

**ROBERT
MICHAEL
BALLANTYNE**

THE GOLDEN DREAM:
ADVENTURES IN THE FAR
WEST

Robert Michael Ballantyne

**The Golden Dream:
Adventures in the Far West**

«Public Domain»

Ballantyne R.

The Golden Dream: Adventures in the Far West / R. Ballantyne —
«Public Domain»,

© Ballantyne R.
© Public Domain

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	8
Chapter Three.	11
Chapter Four.	14
Chapter Five.	16
Chapter Six.	20
Chapter Seven.	26
Chapter Eight.	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40

R. M. Ballantyne

The Golden Dream: Adventures in the Far West

Chapter One.

Adventures in the Far West. The Cause of the Whole Affair

Ned Sinton gazed at the scene before him with indescribable amazement! He had often witnessed strange things in the course of his short though chequered life, but he had never seen anything like this. Many a dream of the most extravagant nature had surrounded his pillow with creatures of curious form and scenes of magic beauty, but never before, either by actual observation or in nightly vision, had Ned Sinton beheld a scene so wonderful as that which now lay spread out before him.

Ned stood in the centre of a cavern of vast dimensions—so vast, and so full of intense light, that instead of looking on it as a huge cave, he felt disposed to regard it as a small world. The sides of this cavern were made of pure gold, and the roof—far above his head—was spangled all over with glittering points, like a starry sky. The ground, too, and, in short, everything within the cave, was made of the same precious metal. Thousands of stalactites hung from the roof like golden icicles. Millions of delicate threads of the same material also depended from the star-spangled vault, each thread having a golden ball at the end of it, which, strange to say, was transparent, and permitted a bright flame within to shine through, and shed a yellow lustre over surrounding objects. All the edges, and angles, and points of the irregularly-formed walls were of burnished gold, which reflected the rays of these pendant lamps with dazzling brilliancy, while the broad masses of the frosted walls shone with a subdued light. Magnificent curtains of golden filigree fell in rich voluminous folds on the pavement, half concealing several archways which led into smaller caverns, similar to the large one. Altogether it was a scene of luxurious richness and splendour that is utterly indescribable.

But the thing that amazed Ned Sinton most was, that the company of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen who moved about in these splendid halls, and ate golden ices, or listened to the exquisite strains of music that floated on the atmosphere, were all as yellow as guineas! Ned could by no means understand this. In order to convince himself that there was no deception in the matter, he shook hands with several of the people nearest to him, and found that they were cold and hard as iron; although, to all appearance, they were soft and pliable, and could evidently move about with perfect freedom.

Ned was very much puzzled indeed. One would have thought he must have believed himself to be dreaming. Not a bit of it. He knew perfectly well that he was wide-awake. In fact, a doubt upon that point never crossed his mind for a moment. At length he resolved to ask the meaning of it all, and, observing a stout old gentleman, with a bland smile on his yellow countenance, in the act of taking a pinch of golden snuff from a gold snuff-box, he advanced and accosted him.

“Pray, sir,” began Ned, modestly, “may I take the liberty of asking you what is the meaning of all this?”

“All what, sir?” inquired the old gentleman, in a deep metallic voice.

“This golden cave, with its wonderful lamps, and especially these golden people; and—excuse me, sir, for remarking on the circumstance—you seem to be *made of gold* yourself. I have often heard the term applied to extremely rich persons, but I really never expected to see a man who was literally ‘worth his weight in gold.’”

The old gentleman laughed sarcastically at this sally, and took an enormous pinch of gold-dust.

As he did not seem inclined to be communicative, however, Ned said again, “What is the meaning of it all? can you explain what has done it?”

Smiling blandly at his interrogator, this gentleman of precious metal placed his head a little on one side, and tapped the lid of his snuff-box, but said nothing. Then he suddenly exclaimed, at the full pitch of his voice, “California, my boy! That’s what’s done it, Edward! *California for ever!* Ned, hurrah!”

As the deep tones of his voice rang through the star-spangled vault, the company took up the shout, and with “California for ever!” made the cavern ring again. In the excess of their glee the gentlemen took off their hats, and the ladies their wreaths and turbans, and threw them in the air. As many of them failed to catch these portions of costume in their descent, the clatter caused by their fall on the golden pavement was very striking indeed.

“Come here, my lad,” said the old gentleman, seizing Ned Sinton by the arm, and laughing heartily as he dragged him towards an immense mirror of burnished gold; “look at yourself there.”

Ned looked, and started back with horror on observing that he himself had been converted into gold. There could be no mistake whatever about it. There he stood, staring at himself like a yellow statue. His shooting-jacket was richly chased with alternate stripes of burnished and frosted work; the buttons on his vest shone like stars; his pantaloons were striped like the coat; his hair was a mass of dishevelled filigree; and his hands, when, in the height of his horror, he clasped them together, rang like a brass-founder’s anvil.

For a few moments he stood before the mirror speechless. Then a feeling of intense indignation unaccountably took possession of him, and he turned fiercely on the old gentleman, exclaiming—

“*You* have done this, sir! What do you mean by it? eh!”

“You’re quite mistaken, Ned. I didn’t do it. California has done it. Ha! ha! my boy, you’re done for! Smitten with the yellow fever, Neddy? California for ever! See here—”

As he spoke, the old gentleman threw out one leg and both arms, and began to twirl round, after the fashion of a peg-top, on one toe. At first he revolved slowly, but gradually increased his speed, until no part of him could be distinctly observed. Ned Sinton stood aghast. Suddenly the old gentleman shot upwards like a rocket, but he did not quit the ground; he merely elongated his body until his head stuck against the roof of the cave. Then he ceased to revolve, and remained in the form of a golden stalactite—his head surrounded by stars and his toe resting on the ground!

While Ned stood rooted to the spot, turning the subject over in his mind, and trying to find out by what process of chemical or mechanical action so remarkable a transformation could have been accomplished, he became aware that his uncle, old Mr Shirley, was standing in the middle of the cave regarding him with a look of mingled sarcasm and pity. He observed, too, that his uncle was not made of gold, like the people around him, but was habited in a yeomanry uniform. Mr Shirley had been a yeoman twenty years before his nephew was born. Since that time his proportions had steadily increased, and he was now a man of very considerable rotundity—so much so, that his old uniform fitted him with excessive tightness; the coat would by no means button across his capacious chest, and, being much too short, shewed a very undignified amount of braces below it.

“Uncle!” exclaimed Ned Sinton, rushing up to his relative, “what *can* be the meaning of all this? Everybody seems to be mad. I think you must be mad yourself, to come here such a figure as that; and I’m quite sure *I* shall go mad if you don’t explain it to me. What *does* it all mean?”

“California,” replied Mr Shirley, becoming more sarcastic in expression and less pitiful.

“Why, that’s what everybody cries,” exclaimed Ned, who was now driven almost to desperation. “My dear uncle, do look like yourself and exercise some of your wonted sagacity. Just glance round at the cave and the company, all made of gold, and look at me—gold too, if not pinchbeck, but I’m not a good-enough judge of metals to tell which. What *has* done it, uncle? *Do* look in a better humour, and tell me how it has happened.”

“California,” replied Mr Shirley.

“Yes, yes; I know that. California seems to be everything here. But how has it come about? Why are *you* here, and what has brought me here?”

“California,” repeated Mr Shirley.

“Uncle, I’ll go deranged if you don’t answer me. What do you mean?”

“California,” reiterated Mr Shirley.

At the same moment a stout golden lady with a filigree turban shouted, “for ever!” at the top of a very shrill voice, and immediately the company took up the cry again, filling the cave with deafening sounds.

Ned Sinton gave one look of despair at his relative—then turned and fled.

“Put him out,” shouted the company. “Down with the intruder!”

Ned cast a single glance backward, and beheld the people pushing and buffeting his uncle in a most unceremonious manner. His helmet was knocked down over his eyes, and the coat—so much too small for him—was rendered an easy fit by being ripped up behind to the neck. Ned could not stand this. He was stout of limb and bold as a lion, although not naturally addicted to fighting, so he turned suddenly round and flew to the rescue. Plunging into the midst of the struggling mass of golden creatures, Ned hit out right and left like a young Hercules, and his blows rang upon their metal chests and noses like the sound of sledge-hammers, but without any other effect.

Suddenly he experienced an acute sensation of pain, and—awoke to find himself hammering the bed-post with bleeding knuckles, and his uncle standing beside his bed chuckling immensely.

“O uncle,” cried Ned, sitting up in his bed, and regarding his knuckles with a perplexed expression of countenance, “I’ve had *such* an extraordinary dream!”

“Ay, Ned,” interrupted his uncle, “and all about California, I’ll be bound.”

“Why, how did you guess that?”

“It needs not a wizard to guess that, lad. I’ve observed that you have read nothing in the newspapers for the last three months but the news from the gold-diggings of California. Your mind has of late been constantly running on that subject, and it is well-known that day-dreams are often reproduced at night. Besides, I heard you shouting the word in your sleep as I entered your room. Were you fighting with gold-diggers, eh! or Indians?”

“Neither, uncle; but I was fighting with very strange beings, I assure you, and—”

“Well, well,” interrupted Mr Shirley, “never mind the dream just now; we shall have it at some other time. I have important matters to talk over with you, my boy. Morton has written to me. Get up and come down as quickly as you can, and we’ll discuss the matter over our breakfast.”

As the door closed after the retreating form of his uncle, Edward Sinton leaped out of bed and into his trousers. During his toilet he wondered what matters of importance Mr Shirley could intend to discuss with him, and felt half inclined to fear, from the grave expression of his uncle’s face when he spoke of it, that something of a disagreeable nature awaited him. But these thoughts were intermingled with reminiscences of the past night. His knuckles, too, kept constantly reminding him of his strange encounter, and, do what he would, he could not banish from his mind the curious incidents of that remarkable golden dream.

Chapter Two.

Our Hero

We have entered thus minutely into the details of our hero's dream, because it was the climax to a long series of day-dreams in which he had indulged ever since the discovery of gold in California.

Edward Sinton was a youth of eighteen at the time of which we write, and an orphan. He was tall, strong, broad-shouldered, fair-haired, blue-eyed, Roman-nosed, and gentle as a lamb. This last statement may perhaps appear inconsistent with the fact that, during the whole course of his school-life, he had a pitched battle every week—sometimes two or three in the week. Ned never began a fight, and, indeed, did not like fighting. But some big boys *will* domineer over little ones, and Ned would not be domineered over; consequently he had to be thrashed. He was possessed, even in boyhood, of an amount of physical courage that would have sufficed for any two ordinary men. He did not boast. He did not quarrel. He never struck the first blow, but, if twenty boys had attacked him, he would have tried to fight them all. He never tyrannised over small boys. It was not his nature to do so; but he was not perfect, any more than you are, dear reader. He sometimes punched small boys' heads when they worried him, though he never did so without repenting of it, and doing them a kindness afterwards in order to make up. He was very thoughtless, too, and very careless; nevertheless he was fond of books—specially of books of adventure—and studied these like a hero—as he was.

Boys of his own size, or even a good deal bigger, never fought with Ned Sinton. They knew better than that; but they adored him, in some cases envied him, and in all cases trusted and followed him. It was only *very* big boys who fought with him, and all they got by it was a good deal of hard pummelling before they floored their little adversary, and a good deal of jeering from their comrades for fighting a small boy. From one cause or another, Ned's visage was generally scratched, often cut, frequently swelled, and almost always black and blue.

But as Ned grew older, the occasions for fighting became less frequent; his naturally amiable disposition improved, (partly owing, no doubt, to the care of his uncle, who was, in every sense of the term, a good old man,) and when he attained the age of fifteen and went to college, and was called "Sinton," instead of "Ned," his fighting days were over. No man in his senses would have ventured to attack that strapping youth with the soft blue eyes, the fair hair, the prominent nose, and the firm but smiling lips, or, if he had, he would have had to count on an hour's extremely hard work, whether the fortune of war went for or against him.

When Ned had been three years at college, his uncle hinted that it was time to think of a profession, and suggested that as he was a first-rate mathematician, and had been fond of mechanics from his childhood, he should turn an engineer. Ned would probably have agreed to this cheerfully, had not a thirst for adventure been created by the stirring accounts which had begun to arrive at this time from the recently-discovered gold-fields of California. His enthusiastic spirit was stirred, not so much by the prospect of making a large fortune suddenly by the finding of a huge nugget—although that was a very pleasant idea—as by the hope of meeting with wild adventures in that imperfectly-known and distant land. And the effect of such dreams was to render the idea of sitting down to an engineer's desk, or in a mercantile counting-room, extremely distasteful.

Thus it came to pass that Edward Sinton felt indisposed to business, and disposed to indulge in golden visions.

When he entered the breakfast-parlour, his mind was still full of his curious dream.

"Come along, my lad," cried Mr Shirley, laying down the Bible, and removing his spectacles from a pair of eyes that usually twinkled with a sort of grave humour, but in which there was now an expression of perplexity; "set to work and get the edge off your appetite, and then I'll read Moxton's letter."

When Mr Shirley had finished breakfast, Ned was about half done, having just commenced his third slice of toast. So the old gentleman complimented his nephew on the strength of his appetite, put on his spectacles, drew a letter from his pocket, and leaned back in his chair.

“Now, lad, open your ears and consider what I am about to read.”

“Go on, uncle, I’m all attention,” said Ned, attacking slice number four.

“This is Moxton’s letter. It runs thus—

“Dear Sir,—I beg to acknowledge receipt of yours of the 5th inst. I shall be happy to take your nephew on trial, and, if I find him steady, shall enter into an engagement with him, I need not add that unremitting application to business is the only road to distinction in the profession he is desirous of adopting. Let him call at my office to-morrow between ten and twelve.—Yours very truly, Daniel Moxton.”

“Is that all?” inquired Ned, drawing his chair towards the fire, into which he gazed contemplatively.

Mr Shirley looked at his nephew over the top of his spectacles, and said—

“That’s all.”

