

Castlemon Harry

# Elam Storm, the Wolfer: or, The Lost Nugget



Harry Castlemon

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or, The Lost Nugget**

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### CHAPTER I. SOMETHING ABOUT THE NUGGET

"Yes, sir; it's just like I tell you. Every coyote on this here ranch, mean and sneaking as he is, is worth forty dollars to the man who can catch him."

"Then what is the reason Carlos and I can't make some money this winter?"

"You mout, and then again you moutn't. It aint everybody who can coax one of them smart prowlers to stick his foot in a trap. If that was the case, my neighbors would have had more sheep, and Elam Storm would be worth a bushel of dollars."

"And you are going to grub-stake him again this winter, are you, Uncle Ezra?"

"Sure. I always do."

"What is the reason you won't let us go with him to the mountains?"

"'Cause I know that your folks aint so tired of you that they are ready to lose you yet awhile; that's why."

"Only just a few days. We'll come back at the end of the week if you say so, won't we, Carlos?"

"'Taint no use of talking, Ben; not a bit. Man alive! what would I say to the major if anything should happen to you? And going off with Elam Storm! That would be the worst yet."

"But Elam is honest and reliable. You have said so more than once, Uncle Ezra."

"Oh, he's honest enough, as far as that goes, but shiftless – mighty shiftless. And I never said he was reliable except in one way. He's reliable enough to go to the mountains every fall and come back every spring with a hoss-back load of peltries, and that's all he is reliable for. I did make out to hold him down to the business of sheep-herding for a couple of years, but then the roaming fever took him again and nobody couldn't do nothing with him. He just had to go, and so he asked for a grub-stake and lit out."

"You think that while he is in the mountains he looks for something besides wolf-skins, don't you?"

"I know he does. He's got a fool notion that will some day be the death of him, just as it has been the death of a dozen other men who tried to follow out the same notion."

"You promised to tell me all about it some day, and about Elam, too; and what better time can we have than the present? We are here by ourselves, and there is no one to break in on your story."

"Well, then, I'll tell you if it will ease your minds any. It won't be long, so you needn't go to settling yourself as though you had an all-night's job before you to listen. And perhaps when I am done you will know why I don't want you to go piking about the country with such a fellow as Elam Storm."

It was just the night for story-telling and pipes. The blizzard, which had been brewing for a week or more, had burst forth in all its fury, and the elements were in frightful commotion. The wind howled mournfully through the branches of the evergreens that covered the bluff behind the cabin; the rain and sleet, freezing as they fell, rattled harshly upon the bark roof over our heads; and the whole aspect of nature, as I caught a momentary glimpse of it when I went out to gather our evening's supply of fire-wood, was cheerless and desolate in the extreme. Our party consisted of three (or I should say four, for the Elam Storm whose name has so often been mentioned was to have shown up two days before) – Uncle Ezra Norton, who was a sheep-herder in a small way during the summer, and an untiring hunter and trapper in winter; Ben Hastings, whose father, an officer of rank in the regular army, was stationed at the fort fifty miles away; and myself, Carlos Burton, a ne'er-do-well,

who – but I will say no more on that point, as perhaps you will find out what sort of a fellow I am as my story progresses. We were comfortably sheltered in our valley home, but we heard all the noise of the tempest and felt a good deal of its force; and accustomed as I had become to such things during my wild life in the far West, I did not forget to breathe a silent but heart-felt prayer for any unfortunate who might be overtaken by the storm before he had time to reach the shelter of his cabin.

Under our humble roof there were warmth, comfort, and supreme contentment. The single room of which the cabin could boast was brilliantly lighted by the fire on the hearth, which roared back a defiance to the storm outside; its rough walls of unhewn logs were heavily draped with the skins of the elk, blacktail, and mountain sheep that had fallen to our rifles during the hunt, completely shutting out all the cold and damp and darkness; and Ben and I, with our moccasoned feet thrust toward the cheerful blaze, reclined luxuriously upon a pile of genuine Navajo blankets, while our guide, friend, and mentor, Uncle Ezra Norton, sat upon his couch of balsam sending up from his pipe clouds of tobacco incense that broke in fleecy folds against the low roof over our heads. Our minds were in the dreamy, tranquil state that comes after a good dinner and a brief season of repose following a period of toil and hard tramping that had been rewarded beyond our hopes.

Uncle Ezra was a typical borderman, strong as one of his own mules, and grizzly as any of the numerous specimens of *Ursus ferox* that had fallen before his big-bored Henry. Although he took no little pride in recounting Ben's exploits to the officers of the garrison, he was very strict with the boy when the latter was under his care, and never permitted him to wander far out of his sight if he could help it.

Uncle Ezra was my particular friend, and had won my undying gratitude by his kindness to me. I was in trouble and he helped me out of the deepest hole I ever was in. When I struck his ranch one dreary day, two years before this story begins, afoot and alone, almost ready to drop with fatigue, and told him that every hoof and horn I had in the world had been rounded up by a gang of cattle thieves who had driven them into the Bad Lands to be slaughtered for their hides – when I told him this he not only expressed the profoundest sympathy for my forlorn condition, but grub-staked me and sent me into the foot-hills to find a gold mine.

Judging from what I know now there was about as much chance of finding gold in the region to which he sent me as there was of being struck by lightning, and, more than that, I couldn't have distinguished the precious metal from iron pyrites; but I had to do something to pay for my outfit, and so I went, glad to get away by myself and brood over my great loss. For I had been pretty well off for a boy of fifteen, I want you to remember, and every dollar I had made was made by the hardest kind of knocks.

When I first came out West, I began working on a ranch, taking my pay in stock at twelve dollars a month. My wages soon grew as my services increased in value, and as I took to riding like an old timer, I learned rapidly, because I liked the business; and it was not long before I was the proud possessor of a herd of cattle worth six thousand dollars. But it was precarious property in those days, – as uncertain as the weather. You might be fairly well off when you rolled yourself up in your blanket at night, and as poor as Job's turkey when you awoke in the morning; and that's the way it was with me. I was moving my herd to another section of the country in search of better pasturage, and was passing through a narrow canyon within two days' journey of the new range that one of my cowboys had selected for me, when all on a sudden there was a yell of charging men, whom I at first thought to be Indians, a rifle shot which killed my horse and injured my leg so badly that I could scarcely crawl into the nearest thicket out of sight, a hurried stampede of frightened cattle, and I was a beggar or the next thing to it. My three cowboys disappeared when the cattle did, and that was all the evidence I wanted to satisfy me that they were in league with the robbers. Ever since that time I had lived in hopes that it might be my good fortune to meet them again under different circumstances. When I learned that two of their number had been hanged somewhere in Arizona for horse-stealing,

I was sorry to hear it, and hoped the other would mend his ways and so escape lynching, for I wanted to settle with him myself.

At the time my story begins, however, I was on my feet again, as anyone can be in that Western country who is suffering from reverses. I had a home ranch and perhaps ten thousand dollars' worth of cattle ranging near the Bad Lands, into which my small herd had been driven to be killed for their hides; but I was poor enough and miserable enough when Uncle Ezra sent me off to hunt up a gold mine. I didn't find it, of course, but I took back to old Norton's ranch some specimens of quartz that made him open his eyes. They looked like chunks of granite, with little pieces of different-colored glass scattered through them. I had no idea of the value of my find, but so certain was Uncle Ezra that I had struck it rich that he took the specimens to Denver himself, and some expert there assured him that he was a millionaire. But he wasn't, by a long shot, and neither was I. Uncle Ezra knew no more about business outside of sheep-herding and trapping than an Apache knows about astronomy, and the fifteen-year-old boy who was his only counsellor knew less, and the usual results followed. We were euchred out of our find, which meant the loss of bushels of dollars to us. During my prospecting tour I camped on the banks of a little stream, following through a secluded valley a hundred miles deep in the mountains, and stumbled upon a rich deposit of rubies and sapphires. Although there were no true red rubies nor true blue sapphires among them, they were beautiful gems and worth money. The Denver expert told Uncle Ezra that there was a sprinkling of fire opals among them, but this I am inclined to doubt, for I never heard of those stones being found together. Anyhow, that deposit, whose wealth was first presented to my inexperienced eyes, covered sixteen acres of ground, and is being worked by a syndicate with a cash capital of two million dollars. Uncle Ezra and I saved a small stake for old age; but you bet I will know a good thing the next time I see it.

