

**ROBERT
MICHAEL
BALLANTYNE**

DIGGING FOR GOLD:
ADVENTURES IN
CALIFORNIA

Robert Michael Ballantyne

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R. M. Ballantyne

Digging for Gold: Adventures in California

Chapter One.

Adventures in California.

Begins with Differences of Opinion

If ever there was a man in this world who was passionately fond of painting and cut out for a painter, that man was Frank Allfrey; but fate, in the form of an old uncle, had decided that Frank should not follow the bent of his inclinations.

We introduce our hero to the reader at the interesting age of eighteen, but, long before that period of life, he had shown the powerful leaning of his spirit. All his school-books were covered with heads of dogs, horses, and portraits of his companions. Most of his story-books were illustrated with coloured engravings, the colouring of which had been the work of his busy hand, and the walls of his nursery were decorated with cartoons, done in charcoal, which partial friends of the family sometimes declared were worthy of Raphael.

At the age of thirteen, his uncle—for the poor fellow was an orphan—asked him one day what he would like to be. This was an extraordinary condescension on the part of Mr Allfrey, senior, who was a grim, hard-featured man, with little or no soul to speak of, and with an enormously large ill-favoured body. The boy, although taken by surprise—for his uncle seldom addressed him on any subject,—answered promptly, “I’d like to be an artist, sir.”

“A what?”

“An artist.”

“Get along, you goose!”

This was all that was said at the time, and as it is the only conversation which is certainly known to have taken place between the uncle and nephew during the early youth of the latter, we have ventured, at the risk of being tedious, to give the whole of it.

Frank was one of those unfortunates who are styled “neglected boys.” He was naturally sharp-witted, active in mind and body, good-tempered, and well disposed, but disinclined to study, and fond of physical exertion. He might have been a great man had he been looked after in youth, but no one looked after him. He was an infant when his father and mother died and left him to the care of his uncle, who cared not for him but left him to care for himself, having, as he conceived, done his duty towards him when he had supplied him with food, clothing, and lodging, and paid his school fees. No blame, therefore, to poor Frank that he grew up a half-educated youth, without fixed habits of study or thought, and with little capacity for close or prolonged mental exertion.

Mr Allfrey entertained the ridiculous idea that there were only three grand objects of ambition in life, namely, to work, to eat and drink, and to sleep. At least, if he did not say in definite terms that such was his belief, he undoubtedly acted as though it were. His mind appeared to revolve in a sort of small circle. He worked in order that he might eat and drink; he ate and drank that he might be strengthened for work, and he slept in order to recruit his energies that he might be enabled to work for the purposes of eating and drinking. He was a species of self-blinded human-horse that walked the everlasting round of a business-mill of his own creating. It is almost unnecessary to add that he was selfish to the back-bone, and that the only individual who did not see the fact was himself.

When Frank reached the age of eighteen, Mr Allfrey called him into his private “study,”—so called because he was in the habit of retiring regularly at fixed periods every day to study *nothing* there,—and, having bidden him sit down, accosted him thus:—

“Well, boy, have you thought over what I said to you yesterday about fixing upon some profession? You are aware that you cannot expect to lead a life of idleness in this world. I know that you are fit for nothing, but fit or not fit, you must take to something without delay.”

Frank felt a sensation of indignation at being spoken to thus rudely, and in his heart he believed that if he was indeed fit for nothing, his sad condition was due much more to his uncle’s neglect than to his own perversity. He did not, however, give utterance to the thought, because he was of a respectful nature; he merely flushed and said,—“Really, uncle, you do me injustice. I may not be fit for much, and every day I live I feel bitterly the evil of a neglected education, but—”

“It’s well, at all events,” interrupted Mr Allfrey, “that you admit the fact of your having neglected it. That gives you some chance of amendment.”

Frank flushed again and drew his breath shortly; after a moment’s silence he went on:—

“But if I am not fit for much, I am certainly fit for something. I have only a smattering of Latin and Greek, it is true, and a very slight knowledge of French, but, if I am to believe my teacher’s reports, I am not a bad arithmetician, and I know a good deal of mathematics, besides being a pretty fair penman.”

