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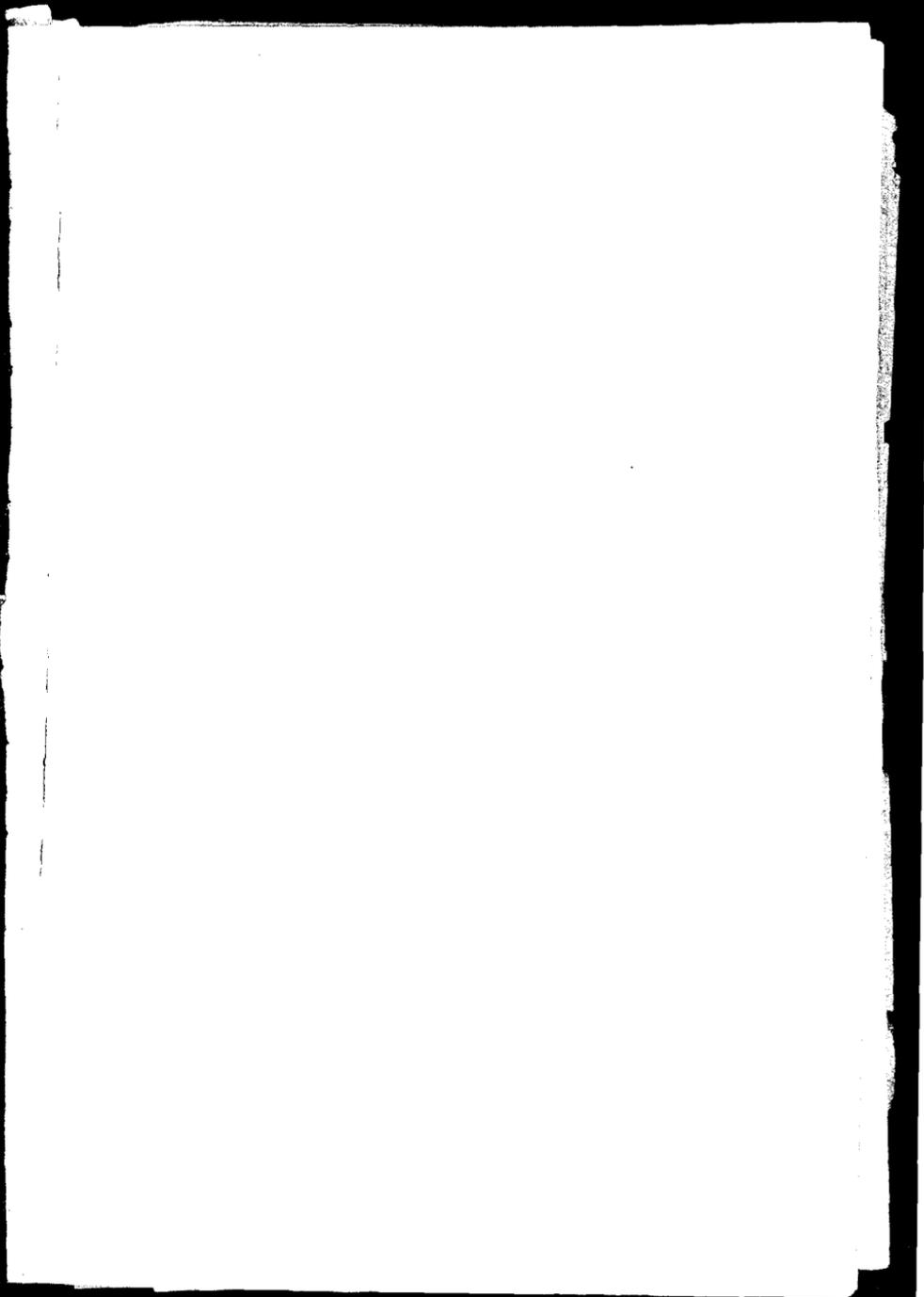


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PAGES MISSING

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He rolled this out in a deep, hoarse chant, and if ever a man looked like a pirate and a cutthroat, it was he. He put his left hand on his hip, the other on the butt of a pistol in his belt, and swung from side to side as he sang. Starboard Sam, who was just behind, pricked up his ears at the sound of the song and pushed forward for a better view of the man's face. I saw a look of surprise come into Sam's eyes, but he said nothing.

