

Hamp Sidford Frederick

The Boys of Crawford's Basin



Hamp Sidford
The Boys of Crawford's Basin

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23144835

*The Boys of Crawford's Basin / The Story of a Mountain Ranch in the Early
Days of Colorado:*

Содержание

PREFACE	4
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	18
CHAPTER III	30
CHAPTER IV	47
CHAPTER V	61
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	66

**Hamp Sidford F.
Sidford Frederick
The Boys of Crawford's
Basin / The Story of a
Mountain Ranch in the
Early Days of Colorado**

PREFACE

In relating the adventures of “The Boys of Crawford’s Basin,” the author has endeavored to depict the life of the ranchman in the mountains of Colorado as he knew it towards the end of the “seventies” of the century just past.

At that date, the railroads, after their long climb from the Missouri River to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, were still seeking a practicable passage westward over that formidable barrier, and in consequence, the mountain ranchman – who, by the way, was also sometimes a prospector and frequently a hunter – having no means of shipping his produce to the outside world, depended for his market upon one or another of the many little

silver-mining camps scattered over the State.

That infant State was but just learning to walk without leading-strings; and it has been the aim of the author to show how two stout young fellows, prone to honesty and not afraid of hard work, were able to do their share in advancing the prosperity of the growing Commonwealth in which their lot was cast.

It may not be out of place, perhaps, to mention that, besides having had considerable experience in ranching, the author was, about the date of the story, himself prospecting for silver and working as a miner. He would add, too, that several of the incidents related therein, and those in his opinion the most remarkable, are drawn from actual facts.

CHAPTER I

Big Reuben's Raid

“Wake up, boys! Wake up! Tumble out, there! Quick! Big Reuben's into the pig-pen again!”

Our bedroom door was banged wide open, and my father stood before us – a startling apparition – dressed only in his night-shirt and a pair of boots, carrying a stable-lantern in one hand and a rifle in the other.

“What is it?” cried Joe, as he bounced out of bed; and, “Where is it?” cried I, both of us half dazed by the sudden awakening.

“It's Big Reuben raiding the pig-pen again! Can't you hear 'em squealing? Come on at once! Bring the eight-bore, Joe; and you, Phil, get the torch and the revolver. Quick; or he'll kill every hog in the pen!”

Big Reuben was not a two-legged thief, as one might suppose from his name. He was a grizzly bear, a notorious old criminal, who, for the past two or three years, had done much harm to the ranchmen of our neighborhood, killing calves and colts and pigs – especially pigs.

Like a robber-baron of old, he laid tribute on the whole community, raiding all the ranches in turn, traveling great distances during the night, but always retreating to his lair among the rocks before morning. This had gone on for a long time, when

one day, in broad daylight, while Ole Johnson, the Swede, was plowing his upper potato-patch, the grizzly jumped down from a ledge of rocks and with one blow of his paw broke the back of Ole's best work-steer; Ole himself, frightened half to death, flying for refuge to his stable, where he shut himself up in the hay-loft for the rest of the day.

This outrage had the effect of waking up the county commissioners, who, understanding at last that we had been terrorized long enough, now offered a reward of one hundred dollars for bruin's scalp – an offer which stimulated all the hunters round about to run the marauder to his lair.

But Big Reuben was as crafty as he was bold. His home was up in one of the rocky gorges of Mount Lincoln to the west of us, where it would be useless to try to trail him; and after Jed Smith had been almost torn to pieces, and his partner, Baldy Atkins, had spent two nights and a day up a tree, the enthusiasm of the hunters had suddenly waned and Big Reuben's closer acquaintance had been shunned by all alike. Thereafter, the bear had continued his depredations unchecked.

Among his many other pieces of mischief, he had killed a valuable calf for us once, once before he had raided the pig-pen, and now here he was again.

Without waiting to put on any extra clothing, Joe and I followed my father through the kitchen, I grabbing a revolver from its nail in the wall, and Joe snatching down the great eight-bore duck-gun and slipping into it two cartridges prepared for

this very contingency, each cartridge containing twelve buck-shot and a big spherical bullet – a terrific charge for close quarters. Once outside the kitchen-door, I ran to the wood-shed and seized the torch which, like the cartridges, had been made ready for this emergency. It consisted of a broom-handle with a great wad of waste, soaked in kerosene, bound with wire to one end of it.

Lighting the torch, I held it high and followed two paces behind the others as they advanced towards the pig-pen. We had not progressed twenty yards, however – luckily for us, as it turned out – when there issued through the roof of the pen a great dark body, dimly seen by the light of the torch.

“There he is!” cried my father, as the bear dropped out of sight behind the corral fence. “Look out, now! We’ll get a shot at him as he runs up the hill!”

But Big Reuben had no intention whatever of running up the hill; he feared neither man nor beast, and the next moment he appeared round the corner of the corral, charging full upon us, open-mouthed.

With a single impulse, we all fired one shot at him and then turned and fled, helter-skelter, for the kitchen, all tumbling in together, treading on each others’ heels; my father slamming behind us the door, which fortunately opened outward.

The kitchen was a slight frame structure, built on to the back of the house as a T-shaped addition. We were barely inside when bang! came a heavy body against the door, with such force as to

send several milk-pans clashing to the floor.

My father had hastily loaded again, and now, hearing the bear's paws patting high up on the door, he fired a chance shot through it. The bear was hit, seemingly, for we heard him grunt; but that he was not killed by any means was evident, for the next moment, with a clattering crash, the kitchen window, glass, frame and all, was knocked into the room, and a great hairy arm and fierce, grinning head were thrust through the gap.

Joe, who was standing just opposite the window, jumped backward, and catching his heels against the great tub wherein the week's wash was soaking, he sat down in it with a splash. Seeing this, I sprang forward and thrust my torch into the bear's face; upon which he dropped to the ground again. A half-second later, Joe, still sitting in the tub, fired his second barrel. It was a good shot, but just a trifle too late, and its only effect was to blow my torch to shreds, leaving us with the dim light of the lantern only.

"Into the house!" shouted my father; whereupon we all retreated from the kitchen into the main building. There, while Joe held the door partly open and I held the lantern so as to throw a light into the kitchen, my father knelt upon the floor waiting for the bear to give him another chance. But Big Reuben was much too clever to do anything of the sort; he was not going to put himself into any such trap as that; and presently my mother from up-stairs called out that she could see him going off.

We waited about for half an hour, but as there was no more

disturbance we all went back to bed, where for another half-hour Joe and I lay talking, unable, naturally, to go to sleep at once after such a lively stirring-up.

By sunrise next morning we were all out to see what damage had been done. The bear had torn a great hole in the roof of the pen, had jumped in and had killed and partly eaten one pig, choosing, as a bear of his sagacity naturally would, the best one. We were fortunate, though, to have come off so cheaply; doubtless the light of our torch shining through the chinks of the logs had disturbed him.

If there had been any question as to the marauder's identity, that was settled at once. His tracks were plain in the dust, and as one of his hind feet showed no marks of claws, we knew it was Big Reuben; for Big Reuben had once been caught in a trap and had only freed himself by leaving his toe-nails behind him.

Outside the kitchen door and window the tracks were very plain; there was also a good deal of blood, showing that he had been hit at least once. But it was evident also that he had not been hurt very seriously, for there was no irregularity in his trail – no swaying from side to side, as from weakness – though we followed it up to the point where, at the upper end of our valley, the bear had climbed the cliff which bounded the Second Mesa. Though on this occasion he had thought fit to run away, there was little doubt but that he would live to fight another day.

“Father,” said I, as we sat together at breakfast, “may Joe and I go and trail him up? If he keeps on bleeding it ought to be easy,

and it is just possible that we might find him dead.”

My father at first shook his head, but presently, reconsidering, he replied: “Well, you may go; but you must go on your ponies: it’s too dangerous to go a-foot. And in any case, if the trail leads you up to the loose rocks or into the big timber you must stop. You know what a tricky beast Big Reuben is. If he sees that he is followed he will lie in hiding and jump out on you. That’s how he caught Jed Smith, you remember.”

“We’ll take care, father,” said I. “We’ll stick to our ponies, and then we shall be all safe.”

“Very well, then; be off with you.”

With this permission we set off, I carrying a rifle and Joe his “old cannon,” as he called the big shotgun; each with a crust of bread and a slice or two of bacon in his pocket by way of lunch. Picking up the trail where we had left it at the foot of the Second Mesa, we scrambled up the little cliff, looking out very sharply lest Big Reuben should be lying in wait for us in some crevice, and finding that the tracks led straight away for Mount Lincoln, we followed them, I doing the tracking while Joe kept watch ahead. The surface of the Second Mesa was very uneven: there were many little rocky hills and many small cañons, some of the latter as much as a hundred feet deep, so, keeping in mind the bear’s crafty nature, whenever the trail led us near any of these obstacles I would stand still while Joe examined the cañon or the rocks, as the case might be.

