

Webster Frank V.

Two Boy Gold Miners: or, Lost in the Mountains



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CHAPTER I HARD TIMES

"What's the matter, Enos?" asked a rather elderly and careworn looking woman, as she stood in the kitchen door of a small farmhouse.

The man to whom she had spoken was gazing up at the sky. His clothes were patched in places, the trousers so much so that there seemed to be very little of the original material left. He did not appear to hear his wife's question, so she repeated it.

"What's the matter, Enos? What are you looking up at the sky that way for?"

"I was looking for a sign of rain, Debby. We need some terribly bad."

"Do you see any?"

"Nope. There isn't a cloud in sight, and the wind has hung in the east for nigh on to a week. Seems so it ought to bring a shower, but it don't come."

"Things are pretty dry around here, aren't they, Enos?"

"That's what they are, Debby, and if they don't get wet soon I don't know what we're going to do."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It's liable to be. The potatoes won't amount to much, and the corn is just shriveling up with the heat. There'll be a short crop of everything but weeds, I'm thinking."

"I wouldn't worry, Enos, if I was you. Maybe things will come out all right."

"How can they, Debby, if we don't get rain? Things can't grow unless they get some moisture, and we haven't had a drop going on four weeks now. I declare, farming is the hardest kind of a life, I don't care what the books say!"

"Well, we'll have to do the best we can, I suppose," said the woman, with a sigh, as she went back into the house.

"What's the matter, mother?" asked a tall, pretty girl, who was washing the breakfast dishes. "You look worried."

"I am, Nettie."

"What about?"

"Everything; but your father in particular."

"Is he sick, mother?"

"No; but he's fretting himself to death because there isn't any rain, and he's afraid the crops will be ruined."

"That would be too bad."

"Yes; times are hard enough as it is, without having a short crop of everything. We depended on a good season this year to finish paying off the mortgage, but the way it looks now we'll be deeper in debt than ever. I declare! it's too bad, just as your father was getting on his feet, after a lot of bad luck, to have this dry spell come."

The girl did not reply, but there came a more serious look on her pretty face. She was a farmer's daughter, and she knew what it meant if there was a long period without rain.

Enos Crosby, with his wife, his daughter Nettie and his two sons, Jed and Will, had a small farm near the town of Lockport, in one of the middle Western States. Jed was the elder son, a good-

humored lad, always inclined to look on the bright sides of things. Will, the younger brother, was somewhat prone to be melancholy. His mother said it was because he grew so fast; that he was always looking ahead and seeing how things came out before they really happened. Though he was two years younger than Jed, he was half a head taller, though not so strong.

Mr. Crosby had tried for many years to make a living off the farm for himself and his family. He had barely succeeded. Some years he saved a little money, but, as soon as he did so, it went to help pay off the mortgage, with which nearly every farm in that locality was saddled. Some years he fell behind, and had to borrow money to carry him through the winter.

As Mr. Crosby stood in the little garden, at the side of the house, and continued to gaze up at the sky, he murmured:

"Well, if we don't get rain by to-morrow night I don't know what we'll do. Have to borrow some more money to get along with, I guess, for the crops are practically ruined now. Still, a good soaking shower would do a world of good. I wonder how the boys are making out with their cultivating? Guess I'll take a walk over and see."

In dry spells it is a practice of farmers to cultivate, or frequently dig up, the soil around their corn, potatoes or such other crops as admit of it. This pulverizing of the earth, in a measure, makes up for the lack of rain.

That morning Jed and Will had been sent to the big corn patch, which was in a distant field, to work over the ground, and let a little air get to the roots, so that the lack of rain might be offset. As Mr. Crosby strolled over to the corn patch his mind was filled with many thoughts.

"I wish I could find something else to do besides farming," he murmured to himself. "It's a very uncertain way of making a living. Still, I suppose it's all I'm fitted for. I don't know much about business, and my folks have been farmers all their lives. But I never saw such hard times as we're having now. I wouldn't mind so much if it was me alone, but there's Nettie. She does want a piano terribly bad, so she can learn to play. She's real quick to learn. And Debby" – as he called his wife, Deborah – "she needs some new clothes, though she never complains about the old ones."

"I need some new ones myself, by the looks of these," he went on, glancing down at his much-patched trousers. "I guess Debby will be hard put to find any of the original pattern left to fasten a patch on. But I don't mind. I wish I could give my boys a better education, though. What little schooling they get here in the winter ain't never going to put them ahead very far. Well, I suppose there's no help for it."

He trudged on despondently, now and again casting anxious glances upward, to see if there was not in the sky some little cloud that bore a promise of the much-needed rain. But the sun shone down hotter than ever.

Meanwhile, Jed and Will were proceeding with their cultivating. Each one was driving a horse attached to a small machine, the sharp teeth of which cut through the dry, caked soil. The horses moved slowly along the rows of corn, a cloud of dust hovering over them and the young farmers.

"Hey, Will!" called Jed to his brother, whose head was some distance above the stunted cornstalks, "don't you feel like having an ice-cream soda?"

"Don't I, though? Say, Jed, quit talking like that, will you! My throat is all dry down inside, and my tongue is getting twice as thick as it ought to be. Whew! But this dust is fierce! I guess it's forgotten how to rain."

"Looks like it. But I'm going to have a drink, anyhow. Whoa, Tabasco Sauce! Stand still!"

"Who you talking to?" asked Will, looking through the corn to where his brother was.

"My horse, of course."

"That's a queer name for him."

"Well, Tabasco Sauce is the hottest stuff I know about, and I reckon my horse is about the hottest thing around here, unless it's me. But don't you want a drink?"

"What of? I don't care for creek water, and it's too far to go back to the house."

"Here's where I stand treat, and surprise you," went on Jed. "Come on. Your horse will stand without hitching."

"I don't know about that. He's been acting queer, lately. He was quite frisky when I started off ahead of you this morning, and tried to run away."

"You don't say so? Fancy Pete running away! Maybe you'd better tie him."

