kept his secret to himself, although he was greatly disturbed over it. He was being hunted—hunted by a savage worse than any red man that ever shot a bow or took a scalp. He remembered, now, that many of his comrades of that memorable raid had since mysteriously disappeared. The truth flashed upon him in an instant. Shorty Thunder, the river pirate, was taking his revenge. Slowly but surely he was hounding down every man that had sought his life that day.

“In a few days the trapping party was picked up by another hunting party.

“What’s the matter, Ham? Are you getting sleepy?” called Mr. Allen as he arose to replenish the fire. Ham had sprawled out on the ground and was looking off into the dark woods, all alert.

“Sh-h-, you,” he whispered as he motioned them not to move. “I saw something move out there in those bushes just now; I’ll bet my hat on it.”

“O sugar,” said Phil. “Something moved, did it? What do you suppose it was, an elephant?”

Just then Fat raised his finger cautiously. “Quiet, there, a second, you rubes. Use your eyes more instead of your mouths, and you’ll see more. Can’t you see that light spot

right over there?" pointing into the darkness with a very crooked stick he had been fooling with. All sat quietly listening and watching, but to no avail. They could see nothing.



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“Go on with your story, Mr. Allen,” urged Ham. “What’s river pirates got to do with the destruction of the Old Road House, that’s what I’d like to know.” The crowd settled themselves again for the rest of the story.

“Well, it’s like this, Ham,” continued Mr. Allen. “Every great story has a preface, and I’ve been telling you the preface so far.” Ham let out a few long, extra well-developed snores. “Say, Fat, wake me when he gets to the beginning of the first chapter, will you?”

“Finally Dad came to Colorado—just why, I don’t know; but he prospected hereabouts a good deal in the early days, and when gold was discovered in Cripple Creek he was right on hand. In 1873, I think it was, the county built the Cripple Creek Stage Road. Dad was a pretty old man then, but not too old to see his opportunity. With a little outside capital, he constructed that famous mountain inn, the Road House. In a short time after it opened for business it became a very popular place, and was soon producing a nice little revenue for Dad.

“The night the house was burned, you remember, I said was dark and stormy. It was in the summer, and a typical mountain storm was in full blast. The thunder and lightning were terrific. When the down stage pulled up at the inn, just before dark, they decided to stay for the night, fearing a possible cloudburst. It happened that the stage was full of passengers that night. There was a little Irishman who had just discovered a fine ledge of onyx out north of Cripple Creek, and a couple of engineers who had been surveying for a mine over in Cookstove Gulch. Besides these there was a hard-looking old scalawag, who kept his business all to himself. As they sat at supper, Dad noticed that the old-timer eyed him very closely, yet had nothing to say; and as he looked back on that night, long after the fire, he remembered a lot of little incidents that gave evidence to his own theory. For instance, several times during the evening the old stranger rose from his seat and went out into the night. He seemed very nervous about something. He did not mingle with the other men, but sat well back in the corner by himself. When it became time to go to bed, the old man insisted on sleeping on a couch near the fireplace. Old Ben, who was there at the time, said afterward he remembered some one moving about the cabin in the night.

“The storm was at its worst. Suddenly out of the raging storm Dad’s dog let out a long, fierce yelp, followed by several low growls. Dad shouted down to him to be quiet, supposing he had smelled a coyote or a pole-cat outside. He was quiet for a few moments, then a second time he howled and scratched at the door. There was a loud cursing, that was nearly lost in a peal of thunder, then the cry of ‘Fire!’ The smoke of the burning logs was already streaming up the open stairway. The outside door opened and shut, yet the dog was left inside. Almost before the sleeping guests

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could grab their clothes, the whole house was a sheet of flame. There was a wild scramble for the back stairway. Dad hurried down the front way, stumbling through the smoke to the door. The dog gave a joyous bark and sprang toward him. As he opened the door, he stumbled over a large oil-can that always stood just under the stairway. He didn't think of it at the time because of his excitement, but later, as he puzzled over the real cause of the fire, he remembered with startling distinctness his stumbling over the empty oil-can, which he knew had been full the day before. As months went by he put this with other little bits of information, and he believed he understood, yet he had no proof. The old man who had slept downstairs had oiled the entire first floor, then set it afire. But why? That was the question.

"He remembered how the old man had insisted that the house had been struck by lightning. Dad never saw him again after that night, but a few months afterwards he recognized him in a description of one of the robbers of a stage coach, held up at Duffield's. Then, like a flash, it came to Dad. The old-timer was his enemy of the river pirates, old Shorty Thunder. He had accidently stumbled onto Dad here in these mountains, and had determined to settle scores once for all. He had meant by setting fire to the cabin to burn Dad alive, and if it hadn't been for the dog he probably would have succeeded."

"Great old tale," sighed Phil, as he arose and stretched himself.

"Let's turn in," suggested Fat, "for you know we have some walking ahead of us tomorrow." "Second the motion," joined in Ham. "Me for a good, big drink, though, to wash that fairy tale down. How about it?"

The little party gathered close about the fire after all final arrangements had been made for the night. Boots were pulled off and set away from the fire. Watches were wound and trousers unbuckled. They had all instinctively looked toward the "Chief." He had drawn close to the fire, and was turning over the leaves of a pocket Testament.

"What will you have to-night, fellows, from the Great Spirit's Message before we sleep?"

"The one about the lilies," said Ham thoughtfully. "There are several big ones in bloom just at the head of my bed." The "Chief" began to read in low, reverent tones.

"And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." So he went on reading till he came to the end of the chapter, after which there was a short, reverent prayer, and they were ready for bed.



“They talk about cold, clammy churches being the House of God,” snorted Ham, as he snuggled down into his blanket, “but they aren’t in it with a night like this spent in the open in such a country.”

“There’s a good deal of the primitive man in you yet, Ham,” said Mr. Allen, as he spread out his blanket before the fire.

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“How do you make that out?” asked Ham.

“Well, you’re just like all the primitive people of long ago. You love nature and the out-of-doors. All these things appeal to you tremendously; but you love them more than the Great Power of which they are just an expression. The only difference between our religion and that of the Nature worshipers is that they worship the manifestations of Nature, but we go beyond that and worship the Great Spirit that is able to create such a Nature.” “Too deep for me, too deep for me; I’m no philosopher,” grunted Ham, as he rolled over and settled himself for a good night’s sleep.

Tad Kieser stood watching the little group as they climbed up the winding trail, then he slowly returned to his chopping.

“Shoot me for a pole-cat, as Dad would say,” he remarked half-aloud, as he spat on his hands and raised the heavy ax over his head. “He’s the very spit’n image of Bill, now that’s dead sure, and there’s one thing more that’s certain.” He was interrupted in his thoughts by the loud report of a gun somewhere up on the mountain side. Turning his head toward the Williams claim, he saw the two men who had gone up the trail to the mine late that morning shooting at a great hawk that was circling in the sky far above them.

“That mine belongs to the boy, but how’s he going to get it?”

He busied himself about his camp the rest of the afternoon, then in the early evening he strolled down the trail to chat with Dad a little before bed-time. Many an evening he had spent with Dad, sitting with him in front of his cabin, talking over old times and bygone years. As Tad came down the trail, the smell of Dad’s simple supper came floating up to him. He had forgotten to eat, but perhaps Dad would share his meal with him. He pulled open the old pine door and entered. Dad sat at his little table eating, his faithful dog at his feet, patiently waiting for his share of the meal, for he had learned from years of experience that it would be something.

“Howdy, Tad, strike it rich to-day? S’pose ye jist been a shovelin’ out nuggets all day long, till yer tired o’ seein’ ’em, hain’t ye? Tad, I seed the beatenest bunch o’ young’uns to-day ye ever seed in yer life, all on a explorin’ trip o’ some kind.”

“That so?” replied Tad, “must have been the same party I saw. Did you see that tall, slender lad with the brown eyes and dark hair?”

“Yep, b’lieve I did, come t’ think on it, only I didn’t pay much pertic’lar ’tention to none of ’em.”



Tad helped himself to an old chair, and, leaning back against the wall, lighted his pipe. He was quiet for a long time, then he spoke in a slow, thoughtful manner, his pipe held firmly between his teeth, his eyes fixed on a spot far away down the mountain.

“Dad, the boy has come. He’s come to me, and he’s just like his father—tall and straight and clean-cut. Dad, he needs a father, and perhaps I’ll have to act in that capacity yet, who knows, for that uncle of his is a rascal and will bear a good deal of watching.”



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“What? Ye don’t mean the young feller ye was a tellin’ me about the other evenin’? Bill’s boy really come to the mountains?” asked Dad, becoming interested at once.

“Yes, he’s here, Dad, as sure as I’m a living man. He went up this trail this afternoon, and I talked with him. He asked about his father the first thing; said his father owned a mine up here somewhere, and asked me if I knew Tad Kieser.”

“Shoot me fer a pole-cat. Well, I’ll be dum-swizzled, course ye told him Yep, ye knowed him a little, didn’t ye?”

“No, Dad, I didn’t, and that’s just what I’ve come down to talk to you about this evening. You see, it’s like this: If I had told him who I was, that would have been the end of it, but if he doesn’t really find out who I am for a while yet, perhaps I can locate a paying gold mine for him. I always have felt that I owed him at least that much.”

“So ye didn’t tell him?” pondered Dad. “Well, Tad, yer head is a sight longer’n mine is, an’ I s’pose ye know what’s best; but, my boy, let me give ye a little advice: If ye wait till ye find a real gold mine in these here parts, the boy’s likely as not to die o’ old age ’fore ye find it.”

“Perhaps so, Dad. Perhaps you’re right; but then, if I don’t ever find it, I won’t tell him who I am, because he’d be disappointed. He thinks his father owned a real mine in these mountains somewhere, and he’s looking for it. Do you know, I’ve been wondering—no, it can’t be, though; I suppose I’m foolish, but someway, I’ve always felt that I ought to have been man enough to have worked the old tunnel just a little farther. Bill was so certain that things looked better, and—”

“Tad, hain’t ye ever been in the old hole sence that day, honest Injun? I used t’ think that’s where ye went when ye’d go off fer a week er ten days in the hills all by yerself.”

“No, Dad, I give you my word, I’ve never been in that hole since the day I carried poor Bill’s broken body out. I’ve never been near since I put that great, heavy lock on the door, and then I dropped the only key into the old shaft. I thought that perhaps some time the temptation to go back in might be too strong, and I’d do it.”

Both smoked silently for a long time, then Dad spoke:

“S’posin’ somebody would jump ye over yonder, Tad. What’s to hinder ’em a breakin’ in an’ startin’ operations? I’ve heerd tell that old Williams claimed that property, but course it’s a dern lie—”

“He couldn’t jump it, Dad, because I hold the deed to it. We proved up on that, you know, the summer before; but I believe Williams does hold a placer claim on the property. You know placers can run into regular lode claims. He could claim the tunnel,

all right, too, I suppose, if the owner couldn't be found. Especially since he seems to be the only relative Bill had, except his wife."

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“What do ye s’pose ever possessed that old pole-cat to stake a placer claim jest there, ‘stead o’ somewhere else? The dirt won’t pan color, will it?” asked Dad. “That’s just what has bothered me, Dad. The only way that I can figure it out is that Williams got some inkling of the prospects of the tunnel from some of Bill’s papers or letters. It wasn’t two weeks after Bill died till that old skinflint went tramping up there and staked that placer claim. He’s worked assessments on it every year since. One year he repaired the cabin, and one year he built a dam; at other times he built a bridge and a trail, and dug an assessment hole or two—most anything to get in the required hundred dollars’ worth of working. It’s that, more than anything else, that has set me to wondering just what was in the old hole, after all, that made him so interested. Bill was conscious long enough to talk a little before he died, and I never believed that Williams told me the truth about what he said. It’s taken me a long time to think it all out, but I believe there is something I don’t know about the deal.”

“Well, who knows, Tad, who knows; maybe we’re a sittin’ on a pile o’ gold nuggets this minute; but we’ll never see ‘em; mark my words, boy, we’ll never see ‘em. God Almighty’s a savin’ ‘em fer somethin’, if there is any, an’ if we ain’t to have ‘em, we’ll never git ‘em, that’s sure.” After a few vigorous puffs, Dad lapsed into a long silence, and soon Tad arose to go.

“Good-night, Dad, good-night,” he said in an absent-minded way, as he started through the old door and up the trail.

Some time in the night the clouds broke and the stars came out clear and shining. A warm current of air came gently up from the valley, softly shaking the ever-responsive leaves of the stately aspens. The night was absolutely still, and the fire had burned down till all that remained of it was a rounded heap of brightly-glowing embers. Far, far away a turtle dove was calling—calling so softly that it almost seemed to be imagination. Now and then a katydid would lift its tiny voice for a few seconds.

Willis rose cautiously on one shoulder, and looked about him. He placed his hand to his ear and gazed intently out into the darkness. What was that? He shut his eyes that he might hear the better. He could not be mistaken, he had heard a dry twig snap—one, two, three little dry, rasping sounds. Perhaps it was just a rabbit or a squirrel. Again he raised himself cautiously on his shoulder and peered out into the shadows. There! another snap, this time nearer and more distinct. The night breeze gently fanned the dying embers. Suddenly there was a series of gentle little patters on the dead leaves just outside the circle of light. Would he awaken Mr. Allen, or would he watch by himself. Hardly had the thought entered his head when, without a sound, and without being conscious that another was watching, Mr. Allen slowly arose to a sitting posture and stared out into the forest in the same direction.



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“What is it, Mr. Allen?” softly whispered Willis. Mr. Allen jumped a trifle. “O, I don’t know; I heard it a couple of hours ago. I’d like to see a wild animal, wouldn’t you? I think it must be the fire that attracts it. I’d like to light my dark lantern, but I hate to strike a match.” He leaned over to the fire, picked up a dry pine needle, and lighted it in the fire, applying the tiny flame to his opened lantern. Quietly Mr. Allen opened the shield, and a long, bright gleam swept noiselessly out into the darkness, revealing with almost painful distinctness the outlines of every stem of grass and flower. Then, far at the end of the path of light, something moved. There were two small, luminous spots, then in an instant two more, a little larger. Slowly the shifting lights and shadows took shape, and there, before them, stood two deer—a doe and a tiny fawn.

“O, aren’t they beautiful?” whispered Willis. Just then the fawn left its mother’s side and came fearlessly down the path of light—one, two, six steps—staring into the wonderful, dazzling beam. There was a gentle call from the mother, and in an instant they had disappeared into the shadows from whence they had come. There was a bound, a broken twig, a rustle of dead leaves, and all was quiet again.

For a long time Willis and Mr. Allen waited, watching for them to return; but they did not come. The fire slowly died out and turned into a pile of ghostly ashes, while the party slept on until morning.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Second Day Out

Ham was the first to awaken in the morning. A pair of saucy jays had been gossiping about the little party for nearly an hour. At first they just exchanged ideas, making their observations from a reasonable distance. One perched on the topmost limb of a dead pine, the other bobbing up and down on the slender twigs of a neighboring aspen.

“Those crazy jabberers would dispute the identity of their own mates,” exclaimed Ham, as he pulled on his trousers and got into his high boots. “They talk about some folks always having too much to say, but—O, shut up, you noisy robbers!” He reached for a heavy stick, and sent it flying into the air toward the aspen. There was a flapping of wings, a harsh, scolding threat, and the jays retreated to talk it over.

Very soon the camp was all astir, and there was a general call for a fire.

“You don’t want to forget that we have the most important ceremony of this entire trip to go through with here yet this morning before any of us can eat breakfast. What’s your hurry, anyway? Get busy here, Fat, and get another armful of wood like this that I have. In about three shakes we’ll have an altar built and we’ll have our oracle fire burning in less than a jiffy. Be quick, now, but don’t disturb the Spirit,” cried Ham.

“Oracle fire, your grandmother,” interrupted Phil. “I’m as hungry as a pet lion, and it’s breakfast for me, and that right soon; oatmeal, a boiled egg, and some rye bread sounds about right!”



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“Me, too,” chimed in Fat, reaching for his haversack. “Hungry’s no name, and I don’t believe I brought enough grub, either.”

“Stop!” shouted Ham. “Now, Mr. Philip Dennis, Jr., hear your humble servant, the Spook Doctor, for just about a second. Long, long ago, even before our friend, Zebulon Pike, took his first peek at Pike’s Peak, there was a custom common to all the Indian tribes about us,” making a gesture to include all the surrounding country, “and it was believed absolutely necessary to the happiness and well-being of their mighty warriors to indulge in this orgy at stated seasons.” Ham was making wild gestures as he went on with his mock oratory. “Never was a hunt started, never was a journey undertaken, never a distant quest sought after, until the tribe had first slept, then gathered around the mystic altar of the Spook Doctor.”

“Ham, you’re a regular heathen,” called Mr. Allen from his blanket. “What has the altar got to do with it, anyway?”

“Well, it’s just like this,” continued Ham. “After the first night’s slumbers we build an Indian signal fire just like this, then in bare feet and empty stomachs we dance around the fire and implore the Mighty Night Wind to interpret the dreams we have had during our first night out. They never fail to disclose the outcome of the journey, whether it will be a success or a failure.” As he bent over and lighted the fire, he said, “You may be seated.”

The childishness of it all appealed to every one of them, and they did as they were commanded. Then Ham solemnly and weirdly called, “Fat, you’re first. Hurry, while the smoke is curling, curling upward.”

Fat arose and made mock obeisance to the fire.

“My dream was a very queer one, but most too short to have a real meaning. I dreamed I was in a big barnyard and all I could see was pigs—little pigs, big pigs, and all kinds of pigs—and they were all standing around an empty trough. Now, Mr. Wise Man, tell me what that has to do with a quest for a cabin site, will you?”

Phil rolled over and chuckled to himself. “Oho, Fat, you will eat bacon for supper, will you? while your poor fellow-travelers sup on a rare and expensive can of beans. Ha-ha-ha! Eat pork and you dream of pigs.”

Ham looked long into the fire, then, turning, cried out:

“I have it, I have it, the Spirit speaks. Fat, you will run out of provisions long before this journey is over. You will eat all you have by to-morrow, and never think of the days to follow. Beware, for so the Spirit tells me.”

A roar of laughter went up from the others.



“Mr. Allen, your dream next,” called Ham, mystically.

“Well, I dreamed of beautiful autumn days, spent in a splendid grove of trees, cutting choice timbers for a cabin; and then I dreamed of a crowd of old men, sitting before an open fire-place, telling about how they had built a cabin long years before, when they were boys.”



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“That needs no interpreter. Phil, your dream is now demanded. Tell it truly, lie and you will live to suffer. Careful, now, and do not hurry.”

“Well, I dreamed a dandy,” cried Phil. “I saw a crazy loon standing in front of a fire, gazing into fiery embers, and—” There was a crackling in the fire, a shower of sparks went up, and one of the altar stones turned over.

“O, how sad,” groaned Ham, “that such a man should lie so to the great Spook Doctor. In wrath he tears down the altar—hisses forth his disapproval in clouds of tiny spark-thoughts. Willis, you are next. Now, do not rile the mighty Master.” “Well,” said Willis, “my dream was not so strange. I just dreamed over and over the thoughts I took to bed with me. I saw cabins and mines and tunnels and miners of all descriptions, only that there was one that looked very familiar, and it was a very hard one to find and get to.” Ham had failed to replenish the fire, and it had burned to a tiny, smoldering heap of ashes.

“I can not answer that one,” said Ham, “for the Great Spirit has now left me. Let’s eat our breakfast, and I hope it will be more substantial than these dreams.”

Soon breakfast was under way. It was a simple meal and soon over with. Cooking utensils were washed and packs rolled, ready for the day’s journey.

“What time of day?” asked Chuck.

“Seven-ten,” promptly replied Willis, “and just the time to be starting through the Park, if we want to see it before the dew is gone.” At the spring they stopped to drink and to examine the deer tracks in the soft, black muck. From there the trail led off, zigzagging down the gentle slope. On either side of the path the wild grasses and ferns grew in rank profusion, while scattered here and there on the soft, green carpet were great numbers of dainty Mariposa lilies. Now and then a tall, green stalk of the columbine could be seen, and occasionally a wooly circle of bracts on the stem of a late anemone. At intervals tall ferns bent over the woodland pathway, as if to hide and protect it for the private use of the many tiny wild feet that scampered over it daily.

“Isn’t this great,” cried Ham. “Just take a peek at that grove of trees. I’ll bet that grass is full of snakes and rabbits. I’d like to take a shot at a big ‘jack’ this morning.”

“It’s an old swamp,” replied Willis. “Perhaps there was once a little lake here. Wouldn’t it be a swell place for a shanty? I’ll bet it’s full of grouse.”

“I suppose it was once an Indian camping ground,” suggested Mr. Allen. “Just a little flat oasis on the summit of a granite mountain. Remember where we came up last night? Now, look away off there,” pointing his finger. “We are ten thousand feet above the sea up here; up where we can see how the world is made, and how beautiful it is.”



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Soon the little park came to an abrupt end, and great boulders began to loom up on every side. They came to the edge of the cliff, and could look far down into the valley below. Away to the west stood Black Mountain, a rounded bluff, so densely covered with young timber that it seemed at a distance to be a mountain of black dirt. Far below them could be seen the silver thread of a tiny stream as it followed the canyon toward the sandy plains. They had climbed out onto a great boulder, now, that overlooked the canyon far below on one side and the level plains on the other. Here they sat down to rest and talk.

“Do you see that hollow spot in the plain there, just at the foot of the mountain?” Mr. Allen was saying. “It is what has been known for many years as the Big Hollow Ranch. It was homesteaded in the early days, before the war, by our friend, Daddy Wright. There is a story that tells of how, in those days, the Indians would lie in wait and steal cattle from the great Texas roundups as they passed, enroute to Kansas City, and would drive large numbers of the cattle into that great hollow. After the cattle were driven inside, a few men could guard the opening while the other Indians drove the cattle off into lonely ravines.”

“My! what a fire there must have been here sometime,” exclaimed Willis, noting the dead trees. “I have always wanted to see a forest fire; it must be a grand sight.”

“Yes, if you’re far enough away to be safe,” joined in Chuck. “I saw one once, but it was several miles away. It looked fine from there. It was the year we camped at the old hatcheries up in the Middle Park. Mount Deception was very much like Black Mountain, then—very heavily timbered with fine, large trees. As the years went by a very large slab pile began to accumulate back of the mill. Some way, no one ever knew just how, those slab piles got afire. It was on a very windy summer night, when everything was as dry as chips and the hills were covered with heaps of dry toppings and pine slash. Well, the fire got into a few piles of toppings, and before the men at the mill realized that there was a fire, it was running over the hills like a wild thing. The dry pine needles are just like turpentine to burn, so in less than two hours there were several square miles of timber land afire. The mill and hundreds of thousands of feet of sawed lumber were burned, and an area of many square miles stripped of every stick of wood, so far as value was concerned.”

“Did you see them fight it?” asked Phil.

“No, I didn’t see them, but I’ve heard them tell how they did it.”

“I was in a forest fire once,” said Mr. Allen. “It wasn’t such an awfully big one, but there was plenty of excitement while it did last, I tell you that.”