“It’s very short,” remarked Ned.

“But to the point,” rejoined his uncle. “Now, boy, I see that you don’t relish the idea, and I must say that I would rather that you became an engineer than a lawyer; but then, lad, situations are difficult to get now-a-days, and, after all, you might do worse than become a lawyer. To be sure, I have no great love for the cloth, Ned; but the ladder reaches very high. The foot is crowded with a struggling mass of aspirants, many of whom are of very questionable character, but the top reaches to one of the highest positions in the empire. You might become the Lord High Chancellor at last, who knows! But seriously, I think you should accept this offer. Moxton is a grave, stern man, but a sterling fellow for all that, and in good practice. Now, what do you think!”

“Well, uncle,” replied Ned, “I’ve never concealed my thoughts from you since the day you took me by the hand, eleven years ago, and brought me to live under your roof; and I’ll not begin to dissemble now. The plain truth is, that I don’t like it at all.”

“Stop, now,” cried Mr Shirley, with a grieved expression of countenance; “don’t be hasty in forming your opinion. Besides, my boy, you ought to be more ready to take my advice, even although it be not altogether palatable.”

“My dear uncle, you quite misunderstand me. I only tell you what I *think* about the proposal. As to taking your advice, I fully intend to do that whether I like it or not; but I think, if you will listen to me for a few minutes, you will change your mind in regard to this matter. You know that I am very fond of travelling, and that I dislike the idea of taking up my abode on the top of a three-legged stool, either as a lawyer’s or a merchant’s clerk. Well, unless a man likes his profession, and goes at it with a will, he cannot hope to succeed, so that I have no prospect of getting on, I fear, in the line you wish me to adopt. Besides, there are plenty of poor fellows out of work, who love sitting still from nine a.m. to ten p.m., and whose bread I would be taking out of their mouths by devoting myself to the legal profession, and—”

At this point Ned hesitated for a moment, and his uncle broke in with—

“Tell me, now, if every one thought about business as you do, how would the world get on, think you?”

“Badly, I fear,” replied the youth, with a smile; “but everybody doesn’t think of it as I do; and, tell me, uncle, if everybody thought of business as you would wish me to do, what would come of the soldiers and sailors who defend our empire, and extend our foreign trade, and achieve the grand geographical discoveries that have of late added so much lustre to the British name?”

Ned flushed and became quite eloquent at this point. “Now, look at California,” he continued; “there’s a magnificent region, full of gold; not a mere myth, or an exaggeration, but a veritable fact, attested by the arrival of letters and gold-dust every month. Surely that land was made to be peopled;

and the poor savages who dwell there need to be converted to Christianity, and delivered from their degraded condition; and the country must be worked, and its resources be developed; and who's to do it, if enterprising clergymen, and schoolmasters, and miners do not go to live there, and push their fortunes?"

"And which of the three callings do you propose adopting?" inquired Mr Shirley, with a peculiar smile.

"Well uncle, I—a—the fact is, I have not thought much about that as yet. Of course, I never thought of the first. I do not forget your own remark, that the calling of a minister of the gospel of Christ is not, like other professions, to be adopted merely as a means of livelihood. Then, as to the second, I might perhaps manage that; but I don't think it would suit me."

"Do you think, then, that you would make a good digger?"

"Well, perhaps I would," replied Ned, modestly.

Mr Shirley gravely regarded the powerful frame that reclined in the easy-chair before him, and was compelled to admit that the supposition was by no means outrageous.

"Besides," continued the youth, "I might turn my hand to many things in a new country. You know I have studied surveying, and I can sketch a little, and know something of architecture. I suppose that Latin and Greek would not be of much use, but the little I have picked up of medicine and surgery among the medical students would be useful. Then I could take notes, and sketch the scenery, and bring back a mass of material that might interest the public, and do good to the country."

"Oh," said the old gentleman, shortly; "come back and turn author, in fact, and write a book that nobody would publish, or which, in the event of its being published, nobody would read!"

"Come, now, my dear uncle, don't laugh at me. I assure you it seems very reasonable to me to think that what others have done, and are doing every day, I am able to do."

"Well, I won't laugh at you; but, to be serious, you are wise enough to know that an old man's experience is worth more than a youth's fancies. Much of what you have said is true, I admit, but I assure you that the bright prospects you have cut out for yourself are very delusive. They will never be realised, at least in the shape in which you have depicted them on your imagination. They will dissolve, my boy, on a nearer approach, and, as Shakespeare has it, 'like the baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a wrack behind,' or, at least, not much more than a wrack."

Ned reverted to the golden dream, and felt uneasy under his uncle's kind but earnest gaze.

"Most men," continued Mr Shirley, "enjoy themselves at first, when they go to wild countries in search of adventure, but they generally regret the loss of their best years afterwards. In my opinion men should never emigrate unless they purpose making the foreign land they go to their *home*. But I won't oppose you, if you are determined to go; I will do all I can to help you, and give you my blessing; but before you make up your mind, I would recommend you to call on Mr Moxton, and hear what prospects he holds out to you. Then take a week to think seriously over it; and if at the end of that time, you are as anxious to go as ever, I'll not stand in your way."

"You are kind to me, uncle; more so than I deserve," said Ned earnestly. "I'll do as you desire, and you may depend upon it that the generous way in which you have left me to make my own choice will influence me against going abroad more than anything else."

Ned sighed as he rose to quit the room, for he felt that his hopes at that moment were sinking.

"And before you take a step in the matter, my boy," said old Mr Shirley, "go to your room and ask counsel of Him who alone has the power to direct your steps in this life."

Ned replied briefly, "I will, uncle," and hastily left the room. Mr Shirley poked the fire, put on his spectacles, smoothed out the wrinkles on his bald forehead with his hand, took up the *Times*, and settled himself down in his easy-chair to read; but his nephew's prospects could not be banished from his mind. He went over the whole argument again, mentally, with copious additions, ere he became aware of the fact, that for three-quarters of an hour he had been, (apparently), reading the newspaper upside down.

Chapter Three.

Hopes and Fears—Mr Shirley receives a Visit and a Wild Proposal

When Edward Sinton left his chamber, an hour after the conversation related in the last chapter, his brow was unruffled and his step light. He had made up his mind that, come what might, he would not resist the wishes of his only near relative and his best friend.

There was a day in the period of early boyhood that remained as fresh on the memory of young Sinton as if it had been yesterday—the day on which his mother died. The desolation of his early home on that day was like the rising of a dark thunder-cloud on a bright sky. His young heart was crushed, his mind stunned, and the first ray of light that broke upon him—the first gush of relief—was when his uncle arrived and took him on his knee, and, seated beside the bed where that cold, still form lay, wept upon the child's neck as if his heart would break. Mr Shirley buried the sister whom he had been too late to see alive. Then he and his little nephew left the quiet country village and went to dwell in the great city of London. From that time forward Mr Shirley was a father to Ned, who loved him more than any one else on earth, and through his influence he was early led to love and reverence his heavenly Father and his blessed Redeemer.

The subject of going abroad was the first in regard to which Ned and his uncle had seriously disagreed, and the effect on the feelings of both was very strong.

Ned's mind wandered as he put on his hat, and buttoned his great-coat up to the chin, and drew on his gloves slowly. He was not vain of his personal appearance; neither was he reckless of it. He always struck you as being a particularly well-dressed man, and he had naturally a dashing look about him. Poor fellow! he felt anything but dashing or reckless as he hurried through the crowded streets in the direction of the city that day.

Moxton's door was a green one, with a brass knocker and a brass plate, both of which ornaments, owing to verdigris, were anything but ornamental. The plate was almost useless, being nearly illegible, but the knocker was still fit for duty. The street was narrow—as Ned observed with a feeling of deep depression—and the house to which the green door belonged, besides being dirty, retreated a little, as if it were ashamed of itself.

On the knocker being applied, the green door was opened by a disagreeable-looking old woman, who answered to the question, "Is Mr Moxton in?" with a short "Yes," and, without farther remark, ushered our hero into a very dingy and particularly small office, which, owing to the insufficient quantity of daylight that struggled through the dirty little windows, required to be lighted with gas. Ned felt, so to speak, like a thermometer which was falling rapidly.

"Can I see Mr Moxton?" he inquired of a small dishevelled clerk, who sat on a tall stool behind a high desk, engaged in writing his name in every imaginable form on a sheet of note paper.

The dishevelled clerk pointed to a door which opened into an inner apartment, and resumed his occupation.

Ned tapped at the door indicated.

"Come in," cried a stern voice.

Ned, (as a thermometer), fell considerably lower. On entering, he beheld a tall, gaunt man, with a sour cast of countenance, standing with his back to the fire.

Ned advanced with a cheerful expression of face. Thermometrically speaking, he fell to the freezing-point.

"You are young Sinton, I suppose. You've come later than I expected."

Ned apologised, and explained that he had had some difficulty in finding the house.

“Umph! Your uncle tells me that you’re a sharp fellow, and write a good hand. Have you ever been in an office before?”

“No, sir. Up till now I have been at college. My uncle is rather partial, I fear, and may have spoken too highly of me. I think, however, that my hand is not a bad one. At least it is legible.”

“At least!” said Mr Moxton, with a sarcastic expression that was meant for smile, perhaps for a grin. “Why, that’s the *most* you could say of it. No hand is good, sir, if it is not legible, and no hand can possibly be bad that *is* legible. Have you studied law?”

“No, sir, I have not.”

“Umph! you’re too old to begin. Have you been used to sit at the desk?”

“Yes; I have been accustomed to study the greater part of the day.”

“Well, you may come here on Monday, and I’ll speak to you again, and see what you can do. I’m too busy just now. Good-morning.”

Ned turned to go, but paused on the threshold, and stood holding the door-handle.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, hesitatingly, “may I ask what room I shall occupy, if—if—I come to work here?”

Mr Moxton looked a little surprised at the question, but pointed to the outer office where the dishevelled clerk sat, and said, “There.” Ned fell to twenty below the freezing-point.

“And pray, sir,” he continued, “may I ask what are office-hours?”

“From nine a.m. till nine p.m., with an interval for meals,” said Mr Moxton, sharply; “but we usually continue at work till eleven at night, sometimes later. Good-morning.”

Ned fell to zero, and found himself in the street, with an indistinct impression of having heard the dishevelled clerk chuckling vociferously as he passed through the office.

It was a hard struggle, a very hard struggle, but he recalled to mind all that his uncle had ever done for him, and the love he bore him, and manfully resolved to cast California behind his back for ever, and become a lawyer.

Meanwhile Mr Shirley received a visit from a very peculiar personage. He was still seated in his arm-chair pondering his nephew’s prospects when this personage entered the room, hat in hand—the hat was a round straw one—and cried heartily, “Good day, kinsman.”

“Ha! Captain Bunting, how are ye? Glad to see you, old fellow,” exclaimed Mr Shirley, rising and seizing the sailor by the hand. “Sit down, sit down, and let’s hear your news. Why, I believe it’s six months since I saw you.”

“Longer, Shirley, longer than that,” replied the captain, seating himself in the chair which Ned Sinton had vacated a short time before. “I hope your memory is not giving way. I have been half round the world, and it’s a year and six months to-day since I sat here last.”

“Is it?” cried Mr Shirley, in surprise. “Now, that is very remarkable. But do you know, captain, I have often thought upon that subject, and wondered why it is that, as we get older, time seems to fly faster, and events which happened a month ago seem as if they only occurred yesterday. But let me hear all about it. Where have you been, and where are you going next?”

“I’ve been,” replied the captain, who was a big, broad man with a rough over-all coat, rough pilot-cloth trousers, rough red whiskers, a shaggy head of hair, and a rough-skinned face; the only part of him, in fact, which wasn’t rough was his heart; that was soft and warm—

“I’ve been, as I remarked before, half round the world, and I’m goin’ next to America. That’s a short but comprehensive answer to your question. If you have time and patience, kinsman, I’ll open the log-book of my memory and give you some details of my doings since we last met. But first tell me, how is my young friend, Ned?”

“Oh, he’s well—excellently well—besides being tall and strong. You would hardly know him, captain. He’s full six feet high, I believe, and the scamp has something like a white wreath of smoke over his upper lip already! I wish him to become an engineer or a lawyer, but the boy is in love with California just now, and dreams about nothing but wild adventures and gold-dust.”

The captain gave a grunt, and a peculiar smile crossed his rugged visage as he gazed earnestly and contemplatively into the fire.

Captain Bunting was a philosopher, and was deeply impressed with the belief that the smallest possible hint upon any subject whatever was sufficient to enable him to dive into the marrow of it, and prognosticate the probable issue of it, with much greater certainty than any one else. On the present occasion, however, the grunt above referred to was all he said.

It is not necessary to trouble the reader with the lengthened discourse that the captain delivered to his kinsman. When he concluded, Mr Shirley pushed his spectacles up on his bald head, gazed at the fire, and said, "Odd, very odd; and interesting too—very interesting." After a short pause, he pulled his spectacles down on his nose, and looking over them at the captain, said, "And what part of America are you bound for now?"

"California," answered the captain, slowly.

Mr Shirley started, as if some prophetic vision had been called up by the word and the tone in which it was uttered.

"And that," continued the captain, "brings me to the point. I came here chiefly for the purpose of asking you to let your nephew go with me, as I am in want of a youth to assist me, as a sort of supercargo and Jack-of-all-trades. In fact, I like your nephew much, and have long had my eye on him. I think him the very man for my purpose. I want a companion, too, in my business—one who is good at the pen and can turn his hand to anything. In short, it would be difficult to explain all the outs and ins of why I want him. But he's a tight, clever fellow, as I know, and I *do* want him, and if you'll let him go, I promise to bring him safe back again in the course of two years—if we are all spared. From what you've told me, I've no doubt the lad will be delighted to go. And, believe me, his golden dreams will be all washed out by the time he comes back. Now, what say you!"