"I will. There's a big stone here. But what are you going to drink? I tell you I won't touch that creek water. I don't believe it's good, the creek's so low."

"That's all right. Come on with me."

Jed, whose horse showed no signs of straying away, left his steed standing in the middle of a row of corn, while Will fastened Pete to a big boulder, by wrapping the reins around the stone. The elder brother then led the way to the creek, which bordered the corn field, and striding to a spot where some weeping willow trees cast a cool shade, he plunged his hand down in a little pool, and drew up an earthen jug.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

"Switchel?" inquired Will

"That's what. I made a jug of it this morning when I knew we were coming over to this hot place. That's what made me late, and you got here ahead of me."

"Well, pass it over. I'm as dry as a powder horn."

"I'll take it first, if you don't mind," remarked Jed, with a smile. "You're so tall, Lanky, that if you got to drinking, all there is in the jug might run down to your feet, and I'd get left."

He laughed and, tilting up the jug, drank from the uncorked opening. Switchel, I may explain to my young readers, is a drink much used by farmers, and those who have to work in hot fields often take a jug of it along, especially if they are far from good drinking water. It is composed of molasses, water and ginger, and has a pleasant taste.

"Um! I feel better," remarked Jed as he passed the jug to his brother. "Now, Bean-pole, don't take it all. That's got to last until noon, and the day has only begun."

"Don't worry. I won't take any more than you did."

After the refreshing draught the two brothers rested for a moment in the shade of the willow trees.

"Do you know, Will, I'm not much stuck on farming," remarked Jed slowly.

"Me either. I don't mind hard work, but there doesn't seem to be much of a prospect here."

"You're right. Dad and all of us work hard, but it does not seem to amount to anything. Times are getting harder all the while and even the weather is against us."

"It does seem so. But I suppose it would be just as bad if we were in some other business."

"Maybe. I wish I could get out of here. I'd like to do something else than farm."

"What would be your choice?"

"Well," remarked Jed, slowly, while a smile appeared on his face that had grown a bit serious, "I read about a tramp once that was looking for a contract to gather the blossoms on a century plant, that bloomed once in a hundred years. I don't care for anything quite as slow as that, but I would like a job where I could make a bit of money, instead of always paying up back debts."

"Yes, poor dad has had bad luck. But maybe better times are coming."

"I'm afraid not. But this isn't cultivating the corn, and, if we don't do that, I know there won't be any crop coming this fall. Let's get back to work."

"Suppose we give the horses a drink," suggested Will.

"They can't take switchel out of the jug. Besides, I don't believe they'd care for it."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" exclaimed Will, who was not as fond of a joke as was his older brother. "Let's lead 'em to the creek."

They unhitched the animals, putting halters on them, and led the eager steeds toward the inviting water. Whether it was the heat, or whether he decided he had done enough work for one day was not

made clear, but, no sooner did Will's horse, Pete, take one sip of the water, than he jerked the halter rope from the boy's hand, kicked up his heels and, with a shrill whinny, dashed away through the corn.

CHAPTER II

AFTER THE RUNAWAY

"There he goes!" cried Will.

"So I see," remarked Jed, rather calmly. "You didn't need to tell me that. But he'll not run far. It's too hot. Now hold on, Tabasco Sauce. You needn't think you're going, too," for Jed's horse showed a disposition to follow its mate.

"I'll have to catch him!" cried Will. "He'll trample a lot of corn down. I might have known he'd be up to some trick. He acted queer all the morning."

"Maybe it's a touch of sunstroke," suggested Jed. "Wait a minute and I'll help you. I'll have to fasten this two-twenty trotter of mine, or he may take a notion to start a race against time."

He fastened his horse to a tree, in a shady place near the creek, and then the two brothers started off after the runaway. As they ran through the rows of corn Will uttered an exclamation.

"There he goes!" he shouted, pointing to the road, which ran along one side of the corn field. "He's going toward Fentonville like a blue streak!"

"The rascal!" exclaimed Jed. "He must have headed for the bars. We forgot to put them up when we came in, and he got out. I wonder what ails him, anyhow? Never knew him to act this way before."

"Me either. But it was you who left the bars down. You came in last."

"So I did. That's too bad. But, come on. We'll cut across to the road, and see if we can't catch him."

The two brothers changed their direction, and raced toward the fence that separated the field from the dusty highway. Meanwhile the horse was galloping along it, in the midst of a white cloud which his hoofs kicked up. The animal seemed to be rejoicing in a long-sought freedom.

Just as the boys reached the fence their father came along.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Crosby, surprised to see his two sons leaving their work.

"Old Pete ran away," explained Will. "There he goes," and he pointed to the moving cloud of dust.

"Old Pete ran away?" repeated the farmer.

"Yep. I was giving him some water at the creek, when he kicked up his heels and bolted."

"That's too bad," spoke Mr. Crosby, seriously. "He may run into something, and get hurt, or he may get lost and it will be a week before we can trace him. Or maybe some one may steal him. I heard there was a band of gypsies over near Fentonville, and they're great hands to steal horses. Better take after him, boys."

"We will, dad," said Jed. "Will you go over there and look after my nag? He's tied, but he may take a notion to go off."

"Oh, I guess Ned is safe," remarked Mr. Crosby. "But I would hate to have anything happen to Pete. We need both horses very much at this season, when there's so much cultivating to do, and if he gets stolen, or injured so he can't work, it will be quite a loss to me."

"We'll get him, dad," spoke Will.

"I'll go over and do some cultivating until you get back," went on the boys' father. "Land sakes! But I wish it would rain!" and, with the worried look still on his face, the farmer climbed the fence and walked through the rows of corn.

Meanwhile the two brothers started on an easy run down the highway. They knew they might have a long chase after the runaway, and they wanted to save their energies.

"Suppose he runs into a carriage, or something, and gets all cut and bruised and lame, so he can't work," spoke Will.