“Tell us about it,” came in a chorus.



“It’s pretty hard to describe a forest fire, but it was a very exciting experience. It was up not many miles from Mount Deception, while I was stopping with a friend at Manitou Park. We were eating our Sunday dinner, when suddenly the door opened and in rushed the man from the adjoining farm.



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“Fire, boys,’ he called. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you, but we need you, and you know the law. I’ll have the buggy ready in a shake, and you be ready.’ As he left, my friend cried, ‘Come quick, Allen, into your old clothes.’ ‘Why,’ I said, ‘we don’t have to fight the forest fire, do we?’ He laughed aloud. ‘Well, you just bet we do!’ he cried. ‘The law says that every able-bodied man in reach of a forest fire must give his services. If a fire starts on Government land and burns onto private land, Uncle Sam has to pay for all the private loss. But if it starts on private land and burns onto Government land, the land owner is responsible.’

“I jumped into some old clothes, and was ready just as the buggy drove up to the door. The man handed me a big brown jug and told me to fill it with drinking water. Off to the north we saw a great cloud of gray smoke rising from the forest, but no flame. The farmer handed my friend the lines, told us to take the shortest route, and not to stop for anything, that he would follow on horseback in a few moments. I never shall forget how the little mare did go that day. We drove north on a county road until we got even with the smoke, then we turned in directly toward it through a very large potato field. After an hour’s hard driving, we came to the entrance of a narrow canyon. We tied the horse, and, with as many shovels as I could carry on my shoulder, and with the jug, I followed my friend, who had taken a couple of shovels and two heavy axes. It was a sultry midsummer day, and how I did sweat!

“We hurried on, the smoke getting thicker and thicker, and still we could see no flames. We went up a long, narrow canyon in which there was a tiny stream, and about every hundred yards we stopped to drink. By and by we came to the top of a low ridge, and the farmer met us.

“Hurry, fellows, hurry!’ he shouted. ‘Give me a couple of those axes. Report to the first man you meet, and come home in the buggy when you can.’ He swung his horse round, and in a moment was gone. I was tired out already, and the jug of water was very heavy to carry by so small a handle. As we got near the top of the ridge, we came to an old prospect hole. An idea struck me. I would leave the jug there by the hole, and it would be easy to find when I wanted it, and I would hurry on with the shovels. As we reached the top of the ridge, the fire came into full view. My, what a sight! A great sea of burning, crackling trees below, and above an ocean of heavy smoke, floating upward in great billows. Far away, at least it seemed so to me, I heard chopping, chopping. I don’t know how long I stood there wondering at the sight, but presently an old man—he looked to me like a wild man, came toward me, eyeing me with a scornful look.

“Well, ye goin’ to stand there all day with them implements, son?’ He mopped away the great beads of perspiration from his forehead with a big blue bandanna handkerchief. A large Russian hound stood, panting, by his side. Nearly a year afterwards I learned that the old man was no other than Old Ben himself.



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“Where’s that jug of water that Jim said ye was a bringin’,” he howled as he snatched the best shovel from my hands. I don’t know what I said, but I know that he cursed me roundly and I started for the prospect hole to get the jug. I was excited to the limit. I came to the prospect hole, and the jug was gone. I was starting back when I came to another hole, then a third, then a fourth. I raised my eyes and surveyed the hillside. There were at least a hundred prospect holes. Which one did I leave the jug by? Was it lost, that precious jug of water? Would I ever find it? The great clouds of smoke drifted past me and darkened the landscape; then I began to hunt for the jug, one hole at a time. But I could find no jug. While I was searching all over the hill, up rode the farmer. He called for me to follow him. I tried to explain to him that I was looking for the water, but I couldn’t make him understand. When we got back to the east of the fire, he handed me an ax and showed me what to do. They were cutting an aisle down the south ridge. There were great trees cracking and crashing to the ground all along the line and all around me. I could not see more than a hundred feet ahead, but I worked like a Turk. O, but I thought my ax was dull and the tree hard! It seemed that I could never cut it through. I struck a heavy blow; there was a singing noise in the air, and the head of my ax went flying somewhere into the brush. I heard the farmer, chopping near me, yell something about a fool and a greenhorn.

“Go, bring the water,” he yelled. I asked what water, and he yelled back, ‘The jug, the brown jug.’

“I started again to find it. I don’t know how long I looked, but by accident I stumbled onto it. I raised it to my lips to drink, but the water was warm and insipid. It made me feel faint. My head began to get dizzy and everything looked burned. I straightened up and went back toward the fire. When I reached the farmer, he gave me his ax and started off with the jug. I chose my tree, and began to work. I had cut but one, and was started on another, when a dozen rugged, sweating men passed me on the run and shouted, ‘Look out for the blast!’ I dropped my ax and followed them. The earth shook under my feet, as one after the other I saw mighty pine trees rise into the air a few feet, then crash headlong down the mountain into the flames. The fire was coming nearer. O, such a sight! The heat was intense, but the coloring was beautiful. I followed the men, but one man tripped and fell; the others hurriedly picked him up, and we went onto a safe place. Then a hurried conference was held, and orders given to cut the underbrush in a great circle around the fire. By and by the wind changed, and soon the smoke cleared away from where we were working. To my surprise, there were at least fifty sturdy men—mountain ranchmen, most of them—cutting the underbrush ahead of me, and just next to me worked Ben.



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“We worked on until dark. My friend found me, and we started for the buggy. We got home some way—he drove. I was exhausted. That was my only forest fire experience, but I don’t care for another. I was stiff and sore for a week.”

The little party worked its way into the gulch, and then proceeded up the canyon on an old cattle trail in the second range. Every now and then they would pass a prospect hole, which showed that they were not, by any means, the first to tramp up the gulches and drink at the crystal streams. On a great, flat stone, close by a tiny spring, they stopped to eat their dinner and rest.

“Let’s get as far as we can by night,” suggested Phil, “for we’ll never find a cabin site here in this canyon. It’s too far away. We’ll have to get in closer, near St. Peter’s Dome.”

“Let’s make the Little Fountain by night. It must cross this canyon, and perhaps it will yield us a trout for breakfast. What do you say?” inquired Mr. Allen.

“Little Fountain, or bust,” called Ham. “I’m in for it. Say, we ought to find a few squirrels this afternoon up in this lonesome canyon. A squirrel would taste pretty fine, stewed in a little rice, for supper. I’ll bet I get the first one.”

“Got some salt in your pocket?” asked Willis.

“Salt, what do I want with salt? Just keep your eye on me. I’m dead-shot at squirrels.”

“Hello, here, what’s this?” called out Mr. Allen about the middle of the afternoon. “This looks interesting to me. See here, I’ve found a few small pieces of aspen that have been cut by beaver.” He held them up for inspection. Sure enough, on the ends were the marks of the tiny chisel teeth of the little water workmen. “I’d certainly like to see a real beaver dam. I’ve seen pieces of dams and old, wrecked dams, but never a real good one. Keep your eyes open for more sticks like this, and for stumps along the stream. This ought to be good beaver country, because it’s wild and quiet.”

“What do you suppose killed all those fine big trees in that valley?” asked Willis.

They turned aside to examine the great dead trees.

“Hold on, there,” said Ham in a whisper, as he held up his finger. “There’s my stew for to-night. Great Caesar’s ghost! I’ll bet these dead trees are full of squirrels. Still, now, a moment.”

The squirrel sat for an instant in plain view on a dead limb of a spruce; then he barked and scampered around in great excitement, his tail bobbing up and down in time to his movements. He would run, hide behind the great tree trunk, then out again to jeer and scold and jerk his tail. As they came nearer, a second one, perhaps his mate, joined



him on the limb and seconded everything he had to say. The barrel of Ham's gun was making strange movements in the air. "Hey, there, sit still, you jumping jack," called Ham. The squirrels sat up and listened to his voice in such a way that it appeared they perfectly understood the order to sit still. Fat laughed a hearty laugh; the squirrels took it as a danger signal and were gone. Ham lowered his gun.

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“Fat, you stole my supper right out of my mouth,” said Ham, gloomily.

“Oho,” said Willis. “How do you suppose this happened? All of these big trees are girdled. See, the bark has been cut clear around the trunk with an ax, so as to cut off the supply of sap. Mr. Allen, what is your explanation?”

“Well, I’m not just sure about it, Willis. Some one may have killed them for timber or some one may have girdled them so as to be able to start a big fire. It might have been the work of timber pirates. A man would get a mighty severe punishment for that, if he were caught.”

A little farther up the canyon they found traces of an old placer sluice, and what remained of some of the old, homemade cradles for panning out the gold.

“Gold, gold, gold; you find traces of it everywhere, and traces of the men who sought it. A sight like that always makes me sorry for some old, forlorn, disappointed miner,” said Mr. Allen. “Of all the dilapidated, blue-producing sights that I have ever seen, it’s one of these old, deserted mining camps, for they come as near representing a forlorn hope as anything you can find.

“One time I was with a crowd of boys, and we made a detour to look over a deserted mining camp. They called it Old North Cripple Creek. Years before, shrewd individuals had salted prospect holes at that point, then discovered their own gold. Of course there was a grand rush, and a boom town resulted. Crude houses were built, stores and saloons erected, and mining operations begun. A real, substantial log hotel was erected, and I’ve heard that their charge was upwards of ten dollars a night, payable in advance.

“But the camp died as quickly as it had been born, and the people, mostly men, pushed on to other fields.

“It was a good many years after the place was deserted that I was there, but it made a tremendous impression upon me. I had the blues for days afterward. Old, tumbled-down houses, the windows knocked out and the doors hanging on leather hinges. I remember one building that had been a saloon. The great mirrors back of the bar had never been removed, and the rains of many seasons had peeled the mercury from the plate glass and the gilt frames were faded. We entered the old hotel, and were surprised to find some of the fittings still there. In the attic we found an old chest of letters—and, speaking of strange coincidences, a large number of those letters were written and signed by Daddy Wright. Away up in the back corner of the attic sat an old owl. He looked down on us from his perch in a reproving manner, to think we would disturb the haunts of the past in that crude way. He was a weird looking old fellow as he sat there, blinking his big yellow eyes, and I couldn’t help thinking that the owl of

wisdom perhaps a good many times might be found perched in the dark attics of the past, instead of spending his time in the sunlight of the great and active present.”



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The afternoon passed, and soon the sun began to settle behind the western peaks. It was just six o'clock when the party came to the Little Fountain and chose their camping spot on a little green knoll of high ground, right by the water's edge. Some one suggested a dip, and so, in the quiet coolness of a perfect summer twilight, with a cheerful fire burning on the bank, clothes were stripped and a bath taken. Then came the evening meal, the usual round of stories, the message from the letter of the Great Spirit, then to sleep.

As Willis and Mr. Allen lay watching the firelight and listening to the thousand sounds of the night, the night breeze began to rise and to sing to them through the balsam boughs overhead.

"Do you know what I think of when I lie out in the woods on such a night and listen to the gentle sighing of the night wind?" asked Mr. Allen.

"No," replied Willis. "What do you think of?"

"It is kind of fanciful, I suppose, but I like to believe that it is God blowing His breath down on us just to let us know that He is very near and cares for us." Willis did not answer; he was thinking.

## CHAPTER IX

### The Third Day Out

The first gray streaks of dawn were just creeping over the ridge of old Cheyenne as Mr. Allen awoke. Up through the green leaves the bluest of blue skies showed in tiny spots. It was an autumn morning, for a light frost had settled during the night, and here and there lay the ghost of an aspen leaf that had flitted down. Everywhere the birds were chirping and hustling about their morning duties. Here and there industrious spiders were at work removing the drops of silver dew from their shining cables of silk, and the bees were already gathering the last of the summer's sweets. The squirrels scolded and chattered to each other from the big trees. All the wild life of the woodland seemed at high tide. The butterflies were already at play in the cool, dewy nooks, and all nature was rosy in the freshness of a new day.

Mr. Allen dressed quietly but quickly, unbuckled his fishing rod from his pack, glanced through his fly book, selected one here and there, then prepared to slip out of camp without waking any one. The little stream had been whispering strange tales of big fish to him all the night, and it was trout for breakfast that he was after. A saucy squirrel, observing him from a limb overhead, asked many foolish questions. Mr. Allen sat on an old moss-covered stump joining his rod and arranging his long, white leader, to which he had attached a royal coachman and a gray hackle. He paused to listen, for it

seemed to him that every wild thing in that vast, rocky gorge had suddenly raised its voice to welcome the coming day.

Willis awoke and saw Mr. Allen as he sat there in the sunlight. In a soft undertone he called, "I'm going, too, just to watch. May I?" Mr. Allen nodded, and in a few moments the two were quietly sneaking off through the bushes, headed up stream.



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“My, O my! isn’t this a perfectly gorgeous morning. Just look off there toward Mount Rosa and Baldy. It’s a perfect splendor of clouds and mist and sun; then look behind you, there, down through the big trees. It’s just the morning to catch a fine big trout.”

“I never caught a trout in all my life,” softly called Willis, as he trailed along behind. “I don’t believe I’ve ever even seen one.”

“Many and many are the days I’ve fished in these old hills for a dozen; but a prouder fisherman never cast a fly than myself, when I could come home to camp, spread out my little catch of speckled beauties on the grass, and tell just how I caught each one.”

“Is it more fun than casting for big black bass on a clear, warm, summer night? Lots of times I’ve seen the big fellows leap out of the water, then in again with a splash, making big rings of ripples on the smooth water. O, it’s great! Can your trout fishing beat that?”

“Every man after his own heart,” replied the “Chief,” “but for me, give me the trout. You rise early on such a morning as this and slip off into the canyon. Far away on all sides rise the mountain peaks, their snow caps jauntily adjusted and their cloaks of ice drawn close about their shoulders. Then the balsam-scented air, and the dew-laden bushes along the chattering little stream as it flows over a chaos of broken granite or works itself into a boiling froth, only to jump headlong into a quiet green pool. Can you beat it?”

“Isn’t that a good pool just ahead of us?” questioned Willis.

“I’m going to try it,” replied Mr. Allen. “Now, be sure to keep that big boulder just ahead between you and the water, for if they see us first there’s no use wasting our time here, we’ll never get a strike to-day.”

Slowly they crept to the great, bare rock. Here the line and flies were adjusted, and the fishing began. Willis watched every motion as for a brief second the fly was allowed to drift down the stream, “to be floated here and there by idle little eddies, to be sucked down, then suddenly spat out by tiny suction holes;” then it fell quietly into the current and floated out to the end of the line, bringing up sharply just at the edge of a bleak old granite boulder in midstream. Again the flies were cast, and again; then—both hearts stood still; there was a splash, a little line of bubbles, a tail, a silver streak tinged with red and black, then ripples, and nothing more.

“He’s there, anyway,” softly whispered Willis in great excitement.

The line was drawn in and inspected; the hackle was removed from the leader, and again the coachman spat the water just above where the trout had disappeared. It floated down and down until it touched the swirl at the edge of the jagged rock. There was a short, sharp tug; the fly disappeared into the water; a plunge, a dash of spray,



then everything kept time to the singing of the reel. Both jumped to their feet just in time to see the big trout clear the water, shake his head vigorously, then dive into the deep pool. It was to be a fight to the finish, and the trout had settled to the cool bottom to lay out his campaign.



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After ten minutes of maneuvering in the water, up and down, out to the bank, then in again, knee deep, waist deep, the line slacked a little, then a little more. Then there was a series of quick jerks and a long singing of the reel as it unwound, only to slacken again, and this time for good. There was a silvery streak in the water, then a dark, moving shadow, a gentle pull of the winding line, and the trout slipped out of the water onto the bank, exhausted.

There was an exclamation of joy and wonder from Willis as the fish was carefully unhooked and placed in the cotton bag, brought for the purpose.

“Just eighteen inches, and a beauty,” cried Mr. Allen. “You’ll never get me away from this stream this morning if there are more fish like this to be had. We have just time to catch another like him, then we can all have a taste for breakfast. What will those fellows think when they wake up and find us gone?”

They clambered over a rough crag and down to a second green pool. It was not a big fish this time, but several small ones in quick succession, till there was a taste for all in camp.

“I hope the fellows will have a fire going, so we won’t have to wait so long for a bed of coals, don’t you?” asked Willis. “I can taste them already. Is the meat pink or white?”

“O, surely Ham will have a fire; he’s enough of a camper for that, and they are expecting us to bring fish. I’ll tell you, let’s leave the bag in the bushes and tell them a sad tale of woe. I’m still wet, and we’ll let on a big one pulled me in and I lost all the others. What do you say?”

“That’s a go. You get up the story and I’ll swear to it. Make it a big one.”

Soon the smell of smoke came drifting through the bushes, and they knew that their return was being patiently awaited. Fat spied them coming first.

“Well, old sea-dogs, where’s your catch?” he shouted.

“Hard luck,” started in Mr. Allen. “Just plain hard luck; caught a few minnows, but slow as far as real fishing goes. There’s nothing in it here. Where’s Ham?”

“O Ham!” snorted Phil from his place by the fire. “Crazy, lunatic Ham. I’d like to see you get him into any kind of a fix he couldn’t get out of. When we woke up and found you gone, Ham declared you’d played a trick on him, and he’s gone off to get even.”

“How do you mean, get even?”



“He wanted to go with you this morning, so he went out and found your track going up stream. He came back to camp, got your fly book, cut him a willow pole, and started off down stream to beat you fishing. He’s been gone most an hour and a half now.”

“Well, he won’t have to fish much to beat me, that’s sure; but he ought to be getting back soon, so we can get started.”

“Fishie, fishie, in the brook,  
Hammie caught him with a hook,”

came drifting into camp from somewhere on the trail. Soon Ham came into view, a cotton flour sack thrown over his shoulder and a broad grin on his face. He had left his pole in the thicket.



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“Fish, fish, fish—little, big, and in between,” he cried as he waved the bag in front of him. “I’ve never had such fishing.”

“Hurrah for the fisherman,” called Chuck, as he came through the trees with a half-dozen small pails in his hands. “Ham gets the fish, I get the berries, and we all get the stomach-ache, see?”

“Let’s look at the fish” shouted every one.

“Bet they are only minnies,” cried Phil.

“Minnies, your grandmother,” scornfully replied Ham. “I have one there that’s a foot and a half long if it’s an inch. The others aren’t so big.” He emptied the contents of the bag on the ground and stood proudly over them, a merry twinkle in his eye.

Willis nudged Mr. Allen. “He’s found our bag of fish, but don’t tell.” Mr. Allen arose, and, holding up the big fish by the tail, said, “Ham, you’re the only original fisherman. That’s the very fellow that pulled me in and came near drowning me.” Ham hurried off to the stream to clean the catch and to laugh over his cleverness. Breakfast was a thoroughly enjoyed meal that morning, for, besides the fish and the sweet wild berries, there were just enough fish stories told to give the real thing the proper seasoning.

“I’d rather sit on those big boulders along Goose Creek, just where it empties into the backwaters of Cheeseman Dam, and catch a few big fellows like that one than to take an extended trip to Europe,” solemnly declared Ham.

“I’d rather fish in the Narrows of Platte Canyon and pull out a fine big rainbow every now and then than ride in a New York subway,” added Chuck.

“And I’d rather see Mr. Allen catch *another* big trout like that one you’re eating,” remarked Willis, with a wink at Mr. Allen, “than to catch all the bass in the State of Michigan.”

By nine o’clock the party was again on the trail, traveling northwest around the base of Black Mountain.

“It’s going to be a scorcher,” exclaimed Fat. “I’m about melted already. I hope they haven’t shipped that bear away from Cather Springs yet. I’d like to see it. They caught it in a bear trap last week. There is hardly a season goes by, any more, but what they get some kind of wild game. Last year it was a big mountain lion, the year before it was a badly-wounded mountain sheep, this year it was a bear and two cubs.”

“That lion must have been the one that followed Ham up Pike’s Peak. How about it, Ham?” said Mr. Allen teasingly. Ham did not reply. The smile disappeared from his



face, and he dropped to the back of the line. “Ham, won’t you tell us that story some time?” urged Mr. Allen. “I’ve never heard the real story, and I’d like to know about it.”

“I’ve forgotten every detail, Mr. Allen,” said Ham, “and I’ve forgotten them for good. It wasn’t nearly as big a joke as every one supposed, though, I’ll tell you that. I’ll never come any nearer to handing in my heavenly passport and not do it than I did that time. Let’s forget it. It brings back unpleasant thoughts.”

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At noon they camped in the shadow of a great overhanging rock and rested. Fat found, upon opening his pack, that he had left what remained of his loaf of bread at the last camping place, along with two cans of milk and a box of raisins.

“The oracle is coming true,” dryly remarked Ham. “It always does, if it’s interpreted properly. Fat, the swine of carelessness have consumed your living.”

By three o’clock the party reached Cather Springs, which was nothing but the home of an old mountaineer—a quaint little log cabin, a barn, and a corral, in which stood two very patient, tired-looking donkeys and a large, raw-boned mountain horse. A little to one side of the cabin stood the spring house—a low, rustic affair, built of young trees. A slab-door stood slightly ajar, and through the opening there came the voice of a woman, softly singing to herself. A thin column of gray smoke was curling gently from the rough stone chimney. At one side of the house, in the shade of a great pine tree, was nestled a little flower garden that gave every sign of having had careful attention each day. On the back stoop was stretched out, at full length, a husky Collie dog. He was evidently asleep, for he did not stir as the boys came down the trail toward the picturesque little cabin.

“Great Caesar’s ghost!” exclaimed Ham. “Take a peep at a few of those jay-birds. I never saw so many in my life. I’ll bet the lady feeds them. Watch me knock that saucy fellow off that dead limb.”

He raised his gun and shot. There was an awful scolding, jabbering, and flapping of wings, but no deaths—fortunately for Ham. The dog came to life in less than a second, and expressed himself freely on the imprudence of such an interruption to his mid-day nap. Likewise, the spring-house door suddenly opened and out popped a funny, little old lady.

“Boys, boys!” she called in a high, quavering voice, “don’t shoot the blue jays. It does beat all how right-down destructive all boys are, anyway—shooting poor, harmless little birds for sport.” The jays, on hearing the familiar voice of their benefactress, began to alight in twos and threes close by, and approved her every word with as much vigor as their tiny throats could command. The little old lady came straight toward Ham.