A small, yellow-faced, weazened man whom I had not noticed before, was walking just in front of the strange sailor. As the big fellow swaggered about he knocked against the little man. The latter turned upon him and cursed him in a foreign tongue.

"Don't get so riled, Pedro," said the sailor, "'cause if ye say much more ye might get the day-lights knocked out o' ye."

The little man shrank back, for the sailor spoke in a savage tone. The latter burst out again:

"Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
As I sailed."

Then he bent his knee, drew up his right foot and gave the little man a violent kick on the shin. The victim made a hissing sound like a cat, and snatched a crooked-bladed knife from somewhere in his clothes. But before he could use it the sailor struck him a violent blow on the wrist and the knife flew into the street. Then he seized the little man's hands in both his powerful ones and twisted his wrists until I almost thought I could hear the bones crack.

The little man's face became yellower and more ghastly than ever and he screamed with the pain. His countenance fell before the malevolent gaze of the sailor and his form shrank and drooped as if the spirit and life had quite gone out of him. It was not pain alone that mastered him, but inborn fear which no effort of the will could control. His face expressed hatred and dread of the man who held him in his grip. Then in his foreign tongue he begged piteously for mercy. I could not understand a word, but what he meant was too plain to be mistaken.

"Don't ye sass me ag'in, Pedro," said the sailor, "or I'll t'ar ye in pieces same ez ef I wuz a shark!"

He was putting an extra twist on the man's wrists, when a tall gaunt figure strode forward, two hands seized the sailor by the shoulder and hurled him back with a force which tore him loose from the little man and sent him reeling against the theatre.

The newcomer was Pike, and involuntarily Henry and I exclaimed, "Hurrah!"

The big sailor remained for a moment against the side of the building, glaring with murderous eyes at Pike, while the little yellow man ran forward, seized one of Pike's hands in both of his, and in a voluble fashion began to pour out what sounded like thanks.

"Don't hol' my hand," said Pike, pulling loose, "I may need it in a minute."

And it certainly looked as if he would, for the big sailor had now drawn a knife. He meant murder. His face showed it plainly, but Pike was too quick for him, for before he could use his blade, the muzzle of a horse pistol was swinging within a foot of his nose.

"You're a leetle slow at this sort uv game," said Pike. "In fact, you ain't in it at all this time."

And the big frontiersman laughed a deep, dry chuckle away down in his throat. The sailor fingered the hilt of his knife and glowered. But all his glowering did him no good. The muzzle of that big horse pistol still swung under his nose, and the weapon seemed to be at least two feet long.

"What business is it o' yours?" growled out the sailor.

"It's anybody's business," returned Pike, "when a big man's imposin' on a leetle un, an' I'm 'tendin' to my business, as you kin see."

A number of people had gathered around, and there was a chorus of approval at these words. Several other pistols were drawn, and one friendly voice said:

"Ef yer need any help, pardner, in polishin' off the big scoundrel with the picturs on him, jest call on me."

It was apparent which way the sympathies of the crowd lay, and the sailor recognized that fact. With

an air that he intended for careless gayety, though the evil look did not go out of his eyes, he thrust the knife back in his belt and said in an offhand manner:

“Wa'al pardner, hev it your way, I don't mind. Ef you want to take this little yaller devil under your pertection, 'tain't no business o' mine. Only he don't want to come interferin' with me and givin' sass to a gen'leman who hez sailed all the seas an' ain't afraid o' nobody, no, not he

“Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,

As I sailed.

Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,

And God's laws I did forbid,

As I sailed.

As I sailed, as I sailed.”

Then he looked around at us with a gaze which seemed to defy heaven and hell together.

Pike let his pistol swing by his side, though he still held it in a tight grip, as if to be ready to use it at a moment's notice.

“Now be off, lettle un,” he said to the yellow-faced man, “an' keep away from this feller, or next time thar may not be anybody to interfere fur ye.”

The little man dived away in the crowd and the darkness. The sailor's eyes followed his retreating form until it disappeared. Then he turned to us, gave us a low bow, as if we were the dearest friends he had in the world, and said:

“Now, gen'lemen, I've had the delight o' your company fur most five minutes, and so I'm that much richer in experience. I don't know your names. Kain't say that I want to. But if the big gen'leman with the pistol thar is through, and hain't more to say on the pints under dispute, or nuthin' else, I'll go, much as it pains me to t'ar myself from sech delightful company; from the most elegant gen'lemen I've met in all my travels, which hev purty nigh kivered this big round earth, ef I do say it myself.”

