ALGER HORATIO JR.

BEN'S NUGGET; OR, A BOY'S SEARCH FOR FORTUNE

Horatio Alger

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Содержание

Jr. Horatio Alger
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PREFACE

"Ben's Nugget" is the concluding volume of the Pacific Series. Though it is complete in itself, and may be read independently, the chief characters introduced will be recognized as old friends by the readers of "The Young Explorer," the volume just preceding, not omitting Ki Sing, the faithful Chinaman, whose virtues may go far to diminish the prejudice which, justly or unjustly, is now felt toward his countrymen.

Though Ben Stanton may be considered rather young for a miner, not a few as young as he drifted to the gold-fields in the early days of California. Mining is carried on now in a very different manner, and I can hardly encourage any of my young readers to follow his example in seeking fortune so far from home.

New York, May 19, 1882.

CHAPTER I.
THE MOUNTAIN-CABIN

"What's the news, Ben? You didn't happen to bring an evenin' paper, did you?"

The speaker was a tall, loose-jointed man, dressed as a miner in a garb that appeared to have seen considerable service. His beard was long and untrimmed, and on his head he wore a Mexican sombrero.

This was Jake Bradley, a rough but good-hearted miner, who was stretched carelessly upon the ground in front of a rude hut crowning a high eminence in the heart of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Ben Stanton, whom he addressed, was a boy of sixteen, with a pleasant face and a manly bearing.

"No, Jake," he answered with a smile, "I didn't meet a newsboy."

"There ain't many in this neighborhood, I reckon," said Bradley. "I tell you, Ben, I'd give an ounce of dust for a New York or Boston paper. Who knows what may have happened since we've been confined here in this lonely mountain-hut? Uncle Sam may have gone to war, for aught we know. P'r'haps the British may be bombarding New York this moment."

"I guess not," said Ben, smiling.

"I don't think it likely myself," said Bradley, filling his pipe. "Still, there may be some astonishin' news if we could only get hold of it."

"I don't think we can complain, Jake," said Ben, turning to a pleasanter subject. "We've made considerable money out of Mr. Dewey's claim."

"That's so. The three weeks we've spent here haven't been thrown away, by a long chalk. We shall be pretty well paid for accommodatin' Dick Dewey by stayin' and takin' care of him."

"How much gold-dust do you think we're got, Mr. Bradley?"

"What!" exclaimed Bradley, taking the pipe from his mouth; "hadn't you better call me the Honorable Mr. Bradley, and done with it? Don't you feel acquainted with me yet, that you put the handle on to my name?"

"Excuse me, Jake," said Ben; "that's what I meant to say, but I was thinking of Mr. Dewey and that's how I happened to call you Mister."

"That's a different matter. Dick's got a kind of dignity, so that it seems natural to call him Mister; but as for me, I'm Jake Bradley, not a bad sort of fellow, but I don't wear store-clo'es, and I'd rather be called Jake by them as know me well."

"All right, Jake; but you haven't answered my question."

"What about?"

"The gold-dust."

"Oh yes. Well, I should say that the dust we've got out must be worth nigh on to five hundred dollars."

"So much as that?" asked Ben, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes, all of that. That claim of Dewey's is a splendid one, and no mistake. I think we ought to pay him a commission for allowing us to work it."

"I think so too, Jake."

They were sitting outside the rude hut which had been roughly put together on the summit of the mountain. The door was open, and what they said could be heard by the occupant, who was stretched on a hard pallet in one corner of the cabin.

"Come in, you two," he called out.

"Sartin, Dick," said Bradley; and he entered the cabin, followed by Ben.

"What was that you were saying just now?" asked Richard Dewey.

"Tell him, Ben," said Bradley.

"Jake was saying that we ought to pay you a commission on the gold-dust we took from your claim, Mr. Dewey," said our hero, for that is Ben's position in our story.

"Why should you?" asked Dewey.

"Because it's yours. You found it, and you ought to get some good of it."

"So I have, Jake. In the first place, I got a thousand dollars out of it before I fell sick—that is, sprained my ankle."

"But you ain't gettin' anything out of it now."

"I think I am," said Dewey, smiling and looking gratefully at his two friends. "I am getting the care and attention of two faithful friends, who will see that I do not suffer while I am laid up in this lonely hut."

"We don't want to be paid for that, Dick."

"I know that, Bradley; but I don't call it paying you to let you work the claim which I don't intend to work myself."

"But you would work it if you were well."

"No, I wouldn't," answered Dewey, with energy. "I would leave this place instantly and take the shortest path to San Francisco."

"To see the gal that sent us out after you?"

"Yes. But, Jake, suppose you call her the young lady."

"Of course. You mustn't mind me, Dick. I don't know much about manners. I was raised kind of rough, and never had no chance to learn politeness. Ben, here, knows ten times as much as I do about how to behave among fashionable folks."

"I don't know about that, Jake," said Ben. "I was brought up in the country, and I know precious little about fashionable folks."

"Oh, well, you know how to talk. Besides, didn't you bring out Miss Douglas from the States?"

"She brought me," said Ben.

"It seems to me we are wandering from the subject," said Dewey. "It was a piece of good luck for me when you two happened upon this cabin where I lay helpless, with no one to look after me but Ki Sing."

"Ki Sing took pretty good care of you for a haythen," said Bradley.

"So he did. He is a good fellow, if he is a Chinaman, and far more grateful than many of his white brothers; but I was sighing for the sight of one of my own color, who would understand my wants better than that poor fellow, faithful as he is."

"I reckon the news we brought you helped you some, Dick," said Jake Bradley.

"Yes. It put fresh life into me to learn that Florence Douglas, my own dear Florence, had come out to this distant coast to search for me. But I tell you, Jake, it's rather tantalizing to think that she is waiting for me in San Francisco, while I am tied by the ankle to this lonely cabin so many miles away."

"It won't be for long now, Dick," said Bradley. "You feel a good deal better, don't you?"

"Yes; my ankle is much stronger than it was. Yesterday I walked about the cabin, and even went out of doors. I felt rather tired afterward, but it didn't hurt me."

"All you want is a little patience, Dick. You mustn't get up too soon. A sprain is worse than a break, so I've often heard: I can't say I know from experience."