“Young man,” she cried, as she shook her long, bony finger in his face, “young man, who ever gave you the right to come into this beautiful wilderness to maraud and murder and kill such beauties as them jays that God has put in these woods to be companions and friends to us lonely mountain folks? Who do you s’pose built this here canyon and that green meadow and this little spring and these hills, and all the little wild folks as lives in ’em? I should think you would hang your head and look like a whipped puppy if ye’re little enough to shoot jay-birds, just to see the blue feathers a flutterin’ in the air. ’Pon my soul, you hunters is



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beyon' my understandin'. S'pose that bird you shot has a nest, which, like as not, she has, an' it's full o' little fuzzy balls o' bird flesh this minute, all mouths an' stomachs, a waitin' for their mother to bring supper, an' they just keep a waitin' an' a waitin' till they starve, cause you was mean enough to kill the mother bird just for fun." Ham's hat had long since come off, and he stood with downcast eyes, not knowing what to say. The old lady looked him up and down with a look of abject pity and scorn as she went on:

"Didn't you ever stop to consider how many things the Almighty has put into these hills to love, young man, if you ain't too selfish an' proud an' mean to see 'em? I wonder what He thinks of a boy like you, anyway? You're like a demon sneakin' through a wonderful picture gallery a cuttin' holes in the pictures just for fun. I know every jay in this valley, young man, every single one—and they know me. When food gets scarce, an' cold nights come, an' snow begins to fall, I feed 'em. They understand all I say to 'em, an' they bring their young ones for me to see as quick as they're big enough. They tell me when it's goin' to storm, an' when a hawk is flyin' over my chicken pen, an' when berries is ripe, an' when strangers is comin'. They're my little family; I care for 'em every day an'—" The flood gates were opened. The little old lady cried as if her heart would break, while the jays gossiped and chattered at the unusual uproar.

Suddenly she turned and went into the house, and the boys, without a word, quietly passed up the trail and into the flat, green meadow ahead. Ham whistled softly to himself as he strode along.

"Beats the Dutch," he said to Mr. Allen, as the two dropped back together, "how a fellow will forget himself now and then. I'd have done just what she did, only I would have gotten mad instead of just feeling bad. I'm mighty thankful I didn't kill that bird."

"What a great joy these simple out-of-doors people get out of nature," replied Mr. Allen. "I'd give half my college education to be able to see and hear and understand the things that little old lady does in these old hills. Every time a bird chirps or a squirrel barks she knows what it says. I think the Master must have been thinking of some such a pure-hearted body as she when He told the people that the poor in spirit would inherit the earth. She doesn't go out in society much, nor she hasn't any party dresses, nor probably never saw a grand opera in her life; but see what she has that most people never get."

In a few moments more they had crossed the little meadow, climbed up through a zigzag trail through the trees, and came out onto the railroad track, just where it crossed the stage road. Directly in front of them rose the crag-tipped cap of St. Peter's Dome. On one hand was the old wagon road, that first pathway of mountain civilization, winding down the canyon in long, graceful curves until it was lost in the distant haze, while on the other hand ran the steel rails of more modern civilization.

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As they stood resting for a few moments they heard the rumble of heavy wheels, a wheezing and puffing, a shrill whistle, a cloud of black smoke, a shower of cinders, and the evening express passed upward into the cool, dark shadows, carrying its load of human necessities into the heart of the Rockies.

It was six o'clock when the last one in the party reached the rickety wooden stairs that made the last ascent of a hundred feet to the Dome possible. Ham and Willis had been on top for some minutes, and were sitting on a huge boulder just at the foot of a lodge-pole that had been erected on the very summit for a flagstaff. Certainly it was a sight to be remembered for many a day—a marvelous wonderland, stretching out in every direction. The detail of plants, trees, and winding trails was swallowed up, and only the vastness of the valleys and canyons could be seen, with here and there a silver ribbon of a stream. Far up in the blue vault two great eagles soared and circled. Here and there the last golden rays of sunlight fell on the distant ridges and lighted up the tree tops with a beautiful iridescence.

“What a sight!” exclaimed Willis. “Now, where is Cookstove Mountain, for I am especially interested in it. O yes, I see it. It’s that great granite cliff that is so flat on the top. Wouldn’t it be grand if we could build a cabin near St. Peter’s Dome, so sometimes in the evening we could climb up here to sit and watch the stars come out? I want to be in the mountains and camp in them and hike in them. I am beginning to understand their charm more and more. I know now what it is that Old Ben has, and Daddy Wright, and the little old lady we saw this afternoon, that I have not. It is a big optimism, a love for everything that lives and is a part of the Great Creation.”

“I don’t know of anything that will take the selfishness and conceit out of a fellow like a few hours spent on a mountain top,” said Mr. Allen.

“It makes a fellow right down glad he’s alive,” remarked Ham. “I always get more out of a view like this than I do out of the best sermon I ever heard.”

“I wish we could camp right here,” exclaimed Chuck; “but we can’t, and we had better be getting down before dark.”

Just at the base of the Dome a little stream trickled over the rocks and down into the canyon. They followed it back from the railroad and soon had a cheery fire burning and a comfortable camp made for the night. It was in a little meadow just at the edge of a grove of small aspens, and at one side of the tiny stream lay a great round boulder that had evidently rolled down from the summit of the Dome at some previous date. Beds were arranged in a row along the side of it, and a pile of dead sticks placed in a convenient position for the night’s fire. The evening breezes were already beginning to play hide-and-seek in the valley, and the leaves on the trees were clapping their innumerable hands in applause at the brightly-burning fire. The sparks flew upward and the shadows danced in and out of the illuminated circle like so many happy fairies.



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“Do you hear it, fellows? There, now, listen! Don’t you hear it?” Ham was saying as he sat back from the fire. “There it is, calling, calling!”

“What is calling?” asked Willis, straining his ear to catch the sound.

“Mother Nature,” answered Ham, dryly. “Mother Nature’s call—the call of the wild. See, even the leaves are beckoning us back farther into the deep, quiet wilderness. Some day I will part with my earthly possessions and answer that call, for, do you know, I believe that the Indian did come the nearest to living an ideal life of any of us!”

Every one knew that Ham was in for a long, private soliloquy, and so began supper operations, for, although they had all heard the call of Mother Nature, as Ham put it, to some of them at least it was only an empty stomach calling to be fed.

Mr. Allen and Willis were the last ones to take to their blankets, for they had many things to talk over between themselves.

What can draw out the innermost thoughts of a fellow’s heart more quickly than a chat with a sympathetic friend when both are seated before a fire in such a place and on such a night? If you really wish to know a fellow in a few days’ time, you need to camp with him, to eat with him, and to sit with him before an open fire in the wilderness under a canopy of stars with the music of Nature about you. Then man speaks with man, and all the conventionalities of life are forgotten.

“Yes, I have often wondered if I will ever find my father’s partner,” Willis was saying. “I would rather see him than any man on earth, sometimes.”

“Wouldn’t you be happier if you didn’t ever find him, though?” questioned Mr. Allen.

“No, I wouldn’t, Mr. Allen, because he could explain so many things to me that I have wondered about. I don’t know that I ever told you, but it has always seemed so strange to me that my uncle, Mr. Williams, has never once mentioned my father’s name to me. He was the last man that saw him alive, yet he has never spoken of him. I have been going to talk with him several times, but he is so gruff and absorbed I can’t get up my nerve. There is one thing that has bothered me a lot lately, though, and I’ve never told you of it, but I’m going to now. I probably never would have thought much about it if it hadn’t been for what the old prospector told me the other day over on Cheyenne. I’ve been wondering if there possibly could be any connection between his not wanting me to come on this trip and the fact that he was just then sending men to do his assessment work on the claim that once belonged to my father.

“There is another thing, too, Mr. Allen. I feel ashamed of even thinking of such things, yet the night we had our meeting at Bruin Inn I heard that same prospector discussing a Mr. Williams with Old Ben. I heard him say that Williams was a thief and a

sanctimonious old hypocrite. The thing that bothers me is, how much does Williams know of my father's affairs that he has not told my mother. Surely he would not dare to be crooked in such a thing as that."



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“If you could locate Mr. Kieser, he probably could tell you some things,” slowly added Mr. Allen. “Well, there is one thing sure: ‘Murder will out,’ and with the suspicion I now have, I’ll keep quiet, keep my eyes open, and see what I can learn. That Cheyenne claim must be worth holding, or he wouldn’t send men away up there to do that work. That costs money!”

“Don’t worry about it, anyway, boy. I wouldn’t be building any air castles concerning that gold mine. It was, no doubt, just like thousands of others here in these mountains—”

“I know that, but I want to see the mine that my father dug. Do you suppose I ever will?”

“Who can tell but that you have already seen it on this trip? I don’t know, but let’s go to bed. To-morrow we must find that cabin site, or go home empty-handed. I think we’ll get over into these little canyons on the north and work over to the railroad. If we don’t find a place there, somewhere, then I’m afraid there is none. Most all of this land is Forest Reserve, and we’ll have to get a ninety-nine years’ lease if we locate on Government land; but you know, I’ve been thinking we could build a dandy cabin of these large quaking-aspens, if we could find a place in a good grove. Build a frame, then fit them in, standing them on end, and line with building paper, and perhaps boards. These aspens cut very easily in the winter when they are cold. What would you think of that idea?”

Willis was already nodding by the fire, and did not answer.

“Good-night,” said Mr. Allen, as he pulled his blanket up about him. “Sleep tight, and no dreams, mind you.”

## CHAPTER X

### A Glimpse of Buffalo Roost

The little party gathered about the fire the next morning, cooking the last breakfast of the trip. To-morrow they would be home again. Would they take back a glowing description of a cabin site, situated in some cool forest nook, in the shadow of some mighty crag, or would they be forced to disappoint the anxious crowd of fellows who would be waiting for their return?

By seven o’clock they were jogging down the railroad at a lively gait, keeping their eyes open for a canyon that would lead in back of Cookstove Mountain. They had come down the track at least two miles without finding any encouraging signs when they came upon a trail that seemed to lead from the railroad into an unknown canyon. Perhaps it was one of the many trails from the railroad back to the remains of some of the old construction camps. Perhaps it was a cowpath that led into a fertile meadow where cattle loved to rest by cool springs. Might it not have been the connecting link between



some old prospector's diggings and his point of supplies? Possibly it had been worn by the ever-watchful forest ranger as he rode over the reserve, watching for the fires of careless campers, the trespass of cattle, or, perhaps, to make a timber sale to some mountain

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ranchman. Perhaps it was one of these, but more likely it was a combination of them all. What strange stories it could tell if it could but speak! Had it been on the southern slope it might have been lost in the cool shadows of the forest, or have disappeared in the leafy molds and decaying twigs of many autumns. But it was on the north slope, from which the hungry flames of a giant forest fire had snatched every tree and bush, leaving only the barren hillside.

It was a very alluring trail, for it led to no one knew just where. Just at the point where it slipped over the rocky ridge and dropped down out of sight into the canyon beyond there rose a group of great, tall pines, which seemed to be guarding the pathway. Just ahead stood Cookstove, its rocky crest bathed in the morning light, while far away to the north the sharper outlines were lost in a great army of evergreens, which seemed to be trooping restlessly up the hill and descending again into the great unknown of the valley. It led straight away down a gently-curving aisle of beautiful large trees that had already begun to carpet the floor with dull pine needles, picked from their shaggy heads by the mischievous dryads of the valley. Away up on the shoulder of Cookstove could be seen a long silver ribbon of water, the lower end of which was lost in the treetops of the canyon. From somewhere down below the trail there came the gentle murmur of jubilant little dashes of mountain spray as they frolicked and chased each other in the happy play of a mountain stream. On the inside of the trail the trees dropped away rapidly until you could look into their topmost branches without raising your eyes, while on the other side they trooped noiselessly upward, like some great, silent army, showing only their weather-beaten bodies.

As the boys hastened down this trail, deeper into the land of enchantment, their enthusiasm knew no bounds.

“I’ve about changed my mind about the location of the Garden of Eden,” Ham sung out.

“That’s the twentieth time,” announced Chuck.

“We’re just on the edge of it yet,” shouted Mr. Allen. “Let’s hurry and get into it.”

The trail began immediately to descend, and before they knew it the party found themselves beside a crystal stream that seemed to be lost in a narrow park of great trees and mighty boulders. The trail crossed the stream by an ancient corduroy bridge, then off it ran again up the opposite side of the canyon, penetrating deeper into the quiet forest.

“This is the forest primeval,  
The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,”



quoted Ham. There was a perfume of the forest dampness in the air. Every tree seemed to shelter a bird family or a host of squirrels, to say nothing of the tiny creatures that made chorus together from their hiding places. Softly filtering through the trees came the constant melody of a waterfall, now far away, now just ahead, crying, laughing, sobbing, in a strange intermingling of feeling.



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The trail made a sharp turn to the left, the trees suddenly came to an end, and in their place were large piles of mossy, ragged boulders. The canyon ended in a perpendicular, moss-covered wall, hundreds of feet high, and from the top of this wrinkled old cliff leaped the stream into the canyon below. On an old tin sign, fastened to the stump of an immense tree, were the words, "St. Marys." Directly at the base of the falls, and at their extreme edge, stood a grand old spruce tree, straight and clean as an arrow, its slender top reaching nearly to the top of the falls. They seemed to be happy comrades, for the tree was gently vibrating with the soft, half-wild music of the crystal stream.

After every nook and cranny had been explored, the group began to retrace their steps down the canyon.

"Isn't it a wonderful little spot?" asked Phil, as they sat down by the bridge to rest. "Who do you suppose ever built this trail away up here? See, it has been dug from the very mountain-side in many places, and this bridge wasn't built as a mere footbridge—it was built to support heavy loads of something."

"Perhaps somewhere way up in those trees there is an old mine," suggested Fat.

"I've been wondering if there was," slowly questioned Willis. "I'd like to go and look, for I'm not a bit tired." His eyes were big with the wonder of the place.

"It surely is a treat to him, isn't it?" asked Mr. Allen.

"Yes, and to us all," replied Ham. "I just wonder what some city people would think of it. When I get old, fellows, I'm going to find me some such a little canyon as this and live out my life in it. I don't believe a fellow could ever think a mean thought out here, could he? He'd be almost afraid to."

"It's an ideal place, all right," returned Mr. Allen.

"Why, I believe I'd be an orator if I just had this valley for a class," went on Ham.

"It's a good thing such places can't be moved," suggested Phil, "or some of these wealthy fellows would be buying them all up and putting them in their art galleries. This view would create quite a sensation in New York City, don't you think? Fifty thousand dollars is not much for a few feet of masterpiece, but this can be had for a few dollars an acre. Strange, isn't it?"

"A man paints a little picture on a canvas and worries over it until his hair gets long and his face sad. He is then a genius. People go wild over a man that can copy a little scene. Yet those same people declare there is no Creator. Account for a valley like this without Him, can you?" declared Fat.



“The man that can deny Him, standing here in this little bit of His handiwork,” solemnly declared Ham, “is blind, deaf, and dumb, besides having marked tendencies toward insanity.”

“Halloo,” came in a clear shout from up on the hillside.

“By gracious, he’s found a mine!” cried Ham, jumping up.



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"Halloo," he shouted back. "What did you find?"

"Two more trails," came the answer. "Come up and look. One goes down the canyon on this side." A wild scramble up through the trees followed. Soon they were all traveling down one of the newly-discovered trails. The other one began at an old log cabin, and ran zigzag up the mountain till it was lost in the gravel slopes.

"I've been trying to make up my mind where this canyon leads to," said Mr. Allen. "I'm wondering if it can be Buffalo Park."

A bridge was visible down the stream, and there was the sound of water splashing. An immense boulder that had rolled from the cliff above obstructed any further view. Ham and Willis were in the lead, the rest following as rapidly as possible. The two ahead disappeared, then came into view beyond the big boulder.

"A house!"

"A cabin!" Every one broke into a run. Just above the bridge a crude dam of logs had been built to back up a supply of water, and it was running over from the little pond behind in a happy, babbling waterfall. Then it turned to the south around the base of a patch of high ground. On this bit of high country, overlooking the stream on one side and the upper canyon on the other, stood the loudly-announced cabin.

It was a typical mountain log-house, except for its roof, which was covered with cedar shingles instead of the customary split poles, thatched over with marsh hay. Its every line suggested age. In some places the mud chinking had dried and dropped out, yet, strange to say, the windows were all there, and even the door, which was of city manufacture, was not past repair. One corner of the roof had been slightly damaged by the falling of a monstrous pine log that was still lying where it had fallen several years before.

The cabin had evidently been used as a summer home only, for there was no fireplace or a chimney of any kind, except a dilapidated old length of stovepipe that stuck through the gable at one end. It was this feature that made it look so completely forlorn and abandoned. Besides the door and two windows that opened on the trail side, there was a window on the up end and a door on the stream side which led out onto a crude back porch, built entirely of aspen poles. The floor was of pine boards, and had once been a marvel of beauty and convenience for a mountain cabin; but time had played strange pranks with it, till now it was uneven and sloped off in a jerky fashion toward the back door. On one wall was fastened a rude set of shelves, on which was perched a motley collection of pickle bottles and tin cans. Stretched along one wall stood a crude, home-made table, and in one corner stood the remains of a little, old-fashioned stove. A wooden chest stood under the shelves, and had probably been used for a grub box. It

still contained a few pounds of yellow cornmeal, half a can of baking powder, a badly molded loaf of rye bread, and a surprisingly sturdy sample



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of butter. Hung on a nail in the corner above the chest was a once-stylish skillet and the battered lower part of a double boiler. A rusty tincup lay on the floor beside a powder can that had been used for a bucket, while just inside the south door stood a comical homemade shakedown. The frame was built of straight young aspen poles, while the springs were just a carefully woven layer of balsam boughs spread over a bottom of limber young saplings. It had once been a wonder of comfort and ease, but its value had passed with the departure of its builder.

The trail ran close in front of the door and then climbed over the sandy base of a great crag, and disappeared over the hill. Just as it left the level of the house and started upward, there stood an immense Douglas spruce like some faithful guard, his proud green helmet stretched up into the sky so that he might be the more able to see any approaching danger. A great smoke-stained rock lay just at the end of the house, before which was built a primitive fireplace. An assortment of tin cans, lying in the little ravine, told the simple tale of bygone campfire suppers and of hunters and explorers and miners.

“Well, this is what I call luck—pure, unadulterated luck, with sugar on it,” drawled Ham as he surveyed the house.

“Luck, your grandmother,” said Phil. “Do you call something that you have been searching for for four long days luck?”

“Excuse me,” answered Ham, in mock courtesy. “I forgot when I made that statement that there is no such thing as luck. It was my old friend, ‘William Shakespeare,’ that wrote that famous line about luck, ‘Luck is pluck in action,’ or something like that, wasn’t it? That’s what it was here, anyway.”

“Well, at any rate,” said Mr. Allen, as he joined the group after his round of inspection, “the old shanty is chucked full of possibilities.”

“I’m glad something is full,” interrupted Fat. “We certainly aren’t in the same class, that cabin and I. It’s been so long since I’ve fed that my floating ribs have run ashore. The worst of it is that all I have left is a can of condensed milk, about a teaspoon of sugar, and a little butter that’s a second cousin to what’s in that grub box yonder. I’m going to borrow a few possibilities from the cabin and beg for food. Let’s have dinner.”

“Right here by this old rock,” called Willis. “Perhaps we can roast a little information out of these rocks.”

Chuck had gone down stream into a grove of large aspens, and at this moment came panting up the trail.



“Bees—peach of a tree—honey galore—millions of them!” he panted.

“That sounds like something to eat,” cried Fat. “Come along, Chuck, I’m with you. Do you know how to make that ‘milk and honey’ that the Good Book speaks about? I’ve got the milk, let’s get the honey.” Ham, Chuck, and Fat started for the bee tree, Ham singing his favorite, “A Preacher went a Huntin’.”

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“Better let up, Ham,” shouted Phil. “The bees will be after the sweetness in that melody of yours.”

Phil stretched out at full length in the sun while Mr. Allen busily made figures and sketches in his note book. Willis rose and started down the trail toward the bee tree. At the edge of the timber he stopped, and a curious smile spread over his face. Then suddenly, as the real significance of what he saw dawned upon him, he doubled up with a howl and laughed till his sides hurt.

The fellows were unable to roll over the great dead tree, so had decided to “smudge the brutes out,” as Ham said. Accordingly, they built a fire at the side where the bees had been seen to enter the tree. Chuck had carried water from the stream in his hat to make the fire smoke, and, as they watched the hole, the bees came swarming out at the end of the log behind them, “with spears sharpened and ready for action,” as Ham afterward said. Such lively gymnastics and hurried departures Willis had never before witnessed. Fat completely forgot that he was hungry, and Ham took occasion to severely chastise himself, using his old felt hat for a paddle, while Chuck went ploughing through the underbrush like a young bull-moose, murmuring strange, inarticulate sentences. Fortunately for them all, the bee tree was nothing but a nest of marsh-wasps, and there were nowhere near as many as Chuck declared there were. The damage was slight to all except Fat, and he had enough signs of battle to warrant a leather medal for bravery. The saddest thing was that the hoped-for “milk and honey” did not materialize.

As the party sat together eating the last of their rations, Ham fell into one of his philosophical moods.

“I like this kind of life,” he began. “Out here you let go your hold on man-made things and shift for yourself.” He looked cautiously over at Fat, who was trying to scratch a particularly itchy sting just out of reach in the middle of his back. “I like the unchanging condition of nature,” he continued. “The wilderness is all yours, and you may take from it all the essentials of primitive living—shelter, warmth, and food.”

“Ham, you’re an unmitigated prevaricator,” cried Fat as he scratched and made faces. Ham paid no attention to him. “Here in the open country you can get mighty close to the great wilderness with its myriads of busy lives, and—” Fat picked up a pine cone and threw it, but Ham disappeared around the end of the big rock.

“Ham, you’re just like the loons we have on the Michigan lakes,” taunted Willis. “You can do and say more crazy things than all the rest of us ducks put together; but when any one takes a shot at you, you’re out of sight.”

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By this time Fat had managed to make two holes in his can of milk and was drinking the contents. Mr. Allen had returned to his sketching, and Willis had gone over to the little dam to get a drink. Suddenly there was the snort of a horse and the rapid tramping of hoofs. A dog gave two or three barks, then horse, rider, and dog appeared on the trail. In a second another rider, with a pick and shovel thrown over his shoulder, came over the ridge. The first pulled in his horse and, turning in his saddle, looked to see if his companion was coming. Being confident that he was not far behind, he again urged his horse forward, apparently not noticing the group by the big boulder. Ham got to his feet and spoke to the dog. The horseman gave a quick exclamation of surprise, then called out, "Howdy!" Mr. Allen rose.

"Well, well!" called the man. "Seems to me yew fellers are travelin' some, ain't ye?"

"O, a little," returned Mr. Allen.

"You don't happen to know, do you, whether there are two cabins above here, do you? We was directed to the middle cabin."

"No, only a very badly decayed one—just a pile of tumbled-down logs," replied Mr. Allen. The second rider had come up and dismounted, and together they studied a sketch which he had taken from his pocket.

"This must be the one, that's all," he drawled, as he spat out a great quid of tobacco, "'cause he said it was by the bridge. We must o' missed the other cabin in the trees somewhere below here."

Willis was eyeing the newcomers closely. A stern, hard look crossed his face as he quickened his pace. He reached Mr. Allen's side, and the first rider nodded to him. He drew nearer and observed the sketch very closely, listening intently to all the strangers had to say. His heart was beating fast, but just why he could not have told.

"Well, Jim, I guess we'd better unsaddle an' give the nags a drink an' a rest," said the stranger as he carefully folded up the sketch and put it in his pocket. "Seems strange as how we'd meet twice in these mountains in nearly as many days, don't it?" remarked the man, as he began to loosen the saddle girths and to untie the sacks of grub that were fastened on behind.

