ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

TWICE BOUGHT

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Ballantyne R.

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Содержание

Chapter One 5
Chapter Two 10
Chapter Three 15
Chapter Four 20
Chapter Five 26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 31

R. M. Ballantyne
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Chapter One

"'Honesty is the best policy,' Tom, you may depend on it," said a youth to his companion, one afternoon, as they walked along the margin of one of those brawling rivulets which, born amid the snows of the Rocky Mountain peaks, run a wild and plunging course of many miles before finding comparative rest in the celebrated goldfields of Oregon.

"I don't agree with you, Fred," said Tom, sternly; "and I don't believe in the proverb you have quoted. The world's maxims are not all gospel."

"You are right, Tom; many of them are false; nevertheless, some are founded on gospel truth."

"It matters not," returned Tom, angrily. "I have made up my mind to get back from that big thief Gashford what he has stolen from me, for it is certain that he cheated at play, though I could not prove it at the time. It is impossible to get it back by fair means, and I hold it quite allowable to steal from a thief, especially when that which you take is your own."

Fred Westly shook his head, but did not reply. Many a time had he reasoned with his friend, Tom Brixton, about the sin of gambling, and urged him to be content with the result of each day's digging for gold, but his words had no effect. Young Brixton had resolved to make a fortune rapidly. He laboured each day with pick and shovel with the energy of a hero and the dogged perseverance of a navvy, and each night he went to Lantry's store to increase his gains by gambling. As a matter of course his "luck," as he called it, varied. Sometimes he returned to the tent which he shared with his friend Westly, depressed, out of humour, and empty-handed. At other times he made his appearance flushed with success—occasionally, also, with drink,—and flung down a heavy bag of golden nuggets as the result of his evening's play. Ultimately, when under the influence of drink, he staked all that he had in the world, except his clothes and tools, to a man named Gashford, who was noted for his size, strength of body, and utter disregard of God and man. As Brixton said, Gashford had cheated him at play, and this had rendered the ruined man unusually savage.

The sun was down when the two friends entered their tent and began to pull off their muddy boots, while a little man in a blue flannel shirt and a brown wide-awake busied himself in the preparation of supper.

"What have you got for us to-night, Paddy?" asked Westly.

"Salt pork it is," said the little man, looking up with a most expressive grin; "the best o' victuals when there's nothin' better. Bein' in a luxurious frame o' mind when I was up at the store, I bought a few split-pays for seasonin'; but it comes hard on a man to spind his gould on sitch things when his luck's down. You've not done much to-day, I see, by the looks of ye."

"Right, Paddy," said Tom Brixton, with a harsh laugh; "we've done nothing—absolutely nothing. See, there is my day's work."

He pulled three small grains of gold, each about the size of a pea, from his trousers pocket, and flung them contemptuously into a washing-pan at his elbow.

"Sure, we won't make our fortins fast at that rate," said Paddy, or Patrick Flinders.

"This won't help it much," said Westly, with a mingled smile and sigh, as he added a small nugget and a little gold-dust to the pile.

"Ah! then, haven't I forgot the shuggar for the tay; but I've not got far to go for to get it. Just kape stirrin' the pot, Mister Westly, I'll be back in a minit."

"Tom," said Westly, when their comrade had gone out, "don't give way to angry feelings. Do try, like a good fellow, to look at things in a philosophical light, since you object to a religious one.

Rightly or wrongly, Gashford has won your gold. Well, take heart and dig away. You know I have saved a considerable sum, the half of which is at your service to—"

"Do you suppose," interrupted the other sharply, "that I will consent to become a beggar?"

"No," replied Westly, "but there is no reason why you should not consent to accept an offer when it is made to you by an old chum. Besides, I offer the money on loan, the only condition being that you won't gamble it away."

"Fred," returned Brixton, impressively, "I *must* gamble with it if I take it. I can no more give up gambling than I can give up drinking. I'm a doomed man, my boy; doomed to be either a millionaire or a madman!"

The glittering eyes and wild expression of the youth while he spoke induced his friend to fear that he was already the latter.

"Oh! Tom, my dear fellow," he said, "God did not doom you. If your doom is fixed, you have yourself fixed it."

"Now, Fred," returned the other impatiently, "don't bore me with your religious notions. Religion is all very well in the old country, but it won't work at all here at the diggin's."

"My experience has proved the contrary," returned Westly, "for religion—or, rather, God—has saved *me* from drink and gaming."

"If it *be* God who has saved you, why has He not saved me?" demanded Brixton.

"Because that mysterious and incomprehensible power of Free Will stands in your way. In the exercise of your free will you have rejected God, therefore the responsibility rests with yourself. If you will now call upon Him, life will, by His Holy Spirit, enable you to accept salvation through Jesus Christ."

"No use, Fred, no use," said Tom, shaking his head. "When you and I left England, three years ago, I might have believed and trusted as you do, but it's too late now—too late I say, so don't worry me with your solemn looks and sermons. My mind's made up, I tell you. With these three paltry little lumps of gold I'll gamble at the store to-night with Gashford. I'll double the stake every game. If I win, well—if not, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, because at that moment Paddy Flinders re-entered with the sugar; possibly, also, because he did not wish to reveal all his intentions.

That night there was more noise, drinking, and gambling than usual at Lantry's store, several of the miners having returned from a prospecting trip into the mountains with a considerable quantity of gold.

Loudest among the swearers, deepest among the drinkers, and most reckless among the gamblers was Gashford "the bully," as he was styled. He had just challenged any one present to play when Brixton entered the room.

"We will each stake all that we own on a single chance," he said, looking round. "Come, that's fair, ain't it? for you know I've got lots of dust."

There was a general laugh, but no one would accept the challenge—which Brixton had not heard—though he heard the laugh that followed. Many of the diggers, especially the poorer ones, would have gladly taken him up if they had not been afraid of the consequences if successful.

"Well, boys, I couldn't make a fairer offer—all I possess against all that any other man owns, though it should only be half an ounce of gold," said the bully, tossing off a glass of spirits.

"Done! I accept your challenge," cried Tom Brixton, stepping forward.

"You!" exclaimed Gashford, with a look of contempt; "why, you've got nothing to stake. I cleaned you out yesterday."

"I have this to stake," said Tom, holding out the three little nuggets of gold which he had found that day. "It is all that I possess, and it is more than half an ounce, which you mentioned as the lowest you'd play for."

"Well, I'll stick to what I said," growled Gashford, "if it *be* half an ounce. Come, Lantry, get out your scales."

The storekeeper promptly produced the little balance which he used for weighing gold-dust, and the diggers crowded round with much interest to watch, while Lantry, with a show of unwonted care, dusted the scales, and put the three nuggets therein.

"Three-quarters of an ounce," said the storekeeper, when the balance ceased to vibrate.

"Come along, then, an' let's have another glass of grog for luck," cried Gashford, striking his huge fist on the counter.

A throw of the dice was to decide the matter. While Lantry, who was appointed to make the throw, rattled the dice in the box, the diggers crowded round in eager curiosity, for, besides the unusual disparity between the stakes, there was much probability of a scene of violence as the result, Brixton having displayed a good deal of temper when he lost to the bully on the previous day.

"Lost!" exclaimed several voices in disappointed tones, when the dice fell on the table.

"Who's lost?" cried those in the rear of the crowd.

"Tom Brixton, to be sure," answered Gashford, with a laugh. "He always loses; but it's no great loss this time, and I am not much the richer."

There was no response to this sally. Every one looked at Brixton, expecting an outburst of rage, but the youth stood calmly contemplating the dice with an absent look, and a pleasant smile on his lips.

"Yes," he said, recovering himself, "luck is indeed against me. But never mind. Let's have a drink, Lantry; you'll have to give it me on credit this time!"

Lantry professed himself to be quite willing to oblige an old customer to that extent. He could well afford it, he said; and it was unquestionable truth that he uttered, for his charges were exorbitant.

That night, when the camp was silent in repose, and the revellers were either steeped in oblivion or wandering in golden dreams, Tom Brixton sauntered slowly down to the river at a point where it spread out into a lakelet, in which the moon was brightly reflected. The overhanging cliffs, fringed with underwood and crowned with trees, shot reflections of ebony blackness here and there down into the water, while beyond, through several openings, could be seen a varied and beautiful landscape, backed and capped by the snow-peaks of the great backbone of America.

It was a scene fitted to solemnise and soften, but it had no such influence on Tom Brixton, who did not give it even a passing thought though he stood with folded arms and contracted brows, gazing at it long and earnestly. After a time he began to mutter to himself in broken sentences.

"Fred is mistaken—*must* be mistaken. There is no law here. Law must be taken into one's own hands. It cannot be wrong to rob a robber. It is not robbery to take back one's own. Foul means are admissible when fair—yet it *is* a sneaking thing to do! Ha! who said it was sneaking?" (He started and thrust his hands through his hair.) "Bah! Lantry, your grog is too fiery. It was the grog that spoke, not conscience. Pooh! I don't believe in conscience. Come, Tom, don't be a fool, but go and —Mother! What has *she* got to do with it? Lantry's fire-water didn't bring *her* to my mind. No, it *is* Fred, confound him! He's always suggesting what she would say in circumstances which she has never been in and could not possibly understand. And he worries me on the plea that he promised her to stick by me through evil report and good report. I suppose that means through thick and thin. Well, he's a good fellow is Fred, but weak. Yes, I've made up my mind to do it and I *will* do it."

He turned hastily as he spoke, and was soon lost in the little belt of woodland that lay between the lake and the miner's camp.

It pleased Gashford to keep his gold in a huge leathern bag, which he hid in a hole in the ground within his tent during the day, and placed under his pillow during the night. It pleased him also to dwell and work alone, partly because he was of an unsociable disposition, and partly to prevent men becoming acquainted with his secrets.

There did not seem to be much fear of the big miner's secrets being discovered, for Lynch law prevailed in the camp at that time, and it was well known that death was the usual punishment

for theft. It was also well known that Gashford was a splendid shot with the revolver, as well as a fierce, unscrupulous man. But strong drink revealed that which might have otherwise been safe. When in his cups Gashford sometimes became boastful, and gave hints now and then which were easily understood. Still his gold was safe, for, apart from the danger of the attempt to rob the bully, it would have been impossible to discover the particular part of his tent-floor in which the hole was dug, and, as to venturing to touch his pillow while his shaggy head rested on it, no one was daring enough to contemplate such an act although there were men there capable of doing almost anything.