"I hope you won't. It's a very trying experience, as I can testify."

"You'd get well quicker if we had some doctor's stuff to put on it, but I reckon anyhow you'll be out in a week or ten days."

"I hope so. If I could only write to Florence and let her know where and how I am, I wouldn't mind so much the waiting."

"Don't worry about her. She's in 'Frisco, where nothing can't happen to her," said Bradley, whose loose grammar I cannot recommend my young readers to imitate.

"I am not sure about that. Her guardian might find out where she is, and follow her even to San Francisco. If I were on the spot he could do no harm."

"I tell you, Dick, that gal—excuse me, I mean that young lady—is a smart one, and I reckon she can get ahead of her guardian if she wants to. Ben here told me how she circumvented him at the Astor House over in York. She'll hold her own ag'in him, even if he does track her to 'Frisco."

Some of my readers may desire to know more about Dewey and his two friends, and I will sketch for their benefit the events to which Bradley referred.

Florence Douglas was the ward of the Albany merchant, John Campbell, who by the terms of her father's will was entrusted with the care of her large property till she had attained the age of twenty-five, a period nearly a year distant. Mr. Campbell, anxious to secure his ward's large property for his son, sought to induce Florence to marry the said son, but this she distinctly declined to do. Irritated and disappointed, Mr. Campbell darkly intimated that should her opposition continue he would procure from two pliant physicians a certificate of her insanity and have her confined in that most terrible of prisons, a mad-house. The fear that he would carry his threat into execution nerved Florence to a bold movement. Being mistress of a fortune of thirty thousand dollars, left by her mother, she had funds enough for her purpose. She fled to New York, where chance made her acquainted with our hero, Ben Stanton, under whose escort she safely reached San Francisco, paying Ben's expenses in return for his protection.

Arrived in San Francisco, she furnished Ben with the necessary funds to seek out Richard Dewey (to whom, without her guardian's knowledge, she was privately betrothed) and inform him of her presence in California. After a series of adventures Ben and his companion had found Dewey, laid up with a sprained ankle in a rude hut high up among the mountains. He had met with an accident while successfully working a rich claim near by.

Of course Richard Dewey was overjoyed to meet friends of his own race who could provide for him better than his faithful attendant, Ki Sing. As he could not yet leave the spot, he offered to Ben and Bradley the privilege of working his claim.

In the next chapter I will briefly explain Ben's position, and the object which brought him to California, and then we shall be able to proceed with our story.

CHAPTER II.
THE MISSING CHINAMAN

If Florence Douglas was an heiress, our young hero, Ben Stanton, was likewise possessed of property, though his inheritance was not a very large one. When his father's estate was settled it was found that it amounted to three hundred and sixty-five dollars. Though rather a large sum in Ben's eyes, he was quite aware that the interest of this amount would not support him. Accordingly, being ambitious, he drew from his uncle, Job Stanton, a worthy shoemaker, the sum of seventy-five dollars, and went to New York, hoping to obtain employment.

In this he was disappointed, but he had the good fortune to meet Miss Florence Douglas, by whom he was invited to accompany her to California as her escort, his expenses of course being paid by his patroness. It is needless to say that Ben accepted this proposal with alacrity, and, embarking on a steamer, landed in less than a month at San Francisco. He did not remain here long, but started for the mining-districts, still employed by Miss Douglas, in search of Richard Dewey, her affianced husband, whom her guardian had forbidden her to marry. As we have already said, Ben and his chosen companion, Jake Bradley, succeeded in their mission, but as yet had been unable to communicate tidings of their success to Miss Douglas, there being no chance to send a letter to San Francisco from the lonely hut where they were at present living.

Besides carrying out the wishes of his patroness, Ben intended to try his hand at mining, and had employed the interval of three weeks since he discovered Mr. Dewey in working the latter's claim, with the success already referred to.

The time when the two friends are introduced to the reader is at the close of the day, when, fatigued by their work on the claim, they are glad to rest and chat. Mr. Bradley has a pipe in his mouth, and evidently takes considerable comfort in his evening smoke.

"I wish I had a pipe for you, Ben," he said. "You don't know how it rests me to smoke."

"I'll take your word for it, Jake," returned Ben, smiling.

"Won't you take a whiff? You don't know how soothin' it is."

"I don't need to be soothed, Jake. I'm glad you enjoy it, but I don't envy you a particle."

"Well, p'r'aps you're right, Ben. Our old doctor used to say smokin' wasn't good for boys, but I've smoked more or less since I was twelve years old."

"There's something I'd like better than smoking just now," said Ben.

"What's that?"

"Eating supper."

"Just so. I wonder where that heathen Ki Sing is?"

Ki Sing was cook and general servant to the little party, and performed his duties in a very satisfactory manner—better than either Ben or Bradley could have done—and left his white employers freer to work at the more congenial occupation of searching for gold.

"Ki Sing is unusually late," said Richard Dewey. "I wonder what can have detained him? I am beginning to feel hungry myself."

"The heathen is usually on time," said Bradley, "though he hasn't got a watch, any more than I have.—Dick, what time is it?"

"Half-past six," answered Richard Dewey, who, though a miner, had not been willing to dispense with all the appliances of civilization.

"Maybe Ki Sing has found another place," suggested Ben, jocosely.

"He is faithful; I will vouch for that," said Dewey. "I am more afraid that he has met with some accident—like mine, for instance."

"You won't catch a Chinaman spraining his ankle," said Bradley; "they're too spry for that. They'll squeeze through where a white man can't, and I wouldn't wonder if they could turn themselves inside out if they tried hard."

"It is possible," suggested Dewey, "that Ki Sing may have met with some of our own race who have treated him roughly. You know the strong prejudice that is felt against the poor fellows by some who are far less deserving than they. They think it good sport to torment a Chinaman."

"I can't say I like 'em much myself," said Bradley; "but I don't mind saying that Ki Sing is a gentleman. He is the best heathen I know of, and if I should come across any fellow harmin' him I reckon I'd be ready to take a hand myself."

"We couldn't get along very well without him, Jake," said Ben.

"That's where you're right, Ben. He's made himself useful to us, and no mistake."

"I have reason to feel indebted to him," said Dewey. "Injured as I was, I should have fared badly but for his faithful services. I am not at all sure that I should have been living at this moment had not the grateful fellow cared for me and supplied my wants."