"What's the use of supposing any such thing as that?" asked Jed. "Probably he'll run until he gets tired, and we'll find him along the road, waiting for us."

"I'm afraid something will happen," went on Will, rather gloomily. "Maybe, as dad said, the gypsies will steal him."

"Nonsense!" retorted Jed, taking a more hopeful view. "What's the use of worrying until you have to?"

"But if we lose that horse it will be a serious blow to dad. He's only got these two, and there's no money left to hire or buy another."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him and mother talking about it the other night. She asked him why he didn't hire Joe Wright's horse, to help with the cultivating, and he said he couldn't afford it."

"Well, of course it would be serious if we only had one horse left to do the farm work with," admitted Jed. "But Pete isn't lost yet."

"It will be my fault if he is," said his brother. "I suppose I shouldn't have unharnessed him from the cultivator. He couldn't have run very far, dragging that."

"I guess not. But we'll find him, all right."

"I can't see any more of him."

"No, he's gone around the bend in the road. We'll make some inquiries when we get there."

The two lads went on at a dog-trot. In spite of the calm way in which he took it, Jed was not a little worried over the running away of the horse. A number of things might happen to the animal, and even the loss of its services meant a serious handicap at the farm in those hard times. Both boys felt that they simply must recover the animal, before it had run too far.

As they reached the turn of the road, around which the horse had disappeared, they looked ahead, hoping to get a sight of the runaway. But the road twisted and turned so that it was impossible to see very far.

"Hello, Mr. Johnson!" called Jed to a man who was hoeing some cabbages in a field near the highway. "Did you see our brown horse pass here a while ago?"

"Was that your hoss?" asked the man, straightening up, and wiping his head with a big, red handkerchief.

"Yep."

"Waal, I couldn't tell whether it was a hoss or a cow, it were goin' so fast, and th' dust was so thick. I never see it so dry, not since seventy-three. I guess –"

"Then the horse went on toward Fentonville?" asked Jed, interrupting the farmer, who was one of the greatest talkers in that locality.

"Yep, he did that. But, as I was sayin', I ain't seen it so dry since seventy-three. That was th' year I –"

"Come on, Will," spoke Jed, in a low voice. "I've heard that story a dozen times. Much obliged," he called to Mr. Johnson. "We want to catch him before the gypsies nab him," and with that the two boys ran on.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mr. Johnson, as he looked after the disappearing lads. "They're in a turrible hurry. I ain't never seen it so dry since seventy-three, and that year I –" Then he seemed to realize that he had no audience, and he began to hoe the cabbages again.

Meanwhile Jed and Will ran on. When they came to a straight stretch of road, they looked eagerly down it, but they were not rewarded by a sight of the horse.

"I didn't think he would run so long," remarked Will.

"Especially on a hot day like this," added Jed. "I'm going to slow down a bit. You're so thin, Will, the heat doesn't have a good chance to get at you." Jed was inclined to fleshiness.

"We'd ought to have taken the other horse to chase after Pete on," said Will.

"Ned couldn't carry both of us."

"I didn't mean we were both to ride him."

"Oh, I suppose I could walk, and you'd ride."

"I'm not particular. But it's too late to think of that now. I wonder why we can't see him? He must have turned off somewhere."

"Very likely. Here comes a man. We'll ask him."

Down the road the boys saw approaching a rather elderly man. He walked slowly, leaning heavily on a cane, and over his shoulder was a bundle.

"Looks like a pedler," commented Jed.

"Maybe he's one of the gypsy gang," suggested Will.

"Guess not. They very seldom travel alone. No, he's a white man, but he's tanned enough to be a gypsy," went on Jed, as the stranger approached closer.

"Morning, boys," said the man, pleasantly. "Hot, ain't it? My, you look all played out! Is the sheriff after you?"

"The sheriff?" repeated Jed, for the words were somewhat puzzling to him.

"Yes. Out West, where I hail from, a man doesn't run the way you have unless the sheriff gets after him. And then usually he does his running on a horse."

"Well, we happen to be doing our running after a horse," replied Jed, with a smile. "You didn't happen to see a brown horse with only a bridle on, as you came along, did you?"

"Did he have a white spot on the breast?"

"Yes," said Will, eagerly.

"Then I guess I saw him. I was walking along, a way back, going slow because my corn hurts me, and I see a cloud of dust coming toward me, lickity-split. I thought it was a drove of steers on a stampede at first, and I got out of the way. Then I see it was only one horse. Queer how much dust he did kick up, but then it's terrible dry in these parts. Worse than the Nevada desert in midsummer."

"Where did the horse go?" asked Jed, a little impatiently, for he did not care for all those details.

"I'm coming to that, my lad. Just after he passed me the horse seemed to think he'd run enough, and he jumped over a fence, into a pasture, and began to eat. Pretty good jump it was, too, after the way he'd been running."

"Come on, Will!" cried Jed. "We'll catch him."

"Hold on, and I'll help you," exclaimed the man, as he followed the two boys down the road.

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD MINER

"Shall we let him help us?" asked Will, in a low tone, of his brother.

"I guess so. I don't see why we shouldn't. He was kind enough to tell us about the horse."

"I know; but he seems like a queer character."

"Oh, I guess he's all right. He said he was from out West, and the folks there are a little different from those in this part of the country. We'll wait for him."

The boys, who had started off at a fast pace, on hearing where their horse was, now slackened their gait, to allow the man to catch up to them.

"You seem to be in pretty much of a hurry, boys," remarked the stranger.

"Well, it means quite a loss to us if that horse gets away," replied Jed. "We were cultivating corn, my brother and I, and Pete took a notion he wanted a vacation. We're afraid he'll get hurt, or stolen, and we only have one other horse."

"Where might you boys live?"

"About a mile back," replied Will.

"And what might your names be?"

Jed told him, wondering the while at the man's rather queer manner.

"And what might be the name of the place where you live?"

"Well, it might be almost anything," responded Jed, unable to withstand the chance to make a little joke, "but it happens to be Lockport."