Here again, however, strong drink proved to be the big miner's foe. Occasionally, though not often, Gashford drank so deeply as to become almost helpless, and, after lying down in his bed, sank into a sleep so profound that it seemed as if he could not have been roused even with violence.

He was in this condition on the night in which his victim made up his mind to rob him. Despair and brandy had united to render Brixton utterly reckless; so much so, that instead of creeping stealthily towards his enemy's tent, an act which would probably have aroused the suspicion of a light sleeper, he walked boldly up, entered it, raised Gashford's unconscious head with one hand, pulled out the bag of gold with the other, put it on his shoulder, and coolly marched out of the camp. The audacity of the deed contributed largely to its success.

Great was the rage and consternation of Gashford when he awoke the following morning and found that his treasure had disappeared. Jumping at once to the conclusion that it had been stolen by Brixton, he ran to that youth's tent and demanded to know where the thief had gone to.

"What do you mean by the thief?" asked Fred Westly, with misgiving at his heart.

"I mean your chum, Tom Brixton," shouted the enraged miner.

"How do you know he's a thief?" asked Westly.

"I didn't come here to be asked questions by you," said Gashford. "Where has he gone to, I say?"

"I don't know."

"That's a lie!" roared the miner, clenching his fist in a threatening manner.

"Poor Tom! I wish I did know where you have gone!" said Fred, shaking his head sadly as he gazed on the floor, and taking no notice whatever of the threatening action of his visitor.

"Look here now, Westly," said Gashford, in a low suppressed voice, shutting the curtain of the tent and drawing a revolver from his pocket, "you know something about this matter, and you know *me*. If you don't tell me all you know and where your chum has bolted to, I'll blow your brains out as sure as there's a God in heaven."

"I thought," said Westly, quietly, and without the slightest symptom of alarm, "you held the opinion that there is no God and no heaven."

"Come, young fellow, none o' your religious chaff, but answer my question."

"Nothing is farther from my thoughts than chaffing you," returned Westly, gently, "and if the mere mention of God's name is religion, then you may claim to be one of the most religious men at the diggings, for you are constantly praying Him to curse people. I have already answered your question, and can only repeat that I *don't know* where my friend Brixton has gone to. But let me ask, in turn, what has happened to *you*?"

There was no resisting the earnest sincerity of Fred's look and tone, to say nothing of his cool courage. Gashford felt somewhat abashed in spite of himself.

"What has happened to me?" he repeated, bitterly. "The worst that could happen has happened. My gold has been stolen, and your chum is the man who has cribbed it. I know that as well as if I had seen him do it. But I'll hunt him down and have it out of him with interest; with interest, mark you—if I should have to go to the ends o' the 'arth to find him."

Without another word Gashford thrust the revolver into his pocket, flung aside the tent curtain, and strode away.

Meanwhile Tom Brixton, with the gold in a game-bag slung across his shoulder, was speeding down the valley, or mountain gorge, at the head of which the Pine Tree Diggings lay, with all the

vigour and activity of youthful strength, but with none of the exultation that might be supposed to characterise a successful thief. On the contrary, a weight like lead seemed to lie on his heart, and the faces of his mother and his friend, Fred Westly, seemed to flit before him continually, gazing at him with sorrowful expression. As the fumes of the liquor which he had drunk began to dissipate, the shame and depression of spirit increased, and his strength, great though it was, began to give way.

By that time, however, he had placed many a mile between him and the camp where he had committed the robbery. The valley opened into a wide, almost boundless stretch of comparatively level land, covered here and there with forests so dense, that, once concealed in their recesses, it would be exceedingly difficult if not impossible, for white men to trace him, especially men who were so little acquainted with woodcraft as the diggers. Besides this, the region was undulating in form, here and there, so that from the tops of many of the eminences, he could see over the whole land, and observe the approach of enemies without being himself seen.

Feeling, therefore, comparatively safe, he paused in his mad flight, and went down on hands and knees to take a long drink at a bubbling spring. Rising, refreshed, with a deep sigh, he slowly mounted to the top of a knoll which was bathed at the time in the first beams of the rising sun.

From the spot he obtained a view of intermingled forest, prairie, lake, and river, so resplendent that even *his* mind was for a moment diverted from its gloomy introspections, and a glance of admiration shot from his eyes and chased the wrinkles from his brow; but the frown quickly returned, and the glorious landscape was forgotten as the thought of his dreadful condition returned with overwhelming power.

Up to that day Tom Brixton, with all his faults, had kept within the circle of the world's laws. He had been well trained in boyhood, and, with the approval of his mother, had left England for the Oregon goldfields in company with a steady, well-principled friend, who had been a playmate in early childhood and at school. The two friends had experienced during three years the varying fortune of a digger's life; sometimes working for long periods successfully, and gradually increasing their "pile;" at other times toiling day after day for nothing and living on their capital, but on the whole, making what men called a good thing of it until Tom took to gambling, which, almost as a matter of course, led to drinking. The process of demoralisation had continued until, as we have seen, the boundary line was at last overstepped, and he had become a thief and an outlaw.

At that period and in those diggings Judge Lynch—in other words, off-hand and speedy "justice" by the community of miners—was the order of the day, and, as stealing had become exasperatingly common, the penalty appointed was death, the judges being, in most cases, the prompt executioners.

Tom Brixton knew well what his fate would be if captured, and this unquestionably filled him with anxiety, but it was not this thought that caused him, as he reclined on the sunny knoll, to spurn the bag of gold with his foot.

"Trash!" he exclaimed, bitterly, repeating the kick.

But the love of gold had taken deep root in the fallen youth's heart. After a brief rest he arose, slung the "trash" over his shoulder, and, descending the knoll, quickly disappeared in the glades of the forests.

Chapter Two

While Brixton was hurrying with a guilty conscience deeper and deeper into the dark woods which covered the spur of the mountains in the neighbourhood of Pine Tree Diggings, glancing back nervously from time to time as if he expected the pursuers to be close at his heels, an enemy was advancing to meet him in front, of whom he little dreamed.

A brown bear, either enjoying his morning walk or on the look-out for breakfast, suddenly met him face to face, and stood up on its hind legs as if to have a good look at him.

Tom was no coward; indeed he was gifted with more than an average amount of animal courage. He at once levelled his rifle at the creature's breast and fired. The bear rushed at him, nevertheless, as if uninjured. Drawing his revolver, Tom discharged two shots before the monster reached him. All three shots had taken effect but bears are noted for tenacity of life, and are frequently able to fight a furious battle after being mortally wounded. The rifle ball had touched its heart, and the revolver bullets had gone deep into its chest, yet it showed little sign of having been hurt.

Knowing full well the fate that awaited him if he stood to wrestle with a bear, the youth turned to run, but the bear was too quick for him. It struck him on the back and felled him to the earth.

Strange to say, at that moment Tom Brixton's ill-gotten gains stood him in good stead. There can be no question that the bear's tremendous claws would have sunk deep into the youth's back, and probably broken his spine, if they had not been arrested by the bag of gold which was slung at his back. Although knocked down and slightly stunned, Brixton was still unwounded, and, even in the act of falling, had presence of mind to draw his long knife and plunge it up to the haft in the creature's side, at the same time twisting himself violently round so as to fall on his back and thus face the foe.

In this position, partly owing to the form of the ground, the bear found it difficult to grasp its opponent in its awful embrace, but it held him with its claws and seized his left shoulder with its teeth. This rendered the use of the revolver impossible, but fortunately Brixton's right arm was still free, and he drove the keen knife a second time deep into the animal's sides. Whether mortal or not, the wound did not immediately kill. Tom felt that his hour was come, and a deadly fear came over him as the thought of death, his recent life, and judgment, flashed through his brain. He drew out the knife, however, to make another desperate thrust. The bear's great throat was close over his face. He thought of its jugular vein, and made a deadly thrust at the spot where he imagined that to run.

Instantly a flood of warm blood deluged his face and breast; at the same time he felt as if some dreadful weight were pressing him to death. Then consciousness forsook him.

While this desperate fight was going on, the miners of Pine Tree camp were scouring the woods in all directions in search of the fugitive. As we have said, great indignation was felt at that time against thieves, because some of them had become very daring, and cases of theft were multiplying. Severe penalties had been imposed on the culprits by the rest of the community without curing the evil. At last death was decided on as the penalty for any act of theft, however trifling it might be. That these men were in earnest was proved by the summary execution of the next two offenders who were caught. Immediately after that thieving came to an abrupt end, insomuch that if you had left a bag of gold on an exposed place, men would have gone out of their way to avoid it!

One can understand, therefore, the indignation that was roused in the camp when Tom Brixton revived the practice in such a cool and impudent manner. It was felt that, despite his being a favourite with many of the diggers, he must be made an example. Pursuit was, therefore, organised on an extensive scale and in a methodical manner. Among others, his friend Fred Westly took part in it.

It cost those diggers something thus to give up the exciting work of gold-finding for a chase that promised to occupy time and tax perseverance. Some of them even refused to join in it, but on the whole the desire for vengeance seemed general.

Bully Gashford, as he did not object to be called, was, in virtue of his size, energy, and desperate character, tacitly appointed leader. Indeed he would have assumed that position if it had not been accorded to him, for he was made of that stuff which produces either heroes of the highest type or scoundrels of the deepest dye. He arranged that the pursuers should proceed in a body to the mouth of the valley, and there, dividing into several parties, scatter themselves abroad until they should find the thief's trail and then follow it up. As the miners were not much accustomed to following trails, they engaged the services of several Indians who chanced to be at the camp at that time.

"What direction d'ye think it's likely your precious chum has taken?" asked Gashford, turning abruptly to Fred Westly when the different parties were about to start.

"It is impossible for me to tell."

"I know that," retorted Gashford, with a scowl and something of a sneer, "but it ain't impossible for you to guess. However, it will do as well if you tell me which party you intend to join."

"I shall join that which goes to the south-west," replied Westly.

"Well, then, *I* will join that which goes to the south-east," returned the bully, shouldering his rifle. "Go ahead, you red reptile," he added, giving a sign to the Indian at the head of the party he had selected to lead.