It may be explained here that Richard Dewey had at one time rescued Ki Sing from some rough companions who had made up their minds to cut off the Chinaman's queue, thereby, in accordance with Chinese custom, preventing him ever returning to his native country. It was the thought of this service that had prompted Ki Sing to faithful service when he found his benefactor in need of it.

Half an hour passed, and still the Chinaman did not appear.

All three became anxious, especially Dewey. "Bradley," said he, "would you mind going out to look for Ki Sing? I'm sure something has happened to him."

"Just what I was thinkin' of myself," said Bradley. "I'll go, and I'll bring him back if he's above ground."

"I'll go with you, Jake," said Ben, rising from the ground on which he was seated.

"You'd better stay with Dick Dewey," said Bradley; "maybe he'll want you."

"I forgot that. Yes, I will stay."

"No; I would rather you would go with Bradley," said the invalid. "Two will stand a better chance of success than one. I sha'n't need anything while you are away."

"Just as you say, Dick.—Well, Ben, let's start along. I reckon we'll find Ki Sing before long, and then we'll have some supper."

As the two started on their errand Richard Dewey breathed a sigh of relief. "I really believe I'm getting attached to Ki Sing," he said to himself. "He's a good fellow, if he is a Chinaman, and if ever I am prosperous I will take him into my service and see that he is comfortably provided for."

The poor Chinaman, though Dewey did not suspect it, was at that moment in a very uncomfortable position indeed, and he himself was menaced by a peril already near at hand against which his helpless condition allowed of no defence. His lonely and monotonous life was destined to be varied that evening in an unpleasant manner.

CHAPTER III.
TWO GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD

Perhaps two hours earlier two horsemen might have been seen riding slowly over a lower slope of the mountain. The horses they bestrode were of the Mexican breed, or, in common parlance, mustangs. They were themselves dressed in Mexican style, and bore a strong resemblance to bandits as we are apt to picture them.

These gentlemen were Bill Mosely and Tom Hadley, hailing originally from Missouri, but not reflecting any particular credit on their native State. They were in fact adventurers, having a strong objection to honest work and a decided preference for gaining a living by unlawful means. The very horses they bestrode were stolen, having once belonged to Jake Bradley and Ben Stanton. The circumstances under which they were stolen will be remembered by readers of *The Young Explorer*.

"Beastly place, this, Tom!" said Bill Mosely, with a strong expression of disgust.

"I should say so," answered Hadley, who was wont by this phrase to echo the sentiments expressed by his companion and leader.

"I wouldn't have come up here if it had proved safe to stay lower down," continued Bill Mosely. "That last man we relieved of his gold-dust might prove troublesome if we should fall in with him again—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so," remarked Mr. Hadley in a tone of sincere conviction.

"I should like to see him when he wakes up and finds his bag of dust missing," said Mosely, with a laugh.

As he spoke he drew from his pocket a good-sized bag which appeared to be nearly full of dust. "There must be several hundred dollars' worth there," he said, complacently.

He expected to hear Hadley answer in his usual style, but was disappointed.

"When are we going to divide?" asked Hadley, with an expression of interest not unmingled with anxiety.

"You'd better let me carry it, Tom; it's all the same."

"I should say so. No, I would prefer to take charge of my part," said Hadley, "or at least to carry the bag part of the time."

Bill Mosely frowned darkly, and he brought his hand near the pocket in which he carried his pistol. "Hadley," he said, sternly, "do you doubt my honor?"

"I should say—not," answered Tom Hadley in a dissatisfied tone, bringing out the last word after a slight pause; "but I don't see why I shouldn't carry the bag part of the time."

"Had you doubted my honor," continued Mosely with a grand air, "though you are my friend, I should have been compelled to take your life. I never take any back talk. I chaw up any one who insults me. I'm a regular out-and-out desperado, I am, when I'm riled."

"I've heard all that before," said Tom Hadley, rather impatiently.

It was quite true, for this was the style in which Bill Mosely was accustomed to address new acquaintances. It had not succeeded with Jake Bradley, who had enough knowledge of human nature to detect the falsity of Mosely's pretensions and the sham character of his valor.

"You've heard it before," said Mosely, severely, "but ain't it true? That's what I ask you, Tom Hadley."

"I should say so," slipped out almost unconsciously from the lips of the habitual echo.

"'Tis well," said Mosely, waving his hand. "You know it and you believe it. I'm a bad man to insult, I am. I generally chaw up them that stand in my way."

Tom Hadley was really a braver man than Mosely, and he answered obstinately, "Give me half that gold-dust, or I'll take it."

Bill Mosely saw his determined face and felt that it was necessary to back down. "I don't know why I don't shoot you," he said, trying to keep up his air of domination.

"Because two can play at that game," said Hadley, doggedly.

He produced a pouch, and Bill Mosely, much against his will, was compelled to divide the contents of the stolen bag, managing, however, to retain the larger share himself.

"I don't want to quarrel with a friend," said Bill, more mildly, "but you don't act friendly to-day."

"It's all right now," said Hadley, satisfied.

"Maybe you think I don't want to act fair," continued Mosely in an injured tone. "Why, the very horse you are riding is a proof to the contrary. I didn't ask for both horses, did I?"

"You couldn't ride both," answered Tom Hadley, with practical good sense.

"I wonder where the fellows are we took them from?" said Mosely, with a change of subject. "The man was a regular fire-eater: I wouldn't like to meet him again."

"I should say so," chimed in Hadley, emphatically.

Bradley had paid Mosely in his own coin, and boasted of his prowess even more extravagantly than that braggadocio, claiming to have killed from seventy to eighty men in the course of his experience. Mosely had been taken in by his confident tone, and knowing that he was himself a sham desperado, though a genuine thief and highwayman, had been made to feel uneasy while in Bradley's company.

"I wonder what became of them?" continued Mosely, thoughtfully.

As Tom Hadley's special phrase could not come in here appropriately, he forbore to make any remark.

"He thought he would scare me by his fierce talk," said Mosely, who would hardly have spoken so confidently had he known that Bradley was only two miles distant from him at that identical moment. "It takes a good deal to scare a man like me—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so," returned Hadley, but it was noticeable that he spoke rather dubiously, and not with his usual positiveness.