"Lockport. That's a queer name. If it was out West, where I come from, they'd probably call it 'Dead Man's Gulch,' or 'Red Horseville,' or 'Eagle Pass,' or some such common-sense name as that. But Lockport – "

"They call it that because when you're there you're as good as locked up," spoke Jed. "You can't get away from it; that is, if you're poor."

"Are you poor?" inquired the man, with a quick look from under his shaggy brows at the two boys.

"Well, we don't throw any gold dollars over our left shoulder," replied Jed. "My father is a farmer, and I never knew any rich ones."

"That's so," admitted the man. "They generally have to work hard for their money."

"Say, if we're going to catch that horse, we'd better hurry," remarked Will, who was anxious lest the animal might again take a notion to run away.

"That's so, boys. I didn't mean to detain you. Step along lively. I guess you'll find that Gabe Harrison can keep up to you. I'm pretty lively, if I am old."

"Is your name Gabe Harrison?" asked Jed.

"That's it. Gabe – short for Gabriel – only I'm no relation to the trumpet blower, so don't think the end of the world is coming. Now trot along, and we'll catch the horse. Then we can talk afterward."

It was good advice, and the boys followed it. When they hurried on, for a quarter of a mile further, they saw, in a field near the highway, old Pete calmly browsing on what little grass was left after the dry spell.

"There he is!" exclaimed Will. "I'll catch him. I can run faster than you, Jed."

"Better go easy," advised Gabe Harrison. "Once a horse finds out what fun it is to run away, he's liable to want to do some more of it."

"He never did it before," observed Jed.

"There's always a first time. Here, I'll tell you what to do. It's the way I used to catch my mule when he took a notion to be contrary, and would stray away when I was prospecting."

"Prospecting for what?" asked Jed, who was beginning to be interested in the stranger.

"For gold, of course. I'm an old gold miner, but I'm down on my luck now. Here, take some of this salt, and hold it out in your hat. Horses will do almost anything for a bit of salt, and I guess you won't have any trouble catching him."

While he was speaking the old miner had put his bundle down on the ground, and opened it. The boys saw he had a regular outfit such as a man might use to camp out with along the road in the summer. There were some tin and sheet iron dishes and utensils, some food, and the head of a pickaxe.

"I can't get out of the habit of traveling just as I used to do when I was prospecting," said the man. "I don't have to ask any odds of anybody then, but it's not so easy packing this stuff on my back. I ought to have a mule or a pony, but I can't afford to. There, take this salt," and he gave Will some from a sack. "I guess that will fetch the horse."

Will put it in his hat, jumped the fence, and approached the animal, which ceased cropping the grass, and looked up as the boy entered the field. Probably old Pete was debating in his equine mind, if he had one, whether it was better to see what it was that Will had in his hat, or whether he would kick up his heels, and enjoy a little more freedom.

Meanwhile Jed, who had remained with the old miner, looked curiously at the bundle, which Mr. Harrison was tying up again.

"What's the pickaxe for?" inquired the boy.

"That's my old pick that I used when I was a miner."

"What are you carrying it with you for?"

"Because that's a lucky pickaxe. Many a hundred dollars' worth of gold has that pick dug for me. I broke the handle, and from then on I had bad luck. But I kept the pick, and some day I may put a new handle on it, and start to mining again."

"Where did you dig gold?" asked Jed, while a curious longing came into his heart to get away from the tiresome farm work and embark upon the free and fascinating life of a prospector. He knew little of such life, or, perhaps, he would not have desired to undertake it, for it is full of hardships and dangers, compared to which farming is easy and simple.

But the meeting that day of the old miner and the two boys was destined to have a far-reaching effect, and the head of the pick, which Gabe Harrison carried mainly for sentimental reasons, played quite a part in the adventures that were soon to follow.

"Where did I dig gold?" repeated Gabe, as he finished tying up his pack. "Well, young man – Jed, I mean, if you'll allow me to call you that – I've dug gold 'most every place there was gold to dig. I'm not particular that way. I've prospected all over the Western part of the United States, and I've even been in Alaska, where I nearly froze to death, but I got a lot of gold there."

"What made you give it up?" asked Jed, becoming more and more interested.

"I didn't. I had bad luck, though it was as much my fault as it was anything else."

"Did some one rob you?"

"Yes, but for the matter of that I gave them the chance. It was mostly my own fault. I'm my own worst enemy, my lad, but I think I've turned over a new leaf, and when Gabe Harrison does the foolish things he used to do, I hope you'll send him a special-delivery letter and tell him so."

"I will, if he leaves me his address," replied Jed, entering into the spirit of the occasion.

"I'll do that. There, your brother has caught the horse. I thought that salt would fetch the critter. I had a mule once – but that's a long while ago. Maybe I'll tell you about it some day."

Will had caught old Pete, and the horse was eagerly licking up the salt from the lad's hat.

"I'll open the bars for you," called Jed, hurrying forward to help his brother. "Is he hurt any?"

"Not a scratch on him."

"That's good. You'd better ride him home, so dad won't be worrying. I'll walk."

"You can ride if you want to," said Will, generously.

"No, you're lighter weight, and it's a hot day. Besides, Pete must be pretty well tired out. Look out he doesn't run away with you again."

"I will. Wish I had a bridle instead of this halter."

"Hold on. I've got one!" exclaimed Mr. Harrison. "It's one that belonged to my mule, but I lost the mule and you might as well take the bridle."

The old miner opened another part of his pack, and took out a strong bridle, that showed some signs of wear. It was quickly slipped on Pete, and then Will, mounting the animal's back, rode off.

"If you'll stop at our house on your way past," he called back to Mr. Harrison, "you can get your bridle."

"All right, I will. Might as well go that way as any other," the man added to Jed, as they started along the highway.

"Haven't you any particular place to go?"

"No, I'm just sort of waiting for something to turn up. I've about made up my mind to get back to the gold country. I heard of some new strikes they were making in Montana, and I've a sort of fever in my blood to get there."