"How is that?" queried Mr. Allen.

"Why, wasn't it you that went up the trail to the top of Cheyenne the other day?" questioned the man. Then, without waiting for a reply, he went on: "We was doin' an assessment up there that day an' seed you as you stood talkin' to that crusty old prospector that works that tunnel."

"O yes," said Mr. Allen, "so you are the men that were up there by that black dump?"



“Yep, we’re the fellers, Jim an’ me.”

“Are you going to do more assessment work here in this canyon?” questioned Ham.

“Yep, we’ve got two assessments to do here somewhere,” returned the stranger. “This canyon, or at least part of it, belongs to a real estate company in Colorado Springs. I don’t believe there is any gold here, but they are holdin’ the property as an investment. Seems like they expect sometime to open this canyon to tourist trade to see some swell falls that’s up in it somewheres.”

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“O, is that so?” returned Mr. Allen. “Then you don’t think there is any gold here at all?”

“Nope, I don’t, an’ I’ll tell ye why. Gold, as it’s found in these parts, runs in a strata of quartz. Now, there ain’t no quartz in this range, except on Cheyenne. The old-timer down at the inn says that there’s gold up here, an’ he knows where it is, but you can’t take no stock in these old fellers. They’re daft on the gold question.”

Mr. Allen looked at his watch, then, turning to the fellows, he suggested that they had better start for home. After a little more conversation the two parties separated, one to camp for the night in the cabin, the other to return to the city.

Willis motioned Mr. Allen to the back of the line as they worked their way down the trail and into the park.

“The plot thickens,” began Willis, with a queer little smile on his face. Then with a slight chuckle he added: “To be more accurate, I suppose I should say ‘The plot thins.’ Those are the two men that were at my uncle’s house the morning we started on this trip, and my uncle drew that sketch—I’m sure of it. The heading was torn from the paper, but I feel it in my bones that he was the artist. Those are the men that were doing the assessment on my father’s old claim on Cheyenne for my uncle. He never dreamed of my seeing them here and knowing they were in his employ. I understand now why he didn’t want me to come on this trip. A coward is always suspicious. I never would have put the two together in the wide world if he hadn’t made such a fuss about my coming. One thing is absolutely certain—my Uncle Williams is crooked, and that isn’t all, either. My Uncle Williams owns that cabin, and we’ll never get it for our use in this wide world. What will the fellows say when they know it belongs to my uncle and we can’t get it? The cabin is ideal, and it could be repaired with very little cost. It is isolated and in a beautiful spot, and is the only thing we have found. Don’t tell the fellows about it, please, until I see what I can do. I’ll do my very best.”

“Now, look here, my boy; don’t let that bother you,” replied Mr. Allen. “Wait. Don’t trouble trouble till trouble troubles you. He hasn’t troubled you yet, he’s just getting ready to. Let’s beat him at his own game. There are more ways than one to skin a cat.”

“But how?” inquired Willis.

“Well, the first thing to do is to get the exact location of the cabin, then go to the county recorder’s office and see to whom the property belongs. If it ever belonged to your father, as you are now disposed to believe—”

“Yes, I’d bet my hat, Mr. Allen, that this is the very cabin that my father and Tad Kieser built. O, how I’d like to have it all for my very own!” Mr. Allen interrupted him. “As I was saying, the records will show very plainly if it was ever transferred or if it was anything but a lode claim. If your father owned it, that settles it. Williams has nothing to say

about it. Placer claims can't be taken on deeded property. However, let's not worry about it, but let's count it ours and work toward that end."



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“O my, if Tad were only here, we’d soon know a thing or two!” exclaimed Willis.

“Now, boy, listen! Don’t go home and spoil all this business. Keep still about it until to-morrow, when we can get at the records and find out for certain just what is what. Will you do that?” questioned Mr. Allen.

“I’ll tell my mother,” replied Willis, “and to-morrow I’ll go with you.”

The trail was winding back and forth through a great park of aspens. On every side were prospect holes, remains of old cabins, and places where the wilderness was again reclaiming her own after men had spent their time, money, and energy attempting to force her to give up her gold.

At the top of the hogsback that over-looked Bruin Inn the fellows sat down to rest. They were back in familiar territory, now, and the cabin quest was nearly over.

“Of course, the very first thing to do,” Ham was saying, “is to get in stone and get our fireplace built before the frost comes. It will be a simple matter—just throw down stones from the mountain; they are flat slabs and will lay up very easily. We’ll use that big, flat stone at the end as a foundation, and run the chimney up outside the house—a real big, life-sized one, too. And we want a grand old-fashioned crane in the grate, and andirons of stone, and a big cement hearth.”

“Going to do all your cooking in the fireplace?” asked Chuck.

“Not on your life,” put in Fat. “We’ll bring up our old camp stove, the one we had on the trip last summer—it’s a dandy.”

“I’ve got the only stunt, though,” said Ham. “Let’s build a great big bed on the rafters that run from wall to wall. We’ll just cut a lot of saplings and lay them in close and support the bed from the roof. After it has about two feet of balsam boughs on it, it will be a choice roost, I tell you that. I’m going to be architect and boss carpenter of that job.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Allen gravely, “but it’s not a fireplace, an aerial bunk, or a place to eat that I’m thinking of. There is no use putting our time, effort, and money into this place unless we can take care of at least twenty fellows at a time, and how can we do it?”

“The eating won’t be any trouble,” advised Fat. “They will get enough to eat some way—I always do.” “We’ll build an addition,” suggested Phil, “a bunk house addition. That will be easy; we can build it out where that old back porch is, can’t we? And say, talk about great logs, what’s the matter with those aspens right there ready for us?”



“We could buy tin dishes, but where is the money coming from? That is the main question,” said Mr. Allen. “Money,” snorted Ham, “that will come if we’re in earnest, dead earnest. How about that circus? How much money do we need, anyway?”

Mr. Allen drew out his note-book, and made some rapid calculations. “Well, the very least that you can do with, fellows, is two hundred and fifty dollars.”



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“Good-bye, fond dreams!” cried Fat tragically.

“Two hundred and fifty dollars!” exclaimed Phil and Ham together. “How do you get that?”

“Well, cement and lime for the fireplace, freight to Fairview on boards, shingles, furnishings, and so on; rent on donkeys to do the packing, dishes, and pantry boxes, for everything will have to be kept in tin boxes. Then you’ll have to hire a mason to put in the fireplace. You’ll need axes, saws, and tools. I’ll wager it won’t cost a cent less than two hundred dollars, and great loads of hard work.”

“Hard fun, you mean,” interrupted Phil.

As the evening shadows began to lengthen and the cool breeze to rise from the snow-clad peaks of the Middle Range, the little group of explorers dropped into the canyon and hurried home. All were very full of ideas and suggestions except Willis. He had listened to their talk, but was saying over and over to himself, “If it doesn’t come true, it’s my fault, or my uncle’s, and that’s the same thing.”

## CHAPTER XI

### A Strange Turn of Fate

“Let’s take Mr. Dean to the courthouse with us, Willis,” said Mr. Allen. “He is very shrewd, and we can depend on his judgment in such matters as we have before us today.” Willis found Mr. Dean, and in a short time they were on their way, Mr. Allen explaining to Mr. Dean the possible difficulty that had arisen in regard to the ownership of the cabin.

Upon their arrival at the courthouse, the first thing was to study a United States geological map to find the township, section lines, railroads, and streams. Then began the search through old, yellow volumes of records, one after another, each one bringing them nearer to the desired information.

“Section five, west of range sixty-seven,” read Mr. Dean. “That’s the place, boys; now we must locate an exact point in that section. You say the cabin is located on a stream and a trail. The falls are marked here;” he pointed with his pencil. “Now downstream a little; here we are, three trails marked instead of one. You came over from the railroad, didn’t you?”

“Yes, right here,” said Willis, pointing. “The cabin is where these two trails cross each other.”



In the center of the next volume, for there had been many claims located and recorded on the little stream, they found the record of a property belonging to Willis's father and a Mr. Kieser. The record showed the date of its refiling, after the country had become a part of the Pike's Peak Forest Reserve. The survey lines were given, but of course they could not be located on the map. Was the cabin on the property there recorded or not? Willis remembered that his mother had said not, so they pushed further into the books and came to the description of a lode claim, the corner of which, according to the record, was at the intersection of the two trails, just where the stream swings south. It was originally staked and recorded by a man named Briney as a placer claim. Six consecutive assessments were recorded, then two years later the claim was relocated by a Joseph H. Williams. Willis frowned as he made notes and took down the dates of the assessments.



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“There you are,” he said despondently; “just as I thought yesterday—Mr. Joseph H. Williams, my uncle, owner. Great chance of getting that cabin, isn’t there?”

“Now, hold your horses,” interrupted Mr. Dean. “Let’s finish the rest of this record. Well, that’s the strangest thing I ever heard of. His last assessment is dated last summer, August 3, 19—. This year’s work hasn’t been done yet. Why—well, anyway, there must be something worth while around that cabin. ‘Claim jumped and re-recorded as a lode claim August 22, 19—.’ Why, that’s the day you started on the trip to look for a cabin!”

“You are right,” exclaimed Mr. Allen. “Let’s look at the list of records filed on August 22d last.” The clerk showed them the page. It read as follows:

“Assessment on Joseph H. Williams lode claim, Cheyenne Mountain.” Then followed the description. Directly under it was the following:

“Lode claim, Buffalo Park, located by Beverly H. Pembroke, as described on page 1162.”

“The cabin then belongs, by right of relocation, to Beverly H. Pembroke,” remarked Mr. Allen, “and we are just exactly four days late. Too bad we didn’t start at this end of the trip.”

“Who is Beverly H. Pembroke?” asked Mr. Dean. No one could tell. “Well, this much is clear,” he went on: “there was some very good reason for the relocation of that claim, and it couldn’t have been for that old cabin. Men don’t locate claims to get possession of old, tumbled-down log cabins nowadays.”

“Well, there’s this much that isn’t clear,” returned Willis: “why that change was made the day we started over this route, and furthermore, how does it come that the same men worked the assessment on the two claims if they belong to different parties? No, sir, men, listen: my Uncle didn’t want that cabin in his possession at this time for some reason, so he transferred the claim to this man, Pembroke. Anyway, I’m glad it doesn’t belong to my uncle now, whether we get it for our purpose or not.”

“Now, you listen,” said Mr. Dean: “let’s go and see Mr. Pembroke at once and inquire about it. He can’t do more than throw us out, and it might be he’d be tickled to let us have the cabin. Every hundred dollars’ worth of work done on that property, whether it’s mine, trail, dam, or housework, is equal to an assessment. If we remodel the house and use it, he can buy the property or, as they say, ‘prove up’ on it. What do you say? I believe we can make a bargain.”

“It’s a go!” cried Mr. Allen. “I was sure we would need your brains for this job, Mr. Dean. Let’s go right now.” They looked up the desired gentleman in the directory, then started for his office.



“Cheer up, old boy,” cried Mr. Allen as he slapped Willis on the back. “Here’s where we win, uncle or no uncle. Isn’t that right, Mr. Dean?”

“You feel too confident,” returned Willis. “I see the game. You don’t. Mr. Beverly H. Pembroke will politely refuse any offer. My uncle has coached him on what to say to any inquiries. See if I’m not right!”



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“You haven’t a very good opinion of that uncle of yours, have you?” said Mr. Dean. “I don’t see why he should be so vitally interested in keeping you away from an old cabin. I think you imagine things, boy.”

“You know some things are true that you can’t see,” tersely replied Willis. “You can’t see a pain in your stomach, but you can feel it and it tells you something is wrong. It’s just the same in this case. I can’t see it, but I know something is wrong, and the next thing for us to do is to get our heads together and find out the causes. We’re interested in the causes.”

Mr. Beverly H. Pembroke sat idly in his office. His feet were hoisted up on the window sill, his straw hat tipped far back on his head, while a long, slender cigar was held between his teeth. He was decidedly an Englishman, and a very nervous, fidgety one at that. As the three entered he got to his feet and inquired concerning their wants.

“Log cabin—Buffalo Park—Lode claim located August 22d.” He puffed meditatively at his cigar, endeavoring to focus his thoughts on the matter before him. A frown clouded his face, then suddenly disappeared.

“Why-a, yes, ba Jove, this ’ot weather ’as nearly set me crazy. My brains ’ave been bemuddled all day, don’t you know. Ba Jove, I most forgot that new claim. Yes, yes, and you want ’ow many shares?”

Mr. Allen looked at Mr. Dean and smiled. “You do the talking,” he said.

“Well, it’s like this,” said Mr. Dean. Then he laid his proposition before the Englishman, who puffed away on his cigar and listened in silence. “Sorry, very sorry, gentlemen,” he began, “but I ’ave just arranged with a party to ’old that site for a summer ’otel or a fruit farm, or some such a thing, don’t you know. Sorry, beastly sorry, though, because I ’ave to refuse you.”

Mr. Allen looked at Mr. Dean, a great disappointment showing on his face. He turned to Willis, who was standing in the background. The boy was squinting out between half-closed eyelids and his fists were clenched hard at his sides. He was gazing steadfastly at the floor. Suddenly he looked up at Mr. Allen, then shoved himself behind the railing that separated them from the Englishman and spoke in clearcut tones.

“Mr. Pembroke—” The little Englishman batted his eyes nervously and straightened noticeably. He was all attention in a second. Willis looked him straight in the eye and continued: “I don’t suppose you know who I am, at least you don’t appear to. I hate to ask favors of any man, or take undue advantage of any one, but in this instance I feel that I have just a little claim upon your attention and your consideration.” Mr. Allen looked at Mr. Dean in utter astonishment.



“Very early this spring you and I were fellow passengers on a D. & P.W. train coming to Colorado Springs. Do you remember? That train was wrecked on a stormy afternoon by the splintering of the rails, which caused a collision with a heavy freight. It was my pleasure at that time to save the life of your little son.”



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“Ba Jove,” murmured the Englishman, as he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “It was a deucedly nasty business. I’m very pleased to meet you again, Mr.—a—a—”

“Thornton,” said Mr. Allen.

“Mr. Thornton, and—”

“Never mind that,” continued Willis. “All I have to say is that I would count it a very great favor, personally, if you could see your way clear to let us have the use of that cabin for an Association camp, until such time as you are ready to build or make other improvements there.”

“Why—a—yes, I’ll be pleased to do that,” returned Mr. Pembroke confusedly. “Deucedly glad to ’ave a chance to serve you, don’t you know. Now, just what is your plan again, gentlemen?”

The plan was carefully gone over, this time with Willis as spokesman. Mr. Pembroke listened carefully till he had finished, then he replied, “Ba Jove, I like the idea, it ’as points to it. I’d like to furnish the necessary lumber for the desired addition myself. It will be a deucedly comfortable ’ome for the boys. You know it was the Association boys that returned my dog to me.”

Before leaving his office, a three years’ lease was arranged for and everything looked lovely. What was more, the addition could be started at once.

“Well, by the Great Horn Spoon!” ejaculated Mr. Dean when they were well outside. “You are a wonder! That is what I call nerve. Now tell me all about it.”

“Bah!” replied Willis, “I hated to do it, but I had to. I was going to ask the old boy what Mr. Williams would say to him, but I thought better of it. To-night is when I have my fun. I’ll tell my uncle about our deal and watch him squirm. I wonder if he’ll get mad. I can tell by the way he acts if this recording business was a put-up job. There still remains *the* question, though—why does he want to keep me away from that cabin? It has something to do with my father’s old mine, I’m sure of that much; and I’ll find out, you see if I don’t.”

The evening papers gave a glowing account of the interest of Mr. Beverly H. Pembroke in the new Y.M.C.A. cabin project, and gave the plan of work. A circus was already being planned to raise funds for the building, and a stock company had been organized among the boys of the Boys’ Department to furnish funds with which to begin work at once. Work would be started the next Saturday. The stockholders and some others would go to the cabin on Friday evening, camp around a fire all night, and be ready to begin work in the morning. After supper that evening Willis had a long chat with his



mother, and talked over with her all the things that had been disturbing him in regard to his uncle's recent actions.

"I think you must surely be mistaken," she said. "What object could he have in doing such things. You must remember that you have a very vivid imagination, and you must watch it."



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"No, mother, it is not imagination, for this is how I know this time: Didn't you see how red and nervous he got when I told him what Mr. Pembroke had agreed to do. Right after supper he left for down town without a word. I don't know what it is, but there is some fact relative to father's death that he has never told us. If we could only find Tad, I'm sure he could help us out. I'm going to find father's mine, though, and it's not so very far from that cabin, either. Mother, isn't it wonderful that we are going to have the very old house that father built so long ago? After I find the mine, I'll find out about its worth; but it can't be worth so very much or Tad would never have left it. If the tunnel is still locked up like you said Tad wrote it was, why, we can't get into it. It belongs to Tad. Perhaps it will never be opened. Mother, some day when you have a chance, talk with Uncle Joe and see what you can find out. Father might have left keys and information concerning the mine with him."

"No, son, he wouldn't have keys, because it was Tad that locked up the tunnel. It is Tad that has the keys. But listen, don't worry over it a bit or build any false hopes on it. School will open in a week, and I want you to take advantage of all it can give you. We'll be here until Christmas, anyway, I think, unless Aunt Lucy should slip away before that time."

"I wonder what uncle would say to me if I asked him about Tad when he comes home tonight. I think that's what I'll do."

About nine o'clock he heard the heavy footsteps of his uncle on the veranda, and in another moment heard him in the hall. After hanging up his hat and coat, he came into the library, picked up the *Evening Telegraph*, and began to read, entirely ignoring Willis. After they had sat thus silently for some minutes, Willis spoke:

"Uncle, did you ever know a man named Tad Kieser, who was a great friend of my father's?" The man moved uneasily in his chair, but, without looking up from his paper, he inquired of the boy what he knew of Tad Kieser.

"Not much, to be sure," returned the boy, half sadly, "only what mother has told me about him; but I'd like to know more. I think he must have been a very interesting old character, wasn't he?"

"An old devil and a cut-throat," retorted Mr. Williams. "You couldn't count on him to be square even to his own mother. A sly old fox always on the hunt."

"That's very strange," replied Willis. "He surely was not that sort of a man or my father never would have chosen him for a partner. You surely must be mistaken." "Your father didn't have enough dealings with him to find him out; that was all. I know him."



“Tell me about some of the awful deeds he has committed if he is such a fox,” questioned Willis. “I’ve always thought him absolutely square. I’ve heard he was the finest man in these mountains, years ago.”

“Who told you any such rot? I have enough circumstantial evidence against him to put him behind the bars right now,” growled the uncle.



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“Evidence along what lines, Uncle?” persisted Willis.

“Blackmail!” snorted Williams. “What difference does it make to you, anyway? He would be a capital fellow to join in on such an absurdly foolish scheme as you are just about to pull off at the Y.M.C.A. now. Going into somebody else’s property and absorbing its benefits to yourselves. That’s his scheme exactly. He watches my mining claims like a hawk, and if my assessments should be a day late he’d jump my claims. He hates me.”

“What did you ever do to make him hate you?” innocently inquired Willis.

Again Mr. Williams ignored the question and went on: “He’d just love to work on that old cabin again.”

“I should think that cabin *would* interest him,” calmly replied Willis. “I only wish he was here to join us, for I’d rather know him than any man I can think of just now. A man who builds a house ought to know how best to build onto it, hadn’t he? Personally, I think he must have been a very clever old miner and as true as steel.”

“Yes, true to his own interests.”

“It takes two to make a fight, though, doesn’t it? By the way, Uncle, why did you let that sapheaded Englishman jump your claim last week? I should think you’d hate him for such tricks as you do Tad?” Willis eyed his uncle closely, then in a half undertone he casually remarked, “Anyway, I think a whole lot of this mining business is mighty crooked business.” Then again to his uncle, “Is Tad still around in the mountains somewhere, Uncle?”

Mr. Williams smiled in a preoccupied way and said, “Yes and no.”

“I don’t understand?” questioned Willis.

There was no reply. Soon the man laid down his paper and left the room.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered,” said Willis half-aloud. “What can he have against the man who was my father’s partner? I don’t know, but I’ll find out.” He closed his book with a slam and went off to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last Friday night of the summer vacation saw a large group of husky high school boys board the car en route to the cabin. All were equipped with blanket rolls, and several carried picks, shovels, and other tools, for “to-morrow” real work on the cabin was to begin. It seemed that the coloring of the leaves had given everything their delicate tint. The squirrels were already gathering stray acorns that Mother Nature had

dropped for them. The little canyon lay in perfect quiet, except for the chattering of the line of boys stretched out along its leafy woodland trail. The whole physical body seemed to respond in a mysterious way to its every call, for “In the city we live, but in the mountains we live more abundantly.”



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By eleven o'clock the party sat around a half-dozen blazing campfires, munching at a midnight lunch and speculating on various phases of the work. Ham was keeping the fellows around one fire laughing over his remarks; Fat was giving expression to his views on camp grub and food in general. Mr. Dean entertained another group by his stories of army life, while Mr. Allen and a number of the boys' Cabinet were laying out a plan of work for the morrow. Shorty Wier advised work on the fireplace first, because, as he pointed out, "the fireplace would be the cabin's heart." It might have fine decorations and new rooms, a well-stocked pantry and new furniture, yet what would all these be to a dead thing? The fireplace would be the spot around which all the cabin life would congregate—around which every strange experience would be put into words. "Yes, I'll help cut the logs and pack in the lumber and build the furniture, but first of all let me see the rugged stone chimney with a fire quietly burning on a great, wide, friendly hearth to cheer me as I work."

"You are right, Shorty," cried Willis. "I'm with you, for when the old fireplace is built, and the wind is whistling down the canyon, bringing messages of snow, we'll forget everything outside and just be happy toasting before a great log fire."

And so the night slipped along. After a while they began to drowse, until one by one the little groups became quiet and fell asleep. Only the glowing, flickering pine knots stayed awake to watch the tired sleepers.

The first streak of dawn found the fellows up and eager for work; besides, there was so much to see and learn before the day's work was begun. The remains of the midnight lunches were drawn out of their hiding places and eagerly devoured. The fragrant smell of broiling bacon and the delicious aroma of campfire coffee filled the air. The pine-scented smoke from the campfire hung low in the valley, and every sound carried plainly in the morning air. The squirrels were out in great numbers and at their morning play, while every now and then the harsh, rasping cry of a bewildered bluejay would float up the canyon.

The stone crew were strung out in skirmish order across the front of the high ridge and were rolling down every loose stone. Some came with a merry hop, skip, and jump; others with a shower of gravel and a crash as they struck the bottom. One great stone leaped into the top of a spruce tree and stuck fast. Another jumped over the great boulder at the base of the hill and rattled into the open door of the cabin. Still another dashed in mad frenzy down the slope, through the alders and into the stream, throwing spray in every direction. So the pile steadily grew.