“Humph! well, but you know you have said that you don’t want to enter a mercantile or engineer’s office, and a smattering of Latin and Greek will not do for the learned professions. What, therefore, do you propose to yourself, the army, eh? it is the only opening left, because you are now too old for the navy.”

“I wish to be an artist,” said Frank with some firmness.

“I thought so; the old story. No, sir, you shall never be an artist—at least not with my consent. Why, do you suppose that because you can scribble caricatures on the fly-leaves of your books you have necessarily the genius of Rubens or Titian?”

“Not quite,” replied Frank, smiling in spite of himself at the irascibility of the old gentleman, “and yet I presume that Rubens and Titian began to paint before either themselves or others were aware of the fact that they possessed any genius at all.”

“Tut, tut,” cried Mr Allfrey impatiently, “but what have you ever done, boy, to show your ability to paint?”

“I have studied much, uncle,” said Frank eagerly, “although I have said little to you about the matter, knowing your objection to it; but if you would condescend to look at a few of my drawings from nature, I think—”

“Drawing from nature,” cried Mr Allfrey with a look of supreme contempt, “what do *I* care for nature? What have *you* to do with nature in this nineteenth century? Nature, sir, is only fit for savages. There is nothing natural now-a-days. Why, what do you suppose would become of my ledger and cash-book, my office and business, if I and my clerks raved about nature as you do? A fig for nature!—the less you study it the better. *I* never do.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said Frank respectfully, “if I refuse to believe you, because I have heard you frequently express to friends your admiration of the view from your own drawing-room window—”

“Of course you have, you goose, and you ought to have known that that was a mere bit of conventional humbug, because, since one is constrained unavoidably to live in a world full of monstrous contradictions, it is necessary to fall in with its habits. You ought to know that it is customary to express admiration for a fine view.”

“You spoke as if you felt what you said,” replied Frank, “and I am certain that there are thousands of men in the position of yourself and your clerks who delight in nature in all her varied aspects; who, because they unfortunately see so little of her in town, make it their ambition to have cottages in the country when they can afford it, and many of whom decorate their walls with representations of nature.”

“Frank,” said Mr Allfrey, somewhat solemnly, as he turned his gaze full on the animated face of his nephew, “*if* I could get you put into a lunatic asylum without a doctor’s certificate I would do

so without delay, but, that being impossible just now—although I think it will be not only possible but necessary ere long—I have to make you a final proposal. It is this:— that, as you express such a powerful objection to enter an office in this country, you should go abroad and see whether a three-legged stool is more attractive in foreign parts than it is in England. Now, I happen to have a friend in California. If your geography has not been neglected as much as your Latin, you will remember that this country lies on the western seaboard of North America, not far from those gold-fields which have been recently turning the world upside-down. Will you go?”

“I shall be delighted to go,” said Frank with enthusiasm.

“Eh!” exclaimed Mr Allfrey, with a look of surprise, as if he could not understand the readiness with which his nephew agreed to the proposal, “why, how’s this? I had fully expected you to refuse. Remember, boy, it is not to be a romantic gold-digger, which is another name for a born idiot, that I would send you out to California. It is to be a clerk, a quill-driver. D’you understand?”

“I understand, uncle, perfectly,” replied Frank with a smile. “The fact is that I had made up my mind, lately, not to oppose your wishes any longer, but to agree to go into an office at home. Of course it is more agreeable to me to think of going into one abroad.”

“I’m glad you take such a sensible view of the matter, Frank,” said Mr Allfrey, much mollified.

“Besides,” continued Frank, “I have read a good deal about that country of late, and the descriptions of the magnificence of the scenery have made me long to have an opportunity of painting it and—”

He paused abruptly and started up, for his uncle had seized a book, which usually lay open on his desk, and was in fact a sort of dummy intended to indicate the “study” that was supposed to go on there. Next moment Frank sprang laughing into the passage, and the book flew with a crash against the panels of the door as he shut it behind him, leaving Mr Allfrey to solace himself with a large meerschaum, almost the only unfailing friend that he possessed.