With Jed asking questions, and the old miner giving in answer considerable information about the Western mining country, the two trudged along until they reached the Crosby farm.

"Won't you come in, and have some dinner?" asked Jed, as Will came out to the gate with the bridle. "It's 'most twelve o'clock, and you'll be very welcome. You did us quite a service in helping us to get the horse back. It would have meant a lot to dad to lose him."

"Oh, pshaw! I didn't do anything. But, if you don't mind, I'll sit down and have a bite. It's sort of lonesome, eating all alone beside the road."

"And you promised to tell me how you lost your gold that you dug," said Jed.

"Did I? Well, I don't remember that I did. Still, if you'd like to hear what a foolish man I was, I won't mind telling you."

CHAPTER IV

A CURIOUS STORY

While the old miner was standing at the gate, with the two brothers, Mr. Crosby came out of the house.

"Here is the man who helped us find Pete, father," said Will.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir," responded the farmer heartily, extending his hand. "Won't you come in?"

"I just invited him to dinner, dad," spoke Jed.

"That's right. Come in, Mr. – er – "

"Harrison, Gabriel Harrison, though my pardners and the boys used to call me Gabe. I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure, for your invitation."

"We don't often see strangers out this way," went on the farmer. "I understand you are a miner."

"I used to be, but I'm not much of anything now. I've been prospecting around here lately, looking for something to turn up, but it doesn't seem to be going to. Pretty dry around here, isn't it, Mr. Crosby?"

"Entirely too much so. I don't know what I'm going to do about my crops if we don't get rain soon."

Gabe Harrison looked up at the sky. The sun seemed to be blazing down as hot as ever. The old miner glanced to the various points of the compass. Then he leaned over and gravely felt of his left foot.

"What's the matter? Got a stone bruise?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No, but I've got a very sensitive corn. It's as good as a barometer. It's beginning to hurt like all possessed, and I shouldn't be surprised if we had a rain storm soon. It always aches as it does now, just before a storm."

"Doesn't it bother you at other times?" asked Jed with a smile.

"Not at all. I think we're going to have rain."

"I certainly hope so," remarked Mr. Crosby. "But you'd better come in now. My wife and daughter have dinner all ready, and I know the women folks don't like to be kept waiting when everything's on the table."

"You're right there, stranger – I mean Mr. Crosby," said Gabe. "I'll come in. Can I wash up a bit? I've got considerable of the dirt of this county spread over my face and hands, only it isn't 'pay dirt.'"

"What's 'pay dirt'?" asked Will

"That, my boy, is what miners call dirt that has gold in it. Many a rocker full I've washed up. Sometimes I'd get a lot of the yellow dust, and, again I wouldn't make enough to buy my bacon. But it's all in the day's work."

Mr. Crosby led his rather queer guest to a shed, where in the summer time the male members of the family washed in preparation for their meals. Mr. Harrison gave himself a vigorous scrubbing with the yellow soap, and polished his face on the coarse towel until his countenance fairly shone. He was a well preserved old man, with a ruddy complexion, that showed through his coating of tan.

"Do you find gold mining pays?" asked Mr. Crosby, after the meal, when the gold-hunter had done full justice to the cooking of Mrs. Crosby and Nettie.

"Yes, about as well as anything – farming, for instance. I suppose your business has its ups and downs."

"Mostly downs. I declare, I never knew such hard times as we're having now! Not only me, but every farmer I know. This long dry spell is likely to have a bad effect on the country."

"I believe you. We miners don't have it all our own way, either."

"I thought you said you had dug plenty of gold," put in Jed, who, with his brother, was an interested listener.

"So I did. But digging it and keeping it are two different things, young man."

"Did you lose what you had?" asked Mr. Crosby, who had heard from his sons something of their guest's history.

"I lost it – yes – in a way. I might as well tell you the story. It's not a very pleasant one. It goes to show that a man can be a pretty big fool when he tries real hard. That's not a very nice thing to say, but it's the truth."

"How did it happen?" asked Will.

"Well, as I've told you, I've been a gold miner for a number of years. I've prospected, or looked for gold, in many places in this country. And I've found my share of yellow nuggets in my time.

"I made my last strike in Nevada. Where I was, nobody thought there was much but silver, but I was lucky enough to come upon a good gold lead, and the vein got bigger the farther I dug. Well, to make a long story short, I took out several thousand dollars in pure gold. Then I lost it."

"Couldn't you find it again?" asked Nettie, who, with her brothers, was eagerly listening to the miner's story.

"No, little miss, I couldn't, for I lost it by gambling."

"Gambling!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby, for he and his wife were strict church people, and did not know much about the vices of the world.

"That's the plain truth. Everybody out West gambles – that is, nearly everybody. There are some exceptions, of course, but I wasn't one. Very foolishly thought I could get something for nothing, and put up my money in a card game."

"And you lost?" inquired Mrs. Crosby.

"Every one but the man running the game loses sooner or later, ma'am," replied the miner. "It's run that way. I lost over a thousand dollars before I had sense enough to quit."

"Oh, then you stopped in time. I'm glad to hear that," said the farmer.

"No, I didn't. I stopped gambling, but I didn't get out of the company of the gamblers, as I should have done. I stayed right there, for I thought I knew it all. Ah, that's a true saying, that there's 'no fool like an old fool,' if you'll excuse me using such language, but I want you boys to take a lesson from me."

"Then how did you lose the rest of your fortune?" asked Jed.

"I was swindled out of it," replied Gabe Harrison. "It was partly my own fault, though. If I had had sense enough to keep away from the gamblers it wouldn't have happened. But one of them proposed a certain deal to me, and I went in with him. When it was all over I found I knew a great deal more than I did at first, but I hadn't any money left."

"They took it all?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"One man got the most of it."

"How?"

"Well, it was an old-time swindle, but I don't believe you'd understand if I told you. Such things aren't good for young people to hear about, anyhow. But I woke up one morning without a cent in my pocket, whereas the night before I had over five thousand dollars in pure gold."