Ben Hastings, as I have said, was the son of an army officer who was stationed at the fort a few miles away, and this was the first time he had ever been west of the Mississippi. He had the good sense to acknowledge that he was a tender-foot, and perhaps that made me take to him from the start. He could ride and shoot a little, and had camped in small patches of timber like to Adirondacks and up about Moosehead Lake; but he did not pretend to know it all, as the majority of Eastern men do when they come out here, and so he had plenty of friends among men who were willing to assist him. He fairly overflowed with delight when I took him an invitation from Uncle Ezra to spend a month on his sheep-ranch. His father was glad to let him accept, for old Ezra was a particular friend of his, and often acted as guide when the major went scouting. This hunt to Wind River Mountains had been undertaken for Ben's especial benefit, and as we pushed him to the front as often as the opportunity was presented, he shot more elk and blacktail than we did.

I have spoken of Elam Storm, a particular friend of all of us. He was somewhere in the mountains now and ought to have joined us two days ago, but, seeing that it was Elam, we did not pay any attention to it. He was a professional wolfer whom Uncle Ezra had befriended. Old Ezra said he was shiftless; but he certainly was not lazy, for he would work harder at doing nothing than any fellow I ever saw. He was game, too. He had some sort of a notion in his head that governed all his actions, and although I was as intimate with him as anybody in the country, I never could find out what it was. But I did not push my enquiries, I want you to understand, for Elam had a sharp tongue, which he did not hesitate to use when he thought occasion demanded it, and, besides, he was handy with his gun. I had often asked Uncle Ezra to tell me what he knew of Elam's history, but could never get him started on the subject; so I was glad to hear him say in response to Ben's importunities that he would tell the story.

"How long ago was it since Elam came to you?" enquired Ben Hastings, with a view of hurrying Uncle Ezra, who was refilling his pipe, gazing with great deliberation the while into the fire, as if he there saw the incidents he was about to describe.

"He never came to me at all," replied the old man. "I fetched him to my ranch, and he's been there off and on ever since. He's a different boy from Carlos, here," – with a nod in my direction, –

"the most improvidentest fellow you ever saw, and always dead broke, so that I have to grub-stake him every fall. I have offered more than once to take him right along and give him his pay in stock, so that he could get a start with some sheep of his own, but he won't hear to it. That's what makes me mad at Elam. It's all along of that fool notion that will some day be the death of him like I told you."

"But what is that fool notion?" asked Ben, as Uncle Ezra paused to light his pipe with a brand from the fire.

"Wait till I tell you. You see, Elam's history, so far as I know anything about it, begins with that treasure train that was lost up the country years ago. An army paymaster started for Grayson with three government wagons, a guard of twelve soldiers, and thirty thousand dollars that was to be paid to the garrison at that place. Report says and always did say that there was one private wagon with the train, and Elam Storm he sticks to it that that there wagon was his father's. I don't dispute that part of his history, but I do dispute all the rest, for it won't hold water. He allows that there was a nugget into that there wagon, and that it was worth eight thousand dollars; and that's right where the history of Elam begins.

"Well, sir, none of them men that went out with them wagons was ever seen or heard of after they left Martin's. When the time came for them to show up at Grayson and they didn't do it, scouting parties were sent out to look for them, and I was with the party that found the wreck of one of the wagons. And there's where I found Elam; but not a live man or critter or a cent of money did we discover."

"What do you suppose became of them?" enquired Ben.

"Carried off by the robbers that jumped down on the train," replied Uncle Ezra. "But whether they was Injuns or white men aint known for certain to this day. There wasn't nothing except hoof-prints and a few dried spots of blood to show where the attack was made on the train; but there was a dim trail leading from it, and by following that trail through the chaparral and down a rocky canyon that was hemmed in on all sides by mountains we found the wrecked wagon I spoke of. When one of the axles broke and let the wagon down so that it could not be hauled any further, the robbers took every blessed thing out of it and went on, and we never did catch up with them – everything, I say, except Elam. He was no doubt left in the wagon for dead, for when we came up he was just alive and that was all. He hadn't been hurt at all. He was scared and starved almost to the bounds of endurance, but with such care as we rough men could give him, and being naturally tough and strong, he managed to worry through. After he got so that he could talk he had sense enough to remember that his name was the same as his father's, Elam Storm, and that was everything he did know. He couldn't tell the first thing about the soldiers who composed the escort, or whether the men who made the attack were whites or Injuns, or what went with the money; and the worst of it was when he grew older none of these things didn't come into his mind, like we hoped and believed they would.

"Seeing that the little waif was friendless and alone, and none of us didn't know whether he had kith or kin in the world, I offered to take him and bring him up as if he were my own son, and the rest of the boys they agreed to it. Although he has always been known around these diggin's as 'Ezra Norton's kid,' he aint no more relation to me than you be, and no more use neither, I might say, so far as helping on the ranch is concerned. He always was a shiftless sort of chap, and liked best to get away by himself and 'mope,' as I called it, though I believe now that he was doing a power of thinking, and trying to remember who he was, where he had once lived, and what happened to him before the train was lost. I wasn't much surprised when he took to wolfering as a means of getting his grub and clothes, for that solitary business just suited his solitary disposition; but I was teetotally dumfounded and mad, too, when he told me that his father was alive, and that he would some day find him and his big nugget together. Mind you, he didn't say this as though he hoped and believed it might be true, but as positive as though he knew it was true."

"Where do you suppose they – I mean his father and the nugget – are now?" asked Ben.



"Pshaw! His father is dead long ago," replied Uncle Ezra, in a very decided tone. "Leastwise the men who went with the wagons are dead, and so old Elam must be dead, too. Don't stand to reason that only one man out of the whole outfit should turn up alive, does it? These things happened thirteen year ago, and Elam is nigh about twenty now, I should say. As for his nugget – well, I don't know what to think about that. When I first come to this country, there was a nugget of that description in existence, which had been dug up somewhere in those very mountains, and the finding of it created a rush that reminded old timers of California and Deadwood. I jined in with the rest, but never dug out more than enough to pay my expenses; and that's what set me to raising sheep."

When Uncle Ezra said this, he tipped me a wink, and settled back on his couch of fragrant boughs, nursing his left leg for company.

## CHAPTER II. TOM MASON AGAIN

"Well," said Ben interrogatively, "the nugget that Elam had to do with wasn't any relation to this one, was it?"

"Wait till I tell you. I don't reckon there is any one thing in the world that has been the cause of so much misery and mischief of all kinds as that there nugget," continued Uncle Ezra reflectively. "The man who found it, whose name was Morgan, and who was working with two pardners, share and share alike, was about as honest as a man ever gets to be, but the sight of the small fortune which he unearthed one day by a single stroke of his pick, while working a little apart from the others, was too much for him. He was as poor as a man ever gets to be, and, worse than all, he had a sweetheart off in the States who was waiting for him to raise a stake and come home and marry her. He didn't like the idea of dividing with his two pardners, who would drop their roll at the faro table as soon as they got the chance, and so he took and buried his find and worked on as if nothing had happened. That is to say, he tried to; but with a big chunk of gold within easy reach of his hand it don't stand to reason that he could act just as he did before. He was uneasy all the time, and his pardners noticed it and suspected something. He took to visiting his nugget's hiding-place every night, to make sure that no one had dug it up, and his pardners found it out on him; and when at last he grew desperate and tried to carry it away secretly, there was some shooting done, and Morgan and one of his pardners were killed."

"That left the survivor a rich man!" exclaimed Ben, who was deeply interested.

"Now, just wait till I tell you. That left the survivor a tolerable rich man, but his sudden accession of wealth scared him so badly that he buried the nugget in a new place and put for 'Frisco, where he took sick and died. When the medical sharps warned him that he had not long to live, he told one of the nurses about the nugget, and gave him a map of the locality in which it was hidden. A month or so afterward the nurse organized a small expedition and went to the mountains to hunt for the treasure; but he hired for a guide a treacherous Greaser, who went ahead, dug up the nugget, and brought it to Brazos City, a small mining town in which I was located at the time.

"Pierito – that was the Greaser's name – hadn't any more than got his nugget into the Gold Dollar saloon, which was kept by a countryman of hisn, and put it into a glass case and set it up on the table so that everybody could see and admire it, before he was offered eight thousand dollars for his find; but Pierito wouldn't sell. He thought he could make more money by putting it up at a raffle, and when the raffle was over, he would go back to the mountains and try for another nugget, taking some of us along if we wanted to go. Three thousand shares at ten dollars a share was what he thought would be about right, and I put my name down for ten shares then and there.

"The Gold Dollar did a custom-house business after that. Crowds of miners from every camp for miles around came there to look at Pierito's find, take shares in the raffle, and drink forty-rod whiskey. Pierito and the eight countrymen of hisn whom he employed to guard the nugget night and day were armed with pepper-boxes and machetes, and were as sassy and stuck up as so many bantam chickens, and the lordly way in which they ordered us Gringos to stand back and not crowd the nugget too close was laughable to see. They were a surly gang and looked able to whip their weight in wild-cats; but in reality they were the most harmless lot of cowards that Pierito could have got together.