Thus it came to pass that Frank Allfrey went out to the gold regions of California.

Chapter Two.

Frank discusses his Prospects with a Friend

We pass over our hero's long voyage round "the Horn," and introduce him in a totally new scene and under widely different circumstances—seated near a magnificent tree of which he is making a study, and clad in a white linen coat and pantaloons and a broad-brimmed straw hat.

Just the day before, the "House" to which he had been sent had failed. Two years had he spent in grinding at its account books, perched on a three-legged stool, and now he found himself suddenly cast loose on the world. Of course when the stool was knocked from under him his salary was stopped, and he was told by his employers that it would be necessary for him to go elsewhere to earn a subsistence.

This was rather a startling piece of advice, and for a time Frank felt much depressed, but on returning to his lodgings the day he received his dismissal, his eye fell on his palette and brushes, which he at once seized, and, hastening out to his favourite tree, was soon so thoroughly absorbed in the study of "nature" that his sorrows vanished like morning mist.

After three hours' steady work he arose refreshed in soul and comforted.

Thereafter he returned to his lodgings and sat down to think over his prospects. His cogitations were temporarily interrupted, and afterwards materially assisted, by a short thick-set man of about thirty years of age who entered with a deferential air, and pulled his forelock.

"Come in, Joe. I was just thinking over my future plans, and I daresay you can assist me, being, I suppose, in the same fix with myself."

Joe Graddy had been a porter in the "House" which had failed, and was indeed in the "same fix," as Frank said, with himself.

"I've comed, sir," said Joe, "to ax yer advice, an' to offer ye my sarvice, it it's of any use," said the porter, who was a shrewd straightforward man, and had originally been a sailor.

"If you had come to offer me advice and ask my services," said Frank, "I would have been better pleased to see you. However, sit down and let me hear what you have to say."

"Well, sir," said Joe; "this is wot I've got for to say, that we are in what the Yankees call a pretty considerable fix."

"I know it, Joe; but how do you think we are to get out of the fix?"

"That's just wot I comed for to ax," said the man; "and when you've told me how, I'll lend a hand to weigh anchor an' set sail. The fact is, I'm in want of a place, and I'm willing to engage with *you*, sir."

Frank Allfrey experienced a strange mingling of feelings when he heard this. Of course he felt much gratified by the fact that a man so grave and sensible as Joe Graddy should come and deferentially offer to become his servant at a time when he possessed nothing but the remnant of a month's salary; and when he considered his own youth, he felt amazed that one so old and manly should volunteer to place himself under his orders. The fact is that Frank was not aware that his straightforward earnest manner had commended him very strongly to those with whom he had lately come in contact. He was one of those attractive men whose countenances express exactly what they feel, who usually walk with a quick earnest step, if we may say so, and with a somewhat downcast contemplative look. Frank knew well enough that he was strong and tall, unusually so for his age, and therefore did not continually *assert* the fact by walking as if he was afraid to fall forward, which is a common practice among men who wish to look bigger than they are. Besides, being an ardent student of nature, Frank was himself natural, as well as amiable, and these qualities had endeared him to many people without his being aware of it.

"Why, Joe!" he exclaimed, "what do you mean?"

"I mean wot I says, sir."

“Are you aware,” said Frank, smiling, “that I do not possess a shilling beyond the few dollars that I saved off my last month’s salary?”

“I s’posed as much, sir.”

“Then if you engage with me, as you express it, how do you expect to be paid?”

“I don’t expect to be paid, sir.”

“Come, Joe, explain your meaning, for I don’t pretend to be a diviner of men’s thoughts.”

“Well, sir, this is how it is. W’en we got the sack the other day, says I to myself, says I, now you’re afloat on the world without rudder, compass, or charts, but you’ve got a tight craft of your own,—somewhat scrubbed, no doubt, with rough usage, but sound,—so it’s time for you to look out for rudder, compass, and charts, and it seems to me that them to be found with young Mister Allfrey, so you’d better go an’ git him to become skipper o’ your ship without delay. You see, sir, havin’ said that to myself, I’ve took my own advice, so if you’ll take command of me, sir, you may steer me where you please, for I’m ready to be your sarvant for love, seein’ that you han’t got no money.”