"Five thousand dollars!" murmured Mr. Crosby, to whom such a sum seemed a large fortune.

"Yes. Oh, we didn't think much of that amount in the West. Money was easily made and easily spent there."

"Who got it?" asked Jed, leaning forward in his intense interest in the miner's curious story.

"One man got the most of it."

"Who was he?" inquired Will.

"He went by the name of Con Morton, but I guess he had half a dozen other titles he used whenever it was convenient. Yes, he got most of my fortune by a swindle, and then he lit out. I haven't seen him since. I wish I had. I think I could have made him give me back at least a part of it."

"Where was this?" asked Mrs. Crosby.

"Out in Nevada. Now, I'm afraid I've taken up too much of your time with my foolish story. But maybe it will be a lesson to the boys," and he looked at Jed and Will. "I don't suppose you'll ever go hunting gold, and gambling, but if you do, steer clear of any one by the name of Con Morton."

"I don't believe we'll ever get the chance to hunt gold, Mr. Harrison," replied Jed, "and we certainly won't gamble."

"Stranger things have happened – I mean about hunting gold – but I'm pretty sure if you do find any of the yellow lumps you won't be as foolish as I was, and let a swindler get them away from you. Well, I reckon I'd better be traveling along."

"Are you going to any place in particular?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No. As I told your boys when I met them looking for the runaway horse, I'm just waiting for something to turn up. I may go back West again, or I may settle down in the East. I'm looking for a job, to tell you the truth. My money is 'most gone, and I need a little to keep me going, though I don't require much to live on."

"Then why don't you stay here?" asked the farmer. "I need a man to help me with the cultivating. I can't pay much – no farmer can these times – but I'll do the best I can. If I had a man to help with the cultivating I could stir the dirt up around the crops, and it wouldn't matter quite so much about the rain. Did you ever work on a farm?"

"Once, when I was a young lad. But if my corn keeps on hurting the way it does, I know we'll have rain."

"I hope so. But would you like to stay here a few days?"

"I think so. In fact, I will. I don't care so much about the money, but I like it here, and it will give me a chance to rest. Yes, Mr. Crosby, I'll stay and help you cultivate. Maybe it will rain, and I can then help you in other ways."

"Perhaps. Then if you'll come with me I'll show you a room you can use."

And so it was settled that the old miner should remain, for the time being, at the Crosby farm.

CHAPTER V

MORE HARD LUCK

That afternoon the two boys went back to the cornfield to resume the cultivating that had been interrupted by the runaway. It seemed hotter than ever, and there was scarcely a breath of wind.

"Whew! This is fierce!" exclaimed Will. "I can't stand it!" and he mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Oh, it might be worse," observed Jed.

"Worse? I don't see how."

"You might be out on the Nevada desert that Mr. Harrison was telling about."

"That's so. Well, I'm glad I'm not. But, what do you think of him, anyhow, Jed?"

"I think he's quite a character."

"So do I. I wish I had some of the gold he dug."

"Same here. If we had that we wouldn't have to be working in this hot cornfield. Maybe we'll find some, by and by, Will."

"Find some? How?"

"Why, go after it, to be sure. Do you know, I have an idea I'd like to be a gold miner."

"A heap you know about gold mining!"

"That's all right. Every one has to learn. I guess he didn't know anything about it at first," said the stout youth.

"Perhaps not. But what chance have we to go out West in the mining country?"

"None, I guess, Will, but I can't help thinking of it. I certainly would like to go West and be a gold miner. Think of digging gold instead of potatoes."

"There's only one thing about that," replied his brother, who was not so inclined to look on the rosy side of things, "when you're digging for potatoes you go to a field where potatoes have been planted, and when you dig, you know you're going to get some."

"Well?"

"Well, when you dig for gold you have to go it blind. It may be there and it may not. Oftener not, and you have all your digging for nothing."

"So you do here, sometimes, when the drouth or too much rain has ruined the potato crop," retorted Jed. "I guess it's about an even thing, Will."

"Maybe so. But I guess dad wouldn't let us go West."

"Probably not. Come on, we'll do ten more rows each, and then it will be time to go home to supper. My! But I'm glad this day will soon be over! It's been a scorcher!"

It had been very hot, and the unclouded sun, beating down on the two lads in the cornfield, seemed to fairly be trying to shrivel them up.

"I'm done!" exclaimed Jed at length, as he reached the end of the tenth row, which he had set as his "stent."

"So'm I," added his brother a minute later. "Come on, Pete. You're moving slow on account of the run you had this morning. Hark! What's that, Jed?"

"Sounded like thunder."

The two brothers listened a moment. Off in the west there was a dull rumble, where some copper-colored clouds had gathered.

"It is thunder!" exclaimed Will. "Say, I do believe it's going to rain. Won't dad be glad!"

"He sure will," spoke Jed.

"But I'm afraid it's too late to do any good," went on Will.

"Nonsense! There you go again. Always looking on the dark side of things. Why don't you say the rain will do all sorts of good?"

"I suppose I'm not built that way. But I hope it does."

"Of course it will. Come on. Let's hurry up. I don't want to get wet."

"I'll be glad to," declared Will. "Seems as if I never was so hot. I'd like to get in a tubful of ice water and stay there an hour or so."

As the lads unhitched the horses from the cultivators, leaving the machines in the field, in readiness for the work on the next day, and started homeward with the steeds, the rumble of thunder became louder, and there were flashes of lightning in the western sky.

"She's a-coming!" cried Jed. "It'll be a corker, too, after this long dry spell."

The boys had scarcely reached home before it began to rain. First there were only a few large drops, each the size of a half dollar. There was no wind, and the crack of thunder seemed like the discharge of heavy guns.

Then the trees began to bend before the blast. The wind howled through their branches. The dust from parched fields and long dry highways rose in big clouds, making a yellow haze as the sun shone through it. Then the sky was quickly overcast with a yellow cloud. The wind blew harder. Louder crashed the thunder and then, with a rushing, hissing sound, the rain fell in torrents.