The Indian at once went off at a swinging walk, amounting almost to a trot. The others followed suit and the forest soon swallowed them all in its dark embrace.

In making this selection Gashford had fallen into a mistake not uncommon among scoundrels —that of judging other men by themselves. He knew that Westly was fond of his guilty friend, and concluded that he would tell any falsehood or put the pursuers on any false scent that might favour his escape. He also guessed—and he was fond of guessing—that Fred would answer his question by indicating the direction which he thought it most probable his friend had *not* taken. In these guesses he was only to a small extent right. Westly did indeed earnestly hope that his friend would escape; for he deemed the intended punishment of death most unjustly severe, and, knowing intimately the character and tendencies of Tom Brixton's mind and tastes, he had a pretty shrewd guess as to the direction he had taken, but, so far from desiring to throw the pursuers off the scent his main anxiety was to join the party which he thought most likely to find the fugitive—if they should find him at all —in order that he might be present to defend him from sudden or unnecessary violence.

Of course Paddy Flinders went with the same party, and we need scarcely add that the little Irishman sympathised with Fred.

"D'ee think it's likely we'll cotch 'im?" he asked, in a whisper, on the evening of that day, as they went rapidly through the woods together, a little in rear of their party.

"It is difficult to say," answered Westly. "I earnestly hope not; indeed I think not, for Tom has had a good start; but the search is well organised, and there are bloodthirsty, indignant, and persevering men among the various parties, who won't be easily baffled. Still Tom is a splendid runner. We may depend on having a long chase before we come up with him."

"Ah, then, it's glad I am that ye think so, sor," returned Paddy, "for I've been afear'd Mister Tom hadn't got quite so much go in him, since he tuk to gambling and drinkin'."

"Look here, Paddy," exclaimed his companion, stopping abruptly, and pointing to the ground, "are not these the footprints of one of your friends?"

"Sure it's a bar," said the little man, going down on his knees to examine the footprints in question with deep interest.

Flinders was a remarkably plucky little man, and one of his great ambitions was to meet with a bear, when alone, and slay it single-handed. His ambition had not up to that time, been gratified, fortunately for himself, for he was a bad shot and exceedingly reckless, two qualities which would probably have insured his own destruction if he had had his wish.

"Let's go after it, Mister Westly," he said, springing to his feet with an excited look.

"Nonsense, it is probably miles off by this time; besides, we should lose our party."

"Niver a taste, sor; we could soon overhaul them agin. An' won't they have to camp at sundown anyhow? Moreover, if we don't come up wi' the bar in a mile or so we can give it up."

"No, no, Paddy, we must not fall behind. At least, *I* must not; but you may go after it alone if you choose."

"Well, I will, sor. Sure it's not ivery day I git the chance; an' there's no fear o' ye overhaulin' Mister Tom this night. We'll have to slape over it, I'll be bound. Just tell the boys I'll be after them in no time."

So saying Paddy shouldered his rifle, felt knife and axe to make sure of their being safe in his belt, and strode away in the track of the bear.

He had not gone above a quarter of a mile when he came to the spot where the mortal combat had taken place, and found Tom Brixton and the bear dead—as he imagined—on the blood-stained turf.

He uttered a mighty cry, partly to relieve his feelings and partly to recall his friend. The imprudence of this flashed upon him when too late, for others, besides Fred, might have heard him.

But Tom Brixton was not dead. Soon after the dying bear had fallen on him, he recovered consciousness, and shaking himself clear of the carcass with difficulty had arisen; but, giddiness returning, he lay down, and while in this position, overcome with fatigue, had fallen asleep. Paddy's shout aroused him. With a sense of deadly peril hanging over him he leaped up and sprang on the Irishman.

"Hallo, Paddy!" he cried, checking himself, and endeavouring to wipe from his face some of the clotted blood with which he had been deluged. "*You* here? Are you alone?"

"It's wishin' that I was," replied the little man, looking round anxiously. "Mister Fred 'll be here d'rectly, sor—an'—an' I hope that'll be all. But it's alive ye are, is it? An' didn't I take ye for dead. Oh! Mister Brixton, there's more blood on an' about ye, I do belave, than yer whole body could howld."

Before an answer could be returned, Fred Westly, having heard Paddy's shout, came running up.

"Oh! Tom, Tom," he cried, eagerly, "are you hurt? Can you walk? Can you run? The whole camp is out after you."

"Indeed?" replied the fugitive, with a frown. "It would seem that even my *friends* have joined in the chase."

"We have," said the other, hurriedly, "but not to capture—to save, if possible. Come, Tom, can you make an effort? Are you hurt much? You are so horribly covered with blood—"

He stopped short, for at that moment a shout was heard in the distance. It was replied to in another direction nearer at hand.

There happened to be a man in the party which Westly had joined, named Crossby. He had suffered much from thieves, and had a particular spite against Brixton because he had lost to him at play. He had heard Paddy Flinders's unfortunate shout, and immediately ran in the direction whence it came; while others of the party, having discovered the fugitive's track, had followed it up.

"Too late," groaned Fred on hearing Crossby's voice.

"Not too late for *this*," growled Brixton, bitterly, as he quickly loaded his rifle.

"For God's sake don't do that, Tom," cried his friend earnestly, as he laid his hand on his arm; but Tom shook him off and completed the operation just as Crossby burst from the bushes and ran towards them. Seeing the fugitive standing ready with rifle in hand, he stopped at once, took rapid aim, and fired. The ball whistled close past the head of Tom, who then raised his own rifle, took deliberate aim, and fired, but Westly threw up the muzzle and the bullet went high among the tree-tops.

With an exclamation of fury Brixton drew his knife, while Crossby rushed at him with his rifle clubbed.

The digger was a strong and fierce man, and there would doubtless have been a terrible and fatal encounter if Fred had not again interfered. He seized his friend from behind, and, whirling him

sharply round, received on his own shoulder the blow which was meant for Tom's head. Fred fell, dragging his friend down with him.

Flinders, who witnessed the unaccountable action of his companion with much surprise, now sprang to the rescue, but at the moment several of the other pursuers rushed upon the scene, and the luckless fugitive was instantly overpowered and secured.

"Now, my young buck," said Crossby, "stand up! Hold him, four of you, till I fix his hands wi' this rope. There, it's the rope that you'll swing by, so you'll find it hard to break."

While Tom was being bound he cast a look of fierce anger on Westly, who still lay prostrate and insensible on the ground, despite Paddy's efforts to rouse him.

"I hope he is killed," muttered Tom between his teeth.

"Och! no fear of him, he's not so aisy kilt," said Flinders, looking up. "Bad luck to ye for wishin' it."

As if to corroborate Paddy's opinion, Westly showed signs of returning consciousness, and soon after sat up.

"Did ye kill that bar all by yerself?" asked one of the men who held the fugitive.

But Tom would not condescend to reply, and in a few minutes Crossby gave the word to march back towards Pine Tree Diggings.

They set off—two men marching on either side of the prisoner with loaded rifles and revolvers, the rest in front and in rear. A party was left behind to skin the bear and bring away the tit-bits of the carcass for supper. Being too late to return to Pine Tree Camp that night, they arranged to bivouac for the night in a hollow where there was a little pond fed by a clear spring which was known as the Red Man's Teacup.

Here they kindled a large fire, the bright sparks from which, rising above the tree-tops, soon attracted the attention of the other parties, so that, ere long, the whole band of pursuers was gathered to the spot.

Gashford was the last to come up. On hearing that the thief had been captured by his former chum Westly, assisted by Flinders and Crossby, he expressed considerable surprise, and cast a long and searching gaze on Fred, who, however, being busy with the fire at the time, was unconscious of it. Whatever the bully thought, he kept his opinions to himself.

"Have you tied him up well!" he said, turning to Crossby.

"A wild horse couldn't break his fastenings," answered the digger.

"Perhaps not," returned Gashford, with a sneer, "but you are always too sure by half o' yer work. Come, stand up," he added, going to where Tom lay, and stirring his prostrate form with his toe.

Brixton having now had time to consider his case coolly, had made up his mind to submit with a good grace to his fate, and, if it were so decreed, to die "like a man." "I deserve punishment," he reasoned with himself, "though death is too severe for the offence. However, a guilty man can't expect to be the chooser of his reward. I suppose it is fate, as the Turks say, so I'll submit—like them."

He stood up at once, therefore, on being ordered to do so, and quietly underwent inspection.

"Ha! I thought so!" exclaimed Gashford, contemptuously. "Any man could free himself from that in half an hour. But what better could be expected from a land-lubber?"

Crossby made some sharp allusions to a "sea-lubber," but he wisely restrained his voice so that only those nearest overheard him.

Meanwhile Gashford undid the rope that bound Tom Brixton's arms behind him, and, holding him in his iron grip, ordered a smaller cord to be fetched.

Paddy Flinders, who had a schoolboy tendency to stuff his various pockets full of all sorts of miscellaneous articles, at once stepped forward and handed the leader a piece of strong cod-line.

"There ye are, sor," said he.

"Just the thing, Paddy. Here, catch hold of this end of it an' haul."

"Yis, gineral," said the Irishman, in a tone and with a degree of alacrity that caused a laugh from most of those who were looking on. Even the "gineral" observed it, and remarked with a sardonic smile—

"You seem to be pleased to see your old chum in this fix, I think."

"Well now, gineral," returned Flinders, in an argumentative tone of voice, "I can't exactly say that, sor, for I'm troubled with what ye may call amiable weaknesses. Anyhow, I might see 'im in a worse fix."

"Well, you're like to see him in a worse fix if you live long enough," returned the leader. "Haul now on this knot. It'll puzzle him to undo that. Lend me your knife."

Flinders drew his glittering bowie-knife from its sheath and handed it to his leader, who cut off the superfluous cordage with it, after having bound the prisoner's wrists behind his back in a sailor-like manner.

In returning the knife to its owner, Gashford, who was fond of a practical joke, tossed it high in the air towards him with a "Here, catch."

The keen glittering thing came twirling down, but to the surprise of all, the Irishman caught it by the handle as deftly as though he had been a trained juggler.