Every time we did this, however, we drew a blank. The

trail continued to lead straight away for the mountain without diverging to one side or the other, and for five or six miles we followed it until the stunted cedars began to give place to pine trees, when we decided that we might as well stop, especially as for some time past there had ceased to be any blood-marks on the stones and we had been following only the occasional imprint of the bear's paws in the patches of sand.

"The trail is headed straight for that rocky gorge, Phil," said my companion, pointing forward, "and it's no use going on. Even if your father hadn't forbidden it, I wouldn't go into that gorge, knowing that Big Reuben was in there somewhere, not if the county commissioners should offer me the whole county as a reward."

"Nor I, either," said I. "Big Reuben may have his mountain all to himself as far as I'm concerned. So, come on; let's get back. What time is it?"

"After noon," replied Joe, looking up at the sun. "We've been a long time coming, but it won't take us more than half the time going back. Let's dig out at once."

Turning our ponies, we set off at an easy lope, and had ridden about two miles on the back track when, skirting along the edge of one of the little cañons I have mentioned, we noticed a tiny spring of water, which, issuing from the face of the cliff close to the top, fell in a thin thread into the chasm.

"Joe," said I, "let's stop here and eat our lunch. I'm getting pretty hungry."

“All right,” said Joe; and in another minute we were seated on the edge of the cliff with our feet dangling in space, munching our bread and bacon, while the ponies, with the reins hanging loose, were cropping the scanty grass just behind us.

About five feet below where we sat was a little ledge some eighteen inches wide, which, on our left, gradually sloped upward until it came to the top, while in the other direction it sloped downward, diminishing in width until it “petered out” entirely. The little spring fell upon this ledge, and running along it, fell off again at its lower end. As the best place to fill our tin cup was where the water struck the ledge, we, when we had finished our lunch, walked down to that point.

Filling the cup, I was in the act of handing it to Joe, who was behind me, when a sudden clatter of hoofs caused us to straighten up. Our eyes came just above the level of the cliff, and the first thing they encountered was Big Reuben himself, not ten feet away, coming straight for us at a run!

“Duck!” yelled Joe; and down we went – only just in time, too, for the bear’s great claws rattled on the surface of the rock as he made a slap at us.

Where had he come from? Had he followed us back from the mountain? Hardly: we had come too quickly. Had he seen us coming in the early morning, and, making a circuit out of our sight, lain in wait for us as we returned? Such uncanny cleverness seemed hardly possible, even for Big Reuben, clever as he was known to be.

These questions, however, did not occur to us at the moment. All that concerned us just then was that there was Big Reuben, looking down at us from the edge of the cliff.

There was no doubt that it was the same bear we had interviewed in the night, for all the hair on one side of his face was singed off where I had thrust at him with the torch, while one of his ears was tattered and bloody, showing that some of Joe's buck-shot, at least, had got him as he dropped from the window.

Joe and I were on our hands and knees, when the bear, going down upon his chest, reached for us with one of his paws. He could not quite touch us, but he came so uncomfortably close that we crept away down the ledge, which, dipping pretty sharply, soon put us out of his reach altogether.

Seeing this, the bear rose to his feet again, gazed at us for a moment, and then stepped back out of sight.

"Has he gone?" I whispered; but before Joe could answer Big Reuben appeared again, walking down the ledge towards us. Of course we sidled away from him, until the ledge had become so narrow that I could go no farther; and lucky it was for us that the ledge was narrow, for what was standing-room for us was by no means standing-room for the bear: his body was much too thick to allow him to come near us, or even to approach the spot whence we had just retreated.

As it was obvious that the bear could advance no farther, for he was standing on the very edge of the ledge and there was a bulge in the rock before him which would inevitably have pushed

him off into the chasm had he attempted to pass it, Joe and I returned to the spring, where we had room to stand or to sit down as we wished.

The enemy watched our approach, with a glint of malice in his little piggy eyes, but when he saw that we intended to come no nearer, he lay down where he was and began unconcernedly licking his paws.

“He thinks he can starve us out,” said Joe; “but if I’m not mistaken we can stand it longer than he can, even if he did eat half a pig last night. And there’s one thing certain, Phil: if we don’t get home to-night, somebody will come to look for us in the morning.”

“Yes,” I assented. “But they’ll get a pretty bad scare at home if we don’t turn up. Is there no way of sending that beast off? If we could only get hold of one of the guns – ”

By standing upright we could see my rifle lying on the ground and Joe’s big gun standing with its muzzle pointed skyward, leaning against a boulder. They were only six feet away, but six feet were six feet: we could not reach them without climbing up, and that was out of the question – the bear could get there much more quickly than we could.

“Phil!” exclaimed my companion, suddenly. “Have you got any twine in your pocket?”

“Yes,” I replied, pulling out a long, stout piece of string. “Why?”

“Perhaps we can ‘rope’ my gun. See, its muzzle stands clear.

Then we could drag it within reach.”

I very soon had a noose made, and being the more expert roper of the two I swung it round and round my head, keeping the loop wide open, and threw it. My very first cast was successful. The noose fell over the muzzle of the gun and settled half way down the barrel, where it was stopped by the rock.

“Good!” whispered Joe. “Now, tighten it up gently and pull the gun over.”

I followed these directions, and presently we heard the gun fall with a clatter upon the rocks; for, fearing it might go off when it fell, we had both ducked below the rim of the wall.

Our actions had made the bear suspicious, and when the gun came clattering down he rose upon his hind feet and looked about him. Seeing nothing moving, however, he came down again, when I at once began to pull the gun gently towards me, keeping my head down all the time lest one of the hammers, catching against a rock, should explode the charge.

At length, thinking it should be near enough, I ceased pulling, when Joe straightened up, reached out, and, to my great delight, when he withdrew his hand the gun was in it.

Ah! What a difference it made in our situation!

Joe, first opening the breach to make sure the gun was loaded, advanced as near the bear as he dared, and kneeling down took careful aim at his chest. But presently he lowered the gun again, and turning to me, said:

“Phil, can you do anything to make him turn his head so that I

can get a chance at him behind the ear? I'm afraid a shot in front may only wound him."

"All right," said I. "I'll try."

With my knife I pried out of the face of the cliff a piece of stone about the size and shape of the palm of my hand, and aiming carefully I threw it at the bear. It struck him on the very point of his nose – a tender spot – and seemingly hurt him a good deal, for, with an angry snarl, he rose upright on his hind feet.

At that instant a terrific report resounded up and down the cañon, the whole charge of Joe's ponderous weapon struck the bear full in the chest – I could see the hole it made – and without a sound the great beast dropped from the ledge, fell a hundred feet upon the rocks below, bounded two or three times and then lay still, all doubled up in a heap at the bottom.

Big Reuben had killed his last pig!

CHAPTER II

Crawford's Basin

You might think, perhaps, as many people in our neighborhood thought, that Joe was my brother. As a matter of fact he was no relation at all; he had dropped in upon us, a stranger, two years before, and had stayed with us ever since.

It was in the haying season that he came, at a moment when my father and I were overwhelmed with work; for it was the summer of 1879, the year of "the Leadville excitement," when all the able-bodied men in the district were either rushing off to Leadville itself or going off prospecting all over the mountains in the hope of unearthing other Leadvilles. Ranch work was much too slow for them, and as a consequence it was impossible for us to secure any help that was worth having.

What made it all the more provoking was that we had that year an extra-fine stand of grass – the weather, too, was magnificent – yet, unless we could get help, it was hardly likely that we could take full advantage of our splendid hay-crop.

Nevertheless, as what could not be cured must be endured, my father and I tackled the job ourselves, working early and late, and we were making very good progress, all things considered, when we had the misfortune to break a small casting in our mowing-machine; a mishap which would probably entail a delay of several

days until we could get the piece replaced.

It was just before noon that this happened, and we had brought the machine up to the wagon-shed and had put up the horses, when, on stepping out of the stable, we were accosted by a tall, black haired, blue eyed young fellow of about my own age, who asked if he could get a job with us.

“Yes, you can,” replied my father, promptly; and then, remembering the accident to the machine, he added, “at least, you can as soon as I get this casting replaced,” holding out the broken piece as he spoke.

“May I look at it?” asked the young fellow; and taking it in his hand he went on: “I see you have a blacksmith-shop over there; I think I can duplicate this for you if you’ll let me try: I was a blacksmith’s apprentice only a month ago.”