“Most obliging of you,” said Frank, laughing, “and by this offer I understand that you wish to become my companion.”

“Of course, in a country o’ this kind,” replied Graddy, “it’s difficult,—I might a’most say unpossible,—to be a man’s sarvant without bein’ his companion likewise.”

“But here is a great difficulty at the outset, Joe. I have not yet made up my mind what course to pursue.”

“Just so, sir,” said the ex-seaman, with a look of satisfaction, “I know’d you wouldn’t be doin’ that in a hurry, so I’ve comed to have a talk with ’e about it.”

“Very good, sit down,” said Frank, “and let us consider it. In the first place, I regret to say that I have not been taught any trade, so that I cannot become a blacksmith or a carpenter or anything of that sort. A clerk’s duties I can undertake, but it seems to me that clerks are not much wanted here just now. Portage is heavy work and rather slow. I may be reduced to that if nothing better turns up, but it has occurred to me that I might try painting with success. What would you say to that, Joe?”

The man looked at Frank in surprise. “Well,” said he, “people don’t look as if they wanted to paint their houses here, an’ most of ’em’s got no houses.”

“Why, man, I don’t mean house-painting. It is portrait and landscape painting that I refer to,” said Frank, laughing.

Joe shook his head gravely. “Never do, Mr Frank—”

“Stop! if you and I are to be companions in trouble, you must not call me *Mister* Frank, you must drop the mister.”

“Then I won’t go with ’e, sir, that’s all about it,” said Joe firmly.

“Very well, please yourself,” said Frank, with a laugh; “but if painting is so hopeless, what would you advise?”

“The diggin’s,” answered Joe.

“I thought so,” said Frank, shaking his head.

“Most men out of work rush to the diggings. Indeed, many men are fools enough to leave their work to go there, but I confess that I don’t like the notion. It has always appeared to me such a pitiful thing to see men, who are fit for better things, go grubbing in the mud for gold.”

“But what are men to do, Mr Frank, w’en they can’t git no other work?”

“Of course it is better to dig than to idle or starve, or be a burden on one’s friends; nevertheless, I don’t like the notion of it. I suppose, however, that I must try it just now, for it is quite certain that we cannot exist here without gold. By the way, Joe, have you got any more?”

“Not a rap, sir.”

“H’m, then I doubt whether I have enough to buy tools, not to speak of provisions.”

“I’ve bin’ thinkin’ about that, sir,” said Joe, “and it seems to me that our only chance lie in settin’ up a grog and provision store!”

“A grog and provision store!”

“Yes, sir, the fact is that I had laid in a stock of pipes and baccy, tea and brandy, for winter’s use this year. Now as things have turned out, I shan’t want these just at this minute, so we can sell ’em off to the diggers at a large profit. We might make a good thing of it, sir, for you’ve no notion wot prices they’ll give for things on the road to the diggin’s—”

Frank here interrupted his friend with a hearty laugh, and at the same time declared that he would have nothing to do with the grog and provision store; that he would rather take to portorage than engage in any such enterprise.

“Well, then, sir, we won’t say no more about that, but wot coorse would ye advise the ship’s head to be laid?”

Frank was silent for a few minutes as he sat with downcast eyes, absorbed in meditation. Then he looked up suddenly, and said, “Joe, I’ll give you a definite answer to that question to-morrow morning. To-night I will think over it and make arrangements. Meanwhile, let it suffice that I have made up my mind to go to the diggings, and if you remain in the same mind to-morrow, come here all ready for a start.”

The ruddy countenance of the sturdy ex-porter beamed with gratification as he rose and took his leave of Frank, who heard him, as he walked away, making sundry allusions in nautical phraseology to having his anchor tripped at last, and the sails shook out, all ready for a start with the first o’ the flood-tide in the morning!

Chapter Three.

A Visit to the Diggings resolved on.

Terrible Commencement of the Journey

When next morning arrived, Joe Graddy, true to his word, appeared with the first—if not of the “flood-tide,” at least of the morning sun, and Frank told him that, on the previous evening, he had made arrangements to go to the diggings in company with a party that was to start the following day; that he had already made purchases of the few things which they would require on the journey, and that the only thing remaining to be done was to pack up.