“I guess I've said all I wanted to say, an' just ez I wanted to say it,” said Pike, grimly, in reply to this long speech.

“Then let me compliment ye on hevin' things ez ye

want to hev 'em," said the sailor, "an', now gen'lemen, I must t'ar myself away."

Thus speaking, he bowed low again, while the expression of his face grew more villainous than ever, and walked away, singing :

" And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed."

"I'd advise you to keep your hand on your pistol, Pike, when that fellow is around," said Henry, as we walked home in the dark.

"You're mor'n half right about thet, Kid," said Pike. "Wasn't he a peculiar-lookin' imp, though."

"He ees a devil!" exclaimed Bonneau, with great energy. "He ees like the Sicilian bravo. He will stick a knife in your back, Monsieur Pike, ven you not thinking of him. Look out for yourself, Monsieur Pike."

"You bet I'll do that," said Pike.

We talked of nothing but the sailor until we reached our room. Starboard Sam alone was silent. I was sure that he was keeping back something, but I said nothing until we came to the room. Then I said, in order to draw him out :

"Sam, why are you so quiet? Have you been struck by lightning?"

"The next thing to it," replied Sam. "I know that pirate that wanted to put the dirk in Pike."

"You know him!" exclaimed Pike, in great surprise. "Then who wuz he?"

"Hank Halftrigger," replied Sam.

"Hank Halftrigger?" asked Pike. "An' who in tarnation is Hank Halftrigger?"

"You lads jest make yourselves comferble," replied Sam, "an' I'll tell ye."

We sat down on the empty nail kegs which served us as chairs, and were ready to hear Sam's story.

CHAPTER II.

STARBOARD SAM'S STORY.



“LADS,” began Sam, sinking his voice into a husky whisper, which he always affected when he wished to be impressive or was himself impressed with what he was saying, “ye all know I’ve sailed the seas since I wuz knee high to a duck. Wa’al, a man who sails the seas ez long ez I hev will see lots o’ things that he’ll never forgit. All kinds o’ critters are on the seas ez well ez in it.

“It wuz nigh onto fifteen years ago when I wuz on a whalin’ ship, the Nancy Jane out o’ New Bedford. A fine ship wuz the Nancy Jane, an’ Capt’in Ephraim Hawkins, who commanded her, wuz ez fine a man an’ ez brave a man ez ever harpooned a whale or thrashed a landlubber, beggin’ the pardin’ o’ you four, who are landlubbers yourselves.

“Wa’al, the Nancy Jane went roun’ Cape Horn an’ beat down through the South Seas. We passed the tropical islands, stoppin’ now an’ then to take on water an’ fruit and to barter with the natives. One day when we wuz at anchor in a bay in one o’ the purtiest little islands I ever did see, a chief comes to us and sez thar’s another ship on the other side o’ the island. It had white men in it, he said, and they wuz actin’ kind o’ curious. They had took on water, but then they staid thar, why he didn’t know. They had nuthin’ to sell, and didn’t want to buy nuthin’, but they staid right thar at anchor, nobody comin’ on shore ’cept the capt’in an’ the mate, an’ no natives never bein’ ’lowed to go on the vessel.

“This yarn stirred up Capt’in Hawkins’s curiosity mightily. White men wuz mighty sc’ace in that part o’ the world them times, and is yet, I reckon, an’

besides, thar curious way o' doin' wuz enough to make us want to know what they wuz erbout. So Capt'in Hawkins sez to me, me bein' the fust mate :

“ ‘ What do ye think o' it, Sam? ’

“ ‘ Pirates, most likely, ’ sez I.

“ ‘ Hadn't we orter go see? ’

“ ‘ We're huntin' whales, but we ain't dodgin' pirates ef they git in our way. ’

“ ‘ Nuff said. ’

“ Capt'in Hawkins wuzn't the man to dodge a scrimmage, not him. Fact wuz, he'd ruther run to one than run away from it, bein' thet he was a mighty pious an' religious man o' the old Puritan kind. The Nancy Jane was full handed, an' she carried forrards ez purty an' eighteen-pounder brass cannon ez ever you did see, an' down in her cabin thar wuz er long rack full o' rifles an' pistols and sabres. Thar wuz no tellin' what you'd meet in the South Seas them days, an' the Nancy Jane went provided, she did. So we set sail and skimmed 'round the island, kinder lookin' for a brush and kinder hopin' we'd git it, fur every man in the Nancy Jane knew how to handle a weepin, and some o' 'em had done it, too, in thar time.