For the space of five minutes Mr Shirley gazed at the captain over his spectacles in amazement, and said nothing. Then he threw himself back on his chair, pushed his spectacles up on his forehead, and gazed at him from underneath these assistants to vision. The alteration did not seem to improve matters, for he still continued to gaze in silent surprise. At last his lips moved, and he said, slowly but emphatically—

"Now, that is the most remarkable coincidence I ever heard of."

"How so?" inquired the captain.

"Why, that my nephew should be raving about going to California, and that you should be raving about getting him to go, and that these things should suddenly come to a climax on the same forenoon. It's absolutely incredible. If I had read it in a tale, now, or a romance, I would not have been surprised, for authors are such blockheads, generally, that they always make things of this kind fit in with the exactness of a dove-tail; but that it should *really* come to pass in my own experience, is quite incomprehensible. And so suddenly, too!"

"As to that," remarked the captain, with a serious, philosophical expression of countenance, "most things come to a climax suddenly, and coincidences invariably happen together; but, after all, it doesn't seem so strange to me, for vessels are setting sail for California every other day, and—"

"Well," interrupted Mr Shirley, starting up with energy, as if he had suddenly formed a great resolve, "I *will* let the boy go. Perhaps it will do him good. Besides, I have my own reasons for not caring much about his losing a year or two in regard to business. Come with me to the city, captain, and we'll talk over it as we go along." So saying, Mr Shirley took his kinsman by the arm, and they left the house together.

Chapter Four.

The End of the Beginning—Farewell to Old England

As Captain Bunting sagaciously remarked, “most things come to a climax suddenly.”

On the evening of the day in which our tale begins, Edward Sinton—still standing at zero—walked into his uncle’s parlour. The old gentleman was looking earnestly, though unintentionally, at the cat, which sat on the rug; and the cat was looking attentively at the kettle, which sat on the fire, hissing furiously, as if it were disgusted at being kept so long from tea.

Ned’s face was very long and sad as he entered the room.

“Dear uncle,” said he, taking Mr Shirley by the hand, “I’m not going to take a week to think over it. I have made up my mind to remain at home, and become a lawyer.”

“Ned,” replied Mr Shirley, returning his nephew’s grasp, “I’m not going to take a week to think over it either. I have made up my mind that you are to go to California, and become a—a—whatever you like, my dear boy; so sit down to tea, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Ned was incredulous at first, but as his uncle went on to explain how matters stood, and gradually diverged from that subject to the details of his outfit, he recovered from his surprise, and sprang suddenly up to 100 degrees of Fahrenheit, even in the shade of the prospect of parting for a time from old Mr Shirley.

Need we be surprised, reader, that our hero on that night dreamed the golden dream over again, with many wonderful additions, and sundry remarkable variations.

Thus it came to pass that, two weeks afterwards, Ned and his uncle found themselves steaming down the Thames to Gravesend, where the good ship *Roving Bess* lay riding at anchor, with a short cable, and top-sails loose, ready for sea.

“Ned,” said Mr Shirley, as they watched the receding banks of the noble river, “you may never see *home* again, my boy. Will you be sure not to forget me! will you write often, Ned!”

“Forget you, uncle!” exclaimed Ned, in a reproachful voice, while a tear sprang to his eye. “How can you suggest such a—”

“Well, well, my boy, I know it—I know it; but I like to hear the assurance repeated by your own lips. I’m an old man now, and if I should not live to see you again, I would like to have some earnest, loving words to think upon while you are away.” The old man paused a few moments, and then resumed—

“Ned, remember when far from home, that there is another home—eternal in the heavens—to which, if you be the Lord’s child, you are hastening. You will think of that home, Ned, won’t you! If I do not meet you again here at any rate I shall hope to meet you *there*.”

Ned would have spoken, but his heart was too full. He merely pressed old Mr Shirley’s arm.

“Perhaps,” continued his uncle, “it is not necessary to make you promise to read God’s blessed Word. You’ll be surrounded by temptations of no ordinary kind in the gold-regions; and depend upon it that the Bible, read with prayer, will be the best chart and compass to guide you safely through them all.”

“My dear uncle,” replied Ned, with emotion, “perhaps the best promise I can make is to assure you that I will endeavour to do, in all things and at all times, as you have taught me, ever since I was a little boy. If I succeed, I feel assured that I shall do well.”

A long and earnest conversation ensued between the uncle and nephew, which was interrupted at last, by the arrival of the boat at Gravesend. Jumping into a wherry, they pushed off, and were soon alongside of the *Roving Bess*, a barque of about eight hundred tons burden, and, according to Captain Bunting, “an excellent sea-boat.”

“Catch hold o’ the man-ropes,” cried the last-named worthy, looking over the side; “that’s it; now then, jump! all right! How are ye, kinsman? Glad to see you, Ned. I was afraid you were goin’ to give me the slip.”

“I have not kept you waiting, have I?” inquired Ned.

“Yes, you have, youngster,” replied the captain, with a facetious wink, as he ushered his friends into the cabin, and set a tray of broken biscuit and a decanter of wine before them. “The wind has been blowin’ off shore the whole morning, and the good ship has been straining at a short cable like a hound chained up. But we’ll be off now in another half-hour.”

“So soon?” said Mr Shirley, with an anxious expression on his kind old face.

“All ready to heave up the anchor, sir,” shouted the first mate down the companion.

The captain sprang on deck, and soon after the metallic clatter of the windlass rang a cheerful accompaniment to the chorus of the sailors. One by one the white sails spread out to the breeze, and the noble ship began to glide through the water.

In a few minutes more the last words were spoken, the last farewell uttered, and Mr Shirley stood alone in the stern-sheet of the little boat, watching the departing vessel as she gathered way before the freshening breeze. As long as the boat was visible Ned Sinton stood on the ship’s bulwarks, holding on to the mizzen shrouds, and waving his handkerchief from time to time. The old man stood with his head uncovered, and his thin locks waving in the wind.

Soon the boat was lost to view. Our hero brushed away a tear, and leaped upon the deck, where the little world, of which for many days to come he was to form a part, busied itself in making preparation for a long, long voyage. The British Channel was passed; the Atlantic Ocean was entered; England sank beneath the horizon; and, for the first time in his life, Ned Sinton found himself—at sea.

Chapter Five.

The Sea—Dangers of the Deep, and Uncertainty of Human Affairs—A Disastrous Night and a Bright Morning—California at last

Only those who have dwelt upon the ocean for many months together can comprehend the feelings of delight with which the long-imprisoned voyager draws near to his desired haven. For six long months did the *Roving Bess* do battle with the surging billows of the great deep. During that time she steered towards the Gulf of Mexico—carefully avoiding that huge reservoir of sea-weed, termed the Saragossa sea, in which the unscientific but enterprising mariners of old used to get becalmed oftentimes for days and weeks together—she coasted down the eastern shores of South America; fired at, and “shewed her heels” to, a pirate; doubled Cape Horn; fought with the tempests that take special delight in revelling there; and, finally, spreading her sails to the genial breezes of the Pacific Ocean, drew near to her voyage-end.

All this the good ship *Roving Bess* did with credit to herself and comfort to her crew; but a few weeks after she entered the Pacific, she was met, contrary to all expectation, by the bitterest gale that had ever compelled her to scud under bare poles.

It was a beautiful afternoon when the first symptoms of the coming storm were observed. Captain Bunting had just gone down below, and our hero was standing at the weather gangway, observing the sudden dart of a shoal of flying-fish, which sprang out of the sea, whizzed through the air a few hundred feet, and fell with a splash into the water, in their frantic efforts to escape from their bitter enemy, the dolphin.

While Ned gazed contemplatively at the spot where the winged fish had disappeared, the captain sprang on deck.

“We’re goin’ to catch it,” he said, hurriedly, as he passed forward; “tumble up, there; tumble up; all hands to shorten sails. Hand down the royals, and furl the t’gallant sails, Mr Williams, (to the first mate,) and look alive.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” was answered in that prompt tone of voice which indicates thorough discipline and unquestioning obedience, while the men scrambled up the fore-hatch, and sprang up the ratlines hand over hand. A moment before, the vessel had lain quietly on the bosom of the unruffled deep, as if she were asleep, now she was all uproar and apparent confusion; sails slewed round, ropes rattled, and blocks creaked, while the sonorous voice of the first mate sounded commands like a trumpet from the quarter-deck.

“I see no indication of a storm,” remarked young Sinton, as the captain walked aft.

“Possibly not, lad; but *I* do. The barometer has fallen lower, all of a sudden, than I ever saw it fall before. You may depend upon it, we shall have to look out for squalls before long. Just cast your eyes on the horizon over the weather bows there; it’s not much of a cloud, and, to say truth, I would not have thought much of it had the glass remained steady, but that faithful servant never—”

“Better close-reef the top-sails, sir,” said the mate, touching his cap, and pointing to the cloud just referred to.

“Do so, Mr Williams, and let the watch below remain on deck, and stand by to man the halyards.”

In less than an hour the *Roving Bess* was running at the rate of twelve knots, under close-reefed top-sails, before a steady gale, which in half-an-hour later increased to a hurricane, compelling them to take in all sail and “lay to.” The sun set in a blaze of mingled black and lurid clouds, as if the heavens were on fire; the billows rose to their utmost height as the shrieking winds heaved them

upwards, and then, cutting off their crests, hurled the spray along like driving clouds of snow, and dashed it against the labouring ship, as if impatient to engulf her in that ravening maw which has already swallowed up so many human victims.

But the little vessel faced the tempest nobly, and rose like a sea-mew on the white crest of each wave, while the steersmen—for there were two lashed to the wheel—kept her to the wind. Suddenly the sheet of the fore trysail parted, the ship came up to the wind, and a billow at that moment broke over her, pouring tons of water on her deck, and carrying away the foremast, main-top-masts, and the jib-boom.

“Clear the wreck—down the helm, and let her scud,” shouted the captain, who stood by the mizzen-mast, holding on to a belaying-pin. But the captain’s voice was drowned by the whistling winds, and, seeing that the men were uncertain what to do, he seized one of the axes which were lashed to the foot of the mast, and began to cut away the ropes which dragged the wreck of the foremast under the lee of the ship. Williams, the mate, and the second mate, followed his example, while Ned sprang to the wheel to see the orders to the steersmen obeyed. In half-an-hour all was clear, and the ship was scudding before the gale under bare poles.

“We’ve not seen the worst of it,” remarked the captain, as he resumed his post on the quarter-deck, and brushed the brine from his whiskers; “I fear, too, that she has received some bad thumps from the wreck of the foremast. You’d better go below, Sinton, and put on a topcoat; its no use gettin’ wetter than you can help.”

“I’m as wet as I can be, captain; besides, I can work better as I am, if there’s anything for me to do.”

“Well, there ain’t much: you’ll have enough to do to keep yourself from being washed overboard. How’s her head, Larry?”

“Nor’ east an’ by east,” replied one of the men at the wheel, Larry O’Neil by name—a genuine son of Erin, whose jovial smile of rollicking good humour was modified, but by no means quenched, by the serious circumstances in which he found himself placed. His comrade, William Jones, who stood on the larboard side of the wheel, was a short, thick-set, stern seaman, whose facial muscles were scarcely capable of breaking into a smile, and certainly failed to betray any of the owner’s thoughts or feelings, excepting astonishment. Such passions as anger, pity, disgust, fear, and the like, whatever place they might have in Jones’s breast, had no visible index on his visage. Both men were sailor-like and powerful, but they were striking contrasts to each other, as they stood—the one sternly, the other smilingly—steering the *Roving Bess* before that howling storm.

“Is not ‘nor’ east and by east’ our direct course for the harbour of San Francisco?” inquired Ned Sinton.

“It is,” replied the captain, “as near as I can guess; but we’ve been blown about so much that I can’t tell exactly. Moreover, it’s my opinion we can’t be far off the coast now; and if this gale holds on I’ll have to bring to, at the risk of bein’ capsized. Them plaguey coral-reefs, too, are always springin’ up in these seas where you least expect ’em. If we go bump against one as we are goin’ now, its all up with us.”

“Not a pleasant idea,” remarked Ned, somewhat gravely. “Do these storms usually last long?”

Before the captain could reply, the first mate came up and whispered in his ear.

“Eh! how much d’ye say?” he asked quickly.

“Five feet, sir; she surged heavily once or twice on the foremast, and I think must have started a plank.”

“Call all hands to work the pumps; and don’t let the men know how much water there is in the hold. Come below, Ned. I want you. Keep her head steady as she goes.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” sang out O’Neil, as the captain descended the companion-hatch to the cabin, followed by his young friend.

The dim light in the swinging lamp flickered fitfully when the ship plunged into the troughs of the seas, and rose again with a violent surge, as each wave passed under her, while every plank and spar on board seemed to groan under the strain. Darkness now added to the terrors of the wild storm.

Sitting down on a locker, Captain Bunting placed his elbows on the table, and covering his face with his hands, remained silent for several minutes, while Ned sat down beside him, but forbore to interrupt his thoughts.

“Boy,” he said, at length, looking up anxiously, “we’ve sprung a leak, and a few minutes will shew what our fate is to be. Five feet of water in the hold in so short a time implies a bad one.”

“Five feet two, sir,” said the mate, looking in at the cabin door; “and the carpenter can’t get at the leak.”

“I feared as much,” muttered the captain. “Keep the men hard at the pumps, Mr Williams, and let me hear how it stands again in ten minutes.”

“Captain,” said Ned, “it does not become a landsman to suggest, perhaps, but I can’t help reminding you, that leaks of this kind have been stopped by putting a sail below the ship’s bottom.”

“I know it, boy, I know it; but we could never get a sail down in such a night.”

“Can nothing be done, then?”

“Yes, lad; it’s hard to do it, but it must be done; life is more precious than gold—we must heave the cargo overboard. I have invested every farthing I have in the world in this venture,” continued Captain Bunting, sadly, “but there’s no help for it. Now, you were at the shifting of the cargo when we opened the hatches during the calms off the Brazilian coast, and as you know the position of the bales and boxes, I want you to direct the men so as to get it hove out quickly. Luckily, bein’ a general cargo, most o’ the bales are small and easily handled. Here comes the mate again—well, Mr Williams?”