"Like all mining towns, Brazos City could boast of some tough citizens, and among them was Red Jimmy Murphy, a noted desperado, and as smart a rough as ever pulled a gun. He and two of his pals were in the Gold Dollar every day and night, and after looking the ground over they concluded that the plant could be raised. No sooner had this been settled to their satisfaction than they set to work to get things ready.

"The night before the raffle was to come off the Gold Dollar was packed as full as it could hold, – so full that there was scarcely room for the fiddlers to work their elbows, – and Pierto's guard had to use some little muscular strength to keep the crowd from pushing over the table on which lay the nugget in its glass case. Red Jimmy's gang was there, ready to grab the chunk at the critical moment, and finally Jimmy himself rode into the saloon on a kicking, plunging bronco. The closely packed men cursed and threatened and ordered him out, but gave way all the same, and when the bronco heard the squawking of the fiddles and felt the jab of his rider's spurs, he slewed around and backed toward the table. Pierto saw the danger, and made a desperate rush to save his nugget, but was just a second too late. Jimmy raised a yell to put his pals on the watch, and spurred up the bronco, which at once sent his heels into the air as high as the ceiling. Down went the table, and the glass flew into a thousand pieces. The nugget went sailing over the heads of the crowd and into the hands of one of the gang, who, in spite of every effort that was made to stop him, succeeded in tossing it to Jimmy; and Jimmy he headed for the door, riding over everybody that got in his way. Then there was fun, I tell you. I never saw lead fly so thickly before nor since. Everybody had a gun out, and Red Jimmy ought by rights to have been riddled like a sieve."

"Uncle Ezra, did you shoot?" asked Ben.

"I presume to say that I made as much noise as the rest," answered the old man, with a chuckle. "You know, I held some chances in that chunk, and didn't want to lose them. Of course Pierto had to shell out the money we paid him for the tickets, for the raffle could not now be brought off; we kept him right there under our guns till he gave back the last dollar, but he never set eyes on his nugget, and neither did we. Red Jimmy, desperately wounded as he was, got away to the mountains with his prize, and although a strong posse headed by the sheriff followed on his trail and finished him the next day, they did not find the nugget. One of his gang made off with it."

"And you lost it all?"

"Cer'n'y," said the old man.

"And never got a chance to raffle for any of it?" asked Ben. "It has probably been fixed up into ornaments of some description by this time. An article worth eight thousand dollars isn't going to be left around loose."

"It wasn't so two years ago."

"Two years?"

"Wait till I tell you. That nugget has travelled as much as five hundred miles from here, but somehow it always manages to come back. Here it was born, and right here it is going to stay until it has its rights. Mind you, that is Elam's way of looking at it, but it aint mine, by a long shot. We didn't none of us hear of the nugget again for nearly a year, and then one of the boys happened to strike a pardner who had got dissatisfied with the money he was making and went off to Pike's Peak, and there he learned that two of the gang who had stolen it were seen and killed for the part they had taken in the enterprise; for you will remember that several miners in the country had knocked off work and come in to catch a glimpse of Pierto's find, and of course they didn't feel very friendly toward the robbers.

"Well, everybody for miles around kept open eyes for that nugget for years, until at last I forgot all about it until I heard that a couple of worthless Greasers had somehow got hold of it, and had been found done to death with that nugget by their side. Then I gave up all hopes, for if the nugget had fallen into the hands of honest men, that was the last of it; but it seems it hadn't, and that gave me another show," said Ezra, tipping me another wink, which was as near to a laugh as he ever got. "The two Greasers were about as tough specimens as you see, and they finally got into a fight to see which was the better man. When they were found, the victor had the nugget hugged closely to his breast, as if he did not want to part with it even in death. Not only that, but these two had scarcely found the nugget till they got into a row over who should carry it, and one of them got so badly whipped that he dropped and fainted right there. The other had strength enough to travel ten miles nearer the fort,

and there he hid the nugget; but where he hid it he don't know. He raved about it while he was sick, and somebody told Elam of it (you see, everybody around here knows the history of that nugget), and every fall and winter he asks for a grub-stake and lights out, and I don't see any more of him till I drive my sheep down on the prairie. That happened two years ago, and every fall you'll see three or four fellows in the edge of Death Valley, saying nothing to each other, but ostensibly hunting coyotes, and all the while looking for that nugget, which is the thing they most want to find."

"Then the nugget is really here?" exclaimed Ben.

"It's here or hereabouts. It may be within ten miles of this place or it may be a hundred; for nobody knows where that fellow hid it. Mind you, I shouldn't like to be the fellow that finds it."

"Why not?"

"Because Elam will go for him. It's his nugget, and he knows it and he's bound to have it. Mind you, Elam doesn't say nothing about it, and he can't imagine what it is that sends the fellows prowling around Death Valley. But, laws! they may as well give it up. There have been a good many landslides in the canyon here the last fall, and if the nugget is under them, we may as well bid it good-bye. I don't know that this nugget is any relation to Elam's, but it looks to me that way; don't it to you? And it seems so strange that it should come back here when it gets off a certain distance. The poor fellow is out there now hunting for it, and he may not show up this trip."

"That won't be anything new for Elam, will it?"

Uncle Ezra thought it would not. He might be a longer or shorter distance from there, and if he didn't put in an appearance, it was no matter; and, having got through with his talk, Uncle Ezra knocked the ashes from his pipe and settled himself in an attitude of rest, while Ben and I listened to the noise of the storm and thought of Elam's strange history. The nugget belonged to him, and we hoped from the bottom of our hearts that he would get it, although we made up our minds that he would have a strange time in getting back to the fort with it while there were so many desperate men waiting for him to recover it. Suddenly Ben thought of something.

"Uncle Ezra, you didn't tell us how Elam's father came into possession of that nugget in the first place," said he.

"Ask me something hard," replied the old frontiersman.

"Don't you know?"

"Nobody knows. We don't know whether it was hisn or he was just carrying it for somebody. We only know it was there – at least Elam says so. We only know that the robbers had it for years. There is a hiatus in the history of the nugget, and nobody don't seem to know what became of it in that time. We only know that them two Greasers had it and fought over it, and that brings it up to two years ago. It's my opinion that there will be another hiatus lasting for all time. At any rate it is worth eight thousand dollars, and I believe it is the same one I took ten chances on."

Uncle Ezra rolled over as if he intended to go to sleep, and once more silence reigned in the cabin. Presently a deep snore coming from Ben's way told me that he was fast losing consciousness, and I was left to keep watch of the fire and listen to the howling of the storm outside. While I was thinking how foolish Elam was to go on searching for that nugget, when he might just as well have turned an honest sheep-herder, and laid out a little of his strength in taking care of his woolly companions instead of spending it all in wolfing, I, too, passed into the land of dreams.

The next morning's sun (for the storm ceased shortly after midnight) found us still upon our blankets, for Uncle Ezra did not intend to go hunting that day, and it was nine o'clock when we got breakfast off our hands and the dishes washed and put away. We were just settling ourselves for another long story – a good one we knew it was going to be, for Uncle Ezra had promised to tell us about the first bear he ever killed – when a far-away and lonely howl came to our ears. It was so lonely that it seemed as if a single wolf was left, and that he was mourning over those who had fallen before the hunter's traps and rifle; but we knew it was not that. We listened, and when the sound was repeated, I threw open the door, and stepped out and set up an answering howl.

"That's Elam," said Ezra, in response to Ben's enquiring look. "It is his way of announcing his whereabouts. I expect he will come along with a hoss-back load of peltries, so that I won't have to grub-stake him again this winter. Elam is pretty sharp, if I did raise him."

The blizzard had swept the mountain free of snow, and it was only in the valley, where the fury of the storm had spent itself; consequently the new-comer had little difficulty in making his appearance. In the course of twenty minutes he came up, and then we knew he was not alone. We could hear him carrying on a conversation in a loud tone with someone near him, but could not catch the stranger's reply. Presently he came out of the scrub oaks leading his horse, followed immediately by a boy on foot; but where was the horseback load of peltries that Uncle Ezra so confidently expected?

"Howdy, boys?" said Elam.

"How do you do?" responded Ben. "Where's the rest of your furs?"

"Gone – all gone!" replied Elam cheerfully. "One hundred dollars' worth of wolf-skins and fifty dollars' worth of other furs all gone up in smoke."

"Were they burned?"