"Just in time!" cried Gabe Harrison, as the boys, having put the horses in the barn, rushed up on the side porch of the farm house. "This is going to be a great shower. I knew my old corn wasn't aching for nothing."

"I guess your corn isn't any gladder of the rain than the corn we've been cultivating all day," retorted Jed. "It was almost parched with the heat."

"This will be a godsend to us farmers," spoke Mr. Crosby, as he came out to see the storm. "It would have been worth a lot more had it come sooner, but it will save part of my crops for me."

There was another crash of thunder, and it seemed as if several clouds, right overhead, opened and let out their flood of rain, so fiercely did the big drops dash down.

"Nettie, are all the windows shut?" asked Mrs. Crosby of her daughter.

"Yes, ma. I looked to 'em when I saw the shower coming up. They're all closed."

"Are you sure you shut the one in my bedroom?"

"Yep."

"I'm afraid you didn't. I'm going to look, and make certain."

If there was one worry Mrs. Crosby had, it was that the windows were not shut when a storm came up. She was afraid of the rain coming in, and she was also afraid of lightning, for, like many country women, she believed the electrical current only waited for the chance of darting in an open window to wreak damage. So she hurried off to oversee the work her daughter had said was already done.

The storm became worse. The farmer and his two sons, who, with the old miner, were watching it from the side porch, had to go in, as a shift of the wind sent the rain into their shelter.

"Now if this will keep up all night, we'll have water enough," commented Mr. Crosby.

"Do you need as much as that?" asked Gabe.

"Yes, and more too. Half the springs around here are dried up. Our well didn't have much more water in it, and the creek was lower than I ever saw it before."

They went inside the house. Mrs. Crosby finished her supervision of the windows, and came into the sitting-room, where the others were gathered.

"Jed," she called to her eldest son, "don't sit so close to the window."

"Why not?"

"You might be struck. Lightning always comes in a window."

"But this one is closed."

"That doesn't matter. Come away, do, please."

Not wanting to worry his mother, Jed obeyed. Hardly had he moved back when there came a terrific crash. It was so loud, and sounded so close, that, for a moment, every one in the room was stunned.

"That struck somewhere around here!" cried Mr. Crosby, as soon as the rolling thunder sound had died away.

"I should say so!" added Will. "You can smell the sulphur."

There was a noticeable odor in the room, like when an old-fashioned match is lighted.

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid it hit the house!" cried Mrs. Crosby. "We'll all be killed!"

"If it struck the house we wouldn't be sitting here," replied Jed. "We'd be knocked off our chairs. Come on, Will, we'll go see what damage it did."

Following that one terrible clap the storm seemed to let up a bit, though it rained harder than ever. The two boys, taking heavy coats, from nails in the kitchen, went out. No sooner had they reached the porch than Jed cried:

"It struck our cow barn! The place is on fire! Come on and get the cow out!"

His cry was heard in the sitting-room, and his father and the miner ran out. They did not need to be told what had happened. The cow shed, a small structure, near the barn, but not attached to it, was in flames.

"We must save the cow!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby. "She's worth fifty dollars!"

The men and boys rushed to the little stable. The lightning had torn out one complete side, and it was burning fiercely in spite of the drenching rain. But one look inside showed Mr. Crosby that more bad luck had come to him. Though the rain had arrived in time to save part of his crops, the lightning had struck the cow, and the poor creature was stretched out dead on the floor of the small stable.

CHAPTER VI

THE GOLD STRIKE

"You can't save that cow, Mr. Crosby!" cried Gabe Harrison. "Come on, boys, get pails and we'll see if we can't put out the fire! Where's there a well or a cistern?"

"Right over this way," replied Jed.

"More trouble!" exclaimed Mr. Crosby bitterly, as he saw his property being consumed by the flames, and thought of the dead cow.

Soon the two boys and the old miner had secured buckets and were dashing water on the flames. They might have saved themselves the trouble, however, for there came such a deluge of rain a few minutes later that the fire was extinguished.

"Well, I guess we can't do any more good out here," observed Mr. Harrison.

"No, nothing more can burn in this storm," added Will. "Lucky it didn't strike the barn."

"That's so," agreed Jed. "This is as close as I want lightning to come to me."

"It's too bad about your cow, friend Crosby," spoke the miner, as the four splashed through the water and mud back to the house.

"Indeed it is," admitted the farmer. "She was a valuable animal, and supplied us with all our milk and butter. Now I'll have to buy a new one, and I don't see where I'm going to get the money these hard times."

The boys felt their father's loss keenly, and they wished they could do something to aid him. When they reached the house they found Mrs. Crosby on the verge of hysterics, with her daughter vainly trying to quiet her.

"Some one is killed! I know there is!" exclaimed the nervous woman. "I'm sure some one is killed!"

"Only the cow, mother," replied Jed. "It might have been worse. We still have the pigs left. They seemed to like this rain, for they're out in the open part of their pen, getting a good soaking."

"Oh, Jed! How can you joke at such a serious time as this?" asked Nettie, reproachfully.

"Might as well joke as cry," answered her brother.

"That's the right view to take of it," put in old Gabe. "Always look on the bright side of things. Of course, it's too bad to lose a valuable cow, but it might have been worse. I had a partner prospecting with me once. He got careless with some dynamite, and it blowed our shanty to pieces. We had narrow escapes. But do you think my partner worried over it? Not a bit. He said he was thinking of building a new shanty, anyhow, and the dynamite blast saved him the trouble of tearing the old one down."

"That must be a dreadful country, out in the mining region," remarked Mrs. Crosby, who had somewhat recovered her composure.

"Oh, it's no worse than lots of other places, ma'am. If a man, or a boy either, for that matter, behaves himself and minds his own business, he'll get along all right. I wish I was back there, that's what I do. But listen to that rain! It's a regular cloudburst. I guess you'll get all you want, Mr. Crosby."