“Up another inch, sir.”

“Go, Ned, over with it. I’ll superintend above; so good-bye to our golden dreams.”

There was a slight tone of bitterness in the captain’s voice as he spoke, but it passed away quickly, and the next instant he was on deck encouraging his men to throw the valuable cargo over the side. Bale after bale and box after box were tossed ruthlessly out upon the raging sea until little was left in the ship, save the bulky and less valuable portion of the cargo. Then a cry arose that the leak was discovered! The carpenter had succeeded in partially stopping it with part of a sail, and soon the pumps began to reduce the quantity of water in the hold. At last the leak was gained and effectually stopped, and before daybreak the storm began to subside. While part of the crew, being relieved from the harassing work at the pumps, busied themselves in repairing damages, Ned went to his cabin to put on dry clothes and take a little rest, of which he stood much in need.

Next day the bright sun rose in a cloudless sky, and a gentle breeze now wafted the *Roving Bess* over the Pacific, whose bosom still heaved deeply from the effects of the recent storm. A sense of fervent thankfulness to God for deliverance filled the heart of our hero as he awoke and beheld the warm sunbeams streaming in at the little window of his cabin. Suddenly he was roused from a deep reverie by the shout of “Land, ho!” on deck.

Words cannot convey an adequate idea of the effect of such a shout upon all on board. “Land, ho!” was repeated by every one, as he sprang in dishabille up the hatchway.

“Where away?” inquired Captain Bunting.

“Right ahead, sir,” answered the look-out.

“Ay, there it is,” said the captain, as Ned, without coat or vest, rushed to his side, and gazed eagerly over the bow, “there it is, Ned,—California, at last! Yonder rise the golden mountains that have so suddenly become the world’s magnet; and yonder, too, is the ‘Golden Gate’ of the harbour of San Francisco. Humph! much good it’ll do us.”

Again there was a slight tone of bitterness in the captain’s voice.

“Don’t let down your spirits, captain,” said Ned, in a cheering tone; “there is still enough of the cargo left to enable us to make a start for the gold-fields. Perhaps we may make more money there than we would have made had we sold the cargo at a large profit by trafficking on the coast.”

Captain Bunting hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and shook his head. It was evident that he had no faith in gold-digging. Meanwhile the crew had assembled on the fore-castle, and were looking out ahead with wistful and excited glances; for the fame of the golden land to which they were approaching had spread far and wide, and they longed to see the gold-dust and nuggets with their own eyes.

“It’s a beautiful land, intirely,” exclaimed Larry O’Neil, with an irrepressible shout of enthusiasm, which called forth a general cheer from the men.

“Arrah, now,” remarked another Patlander, “don’t ye wish ye wos up to the knees and elbows in the goolden sands already? Faix I’d give a month’s pay to have wan day at the diggin’s.”

“I don’t believe a word about it—I don’t,” remarked Jones, with the dogged air of a man who shouldn’t, wouldn’t, and didn’t believe, and yet felt, somehow, that he couldn’t help it.

“Nother do I,” said another, “It’s all a sham; come, now, ain’t it, Bill?” he added, turning to a bronzed veteran who had visited California two years before.

“A sham!” exclaimed Bill. “I tell ’e wot it is, messmate, when you comes for to see the miners in San Francisco drinkin’ *shampain* like water, an’ payin’ a dollar for a glass o’ six-water grog, you’ll—”

“How much is a dollar?” inquired a soft-looking youth, interrupting him.

Bill said it was “‘bout four shillin’s,” and turned away with a look of contempt at such a display of ignorance.

“*Four shillin’s!*” exclaimed the soft youth, in amazement.

“Clear the anchor, and clew up the main-topsail,” shouted the mate.

In another moment the crew were scattered, some aloft to “lay out” on the topsail yard, some to the clew-lines, and some to clear the anchor, which latter had not been disturbed since the *Roving Bess* left the shores of Old England.

Chapter Six.

San Francisco—An Unexpected Desertion—Captain Bunting takes a Gloomy View of Things in General—New Friends and New Plans—Singular Facts and Curious Fancies

The “Golden Gates,” as they are called, of San Francisco, are two rocky headlands, about a mile apart, which form the entrance to one of the finest harbours, or rather land-locked seas, in the world. This harbour is upwards of forty miles long, by about twelve miles broad at its widest point, and receives at its northern end the waters of the noble Sacramento river, into which all the other rivers in California flow.

Nearly opposite to the mouth of the Sacramento, on the southern shores of the bay, stands the famous city of San Francisco, close to which the *Roving Bess* let go her anchor and clasped the golden strand.

The old adage that, “truth is strange, stranger than fiction,” was never more forcibly verified than in the growth and career of this wonderful city. No dreams of Arabian romance ever surpassed the inconceivable wonders that were matters of every-day occurrence there during the first years of the gold-fever; and many of the results attributed to Aladdin’s wonderful lamp were almost literally accomplished—in some cases actually surpassed—in and around the cities of California.

Before the discovery of gold, San Francisco was a mere hamlet. It consisted of a few rude cottages, built of sun-dried bricks, which were tenanted by native Californians; there were also a few merchants who trafficked in hides and horns. Cruisers and whalers occasionally put into the harbour to obtain fresh supplies of water, but beyond these and the vessels engaged in the hide-trade few ships ever visited the port, and the name of San Francisco was almost unknown.

But the instant the rumour got abroad that gold had been discovered there, the eyes of the world were turned towards it. In a few months men and ships began to pour into the capacious harbour; a city of tents overspread the sand-hills on which the hamlet stood; thousands upon thousands of gold-hunters rushed to the mines; the golden treasures of the land were laid bare, and immense fortunes were made literally in the course of a few weeks. In many cases these were squandered or gambled away almost as soon as made; but hundreds of men retired from the gold-fields after a few months’ labour, and returned home possessed of ample fortunes. Thousands, too, failed—some from physical inability to stand the fatiguing labour of the mines, and some from what they termed “want of luck,” though want of perseverance was, in nine cases out of ten, the real cause; while many hundreds perished from exposure and from the diseases that were prevalent in the country.

Well would it have been for these last had they remembered God’s word, “Make not haste to be rich;” but the thirst for gold, and the prospect of the sudden acquisition of enormous wealth, had blinded them to the fact that their frames were not equal to the rough life at the mines.

The excitement was at its height when the *Roving Bess* anchored off the shores of this land of gold.

The sun was just setting as the anchor dropped, and the crippled ship swung round towards the shore, for the tide had just begun to rise.

“Faix, it’s a quare town,” said Larry O’Neil to Ned, who was gazing in wrapt, astonishment and admiration ever the stern.

It was indeed “quare.” The entire city was made up of the most flimsy and make-shift materials that can be conceived. Many of the shops were mere tents with an open framework of wood in front; some were made of sheet-iron nailed to wooden posts; some were made of zinc; others, (imported from the States), of wood, painted white, and edged with green; a few were built of sun-dried bricks,

still fewer of corrugated iron, and many of all these materials pieced together in a sort of fancy patchwork. Even boats were used as dwellings, turned keel up, with a hole cut in their sides for the egress of a tin smoke-pipe, and two others of larger size to serve as door and window.

Finding space scarce, owing to the abrupt rise of the hills from the shore, many enterprising individuals had encroached upon the sea, and built houses on piles driven into the sand nearly half-a-mile below the original high water mark.

Almost every nation under the sun had representatives there, and the consequent confusion of tongues was equal to that of Babel.

The hills overhanging the lower part of the town were also well covered with tents, temporary houses, and cottages that had some appearance of comfort about them.

Such was the city on which the sun went down that night, and many were the quaint, sagacious, and comic remarks made by the men as they sat round their various mess-tables in the fore-castle of the *Roving Bess*, speculating noisily and half-seriously on the possibility of getting a run into the interior for a day or two.

But there was a party of men in the ship whose conversation that night was neither so light-hearted nor so loud. They sat in a dark corner of the fore-castle talking earnestly in subdued tones after the watch for the night was set. Their chief spokesman was a rough, ill-looking fellow, named Elliot.

“Ye see, lads,” said this man to the half-dozen comrades around him, “we must do it to-night, if we’re to do it at all. There’s the captain’s small boat layin’ out astarn, which comes quite handy, an’ as we lose all our pay by the dodge, I don’t see why we shouldn’t take it.”

The man struck his fist into his left palm, and looked round the circle for opinions.

“I don’t half like it,” said one; “it seems to me a sneaking way of doin’ it.”

“Bah!” ejaculated another, “wot gammon you do talk. If *he* lose the boat, don’t *we* lose the tin? Besides, are we agoin’ to let sich a trifle stand in the way o’ us an’ our fortins?”

“Have ye spoken to the other men, Elliot?” inquired one of the group.

“Ay, in coorse I have; an’ they’re all agreeable. Young Spense stood out pretty stiff at first; but I talked him over. Only I said nothing to Larry O’Neil or Bill Jones. I know it’s of no use. They’ll never agree; and if we wos to speak of it to either on ’em, he’d go right away aft an’ tell the captain. Their watch below ’ll come on in an hour, an’ then the watch on deck’ll be on our side. So, lads, go and git ready—an’ sharp’s the word.”

The party broke up, and went quietly below to prepare for flight, leaving no one on deck except O’Neil and Jones, and two of their comrades, who formed part of the watch. As Elliot had said, the watch was changed in about an hour. The mate and captain came on deck, looked round to see that all was right, and then returned to the cabin, to consult about the preliminary arrangements for disposing of the remnant of the cargo. Ned Sinton had turned in to have a good sleep before the expected toil and bustle of the following day; O’Neil and Jones, being relieved from duty, were glad to jump into their hammocks; and the deck was left in charge of the conspirators.

It was a clear, lovely night. Not a zephyr stirred the surface of the sea, in whose depths the starry host and the images of a hundred ships of all shapes and tonnage were faithfully mirrored. Bright lights illumined the city, those in the tents giving to them the appearance of cones and cubes of solid fire. The subdued din of thousands of human voices floated over the water, and mingled with the occasional shout or song that rose from the fleet and the splash of oars, as boats passed to and from the shore. Over all, the young moon shed a pale, soft light, threw into deep shadow the hills towards the north, which rose abruptly to a height of 3000 feet, and tipped with a silver edge the peak of Monte Diavolo, whose lofty summit overlooks all the golden land between the great range of the Sierra Nevada and the ocean. It was a scene of peaceful beauty, well fitted to call forth the adoration of man to the great and good Creator. Doubtless there were some whose hearts rose that night above the sordid thoughts of gain and gold; but few such were recognisable by their fellow-men, compared with the numerous votaries of sin and so-called pleasure.

Towards midnight, Captain Bunting turned in, ordering the steward to call him at daybreak; and shortly afterwards the mate retired, having previously looked round the deck and spoken the watch. A few minutes after, Elliot and his comrades appeared on deck, with their boots and small bundles in their hands.

“Is all right?” whispered Elliot.

“All right!” replied one of the watch.

Nothing more was said; the boat was hauled softly alongside, and held firmly there while two men descended and muffled the oars; then one by one the men slid down the side, and a bag of biscuit and a junk of beef were lowered into it by the second mate, who was one of the conspirators.

At that moment the first mate came on deck, and went forward to inquire what was wrong.

“It’s something in the boat, sir,” replied the second mate.

The mate looked over the side, and the sailors felt that they must be discovered, and that their plans were about to be frustrated. But the second mate was a man of decision. He suddenly seized Williams round the neck, and, covering his mouth with his hand, held him as if in a vice until he was secured and gagged.

“Shall we leave him!” whisperingly inquired one of the men.

“No, he’d manage to kick up a row; take him with us.”

The helpless mate was immediately passed over the side, the rope was cast off; and the boat floated softly away. At first, the oars were dipped so lightly that no sound was heard, even by those on board, except the drops of brine that trickled from the blades as they rose from the water; then, as the distance increased, the strokes were given more vigorously, and, at last, the men bent to it “with a will;” and they were soon shooting over the vast bay in the direction of the Sacramento river, up which they meant to proceed to the “diggings.”

With the exception of O’Neil and Jones, who had already reached the diggings in their dreams, the whole crew, sixteen in all, levanted, leaving Captain Bunting to navigate the ship back to Old England as he best might.

It is easier to conceive than to describe the feelings of the captain, when, on the following morning, he discovered that his crew had fled. He stamped, and danced, and tugged his hair, and pursed up his lips so tight that nothing but an occasional splutter escaped them! Then he sat down on the cabin skylight, looked steadily at Ned, who came hurriedly on deck in his shirt and drawers to see what was wrong, and burst into a prolonged fit of laughter.

“Hallo, captain! what’s up!”

“Nothin’, lad, ha! ha! Oh yes, human flesh is up, Ned; sailors is riz, an’ we’ve been sold;—we have—uncommon!”

Hereupon the captain roared again; but there was a slight peculiarity in the tone, that indicated a strong infusion of rage with the seeming merriment.

“They’re all gone—every man, Jack,” said Jones, with a face of deep solemnity, as he stood looking at the captain.

“So they are, the blackguards; an’ that without biddin’ us good mornin’, bad luck to them,” added O’Neil.

At first, Ned Sinton felt little disposed to take a comic view of the affair, and urged the captain strongly to take the lightest boat and set off in pursuit; but the latter objected to this.

“It’s of no use,” he said, “the ship can’t be repaired here without heavy expense; so, as I don’t mean to go to sea again for some time, the desertion of the men matters little after all.”

“Not go to sea again!” exclaimed Ned, in surprise. “What, then, do you mean to do?”

“That’s more than I can tell. I must see first how the cargo is to be disposed of; after that, it will be time enough to concoct plans for the future. It is quite clear that the tide of luck is out about as far as it can go just now; perhaps it may turn soon.”