“Do you think you can? Well, you shall certainly be allowed to try. But come in now: dinner will be ready in five minutes; you shall try your hand at blacksmithing afterwards. What’s your name?”

“Joe Garnier,” replied the boy. “I come from Iowa. I was going to Leadville, but I met so many men coming back, with tales of what numbers of idle men there were up there unable to get work, that, hearing of a place called Sulphide as a rising camp, I decided to go there instead. This is the right way to get there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, this is the way to Sulphide. Did you expect to get work as a miner?”

“Well, I intended to take any work I could get, but if you can give me employment here, I’d a good deal rather work out in the sun than down in a hole in the ground.”

“You replace that casting if you can, and I’ll give you work for a month, at least, and longer if we get on well together.”

“Thank you,” said the stranger; and with that we went into the house.

The newcomer started well: he won my mother’s good opinion at once by wiping his boots carefully before entering, and by giving himself a sousing good wash at the pump before sitting down to table. It was plain he was no ordinary tramp – though, for that matter, the genus “tramp” had not yet invaded the three-year-old state of Colorado – for his manners were good; while his clear blue eyes, in contrast with his brown face and wavy black hair, gave him a remarkably bright and wide-awake look.

As soon as dinner was over, we all repaired to the blacksmith-shop, where Joe at once went to work. It was very evident that he knew what he was about: every blow seemed to count in the right direction; so that in about half an hour he had fashioned his piece of iron into the desired shape, when he plunged it into the tub of water, and then, clapping it into the vise, went to work on it with a file; every now and then comparing it with the broken casting which lay on the bench beside him.

“There!” he exclaimed at last. “I believe that will fit.” And, indeed, when he laid them side by side, one would have been puzzled to tell which was which, had not the old piece been

painted red while the other was not painted at all.

Joe was right: the piece did fit; and in less than an hour from the time we had finished dinner we were at work again in the hay-field.

The month which followed was a strenuous one, but by the end of it we had the satisfaction of knowing that we had put up the biggest crop of hay ever cut on the ranch.

Our new helper, who was a tall, stout fellow for his age, and an untiring worker, proved to be a capital hand, and though at first he was somewhat awkward, being unused to farm labor, before we had finished he could do a better day's work than I could, in spite of the fact that I had been a ranch boy ever since I had been a boy at all.

We all took a great liking for Joe, and we were very pleased, therefore, when, the hay being in, it was arranged that he should stay on. For there was plenty of work to be done that year – extra work, I mean – such as building fences, putting up an ice-house and so forth, in which Joe, having a decided mechanical turn, proved a valuable assistant. So, when the spring came round again it found Joe still with us; and with us he continued to stay, becoming so much one of the family that many people, as I said, who did not know his story, supposed that he and I were brothers in fact, as we soon learned to become brothers in feeling.

Long before this, of course, Joe had told us all about himself and how he had come to leave his old home and make his way westward.

Of French-Canadian descent, the boy, left an orphan at three years of age, had been taken in by a neighbor, a kind-hearted blacksmith, and with him he had lived for the twelve years following, when the blacksmith, now an old man, had decided to go out of business. Just at this time “the Leadville excitement” was making a great stir in the country; thousands of men were heading for the new Eldorado, and Joe, his old friend consenting, determined to join the throng.

It was, perhaps, lucky for the young blacksmith that he started rather late, for, on his approach to the mountains, he encountered files of disappointed men streaming in the opposite direction, and hearing their stories of the overcrowded condition of things in Leadville, he determined to try instead the mining camp of Sulphide, when, passing our place on the way he was caught by my father, as I have described, and turned into a ranchman.

Such was the condition of affairs with us when Big Reuben made his final raid upon our pig-pen.

The reward of one hundred dollars which the county paid us for our exploit in ridding the community of Big Reuben’s presence came in very handily for Joe and me. It enabled us to achieve an object for which we had long been hoarding our savings – the purchase of a pair of mules.

For the past two years, in the slack season, after the gathering of our hay and potato crops, we had hired out during the fine weather remaining to a man whose business it was to cut and haul timbers for the mines in and around the town of Sulphide,

which lay in the mountains seven miles southwestward from our ranch. We found it congenial work, and Joe and I, who were now seventeen years old, hardened to labor with ax, shovel or pitchfork, saw no reason why we should not put in these odd five or six weeks cutting timbers on our own account. No reason but one, that is to say. My father would readily lend us one of his wagons, but he could not spare a team, and so, until we could procure a team of our own, we were obliged to forego the honor and glory – to say nothing of the expected profits – of setting up as an independent firm.

Now, however, we had suddenly and unexpectedly acquired the necessary funds, and with the money in our pockets away we went at once to Ole Johnson's, from whom we bought a stout little pair of mouse-colored mules upon which we had long had an eye.

But though the firm of Crawford and Garnier might now, if it pleased, consider itself established, it could not enter upon the practice of its business for some time yet. It was still the middle of summer, and there was plenty to do on the ranch: the hay and the oats would be ready to cut in two weeks, while after that there were the potatoes to gather – a very heavy piece of work.

All these tasks had to be cleared out of the way before we could move up to Sulphide to begin on our timber-cutting enterprise. But between the harvesting of the oats and the gathering of the potato-crop there occurred an incident, which, besides being remarkable in itself, had a very notable effect upon my father's fortunes – and, incidentally, upon our own.

To make understandable the ins and outs of this matter, I must pause a moment to describe the situation of our ranch; for it is upon the peculiarity of its situation that much of my story hinges.

Anybody traveling westward from San Remo, the county seat, with the idea of getting up into the mountains, would encounter, about a mile from town, a rocky ridge, which, running north and south, extended for several miles each way. Ascending this bluff and still going westward, he would presently encounter a second ridge, the counterpart of the first, and climbing that in turn he would find himself upon the wide-spreading plateau known as the Second Mesa, which extended, without presenting any serious impediment, to the foot of the range – itself one of the finest and ruggedest masses of mountains in the whole state of Colorado.

In a deep depression of the First Mesa – known as Crawford's Basin – lay our ranch. This "Basin" was evidently an ancient lake-bed – as one could tell by the "benches" surrounding it – but the water of the lake having in the course of ages sawed its way out through the rocky barrier, now ran off through a little cañon about a quarter of a mile long.

The natural way for us to get from the ranch down to San Remo was to follow the stream down this cañon, but, curiously enough, for more than half the year this road was impassable. The lower end of Crawford's Basin, for a quarter of a mile back from the entrance of the cañon, was so soft and water-logged that not even an empty wagon could pass over it. In fact, so soft

was it that we could not get upon it to cut hay and were obliged to leave the splendid stand of grass that grew there as a winter pasture. In the cold weather, when the ground froze up, it was all right, but at the first breath of spring it began to soften, and from then until winter again we could do nothing with it. It was, in fact, little better than a source of annoyance to us, for, until we fenced it off, our milk cows, tempted by the luxuriant grass, were always getting themselves mired there.

This wet patch was known to every teamster in the county as "the bottomless forty rods," and was shunned by them like a pestilence. Its existence was a great drawback to us, for, between San Remo, where the smelters were, and the town of Sulphide, where the mines were, there was a constant stream of wagons passing up and down, carrying ore to the smelters and bringing back provisions, tools and all the other multitudinous necessities required by the population of a busy mining town. Had it not been for the presence of "the bottomless forty rods," all these wagons would have come through our place and we should have done a great trade in oats and hay with the teamsters. But as it was, they all took the mesa road, which, though three miles longer and necessitating the descent of a long, steep hill where the road came down from the First Mesa to the plains, had the advantage of being hard and sound at all seasons of the year.

My father had spent much time and labor in the attempt to make a permanent road through this morass, cutting trenches and throwing in load after load of stones and brush and earth, but all

in vain, and at length he gave it up – though with great reluctance. For, not only did the teamsters avoid us, but we, ourselves, when we wished to go with a load to San Remo, were obliged to ascend to the mesa and go down by the hill road.

The cause of this wet spot was apparently an underground stream which came to the surface at that point. The creek which supplied us with water for irrigation had its sources on Mount Lincoln and falling from the Second Mesa into our Basin in a little waterfall some twelve feet high, it had scooped out a circular hole in the rock about a hundred feet across and then, running down the length of the valley, found its way out through the cañon. Now this creek received no accession from any other stream in its course across the Basin, but for all that the amount of water in the cañon was twice as great as that which came over the fall; showing conclusively that the marsh whence the increase came must be supplied by a very strong underground stream.