"I'm a hard man to handle," continued Mosely, complacently, relapsing into the style of talk which he most enjoyed. "I'm as bad as they make 'em."

"I should say so," chimed in Tom Hadley; and there was nothing doubtful in his tone now.

Bill Mosely looked at him as if he suspected there was something suspicious under this speech, but Tom Hadley wore his usual look, and his companion dismissed his momentary doubt. "You never saw me afraid of any living man—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so," answered Hadley.

There was something equivocal in this speech, and Bill Mosely looked vexed.

"Can't you say anything but that?" he grumbled. "It looks as if you doubted my statement. No man doubt my word—and lives."

Tom Hadley merely shrugged his shoulders. He was not a man of brilliant intellectual ability or of rare penetration, but there were times when even he was led to suspect that his companion was a humbug. Yet Mosely had greater force of character, and took uncommon pains to retain his ascendency over his more simple-minded companion, and had in the main been successful, though in the matter of the gold-dust he had been obliged to score a defeat.

As Hadley did not see fit to express any doubt of this last statement, Bill Mosely was content to let the matter drop, assuming that he had gained a victory and recovered his ascendency over his echo.

They had met no one for some hours, and did not look for an encounter with anything wearing the semblance of humanity, when all at once Tom Hadley uttered an exclamation.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Mosely.

"Look there!" was the only answer, as Hadley, with outstretched finger, pointed to a Chinaman walking slowly up the hill.

"It's a heathen Chinee!" exclaimed Mosely with animation.

"I should say so," echoed Hadley.

Mosely urged his mustang to greater speed, and soon overtook Ki Sing, for it was Richard Dewey's attendant whom the two adventurers had fallen in with.

CHAPTER IV.
KI SING IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

Ki Sing turned when he heard the sound of horses' feet, for in that mountain-solitude such a sound was unusual. He was not reassured by the appearance of the two men, whose intention seemed to be to overtake him, and he turned aside from the path with the intention of getting out of the way.

"Stop there, you heathen!" called Bill Mosely in his fiercest tone.

Ki Sing halted, and an expression of uneasiness came over his broad, flat face.

"What are you doing here, you Chinese loafer?"

Ki Sing did not exactly comprehend this speech, but answered mildly, "How do, Melican man?"

"How do?" echoed Bill Mosely, laughing rather boisterously.—"Tom, the heathen wants to know how I do.—Well, heathen, I'm so's to be around, and wouldn't mind chawing up a dozen Chinamen. Where do you live?"

"Up mountain," answered Ki Sing.

"Which way?"

The Chinaman pointed in the right direction.

"What do you do for a living?"

"Wait on Melican man—cookee, washee."

"So you are a servant to a white man, John?"

"Yes, John."

"Don't you call me John, you yellow mummy! I'm not one of your countrymen, I reckon.—What do you say to that, Tom? The fellow's gettin' familiar."

"I should say so," remarked Tom Hadley, with his usual originality.

"What's the name of the Melican man you work for?" continued Mosely, after a slight pause.

"Dickee Dewee," answered Ki Sing, repeating the familiar name applied by Bradley to the invalid. The name seemed still more odd as the Chinaman pronounced it.

"Well, he's got a queer name, that's all I can say," continued Mosely. "What's your name?"

"Ki Sing."

"Ki Sing? How's Mrs. Ki Sing?" asked Mosely, who was disposed, like the cat, to play with his victim before turning and rending him.

"Me got no wifee," said the Chinaman, stolidly.

"Then you're in the market. Do you want to marry?"

"Me no want to mally?"

"So much the worse for the ladies. Well, as to this Dickee, as you call him? What does he do?"

"He sick—lie down on bedee."

"He's sick, is he? What's the matter with him?"

"Fall down and hurt leggee."

"Oh, that was it? What did he do before he hurt himself?"

"Dig gold."

Bill Mosely became more interested. "Did he find much gold?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, muchee," answered Ki Sing, unsuspiciously.

"Does he keep it with him?"

Bill Mosely betrayed a little too much interest when he asked this question, and the Chinaman, hitherto unsuspicious, became on his guard.

"Why you wantee know?" he asked shrewdly.

"Do you dare give me any of your back talk, you yellow heathen?" exclaimed Mosely, angrily. "Answer my question, or I'll chaw you up in less'n a minute."

"What you ask?" said Ki Sing, innocently.

"You know well enough. Where does this Dickee keep the gold he found before he met with an accident?"

"He no tellee me," answered Ki Sing.

This might be true, so that Mosely did not feel sure that the Chinaman's ignorance was feigned. Still, he resolved to push the inquiry, in the hope of eliciting some information that might be of value, for already a plan had come into his mind which was in accordance with his general character and reputation—that of relieving the invalid of his hoard of gold-dust.

"Where do you think he keeps the gold, John?" he asked mildly.

Ki Sing looked particularly vacant as he expressed his ignorance on this subject.

"Has he got a cabin up there?" asked Mosely.

"Yes."

"And how far might it be?"

"Long way," answered Ki Sing, who wished to divert Mosely from the plan which the faithful servant could see he had in view.

Bill Mosely was keen enough to understand the Chinaman's meaning, and answered, "Long or not, I will go and see your master. I am a doctor," he added, winking to Hadley, "and perhaps I can help him.—Ain't I a doctor, Tom?"

"I should say so," answered Hadley, whose respect for truth did not interfere with his corroborating in his usual style anything which his companion saw fit to assert.

Ki Sing did not express any opinion on the subject of Bill Mosely's medical pretensions, though he was quite incredulous.

"Lead the way, John," said Mosely.

"Where me go?" asked the Chinaman innocently.

"Go? Go to the cabin where your master lives, and that by the shortest path. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

Ki Sing, however, still faithful to the man who had befriended him in the hour of danger, did not direct his course toward Richard Dewey's cabin, but guided the two adventurers in a different direction. The course he took was a circuitous one, taking him no farther away from the cabin, but encircling the summit and drawing no nearer to it. He hoped that the two men, whose purpose he suspected was not honest nor friendly, would become tired and would give up the quest.

He did not, however, understand the perseverance of Mosely when he felt that he was on the scent of gold.