"Thank your gineralship," exclaimed Paddy, amid a shout of laughter and applause, bowing low in mock reverence. As he rose he made a wild flourish with the knife, uttered an Indian war-whoop, and cut a caper.

In that flourish he managed to strike the cord that bound the prisoner, and severed one turn of it. The barefaced audacity of the act (like that of a juggler) caused it to pass unobserved. Even Tom, although he felt the touch of the knife, was not aware of what had happened, for, of course, a number of uncut turns of the cord still held his wrists painfully tight.

"Now, lie down on your back," said Gashford, sternly, when the laugh that Paddy had raised subsided.

Either the tone of this command, or the pain caused by his bonds, roused Tom's anger, for he refused to obey.

"Lie down, ye spalpeen, whin the gineral bids ye," cried Flinders, suddenly seizing his old friend by the collar and flinging him flat on his back, in which act he managed to trip and fall on the top of him.

The opportunity was not a good one, nevertheless the energetic fellow managed to whisper, "The rope's cut! Lie still!" in the very act of falling.

"Well done, Paddy," exclaimed several of the laughing men, as Flinders rose with a pretended look of discomfiture, and went towards the fire, exclaiming—

"Niver mind, boys, I'll have me supper now. Hi! who's bin an' stole it whin I was out on dooty? Oh! here it is all right. Now then, go to work, an' whin the pipes is lighted I'll maybe sing ye a song, or tell ye a story about ould Ireland."

Chapter Three

Obedient to orders, Tom Brixton lay perfectly still on his back, just where he had fallen, wondering much whether the cord was really cut, for he did not feel much relaxation of it or abatement of the pain. He resolved, at any rate, to give no further cause for rough treatment, but to await the issue of events as patiently as he could.

True to his promise, the Irishman after supper sang several songs, which, if not characterised by sweetness of tone, were delivered with a degree of vigour that seemed to make full amends in the estimation of his hearers. After that he told a thrilling ghost story, which drew the entire band of men round him. Paddy had a natural gift in the way of relating ghost stories, for, besides the power of rapid and sustained discourse, without hesitation or redundancy of words, he possessed a vivid imagination, a rich fancy, a deep bass voice, an expressive countenance, and a pair of large coal-black eyes, which, as one of the Yankee diggers said, "would sartinly bore two holes in a blanket if he only looked at it long enough."

We do not intend to inflict that ghost story on the reader. It is sufficient to say that Paddy began it by exclaiming in a loud voice—"'Now or niver, boys—now or niver.' That's what the ghost said."

"What's that you say, Paddy?" asked Gashford, leaving his own separate and private fire, which he enjoyed with one or two chosen comrades, and approaching that round which the great body of the diggers were already assembled.

"I was just goin' to tell the boys, sor, a bit of a ghost story."

"Well, go on, lad, I'd like to hear it, too."

"'Now or niver!'" repeated the Irishman, with such startling emphasis that even Tom Brixton, lying bound as he was under the shelter of a spreading tree at some distance from the fire, had his curiosity aroused. "That's what the ghost said, under somewhat pecooliar circumstances; an' he said it twice so that there might be no mistake at all about it. 'Now or niver! now or niver!' says he, an' he said it earnestly—"

"I didn't know that ghosts could speak," interrupted Crossby, who, when not in a bad humour, was rather fond of thrusting bad jokes and blunt witticisms on his comrades.

"Sure, I'm not surprised at that for there's many things ye don't know, Crossby; besides, no ghost with the smallest taste of propriety about it would condescind to spake wid *you*. Well, boys, that's what the ghost said in a muffled vice—their vices are muffled, you know, an their virtues too, for all I know to the contrairy. It's a good sentiment is that 'Now or niver' for every wan of ye—so ye may putt it in yer pipes an' smoke it, an' those of ye who haven't got pipes can make a quid of it an' chaw it, or subject it to meditation. 'Now or niver!' Think o' that! You see I'm partikler about it, for the whole story turns on that pint, as the ghost's life depended on it, but ye'll see an' onderstan' better whin I come to the end o' the story."

Paddy said this so earnestly that it had the double effect of chaining the attention of his hearers and sending a flash of light into Tom Brixton's brain.

"Now or never!" he muttered to himself, and turned gently on his side so as to be able to feel the cord that bound his wrists. It was still tight, but, by moving his fingers, he could feel that one of its coils had really been cut, and that with a little patience and exertion he might possibly free his hands.

Slight as the motion was, however, Gashford observed it, for the fire-light shone brightly on Tom's recumbent figure.

"Lie still, there!" he cried, sternly.

Tom lay perfectly still, and the Irishman continued his story. It grew in mystery and in horror as he proceeded, and his audience became entranced, while some of the more superstitious among them cast occasional glances over their shoulders into the forest behind, which ere long was steeped

in the blackness of an unusually dark night. A few of those outside the circle rose and drew nearer to the story-teller.

At that moment a gleam of light which had already entered Brixton's brain flashed into that of Fred Westly, who arose, and, under pretext of being too far off from the speaker, went round to the opposite side of the fire so as to face him. By so doing he placed himself between the fire and his friend Tom. Two or three of the others followed his example, though not from the same motive, and thus, when the fire burnt low, the prisoner found himself lying in deep shadow. By that time he had freed his benumbed hands, chafed them into a condition of vitality, and was considering whether he should endeavour to creep quietly away or spring up and make a dash for life.

"'Now or niver,' said the ghost, in a solemn muffled vice," continued Paddy—

"Who did he say that to?" asked Gashford, who was by that time as much fascinated as the rest of the party.

"To the thief, sor, av coorse, who was standin' tremblin' fornint him, while the sexton was diggin' the grave to putt him in alive—in the dark shadow of a big tombstone."

The Irishman had now almost reached the climax of his story, and was intensely graphic in his descriptions—especially at the horrible parts. He was obviously spinning it out, and the profound silence around told how completely he had enchained his hearers. It also warned Tom Brixton that his time was short, and that in his case it was indeed, "now or never."

He crept quietly towards the bushes near him. In passing a tree against which several rifles had been placed he could not resist the temptation to take one. Laying hold of that which stood nearest, and which seemed to be similar in make to the rifle they had taken from himself when he was captured, he drew it towards him. Unfortunately it formed a prop to several other rifles, which fell with a crash, and one of them exploded in the fall.

The effect on Paddy's highly-strung audience was tremendous. Many of them yelled as if they had received an electric shock. All of them sprang up and turned round just in time to see their captive vanish, not unlike a ghost, into the thick darkness!

That glance, however, was sufficient to enlighten them. With shouts of rage many of them darted after the fugitive, and followed him up like bloodhounds. Others, who had never been very anxious for his capture or death, and had been turned somewhat in his favour by the bold stand he had made against the bear, returned to the fire after a short run.

If there had been even a glimmering of light Tom would certainly have been retaken at once, for not a few of his pursuers were quite as active and hardy as himself, but the intense darkness favoured him. Fortunately the forest immediately behind him was not so dense as elsewhere, else in his first desperate rush, regardless of consequences, he would probably have dashed himself against a tree. As it was he went right through a thicket and plunged headlong into a deep hole. He scrambled out of this with the agility of a panther, just in time to escape Gashford, who chanced to plunge into the same hole, but not so lightly. Heavy though he was, however, his strength was equal to the shock, and he would have scrambled out quickly enough if Crossby had not run on the same course and tumbled on the top of him.

Amid the growling half-fight, half-scramble that ensued, Tom crept swiftly away to the left, but the pursuers had so scattered themselves that he heard them panting and stumbling about in every direction—before, on either hand, and behind. Hurrying blindly on for a few paces, he almost ran into the arms of a man whom he could hear, though he could not see him, and stopped.

"Hallo! is that you, Bill Smith?" demanded the man.

"Ay, that's me," replied Tom, promptly, mimicking Bill Smith's voice and gasping violently. "I thought you were Brixton. He's just passed this way. I saw him."

"Did you?—where?"

"Away there—to the left!"

Off went the pursuer as fast as he dared, and Tom continued his flight with more caution.

"Hallo! hi! hooroo!" came at that moment from a long distance to the right, in unmistakable tones. "Here he is, down this way. Stop, you big thief! Howld him. Dick! Have ye got him?"

There was a general rush and scramble towards the owner of the bass voice, and Tom, who at once perceived the ruse, went quietly off in the opposite direction.

Of course, the hunt came to an end in a very few minutes. Every one, having more or less damaged his head, knees, elbows, and shins, came to the natural conclusion that a chase in the dark was absurd as well as hopeless, and in a short time all were reassembled round the fire, where Fred Westly still stood, for he had not joined in the pursuit. Gashford was the last to come up, with the exception of Paddy Flinders.

The bully came forward, fuming with rage, and strode up to Fred Westly with a threatening look.

"You were at the bottom of this!" he cried, doubling his huge fist. "It was you who cut the rope, for no mortal man could have untied it!"

"Indeed I did not!" replied Fred, with a steady but not defiant look.

"Then it must have bin your little chum Flinders. Where is he?"

"How could Flinders ha' done it when he was tellin' a ghost story?" said Crossby.

Gashford turned with a furious look to the speaker, and seemed on the point of venting his ill-humour upon him, when he was arrested by the sound of the Irishman's voice shouting in the distance.

As he drew nearer the words became intelligible. "Howld him tight, now! d'ye hear? Och! whereiver have ye gone an' lost yersilf? Howld him tight till I come an' help ye! What! is it let him go ye have? Ah then it's wishin' I had the eyes of a cat this night for I can't rightly see the length of my nose. Sure ye've niver gone an' let him go? Don't say so, now!" wound up Paddy as, issuing from the wood, he advanced into the circle of light.

"Who's got hold of him, Flin?" asked one of the men as he came up.

"Sorrow wan o' me knows," returned the Irishman, wiping the perspiration from his brow; "d'ye suppose I can see in the dark like the moles? All I know is that half a dozen of ye have bin shoutin' 'Here he is!' an' another half-dozen, 'No, he's here—this way!' an' sure I ran this way an' then I ran that way—havin' a nat'ral disposition to obey orders, acquired in the Louth Militia—an' then I ran my nose flat on a tree—bad luck to it!—that putt more stars in me hid than you'll see in the sky this night. Ah! ye may laugh, but it's truth I'm tellin'. See, there's a blob on the ind of it as big as a chirry!"