“No doubt of it, captain,” cried his young *protégé* with a degree of energy that shewed he had made up his mind as to what *his* course should be, in the event of things coming to the worst. “I’ll go down and put on a few more articles of clothing, and then we’ll have a talk over matters.”

The “talk,” which was held over the breakfast-table in the cabin, resulted in the captain resolving to go ashore, and call on a Scotch merchant, named Thompson, to whom he had a letter of introduction. Half-an-hour later this resolve was carried out. Jones rowed them ashore in the smallest boat they had, and sculled back to the ship, leaving O’Neil with them to assist in carrying up two boxes which were consigned to Mr Thompson.

The quay on which they stood was crowded with men of all nations, whose excited looks, and tones, and “go-ahead” movements, testified to the high-pressure speed with which business in San Francisco was transacted.

“It’s more nor I can do to carry them two boxes at wance,” said Larry O’Neil, regarding them with a puzzled look, “an’ sorra a porter do I see nowhere.”

As he spoke, a tall, gentlemanly-looking young man, in a red-flannel shirt, round-crowned wide-awake, long boots, and corduroys, stepped forward, and said, “I’ll help you, if you like.”

“D’ye think ye can lift it!” inquired Larry, with a dubious look.

The youth replied by seizing one of the boxes, and lifting it with ease on his shoulder, shewing that, though destitute of fat, he had more than the average allowance of bone and sinew.

“I doubt if you could do it better than that yourself, Larry,” said Ned, laughing. “Come along, now, close at our heels, lest we get separated in the crowd.”

The young porter knew the residence of Mr Thompson well, and guided them swiftly through the crowded thoroughfares towards it. Passing completely through the town, he led them over the brow of one of the sand-hills beyond it, and descended into a little valley, where several neat villas were scattered along the sides of a pleasant green slope, that descended towards another part of the bay. Turning into the little garden in front of one of these villas, he placed the box on the wooden platform before the door, and said, “This is Mr Thompson’s house.”

There was something striking in the appearance of this young porter; he seemed much above his station in life; and Ned Sinton regarded his bronzed and handsome, but somewhat haggard and dissipated countenance, with interest, as he drew out his purse, and asked what was to pay.

“Two dollars,” answered the man.

Ned looked up in surprise. The idea of paying eight shillings for so slight a service had never entered his imagination. At that moment the door opened, and Mr Thompson appeared, and invited them to enter. He was a shrewd, business-like man, with stern, but kind expression of countenance.

“Come in, come in, and welcome to California,” he said, on perusing the captain’s letter of introduction. “Glad to see you, gentlemen. You’ve not had breakfast, of course; we are just about to sit down. This way,” he added, throwing open the door of a comfortable and elegantly-furnished parlour. “Bring the boxes into the passage—that will do. Here, Lizette, pay the men, dear; two dollars a-piece, I fancy—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Captain Bunting, “only one bas to be paid, the other is one of my sailors.”

“Ah! very good; which is he?”

Larry O’Neil stepped forward, hat in hand.

“Go in there, my man, and cook will attend to you.”

Larry passed through the doorway pointed out with a pleasant, fluttering sensation at the heart, which was quickly changed to a feeling of considerable disappointment on discovering that “cook” was a negro.

Meanwhile Lizette took two dollars from her purse, and bowing modestly to the strangers as she passed out of the room, advanced with them towards the young porter.

Now, Lizette was *not* beautiful—few women are, in the highest sense of the term, and the few who are, are seldom interesting; but she was pretty, and sweet, and innocent, and just turned sixteen. Fortunately for the male part of the world, there are many such. She had light-brown hair, which hung in dishevelled curls all round, a soft fair complexion, blue eyes, and a turned-up nose—a pert little nose that said plainly, “I *will* have my own way; now see if I don’t.” But the heart that animated the body to which that nose belonged, was a good, kind, earnest one; therefore, the nose having its own way was rather a blessing than otherwise to those happy individuals who dwelt habitually in the sunshine of Lizette’s presence.

At this particular time, ladies were scarce in California. The immense rush of men from all parts of the earth to the diggings had not been accompanied as yet by a corresponding rush of women, consequently the sight of a female face was, as it always ought to be, a source of comfort to mankind. We say “comfort” advisedly, because life at the gold-mines was a hard, riotous, mammon-seeking, rugged, and, we regret to say it, ungodly life; and men, in whom the soft memories of “other days” were not entirely quenched, had need, sometimes, of the comforting reflection that there still existed beings on the earth who didn’t rant, and roar, and drink, and swear, and wear beards, and boots, and bowie-knives.

There was double cause, then, for the gaze of respectful admiration with which the young porter regarded Lizette, as she said, “Here is your fare, porter,” and put the money into his hand, which he did not even thank her for, but continued to hold extended as if he wished her to take it back again.

Lizette did not observe the gaze, for she turned away immediately after giving him the money, and re-entered the parlour, whereupon the youth thrust both hands into his breeches-pockets, left the house, and returned slowly to the city, with the expression on his countenance of one who had seen a ghost.

Meanwhile Captain Bunting and Ned Sinton sat down with their host and hostess to a second breakfast, over which the former related the circumstances of the double loss of his crew and cargo.

“You are unfortunate,” said Mr Thompson, when the captain paused; “but there are hundreds in nearly the same predicament. Many of the fine-looking vessels you see in the harbour have lain helplessly there for months, the crews having taken French leave, and gone off to the diggings.”

“It’s awkward,” said the captain, with a troubled expression, as he slowly raised a square lump of pork to his mouth; “what would you advise me to do?”

“Sell off the remnant of the cargo, and set up a floating boarding-house.”

The square lump of pork disappeared, as the captain thrust it into his cheek in order to say, “What?” with a look of intense amazement.

Lizette laughed inadvertently, and, feeling that this was somewhat rude, she, in her effort to escape, plunged deeper into misfortune by turning to Sinton, with a blushing countenance, and asking him to take another cup of tea—a proposal that was obviously absurd, seeing that she had a moment before filled up his second cup.

Thus suddenly appealed to, Ned stammered, “Thank you—if you—ah!—no, thank you, not any more.”

“Set up a floating boarding establishment,” reiterated the merchant, in a tone of decision that caused them all to laugh heartily.

“It may sound strange,” he continued, “but I assure you it’s not a bad speculation. The captain of an American schooner, whose crew deserted the very day she arrived, turned his vessel into a floating boarding-house, about two months ago, and I believe he’s making a fortune.”

“Indeed,” ejaculated the captain, helping himself to another mass of pork, and accepting Lizette’s proffer of a third cup of tea.

“You have no idea,” continued the merchant, as he handed the bread to Ned, and pressed him to eat—“you have no idea of the strange state of things here just now, and the odd ways in which men make money. Owing to the rush of immigrants everything is enormously dear, and house-room

is not to be had for love or money, so that if you were to fit up your ship for the purpose you could fill it at once. At the various hotels in the city an ordinary meal at the *table d'hôte* costs from two to three dollars—eight and twelve shillings of our money—and there are some articles that bear fabulous prices. It's a fact that eggs at this moment sell at a shilling each, and onions and potatoes at the same price; but then wages are enormously high. How long this state of things will last no one can tell; in the meantime, hundreds of men are making fortunes. Only the other day a ship arrived from New York, and one of the passengers, a "cute" fellow, had brought out fifteen hundred copies of several newspapers, which he sold for a dollar each in less than two hours! Then, rents are tremendous. You will scarcely believe me when I tell you that the rent paid by the landlord of one of the hotels here is 110,000 dollars—about 22,000 pounds—a year, and it is but a poor building too. My own warehouse, which is a building of only one storey, with a front of twenty feet, is rented to me at 40,000 dollars—8000 pounds a year—and rents are rising."

Ned and the captain leaned back in their chairs aghast at such statements, and began to entertain some doubts as to the sanity of their host; but the worthy merchant was a grave, quiet man, without a particle of romance in his composition, and he went on coolly telling them facts which Ned afterwards said made his hair almost stand on end, when he thought of how little money he possessed, and how much he would have to pay for the bare necessities of life.

After some further converse on men and things in general, and on prospects at the mines, Mr Thompson said, "And now, Captain Bunting, I'll tell you what I'll do. I will go down to your ship, overhaul the cargo, and make you an offer for the whole in the lump, taking the saleable with the unsaleable. This will, at any rate, put you in funds at once, and enable you to follow what course seems best. Will that suit you?"

"It will," said the captain, "and thank 'ee. As for turning a boardin'-house keeper, I don't think I'm cut out for it. Neither is my friend Sinton, eh?"

"Certainly not," answered Ned, laughing: "we might as well become washerwomen."

"You'd make a pretty good thing of it if you did," retorted Mr Thompson; "would they not, Lizette? you know more about these things than I do."

"Indeed, I cannot tell, papa, as I do not know the capabilities of our friends in that way; but I think the few washerwomen in the city must be making fortunes, for they charge two shillings a-piece for everything, large and small."

"Now, then, gentlemen," said the merchant, rising, "if you have quite finished, we will walk down to the harbour and inspect the goods."

An arch smile played round Lizette's lips as she shook hands with Ned at parting, and she seemed on the point of speaking, but checked herself.

"I beg pardon," said Ned, pausing, "did you—"

"Oh, it was nothing!" said Lizette; "I was only going to remark that—that if you set up in the washing line, I shall be happy to give you all the work I can."

"Ahem!" coughed Ned gravely, "and if we should set up in the *other* line, will you kindly come and board with us?"

"Hallo, Ned, what's keeping you?" roared the captain.

"Coming," shouted Ned, as he ran after him. "Where has Larry O'Neil gone?"

"He's away down before us to have a look at the town. We shall find him, I doubt not, cruising about the quay."

In a few minutes the three friends were wending their way through the crowded streets back to the shore.

Chapter Seven.

The Fate of the Roving Bess—Gambling Scenes —Mr Sinton makes a New Friend—Larry O’Neil makes Money in Strange Ways—A Murder, and a Beggar’s Death—Ned becomes a Poor Man’s Heir

The remnant of the cargo of the *Roving Bess* proved to be worth comparatively little—less even than had been anticipated. After a careful inspection, Mr Thompson offered to purchase it “in the slump” for 1000 dollars—about 200 pounds sterling. This was a heavy blow to poor Captain Bunting, who had invested his all—the savings of many years—in the present unfortunate venture. However, his was not a nature to brood over misfortunes that could not be avoided, so he accepted the sum with the best grace he might, and busied himself during the next few days in assisting the merchant to remove the bales.

During this period he did not converse much with any one, but meditated seriously on the steps he ought to take. From all that he heard, it seemed impossible to procure hands to man the ship at that time, so he began to entertain serious thoughts of “taking his chance” at the diggings after all. He was by nature averse to this, however; and had nearly made up his mind to try to beat up recruits for the ship, when an event occurred that settled the matter for him rather unexpectedly. This event was the bursting out of a hurricane, or brief but violent squall, which, before assistance could be procured, dragged the *Roving Bess* from her moorings, and stranded her upon the beach, just below the town. Here was an end to sea-faring prospects. The whole of his limited capital would not have paid for a tenth part of the labour necessary to refloat the ship, so he resolved to leave her on the beach, and go to the diggings.

Mr Thompson advised him to sell the hull, as it would fetch a good price for the sake of the timber, which at that time was much wanted in the town, but the captain had still a lurking hope that he might get his old ship afloat at some future period, and would not hear of it.

“What,” said he, “sell the *Roving Bess*, which stands *AI* at Lloyd’s, to be broken up to build gold-diggers houses? I trow not. No, no; let her lie where she is in peace.”

On the day after the squall, as Ned and the captain were standing on the shore regarding their late floating, and now grounded, home in sad silence, a long-legged, lantern-jawed man, in dirty canvas trousers, long boots, a rough coat, and broad straw hat, with an enormous cigar in his mouth, and both hands in his trousers-pockets, walked up and accosted them. It did not require a second glance to know that he was a Yankee.

“Guess that ’ere’s pretty wall fixed up, stranger,” he said, addressing the captain, and pointing with his nose to the stranded vessel.

“It is,” answered the captain, shortly.

“Fit for nothin’ but firewood, I calculate.”

To this the captain made no reply.

“I say, stranger,” continued the Yankee, “I wouldn’t mind to give ’e 1000 dollars for her slick off.”

“I don’t wish to sell her,” replied the captain.

“Say 1500,” replied the man.

“I tell you, I *won’t* sell her.”

“No! Now that *is* kurous. Will ’e loan her, then!”

Here Ned whispered a few words to the captain, who nodded his head, and, turning to the Yankee, said—

“How much will you give?”

“Wall, I reckon, she’s too far out to drive a screamin’ trade, but I don’t mind sayin’ 100 dollars a month.”

After some consultation with Ned, and a little more talk with the Yankee, Captain Bunting agreed to this proposal, only stipulating that the bargain should hold good for a year, that the hull should not be cut or damaged in any way, and that the rent should be paid in advance into the hands of Mr Thompson, as he himself was about to proceed to the gold-fields. Having sealed and settled this piece of business at a neighbouring tavern, where the Yankee—Major Whitlaw—ordered a “brandy-smash” for himself and two “gin-slings” for his companions, (which they civilly declined, to his intense amazement,) the contracting parties separated.

“That’s rather a sudden transfer of our good ship,” said Ned, laughing, as they walked towards the Plaza, or principal square of the town, where some of the chief hotels and gambling-houses were situated.

“I feel half sorry for havin’ done it,” replied the captain; “however, it can’t be helped now, so I’ll away to our friend Thompson’s office, and tell him about it.”

“Then I shall wander about here until you return. It will be dinner time at the hotels two hours hence. Suppose we meet at the Parker House, and talk over our future plans while we discuss a chop?”