Finally, Mosely spoke. "John," he said, "is the cabin near by?"

Ki Sing shook his head. "Long way," he answered.

"How did you happen to get so far away from it, then, I should like to know?" and he examined the face of his guide sharply.

But Ki Sing's broad face seemed utterly void of expression as, neglecting to answer the question, he reiterated his statement, "Housee long way."

"The man's a fool, Tom," said Mosely, turning to his companion.

"I should say so," was all the help he got from Hadley.

"Do you know what I mean to do, Hadley?—Here, you yellow mummy, go a little ahead." (The Chinaman did so.)—"There's a bonanza up there in that cabin, wherever it is. The Chinaman says that this man with the queer name had got out a good deal of gold before he met with an accident—broke his leg, likely. Well, it stands to reason he's got the gold now. There ain't no chance here of sendin' off the dust, and of course he's got it hid somewhere in his cabin. Do you see the point, Tom?"

"I should say so."

"And I should say so too. It strikes me as a particularly good chance. This man is disabled and helpless. He can't prevent us walking off with his gold, can he?"

"Suppose he won't tell us where it is?" suggested Tom Hadley with extraordinary mental acuteness.

"Why, we'll knock him on the head or put a bullet in him, Hadley. It's a pity if two fire-eaters like us can't tackle a man with a broken leg. What do you say?"

"I should say so."

Fifteen minutes more passed, and they seemed to be getting no nearer their destination. At any rate, no cabin was in sight. Ki Sing only answered, when interrogated, "Long way."

"Hadley," said Bill Mosely, "I begin to believe that heathen's misleading us. What do you say?"

"I should say so."

"Then I'll attend to his case.—Here, you heathen!"

"Whatee want?"

Bill Mosely sprang from his mustang, seized Ki Sing, and, in spite of howls, with Hadley's assistance tied him to a small tree with a strong cord he had in his pocket.

"That disposes of you, my friend," he said, mounting his mustang. "I think we shall find the cabin better without you."

The two men rode off, leaving poor Ki Sing in what appeared, considering the loneliness of the spot, to be hopeless captivity.

CHAPTER V.
FURTHER ADVENTURES OF BILL MOSELY

Bill Mosley and his companion pushed on after leaving the poor Chinaman tied to the tree.

"The yellow heathen may starve, for all I care," said Mosely, carelessly. "It's all his own fault. Why didn't he speak up like a man and tell me what I wanted to know?"

"I should say so," chimed in Tom Hadley.

"The question is now, 'Whereabouts is that cabin we are in search of?'"

Hadley appeared to have no idea, and no suggestion to offer.

"It strikes me it must be somewhere near the top of the mountain," said Mosely. "What do you say?"

"I should say so."

"Then we'll take the shortest way to the summit. I tell you, Tom, we're on the track of something rich. We'll take all this fellow's gold-dust, and he can't help himself. It'll be richer than any claim we've worked yet, if it pans out as well as I expect—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so, Bill," answered Hadley, with an expression of interest.

"I tell you, Tom," said Bill Mosely, complacently, "you were in luck when you fell in with me. We've done pretty well since we j'ined hosses, pard."

"I should say so—but," added Hadley, after a pause, "it would go hard with us if we got caught."

"We don't mean to get caught," said Mosely, promptly. "As for this new job, there's no danger in it. This man is down with a broken leg, and he can't help our taking his gold. The Chinaman's out of the way, and we've got a clear field. Take a good look, Tom, for your eyes are better than mine, and tell me if you see anything that looks like a cabin anywhere around?"

This inquiry was made some twenty minutes after they had left Ki Sing. They had pursued a circuitous course, or in half the time they might have been as near the cabin as they now were.

Tom Hadley didn't answer in his customary phrase, but instead raised himself erect on his mustang and looked sharply about him.

"Well?" demanded Mosely, impatiently.

"I don't see anything that looks like a cabin," said Hadley, deliberately, "but I think I see smoke."

"Where?" asked his companion in an eager tone.

"There," said Tom Hadley, pointing with his whip in a particular direction.

Mosely strained his eyes, but he was a trifle near-sighted and could see nothing.

"I can't see anything," he said, "but that proves nothing. If there's smoke, there's a house. There's no question about that, and there's not likely to be more than one cabin about here. Steer in the direction of the smoke, Tom, and I'll follow in your tracks. My horse is getting tired; he'll be glad to rest for the night."

"Will it be safe?" queried Hadley.

"Safe enough. The Chinaman is disposed of, and as for this broken-legged Dewey, we'll bind him fast and set him outside of the cabin while we make ourselves comfortable within. I shall be sorry to inconvenience him, but when a man has company he must expect to be put out—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so, Bill."

The two worthy gentlemen kept on their way till, making a sudden turn, the house, which had hitherto been concealed from them by a cliff, stood plainly revealed.

"There it is, Tom!" cried Mosely, joyfully. "We've found it, in spite of that lying heathen. It seems good to see a house after wandering about for weeks without a chance to sleep under a roof—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so, Bill."

It will be observed that Mr. William Mosely was fond of designating Ki Sing as a heathen, evidently appreciating his own superiority as a Christian. Yet I am inclined to think that a heathen like the Chinaman possessed more moral worth than a dozen Christians of the type of Mosely. From youth he had preyed upon the community, and his aim had been to get a living in any way that did not involve labor. Honesty was an obsolete word in his vocabulary, and a successful theft yielded him a satisfaction such as other men derive from the consciousness of well-doing. In fact, Mosely's moral nature was warped, and there was very little chance of his reformation.

Now that the cabin was near at hand, the two men did not quicken their speed, for the ascent was somewhat steep and their animals were tired.

"Take it easy, Tom. The whole thing's in our hands. Wonder whether Dewey's expectin' visitors?" he added, chuckling. "I say, Hadley, he'll be glad to see us—don't you think so?"

"I should say so," returned Hadley, before the joke dawned upon him.

"You see, we are going to relieve him of the care of that gold-dust of his. We're two bankers from 'Frisco, that's what we are, and we'll take care of all the gold-dust we can take in."

"I shall want my half," said Tom Hadley, unexpectedly deviating from his customary formula.