“ Wa'al, we got 'roun' the next day after we started, and thar, shore nuff, through the glass we saw the strange ship lyin' in a little cove. When we fust spied her she seemed mighty quiet an' peaceful like, but afore we'd come nigh the captain, who hed the glass, began to bustle about er bit, ez ef he seed suthin' unusual.

“ ‘ What is it, Captain? ’ I asks.

“ ‘ Thar's a signal o' distress flyin' from her peak, ’ sez he.

“ He took another good and long look, an' then he sez ter me:

“ ‘ Sam, see thet ther 18-pounder is ready, and ye'd better hev Tom Landrail standin' by her. He's the best gunner in the crew. I can't make out the character o' that craft, but suthin's wrong aboard her. Sarve out the weepins to the men. ’

“ Wa'al, we swept up with that signal o' distress

still flyin' from the strange craft. Thar war two or three men about the decks, but they seemed to pay no sort o' attention to us. We manœuvred about a bit in order to get a good look at the ship, an' then, not bein' able to make out nuthin' more, the capt'in gave the order to lay us alongside.

"Jest ez we hove up a tall, slim, preacher-lookin' man came up the companion way an' hailed us.

" 'What ship is this?' asked our capt'in.

" 'It's the bark John Allen, of Bostin.'

" 'What be your business?'

" 'Tradin' among the South Sea Islands.'

" 'Who put up that signal o' distress?'

" 'I did.'

" 'Are you the capt'in?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Wa'al,' said our capt'in, 'we're ready to help you; what kin we do?'

"The preacher chap kinder hesitated and shuffled his feet about. He looked at us kinder uneasy like, an' then back behind him ez ef he wuz afeared o' suthin'.

"Jest then another man come up the companion way. He wuz big an' broad, an' he had the ugliest an' evilest lookin' face I ever saw. Thar wuz er big scar on one side o' it and er big burn on t'other side. That wuz Hank Halftrigger, an' when he come up the capt'in shrank afore him jest ez thet little yeller man we saw to-night wuz afeared o' him, and couldn't meet his eye.

" 'What do you want?' said Halftrigger to us.

" 'I'm talkin' to your capt'in,' said our capt'in, angry-like. 'An' kin I ask who are you?'

" 'I'm Hank Halftrigger, o' Bostin,' said the ugly imp, 'an' I ask you ag'in what d'ye want comin' up alongside a peaceful tradin' vessel this way an' threatenin' murder?'

"Our men, all armed, were standin' near, right in plain view.

" 'Thar's a signal o' distress flyin' from your mast-head,' said our capt'in, 'an' your capt'in hez jest told

me he h'isted it. Now, I tell ye, I ain't goin' away until I know what's the matter aboard this vessel.'

"Then our capt'in shet his teeth down ez ef he meant it, an' you can bet he did, too. Halftrigger looked at our deck, an' when he saw all our men standin' thar with weepins in thar hands an' never sayin' er word, but jest lookin' ez ef they wuz itchin' fur er scrap, his eyes hed a villainous flash an' his throat swelled up jest ez they did to-night when he looked into the muzzle o' Pike's pistol. All the time ther preacher-lookin' cove whut wuz capt'in wuz shakin' ez of thar wuzn't a pinch o' sand in his gizzard.

"Look out,' said our capt'in. 'I'm comin' aboard an' I want an explanation o' this here thing.'

"It's all er mistake, ain't it, Capt'in Parker?' said Halftrigger, lookin' very threatenin' like at his own capt'in. 'You meant just ter run up the flag, an' not that thar signal, didn't you, Capt'in Parker?'

"He looked at thet poor, cowardly capt'in ez ef he'd bore two holes right through him with them gimlet eyes o' hisn. The Capt'in wuz all a-wobble, an' dern my eyes ef he didn't speak up, an' sez he:

"Yes, it wuz all er mistake. I thought I wuz runnin' up the flag o' our country, an' I must be half blin', shore, fur I run up thet signal instead without ever seein' the difference.'

"I wuz shore thet wuz er lie, an' I could tell by the look o' Capt'in Hawkins's face thet he thought jest ez I did.