To this the captain agreed, and then hurried off to his friend’s office, while Ned entered the hotel. A large portion of this building was rented by gamblers, who paid the enormous sum of 60,000 dollars a year for it, and carried on their villainous and degrading occupation in it night and day. The chief games played were monte and faro, but no interest attached to the games *as such*, the winning or losing of money was that which lent fascination to the play.

Ned had intended to stroll through the hotel and observe the various visitors who thronged the bar, but the crash of a brass band in the gambling-saloons awakened his curiosity, and induced him to enter. The scene that met his eyes was, perhaps, the strangest and the saddest he had ever looked upon. The large saloon was crowded with representatives of almost every civilised nation under the sun. English, Scotch, Irish, Yankees, French, Russians, Turks, Chinese, Mexicans, Indians, Malays, Jews, and negroes—all were there in their national costumes, and all were, more or less, under the fascinating influence of the reigning vice of California, and especially of San Francisco. The jargon of excited voices can neither be conceived nor described. Crowds surrounded the monte tables, on which glittering piles of gold and silver coin were passing from hand to hand according to varying fortune. The characteristics—and we may add the worst passions—of the various nations were ever and anon brought strongly out. The German and Spaniard laid down their money, and lost or won without a symptom of emotion; the Turk stroked his beard as if with the view of keeping himself cool; the Russian looked stolid and indifferent; the Frenchman started, frowned, swore, and occasionally clutched his concealed pistol or bowie-knife; while the Yankee stamped and swore. But, indeed, the men of all nations cursed and swore in that terrible place.

Those who dwelt in the city staked gold and silver coin, while the men just returned from the mines staked gold-dust and nuggets. These last were conspicuous from their rough clothing, rugged, bronzed, and weather-worn countenances. Many of them played most recklessly. Several successful diggers staked immense sums, and either doubled or lost, in two or three throws, the hard earnings of many months of toil, and left the rooms penniless.

At one end of the saloon there was a counter, with a plentiful supply of stimulants to feed the excitement of the wretched gamblers; and the waiter here was kept in constant employment. Ned had never been within the unhallowed precincts of a gambling-house before, and it was with a feeling of almost superstitious dread that he approached the table, and looked on. A tall, burly, bearded miner stepped forward at the moment and placed a huge purse of gold-dust on the table—

“Now, then,” he cried, with a reckless air, “here goes—neck or nothin’.”

“Nothin’!” he muttered with a fearful oath, as the president raked the purse into his coffers.

The man rose and strode sullenly from the room, his fingers twitching nervously about the hilt of his bowie-knife; an action which the president observed, but heeded not, being prepared with a concealed revolver for whatever might occur. Immediately another victim stepped forward, staked five hundred dollars—and won. He staked again a thousand dollars—and won; then he rose, apparently resolved to tempt fickle fortune no more, and left the saloon. As he retired his place was filled by a young man who laid down the small sum of two dollars. Fortune favoured this man for a long time, and his pile of dollars gradually increased until he became over-confident and staked fully half of his gains—and lost.

Ned's attention was drawn particularly to this player, whom he thought he had seen before. On looking more fixedly at him, he recognised the young porter who had carried up the box to the merchant's house. His next stake was again made recklessly. He laid down all he possessed—and lost. Then he rose suddenly, and drawing a pistol from his breast, rushed towards the door. None of the players who crowded the saloon paid him more than momentary attention. It mattered not to them whether he meditated suicide or murder. They made way for him to pass, and then, closing in, were deep again in the all-absorbing game.

But our hero was not thus callous. A strong feeling of sympathy filled his breast, prompting him to spring through the doorway, and catch the youth by the shoulder just as he gained the street. He turned round instantly, and presented the revolver at Ned's breast, but the latter caught his right arm in his powerful grasp and held it in the air.

"Be calm, my poor fellow," he said, "I mean you no harm; I only wish to have a word of conversation with you. You are an Englishman, I perceive."

The young man's head fell on his breast, and he groaned aloud.

"Come, come," said Ned, releasing his arm, "don't give way like that."

"I'm lost," said the youth, bitterly. "I have struggled against this passion for gaming, but it has overcome me again and again. It is vain to fight against it any longer."

"Not a bit of it, man," said Ned, in a cheering tone, as he drew the arm of the young man within his own, and led him slowly along the street. "You are excited just now by your disappointments. Let us walk together a while, for I have something to say to you. I am quite a stranger here, and it's a comfort to have a countryman to talk with."

The kind words, and earnest, hearty manner of our hero, had the effect of soothing the agitated feelings of his new friend, and of winning his confidence. In the course of half-an-hour, he drew from him a brief account of his past history.

His name, he said, was Collins; he was the son of a clergyman, and had received a good education. Five years before the period of which we now write, he had left his home in England, and gone to sea, being at that time sixteen years of age. For three years he served before the mast in a South-Sea whale-ship, and then returned home to find his father and mother dead. Having no near relations alive, and not a sixpence in the world, he turned once more towards the sea, with a heavy heart and an empty pocket, obtained a situation as second mate in a trading vessel which was about to proceed to the Sandwich Islands. Encountering a heavy gale on the western coast of South America, his vessel was so much disabled as to be compelled to put into the harbour of San Francisco for repairs. Here the first violent attack of the gold-fever had set in. The rush of immigrants was so great, that goods of all kinds were selling at fabulous prices, and the few bales that happened to be on board the ship were disposed off for twenty times their value. The captain was in ecstasies, and purposed sailing immediately to the nearest civilised port for a cargo of miscellaneous goods; but the same fate befell him which afterwards befell Captain Bunting, and many hundreds of others—the crew deserted to the mines. Thereupon the captain and young Collins also betook themselves to the gold-fields, leaving the ship to swing idly at her anchor. Like most of the first arrivals at the mines, Collins was very successful, and would soon—in diggers' parlance—have "made his pile,"—i.e. his fortune, had not scurvy attacked and almost killed him; compelling him to return to San Francisco

in search of fresh vegetables and medicine, neither of which, at that time, could be obtained at the mines for love or money. He recovered slowly; but living in San Francisco was so expensive that, ere his health was sufficiently recruited to enable him to return to the gold-fields, his funds were well-nigh exhausted. In order to recruit them he went, in an evil hour, to the gaming-saloons, and soon became an inveterate gambler.

In the providence of God he had been led, some years before, to become an abstainer from all intoxicating drinks, and, remaining firm to his pledge throughout the course of his downward career, was thus saved from the rapid destruction which too frequently overtook those who to the exciting influences of gambling added the maddening stimulus of alcohol. But the constant mental fever under which he laboured was beginning to undermine a naturally-robust constitution, and to unstring the nerves of a well-made, powerful frame. Sometimes, when fortune favoured him, he became suddenly possessor of a large sum of money, which he squandered in reckless gaiety, often, however, following the dictates of an amiable, sympathetic disposition, he gave the most of it away to companions and acquaintances in distress. At other times he had not wherewith to pay for his dinner, in which case he took the first job that offered in order to procure a few dollars. Being strong and active, he frequently went down to the quays and offered his services as a porter to any of the gold-hunters who were arriving in shoals from all parts of the world. It was thus, as we have seen, that he first met with Ned Sinton and his friends.

All this, and a great deal more, did Ned worm out of his companion in the course of half-an-hour's stroll in the Plaza.

"Now," said he, when Collins had finished, "I'm going to make a proposal to you. I feel very much interested in all that you have told me; to be candid with you, I like your looks, and I like your voice—in fact, I like *yourself*, and—but what's your Christian name?"

"Tom," replied the other.

"Very well; then I'll call you Tom in future, and you'll call me Ned. Now, Tom, you must come with me and Captain Bunting to the gold-fields, and try your fortune over again—nay, don't shake your head, I know what you would say, you have no money to equip yourself, and you won't be indebted to strangers, and all that sort of stuff; but that won't do, my boy. I'm not a stranger; don't I know all your history from first to last?"

Tom Collins sighed.

"Well, perhaps I don't know it all, but I know the most of it, and besides, I feel as if I had known you all my life—"

"Ned," interrupted the other, in an earnest tone of voice, "I feel your kindness very much—no one has spoken to me as you have done since I came to the diggings—but I cannot agree to your proposal to-day. Meet me at the Parker House to-morrow, at this time, and I shall give you a final answer."

"But why not give it now?"

"Because—because, I want to—to get paid for a job I expect to get—"

"Tom," said Ned, stopping and laying his hand on the shoulder of his companion, while he looked earnestly into his face, "let us begin our friendship with mutual candour. Do you not intend to make a few dollars, and then try to increase them by another throw at the gaming-table!"

The youth's brow flushed slightly as he answered, "You are right, I had half an intention of trying my fortune for the last time—"

"Then," said Ned firmly and emphatically, "you shall do nothing of the sort. Gambling for money is a mean, pitiful, contemptible thing—don't frown, my dear fellow, I do not apply these terms to *you*, I apply them to the principle of gambling—a principle which you do not hold, as I know from your admission, made to me not many minutes ago, that you have often striven against the temptation. Many men don't realise the full extent of the sinfulness of many of their practices, but although that renders them less culpable, it does not render them innocent, much less does it justify

the evil practices. Gambling is all that I have styled it, and a great deal worse; and you *must* give it up—I insist on it. Moreover, Tom, I insist on your coming to dine with me at the Parker House. I shall introduce you to my friend Captain Bunting, whom you already know by sight—so come along.”

“Well, I will,” said Tom, smiling at his friend’s energy, but still hanging back; “but you must permit me to go to my lodgings first. I shall be back immediately.”

“Very good. Remember, we dine in the course of an hour, so be punctual.”

While Tom Collins hurried away to his lodgings, Ned Sinton proceeded towards the shores of the bay in a remarkably happy frame of mind, intending to pass his leisure hour in watching the thousands of interesting and amusing incidents that were perpetually taking place on the crowded quays, where the passengers from a newly-arrived brig were looking in bewildered anxiety after their luggage, and calling for porters; where traffic, by means of boats, between the fleet and the land created constant confusion and hubbub; where men of all nations bargained for the goods of all climes in every known tongue.

While he gazed in silence at the exciting and almost bewildering scene, his attention was attracted to a group of men, among whose vociferating tones he thought he distinguished familiar voices.

“That’s it; here’s your man, sir,” cried one, bursting from the crowd with a huge portmanteau on his shoulder. “Now, then, where’ll I steer to?”

“Right ahead to the best hotel,” answered a slim Yankee, whose black coat, patent-leather boots, and white kids, in such a place, told plainly enough that a superfine dandy had mistaken his calling.

“Ay, ay, sir!” shouted Bill Jones, as he brushed past Ned, in his new capacity of porter.

“Faix, ye’ve cotched a live Yankee!” exclaimed a voice there was no mistaking, as the owner slapped Bill on the shoulder. “He’ll make yer fortin’, av ye only stick by him. He’s just cut out for the diggin’s, av his mother wos here to take care of him.”

Larry O’Neil gave a chuckle, slapped his pockets, and cut an elephantine caper, as he turned from contemplating the retreating figure of his shipmate’s employer, and advanced towards the end of the quay.

“Now, thin, who’s nixt?” cried he, holding out both arms, and looking excited, as if he were ready to carry off any individual bodily in his arms to any place, for mere love, without reference to money. “Don’t all spake at wance. Tshoo dollars a mile for anythin’ onder a ton, an’ yerself on the top of it for four! Horoo, Mister Sinton, darlint, is it yerself? Och, but this is the place intirely—goold and silver for the axin’ a’most! Ah, ye needn’t grin. Look here!”

Larry plunged both hands into the pockets of his trousers, and pulled them forth full of half and quarter dollars, with a few shining little nuggets of gold interspersed among them.

Ned opened his eyes in amazement, and, taking his excited comrade apart from the crowd, asked how he had come by so much money.

“Come by it!” he exclaimed; “ye could come by twice the sum, av ye liked. Sure, didn’t I find that they wos chargin’ tshoo dollars—aiqual to eight shillin’s, I’m towld—for carryin’ a box or portmanter the length o’ me fut; so I turns porter all at wance, an’ faix I made six dollars in less nor an hour. But as I was comin’ back, I says to myself, says I, ‘Larry, ye’ll be the better of a small glass o’ somethin’—eh!’ So in I goes to a grog-shop, and faix I had to pay half-a-dollar for a thimbleful o’ brandy, bad luck to them, as would turn the stomik o’ a pig. I almost had a round wi’ the landlord; but they towld me it wos the same iverywhere. So I wint and had another in the nixt shop I sees, jist to try; and it was thrue. Then a Yankee spies my knife,—the great pig-sticker that Bob Short swopped wi’ me for my junk o’ plum-duff off the Cape. It seems they’ve run out o’ sich articles just at this time, and would give handfuls o’ goold for wan. So says I, ‘Wot’ll ye give?’

“‘Three dollars, I guess,’ says wan.

“‘Four,’ says another; ‘he’s chaitin’ ye.’

“Four’s bid,’ says I, mountin’ on a keg o’ baccy, and howldin up the knife; ‘who says more? It’s the rale steel, straight from Manchester or Connaught, I misremimber which. Warranted to cut both ways, av ye only turn the idge round, and shove with a will.’

“I begood in joke; but faix they took me up in arnest, an’ run up the price to twinty dollars—four pounds, as sure as me name’s Larry—before I know’d where I wos. I belave I could ha’ got forty for it, but I hadn’t the heart to ax more, for it wasn’t worth a brass button.”

“You’ve made a most successful beginning, Larry. Have you any more knives like that one?”

“Sorrow a wan—more’s the pity. But that’s only a small bit o’ me speckilations. I found six owld newspapers in the bottom o’ me chist, and, would ye belave it, I sowld ’em, ivery wan, for half-a-dollar the pace; and I don’t rightly know how much clear goold I’ve got by standin’ all mornin’ at the post-office.”

“Standing at the post-office! What do you mean?”