Mosely shrugged his shoulders. He did not quite like this new disposition of Hadley's to look after his own interests, but at present did not think it politic to say much about it. Though Tom Hadley had generally been subservient to him, he knew very well that if any difficulty should arise between them Tom would be a formidable antagonist. Fortunately for him, Hadley did not know his own power, or he would not have remained in subjection to a man whom he could have overcome had he been so disposed. He did not fully believe Bill Mosely's ridiculous boasts of his own prowess, but he was nevertheless disposed to overrate the man who made so many pretensions. All he asked was a fair share of the booty which the two together managed to secure, and this he had made up his mind to have.

They reached the cabin at last, and halted their horses before the door.

Both sprang off, and Bill Mosely, with a sign to his companion to remain in charge of them, entered at the open door.

"Is that you, Ki Sing?" asked Dewey, whose face was turned toward the wall.

Bill Mosely could not tell from the way he lay on the pallet, covered with a blanket, whether his leg were broken or not, but believed that this was the case. "That doesn't happen to be my name, stranger," he answered.

Richard Dewey turned suddenly on his low bed and fixed his eyes on the intruder. "Who are you? what do you want?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I thought I'd come round and make you a call, being in the neighborhood," answered Mosely, with a smile.

"Who are you?"

"Well, I'm not the President of the United States, nor I ain't Queen Victoria, as I know of," said Mosely.

"You look more like a horse-thief," said Richard Dewey, bluntly.

"Do you mean to insult me?" exclaimed Bill Mosely, fiercely. "Do you know who I am?"

Dewey was not easily frightened, and he answered coolly, "You haven't told me yet."

"Well, I'm Bill Mosely from the State of Missouri. I'm a regular tearer, I am. I don't take no back talk. When a man insults me I kill him."

"Very well. Now I know who you are," said Richard Dewey, calmly. "Now, what do you want?"

"How much gold-dust have you in this cabin? We may as well come to business."

"None at all."

"I know better. You can't pull wool over my eyes. Your Chinaman tells a different story."

"Ha! Have you seen Ki Sing?" asked Dewey, interested at last.

"Yes, I had the pleasure of meeting the heathen you refer to."

"Where is he now? Can you tell me?"

"To the best of my knowledge he is tied to a tree a mile or so from here. I don't think he will get away very easily."

"Scoundrel! you shall answer for this!" exclaimed Richard Dewey, springing to his feet, and thereby showing that neither of his legs was broken.

CHAPTER VI.
AN UNEQUAL CONTEST

Bill Mosely was decidedly startled when the man whom he thought helpless sprang up so suddenly and approached him in a menacing manner. He rose precipitately from the rude seat on which he had settled himself comfortably, his face wearing an expression of alarm.

Richard Dewey paused and confronted him. A frown was on his face, and he appeared very much in earnest in the question he next asked. "Have you dared to ill-treat my servant, you scoundrel?" he demanded.

"Look here, stranger," said Mosely, with a faint attempt at bluster, "you'd better take care what you say to me. I'm a bad man, I am."

"I don't doubt it," said Dewey, contemptuously.

This was not altogether satisfactory to Bill Mosely, though it expressed confidence in the truth of his statement.

"You haven't answered my question," continued Dewey. "What have you done with my servant?"

"Perhaps he wasn't your servant," said Bill Mosely, evasively.

"There is but one Chinaman in this neighborhood," said Richard Dewey impatiently, "and he is my faithful servant. Did you tie him to a tree?"

"He was impudent to me," answered Bill Mosely, uneasily.

"Ki Sing is never impudent to any one," returned Dewey, his eyes flashing with anger. "Tell me what you did with him, or I will fell you to the ground."

"I didn't harm him," said Bill Mosely, hastily. "I wanted to teach him a lesson; that is all."

"And so you tied him to a tree, did you?"

"Yes."

"Then go back and release him instantly, or it will be the worse for you. I would go with you, to make sure that you did so, but my ankle is weak. Where did you leave him?"

"A little way down the hill."

"Then go at once and release him. If you fail to do it, some day I shall meet you again and I will make you bitterly repent it."

"All right, stranger; make your mind easy."

Bill Mosely turned to leave the cabin, and Richard Dewey threw himself down on the pallet once more.

But Mosely had no intention of letting the matter rest there. Had he been alone he would not have ventured on any further conflict with Dewey, who, invalid as he was, had shown so much spirit; but he felt considerable confidence in his companion, who was strong and powerful.

He approached Tom Hadley and whispered in his ear. Tom nodded his head, and the two stealthily approached the entrance again and re-entered the cabin.

Richard Dewey had laid himself down on the pallet, thinking that Bill Mosely had gone about his business, when Tom Hadley, who had been assigned to this duty by his more timid companion, threw himself upon the invalid and overpowered him.

"Perhaps you'll insult a gentleman again," exclaimed Mosely tauntingly as he stood by and witnessed the ineffectual struggles of Tom's victim, who had been taken at disadvantage.—"Here's the cord, Tom, tie his hands and feet."

"You're contemptible cowards," exclaimed Dewey. "It takes two of you to overpower a sick man."

"You don't look very sick," said Mosely, tauntingly.

"I have sprained my ankle or I would defy both of you."

"Talk's cheap!" retorted Bill Mosely.

"What is your object in this outrageous assault upon a stranger?" demanded Dewey.

"We'll tell you presently," answered Mosely.—"Now tie his feet, Tom."

"Be careful of my ankle—it is sore and sensitive," said Dewey, addressing himself to Tom Hadley. "You need not tie me further. In my present condition I am no match for you both. Tell me why it is you have chosen to attack a man who has never harmed you?"

Tom Hadley looked to Mosely to answer.

"I'll tell you what we want, Dewey, if that is your name," said the superior rascal. "We want that gold-dust you've got hidden about here somewhere."

"Who told you I had any gold-dust?" inquired the invalid.

"Your servant. He let it out without thinking, but when we wanted him to guide us here, he wouldn't. That's why we left him tied to a tree—isn't it, Tom?"

"I should say so."

"Poor fellow! I am glad to hear he was faithful even when he found himself in the power of two such ruffians as you."

"Look here, Dewey: don't give us any of your back talk. It ain't safe—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so, Bill."