"Thet's er mighty curious tale you tell,' said Capt'in Hawkins. 'That signal o' distress hez been flyin' fur some time, fur I seed it ez soon ez I came in sight. When I came alongside I sez, who histed that signal o' distress? an' you sez you did. Your tales don't 'gree.'

"Oh, the Capt'in misunderstood you,' spoke up Halftrigger, 'I kin vouch fur that.'

"I don't think your vouchin' is eny good,' said Capt'in Hawkins, 'an' I don't like the looks o' things here at all. I'm comin' aboard to get er better understandin'.'

"This is our vessel,' said Halftrigger, puttin' his

hand on the hilt o' er knife in his belt, 'yer come on board at your peril.'

"Now, thet wuz the wrong way to talk to Capt'in Hawkins, ez brave er man ez ever harpooned er whale, an' er pious man, too, an' his temper fired up like er flash o' powder.

"'Stan' by ther cannon thar, Landrail,' sez he. 'I'm goin' aboard this pirate, an' ef any one o' em raises a weepin blow 'em to Kingdom come.'

"Halftrigger saw thet he meant it, and thet Landrail would pull the lock whenever Capt'in Hawkins said the word. He looked ez ef he didn't know what to do, and then thet limber-jinted Capt'in o' his broke out, sayin' in ther most excited an' appealin' manner.

"'Don't quarrel, gentlemen! Don't quarrel! Its all right, it was a mistake, nothing but a mistake! I'm Captain of this vessel, and Mr. Halftrigger here is the first mate, one of the best, too, that a ship ever had. He wouldn't tell a falsehood!'

"Halftrigger looked at him and grinned, and then the capt'in seemed ter be wus skeard than ever, jest like er bird thet's tremblin' afore a rattlesnake.

"But Capt'in Hawkins had his min' made up. He said he wus a-goin' aboard o' that bark, and aboard o' her he went, me an' half er dozen sailors, all armed, a-goin' with him. Wa'al, we didn't find nuthin' wrong, at which Capt'in Hawkins—an' we, too—wus mightily disappointed. Thar wus er crew o' erbout er dozen men, most o' 'em nigh erbout ez ugly an' evil-lookin' ez Halftrigger. They slouched erbout an' give us mighty short answers when we questioned 'em, an' thet limber-j'inted captain followed right erlong behind us, a-beggin' us not to make no trouble an' a-swearin' all the time that his fust mate, Hank Halftrigger, wus the finest Christian gen'leman thet ever went erboard ship. We didn't pay no 'tention to him, but we searched the ship through an' through, an' findin' no evidence ag'inst anybody we had to leave.

"Ez we went on board the Nancy Jane, Halftrigger sez to us:

"'When we git back to port you'll hev to pay for

this! Overhaulin' our ship an' searchin' her! Why it's piracy; that's what it is!

" 'I'll risk that,' said Capt'in Hawkins. 'An' ez fur pirates, I mor'en half believe you are one or inten' to be one.'

" 'Oh, ye think I'm er pirate, do ye?' said Halftrigger, with er snarlin' kind o' laugh. 'Then he bust out all at once with thet song we heard him singin' ter-night:

" 'Oh, my name is Capt'in Kidd,

As I sailed.

Oh, my name is Capt'in Kidd,

And God's laws I did forbid,

As I sailed.

As I sailed, as I sailed.'

" 'He leered at us, an' I'd mor'en half er min' to let him have a bullet, but I knowed that'd never do, an' I did nuthin' and said nuthin'. Wa'al, we watched thet ship fur three days' but we couldn't see nuthin' wrong with her 'cept her lyin' thar in the cove when she hed no business thar. We couldn't stay any longer to watch her. So we set sail an' left fur the South fur whales.

" 'Bout nine months after that we stopped in Valparaiso on our home voyage fur supplies. While we wus thar er ship come inter port, an' ez soon ez Capt'in Hawkins clapped eyes on her he said.

" 'Thet's the bark John Allen, thet we boarded down among the islands, an' I'm goin' aboard her to see what's happened.'

" 'He lowered er boat right erway, an' takin' me an' four sailors pulled to the bark, which wus the John Allen, shore 'nuff. When we reached her who should poke his head over her side but thet devil, Halftrigger. He knew us at the fust glance, an' he called out:

" 'Oh, it's the pirate Capt'in, is it? What d'ye want?'

" 'You said you'd hev me up fur a-bordin' ye when ye got back to port,' sez Cap'tin Hawkins. 'I wanted to tell ye I'm here, an' that now's your chance.'