"Burned? no. Some travelling trappers came to camp while I was absent, and Tom, here, wasn't man enough to stop 'em. They took everything I had down to the fort, and although I went there and did some of the best talking I knew how to do, I came pretty near getting myself in trouble by it. I want to see Uncle Ezra, though I suppose it is too late to do anything. This fellow is Tom Mason, and I want you to know him and treat him right. He got into a little trouble down in Mississippi, where he used to live, and came out here to get clear of it. Know him, boys."

We shook hands heartily with Tom Mason, and although we were considerably surprised at Elam's statement that his outfit had been broken up by thieves, we were a good deal more surprised to learn that the youth at his side had got into "trouble" in Mississippi. After hitching their horse where he could graze we went into the cabin with them, and gathered about them with the idea of hearing an exciting story; for although I had been in the far West nearly all my life, I had not got over my fondness for a story yet.

"Howdy, Elam?" said Uncle Ezra, removing his pipe from his mouth with one hand and extending the other. "You got into trouble, I hear, all on account of your furs. How did it happen? And you, too, Tommy." You will remember that the door of the cabin was open, and that Uncle Ezra heard every word of our conversation. "You didn't steer clear of all trouble by coming out here, did you? Well, never mind. Troubles will come to everybody, no matter what they do. Sit down and tell me all about it. Haven't had any breakfast, have you?"

Elam declared that they had had enough left for breakfast, and produced his pipe and got ready for a smoke, while Tom sat by with his gaze fastened on the fire. I will tell both stories together, for Elam did not touch upon Tom's tale of sorrow at all. But, in the first place, you remember something about Tom Mason, don't you? You recall that he got Jerry Lamar into serious trouble by stealing a grip-sack that belonged to his uncle, General Mason, which contained five thousand dollars, that Jerry was arrested and put into prison on account of it, and that the only thing that turned Tom Mason in favor of the boys who were working to help him was the fact that Luke Redman was going to take the money across the river into Texas. Mark Coleman came near getting the money, when his skiff was stranded at Dead Man's Elbow, but had to go away without it; and from that time the history of the five thousand begins. Tom Mason fell in with Joe Coleman, who was Mark's twin brother, and he told him everything he had done; and when the last moment arrived, when the horns of the settlers announced that they were fast closing in upon the robbers, he told Joe to take charge of the money and dived into a canebrake and disappeared. No one would have thought of prosecuting Tom Mason if he had stayed there, but that was not the thing. He had been guilty, he had never done such a thing before, and he couldn't bear to stand up in that community and have people point at him and whisper:

"There goes Tom Mason, the boy that robbed his uncle of five thousand dollars!"

He would go West, to Texas, and when he had lived over a good portion of his life, he would write to his uncle and ask him if he might return.

Now, bear in mind that this is what I heard from Tom's lips, after I became so well acquainted with him that he thought it advisable to tell me his story. I don't say that I advised him to stay out there in that lawless country among those lawless folks, for I didn't. I advised him to go home and "live it down"; but Tom was plucky and wouldn't budge an inch. Perhaps you will wonder, too, how it came about that a cowboy who never heard of Mark Coleman, Duke Hampton, and the rest should come upon Tom Mason in time to write the continuation of his story – a sequel that the boys in Mississippi knew nothing about until long after it occurred. All I can say is it just happened so.

## CHAPTER III. TOM BEGINS HIS WANDERINGS

"Joe, I will give this valise and gun into your care, and will thank you to see that they are restored to their owners. I know you will do this much for me, for it is the last favor I shall ask of you."

"I took the articles in question as Tom handed them to me, and when I raised my eyes to look at him, he was gone. He had jumped past me, dashed out of the passage, and disappeared into the bushes before I could say a word to him."

And that was the last that Joe Coleman ever saw of Tom Mason for long years to come. He was friendless and alone – how very much alone he never knew until by skilful dodging he managed to get on the outskirts of the body of settlers that were closing up around Luke Redman and his gang, and found himself beyond the reach of capture. His face was very pale, but he went about his business as though he knew what he was doing. It was very strange that a boy who had servants to wait on him at every turn – one to saddle his horse, another to black his boots, and still another to serve up his lunch when he got hungry – should have been willing to set off on an expedition by himself, but it showed that he knew nothing of the world before him.

Having satisfied himself by the sound of the horns and the baying of the dogs that he was out of danger, Tom paused long enough to transfer his roll of money from his trousers pocket to his boot-leg. He had about fifty dollars that was all his own, and as he did not wish to lose it, he put it where he thought it would be safe, then straightened up, listened for a moment to a faint, far-off note that came to his ears, drew his hands swiftly across his eyes, and made the best of his way toward the Mississippi River.

"That is my hound, and I'll bet it will be a long time before I shall hear him give tongue in that fashion again," soliloquized Tom, as he emerged from the cane and took a survey of the prospect before him. "I may never hear him, but I shall always remember him."

As Tom came out of the cane he found himself on the verge of that swamp over which, one short week previous, the water had stood to the depth of fifteen feet; but Our Fellows had already ridden over it, with Sandy Todd for a leader, – the boy who admitted that he "might be slow a-walkin' an' a-talkin', but was not slow a-ridin'," – in their wild chase after the Indians and after Luke Redman, the man who had stolen Black Bess, and had managed in some way, they could not tell how, to secure possession of the valise which contained General Mason's five thousand dollars. The ridges were high and dry, and by following them one could enjoy a pleasant ride, avoiding the water altogether; but the trouble in Tom's case was the ridges ended either in the swamp at Dead Man's Elbow, the place where they afterward captured Luke Redman, or veered around until they ended in the very spot Tom did not want to go, the town of Burton, which was the only place in the county that could boast of a jail. It was dangerous to attempt to pass from one ridge to another, for the bottom was covered with a bed of mud in which a horseman would sink out of sight. Tom speculated upon this as he walked along, and although he was positive that no very desperate attempt would be made to capture him when it was found out that he was the guilty one, he would have felt safer if he had left all sights and sounds of his first wrong-doing far behind. How his uncle would scorn him when first he found it out! And the negroes! Why, it wouldn't be long till it would be all over the State.

"This is what comes of a rash attempt to have revenge on a boy who never did me a thought of harm. Because I couldn't be the leader among Our Fellows I had to go to work and get myself into worse trouble by it. Why couldn't I have rested easy when I had nothing to worry about? But I mustn't allow my thoughts to get the start of me right at the beginning, for if I do, I shall come out at the little end of the horn. I wish I had an axe, for I would soon get across. I shall never find my way to the Mississippi as long as I stay on this side the bayou."

While Tom was talking to himself in this way, he stood upon the bluffs, which, by drawing near to one another, had gradually left the low lands behind and brought the two banks of the stream within twenty feet – a bad-looking place, for it went far to remind Tom of Dead Man's Elbow. It was his only chance to cross the stream. While he stood there, looking at the dark, muddy water that flowed between him and liberty, that is, between him and the Mississippi, and trying hard to determine what his chances were of passing the night in his wet clothes with no means of starting a fire, his attention was attracted by the very sound he wanted to hear. He listened, and when the blows began to fall in regular order, as if the woodman was warming at his work, he left the bluffs behind him and turned and went into the woods.

"That's an axe," thought Tom, "and as nobody but negroes can be chopping out here, I'll go up and get a bite to eat; for, now that I think of it, I'm hungry. I must be ten miles from my uncle's now, and of course no one down here has heard of that grip-sack business. To-morrow morning I will make him cut a tree across the bayou."

Guided by the sound of the woodman's axe, Tom felt his way through the cane (for by this time it was so dark in there that feeling was the only sense he could go by), and presently came within sight of the chopper. He was a jolly, good-natured negro, who seemed a little startled on discovering Tom's approach, but speedily recovered himself when the boy addressed him by saying:

"Hallo, Snowball! What are you doing so far out of the world?"

"Sarvent, sar. Well, sar, you see all dis timber here? My moster is needin' some rail timber mighty bad, so he sends me out here every Monday and I stays here until Saturday. Say, boss, what you doin' out here? Ise you los'?"

"You haven't seen a gray horse, with saddle and bridle on, going by here, have you?" asked Tom in reply.

"No, sar, I aint. Did he threw you?"

"Nor any hounds giving tongue?"

"No, sar, I aint. Ise dey de ones you is lookin' for, boss?"

"They're gone, and the best thing I can do is to follow after them on foot," said Tom, looking around for a handy log to sit down on; for, now that his tramp for the day was ended and he had somebody to talk to, he began to realize that he was tired. "I believe I'll camp with you to-night."

"Sarvent, sar. Cert'n'y, sar. Whar might you uns come from?"