"That blob's always there, Paddy," cried one of the men; "it's a grog-blossom."

"There now, Peter, don't become personal. But tell me—ye've got him, av coorse?"

"No, we haven't got him," growled Crossby.

"Well, now, you're a purty lot o' hunters. Sure if—"

"Come, shut up, Flinders," interrupted Gashford, swallowing his wrath. (Paddy brought his teeth together with a snap in prompt obedience.) "You know well enough that we haven't got him, and you know you're not sorry for it; but mark my words, I'll hunt him down yet. Who'll go with me?"

"I'll go," said Crossby, stepping forward at once. "I've a grudge agin the puppy, and I'll help to make him swing if I can."

Half a dozen other men, who were noted for leading idle and dissipated lives, and who would rather have hunted men than nothing, also offered to go, but the most of the party had had enough of it, and resolved to return home in the morning.

"We can't go just now, however," said Crossby, "we'd only break our legs or necks."

"The moon will rise in an hour," returned Gashford; "we can start then."

He flung himself down sulkily on the ground beside the fire and began to fill his pipe. Most of the others followed his example, and sat chatting about the recent escape, while a few, rolling themselves in their blankets, resigned themselves to sleep.

About an hour later, as had been predicted, the moon rose, and Gashford with his men set forth. But by that time the fugitive, groping his way painfully with many a stumble and fall, had managed

to put a considerable distance between him and his enemies, so that when the first silvery moonbeans tipped the tree-tops and shed a faint glimmer on the ground, which served to make darkness barely visible, he had secured a good start, and was able to keep well ahead. The pursuers were not long in finding his track, however, for they had taken a Red Indian with them to act as guide, but the necessity for frequent halts to examine the footprints carefully delayed them much, while Tom Brixton ran straight on without halt or stay. Still he felt that his chance of escape was by no means a good one, for as he guessed rightly, they would not start without a native guide, and he knew the power and patience of these red men in following an enemy's trail. What made his case more desperate was the sudden diminution of his strength. For it must be borne in mind that he had taken but little rest and no food since his flight from Pine Tree Diggings, and the wounds he had received from the bear, although not dangerous, were painful and exhausting.

A feeling of despair crept over the stalwart youth when the old familiar sensation of bodily strength began to forsake him. Near daybreak he was on the point of casting himself on the ground to take rest at all hazards, when the sound of falling water broke upon his ear. His spirit revived at once, for he now knew that in his blind wandering he had come near to a well-known river or stream, where he could slake his burning thirst, and, by wading down its course for some distance, throw additional difficulty in the pursuers' way. Not that he expected by that course to throw them entirely off the scent, he only hoped to delay them.

On reaching the river's brink he fell down on his breast and, applying his lips to the bubbling water, took a deep refreshing draught.

"God help me!" he exclaimed, on rising, and then feeling the burden of gold (which, all through his flight had been concealed beneath his shirt, packed flat so as to lie close), he took it off and flung it down.

"There," he said bitterly, "for *you* I have sold myself body and soul, and now I fling you away!"

Instead of resting as he had intended, he now, feeling strengthened, looked about for a suitable place to enter the stream and wade down so as to leave no footprints behind. To his surprise and joy he observed the bow of a small Indian canoe half hidden among the bushes. It had apparently been dragged there by its owner, and left to await his return, for the paddles were lying under it.

Launching this frail bark without a moment's delay, he found that it was tight; pushed off and went rapidly down with the current. Either he had forgotten the gold in his haste, or the disgust he had expressed was genuine, for he left it lying on the bank.

He now no longer fled without a purpose. Many miles down that same stream there dwelt a gold-digger in a lonely hut. His name was Paul Bevan. He was an eccentric being, and a widower with an only child, a daughter, named Elizabeth—better known as Betty.

One phase of Paul Bevan's eccentricity was exhibited in his selection of a spot in which to search for the precious metal. It was a savage, gloomy gorge, such as a misanthrope might choose in which to end an unlovely career. But Bevan was no misanthrope. On the contrary, he was one of those men who are gifted with amiable dispositions, high spirits, strong frames, and unfailing health. He was a favourite with all who knew him, and, although considerably past middle life, possessed much of the fire, energy, and light-heartedness of youth. There is no accounting for the acts of eccentric men, and we make no attempt to explain why it was that Paul Bevan selected a home which was not only far removed from the abodes of other men, but which did not produce much gold. Many prospecting parties had visited the region from time to time, under the impression that Bevan had discovered a rich mine, which he was desirous of keeping all to himself; but, after searching and digging all round the neighbourhood, and discovering that gold was to be found in barely paying quantities, they had left in search of more prolific fields, and spread the report that Paul Bevan was an eccentric fellow. Some said he was a queer chap; others, more outspoken, styled him an ass, but all agreed in the opinion that his daughter Betty was the finest girl in Oregon.

Perhaps this opinion may account for the fact that many of the miners—especially the younger among them—returned again and again to Bevan's Gully to search for gold although the search was not remunerative. Among those persevering though unsuccessful diggers had been, for a considerable time past, our hero Tom Brixton. Perhaps the decision with which Elizabeth Bevan repelled him had had something to do with his late reckless life.

But we must guard the reader here from supposing that Betty Bevan was a beauty. She was not. On the other hand, she was by no means plain, for her complexion was good, her nut-brown hair was soft and wavy, and her eyes were tender and true. It was the blending of the graces of body and of soul that rendered Betty so attractive. As poor Tom Brixton once said in a moment of confidence to his friend Westly, while excusing himself for so frequently going on prospecting expeditions to Bevan's Gully, "There's no question about it, Fred; she's the sweetest girl in Oregon—pshaw! in the world, I should have said. Loving-kindness beams in her eyes, sympathy ripples on her brow, grace dwells in her every motion, and honest, straightforward simplicity sits enthroned upon her countenance!"

Even Crossby, the surly digger, entertained similar sentiments regarding her, though he expressed them in less refined language. "She's a bu'ster," he said once to a comrade, "that's what *she* is, an' no mistake about it. What with her great eyes glarin' affection, an' her little mouth smilin' good-natur', an' her figure goin' about as graceful as a small cat at play—why, I tell 'ee what it is, mate, with such a gal for a wife a feller might snap his fingers at hunger an' thirst, heat an' cold, bad luck an' all the rest of it. But she's got one fault that don't suit me. She's overly religious—an' that don't pay at the diggin's."

This so-called fault did indeed appear to interfere with Betty Bevan's matrimonial prospects, for it kept a large number of dissipated diggers at arm's-length from her, and it made even the more respectable men feel shy in her presence.

Tom Brixton, however, had not been one of her timid admirers. He had a drop or two of Irish blood in his veins which rendered that impossible! Before falling into dissipated habits he had paid his addresses to her boldly. Moreover, his suit was approved by Betty's father, who had taken a great fancy to Tom. But, as we have said, this Rose of Oregon repelled Tom. She did it gently and kindly, it is true, but decidedly.

It was, then, towards the residence of Paul Bevan that the fugitive now urged his canoe, with a strange turmoil of conflicting emotions however; for, the last time he had visited the Gully he had been at least free from the stain of having broken the laws of man. Now, he was a fugitive and an outlaw, with hopes and aspirations blighted and the last shred of self-respect gone.

Chapter Four

When Tom Brixton had descended the river some eight or ten miles he deemed himself pretty safe from his pursuers, at least for the time being, as his rate of progress with the current far exceeded the pace at which men could travel on foot; and besides, there was the strong probability that, on reaching the spot where the canoe had been entered and the bag of gold left on the bank, the pursuers would be partially satisfied as well as baffled, and would return home.

On reaching a waterfall, therefore, where the navigable part of the river ended and its broken course through Bevan's Gully began, he landed without any show of haste, drew the canoe up on the bank, where he left it concealed among bushes, and began quietly to descend by a narrow footpath with which he had been long familiar.

Up to that point the unhappy youth had entertained no definite idea as to why he was hurrying towards the hut of Paul Bevan, or what he meant to say for himself on reaching it. But towards noon, as he drew near to it, the thought of Betty in her innocence and purity oppressed him. She rose before his mind's eye like a reproving angel.

How could he ever face her with the dark stain of a mean theft upon his soul? How could he find courage to confess his guilt to her? or, supposing that he did not confess it, how could he forge the tissue of lies that would be necessary to account for his sudden appearance, and in such guise—bloodstained, wounded, haggard, and worn out with fatigue and hunger? Such thoughts now drove him to the verge of despair. Even if Betty were to refrain from putting awkward questions, there was no chance whatever of Paul Bevan being so considerate. Was he then to attempt to deceive them, or was he to reveal all? He shrank from answering the question, for he believed that Bevan was an honest man, and feared that he would have nothing further to do with him when he learned that he had become a common thief. A thief! How the idea burned into his heart, now that the influence of strong drink no longer warped his judgment!

"Has it *really* come to this?" he muttered, gloomily. Then, as he came suddenly in sight of Bevan's hut, he exclaimed more cheerfully, "Come, I'll make a clean breast of it."

Paul Bevan had pitched his hut on the top of a steep rocky mound, the front of which almost overhung a precipice that descended into a deep gully, where the tormented river fell into a black and gurgling pool. Behind the hut flowed a streamlet, which being divided by the mound into a fork, ran on either side of it in two deep channels, so that the hut could only be reached by a plank bridge thrown across the lower or western fork. The forked streamlet tumbled over the precipice and descended into the dark pool below in the form of two tiny silver threads. At least it would have done so if its two threads had not been dissipated in misty spray long before reaching the bottom of the cliff. Thus it will be seen that the gold-digger occupied an almost impregnable fortress, though why he had perched himself in such a position no one could guess, and he declined to tell. It was therefore set down, like all his other doings, to eccentricity.

Of course there was so far a pretext for his caution in the fact that there were scoundrels in those regions, who sometimes banded together and attacked people who were supposed to have gold-dust about them in large quantities, but as such assaults were not common, and as every one was equally liable to them, there seemed no sufficient ground for Bevan's excessive care in the selection of his fortress.

On reaching it, Tom found its owner cutting up some firewood near his plank-bridge.

"Hallo, Brixton!" he cried, looking up in some surprise as the young man advanced; "you seem to have bin in the wars. What have 'e been fightin' wi', lad?"