The greater part of Crawford's Basin was owned by my father, Philip Crawford, the elder, but a portion of it, about thirty acres at the upper end, including the pool, the waterfall and the best part of the potato land, was owned by Simon Yetmore, of Sulphide.

My father was very desirous of purchasing this piece of ground, for it would round out the ranch to perfection, but Yetmore, knowing how much he desired it, asked such an unreasonable price that their bargaining always fell through. Being unable to buy it, my father therefore leased it, paying

the rent in the form of potatoes delivered at Yetmore's store in Sulphide – for Simon, besides being mayor of Sulphide and otherwise a person of importance, was proprietor of Yetmore's Emporium, by far the largest general store in town.

He was an enterprising citizen, Simon was, always having many irons in the fire; a clever fellow, too, in his way; though his way was not exactly to the taste of some people: he drove too hard a bargain. In fact, the opinion was pretty general that his name fitted him to a nicety, for, however much he might get, he always wanted yet more.

My father distrusted him; yet, strange to say, in spite of that fact, and of the added fact that he had always fought shy of all mining schemes, he and Yetmore were partners in a prospecting venture. It was, in a measure, an accident, and it came about in this way:

The smelter-men down at San Remo were always crying out for more lead-ores to mix with the “refractory” ores produced by most of the mines in our district, publishing a standing offer of an extra-good price for all ores containing more than a stated percentage of lead. In spite of the stimulus this offer gave to the prospecting of the mountains, north, south and west of us, there had been found but one mine, the Samson, of which the chief product was lead, and this did not furnish nearly enough to satisfy the wants of the smelter-men.

Its discovery, however, proved the existence of veins of galena – the ore from which lead chiefly comes – in one part of

the district, and the prospectors became more active than ever; though without result. That section of country where the Samson had been discovered was deeply overlaid with “wash,” and as the veins were “blanket” veins – lying flat, that is – and did not crop out above the surface, their discovery was pretty much a matter of chance.

Among the prospectors was one, Tom Connor, who, having had experience in the lead-mines of Missouri, proposed to adopt one of the methods of prospecting in use in that country, to wit, the core-drill. But to procure and operate a core-drill required money, and this Tom Connor had not. He therefore applied to Simon Yetmore, who agreed to supply part of the necessary funds – making good terms for himself, you may be sure – if Tom would provide the rest. The rest, however, was rather more than the sum-total of Tom’s scanty capital, and so he came to my father, who was an old friend of his, and asked him to make up the difference.

My father declined to take any share in the enterprise, for, though most of the ranchmen round about were more or less interested in mining, he himself looked upon it as being too near akin to gambling; but feeling well disposed towards Tom, and the sum required being very moderate, he lent his friend the money, quite prepared, knowing Tom’s optimistic, harum-scarum character, never to see it again.

In this expectation, however, he was happily deceived. It is true he did not get back his money, but he received his money’s

worth, and that in a very curious way.

CHAPTER III

Yetmore's Mistake

Three months had elapsed when Tom Connor turned up one day with a very long face. All his drilling had brought no result; he was at the end of his tether; he could see no possible chance of ever repaying the borrowed money, and so, said he, would my father take his interest in the drill in settlement of the debt?

Very reluctantly my father consented – for what did he want with a one-third share in a core-drill? – whereupon Tom, the load of debt being off his mind, brightened up again in an instant – he was a most mercurial fellow – and forthwith he fell to begging my father's consent to his making one more attempt – just one. He was sure of striking it this time, he had studied the formation carefully and he had selected a spot where the chances of disappointment were, as he declared, “next-to-nothing.”

My father knew Tom well enough to know that he had been just as sure twenty times before, but Tom was so eager and so plausible that at last he agreed that he should sink one more hole – but no more.

“And mind you, Tom,” said he, “I won't spend more than fifty dollars; that is the very utmost I can afford, and I believe I am only throwing that away. But I'll spend fifty just to satisfy you – but that's all, mind you.”

“Fifty dollars!” exclaimed Tom. “Fifty! Bless you, that’ll be more than enough. Twenty ought to do it. I’m going to make your fortune for twenty dollars, Mr. Crawford, and glad of the chance. You’ve treated me ‘white,’ and the more I can make for you the better I’ll be pleased. Inside of a week I’ll be coming back here with a lead-mine in my pocket – you see if I don’t.”

“All right, Tom,” said my father, laughing, as he shook hands with him. “I shall be glad to have it, even if it is only a pocket edition. So, good-bye, old man, and good luck to you.”

It was two days after this that my father at breakfast time turned to us and said:

“Boys, how would you like to take your ponies and go and see Tom Connor at work? There is not much to do on the ranch just now, and an outing of two or three days will do you good.”

Needless to say, we jumped at the chance, and as soon as we could get off, away we went, delighted at the prospect of making an expedition into the mountains.

The place where Tom was at work was thirty miles beyond Sulphide, a long ride, nearly all up hill, and it was not till towards sunset that we approached his camp. As we did so, a very surprising sight met our gaze: three men, close together, with their backs to us, down on their hands and knees, like Mahomedans saying their prayers.

“What are they up to?” asked Joe. “Have they lost something?”

At this moment, my horse’s hoof striking a stone caused the three men to look up. One was Connor, one was his helper, and

the other, to our surprise, was Yetmore.

Connor sprang to his feet and ran towards us, crying:

“What did I tell you, boys! What did I tell you! Get off your ponies, quick, and come and see!”

He was wild with excitement.

We slid from our horses, and joining the other two, went down on our knees beside them. Upon the ground before them lay the object of their worship: a “core” from the drill, neatly pieced together, about eight feet long and something less than an inch in diameter. Of this core, four feet or more at one end and about half a foot at the other was composed of some kind of stone, but in between, for a length of three feet and an inch or two, it was all smooth, shining lead-ore.

Tom Connor had struck it, and no mistake!

“Tom,” said Yetmore, as we all rose to our feet again, “this *looks* like a pretty fair strike; but you’ve got to remember that we know nothing about the extent of the vein – one hole doesn’t prove much. It is three feet thick at this particular point, but it may be only three inches five feet away; and as to its length and breadth, why, that’s all pure speculation. All the same I’m ready to make a deal with you. I’ll buy your interest or I’ll sell you mine. What do you say?”

“What’s the use of that kind of talk?” growled Connor. “You know I haven’t a cent to my name. Besides, I haven’t any interest.”

“You – what! – you haven’t any interest!” cried the other. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve sold it.”

“Sold it! Who to?”

“To Mr. Crawford, two days ago.”

“Well, you are a – ” Yetmore began; but catching sight of Tom’s glowering face he stopped and substituted, “Well, I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Well, I ain’t,” said Tom, shortly. “If Mr. Crawford makes a fortune out of it I’ll be mighty well pleased. He’s treated me ‘white,’ *he* has.”

From the tone and manner of this remark it was easy to guess that Tom did not love Mr. Yetmore: he had found him a difficult partner to get along with, probably.

“I certainly hope he will,” said Yetmore, smiling, “for if he does I shall. Sold it to Mr. Crawford, eh? So that accounts for you two boys being up here. Got here just in time, didn’t you? You’ll stay over to-morrow, of course, and see Tom uncover the vein?”

“Are you proposing to uncover it, Tom?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s only four feet down; one shot will do it. You’ll stay too, I suppose, Mr. Yetmore?”

“Certainly,” replied the other. But as he said it, I saw a change come over his face – it was a leathery face, with a large, long nose. Some idea had occurred to him I was sure, especially when, seeing that I was looking at him, he dropped his eyes, as though fearing they might betray him.

Whatever the idea might be, however, I ceased to think of it when Tom suggested that it was getting late and that we had

better adjourn to the cabin for supper.

Taking our ponies over to the log stable, therefore, we gave them a good feed of oats, and soon afterwards were ourselves seated before a steaming hot meal of ham, bread and coffee; after which we spent an hour talking over the great strike, and then, crawling into the bunks, we very quickly fell asleep.

Early next morning we walked about half a mile up the mountain to the scene of the strike, when, having first shoveled away two or three feet of loose stuff, Tom and his helper set to work, one holding the drill and the other plying the hammer, drilling a hole a little to one side of the spot whence the core had come.

They were no more than well started when Yetmore, remarking that he had forgotten his tobacco, walked back to the cabin to get it – an action to which Joe and I, being interested in the drilling, paid little attention. It was only when Connor, turning to select a fresh drill, asked where he was, that we remembered how long he had been gone.

“Gone back to the cabin, has he?” remarked Tom. “Well, he’s welcome to stay there as far as I’m concerned.”

The work went on, until presently Tom declared that they had gone deep enough, and while we others cleared away the tools, Connor himself loaded and tamped the hole.