"I came from the country about General Mason's place. Have you got anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, sar. Plenty of it, sar," said the negro, sticking his axe into the log he was chopping and leading the way off through the bushes. "Dis way, sar. I's often heared of folks up your way. Somebody up that a-way been a-stealin' five thousand dollars."

Tom was thunderstruck. "Who brought that news here?" he asked.

"De niggers, dey brung it. You can't keep anything away from de darkies."

"How far is General Mason's place from here?"

"Fifteen miles, or sich a matter."

"And did the darkies say who stole it?"

"Oh, yes, sar. Dey say that a youngster named Tom Mason – he's just about your size, but you aint no thief, be ye?"

"Do I look like a thief?" enquired Tom.

"I aint a-sayin' you did, sar. I only say he was just about your size. Then this Luke Redman, – you've heared of him, aint ye? – he got hold of the money and tried to run away to Texas."

"Well, the old gentleman has got it now," said Tom, who plainly saw that it wouldn't do to talk too freely with the darky on this subject, because he knew too much. "They organized a big expedition and hunted the man down and captured him."

"I am mighty glad to hear it, and I hope dey will throw dem as 'as got it in jail so tight that dey won't never have time to think of five thousand dollars. Now, sit down on that block of wood and I'll



soon get you something to eat. You see, there is two bunks here? One belongs to my pardner, who is home now, sick with the rheumatiz. Moster is mighty keerful of his niggers, and he don't like to have Pomp come down here dat a-way, so he told him he must stay about the house and do light chores until next week, when he will come down here to help me split rails. Dere's a slice of bacon and some johnny cake for you. If you can wait till I fix up the fire I will give you a cup of coffee."

"Does your master give you coffee?" asked Tom in surprise, for he could not remember that his uncle ever so far forgot himself.

"'Course he does, sar, when we are splittin' rails; and sometimes" – here the darky leaned over and whispered the words to Tom, as if he feared that somebody would overhear them – "we take a handful now and then to do the old woman. Hy-ya!"

Tom laughed as heartily as the negro did, – his laugh was catching, – but said he would wait until the darky had his supper.

"Very well, den. You eat your lunch and I will go back to my rail-splittin'. When you get through, just lay down in Pomp's bunk and go to sleep. I'll have you up at seven o'clock."

The darky went out, and Tom, being left to himself, proceeded to look about him. The cabin, which was built of rails, was barely large enough to seat two men at the table; but it was tight, and as the most the darkies had to do was to eat and sleep under it, it had plenty of room in it. Besides, there was a bench beside the door, and when the darkies were tired of working, that was the place for them to "loaf." By the time he had made these observations his bacon and johnny cake were gone, and he got up and crept into Pomp's bunk.

By the time he awoke it was pitch dark, save where the faint light from the dying fire which the negro had kindled to cook his supper shone through the open doorway. The terrific snores which came from the bunk at his feet told him that the darky had long ago retired to rest, but he was hungry, and he crept out of bed to see if anything had been left for him. He found a pot of coffee and a huge chunk of bacon and johnny cake waiting for him on the coals, and as the fire had not had time to burn itself out, they were as warm as when they first were cooked. But by certain signs which he discovered while disposing of the good things the darky had provided for him, he found that he had been asleep longer than he had thought, and that daylight was not far off, and finally the negro started up from an apparently sound sleep, threw aside the blankets with a frantic sweep of his arm, and sat up and looked about him.

"Hi! dere you is," said he. "I fix up dat fire fo' times during de night, but you was sleepin' so soundly that I couldn't b'ar to waken you up. Has you got plenty?"

"Plenty, thank you. It's about four o'clock, isn't it?"

The negro pulled himself entirely out of bed, put on his shoes, and went out and looked about him. After looking in vain for several stars which he ought to have found, but could not, he announced that his guest had struck the hour pretty closely.

"Well, then, while you are cooking your own breakfast, couldn't you put on a little mess for me? You see, I am not bound for my uncle's house just now. I have to go down to the landing to meet the steamer *John Clark* there, and get a trifling sum of money that one of the passengers will have ready for me."

"Why, boss, how is you going to get across de bayou?" asked the darky, in surprise.

"If my horse had not thrown me, I could have ridden him across," replied Tom. "But he had to start off on his own hook, and I shall have to do the best I can on foot. For that money I must have."

"Dat's all right, sar. But I don't see how you are going to get across de bayou."

"Don't you? Well, you just go ahead and cook me some breakfast and then I'll show you. If you had lived in these woods as long as I have, you would know that it is an easy matter to cut a tree across some parts of the bayou."

Tom washed his hands and face in some muddy water he dipped up from the stream that ran a short distance from the camp, dried them on his handkerchief, and watched the negro as he went

about his work. Now and then, when he thought Tom was not looking at him, he would roll up his eyes, taking in at one swift glance all the clothing he wore, from his hat down to his boots. Tom was well enough acquainted with the negro character to know that he had excited his suspicions in some way.

"If I keep on in this way, I shall excite the mistrust of everyone I chance to meet," thought Tom, who wondered what he could have said that had caused this sudden change in the darky's behavior. "I have shut him up like an oyster, and not another thing can I get out of him. I shall be with him over half an hour longer, and then he can do what he pleases with his suspicions."

"Dat's a mighty slick rascal, dat feller," muttered the darky, as he fished the bacon out of the frying-pan and placed it on to a clean chip. "Dere's your breakfast, sar. I'll eat mine out here by this stump."

"Give me a cup of coffee," said Tom. "It is all I want."

The steaming beverage was placed before him. Tom thought of the great world into which he was so soon to enter, and wondered if everybody in it was going to treat him as this obscure darky had done. Texas was a pretty good-sized empire, he had heard them say, and he believed it was made up mostly of men who had gone there to get clear of the law, and who had enough to think of to keep themselves out of trouble; consequently they wouldn't bother their heads about a boy who had been suspected of stealing five thousand dollars. When Tom had reached this point in his meditations, the darky, who had evidently swallowed his breakfast whole and rolled up in a piece of old gunny sack the supply he intended Tom should take with him, handed the bundle to him with one hand, and reached out for the axe with the other.

"Ise ready now if you is, sar."

This was all that passed between them. Tom got up, pointed out the path he wished the negro to follow in order to reach the narrowest part of the stream, which he had examined the day before, and fell in behind him; and it is a noticeable fact that he kept the black in front of him all the way to the stream. It is true that the man had no weapon but his axe, but with such an article, if he could only get the start with it, he could easily march him before his master, and that was the very place he didn't want to go. Such things had been done, and Tom did not see why they could not be done again. In a few minutes they reached the bank of the bayou, and when the negro saw it, he leaned on his axe and shook his head.

"You knows what you want to do, don't you, sar?" he asked.

"Yes, I know just what I want to do," replied Tom. "Cut down this tree first."

The negro glanced at the top of the tree in order to see which way it would fall, cut a few bushes out of his way, and went to work. A few blows with the axe brought the tree down and it lodged on the opposite bank. Two more trees were cut down and the bridge was completed.

"Good-by, Snowball," said Tom, extending his closed hand toward the negro. "I don't want you to do this for nothing. Here's a dollar to pay you for your trouble."

"I – I don't want it, sar," replied the darky, drawing back. "I hope dat money won't sink you afore you get across de river, but I'm mighty jubus about it."

"What money?"

"General Mason's five thousand dollars, sar."

"Do you suppose I have got that amount of money stowed away about me? Why, man, it's a valiseful. This money is all honest."

"I can't help dat, sar. I can't shake hands with you, either. I would be afraid it would take all the strength out of my arms so't I couldn't split more rails."

"All right, then. You stand here on the bank and see me work my way across. I bet you that all the money I have about my clothes will not sink me if I do fall overboard."

As Tom spoke he stepped recklessly upon the bridge. We say "recklessly," because had he taken more pains to examine the fastenings on the opposite bank he would have been more careful. He had nearly crossed the bayou when the log on which he was walking tipped a little, and although

Tom made frantic efforts to save himself by seizing all the branches within his reach, it set the whole structure in motion. There was a "swish" of tree-tops, and in a moment more the bridge and Tom went into the water together. The negro looked, but did not see him come up.

"Dar, now!" said he. "The money he had about his clothes was too heavy for him to walk the bridge with."

## CHAPTER IV. THE WRONG BOAT

The negro, almost overwhelmed with surprise, watched the surface of the water to see Tom reappear, but it was only for a moment, and then with a rush one of the trees, which had broken loose from its moorings, swept over the very place where the head was seen, and the negro fairly danced with consternation when he saw one of the limbs catch Tom and carry him under water with it.