"With a bear, Paul Bevan," replied Tom, sitting down on a log, with a long-drawn sigh.

"You're used up, lad, an' want rest; mayhap you want grub also. Anyhow you look awful bad. No wounds, I hope, or bones broken, eh?"

"No, nothing but a broken heart," replied Tom with a faint attempt to smile.

"Why, that's a queer bit o' you for a b'ar to break. If you had said it was a girl that broke it, now, I could have—"

"Where is Betty?" interrupted the youth, quickly, with an anxious expression.

"In the hut, lookin' arter the grub. You'll come in an' have some, of course. But I'm coorious to hear about that b'ar. Was it far from here you met him?"

"Ay, just a short way this side o' Pine Tree Diggings."

"Pine Tree Diggin's!" repeated Paul in surprise. "Why, then, didn't you go back to Pine Tree Diggin's to wash yourself an' rest, instead o' comin' all the way here?"

"Because—because, Paul Bevan," said Tom with sudden earnestness, as he gazed on the other's face, "because I'm a thief!"

"You might be worse," replied Bevan, while a peculiarly significant smile played for a moment on his rugged features.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Tom, in amazement.

"Why, you might have bin a murderer, you know," replied Bevan, with a nod.

The youth was so utterly disgusted with this cool, indifferent way of regarding the matter, that he almost regretted having spoken. He had been condemning himself so severely during the latter part of his journey, and the meanness of his conduct as well as its wickedness had been growing so dark in colour, that Bevan's unexpected levity took him aback, and for a few seconds he could not speak.

"Listen," he said at last, seizing his friend by the arm and looking earnestly into his eyes. "Listen, and I will tell you all about it."

The man became grave as Tom went on with his narrative.

"Yes, it's a bad business," he said, at its conclusion, "an uncommon bad business. Got a very ugly look about it."

"You are right, Paul," said Tom, bowing his head, while a flush of shame covered his face. "No one, I think, can be more fully convinced of the meanness—the sin—of my conduct than I am now—"

"Oh! as to that," returned Bevan, with another of his peculiar smiles, "I didn't exactly mean *that*. You were tempted, you know, pretty bad. Besides, Bully Gashford is a big rascal, an' richly deserves what he got. No, it wasn't that I meant—but it's a bad look-out for you, lad, if they nab you. I knows the temper o' them Pine Tree men, an' they're in such a wax just now that they'll string you up, as sure as fate, if they catch you."

Again Tom was silent, for the lightness with which Bevan regarded his act of theft only had the effect of making him condemn himself the more.

"But I say, Brixton," resumed Bevan, with an altered expression, "not a word of all this to Betty. You haven't much chance with her as it is, although I do my best to back you up; but if she came to know of this affair, you'd not have the ghost of a chance at all—for you know the gal is religious, more's the pity, though I will say it, she's a good obedient gal, in spite of her religion, an' a 'fectionate darter to me. But she'd never marry a thief, you know. You couldn't well expect her to."

The dislike with which Tom Brixton regarded his companion deepened into loathing as he spoke, and he felt it difficult to curb his desire to fell the man to the ground, but the thought that he was Betty's father soon swallowed up all other thoughts and feelings. He resolved in his own mind that, come of it what might, he would certainly tell all the facts to the girl, and then formally give her up, for he agreed with Bevan at least on one point, namely, that he could not expect a good religious girl to marry a thief!

"But you forget, Paul," he said, after a few moments' thought, "that Betty is sure to hear about this affair the first time you have a visitor from Pine Tree Diggings."

"That's true, lad, I did forget that. But you know you can stoutly deny that it was you who did it. Say there was some mistake, and git up some cock-an'-a-bull story to confuse her. Anyhow, say nothing about it just now."

Tom was still meditating what he should say in reply to this, when Betty herself appeared, calling her father to dinner.

"Now, mind, not a word about the robbery," he whispered as he rose, "and we'll make as much as we can of the b'ar."

"Yes, not a word about it," thought Tom, "till Betty and I are alone, and then—a clean breast and good-bye to her, for ever!"

During dinner the girl manifested more than usual sympathy with Tom Brixton. She saw that he was almost worn out with fatigue, and listened with intense interest to her father's embellished narrative of the encounter with the "b'ar," which narrative Tom was forced to interrupt and correct several times, in the course of its delivery. But this sympathy did not throw her off her guard. Remembering past visits, she took special care that Tom should have no opportunity of being alone with her.

"Now, you must be off to rest," said Paul Bevan, the moment his visitor laid down his knife and fork, "for, let me tell you, I may want your help before night. I've got an enemy, Tom, an enemy who has sworn to be the death o' me, and who *will* be the death o' me, I feel sure o' that in the long-run. However, I'll keep him off as long as I can. He'd have been under the sod long afore now, lad—if—if it hadn't bin for my Betty. She's a queer girl is Betty, and she's made a queer man of her old father."

"But who is this enemy, and when—what—? explain yourself."

"Well, I've no time to explain either 'when' or 'what' just now, and you have no time to waste. Only I have had a hint from a friend, early this morning, that my enemy has discovered my whereabouts, and is following me up. But I'm ready for him, and right glad to have your stout arm to help—though you couldn't fight a babby just now. Lie down, I say, an' I'll call you when you're wanted."

Ceasing to press the matter, Tom entered a small room, in one corner of which a narrow bed, or bunk, was fixed. Flinging himself on this, he was fast asleep in less than two minutes. "Kind nature's sweet restorer" held him so fast, that for three hours he lay precisely as he fell, without the slightest motion, save the slow and regular heaving of his broad chest.

At the end of that time he was rudely shaken by a strong hand. The guilty are always easily startled. Springing from his couch he had seized Bevan by the throat before he was quite awake.

"Hist! man, not quite so fast" gasped his host shaking him off. "Come, they've turned up sooner than I expected."

"What—who?" said Brixton, looking round.

"My enemy, of coorse, an' a gang of redskins to help him. They expect to catch us asleep, but they'll find out their mistake soon enough. That lad there brought me the news, and, you see, he an' Betty are getting things ready."

Tom glanced through the slightly opened doorway, as he tightened his belt, and saw Betty and a boy of about fourteen years of age standing at a table, busily engaged loading several old-fashioned horse-pistols with buckshot.

"Who's the boy?" asked Tom.

"They call him Tolly. I saved the little chap once from a grizzly b'ar, an' he's a grateful feller, you see—has run a long way to give me warnin' in time. Come, here's a shot-gun for you, charged wi' slugs. I'm not allowed to use ball, you must know, 'cause Betty thinks that balls kill an' slugs only wound! I humour the little gal, you see, for she's a good darter to me. We've both on us bin lookin' forward to this day, for we knowed it must come sooner or later, an' I made her a promise that, when it did come, I'd only defend the hut wi' slugs. But slugs ain't bad shots at a close range, when aimed low."

The man gave a sly chuckle and a huge wink as he said this, and entered the large room of the hut.

Betty was very pale and silent. She did not even look up from the pistol she was loading when Tom entered. The boy Tolly, however, looked at his tall, strong figure with evident satisfaction.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, ramming down a charge of slugs with great energy; "we'll be able to make a good fight without your services, Betty. Won't we, old man?"

The pertly-put question was addressed to Paul Bevan, between whom and the boy there was evidently strong affection.

"Yes, Tolly," replied Bevan, with a pleasant nod, "three men are quite enough for the defence of this here castle."

"But, I say, old man," continued the boy, shaking a powder-horn before his face, "the powder's all done. Where'll I git more?"

A look of anxiety flitted across Bevan's face.

"It's in the magazine. I got a fresh keg last week, an' thought it safest to put it there till required —an' haven't I gone an' forgot to fetch it in!"

"Well, that don't need to trouble you," returned the boy, "just show me the magazine, an' I'll go an' fetch it in!"

"The magazine's over the bridge," said Bevan. "I dug it there for safety. Come, Tom, the keg's too heavy for the boy. I must fetch it myself, and you must guard the bridge while I do it."

He went out quickly as he spoke, followed by Tom and Tolly.

It was a bright moonlight night, and the forks of the little stream glittered like two lines of silver, at the bottom of their rugged bed on either side of the hut. The plank-bridge had been drawn up on the bank. With the aid of his two allies Bevan quickly thrust it over the gulf, and, without a moment's hesitation, sprang across. While Tom stood at the inner end, ready with a double-barrelled gun to cover his friend's retreat if necessary, he saw Bevan lift a trap-door not thirty yards distant and disappear. A few seconds, and he re-appeared with a keg on his shoulder.

All remained perfectly quiet in the dark woods around. The babbling rivulet alone broke the silence of the night. Bevan seemed to glide over the ground, he trod so softly.

"There's another," he whispered, placing the keg at Tom's feet, and springing back towards the magazine. Again he disappeared, and, as before, re-issued from the hole with the second keg on his shoulder. Suddenly a phantom seemed to glide from the bushes, and fell him to the earth. He dropped without even a cry, and so swift was the act that his friends had not time to move a finger to prevent it. Tom, however, discharged both barrels of his gun at the spot where the phantom seemed to disappear, and Tolly Trevor discharged a horse pistol in the same direction. Instantly a rattling volley was fired from the woods, and balls whistled all round the defenders of the hut.

Most men in the circumstances would have sought shelter, but Tom Brixton's spirit was of that utterly reckless character that refuses to count the cost before action. Betty's father lay helpless on the ground in the power of his enemies! That was enough for Tom. He leaped across the bridge, seized the fallen man, threw him on his shoulder, and had almost regained the bridge, when three painted Indians uttered a hideous war-whoop and sprang after him.

Fortunately, having just emptied their guns, they could not prevent the fugitive from crossing the bridge, but they reached it before there was time to draw in the plank, and were about to follow, when Tolly Trevor planted himself in front of them with a double-barrelled horse-pistol in each band.

"We don't want *you* here, you—red-faced—baboons!" he cried, pausing between each of the last three words to discharge a shot and emphasising the last word with one of the pistols, which he hurled with such precision that it took full effect on the bridge of the nearest red man's nose. All three fell, but rose again with a united screech and fled back to the bushes.

A few moments more and the bridge was drawn back, and Paul Bevan was borne into the hut, amid a scattering fire from the assailants, which, however, did no damage.