“Now, get out of the way!” cried he; and while we ran off and hid behind convenient trees, Tom struck a match and lighted the fuse. The dull thud of an explosion shortly followed; but on

walking back to the spot we were all greatly surprised to see that the rock had remained intact – it was as solid as ever.

“Well, that beats all!” exclaimed Tom. “The thing has shot downward; it must be hollow underneath. We’ll have to put in some short holes and crack it up.”

It did not take long to put in three short holes, and these being charged and tamped, we once more took refuge behind the trees while Tom touched them off. This time there were three sharp explosions, a shower of fragments rattled through the branches above our heads, and on going to inspect the result we found that the rock had been so shattered that it was an easy matter to pry out the pieces with pick and crowbar – a task of which Joe and I did our share.

At length, the hole being now about three feet deep, Joe, who was working with a crowbar, gave a mighty prod at a loose piece of rock, when, to the astonishment of himself and everybody else, the bottom of the hole fell through, and rock, crowbar and all, disappeared into the cavity beneath.

“Well, what kind of a vein is it, anyhow?” cried Tom, going down upon his knees and peering into the darkness. “Blest if there isn’t a sort of cave down here. Knock out some more, boys, and let me get down. This is the queerest thing I’ve struck in a long time.”

We soon had the hole sufficiently enlarged, when, by means of a rope attached to a tree, Tom slid down into it, and lighting a candle, peered about.

Poor old Tom! The change on his face would have been ludicrous had we not felt so sorry for him, when, looking up at us he said in lugubrious tones: “Done again, boys! Come down and see for yourselves.”

We quickly slid down the rope, when, our eyes having become accustomed to the light, Tom pointed out to us the extraordinary accident that had caused him to believe he had struck a three-foot vein of galena.

Though there was no sign of such a thing on the surface, it was evident that the place in which we stood had at one time been a narrow, water-worn gully in the mountain-side. Ages ago there had been a landslide, filling the little gully with enormous boulders. That these rocks came from the vein of the Samson higher up the mountain was also pretty certain, for among them was one pear-shaped boulder of galena ore, standing upright, upon the apex of which rested the immense four-foot slab of stone through which Tom had bored his drill-hole. By a chance that was truly marvelous, the drill, after piercing the great slab, had struck the very point of the galena boulder and had gone through it from end to end, so that when the core came up it was no wonder that even Tom, experienced miner though he was, should have been deceived into the belief that he had discovered a three-foot vein of lead-ore.

As a matter of fact, there was no vein at all – just one single chunk of galena, not worth the trouble of getting it out. Connor’s lead-mine after all had turned out to be only a “pocket edition.”

Tom's disappointment was naturally extreme, but, as usual, his low spirits were only momentary. We had hardly climbed up out of the hole again when he suddenly burst out laughing.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he went, slapping his leg. "What will Yetmore say? I'm sorry, Phil, that I couldn't keep my promise to your father, but I'll own up that as far as Yetmore is concerned I'm rather glad. I don't like the Honorable Simon, and that's a fact. What's he doing down at the cabin all this time, I wonder. Come! Let's gather up the tools and go down there: there's nothing more to be done here."

On arriving at the cabin, Yetmore's non-appearance was at once explained. Fastened to the table with a fork was a piece of paper, upon which was written in pencil, "Gone to look for the horses."

Of course, Joe and I at once ran over to the stable. It was empty; all three of the horses were gone.

"Queer," remarked Joe. "I feel sure I tied mine securely, but you see halters and all are gone."

"Yes," I replied. "And I should have relied upon our ponies' staying even if they had not been tied up; you know what good camp horses they are. Let's go out and see which way they went."

We made a cast all round the stable, and presently Joe called out, "Here they are, all three of them." I thought he had found the horses, but it was only their tracks he had discovered, which with much difficulty we followed over the stony ground, until, after half an hour of careful trailing, they led us to the dusty road

some distance below camp, where they were plainly visible.

“Our ponies have followed Yetmore’s horse,” said Joe, after a brief inspection. “Do you see, Phil, they tread in his tracks all the time?”

For the tracks left by our own ponies were easily distinguishable from those of Yetmore’s big horse, our animals being unshod.

“What puzzles me though, Joe,” said I, “is that there are no marks of the halter-ropes trailing in the dust; and yet they went off with their halters.”

“That’s true. I don’t understand it. And there’s another thing, Phil: Yetmore hasn’t got on their trail yet, apparently; see, the marks of his boots don’t show anywhere. He must be wandering in the woods still.”

“I suppose so. Well, let us go on and see if they haven’t stopped to feed somewhere.”

We went on for half a mile when we came to a spot where the tracks puzzled us still more. For the first time a man’s footmarks appeared. That they were Yetmore’s I knew, for I had noticed the pattern of the nails in the soles of his boots as he had sat with his feet resting on a chair the night before. But where had he dropped from so suddenly? We could find no tracks on either side of the road – though certainly the ground was stony and would not take an impression easily – yet here they were all at once right on top of the horses’ hoof-prints.

Moreover, his appearance seemed to have been the signal for

a new arrangement in the position of the horses, for our ponies had here taken the lead, while Yetmore's horse came treading in their tracks. Moreover, again, twenty yards farther on, the horses had all broken into a gallop. What did it mean?

"Well, this is a puzzler!" exclaimed Joe, taking off his hat and rumpling his hair, as his habit was in such circumstances. "How do you figure it out, Phil?"

"Why," said I. "I'll tell you what I think. Yetmore has caught sight of the horses strolling down the road and has followed them, keeping away from the road himself for fear they should see him and take alarm. Dodging through the scrub-oak and cutting across corners, he has come near enough to them to speak to his own horse; the horse has stopped and Yetmore has caught him. That was where his tracks first showed in the road. Then he has jumped upon his horse and galloped after our ponies, which appear to have bolted."

"That sounds reasonable," Joe assented; "and in that case he'll head them and drive them back; so we may as well walk up to the cabin again and wait for him."

To this I agreed, and we therefore turned round and retraced our steps.

"There's only one thing about this that I can't understand," remarked Joe, as we trudged up the hill, "and that is about the halters – why they leave no trail. That does beat me."

"Yes, that is certainly a queer thing; unless they managed to scrape them off against the trees before they took to the road.

In that case, though, we ought to have found them; and anyhow it is hard to believe that all three horses should have done the same thing.”

We found Tom very busy packing up when we reached the cabin, and on our telling him the result of our horse-hunt he merely nodded, saying, “Well, they’ll be back soon, I suppose, and then I’ll ride down with you.”

“Why, are you going to quit, Tom?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Your father limited me to one more hole, you remember, and if I know him he’ll stick to it; and as to working any longer for Yetmore, no thank you; I’ve had enough of it.”

So saying, Tom, who had already cleaned and put away the tools, began tumbling his scanty wardrobe into a gunny-sack, and this being done, he turned to us and said:

“I’ve got a pony out at pasture about a mile up the valley. I’ll go and bring him down; and while I’m gone you might as well pitch in and get dinner ready. You needn’t provide for Sandy Yates: he’s gone off already to see if he can get a job up at the Samson.”

Sandy Yates was the helper.

In an hour or less Tom was back and we were seated at dinner, without Yetmore, who had not yet turned up, when the conversation naturally fell upon the subject of the runaway horses. We related to Tom how we had trailed them through the woods down to the road, told him of the sudden appearance of Yetmore’s tracks, and how the horses had then set off at a run,

followed by Yetmore.

“But the thing I *cannot* understand,” said Joe, harking back to the old subject, “is why the halter-ropes don’t show in the dust.”

“Don’t they?” exclaimed Tom, suddenly sitting bolt upright and clapping his knife and fork down upon the table. “Don’t they? Just you wait a minute.”

With that he jumped up, strode out of the cabin, and went straight across to the stable. In two minutes he was back again, and standing in the doorway, with his hands in his pockets, he said:

“Boys, I’ve got another surprise for you: Yetmore’s saddle’s gone!”

“His saddle gone!” I exclaimed. “Is that why you went to the stable? Did you expect to find it gone?”

“That’s just what I did.”

“You did! Why?”

Without replying directly, Tom came in, sat down, and leaning his elbows on the table, said, with a quiet chuckle, the meaning of which we could not understand:

“Should you like to know, boys, what Yetmore did when he came down for his tobacco this morning? He went to the stable, saddled his horse, untied your two ponies and led them out. Then he mounted his horse and taking the halter-ropes in his hand he led your ponies by a roundabout way through the woods down to the road. After leading them at a walk along the road for half a mile he dismounted – that was where his tracks showed –

and either took off the halters and threw them away, or what is more likely, tied them up around the ponies' necks so that they shouldn't step on them. Then he mounted again and went off at a gallop, driving your ponies ahead of him."