"Dar, now!" he exclaimed. "If I go home and tell moster about this thief being drowned here, he will think I did it. What's dat?"

When Tom arose to the surface, it was only just long enough to clear the water from his face, settle his hat firmly on his head, and take a fresh hold of the bundle containing his lunch, and then he saw the tree sweeping down upon him. To take in one long breath and go down again before it got to him was barely the work of a moment, so that when the tree passed Tom came up a second time, and this time he was much nearer to the bank he wanted to reach than he was before. A few lusty strokes brought him to it, and by the aid of trailing roots and vines he made his way to the top with the agility of a sailor, so that by the time the darky had got over wondering at his narrow escape, he was high upon the bank opposite to him, and pulling off his boot to see if his money was safe.

"Is dat you, sar?" said he, scarcely raising his voice above a whisper.

"Of course it is I," replied Tom, who did not know whether to get angry over the effects of his unfortunate plunge or to laugh outright at the darky's exhibition of astonishment. "You thought you had seen the last of me, didn't you? It takes a bigger stream than this to drown me. There is all the money I have got," he went on, taking his roll from his boot and holding it out to the view of the negro. "It don't amount to five thousand dollars, by a long shot."

The darky did not know what else to say. He watched Tom as he pulled off his coat and vest and wrung the water from them, examined his bundle to see that his lunch was safe, said he thought the steamboat landing was about ten miles distant and there wasn't any more creeks to cross before he got there, and then saw him disappear in the woods. He stood for some moments gazing at the place where he had last been seen, and then shouldered his axe and turned away.

"Dat's a mighty slick little rascal," said he, as he wended his course back to his camp – "a mighty slick little rascal. I don't reckon I'd best say anything to moster about it; and as for Pomp – I won't say anything to him, either. He'll leave me to cut rails alone if I do dat."

"My first adventure," muttered Tom, as he hastened along the narrow ridge that led him toward the Mississippi. "That old darky believes, as much as he believes anything, that the little money I had in my boot was the cause of my being spilled into the drink; but it is all honest money, every bit of it."

The sun grew hot as he went along, and by changing his coat and vest from one arm to the other, and by turning his money over in his hands to keep the wet bills on the outside, he gradually removed the effects of his cold plunge, so that long before he arrived at the point where the negroes were chopping he could tell them that he had started for the landing on horseback, but that his nag had thrown him and he was obliged to continue his journey on foot. He also tried to eat a little of the lunch with which the darky had provided him, but the johnny cake and bacon were wet, and after a few mouthfuls he dropped the remainder behind the log on which he was sitting.

The negroes who were cutting wood for the supply of steamers that were plying up and down the river belonged to the man who owned the yard. As there were probably a dozen of them in all engaged in chopping wood all the time, their employer could afford a white man to oversee their work and the teams, but he seemed to have nothing to do but to sit on a log and whittle a stick. He listened good-naturedly to Tom's story, and told him where he could go to find the camp. The largest house in it was his, and he would probably find books and papers enough to amuse him until he came

in from his work. The *Jennie June* would probably be the next steamer that would stop at the landing for wood, and she would be along some time during the night.

"I think that books and papers occupy the most of your time," said Tom to himself, as he started away in obedience to these instructions. "If I were a negro, I don't know any better job than having you for an overseer. Did you see how those negroes clustered around him to hear my story? If I had been their overseer, I should have started them back to their work in a hurry."

Tom found the camp deserted by all save an old ducky who was sitting on a bench outside one of the doors sunning himself. He was the cook, he said. He pointed out the overseer's house and told Tom to go in there and make himself at home, and Tom went; but he did not make himself very much at home after he got there. He found several books scattered about, but they were all old; and it was hard to tell where the overseer hung his clothes, for the back of the solitary chair of which the cabin could boast was liberally supplied with them. His trunk was open and the contents were littered about, and on the bare table, on which the overseer had left some signs of his breakfast which were still untouched, were articles that ought long ago to have been in the wash. A glance about the cabin showed Tom that there was at least one article of which the overseer was choice – his rifle. That, together with the powder-horn, bullet-pouch, and hunting-knife, was hung upon pegs over the door. Whatever accident might befall his other traps, his hunting outfit would always be safe.

Tom took a seat on the bench outside the door, looked up at the sun to see how near twelve o'clock it was, and then looked at the negro. The latter made no signs of getting dinner, and Tom finally made up his mind that the men had taken their dinner to the woods with them; but his own stomach clamored loudly for something nourishing, and Tom finally accosted the negro.

"I say, uncle, are you not going to get some dinner?"

"Not before fo' o'clock, sar," replied the ducky. "I blow de horn den and all hands come in."

Tom was uneasy after that, and wished now when it was too late that he had reserved a portion of the johnny cake and bacon that had been furnished him. Wet as it was, it was much better than nothing. He found a book and made out to interest himself in a story for five mortal hours, when suddenly the long shrill notes of a horn rang in his ears. He would soon have something to eat, at all events. Presently a thought occurred to him.

"Say, uncle, how do you tell the time? You haven't got any clock, have you?"

"Oh, no, sar," said the negro. "Ise got something better than a clock. You see that ar peak of dat building hyar? Well, every time it's fo' o'clock the p'int of that peak is right hyar."

"Summer and winter?" asked Tom.

"Summer and winter dat peak is right hyar. Den I knows it is fo' o'clock and den I blows de horn."

Tom wanted to ask him whether or not the sun was always in the same place summer and winter, but gave it up when he heard the sound of the negroes' voices raised in a rude sort of a plantation melody coming from the woods, for he knew that supper was close at hand. Nearer came the strains, and in the short space of half an hour the cavalcade streamed into view. What a lively set they were then! One would have thought that cutting wood was the happiest part of a ducky's life. Keeping up their song, they slipped off the wagon, leaving the teamsters to take care of the mules. The overseer came into the cabin, and after exchanging a merry salutation with Tom, remarking that he and the darkies had performed a task that day that would have done credit to a bigger force than his, he cleared the table in readiness for supper. The articles that adorned the back of the chair were cast upon the trunk, the unwashed apparel on the table was swept off and thrown on the top of them, and then the overseer was ready for a smoke.

"Yes, sir, me and the niggers have done a heap of work," said the man, seating himself on the threshold by Tom's side. "They were taking it easy when you came along, just as I mean that all black ones shall who work under me, but perked up a bit and went to work right smart. Aint they happy now? Every one singing at the top of his voice."

Supper being over, which consisted of corn bread, bacon, and tea, Tom spent two hours in conversation with the overseer, until, as he was relating a story of his personal experience, an audible snore came from his direction, and, facing about, he found that his auditor had gone fast asleep, stretched out on the floor, and using the back of his chair for a pillow. It wasn't dark yet, by a long ways, and the sounds that came from the camp of the negroes told him that there was a heap of fun going on there; but as it seemed to be the rule to go to slumber whenever he was ready, Tom went to the overseer's bed and climbed into it.

It seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes when someone laid a hand upon his shoulder and shouted in his ear that the *Jennie June* was at the landing and taking on a load of wood. That was enough for Tom, who wanted to get into a bed where he could take his clothes off. When he got his eyes fairly open, there was no one in sight, but he heard the sound of a steamer's bell, followed by the hoarse commands of the mate, and when he reached the door, he found the whole yard lighted up by a torch which the steamer had placed in her bow. The boat was made fast to the levee when he got there, and her crew were making ready to carry on her load of wood, but Tom paid no attention to them. More than half asleep, he made his way on deck and into the saloon, which he found deserted by all save a party of men who were engaged in playing cards. They never looked up as Tom entered, being deeply interested in the piles of money before them, and he passed on to the desk and made application for a room to a man with a pen behind his ear. Without saying a word he took down a key from a board by the side of his desk and led Tom along the cabin and unlocked a door and showed him two bunks. The lower one had evidently been occupied during the afternoon.

"Take the upper bunk," said the clerk. "The lower one belongs to a man who is playing cards, but I guess he won't care. Good-night."

Tom was much too sleepy to know or care who owned the lower bunk; he pulled off his clothes and with a mingled sigh of satisfaction and comfort climbed into the upper one, and composed himself to sleep. He awoke once during the night, only to find that the steamer had finished taking on her load of wood, and was now ploughing her way along the river; and, having satisfied himself on this point, Tom rolled over and went to sleep again.