“Nother more or less nor what I say. I suppose ye know the mail’s comed in yisterday morning; so says I to myself this mornin’, ‘Ye’ve got no livin’ sowld in the owld country that’s likely to write to ye, but ye better go, for all that, an’ ax if there’s letters. Maybe there is; who knows?’ So away I wint, and sure enough I found a row o’ men waitin’ for their letters; so I crushes for’ard—och! but I thought they’d ha’ hung me on the spot,—and I found it was a rule that ‘first come first sarved—fair play and no favour.’ They wos all standin’ wan behind another in a line half-a-mile long av it wos a fut, as patient as could be; some readin’ the noosepapers, and some drinkin’ coffee and tay and grog, that wos sowld by men as went up an’ down the line the whole mornin’. So away I goes to the end o’ the line, an’ took my place, detarmined to stand it out; and, in three minutes, I had a tail of a dozen men behind me. ‘Faix, Larry,’ says I, ‘it’s the first time ye iver comminced at the end of a thing in order to git to the beginnin’.’

“Well, when I wos gittin’ pretty near the post-office windy, I hears the chap behind me a-sayin’ to the fellow behind him that he expected no letters, but only took up his place in the line to sell it to them what did. An’ sure enough I found that lots o’ them were there on the same errand. Just then up comes a miner, in big boots and a wide-awake.

“‘Och,’ says he, ‘who’ll sell me a place?’ and with that he offered a lot o’ pure goold lumps.

“‘Guess it’s too little,’ says the man next me.

“‘Ah, ye thievin’ blackguard!’ says I. ‘Here, yer honer, I’ll sell ye my place for half the lot. I can wait for me letter, more be token I’m not sure there is wan.’ For, ye see, I wos riled at the Yankee’s greed. So out I steps, and in steps the miner, and hands me the whole he’d offered at first.

“‘Take them, my man,’ says he; ‘you’re an honest fellow, and it’s a trate to meet wan here.’”

“‘Capital,’ cried Ned, laughing heartily; “and you didn’t try for a letter after all?”

“‘Porter there?’” shouted a voice from the quay.

“That’s me, yer honer. Here ye are,” replied the Irishman, bounding away with a yell, and shouldering a huge leathern trunk, with which he vanished from the scene, leaving Ned to pursue the train of thought evoked by his account of his remarkable experiences.

We deem it necessary here to assure the reader that the account given by Larry O’Neil of his doings was by no means exaggerated. The state of society, and the eccentricities of traffic displayed in San Francisco and other Californian cities during the first years of the gold-fever, beggars all description. Writers on that place and period find difficulty in selecting words and inventing similes in order to convey anything like an adequate idea of their meaning. Even eye-witnesses found it almost impossible to believe the truth of what they heard and saw; and some have described the whole circle of life and manners there to have been more like to the wild, incongruous whirl of a pantomime than to the facts of real life.

Even in the close and abrupt juxtaposition of the ludicrous and the horrible this held good. Ned Sinton had scarcely parted from his hilarious shipmate, when he was attracted by shouts, as if of men quarrelling, in a gaming-house; and, a few moments later, the report of a pistol was heard, followed

by a sharp cry of agony. Rushing into the house, and forcing his way through the crowd, he reached the table in time to see the bloody corpse of a man carried out. This unfortunate had repeatedly lost large sums of money, and, growing desperate, staked his all on a final chance. He lost; and, drawing his bowie-knife, in the heat of despair, rushed at the president of the table. A dozen arms arrested him, and rendered his intended assault abortive; nevertheless, the president coolly drew a revolver from under the cloth, and shot him dead. For a few minutes there was some attempt at disturbance, and some condemned, while others justified the act. But the body was removed, and soon the game went on again as if nothing had occurred.

Sickened with the sight, Ned hurried from the house, and walked rapidly towards the shores of the bay, beyond the limits of the canvas town, where he could breathe the free ocean air, and wander on the sands in comparative solitude.

The last straggling tent in that quarter was soon behind him, and he stopped by the side of an old upturned boat, against which he leaned, and gazed out upon the crowded bay with saddened feelings. As he stood in contemplation, he became aware of a sound, as if of heaving, plethoric breathing under the boat. Starting up, he listened intently, and heard a faint groan. He now observed, what had escaped his notice before, that the boat against which he leaned was a human habitation. A small hole near the keel admitted light, and possibly, at times, emitted smoke. Hastening round to the other side, he discovered a small aperture, which served as a doorway. It was covered with a rag of coarse canvas, which he lifted, and looked in.

“Who’s there?” inquired a voice, as sharply as extreme weakness would allow. “Have a care! There’s a revolver pointing at your head. If you come in without leave, I’ll blow out your brains.”

“I am a friend,” said Ned, looking towards the further end of the boat, where, on a couch of straw, lay the emaciated form of a middle-aged man. “Put down your pistol, friend; my presence here is simply owing to the fact that I heard you groan, and I would relieve your distress, if it is in my power.”

“You are the first that has said so since I lay down here,” sighed the man, falling back heavily.

Ned entered, and, advancing as well as he could in a stooping posture, sat down beside the sick man’s pallet, and felt his pulse. Then he looked anxiously in his face, on which the hand of death was visibly placed.

“My poor fellow!” said Ned, in a soothing tone, “you are very ill, I fear. Have you no one to look after you?”

“Ill!” replied the sick man, almost fiercely, “I am dying. I have seen death too often, and know it too well, to be mistaken.” His voice sank to a whisper as he added, “It is not far off now.”

For a few seconds Ned could not make up his mind what to say. He felt unwilling to disturb the last moments of the man. At last he leaned forward, and repeated from memory several of the most consoling passages of Scripture. Twice over he said, “Though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as wool,” and, “Him that cometh unto Me, (Christ), I will in no wise cast out.”

The man appeared to listen, but made no reply. Suddenly he started up, and, leaning on his elbow, looked with an awfully earnest stare into Ned’s face.

“Young man, gold is good—gold is good—remember that, *if you don’t make it your god.*”

After a pause, he continued, “I made it my god. I toiled for it night and day, in heat and cold, wet and dry. I gave up everything for it; I spent all my time in search of it—and I got it—and what good can it do me *now*? I have spent night and day here for weeks, threatening to shoot any one who should come near my gold—Ha!” he added, sharply, observing that his visitor glanced round the apartment, “you’ll not find it *here*. No, look, look round, peer into every corner, tear up every plank of my boat, and you’ll find nothing but rotten wood, and dust, and rusty nails.”

“Be calm, my friend,” said Ned, who now believed that the poor man’s mind was wandering, “I don’t want your gold; I wish to comfort you, if I can. Would you like me to do anything for you after—”

“After I’m dead,” said the man, abruptly. “No, nothing. I have no relations—no friends—no enemies, even, *now*. Yes,” he added, quickly, “I have one friend. *You* are my friend. You have spoken kindly to me—a beggar. You deserve the name of friend. Listen, I want you to be my heir. See here, I have had my will drawn up long ago, with the place for the name left blank I had intended—but no matter—what is your name?”

“Edward Sinton.”

“Here, hand me that ink-horn, and the pen. There,” continued the man, pushing the paper towards him, “I have made over to you the old boat, and the ground it lies on. Both are mine. The piece of ground is marked off by four posts. Take care of the—”

The man’s voice sank to a mere whisper; then it ceased suddenly. When Ned looked at him again, he started, for the cold hand of death had sealed his lips for ever.

A feeling of deep, intense pity filled the youth’s heart, as he gazed on the emaciated form of this friendless man—yet he experienced a sensation approaching almost to gladness, when he remembered that the last words he had spoken to him were those of our blessed Saviour to the chief of sinners.

Spreading the ragged piece of canvas that formed a quilt over the dead man’s face, he rose, and left the strange dwelling, the entrance to which he secured, and then hastened to give information of the death to the proper authorities.

Ned was an hour too late for dinner when he arrived at the hotel, where he found Captain Bunting and his new friend awaiting him in some anxiety. Hastily informing them of the cause of his detention, he introduced them to each other, and forgot for a time the scene of death he had just witnessed, in talking over plans for the future, and in making arrangements for a trip to the diggings.

Chapter Eight.

Our Hero and his Friends start for the Diggings— The Captain's Portrait—Costumes, and Scenery, and Surprises—The Ranche by the Road-Side— Strange Travellers—They meet with a New Friend, and adopt him—The Hunter's Story—Larry offers to fight a Yankee—High Prices and Empty Purses

Ovid never accomplished a metamorphosis more striking or complete than that effected by Captain Bunting upon his own proper person. We have said, elsewhere, that the worthy captain was a big, broad man, with a shaggy head of hair, and red whiskers. Moreover, when he landed in San Francisco, he wore a blue coat, with clear brass buttons, blue vest, blue trousers, and a glazed straw hat; but in the course of a week he effected such a change in his outward man, that his most intimate friend would have failed to recognise him.

No brigand of the Pyrenees ever looked more savage—no robber of the stage ever appeared more outrageously fierce. We do not mean to say that Captain Bunting “got himself up” for the purpose of making himself conspicuous. He merely donned the usual habiliments of a miner; but these habiliments were curious, and the captain's figure in them was unusually remarkable.

In order that the reader may have a satisfactory view of the captain, we will change the scene, and proceed at once to that part of the road to the gold-fields which has now been reached by our adventurers.

It is a wide plain, or prairie, on which the grass waves like the waters of the sea. On one side it meets the horizon, on another it is bounded by the faint and far-distant range of the Sierra Nevada. Thousands of millions of beautiful wild-flowers spangle and beautify the soft green carpet, over which spreads a cloudless sky, not a whit less blue and soft than the vaunted sky of Italy. Herds of deer are grazing over the vast plain, like tame cattle. Wild geese and other water-fowl wing their way through the soft atmosphere, and little birds twitter joyously among the flowers. Everything is bright, and green, and beautiful; for it is spring, and the sun has not yet scorched the grass to a russet-brown, and parched and cracked the thirsty ground, and banished animal and vegetable life away, as it will yet do, ere the hot summer of those regions is past and gone.

There is but one tree in all that vast plain. It is a sturdy oak, and near it bubbles a cool, refreshing spring, over which, one could fancy, it had been appointed guardian. The spot is hundreds of miles from San Francisco, on the road to the gold-mines of California. Beneath that solitary oak a party of weary travellers have halted, to rest and refresh themselves and their animals; or, as the diggers have it, to take their “nooning.” In the midst of that party sits our captain, on the back of a long-legged mule.

On his head is, or, rather, was—for he has just removed it, in order to wipe the perspiration from his forehead—a brown felt wide-awake, very much battered in appearance, suggesting the idea that the captain had used it constantly as a night-cap, which, indeed, is the fact. Nothing but a flannel shirt, of the brightest possible scarlet, clothes the upper portion of his burly frame, while brown corduroys adorn the lower. Boots of the most ponderous dimensions engulf, not only his feet, but his entire legs, leaving only a small part of the corduroys visible. On his heels, or, rather, just above his heels, are strapped a pair of enormous Mexican spurs, with the frightful prongs of which he so lacerated the sides of his unfortunate mule, during the first part of the journey, as to drive that animal frantic, and cause it to throw him off at least six times a day. Dire necessity has now, however, taught

the captain that most difficult and rarely-accomplished feat of horsemanship, to ride with the toes well in, and the heels well out.

Round Captain Bunting's waist is a belt, which is of itself quite a study. It is made of tough cow-hide, full two and a half inches broad, and is fastened by a brass buckle that would cause the mouth of a robber-chief to water. Attached to it in various ways and places are the following articles:—A bowie-knife of the largest size—not far short of a small cutlass; a pair of revolving pistols, also large, and having six barrels each; a stout leathern purse; and a leathern bag of larger dimensions for miscellaneous articles. As the captain has given up shaving for many weeks past, little of his face is visible, except the nose, eyes, and forehead. All besides is a rugged mass of red hair, which rough travel has rendered an indescribable and irreclaimable waste. But the captain cares not: as long as he can clear a passage through the brushwood to his mouth, he says, his mind is easy.

Such is Captain Bunting, and such, with but trifling modifications, is every member of his party. On Ned Sinton and his almost equally stalwart and handsome friend, Tom Collins, the picturesque costume of the miner sits well; and it gives a truly wild, dashing look to the whole party, as they stand beneath the shade of that lovely oak, preparing to refresh themselves with biscuit and jerked beef, and pipes of esteemed tobacco.

Besides those we have mentioned, Larry O'Neil is there,—busy carrying water in a bucket to the horses, and as proud of his Mexican spurs as if they were the golden spurs of the days of chivalry. Bill Jones is there, with a blue instead of a red-flannel shirt, and coarse canvas ducks in place of corduroys. Bill affects the sailor in other respects, for he scorns heavy boots, and wears shoes and a straw hat; but he is compelled to wear the spurs, for reasons best known to his intensely obstinate mule. There is also among them a native Californian,—a *vaquero*, or herd,—who has been hired to accompany the party to the diggings, to look after the pack-mules, of which there are two, and to assist them generally with advice and otherwise. He is a fine athletic fellow—Spanish-like, both in appearance and costume; and, in addition to bad Spanish, gives utterance to a few sounds, which *he* calls “Encleesh.” The upper part of his person is covered by the *serape*, or Mexican cloak, which is simply a blanket, with a hole in its centre, through which the head of the wearer is thrust, the rest being left to fall over the shoulders.

Our travellers had reached the spot on which we now find them by means of a boat voyage of more than a hundred miles, partly over the great bay of San Francisco, and partly up the Sacramento River, until they reached the city of Sacramento. Here they purchased mules and provisions for the overland journey to the mines—a further distance of about a hundred and fifty miles,—and also the picks, shovels, axes, pewter plates, spoons, pans, and pannikins, and other implements and utensils that were necessary for a campaign among the golden mountains of the Sierra Nevada. For these the prices demanded were so enormous, that when all was ready for a start they had only a few dollars left amongst them. But being on their way to dig for gold, they felt little concern on this head.