As Tom concluded, he leaned back in his chair, bubbling with suppressed merriment, until the sight of our round-eyed wonder was too much for him and he burst into uproarious laughter, which was so infectious that we could not help joining in, though the cause of it was a perfect mystery to us both.

At length, when he had laughed himself out, he leaned forward again, and rubbing the tears out of his eyes with the back of his hand, he said:

"Can't you guess, boys, why Yetmore has gone off with your horses?"

I shook my head. "No," said I, "unless he wants to steal them, and he'd hardly do that, I suppose."

"No; anyhow not in such a bare-faced way as that. What he's after is to make you boys walk home."

"Make us walk home!" cried Joe. "What should he want to do that for?"

Tom grinned, and in reply, said: "Yetmore thought that as soon as we uncovered that fine three-foot vein of galena you would be for getting your ponies and galloping off home to tell Mr. Crawford of the great strike, and as he wanted to get there first he stole your ponies – temporarily – to make sure of doing it."

"But why should he want to get there first?" I asked. "You are

talking in riddles, Tom, and we haven't the key."

"No, I know you haven't. You don't know Yetmore. I do. He's gone down to buy your father's share in the claim for next-to-nothing before he hears of the strike!"

The whole thing was plain and clear now; and the hilarity of our friend, Connor, was explained. He had no liking for Yetmore, as we have seen, and it delighted him immeasurably to think of that too astute gentleman rushing off to buy my father's share of a valuable mine, and, if he succeeded, finding himself the owner of a worthless boulder instead.

For myself, I was much puzzled how to act. Naturally, I felt pretty indignant at Yetmore's action, and it seemed to me that if, in trying to cheat my father, he should only succeed in cheating himself, it would be no more than just that he should be allowed to do so. But at the same time I thought that my father ought to be informed of the state of the case as soon as possible – he, not I, was the one to judge – and so, turning to Connor, I asked him to lend me his pony so that I might set off at once.

"What! And spoil the deal!" cried Connor; and at first he was disposed to refuse. But on consideration, he added: "Well, perhaps you're right. Your father's an honest man, if ever there was one, and I doubt if he'd let even a man like Yetmore cheat himself if he could help it; and so I suppose you must go and tell him the particulars as soon as you can. All I hope is that he will have made his deal before you get there. Yes, you can take the pony."

But it was not necessary to borrow Connor's steed after all, for when we stepped outside the cabin, there were our own ponies coming up the road. The halters were fastened up round their necks, and they showed evident signs of having been run hard some time during the morning. Presumably Yetmore had abandoned them somewhere on the road and they had walked leisurely back.

"Well, boys," said Connor, "we may as well all start together now; but as your ponies have had a good morning's work already, we can't expect to make the whole distance this evening. We'll stop over night at Thornburg's, twenty miles down, and go on again first thing in the morning."

This we did, and by ten o'clock we reached home, where the first person we encountered was my father.

"Well, Tom," he cried, as the miner slipped down from his horse. "So you made a strike, did you?"

At this Tom opened his eyes pretty widely. "How did you know?" he asked.

"I didn't know," my father replied, smiling, "but I guessed. Does it amount to much?"

"Well, no, I can't say it does," Tom replied, as he covered his mouth with his hand to hide the grin which would come to the surface. "Yetmore's been here, I suppose?" he added, inquiringly.

"Yes, he has," answered my father, surprised in his turn. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just thought he might have, that's all."

“Yes, he was here yesterday afternoon. I sold him my one-third share.”

“Did you?” asked Tom, eagerly. “I hope you got a good price.”

“Yes, I made a very satisfactory bargain. I traded my share for his thirty acres here, so that now, at last, I own the whole of Crawford’s Basin, I’m glad to say.”

“Bully!” cried Tom, clapping his hands together with a report which made his pony shy. “That’s great! Tell us about it, Mr. Crawford.”

“Why, Yetmore rode in yesterday afternoon, as I told you, on his way to town – he said. But I rather suspected the truth of his statement. He had come in a desperate hurry, for his horse was in a lather, and if he was in such haste to get to town, why did he waste time talking to me, as he did for twenty minutes? But when, just as he was starting off again, he turned back and asked me if I wanted to sell my share in the drill and claim, I knew that that was what he had come about, and I had a strong suspicion that he had heard of a strike of some sort and was trying to get the better of me. So when he asked what I wanted for my share, I said I would take his thirty acres, and in spite of his protestations that I was asking far too much, I stuck to it. The final result was that I rode on with him to town, where we exchanged deeds and the bargain was completed.”

“That’s great!” exclaimed Connor once more, rubbing his hands. “And now I’ll tell you our part of the story.”

When he had finished, my father stood thinking for a minute,

and then said: "Well, the deal will have to stand. Yet more believed we had a three-foot vein of galena, and it is perfectly evident that he meant to get my share out of me at a trifling price before I was aware of its value. It was a shabby trick. If he had dealt squarely with me, I would have offered to give him back his deed, but, as it is, I shan't. The deal will have to stand."

Thus it was that my father became sole owner of Crawford's Basin.

CHAPTER IV

Lost In The Clouds

The fact that he had lost his little all in the core-boring venture did not trouble Tom Connor in the least; the money was gone, and as worrying about it would not bring it back, Tom decided not to worry. The same thing had happened to him many a time before, for his system of life was to work in the mines until he had accumulated a respectable sum, and then go off prospecting till such time as the imminence of starvation drove him back again to regular work.

It was so in this case; and being known all over the district as a skilful miner, his specialty being timber-work, he very soon got a good job on the Pelican as boss timberman on a section of that important mine.

One effect of Tom's getting work on the Pelican was that he secured for Joe and me an order for lagging – small poles used in the mines to hold up the ore and waste – and our potato-crop being gathered and marketed, my father gave us permission to go off and earn some extra money for ourselves by filling the order which Tom's kindly thoughtfulness had secured for us.

The place we had chosen as the scene of our operations was on the northern slope of Elkhorn Mountain, which lay next south of Mount Lincoln, and one bright morning in the late fall Joe

and I packed our bedding and provisions into a wagon borrowed from my father and set out.

We had chosen this spot, after making a preliminary survey for the purpose, partly because the growth of timber was – as it nearly always is – much thicker on the northern slopes of Elkhorn than on the south side of Lincoln, and also because, being a rather long haul, it had not yet been encroached upon by the timber-cutters of Sulphide.

On a little branch creek of the stream which ran through Sulphide we selected a favorable spot and went to work. It was rather high up, and the country being steep and rocky, we had to make our camp about a mile below our working-ground, snaking out the poles as we cut them. This, of course, was a rather slow process, but it had its compensation in the fact that from the foot of the mountain nearly all the way to Sulphide our course lay across the Second Mesa, which was fairly smooth going, and as it was down hill for the whole distance we could haul a very big load when we did start. In due time we filled our contract and received our pay, after which, by advice of Tom Connor, we branched out on another line of the same business.

Being unable to get a second contract, and being, in fact, afraid to take one if we could get it on account of the lateness of the season – for the snow might come at any moment and prevent our carrying it out – we consulted Tom, who suggested that we put in the rest of the fine weather cutting big timbers, hauling them to town, and storing them on a vacant lot, or, what would

be better, in somebody's back yard.

“For,” said he, “though the Pelican and most of the other mines have their supplies for the winter on hand or contracted for, it is always likely they may want a few more stulls or other big timbers than they think. I'll keep you in mind, and if I hear of any such I'll try and make a deal for you, either for the whole stick or cut in lengths to order.”

As this seemed like good sense to us, we at once went off to find a storage place, a quest in which we were successful at the first attempt.

Among my father's customers was the widow Appleby, who conducted a small grocery store on a side street in town. She was accustomed to buy her potatoes from us, and my father, knowing that she had a hard struggle to make both ends meet, had always been very easy with her in the matter of payment, giving her all the time she needed.

This act of consideration had its effect, for, when we went to her and suggested that she rent us her back yard for storage purposes, she readily assented, and not only refused to take any rent, but gave us as well the use of an old stable which stood empty on the back of her lot.

This was very convenient for us, for though a twenty-foot pole, measuring twelve inches at the butt is not the sort of thing that a thief would pick up and run away with, it was less likely that he would attempt it from an enclosed back yard than if the poles were stored in an open lot. Besides this, a stable rent-free for our

mules, and a loft above it rent-free for ourselves to sleep in was a great accommodation.