“Now, Joe, you must go at once to the principal guide and make arrangements with him as to that brandy and tea on which you expect to found your future fortunes. I told him to expect a visit from you early in the day.”

“Wotiver you do, do it at once,” said Joe, putting on his straw hat with an energetic slap. “That’s one of my mottos. I’ll go an’ carry it into practice.”

The following day saw Frank and his man set forth with a party of about thirty men, all of whom were clad in blue or red flannel shirts, straw hats, big boots, and other rough garments; with rifles on their shoulders, and bowie-knives and pistols in their belts. These were men of various nations; Californians, Chinamen, Malays, Americans, Scotch, and English, and many of them looked not only rough but savage. In truth, they were as diverse in their characters as in their appearance, some of them being men who had evidently moved in good society, while others were as evidently of the lowest—probably the convict—class. They had all, however, been thrown together by the force of a common interest. All were bound for the gold-mines, and it was necessary that they should travel in company for mutual protection and assistance.

There were two guides, who had charge of ten pack-mules loaded with provisions for the storekeepers at some remote diggings. These guides were stern, powerful, bronzed fellows, who had to make their way among rough men in difficult circumstances, and they seemed to be quite prepared to do so, being fearless, resolute, and armed to the teeth.

Joe Graddy had obtained permission, on promise of payment, to place his little fortune on the backs of the mules, so that he and Frank had nothing to carry save their weapons and blankets, besides a tin cup each at their girdles, and a water-bag.

“Come, I like this sort of thing,” said one of the party, an Englishman, when the order was given to start. “If it is all like this it will be uncommonly jolly.”

“I guess it ain’t all like this, stranger,” said one of the Americans with a good-humoured grin.

One of the guides laughed, and the other ejaculated “humph!” as they set forward.

There was indeed some ground for the remark of the Englishman, for the country through which they passed was most beautiful, and the weather delicious. Their track lay over an undulating region of park-like land covered with short grass; clumps of bushes were scattered here and there about the plain, and high above these towered some magnificent specimens of the oak, sycamore, and Californian cypress, while in the extreme distance rose the ranges of the “golden” mountains—the Sierra Nevada—in the midst of which lay the treasures of which they were in search.

All the members of the party were on foot, and, being fresh, full of hope, and eager to reach their destination. They chatted gaily as they marched over the prairie.

On the way the good-humoured American seemed to take a fancy to Frank, with whom he had a great deal of animated conversation. After asking our hero every possible question in regard to himself and intentions, he told him that he was Yankee,—a piece of superfluous information, by the way;—that his name was Jeffson, that he was a store-keeper at one of the farthest off diggings,

that the chief part of the loading of one of the mules belonged to him, and that he was driving a considerable business in gold-dust without the trouble of digging for it.

Towards evening they came to a very small hole in the plain, which was dignified with the name of a well. Here they stopped to replenish their water-casks.

“Take as much as you can carry, men,” said the principal guide, “we’ve a long march to the next well, over sandy ground, and sometimes there ain’t much water in it.”

They all followed this advice with the exception of one man, a coarse savage-looking fellow, with a huge black beard and matted locks, who called himself Bradling, though there was ground for doubting whether that was the name by which he had been at first known in the world. This man pulled out an enormous brandy-flask, and with a scoffing laugh said:—

“This is the water for me, mister guide, pure and unmixed, there’s nothin’ like it.”

He nodded as he spoke, and put the flask to his lips, while the guide, who made no rejoinder, eyed him with a grave, stern expression of countenance.

That night they all encamped under the shade of a small clump of trees, kindled several large fires, and, heartily glad to be relieved of their back-burdens, sat down to enjoy supper. After it was over pipes were smoked and stories told, until it was time to retire to rest. Then each man lay down under his blanket, the sky being his canopy, and the howling of the wolves his lullaby.