" 'Oh, thet's all, is it?' said Halftrigger, with a grin. 'We'll let thet pass now. I guess I kin furgive ye.'

" 'I want to see the Capt'in,' said Capt'in Hawkins.

" 'You're a-seein' him right now.'

" 'I ain't.'

" 'Ain't you a-lookin' at me?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Well, I'm the Capt'in.'

" 'Whut hez become o' Capt'in Parker?' demanded Capt'in Hawkins.

" 'Oh, he tuk sick o' er fever down on one o' the islands, and died,' said Halftrigger, ez cool ez er cake o' ice, an' three or four o' the sailors tuck sick o' the same thing, an' died, too. So I, bein' fust mate, become capt'in o' the ship, an' right here I am now, matey, capt'in o' the stout bark John Allen. Now then my gay cocksparrer, whut are ye a-goin' to do erbout it?'

" Capt'in Hawkins reported the case and his suspicions to the port officials, and they investigated, but could make nuthin' out o' it. We met Halftrigger and some o' his men on shore three or four times, an' whenever he saw us he'd cock his hat over on the side o' his head and grin and sing that infernal song o' his:

'Oh, my name is Capt'in Kidd,
As I sailed.'

" 'When we left, the John Allen was still in Valparaiso, an' I never seed or heard o' any o' her crew again until we met Hank Halftrigger ternight. I stood back whar he cotldn't see me, but I don' think he'd a-knowed me anyway, ez I ain't got er face that's marked like his'n.

" 'Thar ain't no direct evidence ag'inst him, but, just as shore ez I'm a-settin' here and a-seein' you, that feller murdered his capt'in and seized that bark. He's a pirate, jest ez his song says. Capt'in Hawkins was shore o' it, too, an' the last time I seed him he said ter me:

" 'Sam, I guess I'll have a lot o' things to repent on when I comes to my dying bed, an' one 'll be our failin' to seize the John Allen an' save that capt'in's life, for he was murdered, shore.'"

CHAPTER III.

THE MANILA MAN.



TARBOARD SAM'S tale interested us deeply, but we could make nothing out of it, and the next morning the preparations for our departure drove the matter out of our heads, for before going to bed we had decided that we must take a new start right away. It was time to stave off the lethargy that was creeping over us

and numbing all our energies. We had no well concerted plan, but we would leave immediately for a new gold region, which, so it was reported, had been found in the foothills. We could make our preparations in one day and start on the following morning.

About noon Pike and I went out together to a general store to buy some provisions for the journey. On our way back we heard the tap-tap of light footsteps behind us. We paid no attention, thinking it was merely some ordinary pedestrian who happened to be going in the same direction we were, for we had no exclusive right to the streets of San Francisco. But presently a light hand was laid upon Pike's arm, and as we faced around the hunter exclaimed:

"Wa'al, blame me ef it ain't our little friend uv last night!"

Sure enough, it was the man who had shrunk and cowered so much in Halftrigger's grasp. In the full light of day he looked smaller and yellower and more weazened than ever.

"I don't know your name, my friend," said Pike, "but ef thar's anythin' I kin do fur you, I'm at your sarvice."

The little man smiled, rubbed his hands together, and said in fairly good English, though he had talked in a foreign tongue the night before:

"Pedro not want any favor. Him come to do favor for you."

"Do us a favor!" said Pike in surprise. "What kin you do fur us?"

"Perhaps more than you t'ink, Mr. Pike. Ah, you see I know your name. And I know that of your young frien', too, Mr. Fielding."

"Wa'al, you've sartinly hit us off right," said Pike, "an' ef you want to do us er sarvice we ain't the boys to drive you away. We're needin' suthin' uv that kind bad nuff just now. Whut is it?"

"I go with you to your room, your house. I tell you there. I no want any one to see me talkin' with you on the street."

The man looked all around him, like a rat caught in a trap, and again his whole form seemed to shrivel up with fear.

"Who are yer lookin' fur?" asked Pike, impatiently. "Is it thet fellow, Halftrigger?"

The man nodded.

"Don't be afraid uv him," said Pike, "even ef he is erbout we'll take keer uv yer."

"Ah, I know that you not fear him," said the little man. "Did I not behold how you held him back with your pistol last night? But I not want him to know at any time that I have been talkin' with you an' your frien's."

"Wa'al, come along," said Pike, good-naturedly. "You kin go up to our room with us an' tell us about this great favor you're goin' to do us."