Returning to the Elkhorn, therefore, we went to work in a new place, a place where some time previously a fire had swept through a strip of the woods, killing the trees, but leaving them standing, stark and bare, but still sound as nuts – just the thing we wanted. Our chief difficulty this time was in getting the felled timbers out from amidst their fellows – for the dead trees were very thick and the mountain-side very steep – but by taking great care we accomplished this without accident. The loading of these big “sticks” would have been an awkward task, too, had we not fortunately found a cut bank alongside of which we ran our wagon, and having snaked the logs into place upon the bank we skidded them across the gap into the wagon without much difficulty.

We had made three loads, and the fine weather still holding, we had gone back for a fourth and last one, when, having got our logs in place on the cut bank all ready to load, Joe and I, after due consultation, decided that we would take a day off and climb up to the saddle which connected the two mountains. We had never been up there before, and we were curious to see what the country was like on the other side.

Knowing that it would be a long and hard climb, we started about sunrise, taking a rifle with us; not that we expected to use it, but because it is not good to be entirely defenseless in those wild, out-of-the-way places. Following at first our little

creek, we went on up and up, taking it slowly, until presently the pines began to thin out, the weather-beaten trees, gnarled, twisted and stunted, becoming few and far between, and pretty soon we left even these behind and emerged upon the bare rocks above timber-line. Here, too, we left behind our little creek.

For another thousand feet we scrambled up the rocks, clambering over great boulders, picking our way along the edges of little precipices, until at last we stood upon the summit of the saddle.

To right and left were the two great peaks, still three thousand feet above us, but westward the view was clear. As far as we could see – and that, I expect, was near two hundred miles – were ranges and masses of mountains, some of them already capped with snow, a magnificent sight.

“That is fine!” cried Joe, enthusiastically. “It’s well worth the trouble of the climb. I only wish we had a map so that we could tell which range is which.”

“Yes, it’s a great sight,” said I. “And the view eastward is about as fine, I think. Look! That cloud of smoke, due east about ten miles away, comes from the smelters of San Remo, and that other smoke a little to the left of it is where the coal-mines are. There’s the ranch, too, that green spot in the mesa; you wouldn’t think it was nearly a mile square, would you?”

“That’s Sulphide down there, of course,” remarked Joe, pointing off towards the right. “But what are those other, smaller, clouds of smoke?”

“Those are three other little mining-camps, all tributary to the smelters at San Remo, and all producing refractory ores like the mines of Sulphide. My! Joe!” I exclaimed, as my thoughts reverted to Tom Connor and his late core-boring failure. “What a great thing a good vein of lead ore would be! Better than a gold mine!”

“I expect it would. Poor old Tom! He bears his disappointment pretty well, doesn’t he?”

“He certainly does. He says, now, that he’s going to stick to straightforward mining and leave prospecting alone; but he’s said that every year for the past ten years at least, and if there’s anything certain about Tom it is that when spring comes and he finds himself once more with money in his pocket, he’ll be off again hunting for his lead-mine.”

“Sure to. Well, Phil, let’s sit down somewhere and eat our lunch. We mustn’t stay here too long.”

“All right. Here’s a good place behind this big rock. It will shelter us from the east wind, which has a decided edge to it up here.”

For half an hour we sat comfortably in the sun eating our lunch, all around us space and silence, when Joe, rising to his feet, gave vent to a soft whistle.

“Phil,” said he, “we must be off. No time to waste. Look eastward.”

I jumped up. A wonderful change had taken place. The view of the plains was completely cut off by masses of soft cloud,

which, coming from the east, struck the mountain-side about two thousand feet below us and were swiftly and softly drifting up to where we stood.

“Yes, we must be off,” said I. “It won’t do to be caught up here in the clouds: it would be dangerous getting down over the rocks. And besides that, it might turn cold and come on to snow. Let us be off at once.”

It was fortunate we did so, for, though we traveled as fast as we dared, the cloud, coming at first in thin wisps and then in dense masses, enveloped us before we reached timber-line, and the difficulty we experienced in covering the small intervening space showed us how risky it would have been had the cloud caught us while we were still on the summit of the ridge.

As it was, we lost our bearings immediately, for the chilly mist filled all the spaces between the trees, so that we could not see more than twenty yards in any direction. As to our proper course, we could tell nothing about it, so that the only thing left for us to do was to keep on going down hill. We expected every moment to see or hear our little creek, but we must have missed it somehow, for, though we ought to have reached it long before, we had been picking our way over loose rocks and fallen trees for two hours before we came upon a stream – whether the right or the wrong one we could not tell. Right or wrong, however, we were glad to see it, for by following it we should sooner or later reach the foot of the mountain and get below the cloud.

But to follow it was by no means easy: the country was so

unexpectedly rough – a fact which convinced us that we had struck the wrong creek. As we progressed, we presently found ourselves upon the edge of a little cañon which, being too steep to descend, obliged us to diverge to the left, and not only so, but compelled us to go up hill to get around it, which did not suit us at all.

After a time, however, we began to go down once more, but though we kept edging to the right we could not find our creek again. The fog, too, had become more dense than ever, and whether our faces were turned north, south or east we had no idea.

We were going on side by side, when suddenly we were astonished to hear a dog bark, somewhere close by; but though we shouted and whistled there was no reply.

“It must be a prospector’s dog,” said Joe, “and the man himself must be underground and can’t hear us.”

“Perhaps that’s it,” I replied. “Well, let’s take the direction of the sound – if we can. It seemed to me to be that way,” pointing with my hand. “I wish the dog would bark again.”

The dog, however, did not bark again, but instead there happened another surprising thing. We were walking near together, carefully picking our way, when suddenly a big raven, coming from we knew not where, flew between us, so close that we felt the flap of his wings and heard their soft *fluff-fluff* in the moisture-laden air, and disappeared again into the fog before us with a single croak.

It was rather startling, but beyond that we thought nothing of it, and on we went again, until Joe stopped short, exclaiming:

“Phil, I smell smoke!”

I stopped, too, and gave a sniff. “So do I,” I said; “and there’s something queer about it. It isn’t plain wood-smoke. What is it?”

“Sulphur,” replied Joe.

“Sulphur! So it is. What can any one be burning sulphur up here for? Anyhow, sulphur or no sulphur, some one must have lighted the fire, so let us follow the smoke.”

We had not gone far when we perceived the light of a fire glowing redly through the fog, and hurried on, expecting to find some man beside it.

But not only was there nobody about, which was surprising enough, but the fire itself was something to arouse our curiosity. Beneath a large, flat stone, supported at the corners by four other stones, was a hot bed of “coals,” while upon the stone itself was spread a thin layer of black sand. It was from these grains of sand, apparently, that the smell of sulphur came; though what they were or why they should be there we could not guess.

We were standing there, wondering, when, suddenly, close behind us, the dog barked again. Round we whirled. There was no dog there! Instead, perched upon the stump of a dead tree, sat a big black raven, who eyed us as though enjoying our bewilderment. Bewildered we certainly were, and still more so when the bird, after staring us out of countenance for a few seconds, cocked his head on one side and said in a hoarse voice:

“Gim’me a chew of tobacco!”

And then, throwing back his head, he produced such a perfect imitation of the howl of a coyote, that a real coyote, somewhere up on the mountain, howled in reply.

All this – the talking raven, the mysterious fire, the encompassing shroud of fog – made us wonder whether we were awake or asleep, when we were still more startled by a voice behind us saying, genially:

“Good-evening, boys.”

Round we whirled once more, to find standing beside us a man, a tall, bony, bearded man, about fifty years old, carrying in his hand a long, old-fashioned muzzle-loading rifle. He was dressed all in buckskin, while the moccasins on his feet explained how it was he had been able to slip up on us so silently.

Naturally, we were somewhat taken aback by the sudden appearance of this wild-looking specimen of humanity, when, thinking that he had alarmed us, perhaps, the man asked, pleasantly: “Lost, boys?”

“Yes,” I replied, reassured by his kindly manner. “We have been up to the saddle and got caught in the clouds. We don’t know where we are. We are trying to get back to our camp on a branch of Sulphide creek.”

“Ah! You are the two boys I’ve seen cutting timbers down there, are you? Well, your troubles are over: I can put you on the road to your camp in an hour or so; I know every foot of these mountains.”

“But come in,” he continued. “I suppose you are hungry, and a little something to eat won’t be amiss.”

When the man said, “Come in,” we naturally glanced about us to see where his house was, but none being visible we concluded it must be some distance off in the mist. In this, however, we were mistaken. The side of the mountain just here was covered with enormous rocks – a whole cliff must have tumbled down at once – and between two of these our guide led the way. In a few steps the passage widened out, when we saw before us, neatly fitted in between three of these immense blocks of stone – one on either side and one behind – a little log cabin, with chimney, door and window all complete; while just to one side was another, a smaller one, which was doubtless a storehouse. Past his front door ran a small stream of water which evidently fell from a cliff near by, for, though we could not see the waterfall we could hear it plainly enough.