To the surprise and consternation of Tolly, who entered first, Betty was found sitting on a chair with blood trickling from her left arm. A ball entering through the window had grazed her, and she sank down, partly from the shock, coupled with alarm. She recovered, however, on seeing her father carried in, sprang up, and ran to him.

"Only stunned, Betty," said Tom; "will be all right soon, but we must rouse him, for the scoundrels will be upon us in a minute. What—what's this—wounded?"

"Only a scratch. Don't mind me. Father! dear father—rouse up! They will be here—oh! rouse up, dear father!"

But Betty shook him in vain.

"Out o' the way, *I* know how to stir him up," said Tolly, coming forward with a pail of water and sending the contents violently into his friend's face—thus drenching him from head to foot.

The result was that Paul Bevan sneezed, and, sitting up, looked astonished.

"Ha! I thought that 'ud fetch you," said the boy, with a grin. "Come, you'd better look alive if you don't want to lose yer scalp."

"Ho! ho!" exclaimed Bevan, rising with a sudden look of intelligence and staggering to the door, "here, give me the old sword, Betty, and the blunderbuss. Now then."

He went out at the door, and Tom Brixton was following, when the girl stopped him.

"Oh! Mr Brixton," she said, "do not *kill* any one, if you can help it."

"I won't if I can help it. But listen, Betty," said the youth, hurriedly seizing the girl's hand. "I have tried hard to speak with you alone to-day, to tell you that I am *guilty*, and to say good-bye *for ever*."

"Guilty! what do you mean?" she exclaimed in bewildered surprise.

"No time to explain. I may be shot, you know, or taken prisoner, though the latter's not likely. In any case remember that I confess myself *guilty*! God bless you, dear, *dear* girl."

Without waiting for a reply, he ran to a hollow on the top of the mound where his friend and Tolly were already ensconced, and whence they could see every part of the clearing around the little fortress.

"I see the reptiles," whispered Bevan, as Tom joined them. "They are mustering for an attack on the south side. Just what I wish," he added, with a suppressed chuckle, "for I've got a pretty little arrangement of cod-hooks and man-traps in that direction."

As he spoke several dark figures were seen gliding among the trees. A moment later, and these made a quick silent rush over the clearing to gain the slight shelter of the shrubs that fringed the streamlet.

"Just so," remarked Bevan, in an undertone, when a crash of branches told that one of his traps had taken effect; "an' from the row I should guess that two have gone into the hole at the same time. Ha! that's a fish hooked!" he added, as a short sharp yell of pain, mingled with surprise, suddenly increased the noise.

"An' there goes another!" whispered Tolly, scarcely able to contain himself with delight at such an effective yet comparatively bloodless way of embarrassing their foes.

"And another," added Bevan; "but look out now; they'll retreat presently. Give 'em a dose o' slug as they go back, but take 'em low, lads—about the feet and ankles. It's only a fancy of my dear little gal, but I like to humour her fancies."

Bevan was right. Finding that they were not only surrounded by hidden pit-falls, but caught by painfully sharp little instruments, and entangled among cordage, the Indians used their scalping-knives to free themselves, and rushed back again towards the wood, but before gaining its shelter they received the slug-dose above referred to, and instantly filled the air with shrieks of rage, rather than of pain. At that moment a volley was fired from the other side of the fortress, and several balls passed close over the defenders' heads.

"Surrounded and outnumbered!" exclaimed Bevan, with something like a groan.

As he spoke another, but more distant, volley was heard, accompanied by shouts of anger and confusion among the men who were assaulting the fortress.

"The attackers are attacked," exclaimed Bevan, in surprise; "I wonder who by."

He looked round for a reply, but only saw the crouching figure of Tolly beside him.

"Where's Brixton?" he asked.

"Bolted into the hut," answered the boy.

"Betty," exclaimed Tom, springing into the little parlour or hall, where he found the poor girl on her knees, "you are safe now. I heard the voice of Gashford, and the Indians are flying. But I too must fly. I am guilty, as I have said, but my crime is not worthy of death, yet death is the award, and, God knows, I am not fit to die. Once more—farewell!"

He spoke rapidly, and was turning to go without even venturing to look at the girl, when she said—

"Whatever your crime may be, remember that there is a Saviour from sin. Stay! You cannot leap the creek, and, even if you did, you would be caught, for I hear voices near us. Come with me."

She spoke in a tone of decision that compelled obedience. Lifting a trap-door in the floor she bade her lover descend. He did so, and found himself in a cellar half full of lumber and with several casks ranged round the walls. The girl followed, removed one of the casks, and disclosed a hole behind it.

"It is small," she said, quickly, "but you will be able to force yourself through. Inside it enlarges at once to a low tunnel, along which you will creep for a hundred yards, when you will reach open air in a dark, rocky dell, close to the edge of the precipice above the river. Descend to its bed, and, when free, use your freedom to escape from death—but much more, to escape from sin. Go quickly!"

Tom Brixton would fain have delayed to seize and kiss his preserver's hand, but the sound of voices overhead warned him to make haste. Without a word he dropped on hands and knees and thrust himself through the aperture. Betty replaced the cask, returned to the upper room, and closed the trap-door just a few minutes before her father ushered Gashford and his party into the hut.

Chapter Five

When our hero found himself in a hole, pitch dark and barely large enough to permit of his creeping on hands and knees, he felt a sudden sensation of fear—of undefinable dread—come over him, such as one might be supposed to experience on awaking to the discovery that he had been buried alive. His first impulse was to shout for deliverance, but his manhood returned to him, and he restrained himself.

Groping his way cautiously along the passage or tunnel, which descended at first steeply, he came to a part which he could feel was regularly built over with an arch of brickwork or masonry, and the sound of running water overhead told him that this was a tunnel under the rivulet. As he advanced the tunnel widened a little, and began to ascend. After creeping what he judged to be a hundred yards or so, he thought he could see a glimmer of light like a faint star in front of him. It was the opening to which Betty had referred. He soon reached it and emerged into the fresh air.

As he raised himself, and drew a long breath of relief, the words of his deliverer seemed to start up before him in letters of fire—

"Use your freedom to escape from death—but *much more, to escape from sin*."

"I will, so help me God!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands convulsively and looking upward. In the strength of the new-born resolution thus induced by the Spirit of God, he fell on his knees and tried to pray. Then he rose and sat down to think, strangely forgetful of the urgent need there was for flight.

Meanwhile Gashford and his men proceeded to question Paul Bevan and his daughter. The party included, among others, Fred Westly, Paddy Flinders, and Crossby. Gashford more than suspected the motives of the first two in accompanying him, but did not quite see his way to decline their services, even if he had possessed the power to do so. He consoled himself, however, with the reflection that he could keep a sharp eye on their movements.

"No, no, Bevan," he said, when the man brought out a case-bottle of rum and invited him to drink, "we have other work on hand just now. We have traced that young thief Brixton to this hut, and we want to get hold of him."

"A thief, is he?" returned Bevan, with a look of feigned surprise. "Well, now, that *is* strange news. Tom Brixton don't look much like a thief, do he?" (appealing to the by-standers). "There must be some mistake, surely."

"There's no mistake," said Gashford, with an oath. "He stole a bag o' gold from my tent. To be sure he dropped it in his flight so I've got it back again, but that don't affect his guilt."

"But surely, Mister Gashford," said Bevan slowly, for, having been hurriedly told in a whisper by Betty what she had done for Tom, he was anxious to give his friend as much time as possible to escape, "surely as you've come by no loss, ye can afford to let the poor young feller off this time."

"No, we can't," shouted Gashford, fiercely. "These mean pilferers have become a perfect pest at the diggin's, an' we intend to stop their little game, we do, by stoppin' their windpipes when we catch them. Come, don't shilly-shally any longer, Paul Bevan. He's here, and no mistake, so you'd better hand him over. Besides, you owe us something, you know, for coming to your help agin the redskins in the nick of time."

"Well, as to that I *am* much obliged, though, after all, it wasn't to help me you came."

"No matter," exclaimed the other impatiently, "you know he is here, an' you're bound to give him up."

"But I *don't* know that he's here, an' I *can't* give him up, cause why? he's escaped."

"Escaped! impossible, there is only one bridge to this mound, and he has not crossed that since we arrived, I'll be bound. There's a sentry on it now."

"But an active young feller can jump, you know."

"No, he couldn't jump over the creek, unless he was a human flea or a Rocky Mountain goat. Come, since you won't show us where he is, we'll take the liberty of sarchin' your premises. But stay, your daughter's got the name o' bein' a religious gal. If there's any truth in that she'd be above tellin' a lie. Come now, Betty, tell us, like a good gal, is Tom Brixton here?"

"No, he is not here," replied the girl.

"Where is he, then?"

"I do not know."

"That's false, you *do* know. But come, lads, we'll sarch, and here's a cellar to begin with."

He laid hold of the iron ring of the trap-door, opened it, and seizing a light descended, followed by Bevan, Crossby, Flinders, and one or two others. Tossing the lumber about he finally rolled aside the barrels ranged beside the wall, until the entrance to the subterranean way was discovered.

"Ho! ho!" he cried, lowering the light and gazing into it. "Here's something, anyhow."

After peering into the dark hole for some time he felt with his hand as far as his arm could reach.

"Mind he don't bite!" suggested Paddy Flinders, in a tone that drew a laugh from the by-standers.

"Hand me that stick, Paddy," said Gashford, "and keep your jokes to a more convenient season."

"Ah! then 'tis always a convanient season wid me, sor," replied Paddy, with a wink at his companions as he handed the stick.

"Does this hole go far in?" he asked, after a fruitless poking about with the stick.

"Ay, a long way. More'n a hundred yards," returned Bevan.

"Well, I'll have a look at it."

Saying which Gashford pushed the light as far in as he could reach, and then, taking a bowie-knife between his teeth, attempted to follow.

We say attempted, because he was successful only in a partial degree. It must be remembered that Gashford was an unusually large man, and that Tom Brixton had been obliged to use a little force in order to gain an entrance. When, therefore, the huge bully had thrust himself in about as far as his waist he stuck hard and fast, so that he could neither advance nor retreat! He struggled violently, and a muffled sound of shouting was heard inside the hole, but no one could make out what was said.