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In the afternoon the cabin was cleaned out and a part of the back porch demolished, ready for the new addition. It had been decided to build a room eight by twenty-eight feet, and in it lay one great balsam-bough mattress. Under Ham's direction the aerial bunk was begun, and it very soon showed signs of being built by a master builder. It was what might be termed "rustic," as Ham said. Logs from the woodpile were substituted for the rotting ones in the floor of the bridge. A great pile of brush, twigs, and trash were set afire and destroyed. So the day slipped away—all too quickly. Four o'clock found a group of royal good fellows again on the trail—that trail that was soon to become so dear to every one of them. Their muscles were tired with unselfish work, and their minds and hearts were full of the joy of living. There was already something of the great social bond that was later to tie their lives together for all time with a cord of pleasant memories.

Ham had fastened his blanket to a nail away up in the topmost rafter of the cabin, and here he left it for another time.

"Where your blanket is, there will your heart be also, sometimes," he quoted as they took the trail that led down out of the wilderness.

## CHAPTER XII

### The Discovery of the Mine

Two weeks later another crowd was organized to do a day's work on the cabin, and it seemed every boy in the Department wanted to go. "Unless you feel as husky as a steam elevator, you better stay home," was Ham's advice to one small boy, for Ham had been chairman of the committee that had been so busy since the last trip, purchasing all manner of supplies, equipment, and building material for the cabin, all of which would have to be packed over from Fairview on donkeys, and there was nearly a carload of it. Ham was under the impression that the donkeys would fall dead when they saw the "pile of junk," and that every single fellow in the crowd would have to "wiggle his ears, bray once or twice, and get busy," if the cabin ever became the possessor of the new equipment.

Twenty fellows besides the "Chief" and Mr. Dean were on hand at the appointed time. At the mouth of the canyon two very faithful old donkeys, that had years before belonged to a prospector, were rented for the trip. Under their former master they had been trained to carry heavy loads of ore from the little mine far back in the mountains out to the city, and to return again heavily laden with the provisions for another winter in camp. They had learned their lessons well, so were perfectly trustworthy.

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Peanuts was the oldest, and therefore came in for the most consideration and the lightest load. As he raised his tired, patient old head, his long gray ears pointed forward at the sight of the pack saddles. One glance and he was satisfied. He perfectly understood what was coming, and visions of the long, zigzag paths through shaded valleys all fresh from the summer showers flashed through his brain. Peanuts loved the trail, the deep, long, grassy trail, that crept along close to the little stream, then up and up into the great Silent Places. Tradition told that Peanuts had been the first donkey to carry a pack up Pike's Peak, as well as the first to bring real "high grade" out of the Cripple Creek; but of course tradition might have been mistaken. At any rate, Peanuts was a gentle, slow, patient toiler of the trail, and it was largely due to his good judgment that the cabin was ever equipped.

Many were the trips he made after that first journey. There were summer trips in the hot sun of July days; autumn trips in the cool, sweet-scented evenings when the mountain twilight lingers on the treetops and the rocky crests. There were trips in the winter when the trail was hidden underneath heavy blankets of snow or lost in the deep white drifts. Once he had gone in beyond his depth and had settled down and down into the fluffy snow until just his head and big ears were visible above the snowbank.

His companion, Tuberculosis, was a little different type of beast. His legs were long and his spirits high. He was in the prime of life and was not as trustworthy as his partner. Certainly Tuberculosis had his idiosyncrasies, and that fact often spelled trouble for both himself and his masters. Now, Peanuts had learned that his driver was always boss, and acted accordingly; but not so with Tuberculosis. He believed that his own judgment in certain matters of conduct was best. For instance, it was absolutely against his principles to ever cross a stream, no matter how well it was bridged or how insignificant its size. Yet, after many experiences, seasoned with a little strenuous persuasion from the end of an alder limb, he began slowly to change his views. However, he positively had no use for burned stumps, and when it came to passing a campfire, Tuberculosis absolutely declined. There was just one thing that both donkeys very firmly believed, and that was that each was to lead and the other follow when on the trail. This was the only point upon which they really ever quarreled, and most every time Peanuts, because of his mature judgment and statesmanship, won out.

When the pack saddles were on, and the pack bags of food adjusted on either side, the blanket rolls piled high on top, they were ready to begin the journey, "Donkeys are a good deal like some men," observed Ham as the little column came to the base of the hogsback, "they always have to travel by freight."

"How is that?" questioned Willis, who had appointed himself guardian to Peanuts and was just ahead of Ham.



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“Why, because they can’t express themselves,” was the reply.

“Not verbally, perhaps,” suggested Fat, “but they do have a signal code, of which their hind legs are the main features. I’ve had them signal at me more than once.”

“And if you ever receive the completed message,” added Ham, “it usually says, ‘Six weeks in the hospital.’”

At the top of the hogsback the party separated into two groups. The one under Mr. Allen continued on up the trail with the two donkeys, while the other, under Mr. Dean, took the railroad, walking around by Fairview, to see if their equipment had arrived.

It was decided the boys would sleep around a rousing fire rather than on the cold floor of the cabin. The shakedown was too dry to be comfortable, and Ham’s aerial bunk had not yet been completed. They therefore chose a spot for the night’s camp across the stream from the cabin on a piece of high level ground covered with a thick brown carpet of pine needles. Very soon a bright fire was burning and the night’s wood gathered. From the bulging packsacks a real camp supper was gotten under way. Every fellow cooked his own piece of meat and baked his potato in the coals, while Mr. Allen made the coffee and opened the cans of beans. Each fellow fashioned himself a spoon from a dry stick, and the new cabin tincups were initiated into service. Ham, who had had some previous experience with donkeys, warned everybody to be sure to save all the scraps, for beans, rye bread, or beefsteak were all dainties to the faithful animals.

One of the fellows had brought his mouth-organ, and under his leadership they sang every song from “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” to “Nearer, My God, to Thee.” When the fire had had time to work its wonders on the hearts and spirits of the campers, Mr. Allen suggested a few stories. Of course, he just voiced what was in the minds of many others, for who ever heard of a campfire, a grand night, a happy crowd, and no stories? Such a situation was inconceivable. Every fellow looked forward to the campfire because of the stories, and remembered the stories because of the campfire. They were inseparable. Mr. Dean opened the program. One story suggested another, and that one another, until nearly every one in the circle had told a story except Ham. Willis told Indian legends of the great Kankakee Swamp and of the disappearance of the Pottawattomie Indians. Another told of a wonderful trip through Yellowstone Park; another of a deer hunt in Routt County; and still another of a mountain goat expedition in the Canadian Rockies. All the while Ham lay flat on his back, shading his face from the fire with his hands, and looking up at the stars. He was reveling in the spirit of the fire and of the night.

“What are you dreaming about, Ham?” called Willis from the other side of the fire, to which Ham made no reply.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Fat, as he rolled over, facing Ham, and punched him in the ribs.



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“Nothing special,” drawled Ham as he rose to a sitting position and drew his legs up under him. “I’ve just been listening. Your stories have been the words to the music that is in the air to-night. I love to lie still before a fire and listen to its music. I never realized before how many out-of-door noises are liberated when a pile of dry sticks are burned. That old fire has just been singing all the imprisoned songs of the forest wild to-night, and giving out again in its little flames a hundred thousand tons of absorbed sunshine.”

“Ham, let’s have the Pike’s Peak story,” urged Mr. Dean; but Ham only laughed.

“Yes, let’s do,” begged Willis.

“What’s the Pike’s Peak story?” inquired Sleepy from his place against an old stump.

“Well, if every one of you fellows will promise to never mention it again to me,” said Ham hesitatingly; “but I’m not going to tell you all the details—just the plot—remember that!” He settled himself comfortably and began:

“The three of us had been in the habit of taking long Sunday afternoon tramps in the mountains, but because of the cold weather we had been pretty well shut in all winter. The snowfall for the season had been heavy and the cold, especially in the mountains, had been intense. It was the eighth of March, I think, and the very first signs of spring had just put in their appearance. We decided that we would walk to the Half-Way House on the Cog Road, or at least as far as we could. We didn’t know how much snow there was, or where it began, but we were all feeling good and anxious for another real hike. We were all three dressed in our Sunday clothes, and I was the proud possessor of a new spring suit and a pair of low shoes. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon when we started up the track from Manitou; by five o’clock we reached the Half-Way House, and much to our surprise found the keeper there. We had encountered very little or no snow that far on the track, and, as the days were getting longer, we knew we had two good hours yet before dark. We inquired of the inn keeper how far the track was open, and he informed us that it was clear as far as Windy Point, that there the great ice sheets began. There is always more snow on the great south shoulder of the Peak than anywhere else. You remember Son-of-a-Gun Hill? Well, we decided that we would push on to the top of Son-of-a-Gun, then come back. We left the Half-Way House and started up the track. The walking was fine on that flat stretch just after you leave the inn, and we covered space very rapidly. At the bottom of the great hill, in a grove of young aspens, we stopped and cut us some walking sticks.



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“If it had been summer, and the snow and ice gone, we would probably have noticed that there was a terrible storm gathering in the valley back of Cameron’s Cone; but with the range all white and dreary we did not notice it. You fellows who have lived here near the mountain know that a storm often rises up there as if by magic. They come so quickly you often wonder where they came from. Of course, being directly in the shadow of Pike’s Peak, the sun went down very early, and our twilight was not as long as we anticipated. I was the first to notice the cold breeze that had sprung up, and I remarked about it; but we were walking fast and were really too much interested in reaching the edge of the snow to pay much attention to anything. Suddenly it grew dark and the wind increased. In less than ten minutes we were in the midst of a howling mountain blizzard and the snow was being driven before the wind at a terrific speed. John suggested turning back, but Al and I were for pushing on, thinking it was just a squall, and, as it seemed to be headed straight down the canyon, we thought we would soon get above it. John insisted that we were crazy, but we made all manner of fun of him, so on we went.

“‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,’ sometimes. That is just what we did. We walked on in silence as fast as we could for half an hour. Then we stopped and held a parley. We suddenly awoke from our little dream of foolishness and began to realize that instead of getting out of that storm, we had gotten into it. Up there on that great mountain side we could not see ten feet in any direction. Above us and around us was a raging sea of frozen pellets. The snow was drifting along the track, and in some places it was already completely hidden. Night was coming, and there was no shelter from the swirling winds. In number of miles we were a good deal nearer the summit of the Peak than we were home, and somewhere ahead of us was the old printing station. We would make for it and its shelter—it would be foolish to expose ourselves to the storm by returning in the open valley. Then, too, we might lose our way and slip into the canyon below. We fought on bravely in the dark until finally the wind went down a little and the snow grew soft and wet. Our shoes were wet through and our bodies completely chilled, yet we could not find the printing station. Had we passed it, or was it still ahead. We differed in our opinions.

“Finally the snow ceased, and we could see about us a little by the reflected light. We spied a few straggly trees and made for them, for we were just at timber line. We found a great tree that had blown over, and, breaking limbs from its prostrate trunk, we built a large fire and sat on the log to dry our feet. We were now very keenly alive to our situation, and knew it was becoming serious. We suddenly realized that our only safety depended on the locating of that old printing station. Our shoes were so wet and our feet so cold that the leather burned before we knew it; but, as a real matter of fact, we didn’t realize how badly they were burned until an hour later, when the shoes began to crack away in bits and the uppers to rip open along the seams.



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“We reached the great snowbanks. The track and roadbed was buried deep. The last straggling trees were far behind. We stood on a great white waste of snow, thirty feet in depth, not a landmark to be seen. If the station was ahead, it was buried; if it was behind, we had missed it. With that realization our spirits fell, for to turn back now meant certain death. Then, to add to our danger, it had begun to turn fearfully cold—that kind of a clear, steady cold that comes only in the mountains, when the thermometer drops twenty-five degrees below zero and the air cuts like a knife, while your nostrils freeze together when you breathe. At the fire we had tied handkerchiefs over our ears and tied strings around our trouser legs to keep the wind and snow out.

“Every little while we sat down and pounded our feet with our walking sticks to keep up the circulation. At last we came to about two feet of a telephone pole sticking up through the snowbank. We knew then that we were off the road and were high up on the mountain. Luckily for us, the snowbanks were so heavily crusted that they held us up without breaking through. John suggested a plan: We would follow the post ends to the Summit House; in that way we could not get lost. Two of us would stop at the tip of one post, while the other, usually John, would push on to find the next one. When it was located he would call and we would go to him. Just how long we traveled in that manner I do not know. It seemed days, but, of course, it was only a brief time. Often I was positive that the posts were at least a half a mile apart. My shoes were so badly cracked at the seams that my feet grew very numb with the cold, and before long I knew I was freezing.

“Time and again we thought we heard something coming over the snow behind us. The air was clear as a bell, and, as we pushed on, this sound frightened us more and more. Our imaginations began to play strange pranks. I remember that I was too frightened to even move, so sometimes I would just stand shivering and listening. We hardly spoke a word. By and by the time came when I was too cold to leave my post for the next one. I just put my arms about it and begged the fellows not to wait for me, but to go on and save themselves; to dig a hole in the snow and leave me in it. But John, dear old John, refused and, putting his arm about me, he dragged me on and on. He tried to make me angry by striking me, and warned me not to go to sleep or I would freeze. But I told him I must sleep, for my feet and legs were numb and my arms and shoulders ached with sharp pains; then I cried like a baby. Soon Al began to play out also, and John plead with him not to give up. Al took me by one arm and John the other, and together they fairly dragged me over the snow.



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“When we least expected it, we stumbled over the steps that led to the Summit House. In a few moments we were at the door, but I was helpless. The summit was completely buried, except at one end, where the wind had kept it clear. John hastily examined the windows, only to find that every opening was securely covered with an iron shutter. We were lost! I heard John muttering to himself; then he slipped his fingers under the bottom of the shutter, braced his feet, and pulled with a superhuman strength—the strength of a last hope. With a creak the shutter gave at its fastenings, then bent in the middle, and slipped out. He then knocked out the double window with his elbow and soon had me inside.

“We found candles in a jar, and there was a great wood stove in the room, but no fuel. He didn’t hesitate, but went to the counter, removed the shelves from it, and, with a meat cleaver which lay on the table, he cut the shelves, and we soon had a fire. We heard sounds outside, and realized that the something we had heard behind us on the snow was at the window. We were conscious of a presence without being able to see it. John went to the broken window and looked out, but he could see nothing. Soon we heard stealthy steps back and forth on the flat roof above. He barricaded the window, brought snow on the end of a board, and rubbed my face, feet, and legs with it, then wrapped me in tablecloths which he found in the cupboard. Several times he brought a great armful of shelves from the storeroom and cut them up for the stove.

“As soon as the fire was started, Al lay down on the floor and fell into a heavy sleep. We could not waken him, and it frightened us badly. John began to cry, and I think if it had not been for the constant pacing back and forth of the strange animal on the roof we would all have given up. Soon the first streaks of dawn began to show themselves, and with the light the pacing on the roof stopped. John climbed up the tower steps and peered out just in time to see the animal jump from the roof and disappear.

“The house was fairly overrun with rats that scampered in every direction. I thought I had seen rats, mountain rats, but I had never seen any like those. They were so bold we were afraid to sleep, for they were large enough to be dangerous.

“When Al awoke he was very sick and weak. John found a big tin box in the kitchen, and in it were coffee, grapenuts, and the remains of a ham. He melted snow for water, and got us a little breakfast. We were three pretty serious fellows, for we knew only too well how the folks at home would be worrying about us and how near we had come to freezing to death on that great mountain of snow and ice.



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“After we had had breakfast, we made us crude snowshoes from the ends of grocery boxes, which we fastened to our feet with strings. Our shoes became hard when they dried, and it was only after painful effort that we got them on at all. We took the piece of ham, cooked the grease from it, and with this oiled our shoes as best we could.

Traveling was very slow, for we were weak and sick, so it was nearly evening before we reached Manitou. There we met several rescue parties just starting to find us. I can shut my eyes and see them now. Some carried blankets and some food. Mr. Allen had a big red sweater on his arm and a coil of heavy rope hung from his shoulder. Old Ben was there, too, for they had sent word to him at Bruin Inn, inquiring if we were there, and when he found out we were lost he insisted on joining the rescue party. In fact, it was he that suggested that we had probably gone up Pike’s Peak. Ben and I have always been great friends ever since.

“We held out some way till we reached home, then we all three gave up. O, the awful sickness that followed and the pain of frozen feet! I was in bed nearly a month, and every time I slept I dreamed of that awful night. I came very near slipping off this earth then. Of course the newspapers made fools of us and all the fellows teased us nearly beyond endurance. It was only a few weeks later that an immense mountain lion was shot near the cabin on the carriage road. There you are, you have my story, now let’s forget it.”

Not a fellow moved. They all sat looking intently into the dying fire. After a few minutes Mr. Allen suggested a sleep, and before long the camp was quiet, each camper wrapped in his blanket and stretched full length on the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Very early the next morning the transportation of equipment was begun. The entire party went over to Fairview to bring the first load of tin dishes, plates, cups, knives, forks and spoons, kettles, pots, frying-pans, sugar cans—and so the list went on. The old shelves were removed from the blind end of the cabin and placed near the window in the other end. These were to serve as pantry shelves in the kitchen corner.

After breakfast was over one group returned to the car for another load, while Ham, with a helper, pushed forward the construction of the aerial bunk. The queer old shakedown was torn to pieces and the poles used for Ham’s bed, the rest of it was shoved out of the back door and set afire. On this load the stove came, two fellows supporting it on the pack-saddle of old Peanuts. It was set up near the window and a work table built at the end of it. Another set of shelves was made for the pantry, and soon all was in readiness at that end of the house. The old grub box was converted into a bread box, and the little old stove was set back in an out-of-the-way corner. It was, indeed, the passing of the old to give place to the new.

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Tuberculosis seemed to enter completely into the spirit of the new, for he had walked calmly back and forth over the shaky old bridge which crossed the stream with load after load of shingles and sacks of cement and a thousand other things that were to have a place in the cabin. There were windows and a heavy pine door for the new room. There were axes and saws and hammers. There were buckets and lanterns and iron bars to put over the windows, and stove-pipe for the kitchen stove. Then, too, there was a grand old crane for the fireplace and the frame for a wire screen to keep the flying brands on the hearth. Not a thing that would be needed had been forgotten. It was a weary crowd of fellows that came slowly along the trail at noon with the last load of boards, hung on the sides of Peanuts' saddle, the nails and hardware, packed in heavy canvas bags, loaded on Tuberculosis.

The aerial bunk was all completed before dinner time, except thatching it with balsam boughs, and all hands would help at that after the noon meal. Mr. Allen prepared the meal, and it was a real camp dinner. Could fellows ever have been so hungry before?

In the afternoon the rest of the old back veranda was demolished and cleared away. A large number of great, tall aspens, the choice of the grove, were cut, trimmed, and dragged in, in readiness for the new structure. It seemed that all the jays for miles around and all the squirrels in the valley came to investigate when they heard the crashing of the big trees and the merry sound of the axes. Great piles of balsam boughs were dragged down from the mountain side opposite the cabin. These were carefully trimmed before they were handed up to Ham, who was in the bunk doing the thatching. The early afternoon saw the completion of the fine, big bed—big enough for five people; and as the fellows became too tired to work, the bunk became more and more popular. Every one was anxious to try it.

A heavy hasp was spiked to its place, and the cabin was put under lock and key for the first time. They had really taken possession of it—it was theirs.

"It beats the Dutch how much that yard of stovepipe sticking out there adds to her looks," observed Mr. Dean when the stove had been set up.

"It isn't the stovepipe so much," replied Chuck, "as it is the smoke coming out of it."

"What pipe are you talking about?" inquired Sleepy as he dropped down out of the new bunk to inspect the work the others had been doing since noon. "Who's smoking a pipe?" he persisted, not understanding the conversation.

"The cabin," tersely remarked Chuck. "But it has to get warm before it can smoke, and it has to work before it can get warm. The cabin might teach you a lesson."

Later in the afternoon there was a great commotion a little distance up the trail, and Mr. Allen hastened to investigate the shouting and sounds of chopping. To his great disgust

he found Sleepy dealing heavy blows to an old pine tree with an ax while the perspiration was running down his face. He was prancing about in great excitement.



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"What on earth?" questioned Mr. Allen.

"I'm trying to get a squirrel. I saw him up in this tree just a moment ago," cried Sleepy.

"Is that all you can find to do to use up your energy?" asked Mr. Allen dryly. Sleepy looked at him sheepishly, then hung his head and slowly returned to the cabin, brought a pail of water from the stream, then crawled up into the bunk, out of sight.

By the time things were straightened around in the cabin so that the mason could build the fireplace it was time to be starting home, but every one was too tired from the day's work. They decided they would rest in the cool shade for an hour before beginning the tramp down. It would then be twilight.

Willis took this occasion to do a little exploring on his own account. He had worked faithfully all day and was very tired, but he did so want to find his father's mine before he went home this time. He slipped away unobserved and took the lower trail, which followed up to the remains of the second bridge, then climbed to the tumbled-down cabin they had found the first day. Here he took the trail that led far up into the timber. Finally he saw far up above him what appeared to be an old mine dump. Quickly he clambered up over rocks and rotting logs toward it, and in a few moments he stood on the dump itself, which was of hard black stone, with the exception of just a little quartz. He was sure it was the same kind of stone he had seen on the old mantle at his grandfather's. The quartz was apparently the last stone dumped.

At one side stood an old mine shaft, perhaps fifty feet deep, with an ancient hand-made windlass still at the top. Then just to one side and entering the mountain was a great log door, put together with bolts. The lock was a strong powder-house lock, made of heavy brass. The place gave no appearance of having seen a man in many years. The hinges and hasp on the great door were heavily corroded, and an old metal wheelbarrow lay on the dump, rusted red. A tin sign fastened to a tree at the side of the tunnel had become a target for expert gunners. Willis tried the door, but could not force it a particle. Turning, he stood looking off into the canyon toward Cheyenne. "So this is the spot," he mused; "and it has never been touched in these ten years. Poor old daddy, poor old daddy!" He leaned heavily against the log door, and his thoughts came thick and fast, only to conclude, as they always did, with, "Where is Tad Kieser and why does my uncle try to keep me away from this spot?"

He was standing where his father had stood many times, and the boy seemed to be very conscious of his presence just then. He wondered if, perhaps, there had not been something of just love for the place itself, as well as for the gold, which had drawn his father there so irresistibly. Such a spot for a long, quiet visit with one's self! Below him the stream and the little cabin; to one side, and a little



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farther up, the beautiful falls, with Cookstove in the background; to the other side the park, all resplendent in yellow leaves, with here and there a tall pine standing like a green island in a sea of gently-moving gold. Far away over the ridge was the blue outline of Cheyenne with its stage road creeping round the base. He sat down to rest and to think. He was suddenly awakened from his dream by seeing Mr. Allen closing and locking the cabin door below him. He rose and hastened down the trail. In a few moments he had joined the party, but he kept silent about where he had been and what he had seen.

“You’ll have to let me in the cabin a moment, Mr. Allen,” he called; “I left my coat up in the bunk—I forgot it.” The door was unlocked and Willis entered, hastily climbing the little ladder up the side of the wall to the bunk. It was dark in the cabin, for the sun had set. As he stepped into the bunk he touched something, then jumped back with an exclamation. Sleepy raised up on his elbow and looked about him. In a terror-stricken voice he called out, “Who are you?” Willis laughed so heartily that the fellows came hurrying into the cabin to see what occasioned it. Then followed a great deal of fun at Sleepy’s expense. Sleepy only hung his head and tried to act as if his feelings had been badly hurt.