“Well!” I exclaimed. “Whoever would have thought there was a house in here?”

“No one, I expect,” replied the man. “At any rate, with one exception, you are the first strangers to cross the threshold; and yet I have lived here a good many years, too. Come in and make yourselves at home.”

Though we wondered greatly who our host could be and were burning to ask him his name, there was something in his manner which warned us to hold our tongues. But whatever his name might be, there was little doubt about his occupation.

He was evidently a mighty hunter, for, covering the walls, the floor and his sleeping-place were skins innumerable, including foxes, wolves and bears, some of the last-named being of remarkable size; while one magnificent elk-head and several heads of mountain-sheep adorned the space over his fireplace.

Our host having lighted a fire, was busying himself preparing a simple meal for us, when there came a gentle cough from the direction of the doorway, and there on the threshold stood the raven as though waiting for permission to enter.

The man turned, and seeing the bird standing there with its head on one side, said, laughingly: "Ah, Sox, is that you? Come in, old fellow, and be introduced. These gentlemen are friends of mine. Say 'Good-morning.'"

"Good-morning," repeated the raven; and having thus displayed his good manners, he half-opened his wings and danced a solemn jig up and down the floor, finally throwing back his head and laughing so heartily that we could not help joining in.

"Clever fellow, isn't he?" said the man. "His proper name is Socrates, though I call him Sox, for short. He is supposed to be getting on for a hundred years old, though as far as I can see he is just as young as he was when I first got him, twenty years ago. Here," – handing us each a piece of meat – "give him these and he will accept you as friends for life."

Whether he accepted us as friends remained to be seen, but he certainly accepted our offerings, bolting each piece at a single

gulp; after which he hopped up on to a peg driven into the wall, evidently his own private perch, and announced in a self-satisfied tone: "First in war, first in peace," ending up with a modest cough, as though he would have us believe that he knew the rest well enough but was not going to trouble us with any such threadbare quotation.

This solemn display of learning set us laughing again, upon which Socrates, seemingly offended, sank his head between his shoulders and pretended to go to sleep; though, that it was only pretense was evident, for, do what he would, he could not refrain from occasionally opening one eye to see what was going on.

Having presently finished the meal provided for us, we suggested that we ought to be moving on, so, bidding adieu to Socrates, and receiving no response from that sulky philosopher, we followed our host into the open.

That he had not exaggerated when he said he knew every foot of these mountains, seemed to be borne out by the facts. He went straight away, regardless of the fog, up hill and down, without an instant's hesitation, we trotting at his heels, until, in about an hour we found ourselves once more below the clouds, and could see not far away our two mules quietly feeding.

"Now," said our guide, "I'll leave you. If ever you come my way again I shall be glad to see you; though I expect it would puzzle you to find my dwelling unless you should come upon it by accident. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," we repeated, "and many thanks for your

kindness. If we can do anything in return at any time we shall be glad of the chance. We live in Crawford's Basin."

"Oh, do you?" said our friend. "You are Mr. Crawford's boys, then, are you? Well, many thanks. I'll remember. And now, good-bye to you."

With that, this strange man turned round and walked up into the clouds again. In two minutes he had vanished.

"Well, that was a queer adventure," remarked Joe. "I wonder who he is, and why he chooses to live all by himself like that."

"Yes. It's a miserable sort of existence for such a man; for he seems like a sociable, good-hearted fellow. It isn't every one, for instance, who would walk three or four miles over these rough mountains just to help a couple of boys, whom he never saw before and may never see again. I wish we could make him some return."

"Well, perhaps we may, some day," Joe replied.

Whether we did or not will be seen later.

CHAPTER V

What We Found in the Pool

Though we got back to camp pretty late, we set to work to load our poles at once, fearing that there was going to be a fall of snow which might prevent our getting them to town. This turned out to be a wise precaution, for when we started in the morning the snow was already coming down, and though it did not extend as far as Sulphide, the mountains were covered a foot deep before night.

This fall of snow proved to be much to our advantage, for one of the timber contractors, fearing he might not be able to fill his order, bought our “sticks” from us, to be delivered, cut into certain lengths, at the Senator mine.

This occupied us several days, when, having delivered our last load, we thanked Mrs. Appleby for the use of her back yard – the only payment she would accept – and then set off home, where we proudly displayed to my father and mother the money we had earned and related how we had earned it; including, of course, a description of our meeting with the wild man of the woods.

“And didn’t he tell you who he was?” asked my father, when we had finished.

“No,” I replied; “we were afraid to ask him, and he didn’t volunteer any information.”

“And you didn’t guess who he was?”

“No. Why should we? Who is he?”

“Why, Peter the Hermit, of course. I should have thought the presence of the raven would have enlightened you: he is always described as going about in company with a raven.”

“So he is. I’d forgotten that. But, on the other hand he is always described also as being half crazy, and certainly there was no sign of such a thing about him that we could see. Was there, Joe?”

“No. Nobody could have acted more sensibly. Who is he, Mr. Crawford? And why does he live all by himself like that?”

“I know nothing about him beyond common report. I suppose his name is Peter – though it may not be – and because he chooses to lead a secluded life, some genius has dubbed him ‘Peter the Hermit’; though who he really is, or why he lives all alone, or where he comes from, I can’t say. Some people say he is crazy, and some people say he is an escaped criminal – but then people will say anything, particularly when they know nothing about it. Judging from the reports of the two or three men who have met him, however, he appears to be quite inoffensive, and evidently he is a friendly-disposed fellow from your description of him. If you should come across him again you might invite him to come down and see us. I don’t suppose he will, but you might ask him, anyhow.”

“All right,” said I. “We will if we get the chance.” And so the matter ended.

It was just as well that we returned to the ranch when we did,

for we found plenty of work ready to our hands, the first thing being the hauling of fire-wood for the year. To procure this, it was not necessary for us to go to the mountains: our supply was much nearer to hand. The whole region round about us had been at some remote period the scene of vigorous volcanic action. Both the First and Second Mesas were formed by a series of lava-flows which had come down from Mount Lincoln, and ending abruptly about eight miles from the mountains, had built up the cliff which bounded the First Mesa on its eastern side. Then, later, but still in a remote age, a great strip of this lava-bed, a mile wide and ten or twelve miles long, north and south, had broken away and subsided from the general level, forming what the geologists call, I believe, a "fault," thus causing the "step-up" to the Second Mesa. The Second Mesa, because the lava had been hotter perhaps, was distinguished from the lower level by the presence of a number of little hills – "bubbles," they were called, locally, and solidified bubbles of hot lava perhaps they were. They were all sorts of sizes, from fifty to four hundred feet high and from a hundred yards to half a mile in diameter. Viewed from a distance, they looked smooth and even, like inverted bowls, though when you came near them you found that their sides were rough and broken. I had been to the top of a good many of them, and all of those I had explored I had found to be depressed in the centre like little craters. From some of them tiny streams of water ran down, helping to swell the volume of our creek.

Most of these so-called “bubbles,” especially the larger ones, were well covered with pine-trees, and as there were three or four of them within easy reach of the ranch, it was here that we used to get our fire-wood.

There was a good week’s work in this, and after it was finished there was more or less repairing of fences to be done, as there always is in the fall, and the usual mending of sheds, stables and corrals.

The weather by this time had turned cold, and “the bottomless forty rods” having been frozen solid enough to bear a load, Joe and I were next put to work hauling oats down to the livery stable men in San Remo, as well as up to Sulphide.

Before this task was accomplished the winter had set in in earnest. We had had one or two falls of snow, though in our sheltered Basin the heat of the sun was still sufficient to clear off most of it again, and the frost had been sharp enough to freeze up our creek at its sources, so that our little waterfall was now converted into a motionless icicle. Fortunately, we were not dependent upon the creek for the household supply of water: we had one pump which never failed in the back kitchen and another one down by the stables.

The creek having ceased to run, the surface of the pool was no longer agitated by the water pouring into it, and very soon it was solidly frozen over with a sheet of ice twelve inches thick, when, according to our yearly custom, we proceeded to cut this ice and stow it away in the ice-house; having previously been up to the

sawmill near Sulphide and brought away, for packing purposes, several wagon-loads of sawdust, which the sawmill men readily gave us for nothing, being glad to have it hauled out of their way. We had taken the opportunity to do this when we took our loads of oats up to Sulphide, thus utilizing the empty wagons on the return trip.

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.