It seemed to each sleeper, when awakened next morning, that he had only just closed his eyes, so sound had been his repose, and there was a great deal of violent yawning, stretching, grumbling, and winking before the whole party was finally aroused and ready to set forth. However, they got under way at last, and early in the forenoon came to the edge of a sandy plain, which appeared to be interminable, with scarcely a blade of grass on it. Here they halted for a few minutes.

“How wide is the plain, guide?” inquired Frank.

“Forty miles,” replied the man, “and there’s not a drop of water to be had till the end of the first twenty. We’ll get there about sundown, and replenish our kegs, if it’s not all gone dry. Let me warn you, however, to use the water you have sparingly.”

“Do we encamp at the end o’ the first twenty?” asked Jeffson.

“Yes, you’ll find it a long enough day’s march.”

No one made any reply, but by their looks they appeared to think nothing of a twenty-mile walk. They found, however, that such a distance, traversed over loose sand ankle-deep, and under a burning sun, was not what any of them had been accustomed to.

On entering the plain they observed that the heat had opened cracks and fissures in the earth, which omitted a fiery heat. At intervals pyramids of sand arose, which were borne with great velocity through the air, sometimes appearing in the shape of columns sixty feet high, which moved majestically over the plain. Ere long some of these clouds of sand enveloped them, and they were accompanied by hot winds, which seemed to shrivel up, not only the skin, but the very vitals of the travellers. The pores of their skin closed, producing feverish heat in the blood and terrible thirst, while their eyes became inflamed by the dazzling glare of the sun on the white sand.

Of course most of the party applied pretty frequently to their water-kegs and bottles. Even Bradling gave up his brandy, and was content to refresh himself with the little of the pure element which chanced to remain in his formerly despised, but now cherished, water-bottle. The guides carried skins of water for themselves and the mules, but these they opened very seldom, knowing full well the torments that would ensue if they should run short before getting across the scorching desert.

Thus they went on hour after hour, becoming more and more oppressed at every step. The improvident among them drank up the precious water too fast, and towards evening began to sigh for relief, and to regard with longing eyes the supplies of their more self-denying companions. They consoled themselves, however, to some extent, with thoughts of the deep draughts they hoped to obtain at night.

Our hero and Joe were among those who reserved their supplies.

As night approached the thirst of the travellers increased to a terrible extent, insomuch that they appeared to forget their fatigue, and hurried forward at a smart pace, in the eager hope of coming to the promised water-hole. Great, therefore, was their dismay when the guides told them that it was impossible to reach the place that night, that the mules were too much knocked up, but that they would get to it early on the following day.

They said little, however, seeming to be too much depressed to express their disappointment in words, but their haggard looks were fearfully eloquent. Some of those who had wasted their supplies earnestly implored their more prudent comrades to give them a little, a “very little,” of the precious element, and two or three were generous enough to give away a few drops of the little that still remained to them.

The place where they had halted was without a scrap of vegetation, and as there was no wood wherewith to kindle a fire, they were compelled to encamp without one. To most of the travellers, however, this was a matter of little importance, because they were too much exhausted to eat. Those who had water drank a mouthful sparingly, and then lay down to sleep. Those who had none also lay down in gloomy silence. They did not even indulge in the usual solace of a pipe, for fear of adding to the burning thirst with which they were consumed.

At day-break they were aroused by the guides, and rose with alacrity, feeling a little refreshed, and being anxious to push on to the water-hole, but when the sun rose and sent its dazzling rays over the dreary waste, giving promise of another dreadful day, their spirits sank again. Seeing this the principal guide encouraged them by saying that the water-hole was not more than three miles distant.

Onward they pushed with renewed energy and hope. At last they reached the place, and found that the hole was dry!

With consternation depicted on their haggard countenances the men looked at the guide.

“Dig, men, dig,” he said, with a troubled look on his bronzed face, “there may be a little below the surface.”

They did dig with shovels, spades, knives, sticks, hands, anything, and they dug as never men did for gold. All the gold in California would they have given at that time for a cupful of cold water, but all the gold in the world could not have purchased one drop from the parched sand. Never was despair more awfully pictured on men’s faces as they gazed at one another after finding that their efforts were unavailing. Their case was truly pitiable, and they turned to the guide as if they expected commiseration; but the case had become too desperate for him to think of others. In a stern, hard voice he cried—

“Onwards, men! onwards! The nearest stream is forty miles off. None of those who have water can spare a drop, and death lies in delay. Every man for himself now. Onward, men, for your lives!”