The next time he awoke it was broad daylight, and the boat was rocking as boats always do when they have nothing to do but to make their way to their destination as soon as possible. The stool (there were no chairs in the state-room) which he had left unoccupied had been drawn close to the door, and a man's coat and vest lay over it; but it was not that that attracted Tom's attention, and caused his eyes to open to their widest extent. It was a revolver, a murderous-looking thing, and carrying a ball as big as an army musket. Tom thought it would be a good plan to get out of the way of that thing, and, holding in his breath, he slipped out of his bunk; but cautious as he was in his movements, the man heard him. He opened his eyes and gazed fixedly at Tom, then caught up his revolver and thrust it under his pillow, seized his coat and vest and threw them between the bulkhead and himself, and then rolled over and prepared to go to sleep again.

"Morning," said he.

"Good-morning, sir," said Tom.

He thought it a wise thing to be civil, although the man's face did not look like one belonging to one who would use a revolver on slight provocation. The long silken whiskers which fell down upon his breast might cover up the expression of the lower part of his countenance, but they could not conceal the merry twinkle of the mild blue eyes which had looked at Tom for a moment. Considerably relieved, Tom slipped into his clothes and went out, closing the door behind him, and made the best of his way toward the barber shop; for be it known that up to this time Tom had not touched his hair at all. There was just one barber there, and he was as anxious to make money as anyone he ever saw.

"Shave, sir?" said the negro, as Tom came in and pulled off his hat. "I declare if dat aint the worst-looking head I ever set my peepers on. A shampoo will just about set you right."

"Don't want it," said Tom shortly.

"I reckon dat you was playing cards last night," said the barber, as he deftly tucked the towel around Tom's chin and began brushing up his hair.

"No, I wasn't," said Tom.

"Den you missed the purtiest sight you ever see. Dere was one man dere, – he was a cattle-raiser, – and he raked in thirty thousand dollars from the two sharpers who were trying to gouge him out of his money! I wouldn't like to be in his boots, I tell you. Dey mean to kill him afore dey get done with this trip! I declare, I believe he bunks with you – room No. 19."

"By gracious!" exclaimed Tom, starting up. And to himself he added: "I don't wonder that he had his revolver handy. He had his pants on and that was the reason I didn't see them."

"Did you say something, sir?" asked the darky.

"No, I didn't," replied Tom.

"Yes, sar, dat was the purtiest sight I ever saw. De man dealt himself fo' aces, and one of the sharpers, the one that was hottest after his money, fo' kings. De best of it was he drew fo' cards, so he knew right where de cards were stocked. The sharper thought there had been a mistake somewhere, and went down in his jeans and pulled out his money, fifteen thousand dollars' wuth. De man saw him, – he had more bills where dem came from, – and de sharper showed fo' kings; but when he went to take de money – I declare, your head is awful dirty. I think a shampoo will set you just about right."

"I don't want it. Go on. When he went to take the money – then what?"

"Well, he put down de fo' aces with one hand and drew his revolver with the other. De sharper concluded he would let the money stay; and dat broke up de game. You ought to have seen dat sharper's face. He's a mighty slick rogue, and I bet you he'll put a ball into dat sheep-herder before we gets up to Fort Gibson."

"Why don't you tell him of it?"

"Shucks! What do I want to go and get myself into trouble for? He goes up and down dis road every year and he knows it already. It aint none of my business."

The reader will remember that we are describing things that happened a good many years ago. At that time the cotton-planters, and the cattle-and sheep-herders who lived far back in the country, made use of the steamboats, which were the only means of communication they had. Gambling was much in vogue, and if the sharpers who met them at New Orleans couldn't find any means of inducing them to play there, they would take passage in these boats and try them again when every other influence except reading was at a discount. It was a dangerous thing to pick up a stranger on these trips, especially if one had money with him, or anything that could be changed into money. For instance, there was a contractor who started from New Orleans to do some government business at Little Rock. He had half a dozen teams and everything he wanted to make his enterprise successful, with the exception of the men. Those he was going to hire of the planters, and of course he had to have some money to do it with. On the way up he fell in with a very modest stranger who didn't know anything about playing cards, and the consequence was before he reached his destination he was penniless. And the beauty of it was the modest stranger was dead broke, too! Every cent of his little hundred dollars had been won by the two strangers whom the contractor had invited to join in their game, as well as the last mule which the latter had to pull his wagons. The contractor made out a bill of sale of everything he had, and the next morning he was missing. He had jumped overboard, and everybody thought he was drowned accidentally. The modest stranger and his two confederates took the mules ashore and sold them at a big figure, and went back to New Orleans well satisfied with their trip. It seems that in the case of this stranger the sharpers had picked up the wrong man. He had "stocked" the cards on them, and won everything they had, and the darky knew, from certain little signs he had seen, that his life was not safe so long as he remained on board that steamer. Tom had a horror of everything that related to gambling, and he wanted to talk about something else.

"This boat is making pretty good time, isn't she?" he said, during a pause in which the darky went back to his bench after his comb and brush.

"Yes, sar. We don't touch anywhere till we get to Memphis, and we shall reach there about – "

"What?" exclaimed Tom.

"Eh? Did you speak, sar?"

"Why, I want to go down the river," gasped Tom, who couldn't believe that his ears were not deceiving him. "Memphis! That's up the river."

"Course it is, sar. And you are going dere as fast as you kin."

"Memphis!" exclaimed Tom.

He couldn't wait for the barber to get through with him, but, jumping out from his hands, with the apron floating all about him, he ran to the nearest window and looked out. He saw the trees dancing swiftly by, but it was not to them that he devoted the most of his attention. The current of the river was what drew his gaze. He took one look at it, at the trees and stumps that covered the surface of the water which the river managed to pick up in the low lands when it was high, and then returned disconsolately to his chair. He didn't want to go to Memphis. It was two thousand miles out of his way, and, besides, there were any number of business men that knew him on the levee.

"You wanted to go to New Orleans, I take it," said the barber.

But Tom was done talking. He wanted to have his hair brushed as quickly as possible, so that he might go to the office and settle with the clerk; so the darky speedily put the finishing touches to it, received twenty cents for his trouble, and Tom hurried out and in a few seconds more was standing in front of the desk. He did not see much room when he got there, for there was a big broad-shouldered man standing in front of the desk, with his arms spread out over it, talking with the clerk; but he stepped back to make space for Tom, and smiled so good-naturedly at him over his bushy whiskers that the boy was satisfied that he had one friend on the boat, if he didn't have another.

"Morning," said he. "Did the sight of that revolver scare you?"

"No, sir. But I got up just in time to find that I am bound up the river. I didn't say which way I wanted to go, and the overseer at the landing called me for the wrong boat."

"Well, you've got to go now that you are started," said the clerk, pulling a book toward him that contained a list of the passengers, "and it will take just five dollars to pay your fare to Memphis."

Very reluctantly Tom pulled out his roll of bills and counted out the five dollars. Then he turned and went out on the guard and seated himself, almost ready to cry with vexation. Presently his roommate appeared, and without saying so much as "By your leave" he drew a chair close to Tom's side and sat down.



## CHAPTER V. TOM'S LUCK

"I say, my young friend, what have you been doing that is contrary to Scribner?"

"I don't understand you, sir," said Tom, starting involuntarily.

"I mean," said the stranger, bending over and whispering the words to Tom, "what have you been doing that is contrary to law?"

This was a question that Tom never expected to have asked him by strangers. Did he carry the marks of the cruel wrong he had done his uncle and Jerry Lamar upon his face so that anybody could read them? The next time he passed a mirror he would look into it and see.

"What is your name?" asked the stranger suddenly.

"Tom Mason."

"Mine is Bolton – Jasper Bolton; and, Tom, I am glad to see you. Put it there. What have you been doing?"

"Not a thing, sir. My uncle has got the money back all right before this time."

"Ah! Money, was it? How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"*Five* thousand dollars! W-h-e-w! You didn't try to kill anybody in order to get away with it?"

"No, sir. I shot a couple of nigger dogs that were on my trail, but if you knew the circumstances, you would say I did right," said Tom, who had suddenly made up his mind to make a confidant of Mr. Bolton. "It was just this way."

And then Tom straightened around on his seat and faced his new friend and told him his story, being interrupted occasionally with such expressions as "Ah! yes," and "I see," which led him to believe that he was making out a better case against his uncle than he was against himself.

"I don't want you to think that my uncle is in any way to blame for all this," said Tom, in conclusion. "I wanted money, I wanted to be revenged on Jerry Lamar, and so I took it."

"Of course. You ought to have had better sense, seeing that the money would all be your own some day. Do you know what I think you had better do?"

Tom replied that he did not.

"I think you had better go home, tell your uncle just what you have told me, and abide the consequences."

"You don't know my uncle, or you would not advise any such step as that," said Tom, with a sigh which showed that he knew him, and that he was bound to stick to his course. "I am the only relative he has got in the world, but that won't hinder him from saying every time he gets mad at me: 'So you are the lad that tried to reduce me to poverty by stealing five thousand dollars from me!' He will get all over that when he finds that I am not coming home, and then I will go back to him."