"I intend to express my opinion of you and your villainous conduct," said Dewey, undaunted, "whatever you choose to call it. So Ki Sing wouldn't guide you here?"

"No, he led us round in a circle. When we found it out we settled his hash pretty quick—"

"Like cowards, as you were."

"Are we going to stand this, Tom?" asked Bill, fiercely.

Tom Hadley shrugged his shoulder. He did not enjoy what Bill Mosely called "back talk" as well as his partner, and it struck him as so much waste of time. He wanted to come to business, and said briefly, "Where's the gold?"

"Yes, Dewey, let us know what you have done with your gold."

"So you are thieves, you two?"

"I should say so," interjected Tom Hadley.

"You're a fool," ejaculated Bill Mosely, frowning. "What makes you give yourself away?"

"Because," said Hadley, bluntly, "we are thieves, or we wouldn't be after this man's gold."

"That ain't the way to put it," said Bill Mosely, who shrank from accepting the title to which his actions entitled him. "We're bankers from 'Frisco, and we are going to take care of Dewey's gold, as he ain't in a situation to take care of it himself."

"You are very kind," said Dewey, who, embarrassing as his position was, rather enjoyed the humor of the situation. "So you are a banker, and your friend a thief? I believe I have more respect for the thief, who openly avows his objects.—Tom, if that is your name, I am sorry that you are not in a better business. That man is wholly bad, but I believe you could lead an honest life."

Tom Hadley said nothing, but he looked thoughtful. His life had been a lawless one, but he was not the thorough-going scoundrel that Bill Mosely was, and would have been glad if circumstances had favored a more creditable mode of life.

"We're wastin' time, Dewey," said Bill Mosely. "Where's the gold-dust?"

"Sure you know I have it? I leave you to find it for yourself," answered the sick man, who was never lacking for courage, and did not tremble, though wholly in the power of these men.

"What shall we do, Tom?" asked Mosely.

"Hunt for the gold," suggested Tom Hadley.

If Mosely had judged it of any use to threaten Dewey, he would have done so, hoping to force him to reveal the hiding-place of the gold; but the undaunted spirit thus far displayed by his victim convinced him that the attempt would be unsuccessful. He therefore proceeded, with the help of his

companion, to search the hut. The floor was of earth, and he occupied himself in digging down into it, considering that the most likely place of concealment for the treasure.

Richard Dewey watched the work going on in silence.

"If only Ben and Bradley would come back," he said to himself, "I should soon be free of these rascals. They won't find the gold where they are looking, but I needn't tell them that."

CHAPTER VII.
TIED TO A TREE

When Ben and his friend Bradley left the cabin in search of Ki Sing, they were puzzled to fix upon the direction in which it was best to go. There was no particular reason to decide in favor of any one against the others.

"Shall we separate, Jake, or shall we go together?" asked Ben.

"I think we had better stick together, Ben. Otherwise, if one succeeds he won't have any way of letting the other know."

"That's true."

"Besides, we may need each other's help," added Bradley.

"You mean in case Ki Sing has met with an accident?"

"Well, no; I don't exactly mean that, Ben."

"Perhaps," said Ben, laughing, "you think two pairs of eyes better than one."

"That's true, Ben; but you haven't caught my idea."

"Then, suppose you catch it for me and give me the benefit of it."

"I think," said Bradley, not smiling at this sally of Ben's, "that our Chinese friend has fallen in with some rough fellows who have done him harm."

"I hope not," said Ben, sobered by this suggestion.

"So do I. Ki Sing is a good fellow, if he is a heathen, and I'd like to scalp the man that ill-treats him."

"There are not many travellers among these mountains."

"No, but there are some. Some men are always pulling up stakes and looking for better claims. Besides, we are here, and why shouldn't others come here as well?"

"That is so."

"I think, Ben, we'll keep along in this direction," said Bradley, indicating a path on the eastern slope of the hill. "I haven't any particular reason for it, but I've got a sort of idea that this is the right way."

"All right, Jake; I will be guided by you. I hope you're mistaken about Ki Sing's fate. Why couldn't he have fallen and sprained his ankle, like Mr. Dewey?"

"Of course he could, but it isn't likely he has."

"Why not?"

"Because Chinamen, I have always noticed, are cautious and supple. They are some like cats; they fall on their feet. They are not rash like white men, but know better how to take care of their lives and limbs. That's why I don't think Ki Sing has tumbled down or hurt himself in any way."

"Of course he wouldn't leave us without notice," said Ben, musingly.

"Certainly not: that isn't Ki Sing's way. He's faithful to Dick Dewey, and won't leave him as long as Dick is laid up. I never had much idea of Chinamen before, and I don't know as I have now, but Ki Sing is a good fellow, whatever you may say of his countrymen. They're not all honest. I was once robbed by a Chinaman, but I'll bet something on Ki Sing. He might have robbed Dick when he was helpless and dependent, before we came along, but he didn't do it. There are plenty of white men you couldn't say that of."

"For instance, the gentlemen who stole our horses."

"It makes me mad whenever I think of that little transaction," said Bradley. "As for that braggart, Mosely, he'll come to grief some of these days. He'll probably die with his boots on and his feet some way from the ground. Before that happens I'd like a little whack at him myself."

"I owe him a debt too," said Ben. "His running off with my mustang cost me a good many weary hours. But hark! what's that?" said Ben, suddenly.

"What's what?"

"I thought I heard a cry."

"Where away?"

"To the left."

Jake Bradley halted and inclined his ear to listen.

"Ben," said he, looking up, "I believe we're on the scent. That cry came either from a Chinaman or a cat."

Ben couldn't help laughing, in spite of the apprehensions which the words of his companion suggested. "Let us push on, then," he said.

Three minutes later the two came in sight of poor Ki Sing, chafing in his forced captivity and making ineffectual attempts to release himself from his confinement.

"That's he, sure enough," exclaimed Jake Bradley, excited. "The poor fellow's regularly treed."

The Chinaman had not yet seen the approach of his friends, for he happened to be looking in another direction.

"Ki Sing!" called Ben.

An expression of relief and joy overspread the countenance of the unfortunate captive when he saw our hero and Bradley.

"How came you here, Ki Sing?" asked Bradley. "Did you tie yourself to the tree?"

"No, no," replied the Chinaman, earnestly. "Velly bad men tie Ki Sing."