“Dirty trick, after a fellow’s worked hard all day, to go and lock him in and start for home without him. I’d have starved in there, I suppose,” he said gloomily, “and no one would have cared.”

“I suppose you would,” laughed Ham, “for you would be too lazy to cook you a meal after you found the food. We’ll have to keep guard all the way home on Sleepy, fellows, or he’ll fall into some ravine and go to sleep. He worked so hard to-day, poor boy. I never did believe in this child labor business, anyway.”

The fellows took turn about riding the donkeys home, and a unique experience it was, for pack saddles are not the most comfortable seats in the world, especially for a tired boy. Ham gave practical demonstration until the others caught on, then he walked. They were all too tired to chat much, so just jogged along homeward, happy that another day’s work was done on the cabin.

“A few more like this trip and we will be ready to entertain,” called Mr. Dean.

## CHAPTER XIII

Sleepy Smith has an Experience



Two weeks later another trip was made to the now-beloved cabin, but the party was small and, because of the lack of leadership, the amount of constructive work done was not great. Enough logs were cut and dragged in to complete the addition, a new layer of fragrant boughs added to the aerial bunk, and the dam improved and strengthened. The rest of the day was spent in hunting squirrels and chipmunks and in investigating the immense valley above St. Mary's Falls. School was keeping the fellows very busy, and because the fall social life had begun the young men found spare time very scarce. The autumn activities in the Boys' Department were also in full swing, demanding their share of time and attention. The standing committee for the coming circus were already appointed, and were scratching their heads for new and novel stunts.



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The O.F.F. were to present the afterconcert, and Fat was busy on the program. The fall gymnasium was being entered into with great zest, and already there had been a call for basket ball. The Bible study groups were getting together for the winter, the new Cabinet had been elected, so that, someway, there was not a great deal of time left for the cabin.

Mr. Allen and a few picked fellows had made a trip the week before, primarily to take up a supply of food for the mason and his helper, and had gotten the entire frame of the addition up, ready to roof and shingle.

The next week another small group went up to roof the addition and close it in so as to keep out the snow, if, perchance, it might come before they were able to finish the improvements. They found the fireplace completed, crude but artistic, of jagged boulders with an immense cement hearth. The iron crane had been built in, and now hung lazily in the big fire-box.

Next came the cutting of the aspen poles for the floor of the addition. They had hoped to get at least one layer of boughs on the great bed so that the next time a larger crowd could be accommodated, but the long autumn shadows warned them that twilight was approaching long before they started it, so consequently they had to go back without seeing that task accomplished. The curtains had been put on the windows, white oilcloth had been tacked on the board tables, and a mirror, if you please, was hung over the tin wash basin just inside the door. Hooks made of crooked branches were fastened upon the logs on which to hang coats and haversacks. The place had really undergone a genuine transformation.

"Well," said Ham, as he took a long drink from the bucket of fresh water that stood on the kitchen table, "that's the best water that ever flowed down a mountain side. There's life and health in every shining drop of it. To tell you the real truth, fellows, I'm beginning to feel mightily at home here in this little shack. Shack! that doesn't sound right, though, does it? What are we going to call this place, anyway, Mr. Allen? Y.M.C.A. Cabin is no good. It sounds too civilized. Now, does that old fireplace look civilized? And that iron crane, and those twisted rustic seats in the corner, and that bed out there big enough to accommodate twenty fellows? It reminds me of a home the old Vikings must have had long ago, way up in the great pine woods of Northern Europe. Someway, it has a look of health and strength about it that I like. Don't you see the smile on that old fire-box? Can't you hear the happy peasant children gathered there on that hearth singing their woodland songs and drinking their mugs of warm soup? Then, over yonder, all stretched out, his head to the fire, lies a great, gaunt dog, tired from the chase. Then the tap, tap on the wooden floor of the old woman's cane as she hobbles about the cabin. Can't you smell the bear haunch that's roasting there on that long spit before the fire? Don't you hear the merry music of the ax, just outside the door, as brawny arms swing it, cutting the great backlog for the long night? Civilized? Yes, in a way, but not in our way, is it? But what are we going to call this cabin?"



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Willis had slipped out a few minutes before and had wandered up the canyon to the last point from which the cabin could be seen. There he stopped and turned to survey the valley. The air was clear and cool and was completely filled with the fragrant murmuring of the pines. Far down in a vista of shifting lights and shadows stood the cabin.

The next week brought the first signs of the approaching winter. The warm fall rains gave way to cold showers. The leaves fell in countless millions, and the voices of the feathered folk seemed to have blown away with the autumn leaves. Heavy white mists hung over the mountains, lifting occasionally to show curious eyes that the lofty summits were already being painted white. The grass lost its fresh, green color, and the wild purple asters dropped their lovely heads and slept. The first real snow came in the night.

The desire to go to the cabin on the part of a large number of healthy, stalwart boys was matched against a foot of fluffy snow. The fact that they had not seen the new, completed bunk-house, nor the fireplace, added greatly to their intense desire to go. Added to this was the natural boyish love for possible adventure, so, of course, it was decided to go, snow or no snow.

Twenty strong, they were on hand at the appointed hour. Soft shirts had given way to sweaters, outing shoes to high boots or leggings. Still the boys were just the same—happy, healthy, and free, ready for anything the trip might bring. Old Peanuts raised sad eyes as he was led forth and saddled. To think that such as he should tramp through all that snow on such a night. Tuberculosis was disgusted beyond all measure. It was only by much bribing from his bag of precious pinion nuts that Sleepy was able to get him to even move. The snow was dry and fluffy, so walking was not really disagreeable, but necessarily very slow. Somehow Peanuts seemed to have grown old with the season, and many times Ham almost gave up in desperation, declaring they would not reach the cabin by morning. Darkness settled very early that night, and with it came the clear, cold breeze from the snowy peaks beyond. How white everything looked, and how quiet! Even the stream seemed to have been buried under a white blanket. On the hogsback the snow had drifted badly, completely obliterating the trail. It seemed like it took hours to climb that rugged hill. Twice the donkeys slipped from the trail, floundered in the fluffy drifts, and then lay down. Twice they both refused to go another step; then darkness—the black darkness of a stormy winter night, settled about them just as they entered the Park. Who knew the trail—that narrow pathway that led between trees, around buried stumps, across shallow fords, and back again? Who could now general this little disheartened army and lead it on to warmth and shelter? Sleepy complained bitterly because the trail was long, and many times threatened to go back when he was taunted with “Baby!” First it was a false step, then a splash into the cold stream; next it was a false lead into the heart of an aspen thicket, only to return and try again. Ham broke the trail until he was too tired to go another step, while Mr. Allen brought up the discouraged rear.



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It was a gloomy line that worked its way up the snow-filled canyon that night. Minutes seemed like hours, and already the cold winds were making every fellow weak and hungry. Ham was the life of the party, and kept the fellows hopeful at his end of the line, even when he was so tired from breaking trail that it seemed that he could not go another pace. Willis was behind him, ready to lend a hand whenever he tripped on treacherously-covered poles or slipped from the trail into the icy stream. At last the little belt of thick timber was reached, and Ham's heart rejoiced, for he knew the cabin was on the other side of it. Before long they stood on the high trail and looked down into the valley where stood the cabin, gloomy and gray, the light from the snow caught and faintly reflected by the windows. Ham gave a loud shout that cheered and strengthened every heart, and in another moment he was unlocking the door.

Ham's little pocket ax sang out in the winter night, and soon his efforts were rewarded by a tiny blaze on the hearth. He ordered his forces like a veteran, and they obeyed him without question—all save Sleepy, who chose a comfortable spot in the corner and sat down, refusing to move. Very soon the kitchen stove began to heat its end of the house, and the big tin teakettle sang and sighed over the flames. Mr. Allen was busy with supper and Fat was clearing a space before the open fire so they could all sit down together. Some brought in the wood and piled it high in one corner, while others scraped the snow away from the lea of a big boulder, thus making a shelter for the donkeys. Ham smuggled a half a dozen frozen potatoes for them and a half loaf of rye bread.

A column of merry sparks rose from the chimney, while the candles threw weird, funny little shadows out on the snow through the barred windows. Ham and Willis were watering the donkeys and discussing their trip up, when Ham, without any apparent reason, burst into a merry laugh.

"I have an idea, Willis, and it's a capital one, too. Will you help me carry it out?" and he laughed again.

"Well, that depends," returned Willis.

Ham put his hand to his ear and listened, then turned and looked eagerly toward the cabin. When he was satisfied they were alone he continued: "When I first came out here to feed the mules I heard an owl hooting up in that big tree. My, but it startled me at first, until I had time to think what it was. You know they shot a young mountain lion over on Black Mountain day before yesterday. Now, we aren't so far from Black Mountain, and if we are ever going to make a real, worth-while member for O.F.F. out of Sleepy Smith, we have got to begin soon, and, besides, I'm satisfied we will have to use a few extraordinary tactics. We have nursed him long enough; besides, his spirit is rotten. He has been sitting in there by that fire all evening and hasn't turned his hand to do a thing. He will probably want some one to put him to bed, yet, to-night. All the way up the trail he whined and acted like a baby. You remember the tricks he pulled off the

day we moved the stuff over from Fairview on the donkeys—sneaked up in the bunk after dinner and went to sleep. You know how we nearly locked him in. He's hurting our crowd.



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“We took him in, you know, because Mr. Allen thought there was so much in him worth saving. Someway, it hasn’t come out yet, and we’ve got to operate, do you understand? We’ve got to scare Sleepy Smith out of his boots once or twice to see what’s in him. Let’s do it to-night. If we don’t, next time we bring a crowd up here on a night like this there will be three or four sitting around the fire doing nothing, and the next time six or seven, until at last a few of us will be waiting on the whole bunch, do you see?”

“Yes, I see,” replied Willis between chattering teeth; “but how on earth are you going to do it a night like this, with all this crowd?”

“Now, I’ll tell you just what I want you to do. I’ll pull off the game and you be my accomplice. We’ll take Sleepy out for a snow-bird hunt. I never heard of one myself, but I’ll fix that all right. We’ll scare the life out of that boy this night or bust. All you have to do—there comes some one.”

“Ham, Ham!” called Fat from the cabin; “come on to supper while it’s hot.” Then the door closed again. The two started toward the cabin, leaving old Peanuts braying hoarsely in the night.

“All you have to do,” continued Ham, “is to just swear to all I say. You’ll catch on after I get started. Be sure to watch for the chance. I’ll tell Fat the scheme, and if I can get Sleepy out of the house for a minute, I’ll fix it up with the crowd.” They were just about to enter the cabin when somewhere in the night came the weird hoot of an owl, and a pale, sickly moon peeped between the clouds.

“Well, fellows, how do you like that old stone fire-box, anyhow?” Ham questioned. “I haven’t heard a fellow say a word about it yet. That big black pot hanging on that crane makes me happy all over. Why, we have Robinson Crusoe and that last polar expedition beaten a city block. I never do see a pot hanging over the fire like that but I think of some of the delicious stews that Jim Parker made for us the Christmas vacation we spent with him out on his ranch in Middle Park. Snowbird stew good? O my! It has turkey beaten a thousand directions.”

“Snowbird stew?” questioned Chuck. “What in the world is it, Ham? Bacon creamed, or some such stuff?”

“Bacon creamed, nothing,” replied Ham disgustedly. “Snowbirds, just plain snowbirds. When I was out feeding the mules just now, I heard a whole flock of snowbirds fly down the canyon. That’s what made me think of the stew, I suppose.”

“Well, if they’re no bigger than the snowbirds I’ve seen,” remarked one boy, “you’d have to have a bushel of them for a meal.”



“Do you mean those saucy little fellows with the white breasts that come with the first snows?”

“Those are the fellows,” replied Ham, “and of course you need a lot of them. But, then, they are so easy to catch if you just get into a flock of them.”

“How do you get them?” inquired Fat, who was always interested in anything new, so long as it had possibilities of something to eat in it.



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“Well, it’s a good deal of hard work and some inconvenience until you get started. But, O my! the eats the next day! Little fat fellows all stewed down until they’re tender.”

“Let’s get a bunch,” suggested Willis weakly, watching Ham for a cue.

“There isn’t a gun in the crowd,” laughed one.

“You could use clubs, couldn’t you?” asked another.

“Well, it’s just like this,” continued Ham: “you pick out a couple of fellows for the trappers who are strong and husky, and who aren’t afraid to do their share of the work.” Ham smiled at Willis. “Then you place them one at each side of the canyon. You take a shovel, dig a deep hole in the snow for the trapper to stand in so he can work easily without stooping over. Of course, each trapper has a bag, a gunny-sack, or a common flour sack will do, and a lantern. You can use a candle all right, if you have no lantern. I’ve seen very successful hunts conducted by using candles. The trapper stands with his bag held open between his legs. It’s a good scheme to tie the bag, a side to each knee, so you can keep the mouth open without using your hands. You’ll need them for numerous other things, probably. The rest of the hunters divide into two parties, and each party climbs the opposite ridge of the gulch, working up the canyon without really going through it. In that way the birds are not disturbed. Then, at a given signal, both parties descend into the canyon and the hunt begins. Every man must be absolutely silent, for I’ve seen one mouthy fellow spoil a whole evening’s fun. Now, if any of you fellows are sure you can’t keep still for a little, even in a good deal of excitement, you better stay here. If we fail, it will be some one’s fault.” Ham noticed the sly glances that were going back and forth between Mr. Allen and Mr. Dean, but he was sure he could count on both of them, for they liked real fun as well as any of the boys.

“The hunters then move down the canyon in a skirmish line, thrashing the bushes with their pine boughs. As they advance the birds will awaken with a shrill little peep and scuttle off through the bushes down the canyon and directly toward the trappers. The birds take just little flights at a time, so you must keep them moving or they will swarm and fly away in a panic. If a flock panic on you, you might as well quit, for every bird in the canyon will follow. You see this is the game: snowbirds live on little bugs that are found in great numbers around the great Northern Lights. When they see those candles flickering there in the great white quiet, the snow reflecting the long rays out between the dark tree trunks, they think it’s the northern lights, and fly straight toward the candle. All the trapper has to do, then, is to take them in his hand and bag them. Sometimes they come in such great numbers that they fairly swarm into the bag. When each trapper has enough, he puts his mouth close to the snow and halloos to the drivers. At the signal they stop hunting and come into camp. Fun, why it’s the most fun I ever had in my life! The foolish little birds are so easily caught. You see, instead of getting out and hustling for their food, they think it will all be provided for them by kind Providence or others,” and Ham smiled.



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“Did you ever eat quail on toast in some of these stylish restaurants?” queried Fat, who had caught onto the game. “Well, all in the world they are is snowbirds. I suppose there are any number of fellows who make a living by just that trick.”

A general discussion followed. Every one was ready and anxious for the hunt to commence. Candles were gotten ready and a shovel found. Ham took Phil, Fat, and Mr. Dean to help him find some sacks that were supposedly down in the gulch, but in reality to explain to them just what he wanted them to do. My, what a laugh they did have when they reached the open. Fat was instructed to offer his services as the holder of one bag and to suggest that Sleepy hold the other. They would plant Sleepy first, then Fat would go on with the bunch. Mr. Dean and Ham would hide themselves in the brush on either side of Sleepy. Fat would instruct his crowd what was to be done, and Phil would take charge of the other group. They would go down the canyon, over the ridge, then swing round and come back high on the hill, so as to completely lose Sleepy, who would be placed where both parties could see him by his light, but, of course, he could not see any of them out in the shadows and the night.

“If any fellow makes a stir,” continued Ham, “the game is up. Remember, Phil, you are boss of that crowd.”

A difference of opinion had broken out among the rest while Ham and the others were getting the sacks, for Willis, in a sly way, had suggested that the game was a fake, but Sleepy scoffed at the idea.

“You do just as Ham says, and you’ll see it’s all true,” cried Sleepy hotly. “He knows more about camping than all the rest of us put together. If you don’t want to go, stay here. I’ll hold a sack myself, and if I don’t get it full of birds before I come home I’ll treat every one of you.” Fat entered just in time to hear the foregoing conversation.

“I’m with you, Sleepy,” he cried. “We’ll have snowbirds for breakfast in the morning.”

“O shucks,” scoffed some one, “there aren’t enough snowbirds in Colorado to fill a sack like that!”

“Well, of all the quitters,” snorted Sleepy. “Just because you haven’t seen the birds is no sign they aren’t there. If you don’t see and hear a lot of things to-night that you never saw before, I’m badly mistaken. All that’s the matter with you fellows is you’re afraid of a little work.” Ham sneezed several times in quick succession, and Fat suddenly hurried out, slamming the door behind him. Mr. Dean turned his face from the crowd and energetically poked the fire. From the smiles, it was evident that some had caught on and wanted to go along to see the fun, while others declared it was a trick, and wouldn’t move a step.

“Too bad we haven’t a dozen bags so we could give them all a chance,” laughed Ham, as he and Fat entered the cabin.



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Four remained, the rest trailed off to a little grove of young firs and cut themselves branches to drive snowbirds with. Then up the slope they went, winding in and out among the tall, silent trees, over snowy logs and around great, jutting boulders, until the top was reached. Then they hurried along the narrow ridge until it ended in a stone cliff. Here they descended again through the trees until the trail on the south side was reached. Ham picked out an open place entirely surrounded with a heavy growth of young firs. Just at the edge of the little opening, its bulk back in the trees, stood a great stone, twelve or fifteen feet in height. Here Ham began to dig the pit for Sleepy's feet, explaining, as he worked, that the rock would reflect the light and keep the wind from blowing it out. Every hunter spoke in subdued whispers. When the hole was finished, Sleepy stepped into it, and Ham shoveled in the dirt and snow and tramped it tight about him in order to make room for the bag. It was fastened to each leg by a stout cord. Ham gave the parting instructions.

"Light your candle when we get out of hearing, then move it gently back and forth in front of your bag. The first few birds that come will probably scare you, but remember they are only snowbirds and harmless."

The party then separated, filing off in either direction, and were soon swallowed up in the long black shadows. All that Sleepy could hear was the crunching of feet on the partly-crusting snow. He waited nearly breathlessly for all sound to cease, and when the last faint echo had died away it was a very shaky hand that lighted the first match. Of course Sleepy was not frightened—he was only cold! The greasy tip of the new candle sputtered and flared a moment, then went out. He tried again, but this time the match broke off. He felt himself getting excited. He had just two matches left. He must be extremely careful. He struck the third match on the stone behind him and shaded the candle tip with his hand; but his whole body was so nervous and his hands shook so that he could hardly hold candle and match together long enough to get the light. At last he succeeded. He stuck the end of the candle in the snow in front of him while he turned up his collar and pulled his cap down tighter. What was that? His body became rigid, his head went up, his eyes flashed. Was it the snowbirds? He listened intently for an instant, then he quietly relaxed. "Just the kids whacking the brush, I guess," he said, half-aloud. Then he leaned his back against his rock and waited. Every few moments he would gaze cautiously about him, then listen. Here and there back in the shadows he could see a huddled group of pale, straight forms. He knew they were only aspen trees, still he kept a watchful eye on them. The night was absolutely quiet and dark except for long, dimly-lighted alleys between the trees, where the candle rays were frolicking. Here and there he could see the dim outline of a black



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stump, its little snowcap perched upon its rim. He lifted the candle from its place in the snow and waved it gently before the bag, then he paused cautiously. His imagination had rallied from the cold and was now his closest companion. He saw strange shapes flitting here and there among the shadows. He heard every now and then a new, strange voice of the woods. The trees, it seemed to him, were murmuring their disapproval of such things as snowbird hunts. A myriad of unseen folk were peeping at him from limb and stump and shadow. He knew they were there, even if he couldn't see them, yet a strong feeling of loneliness crept over him. It seemed ages since the boys had left him there, still it had been only a few moments.

His spirit was gradually becoming restless, and he began to wonder if there really were any such things as snowbirds, after all. He wished he was back again in the cabin by the fire. If he thought they were playing a joke on him, he would slip back to the cabin and fool them. He had half a notion to do it anyway. What was the use of his standing there? Which way was the cabin? He sighed and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. It was just over there, wasn't it? No, that couldn't be. It must be over yonder. The trail ran through the grove to his right. That couldn't be, the stream was over there, for he heard it every now and then. He began talking half-aloud.

"If the stream is over there, the cabin is over here." He paused and drew his hand across his eyes. "No, no, if that were true, the stream would flow uphill, and, of course, it doesn't."

Far away he heard a series of little chirps, faint but unmistakable. He was alert in an instant. Yes, that was the snowbirds, and they were coming. He wondered if Fat heard them and was ready. Where was Fat, anyway? How strange he felt, now he was almost afraid, for he was sure something was watching him. He shaded his eyes and peered into the gloom, but could see nothing. Far away in the timber it seemed to him he heard brush snapping—still he knew there was nothing bigger than a skunk or a rabbit in the whole valley. Still—and his breath came shorter; had not a mountain lion been killed on Black Mountain just day before yesterday? His imagination suggested hungry kittens searching for a lost mother, and a tremor ran over his body, making his muscles quiver. Was that a snarl? A whine far off, yet near to him? The candle slipped from his shaking fingers and fell in the snow beside him. He made a grab for it, and caught it just before it went out. The sound was now clearer. Was that the crunch of feet upon the snow? Yes, he heard it plainly. A twig snapped somewhere back of the big rock, then another, then another. There was an answering of the whine. He felt for his pocket ax; but, alas! it was at the cabin—he had no weapon, not even a jack knife. Why had Ham taken the shovel with him? Pshaw! was it really a sound at all, or was he still



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in his baby days? No, he was no baby, but—there it was, a low growl, coming nearer and nearer. It flashed upon him in a second—the hunters had scared up the animal, and it was coming toward him—toward the light! He felt faint, then sick; but it was no time to be sick! He swallowed at the big lump in his throat and wondered if the animal really would attack him. He could plainly hear the crunching in the snow now, and he fancied he saw two green eyes staring at him from the shadows. Yes, and there were voices! He could hear them laughing. Suddenly a twig near him broke, and another and another. He cried out in terror, shrill agonized, cries for help. He dropped the candle in the snow. Just how he got out of the hole where his feet were buried he could not tell. He started to run, but his legs were still tied to the bag, and at the first step he fell headlong. He was crying now—great sobs shook his frame. He tore the bag free with a jerk and started off as fast as the soft snow would let him, shouting “Help!” at the top of his voice. He stumbled on through the snow, following the line of least resistance. Finally he emerged from a dark thicket just in time to see three men and a great dog come out of an opposite thicket. They laughed heartily as they turned upward on the trail. The dog’s eyes were gleaming green in the half-light, and the one man carried a heavy rifle on his shoulder. The dog turned, sniffed, then whined, but made no attempt to leave his masters.