So we went to our room, the little man walking behind us, and looking uneasily about him all the time. When we arrived we found Henry, Sam and Bonneau there, making up our packs for the journey.

When the door was shut behind us and we were cut off from the observation of any one outside, the little man brightened up and the marks of fear passed out of his face.

"These are frien's uv ours," said Pike, waving his hand at Henry, Sam and Bonneau. "They belong to our party, an' whut you say to us they'll share."

"It is very well," said the man. "I also have seen them before, and what I say is for them, too."

Starboard Sam looked attentively at the stranger, as if he were sizing him up.

"You're a Manila man, I guess," he said.

"Ah, it is right," said the stranger. "Such I am. A sailor am I, too, and I came to California from Manila to hunt the bright gold."

"Been in the Philippines myself," said Sam, phlegmatically, "an' I've seen your kind all through them islands an' seas. Don't make bad sailors, either, sometimes."

The little man smiled at the compliment, and then sat down on a nail key that we tendered him.

"I come to tell you a great tale," he began, without any preliminaries. "It be true tale, too, for I did see what I tell of. I came also to get your help, which will be of great profit to you. First, I ask that you will keep secret the great tale I tell you."

"Oh, yes," said Pike, lightly. "Now come along to the point, friend."

"Now," said the Manila man, and for the first time his glance was direct and his face showed some spirit, I, Pedro, of Manila, have foun' a river full of gold, an' I ask you to go with me an' help get it."

"What!" shouted Pike. "You say you've found a river full of gold?"

"Yes," said the little man, and his form expanded. "I, Pedro, of Manila, have foun' the river full of gold, when so many others have not foun' gold at all. Ah, it is there, heaps of it, plenty to make us all rich. An' I will lead you there an' we will divide it—Pedro of Manila and his new friend's."

The man's emphasis and evident sincerity excited us all. I felt the gold fever bubbling with renewed vigor in my veins.

"Why have you come to us, who are strangers, with this secret?" asked Pike cautiously.

"I must have help," said Pedro. "The place is far. There be many dangers on the way. Then I cannot get the beautiful yellow gold out by myself."

An' if I could get it out, I could not bring it away; just one man. I must have friends, a strong party, or I can do nothing. I come to you and ask you to go with me."

"But I don't see why you picked us out," said Pike, doubtfully. "You never saw us but once, an' that wuzn't under circumstances that was calkylated to extend our acquaintance."

"Ah!" said Pedro, "I know but one other in all California, an' I not like him at all. You help me once. I see you be brave. I need men who be brave to help me, so it natural that I come to you. I not know other to come to."

"Wa'al that does stan' to reason," said Pike, "though this is kinder suddint, as the man said when the bull tossed him over the fence. You said thar was one other man that you knowed. Is thet man Half-trigger?"

"Yes," said Pedro, shivering.

"You're afeard uv him, ain't you?" said Pike bluntly.

The Manila man bowed.

"He's got some kin' uv a hold on you, hezn't he?"

"I be afraid of him," said the Manila man simply.

"Wa'al," said Pike, "we'll drop Half-trigger fur the present an' git back to that river full uv gold. The gold is a blamed sight more interestin' subject ter me, an' I 'xpect it is to the boys here, too. Whar did you say all thet gold is?"

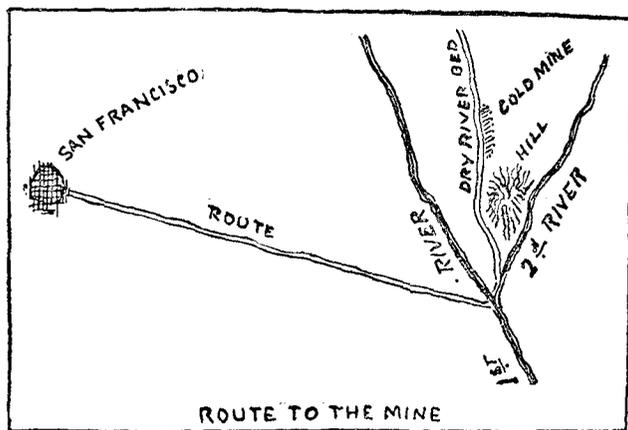
"Many miles from here," said Pedro, who recovered his courage when the subject of Half-trigger was dropped, "one, two, three, four, six, ten days' journey. Cannot tell exactly, but can lead you there. Now, you look an' I draw lines on paper here, which show you, so."