"How long do you think it will take him?"

"About a year, maybe two."

"Do you think you can stand it among all these lawless men for that length of time?"

"I've got to. I don't see any other way out of it."

"And you were going to Texas to get another start? Texas is a country in which all men bring up who have made a failure, and you were bound that way."

"Yes, sir. I think I could make another start there."

"Have you any relatives or friends living there?"

"Not a soul," replied Tom, straightening about on his chair and looking down at the river. "By the way," he added, "I want to give you a piece of advice. Those men of whom you won the money last night have threatened to have it all back if they have to kill you."

"Who told you that story?" said Mr. Bolton, with a smile.

"The barber."

"Well, they will have plenty of time to try their hands at it between here and Cincinnati. I told them a funny story about being a cattle-grower somewhere out West. If they try anything with me, they will have their hands full. There are three of them, and I know them all. The clerk has got the money now under lock and key. There goes the breakfast-bell. I will talk to you again after we go in."

Tom was disappointed in more respects than one when he found that his new friend was to leave him at Memphis. With a view of gaining a little time he did not follow him into the dining-hall, but went into the barber shop and proceeded to wash his hands. When they had been dried to his satisfaction, he went out and drew up before the desk.

"Who is that man who talked to me a little while ago?" he asked.

"He's a gambler," was the reply, "and a mighty good one, too. He got into those fellows last night, didn't he?"

That was just what Tom was afraid of. He went out and took his seat at the table, saw Bolton exchange courtesies with the three sharpers who had tried to fleece him the night before, watched him all through the meal, and told himself that if that was the style that men of his class were made of he had a great deal to learn before he could become a gambler. There wasn't a thing about him that could have been found fault with in any circle of gentlemen. In spite of his calling he had given Tom what he regarded as good advice, and he did not know what else he had to say to him.

"There's one thing about it," thought Tom. "He has been around the world a good deal, is sometimes flush to-day and strapped to-morrow, but I'll bet if he was in my fix he would not go back to my uncle. If I am there to take all his abuse, my uncle never will get over flinging his gibes at me; but if I am away where I can't hear them, it won't take him so long to get over it. He can advise me all he's a mind to, but I won't go home."

Breakfast being over, Tom pushed back his chair and went out and seated himself on the guard. The gambler did not put in an appearance for fifteen minutes, for he was not the one to allow his good fortune to take away his appetite. He came at length and bore in his hand a couple of cigars, one of which he offered to Tom. But the latter did not smoke.

"You'll need an overcoat, Tom," said Mr. Bolton, after he had lighted his cigar and placed his heels upon the railing. "The country you have just come from is a summer's day compared to the one where you are going. It's only the latter part of December, and you'll find blizzards out there, I bet you."

"But I can't afford an overcoat, Mr. Bolton. I have only fifty dollars, and it is all my own, too."

"I'll get it for you. I haven't forgotten that I have been in trouble – I may be that way next week; and when I do get that way, I'd feel mighty glad for the simple gift of an overcoat. I'll get you one in Memphis, and at the same time I will tell the clerk to hand you two hundred dollars for your own."

"I can't take it, Mr. Bolton," said Tom, astonished at the proposition.

"Oh, yes, you can. You never may be able to return it to me, but if you ever find one who is suffering, and you have enough and to spare, I want you to hand it to him. That's all the pay I ask. I've owed this for a year, and this is the first chance I have had to square up with the fellow who gave it to me."

"Where is the fellow now?"

"I don't know whether he is living or dead. He was a good fellow, and when I told him what my circumstances were, how I had got in with a party of roughs and been cleaned out of my pile, he put his hand into his pocket and pulled out two hundred dollars. I told him I never could pay him back, and he said if I ever found some other fellow in need just to give him a lift. I've done it, and it squares me. But it's a mean business anyway."

"Why don't you go on with me instead of going up the Ohio River to Cincinnati?"

"To Fort Gibson?" exclaimed Bolton in astonishment.

"I suppose that's where I am going, aint it?"

"Well, you see, Bub, they've got a little document against me up there," said the gambler, with a laugh. "It is a document which the sheriff doesn't hold against me, but which the people do."

"Are they going to lynch you?"

"Anyway, that is what they call it."

"Well, by gracious!" said Tom, settling back in his chair and watching the clouds of smoke that ascended from the gambler's lips. "What sort of men have I become associated with? This man lynched! I would as soon think of my uncle's being lynched."

"So now, you see, I naturally keep away from there," continued Bolton. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. If you will go on to Fort Hamilton, which is as far as navigation is open now, I will give you something that will introduce you to Black Dan. He's a gambler, you know."

"Oh, I can't do anything to assist him in gambling," said Tom. "I don't know one card from another."

"Why, bless you, I don't want you to do anything to assist him in his work. I want you to keep just as far away from cards as you know how," said Mr. Bolton, fumbling with his neck-handkerchief. "Do you see that? It's a kinder pretty pin, isn't it?"

Tom took the ornament and looked it over. It was rather large for a pin, the body of it being formed of some metal which Tom did not recognize, but the diamonds in the middle of it, six of them in all, were what made it so valuable.

"That pin is worth five hundred dollars," said Mr. Bolton. "Put it on; I want to see how it looks on you."

"But what do you want me to do with it?" enquired Tom.

"I want you to take it up and give it to Black Dan when you see him. You are bound to meet him if you go to Fort Hamilton."

"I can't take it. You have already done more for me than I had any right to expect."

"Never mind that," said the gambler, taking the pin from Tom's hand and fixing it in his neck-handkerchief. "You see, he got into a little rucuss a few nights before I came away, and the fellow grabbed him in there and tore three of the diamonds out, and he gave it to me with the request that I would take it to New Orleans and have it repaired for him. There, now, you look like a sport."

"I wish you would take it out," said Tom. "I don't like to have it in there. Somebody might see it and rob me."

"You haven't got any baggage, have you?"

Tom replied that all the clothes he had with him were those he stood in at that moment.

"It won't take long to fix that. Just tell Dan, when you see him, that that thing has been in pawn more times than I can remember, but somehow I always managed to work around and get the money. By the way, he owes me ten dollars. He didn't give me money enough. What those diamonds are set in I don't know. Dan won the mine in which the stuff was found and had the pin made from some of the quartz; but the diamonds didn't suit him, and so he sent them by me to New Orleans. But, bless you, in two months from that time he was as poor as Job's turkey."

"Did he lose the mine?"

"Yes, and all the money he had besides. Perhaps that pin will hit him again. Dan is a good fellow. He never went back on a man who was down on his luck."

"I don't see why you don't go back to him," ventured Tom.

"Well, you see, there's that document that the people hold against me," said the gambler, with a laugh. "I think I had better stay here until that has had time to wear off. Yes, you go on to Fort Hamilton, and there you will make a strike. I don't know anybody in Fort Gibson."

"What do you suppose they will set me to doing?"

"Oh, perhaps they will grub-stake you and send you into the mountains to hunt up a gold mine. Many a nice fellow has got a start in that way, and is now numbered among the millionnaires. You'll get a start if you strike Black Dan."

"I hope you will take this pin and wear it while you are on the boat," said Tom; for he had already made up his mind to go on to Fort Hamilton and seek an interview with Black Dan if he were still alive. "I wish I had some baggage in which I could hide it away."

Without saying a word Mr. Bolton took the pin, adjusted it into his shirt-front, and once more placed his heels on the railing. The longer Tom talked with him the more he admired him, and the more he detested his avocation. The idea that such a man as that should deliberately prey upon the cupidity of his neighbors! But, then, if he was a gambler, he was the only man in the whole lot of passengers who had taken to him. There were a number of finely dressed planters who sat at the table with him, but not one had had a word to say to him, and would have allowed him to go on his way to ruin if it had not been for this solitary man. And how he had trusted him! Was there a planter on the boat who would have given him so large an amount of money on so short an acquaintance?

"There's one thing about it," said Tom, as he thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "If I make a success of this thing, I shall not have any planters, who have already made their mark in the world, to thank for my salvation."

The sight of the revolver that was placed upon the stool at the head of his bed did not startle Tom as it had done on a former occasion. Answering the cheerful "Morning" of the sleepy gambler he made a trip to the barber shop to get a "shake up," for Tom had not yet had opportunity to buy a brush and comb, and then went out and seated himself on the guards. He felt more lonely now than he had at any time since leaving home. Memphis was only forty miles away, – he had heard one of the customers in the barber shop make that remark, – and he knew that when he got there the last friend he had on earth was to take leave of him.

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