The men had evidently not seen him. He stood for a second irresolute, his teeth chattering, his heart pounding, then, turning, he saw the sparks from the cabin chimney and in another moment he was safe inside.

Back in the woods where Sleepy had been planted the rest of the fellows were shouting and laughing.

“Yes, I’ll take it back,” cried Ham. “Sleepy can go when he gets started, but O my! what a lot it takes to start him! I don’t believe he ever moved so fast before, do you? Mr. Dean, you’re a wonder on the growling stunt—I felt kind of queer myself once or twice.” Fat was too far gone to express himself, but stood leaning against the rock, half-choked with laughter. He had been behind the rock all the time, and had heard all that Sleepy said.

“I was dead sure I heard him laughing,” said Phil, “and I thought he had caught on to the game.” “So did I,” said Mr. Dean. “I certainly did hear some one laugh.”

“It must have been Fat trying to choke down his amusement,” dryly added Chuck. “He couldn’t keep from laughing at a funny thing on a bet.”

“I am sure of one thing,” said Mr. Allen, “and that is that hereafter Sleepy will do his part. I believe he has learned a lesson. You will have a hard time, though, to ever persuade him that he didn’t see an animal.”

“Just let him think he did see it,” suggested Phil, “and we’ll tell him it serves him right. If he hadn’t been so dead anxious to get the easy job, like he is with everything, he would never have gotten into the mess to-night.”



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“Yes, that’s it,” added Ham; “we must be as solemn as we can and say to him that we didn’t see or hear a bear, lion, or any other animal; then add, that if he had just been with us on the job, climbing up canyons, hunting birds, and doing his share, instead of just loafing, he wouldn’t have gotten scared. But, rats! he must know that we have played a joke on him.”

They finally agreed on a plan, then started back to camp. Ham was to do the talking. As they entered the cabin they found Sleepy sitting on a block of wood, looking meditatively into the fire.

“Well, you’re a dandy,” commenced Ham. “We heard you hollering ‘Help’ and ‘Murder.’ We came tearing through the trees to where we left you, and you were gone. Please explain. Who did you think was going to catch those birds? You got tired working so hard, I suppose? Come, now, was there too much real work in it?”

Then Fat began in his most disgusted tone: “You might make sure if there was any real work to be done, Sleepy would get out of it someday. He always does. Work isn’t in his vocabulary.”

“Go easy,” said Mr. Allen in a quiet tone. “Sleepy has made lots of mistakes, and he hasn’t begun to do his share of the work here yet, but he’s going to do different from now on, I’m sure. Why did you leave your post, Sleepy?” He came forward and laid his hand on Sleepy’s shoulder. Sleepy shaded his face with his hand, for the tears were trickling down his cheeks, and he spoke with real effort.

“They frightened me terribly,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Then he rose from his seat, took his cap from the table, and went into the night. The fellows crowded up to the fire to warm their cold feet and talk it over. Mr. Allen was firm in his belief that Sleepy had good stuff in him, and he believed they were going to get it out at last.

“He knows he hasn’t played fair, fellows, and he’s out there now, squaring up with himself. To-night our friend, Sleepy, wins or loses a great fight in his life. If he loses, let’s not be too hard on him. If he wins, let’s help him. Remember, it’s the ‘Other Fellow First’ in this bunch.” They sat quietly looking into the fire for some minutes, then Ham broke the silence.

“Fellows, I believe I understand for the first time in my life an expression that always used to bother me. When my father invited me into the woodshed when I was a kid, he always prefaced each performance with this remark, ‘Son, it hurts me a great deal more than it’s going to hurt you.’ After the performance I used to ponder that statement over and over and wonder how it could possibly be true. In fact, I didn’t believe it then, but now I do. Sleepy needed a good punishment; but, O my, I feel mean, now that it’s over!”



“We are often called on to do unpleasant things for the welfare of others,” remarked Mr. Dean; “but if Sleepy finds himself to-night, and I believe he will, we will all be glad we did it, himself included.” After a little time Sleepy came in. His step was steady and his manner easy. Ham shot a curious glance at him from the corner of his eye. He saw that Sleepy was smiling, and he felt a strange thrill, for he knew Sleepy had won. Sleepy came to the fire, and in a clear voice addressed the crowd:



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“Fellows, I have something I would like to say before we go to bed.” It was very difficult for him to go on. “I am ashamed of myself to-night. I know I have never played fair with you fellows here, for I’m lazy—I always have been. You know I am the only child, and I have been spoiled, for I’ve been taught to always let some one else do the work. I’m sorry.” He stopped, and in the pause he became confused.

“But—but—I’m going to do better, if you’ll give me another chance. I’ve just had a little argument with Sleepy Smith outside, and I whipped him in a fair fight. There is no more Sleepy; after this it’s George Smith, if you please. Sleepy and this crowd have had a falling out. Will you give me another chance?” he asked anxiously.

Ham was the first to cry out:

“Bet your life we will, old boy, put it there!” He rose and they shook hands.

“Sure thing!” cried Fat.

“Of course we will!” echoed Phil.

“Three cheers for Smith!” came from the others.

“Thanks,” was all Smith said, then he sat down and Mr. Allen took the floor. He had caught his cue from what Smith had said:

“Fellows, I think we, too, have made a mistake, and as long as Smith has been man enough to square himself with us, let us be men enough to square ourselves with him. We have always called him Sleepy, and he has been true to the name; but I never knew a boy yet who didn’t live up to what his best friends expected of him. Smith always knew we didn’t expect much, didn’t you, boy? Now, let’s expect more, and we’ll get more. Smith, we, too, are sorry. Let’s expect the best from every fellow and every fellow will give his best, although it will take real manhood to do it sometimes.”

Ham and Willis went out to take a last look at the donkeys before going to bed. As they stood on the step, talking things over, they were startled to hear, somewhere in the night air, the long-drawn bark of a dog. It came again and again. “Over in the next canyon,” was Ham’s remark. “Up by the old mine,” was Willis’s thought, as he turned and went into the cabin.

After breakfast Willis took the trail that led to his father’s mine. He went alone, for he had told no one of its discovery, not even Ham. He was not at all surprised to find the footprints of three men and a dog on the upper trail, and found no difficulty in following them to the mine. Once there, the first thing that attracted his attention was a new sign, nailed up in the place of the old tin one; on it, in bold, black letters, was written, “Private property, keep off!” The snow had been shoveled from one end of the dump, and it looked very much as if some of the rocks had been carried away. Willis wondered, but

his reflections gave him no light. He noticed, however, that the tracks did not return down the trail, but ran off over the hill and into the next canyon. He made some careful observations, then returned to the cabin.



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Upon Mr. Dean's suggestion, the morning was spent in tobogganing in wood while the snow was good. It was great fun to see the great logs slide down with a long swish and pile up in front of the cabin. The fellows worked with a will, and by noon a large supply had been pulled in. The next thing was to cut it and pile it away in the house. Smith undertook to build a sawbuck, and, with Mr. Allen's help, the job was soon accomplished. Every fellow then took his turn sawing off blocks until dinner time.

As they sat around the table enjoying a camp meal of fried ham, boiled rice, potatoes, rye bread, and coffee, a general discussion arose as to what the cabin should be named. They hoped to get the big bed filled with balsam boughs that afternoon before they started home, then the place would be ready for real use on a big scale; and, of course, it must have a name.

"Let's call it Snowbird Retreat," suggested Fat naively.

"Not on your life!" called Smith good-naturedly. "No snowbirds about this house; you want a good, warm, comfortable name. I'd freeze to death, or maybe get scared, if you called it that."

"St. Mary's Inn," suggested Ham.

"O fiddle, sounds like an old Spanish mission," objected another.

"The House that Ham Built," suggested Mr. Dean.

"Buffalo Roost," suggested Willis. "We certainly do love to roost around in here, and it's in Buffalo Canyon." After a very heated discussion, Buffalo Roost was chosen for the name, and Willis set about gathering twigs to make a rustic sign for over the door.

The wood all in, the dinner dishes washed, and the cabin put in order, the next thing to do was to thatch the big bed. O, what mountains of sweet-scented green boughs it took! One party, under Mr. Dean, pulled in pile after pile of boughs from up on the snow-covered hillside, while the other party cut and trimmed and laid them in. Choice large fans were laid in the bottom, the butts toward the foot, the bow of the branch uppermost. Then a thick layer of fine sprigs to fill in every hollow. Smith worked with a will, and enjoyed the day like he had no other since the work on the cabin had begun.

Never before had they so hated to leave the Roost, for every fellow was coming to love it and its companionship. It gave plenty of healthful action, good things to think about, and warm friends. It was building character and they did not know it. It was fitting a choice group of older fellows to work together in the community life about them, working for the welfare and comfort of others, forgetting themselves in their unselfish service.

In the late afternoon it began to snow again, and by the time they were well on their way home it was falling fast.



“Getting in that wood was a wise stunt,” observed Smith, “for the next time we see the old Roost it will probably be snowbound.”

Old Ben had been watching for their return most of the afternoon. As they came across the stream and up to the road below the inn, he called Mr. Allen to the door.



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“I jist want t’ ask ye if that tarnal varmit, Williams, has been botherin’ yew fellers any sence he started work on that new claim o’ hisn. If they ever was a sneakin’ whelp, he’s it. He couldn’t get possession o’ Tad’s tunnel; he darsent touch it, so he’s gone an’ started a tunnel on the other side o’ that dyke. He’s been workin’ it, now, off an’ on all this fall, but I didn’t know it till they brought a wounded man from there yesterday. Seem a stone mashed his foot bad. They stopped here to rest a bit, an’ I seed the feller. I’ve knowed him these ten years, an’ he’s a devil. Does dirty work fer any tarnal critter at’ll pay him well fer it. Served him right. I s’pose you saw something of them last night, as they went back up to the mine. There was three of ’em and a mean lookin’ dog.” Mr. Allen listened in silence. He was wondering just what Old Ben knew of this Williams, and why he should be so interested in the boys at the cabin.

“Ben,” he said, and he looked the old man straight in the eye, “do you know a man named Tad Kieser?” Ben dropped his eyes and shuffled his foot aimlessly on the floor.

“Yep, I know him, boy, an’ a finer man never walked these here hills. Too fine a man to get along with varmits!”

“Is he still living, Ben?”

“Yep, still livin’. He’ll be a poppin’ up in these parts one o’ these days, an’ then you’ll see who’s boss at that tunnel up yonder. I’ve always said they was gold there, but Tad never would go into the mine again after the accident. That varmit, Williams, believes same as I do, or he wouldn’t be a diggin’ that hole on t’ other side o’ the dyke. If he er any o’ the rest o’ them fellers bothers ye any at the cabin, jist let me know; I’ll take ker o’ them fer ye. Good-night.” He went inside and closed the door. Mr. Allen hurried along, and, catching up with the crowd, he called Willis aside to tell him what Ben had said—all except that Tad was living and Ben knew where he was. That much he kept secret. Willis listened intently, then he told of how he heard the dog bark in the night.

When Willis reached the Association that evening he was handed a telephone call. He noted that it was the home number, and he realized in an instant what had happened. His aunt had grown very much worse Friday night, and had died early Saturday morning. He hastened home to do what he could and to comfort his mother.

## CHAPTER XIV

### The Opened Door

It was nearly Thanksgiving time, and it seemed months to Willis since he had been to Buffalo Roost. Mrs. Thornton had almost decided to return to her father’s since the death of her sister, but Willis had objected seriously. He was determined to unravel the mine mystery before they left. They were still living at the Williams’s home, but they



saw very little of the uncle. The death of his wife had been a severe blow to him, and he had been spending long periods of time in the mountains—no one seemed to know just where.



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During Thanksgiving vacation Mr. Allen was going to have a three days' camp at the Roost, so Ham and Willis were planning on making a preliminary trip, to find out how deep the snow was and just what condition the canyon was in.

The circus was over, and had been a big success; enough money had been raised to pay all the debts and leave a nice amount for future improvements. Meanwhile Ham and Willis had become inseparable companions, so much so, that Willis had taken him into the mystery of his father's mine. Very often they had talked it over together, but neither had yet arrived at any satisfactory conclusions. The day chosen for their trip turned out to be bitter cold; but the other fellows were depending on them, and they must not fail. They found it very difficult to climb the hogsback because of the snow, so when they reached the railroad they decided to follow it to Fairview rather than attempt the canyon trail. As they plodded on they grew very cold.

"There is a dandy little pile of pitch-pine shavings on the hearth," said Ham; "it won't take long to get a fire. We'll play a joke on this cold snap yet, when we get inside the cabin." The walking was not bad until they reached the crest, but here the trail lay on the south side and was completely filled with snow. Many of the drifts were shoulder-deep, so it took them nearly an hour to force their way from the ridge to the cabin. Ham, to his surprise, had great difficulty in opening the lock; it was evident that it had been tampered with. As they entered, he noticed that his little pile of shavings were gone from the hearth. Some one had been inside!

How much heat it seemed to take that night to warm that frigid air! They piled in the great logs until the fireplace was full, and still they had to sit close to keep warm. Slowly the cold was driven out, and the cabin became more comfortable. Willis took the water bucket and an ax and went out to the stream for water, but the ice was a foot thick and the water so cold that it froze in the bucket before he got it back to the cabin. As he set the bucket on the shelf, he noticed that the mirror which hung above the bucket was broken into a thousand pieces. No doubt a bullet had come in through the chinking. Was this a declaration of war? Or had some rowdy just been showing off? They examined things carefully, but found nothing missing but the chips, not even food. Ham could not imagine why the kindling had been removed from the hearth, for he was positive that no fire had been built in either the stove or the fireplace since they had last been there.

After they had warmed sufficiently, they began to think of supper. Ham selected a can of clam soup from the shelf and opened it, but it was frozen solid. He set it by the fire to thaw out and made a second selection. This time he chose a can of beans, but found them in the same condition. He looked in the bread box—the rye-bread was as hard as a bullet. They pulled the table close up before the fire and made out a supper, the best thing on the menu being a pot of boiling-hot tea.



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After supper they pulled down the blankets and carefully warmed them before the fire. Then the two boys sat and planned concerning the coming camp until they grew sleepy. After a great pine knot had been placed for the night log, the boys slipped into bed between at least a dozen blankets.

Just before going to bed, Willis prepared a few choice slivers so that a fire could be quickly started in the morning, and he left them in a little pile on the hearth. In the night he heard strange noises down on the floor, but, because it was so cold, he did not venture out to investigate, and in the morning every chip was gone. The mystery of the chips grew deeper.

They lay in bed late next morning, for the cabin was cold and dark and they were so comfortable. Time was nothing to them that day. As they lay, chatting, Ham suddenly squeezed Willis's arm, then raised on his elbow to listen. He heard voices, and they were coming up the canyon. He crawled to where he could peep out of the window, but all he could see were the feet of two men and a dog. The cabin was very cold, so he slipped back between the blankets to warm and talk it over with Willis. About nine o'clock they got up, still wondering what could have brought men into that canyon on such a morning.

Surely there was no hunting, and why should men from the claim in the other gulch be coming up through Buffalo Park? The boys were bothered. They were just sitting down to a breakfast of steaming-hot cakes when from somewhere up in the timber came the clear sound of some one hammering on metal, heavy blow after blow. Ham paused, listened attentively, a forkful of hot cake raised half-way to his mouth. The sound came very clearly and at regular intervals.

"Sounds like some one pounding a stone drill; perhaps they are going to do some blasting!"

Willis rose from his seat, threw open the door, and looked up the snowy hillside. He was right—the sound came from the direction of his father's mine.

"What on earth would any one be blasting up there for?" he said, half to himself. He was thinking of what Ben had told him the last time he was at the Roost. Ham had also risen from the table and stood looking out over Willis's shoulder. The bark of a dog came floating down the canyon.

Suddenly there was a sharp rattle in the corner of the cabin, followed by a heavy thud. Ham turned quickly, just in time to see the ax fall to the floor from its place in the corner. Willis felt a long, cold shiver creep up his back. The ax had been laid on top of the little stove in the corner, and something had caused it to fall.

"Spooks," laughed Ham dryly.



“What made that ax fall?” questioned Willis in a voice which betrayed his feeling. They advanced cautiously toward the corner. There was a scamper of tiny feet, and a large gray rat bounded across the floor and dropped out of sight through a long opening between the floor and the wall. In a moment Willis was down on his hands and knees, investigating.



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“Well, of all things,” he said, as he looked up laughingly at Ham; “we have located our mysterious robber. Here are all of our precious fire starters.” Ham stooped to see for himself, and there, under the stove in the corner, was a neat little pile of pine slivers.

“If that rat lived in the city,” observed Ham, “he’d be a shoplifter, sure. It’s strange he hasn’t stolen our food?”

“Ham, I’m going to the mine. Do you want to stay here or go along?” Ham thought a moment, then began to pull on his coat. As he passed the fireplace, he threw on another log, then the two boys stepped out into the morning air. Ham carefully locked the door behind them—he always took that precaution.

“I’d like to know who tried to get into this house, Willis?” he said as they struck the trail following the footprints of the earlier party up the canyon. The sound of hammering still came occasionally from the hill.

“Perhaps it was the same men that passed this morning,” replied Willis. “I wonder why they didn’t stop and try the door; they must have seen that it was unlocked.”

“Perhaps they wanted to pass unnoticed.”

“No, that couldn’t be, for they were talking loudly as they passed.”

“Perhaps they didn’t notice the cabin door at all.”

“Perhaps not, but they must have noticed our trail over the bridge and your footprints to the stream.”

“O, I don’t know; it snowed in the night, and besides, you see they were on the upper trail. They evidently came for some special purpose, and were anxious to get at it. You know, I’ve been thinking they must have come from Bruin Inn this morning, because they couldn’t have gotten here so early if they had come all the way from the city.”

“By Jove, boy! I hadn’t thought of that, but since you speak of it, there certainly was something familiar in one of those voices, and that laugh! Why, of course, it was Old Ben, his dog, and some stranger.”

Progress was slow, for the snow was deep in places. At the old tumbled-down cabin the trail turned and ran up the mountain side. Willis felt a strange pounding at his heart. The noise on the mountain had stopped, but every now and then he heard the sound of voices from somewhere up in the timber. As they reached the last turn in the trail, the two figures came into view. Ham had been correct in his supposition—one of the men was Old Ben, but the other was a stranger. Ben had, no doubt, seen the boys coming, for he stood looking down the trail toward them. When they were a little nearer he



saluted them: "Howdy, young'uns. This is a tarnal cold morning for a pair o' city fellers, ain't it?"

"Not on your life," cheerily answered Ham; "there's nothing citified about us. Any one who could sleep in these hills a night like last night and not freeze is no tenderfoot. What brings you up here so early this morning?"

"Early, boys? You're so tarnal lazy, you think dinner time is early. See anything o' my dog round the cabin?"



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“No, we haven’t seen him, except when you went by a while ago.”

Willis was interested in what the stranger was doing. He was bent over a big rock, filing a metal instrument. His back was turned. Willis was looking about to see what they could have been hammering, but could see no sign of their work.

“Prospecting a little?” queried Ham, as he picked up the light sledge that lay on the snow.

“Well, not jist exactly,” drawled Old Ben; “it’s too tarnal cold to do much prospectin’. We’re jist on an observin’ trip this time.”

“Observing the scenery, or what?” persisted Ham. “We heard you doing some mighty loud observing up here a few minutes ago. Come, now, no secrets. What are you up to? Do you know you are trespassing this very moment?”

“Trespassin’, eh? Well, I expect Old Ben knows when he’s trespassin’ an’ when he ain’t. This time he ain’t.” He turned to the stranger and continued: “I jist come along to give my friend here a little moral support. He’s so tarnal foolish about this old hole.”

“Not foolish, Ben,” answered the stranger, as he turned from his work, “not foolish, but—why, good morning, lad!” He advanced with extended hand toward Willis.

Willis could hardly believe his own eyes. What was this man doing here?

“It seems like our paths cross often, doesn’t it?”

“Why, I—” exclaimed Willis.

“I know you are surprised,” continued the stranger, “but no more so than I, for I didn’t expect to find you here on such a morning as this.”

“But what are you doing here?” stammered Willis. “What is there about this mine that is of interest to you? This mine is my father’s property, and it’s locked—the tunnel, I mean—”

“Yes, I know, lad,” he interrupted. “I know it does seem strange, but it isn’t half as strange to you as it is to me, and besides—”

“But, sir, how dare you tamper with locked property?”

“Lad,” and the stranger spoke in that same quiet, kindly voice that had attracted Willis the first time he had seen him, “do you remember that fall day when we last talked together? Up back of Daddy Wright’s on the Cheyenne trail?”



“Yes, sir, I do,” replied Willis, “and I remember every word you said, but—”

The stranger lifted his hand for silence, and then continued: “And do you remember you asked me if I had ever known a young engineer that used to be in these parts, and I said, ‘Yes;’ then you asked me if I knew a Tad Kieser that used to be a partner of his, and I told you I did?”

“Yes, yes, I remember all that,” interrupted Willis; “but what has that to do with this mine?”

“A very great deal, my boy. Listen! I know Tad Kieser better than any man alive, and of all the men I ever knew, Tad is the strangest. I believe he owns a half interest in this property, does he not? But he hasn’t been near it for half a dozen years, and to my knowledge he has never been inside of it since the day of the accident. What’s more, my boy, there’s just one thing in all the world that could ever induce him to enter it again —”



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“What is the one thing?” questioned Ham.

“If it wasn’t for the advice of old Ben here, I would not be here to-day, either; but Ben and I have been friends these twenty years, and in that time I have learned to know that Ben’s opinions are expressed only after a very careful consideration of all the facts. I’m here because Old Ben insisted that I come.”

Willis turned and looked at Ben. He stood by, smiling and puffing away at his pipe. “But what has all that to do with Tad Kieser?” questioned Willis a little disappointedly. “Of all the men in the world I would like most to see, it’s Tad. Tell me where he is, if you know.”

“But why do you want to see him so badly, may I ask?” questioned the stranger.

“Because he is the only man in the world that can straighten out a tangle of things that I don’t understand. And I’m sure that if he knew I was here, he’d come to help me.”

Old Ben came to the rescue.

“Boy, Tad would do anything in the great, wide world fer ye. He’s talked about ye every tarnal day since he first seen ye, an’ they ain’t been nothin’ in his mind since, except yer welfare. Ye are a tarnal lucky feller to have such a friend.”

“Saw me?” questioned Willis. “Tad Kieser saw me?”

“Yes, boy, an’ is a lookin’ at ye now, an’ is out in this cold here fer ye this mornin’, a breakin’ of vows he made long ago. Tad, tell the boy all about it. This young feller an’ me is goin’ to look up that tarnal dog.” He took Ham by the arm and drew him away down the trail out of hearing. Tad and Willis were busy at the lock of the old tunnel. Old Ben explained the situation to Ham as they leisurely hunted the dog. At last Ham understood, and was happy for Willis.

“My, but you look pert, Tad. I ain’t seed ye look so pert in ten year. What’s up? Come, tell a feller. Has that young’un been stuffin’ ye while we was gone?” and Ben laughed a merry laugh.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Tad the first day?” questioned Willis, his eyes shining with pleasure.