"Yes, the rain will do all sorts of good."

"That'll make up for the cow, dad," put in Jed, determined to look on the less gloomy side. "Then we can sell the hide to the butcher, so it won't be a total loss."

But when, a day or so later, the dead cow was sold for the hide, only a small sum was realized. As Mr. Crosby could not afford money for another animal, the family had to buy milk and butter of a neighbor.

Gabe Harrison remained at the farm, for there was plenty of work to do, as, following the rain, a big crop of weeds sprang up, and had to be hoed down. This labor the old miner could do very well, and for a week Mr. Crosby, his two sons, and Mr. Harrison were kept very busy.

But even the rain could not make up for the long dry spell, and it did not need a very expert farmer to see that only about three-quarters of the usual crop could be harvested from the Crosby place.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a hard time this winter," remarked the farmer to his wife one night, after the others had gone to bed. "Pork is going to be high, and so is feed, as there was a short crop of hay, and the horses eat an awful lot."

"It's too bad. What can we do?"

"I don't know, Debby. Sometimes I'm tempted to sell out and go to some other place."

"Where do you mean?"

"Well, down South or farther West. I've been struggling along for several years now, working hard, and barely making a living. I can't get a dollar ahead, try with all my might."

"Yes, you do work terribly hard, Enos. I wish you didn't have to."

"Oh, I don't mind the work. It's the lack of returns that I'm dissatisfied with. You work hard for that matter, and so do the boys."

"And Nettie does her share. Poor girl, she wants a new dress very much to wear to the Sunday-school picnic next week."

"I wish I could get it for her, but I don't see how I can. Money is dreadfully scarce, and I can't borrow any more. I suppose I could sell one of the pigs –"

"No, I wouldn't think of that," objected his wife. "We'll need them for pork this winter. Nothing like pork to see you through a hard winter. Nettie will have to wear the old dress. Maybe I can turn it again, though the land knows I've done that twice already. But she'll not complain."

"No, she's a good girl, and my boys are good boys. If they don't have all that lads of their age should, they don't make long faces over it. Maybe times will be better soon."

"Are you going to keep Mr. Harrison much longer?"

"No. I think I'll have to let him go next week. I need his help, but I can't afford to pay him. He works for less than a younger man would, and he does almost as much. But the boys and I will have to get along as best we can."

Though the dry spell was broken there came other troubles for Mr. Crosby. Some of the corn became affected with a fungous disease called "smut," and part of that crop was worthless. The potatoes too began to rot in the ground, and things looked very gloomy indeed. Mr. Harrison took his dismissal good-naturedly. He said he expected to travel on, anyhow, and he was not particular where he stayed.

The week he was to leave, things were rather dull on the farm. All the work it was possible to do had been attended to, and it was only necessary to wait for the maturing of the various crops before harvesting them.

There was one spot of brightness in all this gloom. A big field of barley, which Mr. Crosby had not thought would amount to much, turned out a much larger crop than he expected. Then there happened to be a short supply of that particular grain in that section of the country, and the price went up, unexpectedly.

"Maybe things won't be so bad, after all," said the farmer, on hearing this news. "I was to the city to-day, and I had an offer from a big dealer for my barley. I was about to take it when another man offered me much more. This shows there is going to be a big demand for it, and I'm going to hold on to mine. If I can get a little more per bushel than the last offer, it will see me through the winter nicely, and leave a bit over."

"Well, that certainly is good news," said Mr. Harrison. "I'm glad I heard it before I left, for I'll be thinking of you people often this winter."

"Oh, I almost forgot about it," spoke Mr. Crosby. "I stopped at the post-office on my way home, and here's a letter for you."

"For me?" inquired the old miner in some surprise. "I wonder who can be writing to me?"

"The best way is to open it and then you can tell," said Jed, with a smile.

"Oh, I know now. It's from Ted Jordan. I know his writing. It's like a hen that stepped in an ink bottle and then tried to do a dance. Wonder what he's writing to me for from away out in Montana?"

He tore open the envelope.

"How did he know your address?" asked Will.

"Oh, I sent him one of them souvenir postcards as soon as I got here. I done it more for a joke. Sent him one with a picture of a farmer on it, and told him I'd gone to tilling land for a living. But let's see what he says I'll read you the letter. Guess there's nothing very private in it, and Ted is a jolly chap.

"Dear Gabe," read the old miner. "Sorry to hear you got so down on your luck you had to turn farmer. Your picture don't look a bit like you, but I suppose the crows have been picking at you. Say, I have great news for you. Old Sim Butterfield, the fellow that had one ear bit off in a fight, got into trouble with a gambler out here the other day, and now the other ear is gone."

"How terrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Crosby.

"Oh, jest as like as not 'tain't true, ma'am. Ted is a terrible joker. But what's this?"

Mr. Harrison had turned to the last page of the letter and was earnestly reading it.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "There has been a big strike made near Dizzy Gulch. I'm going there, and so are a lot of the boys. Better chuck up your farming and join us. The new diggings are as rich as butter. Shall I stake out a claim for you?"

No one said anything for a few seconds. This unexpected news from the West, coming into that quiet farmhouse, was like a glimpse into another world. Jed was staring curiously at Gabe. Will's eyes were big with wonder at hearing of men who were about to set off in a quest for gold.

"Do you suppose that's a joke?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"No, sir!" exclaimed Gabe, firmly. "Ted Jordan don't joke about such a serious subject as prospecting for gold. This settles it. I'm going out there as fast as I can make tracks for the West. I'm glad I saved my old pick now. It'll come in handy. Yes, sir, I'm off for Dizzy Gulch!"

Jed had risen to his feet. He was strangely excited.

"Do you suppose there'd be gold enough out there for any other persons, Mr. Harrison?" he asked.

"Enough? Of course there'll be! If it's any kind of a strike at all, it's a good one, or Ted Jordan wouldn't be going. But why do you ask?"

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