"Och! the poor cratur," exclaimed Paddy Flinders, with a look of overdone commiseration, "what'll we do for 'im at all at all?"

"Let's try to pull him out," suggested Crossby.

They tried and failed, although as many as could manage it laid hold of him.

"Sure he minds me of a stiff cork in a bottle," said Flinders, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "an' what a most awful crack he'll make whin he does come out! Let's give another heave, boys."

They gave another heave, but only caused the muffled shouting inside to increase. "Och! the poor cratur's stritchin' out like a injin-rubber man; sure he's a fut longer than he used to be—him that was a sight too long already," said Flinders.

"Let's try to shove him through," suggested the baffled Crossby.

Failure again followed their united efforts—except as regards the muffled shouting within, which increased in vigour and was accompanied by no small amount of kicking by what of Gashford remained in the cellar.

"I'm afeared his legs'll come off altogether if we try to pull harder than we've done," said Crossby, contemplating the huge and helpless limbs of the victim with a perplexed air.

"What a chance, boys," suddenly exclaimed Flinders, "to pay off old scores with a tree-mendous wallopin'! We could do it aisy in five or six minutes, an' then lave 'im to think over it for the rest of his life."

As no one approved of Paddy's proposal, it was finally resolved to dig the big man out and a pick and shovel were procured for the purpose.

Contrary to all expectations, Gashford was calm, almost subdued, when his friends at last set him free. Instead of storming and abusing every one, he said quietly but quickly, “Let us search the bush now. He can’t be far off yet, and there’s moonlight enough.”

Leading the way, he sprang up the cellar stair, out at the hut-door, and across the bridge, followed closely by his party.

“Hooroo!” yelled Paddy Flinders, as if in the irrepressible ardour of the chase, but in reality to give Brixton intimation of the pursuit, if he should chance to be within earshot.

The well-meant signal did indeed take effect, but it came too late. It found Tom still seated in absorbed meditation. Rudely awakened to the consciousness of his danger and his stupidity, he leaped up and ran along the path that Betty had described to him. At the same moment it chanced that Crossby came upon the same path at its river-side extremity, and in a few moments each ran violently into the other’s arms, and both rolled upon the ground.

The embrace that Crossby gave the youth would have been creditable even to a black bear, but Tom was a match for him in his then condition of savage despair. He rolled the rough digger over on his back, half strangled him, and bumped his shaggy head against the conveniently-situated root of a tree. But Crossby held on with the tenacity of sticking-plaster, shouting wildly all the time, and before either could subdue the other, Gashford and his men coming up stopped the combat.

It were vain attempting to describe the conflict of Brixton’s feelings as they once more bound his arms securely behind him and led him back to Paul Bevan’s hut. The thought of death while fighting with man or beast had never given him much concern, but to be done to death by the rope as a petty thief was dreadful to contemplate, while to appear before the girl he loved, humiliated and bound, was in itself a sort of preliminary death. Afterwards, when confined securely in the cellar and left to himself for the night, with a few pine branches as a bed, the thought of home and mother came to him with overwhelming power, and finally mingled with his dreams. But those dreams, however pleasant they might be at first and in some respects, invariably ended with the branch of a tree and a rope with a noose dangling at the end thereof, and he awoke again and again with a choking sensation, under the impression that the noose was already tightening on his throat.

The agony endured that night while alone in the dark cellar was terrible, for Tom knew the temper of the diggers too well to doubt his fate. Still hope, blessed hope, did not utterly desert him. More than once he struggled to his knees and cried to God for mercy in the Saviour’s name.

By daybreak next morning he was awakened out of the first dreamless sleep that he had enjoyed, and bid get up. A slight breakfast of bread and water was handed to him, which he ate by the light of a homemade candle stuck in the neck of a quart bottle. Soon afterwards Crossby descended, and bade him ascend the wooden stair or ladder. He did so, and found the party of miners assembled under arms, and ready for the road.

“I’m sorry I can’t help ’ee,” said Paul Bevan, drawing the unhappy youth aside, and speaking in a low voice. “I would if I could, for I owe my life to you, but they won’t listen to reason. I sent Betty out o’ the way, lad, a-purpose. Thought it better she shouldn’t see you, but—”

“Come, come, old man, time’s up,” interrupted Gashford, roughly; “we must be off. Now, march, my young slippery-heels. I needn’t tell you not to try to bolt again. You’ll find it difficult to do that.”

As they moved off and began their march through the forest on foot, Tom Brixton felt that escape was indeed out of the question, for, while three men marched in front of him, four marched on either side, each with rifle on shoulder, and the rest of the band brought up the rear. But even if his chances had not been so hopeless, he would not have made any further effort to save himself, for he had given himself thoroughly up to despair. In the midst of this a slight sense of relief, mingled with the bitterness of disappointment, when he found that Betty had been sent out of the way, and that he would see her no more, for he could not bear the thought of her seeing him thus led away.

"May I speak with the prisoner for a few minutes?" said Fred Westly to Gashford, as they plodded through the woods. "He has been my comrade for several years, and I promised his poor mother never to forsake him. May I, Gashford?"

"No," was the sharp reply, and then, as if relenting, "Well, yes, you may; but be brief, and no underhand dealing, mind, for if you attempt to help him you shall be a dead man the next moment, as sure as I'm a living one. An' you needn't be too soft, Westly," he added, with a cynical smile. "Your chum has— Well, it's no business o' mine. You can go to him."

Poor Tom Brixton started as his old friend went up to him, and then hung his head.

"Dear Tom," said Fred, in a low voice, "don't give way to despair. With God all things are possible, and even if your life is to be forfeited, it is not too late to save the soul, for Jesus is able and willing to save to the uttermost. But I want to comfort you with the assurance that I will spare no effort to save you. Many of the diggers are not very anxious that you should bear the extreme punishment of the law, and I think Gashford may be bought over. If so, I need not tell you that my little private store hidden away under the pine-tree—"

"There is no such store, Fred," interrupted Tom, with a haggard look of shame.

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"I mean that I gambled it all away unknown to you. Oh! Fred, you do not—you cannot know what a fearful temptation gambling is when given way to, especially when backed by drink. No, it's of no use your trying to comfort me. I do believe, now, that I deserve to die."

"Whatever you deserve, Tom, it is my business to save you, if I can—both body and soul; and what you now tell me does not alter my intentions or my hopes. By the way, does Gashford know about this?"

"Yes, he knows that I have taken your money."

"And that's the reason," said Gashford himself, coming up at the moment, "that I advised you not to be too soft on your chum, for he's a bad lot altogether."

"Is the man who knows of a crime, and connives at it, and does not reveal it, a much better 'lot'?" demanded Fred, with some indignation.

"Perhaps not," replied Gashford, with a short laugh; "but as I never set up for a good lot, you see, there's no need to discuss the subject. Now, fall to the rear, my young blade. Remember that I'm in command of this party, and you know, or ought to know, that I suffer no insolence in those under me."

Poor Fred fell back at once, bitterly regretting that he had spoken out, and thus injured to some extent his influence with the only man who had the power to aid his condemned friend.

It was near sunset when they reached Pine Tree Diggings. Tom Brixton was thrust into a strong blockhouse, used chiefly as a powder magazine, but sometimes as a prison, the key of which was kept on that occasion in Gashford's pocket, while a trusty sentinel paced before the door.

That night Fred Westly sat in his tent, the personification of despair. True, he had not failed all along to lay his friend's case before God, and, up to this point, strong hope had sustained him; but now, the only means by which he had trusted to accomplish his end were gone. The hidden hoard, on which he had counted too much, had been taken and lost by the very man he wished to save, and the weakness of his own faith was revealed by the disappearance of the gold—for he had almost forgotten that the Almighty can provide means at any time and in all circumstances.

Fred would not allow himself for a moment to think that Tom had *stolen* his gold. He only *took* it for a time, with the full intention of refunding it when better times should come. On this point Fred's style of reasoning was in exact accord with that of his unhappy friend. Tom never for a moment regarded the misappropriation of the gold as a theft. Oh no! it was merely an appropriated loan—a temporary accommodation. It would be interesting, perhaps appalling, to know how many thousands of criminal careers have been begun in this way!

"Now, Mister Westly," said Flinders, entering the tent in haste, "what's to be done? It's quite clear that Mister Tom's not to be hanged, for there's two or three of us'll commit murder before that

happens; but I've bin soundin' the boys, an' I'm afeared there's a lot o' the worst wans that'll be glad to see him scragged, an' there's a lot as won't risk their own necks to save him, an' what betune the wan an' the other, them that'll fight for him are a small minority—so, again I say, what's to be done?"

Patrick Flinders's usually jovial face had by that time become almost as long and lugubrious as that of Westly.

"I don't know," returned Fred, shaking his head.

"My one plan, on which I had been founding much hope, is upset. Listen. It was this. I have been saving a good deal of my gold for a long time past and hiding it away secretly, so as to have something to fall back upon when poor Tom had gambled away all his means. This hoard of mine amounted, I should think, to something like five hundred pounds. I meant to have offered it to Gashford for the key of the prison, and for his silence, while we enabled Tom once more to escape. But this money has, without my knowledge, been taken away and—"

"Stolen, you mean!" exclaimed Flinders, in surprise.

"No, not stolen—taken! I can't explain just now. It's enough to know that it is gone, and that my plan is thus overturned."

"D'ee think Gashford would let him out for that?" asked the Irishman, anxiously.

"I think so; but, after all, I'm almost glad that the money's gone, for I can't help feeling that this way of enticing Gashford to do a thing, as it were slily, is underhand. It is a kind of bribery."

"Faix, then, it's not c'ruption anyhow, for the baste is as c'rupt as he can be already. An', sure, wouldn't it just be bribin' a blackguard not to commit murther?"

"I don't know, Pat. It is a horrible position to be placed in. Poor, poor Tom!"

"Have ye had supper?" asked Flinders, quickly.

"No—I cannot eat."

"Cook it then, an' don't be selfish. Other people can ait, though ye can't. It'll kape yer mind employed—an I'll want somethin' to cheer me up whin I come back."

Pat Flinders left the tent abruptly, and poor Fred went about the preparation of supper in a half mechanical way, wondering what his comrade meant by his strange conduct.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.