Saying this he applied the whip to the poor mules, which, with glazed eyes and hanging ears, snorted with agony, and dropped down frequently as they went along, but a sharp thrust of the goad forced them to rise again and stumble forward.

“God help the poor wretches,” murmured Joe Graddy to Frank as they staggered along side by side. “Is our supply nearly out—could we not give them a drop?”

Frank stopped suddenly, and, with desperate energy, seized the keg which hung over his shoulder, and shook it close to the ear of his companion.

“Listen,” he said, “can we afford to spare any with forty miles of the desert before us? It is our life! we must guard it.”

Graddy shook his head, and, admitting that the thing was out of the question, went silently forward. It was all that Frank himself could do to refrain from drinking the little that remained, for his very vitals seemed on fire. Indeed, in this respect, he suffered more than some of his companions, for while those of them who had not charge of the water-kegs and bottles experienced the pain of suffering and hopeless longing, he himself had the additional misery of having to resist temptation,

for at any moment he could have obtained temporary relief by gratifying his desires at the expense of his companions.

Overpowered with heat, and burnt up with thirst, those without water to moisten their parched lips and throats could scarcely keep pace with the guide. By degrees they threw away their possessions—their blankets, their clothes,—until the plain behind was strewn with them.

“Don’t go so fast,” groaned one.

“Won’t ye halt a while?” said another uttering a curse—then, suddenly changing his tone, he implored them to halt.

“We cannot halt. It is death to halt,” said the guide, in a tone so resolute and callous that those who were enfeebled lost heart altogether, and began to lag behind.

At that time the man Bradling, who had become nearly mad with drinking brandy, ran in succession to each of those who had water, and offered all that he possessed of the former for one mouthful of the latter. His flushed face, glassy eyes, and haggard air, told how terrible was his extremity; but although some might have felt a touch of commiseration not one was moved to relieve him. The law of self-preservation had turned the hearts of all to stone. Yet not quite to stone, for there were one or two among them who, although nothing would induce them to give a single drop to a comrade, were content to do with *less* in order that they might relieve a friend!

One man in his desperation attempted to lick the bodies of the mules, hoping to obtain relief from the exudations of their skins, but the dust on them rendered this unavailing.

Suddenly Bradling darted at the water-skin hanging by the side of the guide’s mule, and swore he would have it or die.

“You’ll die, then,” observed the guide quietly, cocking a pistol and presenting it at his head.

Bradling hesitated and looked at the man. There was a cold stony stare, without the least excitement, in his look, which convinced him that his attempt, if continued, would end in certain death. He fell back at once with a deep groan.

Onward they pressed, hour after hour, until, in many of them, exhausted nature began to give way. They became slightly delirious, and, finding that they could not keep up with the party, a few determined, if left behind, to keep together. Among the number was Bradling, and terrible were the imprecations which he hurled after the more fortunate as they parted. It seemed cruel; but to remain with them would have done no good, while it would have sacrificed more lives. Bradling seemed to regard Frank as his chief enemy, for he shouted his name as he was moving off, praying God to send down the bitterest curses on his head.

A sudden impulse moved the heart of Frank. He turned back, poured about half a wine-glassful of water into a tin can and gave it to the unfortunate man, who seized and drained it greedily, licking the rim of the can and gazing into it, to see that not a drop had escaped him, with an eagerness of manner that was very painful to behold.

“God bless you,” he said to Frank with a deep sigh.

“Do you think,” said Frank earnestly, “that God will curse and bless at your bidding?”

“I don’t know, and don’t care,” replied the man, “but I say God bless you. Go away and be content with that.”

Frank had already lost too much time. He turned and hastened after the others as fast as possible.

“They won’t last long,” said the guide harshly, as he came up. “The wolves or the redskins will soon finish them. You were a fool to waste your water on them.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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