"How many of them bad men were there?" queried Bradley.

"Two."

"That's one apiece for us, Ben," said Bradley. "There a job ahead for us."

At the same time he busied himself in cutting the cord that confined the poor Chinaman to the tree, and Ki Sing, with an expression of great relief and contentment, stretched his limbs and chafed his wrists and ankles, which were sore from the cutting of the cord.

"Now, Ki Sing, tell us a little more about them men. What did they look like?"

The Chinaman, in the best English he had at command, described the two men who had perpetrated the outrage.

"Did you hear either of them call the other by name?" inquired Bradley.

"One Billee; the other Tommee," answered Ki Sing, who remembered the way in which they addressed each other.

"Why, those are the names of the men who stole our horses!" said Ben, in surprise.

"That's so!" exclaimed Bradley, in excitement. "It would be just like them scamps to tie up a poor fellow like Ki Sing.—I say, Ki, did them fellows have horses?"

"Yes," answered the Chinaman.

"I believe they're the very fellows," cried Bradley. "I hope they are, for there's a chance of overhauling them.—Why did they tie you, Ki Sing?"

Ki Sing explained that they had tried to induce him to guide them to Richard Dewey's cabin, but that he was sure they wanted to steal his gold, and he had led them astray.

"That's the sort of fellow Ki Sing is," said Bradley, nodding to Ben; "you see, he wouldn't betray his master."

"So they tie me to tlee," continued the poor fellow. "I thought I stay here all night."

"You didn't take us into the account, Ki Sing. When these scoundrels left you where did they go?"

Ki Sing pointed.

"And you think they went in search of the cabin?"

"Yes—they say so."

"Did they know we were there—Ben and I?"

"No; me only say Dickee Dewey."

"Did you say that Dewey was sick?"

"Yes."

"It is clear," said Bradley, turning to Ben, "that them rascals were bent on mischief. From what Ki Sing told them they concluded that Dewey would be unable to resist them, and that they would have a soft thing stealing his gold-dust."

"They may have found the cabin and be at work there now," suggested Ben.

"So they may," answered Bradley, hastily. "What a fool I am to be chattering here when Dick may be in danger!—Stir your stumps, Ki Sing. We're goin' back to the cabin as fast as our legs can carry us. I only hope we'll be in time to catch the scoundrels."

Not without anxiety the three friends retraced their steps toward the little mountain-hut which was at present their only home.

CHAPTER VIII.
TURNING THE TABLES

When the three friends came in view of the cabin, the first sight which attracted their attention was the two mustangs, who stood, in patient enjoyment of the rest they so much needed, just outside. Their unlawful owners, as we know, were engaged inside in searching for gold-dust, without the slightest apprehension or expectation of interference.

"That's my mustang," exclaimed Bradley in a tone of suppressed excitement. "I never looked to lay eyes on him again, but, thank the Lord! the thief has walked into a trap which I didn't set for him. We'll have a reckoning, and that pretty soon."

"How do you know it's your mustang?" asked Ben.

"There's a white spot on the left flank. The other one's yours: I know it by his make, though I can't lay hold of any sign. Even if I didn't know him, his bein' in company with mine makes it stand to reason that it belongs to you."

"I shall be glad to have it again," said Ben, "but we may have a tussle for them."

"I'm ready," said Jake Bradley, grimly.

By this time they had come to a halt to consider the situation.

"I don't hear anything," said Bradley, listening intently. "I expect the skunks must be inside. Pray Heaven they haven't harmed poor Dewey!"

Just then Dewey's voice was heard, and they were so near that they could distinguish his words.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "how are you getting on? Have you found anything yet?"

"No, curse it!" responded Mosely. "Suppose you give us a hint."

"Thank you, but I don't see how that's going to benefit me. If you find the money you mean to take it, don't you?"

"I should say so," answered Tom Hadley, frankly.

Richard Dewey smiled. "I commend your frankness," he said. "Well, you can't expect a man to assist in robbing himself, can you?"

"You're mighty cool," growled Bill Mosely.

"On the contrary, my indignation is very warm, I assure you."

"Look here, Dewey," said Mosely, pausing: "I'm goin' to make you a proposition."

"Go on."

"Of course we shall find this gold-dust of yours, but it's rather hard and troublesome work; so I'll tell you what we'll do. If you'll tell us where to find it, we'll leave a third of it for you. That'll be square, won't it? One part for me, one for my pard, and one for you? What do you say?"

"That you are very kind to allow me a third of what belongs wholly to me. But even if I should think this a profitable arrangement to enter into, how am I to feel secure against your carrying off all of the treasure?"

"You can trust to the honor of a gentleman," laid Mr. William Mosely, pompously.

"Meaning you?" asked Dewey, with a laugh.

"Meaning me, of course, and when perhaps for myself, perhaps for my pard also—eh, Tom?"

"I should say so, Bill."

"I've heard there's honor among thieves," said Dewey, smiling, "and this appears to be an illustration of it. Well, gentlemen, I'm sorry to say I don't feel that confidence in your honor or your word which would justify me in accepting your kind proposal."

"Do you doubt my word?" blustered Mosely.

"I feel no doubt on the subject," answered Dewey.

"I accept your apology," said Mosely; "it's lucky you made it. Me and my friend don't stand no insults. We don't take no back talk. We're bad men when we get into a scrimmage—eh, Tom?"

"I don't doubt your word in the least," said Dewey. "It gives me pleasure to assent cordially to the description you give of yourselves."

Tom Hadley, who was rather obtuse, took this as a compliment, but Mosely was not altogether clear whether Dewey was not chaffing them. "That sounds all right," said he, suspiciously, "if you mean it."

"Oh, set your mind quite at rest on that subject, Bill, if that is your name. You may be sure that I mean everything I say."

"Then you won't give us a hint where to dig?"

"I am sorry to disoblige you, but I really couldn't."

"Do you hear that, Ben?" said Jake Bradley, his mouth distended with a grin. "Dick's chaffin' them scoundrels, and they can't see it. It looks as if they was huntin' for the gold-dust. They haven't found anything yet, and they haven't hurt Dick, or he wouldn't talk as cool as he does."

There was a brief conference, and then the first movement was made by the besieging-party.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.