“I’ll tell you why some time,” replied the old miner, “but not now. I would never have consented to come up here this morning with Ben if I had not suspected that Mr. Williams intended to enter this tunnel very soon. Perhaps you know how he hates me. I caught him in a mighty crooked deal here once, and scared him badly. He and I have fought each other ever since the death of your father. He holds the keys to this lock, that’s why I’m cutting it off. We’re going to replace it with another. When your uncle comes he will find I have been ahead of him.”



“And you aren’t going into the tunnel?” questioned Willis in astonishment.

“No, lad, not to-day. I don’t know as I ever will.”

“Tell me all about the trouble between you and my uncle. How does it happen that he holds the key to this lock instead of you? Mother told me you had the key?” questioned Willis.

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“I did once, but when I refused to let him enter, he came with a hacksaw and removed the lock, placing this great brass one in its stead. Your uncle was the only person with your father when he died, except the nurse, and he has always claimed that Bill turned all his mining property over to him. He offered to buy me out, but I refused to sell.

“Nearly a year after your father’s death, I learned from a nurse in the hospital that in his last moments your father called for me, but Williams told him that I was badly hurt. He told your uncle that the real gold vein had been uncovered by the fatal blast, and that I was to be sure to work it for your sake and your mother’s. Williams promised to tell me. I tried to get the nurse to go into court and swear to her statement, but she refused, and I found out afterward that Williams had bought her off. I went and looked at the tunnel; then he broke in, took samples, and, I believe, found them good. He locked the door with this lock, and since the day of the accident I have never seen inside. I have never wanted to. I don’t know, but I have always been determined that he should not plunder your father’s possessions. At the time of the accident he came into possession of all your father’s papers. He let the assessments run out on the Cheyenne claim, and then jumped it for his own. Only last month he sold that claim to Beverly H. Pembroke for a consideration of eight thousand dollars.

“He hates me, because he knows that one more move on his part and I’ll place the matter in the hands of the law. I believe that he once hired an outlaw to kill me, but was unsuccessful. I can’t prove it, but the facts look so. I have been afraid ever since I knew you were here that your mother, as the rightful heir to the property, would play into his hands. I feared he would offer to sell her share of this mine for her and, in reality, buy it himself. He could then, according to law, force me to sell my share or to buy his. If I refused to sell, he would ask a very large sum for his, and in that way force me to his bargain. His working the tunnel on the other side of the dyke this fall and winter is more to scare me into believing he will get the gold anyway, and that I may as well sell, than anything else. I have learned that they are having a great deal of trouble in their tunnel. It’s very shaly and keeps caving from above. If he spent as much time and money caring for his sick wife as he has on this mine, she might have gotten well.”

Willis had been listening with breathless interest.

“Go on,” he begged. “Tell me all about everything, from the very beginning.”

“Lad, it’s a long, long story. I’ll do that later. Let’s not talk any more about it now.”

“O, I must know about it. Don’t stop. Tad, you can’t possibly know what all this means to me.” Tad rose and snapped the new lock in place on the door, while Old Ben cursed under his breath.



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“Of all the tarnal idiots,” he was saying; “I never seed a man so sot in his ways. Tad, ain’t ye even goin’ to peek inside?”

“No, Ben, not to-day. Perhaps some day,” returned the old prospector, “and perhaps never.”

Willis jumped to his feet. “Not to-day, Tad? Not to-day? Do you mean you aren’t going into the mine. Well, I am, even if you aren’t. I don’t leave this spot until I see the inside for myself. Give me the key. Ham and I will go in alone.”

“O, I wish you wouldn’t. It’s dangerous, and I am sure the story of the gold is only a notion. Your father was out of his mind when he died, and the gold he told about was just one of his dreams. I worked with him that day, and I saw no special signs of gold.”

“Yes, but that varmit, Williams, has seed signs,” muttered Ben. “He went in an’ brought out samples; he knows, an’ you only think you do.”

Willis held out his hand for the key, and Ben urged him on. Tad looked far away over the snowy hills, then up the quiet valley, so peaceful in its white robes, and at last down to the little cabin below. There his gaze rested.

“My, but it hardly seems fourteen years since I built that shanty,” he said. “How happy I was then! Fourteen years brings strange things into a man’s life. My boy, I hope you will never get the gold fever. Steer clear of it.”

“But Tad, I have it already,” replied Willis, “and I am following where it leads me.”

Tad looked at him, and a strange, sad expression came to his face.

“How much you talk like your father, and you’re so like him, too! I’m sorry.”

He reached deep into his trousers’ pocket, pulled out the key, then got slowly to his feet. Twice he changed his mind; but Willis persisted, and at last he yielded. The new lock opened easily, but not so the great log door. Its hinges were rusted from the storms of many seasons. As Willis pulled hard, the old hinges groaned, as if regretting that they were to be disturbed after so long a rest. As the door swung back, and the mouth of the tunnel was disclosed, Tad caught Willis by the arm and held him. “Wait, my boy,” he said, “you must let the old place air out. Remember, it has been bottled up a long time. I’ll wager a light won’t even burn in there just now.”

“Have you a candle?” asked Willis, his tone betraying his excitement.

“I’ll get some,” volunteered Ham, and off he started down the trail for the cabin.



The tunnel was a round, irregular hole a little higher than a man's head, and in width it varied with the width of the dyke. The floor had been covered with rough-hewn planks to make the pushing of the loaded wheelbarrows easier. These old planks were black and wet, but still quite sound. As they stood, waiting for Ham to return, Tad told Willis something more of the early history of the mine:



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“You see, the dyke seems to follow an ancient crevice in the granite, which runs straight in for a hundred and fifty feet, then turns abruptly to the west. Here it widens out, and just at that point the strata shifts and is folded. We found a small quantity of quartz just there. The day of the accident I was replacing some of the floor planks near the entrance and your father was preparing to make a series of blasts on the new strata. I was to help him shoot them when he was ready. He was very pleased at the new outcropping of quartz, and was very anxious to open up the vein before we quit work for the day. The farther in you go, the more shaly the black rock seems to get, and in some places we were forced to roof the drift with mine props in order to keep the ceiling up. I was bending over, chopping the end of a plank, when I was violently knocked down. In falling I struck my head against the rough wall, cutting myself badly over the left eye. I struggled to my feet dazedly, the blood streaming down over my face. I had mined long enough to know just what had happened. In some way your father had prematurely set off his blast. I started toward him, but the heavy powder smoke drove me back. I dropped to my knees to get the air—it’s always best near the floor—and in a moment a second explosion came. I snatched the jug of water and began crawling toward Bill on all fours. I called again and again, but no answer came. When I finally reached him I felt faint and sick. I found him nearly completely buried in a heap of stone. He was unconscious, and never spoke to me again. After two hours of tremendous effort, I was able to lift his poor, broken body in my arms and carry it out. I was thankful then that he was unconscious and could not feel the pain. By night I got him to the cabin, and at once set off for Ben’s. We came back by lantern light that night, and led the old horse. We spent the rest of the night building a crude litter of poles and blankets, and as soon as it was light we fastened one end of the stretcher to the horse, a pole on either side of him, and each one of us carried a pole at the other end. It took an hour for us to get down to the canyon road. In twelve hours your father died. He regained consciousness just long enough to talk with Williams briefly. What he said at that time I have never been able to find out.

“Then followed the awful years of lonesomeness for me, made worse by the always-present knowledge that I should have been the one to shoot those blasts and not your father. I wrote your mother fully concerning the accident, but never received a reply, so have had no word of you since that time. I’ve told you how your uncle tried to get possession of the mine. When I would not sell, he hounded my every step until at last I left the city and went to work for the D. & P.W. as fireman. I went through the city often, but very rarely stopped off. But it seems I came just often enough to keep your uncle too frightened to carry out his plan concerning the tunnel.”



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Ham was returning up the trail now, and soon the candles were lighted. Tad took the lead, followed by Willis, Ham and Old Ben bringing up the rear. A little inside the entrance, and to one side, a small room had been cut in the solid granite for a store-room. Here were the tools of the mine—two wheelbarrows, several shovels and picks, a large lantern, and several boxes of powder. What had once been a heavy coil of hemp rope was now a very comfortable rat's nest. Several old stone drills had been driven into the crevices for hooks, and on them hung old burlap sacks, a coil of heavy wire, two old slouch hats, and a man's coat.

Tad had bared his head as he entered. He slowly led the way down the narrow lane without a word. A little farther in they came to a very rusty ax, leaning against the wall, and Willis guessed that it had never been moved from where Tad had last used it. The large, blackened chips were scattered over the floor, and the great plank lay where he had last worked on it. Tad was very cautious now, trying the props overhead every few feet, to see if they were safe. Willis was walking as if in a dream; he was stepping very softly and his head was bowed. This was the very path his father had trod. He fancied he heard his cheery voice now, as he came and went with load after load of rock. He fancied how he must have felt as he worked day by day, ever surer of the fortune that was to be his. He found himself wondering how his life's course might have been changed if that golden dream had come true. The tunnel turned abruptly to the west, and Tad moved more cautiously still. Presently Tad halted and pointed to a heap of rock on the floor, "It was there, lad," he said very quietly, and that was all. Willis stooped and placed his hand on the place for a second. Tad noticed that his face was white and drawn and his eyes were very big. He let him stay for an instant, then took him gently by the arm and led him out.

Old Ben made a hasty examination of the rocks on the floor, then of the exposed vein. He handed the candle to Ham, and, drawing from his pocket a heavy cold chisel, he carefully knocked off some choice pieces of the ore and placed them in his pocket, muttering to himself all the while. When he had satisfied himself, he turned, took the candle, and started out, motioning Ham to precede him.

"Best gold quartz I've seed in many a year," he said softly, "only Tad will never believe it." Ham understood. Ahead of them, down the narrow black passage, they saw Tad's light disappear.

"They have stepped into the tool-room, boy," said Ben, "an' every tarnal one o' them implements is nearly sacred to Tad. Let's not disturb 'em." He blew out his light and leaned against the wall of the tunnel, pulling Ham back with him.

In a few minutes they were surprised to hear loud exclamations and the moving of the old iron wheelbarrows. Ahead they could see the light of the opening, so Old Ben started again toward the entrance.



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“Guess that memorial service must be all over, from the racket they’re makin’ with them tarnal carts,” he said.

When they reached Willis, they found him carefully going through the pockets of the musty old coat hanging upon the wall. The cloth had fairly rotted in the moisture. Tad was holding the treasures as Willis removed them from the pockets. To Tad’s surprise, there was inside the coat an old vest. They were no doubt the clothes Mr. Thornton had worn the day of the accident. In one vest pocket was Bill’s gold watch, in another a musty pocketbook and a badly worn note-book that had mildewed in the moisture. There were three letters in the outside coat pocket. Willis took one, moist and rotten as it was, from the envelope and noticed they were from his mother, and were probably the last ones she had written. Willis’s hand shook violently and two great tears glistened in his eyes. In the other outside pocket was a strange tin tube, perhaps a foot in length, with a removable lid at either end. The tube was rusted red and the ends sealed tight with rust. Willis handed the tube to Tad, a question on his lips.

“Thank God,” Tad was saying to himself, “thank God, he didn’t do it. I’ve often thought I’d kill him if he had.”

“If who had what?” questioned Willis.

“Don’t ask me, lad, not now—I’ll tell you some time, perhaps. Come, let’s go. This air is very bad, and I’m just a little sick.” He linked his arm through Willis’s, and together they walked out into the cold morning air. Ben and Ham followed. When they were outside, Tad swung the door shut and locked it. Then, with a note of triumph in his voice, he said:

“There, Williams can have the place for all I care,” and he held the queer tin tube in his hand before them.

“Open it,” urged Willis. Tad turned to him.

“My boy, there has never been a day in the past half-dozen years that I have not wondered what became of that tin tube. Many times, after hours of reasoning, I have decided that your uncle stole that tube from your father’s belongings. I have done the man an injustice. From my firm belief that he had taken the tube came my great dislike for him. You have never seen the contents of that can, lad, but your mother has. At one time they were very valuable, and I have no doubt that even now that can contains a small fortune for you—”

“But—” interrupted Willis. Tad paid no attention to him, and went on:

“The contents of that tube will place your father among the greatest of mining engineers and give his name the honor it has always been entitled to—”

“But Tad—”



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“When your father conceived that idea it was impractical. He was too far ahead of the times. But to-day, lad, it means that every mine dump in the Cripple Creek region will be worked over again and the gold removed at a trifling expense, for in that tube are the blueprints of the greatest electrical ore-roasting machine in the world.” He took his knife from his pocket and slowly and carefully pried off the rusty lid. The blue roll slid out into his hand. The moisture had not penetrated the can, and the sketches were as good as the day they were made. Willis took them in his hand and proudly turned them over and over, then he placed them again in the can with the remark, “Tad, these things all belong to mother. I wonder what she’ll say?”

Tad broke into a pleased little laugh, and the old smile that had made him so many friends in the years gone by came back to his grizzled face.

“Lad, you’re rich to-day, and I am better satisfied. Those plans will bring you and your mother a goodly sum. It lifts a great burden from a poor, worthless prospector’s mind.” Willis did not know the true meaning of the words, but Old Ben did, and it was now his turn to talk.

“Tad, I’ve knowed ye for a tarnal lot o’ years, hain’t I? An’, Tad, they ain’t a soul on earth as would do fer ye as me. I’ve lived a life myself, Tad, an’ I ain’t so big a fool as ye are about some things.” Ben pulled a piece of the ore from his pocket and held it up for inspection. “Tad, there’s a twenty-inch vein of that rock in yonder, an’ finer gold quartz ye never seed in all yer days.” He turned to Willis: “Boy, ye’r tarnal lucky. Them plans may be valuable, but I have my doubts about it; but it’s certain that that mine is valuable. Jist how much gold they is there, I don’t know, but they is lots of it. Two or three more weeks an’ Williams would have struck it from the other side. Now listen, lad: sell out, do you hear me, sell out. It’ll bring a handsome price on assay; but sell now, or Williams—” and his voice dropped to a mysterious whisper and he looked suspiciously about him, “or Williams will get the best of ye yet.”

After more talk and discussion, the whole party went down to the cabin, and Ham prepared a special supper. After the meal was over, all sat and talked before the fireplace, and the entire story was gone over again in detail. Towards late afternoon they began the down trip through the canyon.

At the inn Tad promised to come the next day to the city to meet Mrs. Thornton. Together they would confer about the newly-discovered facts.

“Don’t wait too tarnal long to sell, boy, or something will happen. Tad’s unlucky. Sell if ye can, an’ I’d make that tarnal critter, Williams, buy the whole business, if I was you.”

Tad and Willis stood some time talking, Willis then took the plans and the other things that had been in his father’s coat, and started home. They walked in silence for some time, then Willis spoke:



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“O, Ham, I’m so happy to-day, and still—” He paused and the smile faded from his face. “Still, why should I be happy? Do these plans and that gold mine up there give me back my dear old dad?”

“Not really,” replied Ham, “but perhaps those things he left you will make it possible for you to accomplish in this world the things he had hoped to do, and perhaps better things.” The little smile came back again to Willis’s face.

“Ham, you’re really a philosopher. I’ll do my very best, I’ll tell you that. Now, let’s hurry.”

### CHAPTER XV

#### In Which Fate Takes a Hand

Four days later Tad and Ben sat before the log-fire at the inn talking over plans for the future development of the mine in Buffalo Park. Tad was telling Ben of his visit with Mrs. Thornton and what her wishes were in regard to the matter. It seemed that Mr. Williams was out of the city and had been gone for several days. Just where he was no one seemed to know, but as he had taken several such trips since the death of his wife, Mrs. Thornton did not think much of it. It had been decided that they would wait until Mr. Williams returned, at which time he would be given the opportunity to buy the entire mine at a fair price. But if he did not care to buy, the property was to be turned over to Tad for disposal or development, as he saw fit.

The cold weather had continued, and there had been no visitors at the inn for nearly a week. Tad and Ben were making some crude tests before the fire with the pieces of gold quartz Ben had brought from the tunnel. They were just in the middle of their crude assay when suddenly there was a loud knock on the outside door, accompanied by a series of low growls from Ben’s dog. The door was unceremoniously thrown open and a very much excited man stepped in. He made no apologies, but went directly to the point. He spoke between great breaths, and had evidently come from some distance at a good speed. He was completely exhausted, and as he spoke his eyes wandered aimlessly about the room.

“We’ve a devil of a mess,” he panted. “I don’t know how many hurt, but some of ’em are broken all to pieces. Come right away and bring what bandages you have. O, it’s a devil of a mess.”

Old Ben looked at the stranger bewilderedly. Tad jumped to his feet, alert in a second. “Devil of a mess where, man? What’s wrong? Who’s hurt?” The stranger’s voice failed him, and all he could do was to point his finger in the direction of the canyon and make signs for them to hurry. Ben pushed him into a chair by the fire, and in a little while they had his story:



The new tunnel on the old Iron Dyke had caved in without a moment's notice. There were seven men locked in by a wall of fallen rock. Whether they had been crushed or not was hard to tell. The stranger had not been in the tunnel at the time of the accident, but had gone to the stream for water. Upon returning, he discovered the cave-in. He had come at once for help, realizing that a single man would be useless at the mine.



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In a short time the three had the old horse packed and were on the trail. The snow was deep and progress slow. As they walked up the trail the stranger described the appearance of the fallen rock as best he could. He told them that they had been working the tunnel as fast as possible and that they had not been as careful as they should have been about propping the ceiling. He said they had struck considerable water, and that the black rock seemed to have been previously loosened by some great force, for it was cracked in every direction. They had been spending the day putting in temporary props, and the boss had been there superintending the job. He had been urging the men on harder every day, as he seemed so anxious to get the tunnel in to a certain point with the least possible delay. The boss had in mind something very definite, however, for he often referred to a certain sketch which he always carried in his pocket book. The miner declared he had seen the boss make calculations many times, after he had measured the depth of the tunnel.

“Yes, the boss was in the mine, too—had been there all day. It might be that he is dead this moment, for all I know,” said the stranger. From his description of the boss, Tad guessed that it was no other than Mr. Williams himself.

When the mine was reached, operations were at once commenced to remove the fallen stones. Tad took command, and several times he thought he heard the sound of hammering from the other side—but, perhaps, after all it was only an echo. After a careful examination, it was decided that all the loose rock had fallen, and that to remove it was not dangerous. They began work at the top in order to make a hole big enough to reach the men. They had not worked long when they heard sounds from the other side. They were not all dead at least, and if they could but get to them before they suffocated all would be well. The imprisoned miners evidently understood the plan of action, for the sounds from the other side indicated that they, too, were working at the top of the wall. By night a small opening was made and messages exchanged. There were seven men inside—one dead, two very badly hurt, and the others bruised and cut, but able to help themselves. Water and hot food were passed to them, then the work of rescue was taken up in earnest. Mr. Williams had a fractured leg and was unconscious, but was still living. Instead of rushing to the solid wall end of the tunnel, where he would have been comparatively safe, at the first sign of danger he had rushed toward the entrance with one other man, and had been struck down by the falling stone. If he had started out thirty seconds sooner, he would have been crushed to death, as his companion was.

Late that night a large enough hole had been made to move the wounded men out. Tad was the first to enter, and the first man to be brought out was Williams. Tad picked him up in his great strong arms and tenderly carried him to the cabin. By midnight the broken leg was dressed and the cuts and bruises bandaged. Tad proved as good a nurse as he was a miner. As he worked over Williams a great pity filled his heart, for Tad knew only too well that he had been anything but a happy man.



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The tunnel had been driven very rapidly without proper trussing, and it seemed to Tad that the entire dyke must have been shaken by the blasts that had caused Mr. Thornton's death years before. Without a second's notice the shaly rock had given a little, then caved in. It seemed a strange turn of fate to Tad that the same blast that had taken away his partner many years ago had now probably taken away his only enemy. With these thoughts came an intense hatred for the mine and a tender pity for the man that had so wronged him. Tad had put his body to a tremendous test, and every nerve and every muscle was fairly tingling, so he drew up a chair to the bedside and rested. In a little while Mr. Williams became conscious, but on recognizing Tad at his bedside he slipped back again into unconsciousness, muttering strange, broken apologies and begging for mercy. Tad thanked God as he sat there that night that he had never harmed a brother man willfully and that his life had always been, at least to the best of his ability, on the square.

Then he began to think rapidly. Perhaps Williams was near the end. He feared the bad cut on his head might prove fatal. What if he should die and have no chance to talk, no chance to square himself with those that he had wronged? Accordingly he made him as comfortable as he could, and after telling Ben his plan, he hurriedly ate a little food, went out into the night and down the trail.

Willis was awakened early in the morning by a furious pounding on the door. He rose and hurried down. Tad fairly tumbled into the room. He informed Willis just what had happened, and told him to get ready to go with him at once. A doctor was called, a cab ordered, and in a little while the three were hastening back toward Bruin Inn. With all their speed, however, the morning was well-spent before they reached the little shanty again. The doctor made a careful examination and declared Williams in a very critical condition. The broken leg was reset, the cuts dressed and sewed up. Then began the preparations to remove him out of the mountains to a hospital. It seemed very strange to Tad to be again building a crude stretcher from aspen poles and blankets, but by night they had placed him in the hospital and he was sleeping.

It was a long night of strange thoughts and fancies for Willis as he sat by his uncle's bedside. He was too bewildered by all the strange events of the last fortnight to be able to think logically. His admiration for Tad had grown until it knew no bounds, and his pity for his uncle had increased until all the hardness had disappeared from his heart and he was sorry for him. He hoped with all his might that he would yet live.

In the early morning Willis was awakened by his uncle's hand being placed on his. The injured man was looking up into his face. He closed his eyes again and was silent a long while. When he opened them again he spoke falteringly:

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"I'm very sorry, son," he began. "I've been wrong, so wrong all along the way. I've never been square. I have fought the Fates every day of my life, and now I'm whipped." He smiled a little, weak smile. "What a fool a man is," he continued. "Willis, I'm going to slip off very soon, now, and I have so much I want to say to you." He half arose. "Are we alone?" Willis told him that they were, but urged him not to talk. He was determined.

"I have played a desperate game, and I have lost. I'm sorry for my mistakes. I have wronged Tad and you the most, for I have wanted your father's mine. I was jealous of your father's favor. Now I know I did not deserve it. I got your mother's reply to Tad's letter long ago. It was sent in my care, and I read it. It decided me, for it all looked so easy. There's money in the mine, son, and Tad is here somewhere. He will tell you all. Tell him for me that I am sorry." He closed his eyes, and in a moment was gone.

Willis hurried home to his mother, and together they held a long conference, and many things were accounted for.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was at the little cabin that Willis found his greatest pleasure, and already Ham and himself were planning a new and more pretentious Lodge to take the place of Buffalo Roost, for the next Buffalo Roost was to be a memorial camp built in honor of Tad Kieser, gentleman, and Mr. William Thornton.

Willis had found the cabin, and the cabin with its stanch, good friendships, the healthful work together, and the unselfish leadership of the right sort of men, had helped him find his best self in thoughtful service for others. Surely no better thing ever comes to the life of a boy.

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