As the Indians of the interior had committed several murders a short time before, and had come at various times into collision with the gold-diggers, it was deemed prudent to expend a considerable sum on arms and ammunition. Each man, therefore, was armed with a rifle or carbine, a pistol of some sort, and a large knife or short sword. Captain Bunting selected a huge old bell-mouthed blunderbuss, having, as he said, a strong partiality for the weapons of his forefathers. Among other things, Ned, by advice of Tom Collins, purchased a few simple medicines; he also laid in a stock of drawing-paper, pencils, and water-colours, for his own special use, for which he paid so large a sum that he was ashamed to tell it to his comrades; but he was resolved not to lose the opportunity of representing life and scenery at the diggings, for the sake of old Mr Shirley, as well as for his own satisfaction. Thus equipped they set forth.

Before leaving San Francisco, the captain, and Ned, and Tom Collins had paid a final visit to their friend the merchant, Mr Thompson, and committed their property to his care—i.e. the hull of the good ship *Roving Bess*—the rent of which he promised to collect monthly—and Ned's curious

property, the old boat and the little patch of barren sand on which it stood. The boat itself he made over, temporarily, to a poor Irishman who had brought out his wife with him, and was unable to proceed to the diggings in consequence of the said wife having fallen into a delicate state of health. He gave the man a written paper empowering him to keep possession until his return, and refused to accept of any rent whereat the poor woman thanked him earnestly, with the tears running down her pale cheeks.

It was the hottest part of an exceedingly hot day when the travellers found themselves, as we have described, under the grateful shade of what Larry termed the “lone oak.”

“Now our course of proceeding is as follows,” said Ned, at the conclusion of their meal—“We shall travel all this afternoon, and as far into the night as the mules can be made to go. By that time we shall be pretty well off the level ground, and be almost within hail of the diggings—”

“I don’t believe it,” said Larry O’Neil, knocking the ashes out of his pipe in an emphatic manner; “sure av there *was* goold in the country we might have seed it by this time.”

Larry’s feelings were a verification of the words, “hope deferred maketh the heart sick.” He had started enthusiastically many days before on this journey to the gold regions, under the full conviction that on the first or second day he would be, as he expressed it, “riding through fields of goold dust;” instead of which, day after day passed, and night after night, during which he endured all the agonies inseparable from a *first* journey on horseback, and still not a symptom of gold was to be seen, “no more nor in owld Ireland itself.” But Larry bore his disappointments like an Irishman, and defied “fortin’ to put him out of timper by any manes wotiver.”

“Patience,” said Bill Jones, removing his pipe to make room for the remark, “is a wirtue—that’s wot I says. If ye can’t make things better, wot then? why, let ’em alone. W’en there’s no wind, crowd all canvas and ketch wot there is. W’en there *is* wind, why then, steer yer course; or, if ye can’t, steer as near it as ye can. Anyhow, never back yer fore-topsail without a cause—them’s my sentiments.”

“And very good sentiments they are, Bill,” said Tom Collins, jumping up and examining the girth of his horse; “I strongly advise you to adopt them, Larry.”

“Wot a bottle o’ wisdom it is,” said O’Neil, with a look of affected contempt at his messmate. “Wos it yer grandmother, now, or yer great wan, that edicated ye?—Arrah, there ye go! Oh, morthor, ye’ll break me heart!”

The latter part of this remark was addressed to his mule, which at that moment broke its laryat, and gambolled gaily away over the flowering plain. Its owner followed, yelling like a madman. He might as well have chased the wind; and it is probable that he would never have mounted his steed again had not the vaquero come to his aid. This man, leaping on his own horse, which was a very fine one, dashed after the runaway, with which he came up in a few minutes; then grasping the long coil of line that hung at his saddle-bow, he swung it round once or twice, and threw the lasso, or noose, adroitly over the mule’s head, and brought it up.

“Yer a cliver fellow,” said Larry, as he came up, panting; “sure ye did it be chance?”

The man smiled, and without deigning a reply, rode back to the camp, where the party were already in the saddle. In a few minutes they were trotting rapidly over the prairie.

Before evening closed, the travellers arrived at one of the road-side inns, or, as they were named, ranches, which were beginning at this time to spring up in various parts of the country, for the accommodation of gold-hunters on their way to the mines. This ranche belonged to a man of the name of Dawson, who had made a few hundred dollars by digging, and then set up a grog-shop and house of entertainment, being wise enough to perceive that he could gain twice as much gold by supplying the diggers with the necessaries of life than he could hope to procure by digging. His ranche was a mere hovel, built of sun-dried bricks, and he dealt more in drinks than in edibles. The accommodation and provisions were of the poorest description, but, as there was no other house of entertainment near, mine host charged the highest possible prices. There was but one apartment in this establishment, and little or no furniture. Several kegs and barrels supported two long pine planks

which constituted at different periods of the day the counter, the gaming-table, and the *table d'hôte*. A large cooking stove stood in the centre of the house, but there were no chairs; guests were expected to sit on boxes and empty casks, or stand. Beds there were none. When the hour for rest arrived, each guest chose the portion of the earthen floor that suited him best, and, spreading out his blankets, with his saddle for a pillow, lay down to dream of golden nuggets, or, perchance, of home, while innumerable rats—the bane of California—gambolled round and over him.

The rancho, as the owner of such an establishment is named, was said to be an escaped felon. Certainly he might have been, as far as his looks went. He was surly and morose, but men minded this little, so long as he supplied their wants. There were five or six travellers in the rancho when our party arrived, all of whom were awaiting the preparation of supper.

“Here we are,” cried the captain, as they trotted into the yard, “ready for supper, I trow; and, if my nose don’t deceive me, supper’s about ready for us.”

“I hope they’ve got enough for us all,” said Ned, glancing at the party inside, as he leaped from the saddle, and threw the bridle to his vaquero. “Halloo, Boniface! have ye room for a large party in there?”

“Come in an’ see,” growled Dawson, whose duties at the cooking stove rendered him indifferent as to other matters.

“Ah, thin, ye’ve got a swate voice,” said Larry O’Neil, sarcastically, as he led his mule towards a post, to which Bill Jones was already fastening his steed. “I say, Bill,” he added, pointing to a little tin bowl which stood on an inverted cask outside the door of the rancho, “wot can that be for?”

“Dunno,” answered Bill; “s’pose it’s to wash in.”

At that moment a long, cadaverous miner came out of the hut, and rendered further speculation unnecessary, by turning up his shirt sleeves to the elbow, and commencing his ablutions in the little tin bowl, which was just large enough to admit both his hands at once.

“Faix, yer mouth and nose ought to be grateful,” said Larry, in an undertone, as he and Jones stood with their arms crossed, admiring the proceedings of the man.

This remark had reference to the fact that the washer applied the water to the favoured regions around his nose and mouth, but carefully avoided trespassing on any part of the territory lying beyond.

“Oh! morthor, wot nixt?” exclaimed Larry.

Well might he inquire, for this man, having combed his hair with a public comb, which was attached to the door-post by a string, and examined himself carefully in a bit of glass, about two inches in diameter, proceeded to cleanse his teeth with a *public tooth-brush* which hung beside the comb. All these articles had been similarly used by a miner ten minutes previously; and while this one was engaged with his toilet, another man stood beside him awaiting his turn!

“W’en yer in difficulties,” remarked Bill Jones, slowly, as he entered the rancho, and proceeded to fill his pipe, “git out of ’em, if ye can. If ye can’t, why wot then? circumstances is adworse, an’ it’s o’ no use a-tryin’ to mend ’em. Only my sentiments is, that I’ll delay washin’ till I comes to a river.”

“You’ve come from San Francisco, stranger?” said a rough-looking man, in heavy boots, and a Guernsey shirt, addressing Captain Bunting.

“Maybe I have,” replied the captain, regarding his interrogator through the smoke of his pipe, which he was in the act of lighting.

“Goin’ to the diggin’s, I s’pose?”

“Yes.”

“Bin there before?”

“No.”

“Nor none o’ your party, I expect?”

“None, except one.”

“You’ll be goin’ up to the bar at the American Forks now, I calc’late?”

“Don’t know that I am.”

“Perhaps you’ll try the northern diggin’s?”

“Perhaps.”

How long this pertinacious questioner might have continued his attack on the captain is uncertain, had he not been suddenly interrupted by the announcement that supper was ready, so he swaggered off to the corner of the hut where an imposing row of bottles stood, demanded a “brandy-smash,” which he drank, and then, seating himself at the table along with the rest of the party, proceeded to help himself largely to all that was within his reach.

The fare was substantial, but not attractive. It consisted of a large junk of boiled salt beef, a mass of rancid pork, and a tray of broken ship-biscuit. But hungry men are not particular, so the viands were demolished in a remarkably short space of time.

“I’m a’most out o’ supplies,” said the host, in a sort of apologetic tone, “an’ the cart I sent down to Sacramento some weeks ago for more’s not come back.”

“Better than nothin’,” remarked a bronzed, weatherbeaten hunter, as he helped himself to another junk of pork. “If ye would send out yer boy into the hills with a rifle now an’ again, ye’d git lots o’ grizzly bars.”

“Are grizzly-bears eaten here?” inquired Ned Sinton, pausing in the act of mastication, to ask the question.

“Eaten!” exclaimed the hunter, in surprise, “in coorse they is. They’re uncommon good eatin’ too, I guess. Many a one I’ve killed an’ eaten myself; an’ I like ’em better than beef—I do. I shot one up in the hills there two days agone, an’ supped off him; but bein’ in a hurry, I left the carcass to the coyotes.” (Coyotes are small wolves.)

The men assembled round the rude *table d’hôte* were fifteen in number, including our adventurers, and represented at least six different nations—English, Scotch, Irish, German, Yankee, and Chinese. Most of them, however, were Yankees, and all were gold-diggers; even the hunter just referred to, although he had not altogether forsaken his former calling, devoted much of his time to searching for gold. Some, like our friends, were on their way to the diggings for the first time; others were returning with provisions, which they had travelled to Sacramento city to purchase; and one or two were successful diggers who had made their “piles,”—in other words, their fortunes—and were returning home with heavy purses of gold-dust and nuggets.

Good humour was the prevailing characteristic of the party, for each man was either successful or sanguinely hopeful, and all seemed to be affected by a sort of undercurrent of excitement, as they listened to, or related, their adventures at the mines. There was only one serious drawback to the scene, and that was, the perpetual and terrible swearing that mingled with the conversation. The Americans excelled in this wicked practice. They seemed to labour to invent oaths, not for the purpose of venting angry feelings, but apparently with the view of giving emphasis to their statements and assertions. The others swore from *habit*. They had evidently ceased to be aware that they were using oaths—so terribly had familiarity with sinful practices blunted the consciences of men who, in early life, would probably have trembled in this way to break the law of God.

Yes, by the way, there was one other drawback to the otherwise picturesque and interesting group, and this was the spitting propensity of the Yankees. All over the floor—that floor, too, on which other men besides themselves were to repose—they discharged tobacco-juice and spittle. The *nation* cannot be too severely blamed and pitied for this disgusting practice, yet we feel a tendency, not to excuse, but to deal gently with *individuals*, most of whom, having been trained to spitting from their infancy, cannot be expected even to understand the abhorrence with which the practice is regarded by men of other nations.

Nevertheless, brother Jonathan, it is not too much to expect that you ought to respect the universal condemnation of your spitting propensities—by travellers from all lands—and endeavour to *believe* that ejecting saliva promiscuously is a dirty practice, even although you cannot *feel* it. We think that if you had the moral courage to pass a law in Congress to render spitting on floors and

carpets a capital offence, you would fill the world with admiration and your own bosoms with self-respect, not to mention the benefit that would accrue to your digestive powers in consequence thereof!

All of the supper party were clad and armed in the rough-and-ready style already referred to, and most of them were men of the lower ranks, but there were one or two who, like Ned Sinton, had left a more polished class of mortals to mingle in the promiscuous crowd. These, in some cases, carried their manners with them, and exerted a modifying influence on all around. One young American, in particular, named Maxton, soon attracted general attention by the immense fund of information he possessed, and the urbane, gentlemanly manner in which he conveyed it to those around him. He possessed in an eminent degree those qualities which attract men at once, and irresistibly good nature, frankness, manliness, considerable knowledge of almost every subject that can be broached in general conversation, united with genuine modesty. When he sat down to table he did not grasp everything within his reach; he began by offering to carve and help others, and when at length he did begin to eat, he did not gobble. He “guessed” a little, it is true, and “calculated” occasionally, but when he did so, it was in a tone that fell almost as pleasantly on the ear as the brogue of old Ireland.

Ned happened to be seated beside Maxton, and held a good deal of conversation with him.

“Forgive me, if I appear inquisitive,” said the former, helping himself to a handful of broken biscuit, “but I cannot help expressing a hope that our routes may lie in the same direction—are you travelling towards Sacramento city or the mines?”

“Towards the mines; and, as I observed that your party came from the southward, I suppose you are going in the same direction. If so, I shall be delighted to join you.”

“That’s capital,” replied Ned, “we shall be the better of having our party strengthened, and I am quite certain we could not have a more agreeable addition to it.”

“Thank you for the compliment. As to the advantage of a strong party, I feel it a safeguard as well as a privilege to join yours, for, to say truth, the roads are not safe just now. Several lawless scoundrels have been roving about in this part of the country committing robberies and even murder. The Indians, too, are not so friendly as one could wish. They have been treated badly by some of the unprincipled miners; and their custom is to kill two whites for every red-man that falls. They are not particular as to whom they kill, consequently the innocent are frequently punished for the guilty.”

“This is sad,” replied Ned. “Are, then, all the Indian tribes at enmity with the white men?”

“By no means. Many tribes are friendly, but some have been so severely handled, that they have vowed revenge, and take it whenever they can with safety. Their only weapons, however, are bows and arrows, so that a few resolute white men, with rifles, can stand against a hundred of them, and they know this well. I spent the whole of last winter on the Yuba River; and, although large bands were in my neighbourhood, they never ventured to attack us openly, but they succeeded in murdering one or two miners who strayed into the woods alone.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.