And he drew a pencil and a sheet of paper from his pocket, and while we looked on he drew a rude diagram something like this:*

"This straight line that run off to the southeast," he said, "be the journey from San Francisco. It go

*See map on following page

across hill, valley, plain, mountain, take two weeks, three weeks for man ridin' mule; then come to river runnin' through narrow valley. Right there another but little river run into this river. Go up second river half-day's journey, and there come to river bed dry in summer time. When rain comes water run down this bed into the second little river. Go up dry bed one, two, three miles and there you come where it



curve right aroun' rocky hill. Half-mile beyond rocky hill dig down in dry river bed an' there we fin' gold, beautiful gold, much of it, nuggets an' grains, plenty for all of us."

The man's yellow, shrivelled face was transformed as he spoke. He had a case of the gold fever worse than any of ours.

"Now," said Pike, who was still a doubting Thomas, or at least pretended to be, "all this is mighty interestin', but how do you know the gold is thar? That is what we want to find out."

"I have seen the gold with these eyes," said Pedro, putting a finger on each eye.

"You've seen it, ah?" said Pike. "Wa'al, will you tell us how thet happened?"

"It is this," said Pedro. "I hear away off in my own country about the beautiful gold in California, an' I come across the ocean to fin' it, too. I go out with others sometimes, and sometimes alone, an' I hunt for the beautiful gold. Men say it is often foun' in the dry river beds, an' one day when I alone I dig in the dry river bed, where I tell you, an' there I fin' the beautiful gold, much of it. But I see other men, bad men, not far away, an' I fear if I tell them what I fin' they kill me. So I say nothin'. But they watch me an' think I fin' somethin', an' I not able to go to my gold any more 'unless they see. At last I come back here, and then in week or two I see them here, too, an' I know they not fin' my gold. Nobody else have foun' it either. It waitin' there for me and my frien's. You come go with me."

"Wa'al whut yer say sounds purty straight," said Pike. "It's got ther right sort uv ring to it. Fur my part I kin say I believe you, Pedro."

"And I," said Henry.

"Certainelee! Certainelee!" said Bonneau.

"Gospel truth," said Sam.

"I believe it too," said I.

"Thar," said Pike, "you kin hear what all the boys think about you."

The Manila man bowed with exaggerated Oriental politeness, and his face expressed much gratification.

"I be proud," he said, "to know that you and your frien's believe my words."

"Now," said Pike we want to clear up all the groun' as we go erlong. So we'll go back to thet feller Half-trigger. We want to understan' you. We want you to understan' us. Why're ye afraid uv him? What sort uv power hez he got over yer."

"He knows that I have foun' the river full of gold," said Pedro.

All of us uttered exclamations of mingled surprise and annoyance. We forsoaw a formidable antagonist in Half-trigger.

"Does he know where the gold is?" I asked.

"Not the very place," said Pedro. "He not be able to go there without I lead. All he know is that it be off yonder."

He made a sweeping gesture in the direction in which the treasure lay according to his description.

"How happens it that he knows of your discovery?"

"Ah, I foolish," he replied, "I tell him. Very sorry now. But can't help it."

"How wuz it," asked Pike. "Spin us the yarn."

"It long story," said the Manila man shrinking still further down on the nail keg, until he looked in the sputtering light of our single tallow candle like a frightened ape. "I know him over there [gesturing in the direction of the East Indies] long time ago. Work on same ship with him. He be bad, very bad man. He carry a long knife and people fear him, for he kills. Meet him here again when come back to city after I fin' the gold. He know me and ask me what I doin' here. I tell him somethin' and he not believe me. He taps knife in his belt and say he kill me if I no tell truth. Then Pedro grow frightened and tell Halftrigger he foun' gold, but not tell 'xactly where. Then Halftrigger follow him 'roun all time to make him tell very place."

"And you have refused to tell?" I asked.

"Not tell him," replied Pedro shrewdly, "an' he not kill me because if he kill me secret of gold perish, too."

"Well, that's certainly sound reasoning!" exclaimed Henry.

"When he fin' I not tell him," continued Pedro, "he say go with me and we divide gold, but I not do that. Because we get gold, and then Halftrigger kill me. He want it all."

"Your reasoning on that point is as sound as ever," said Henry, "or, at least, I think so from what we have seen of this man Halftrigger."

Pike leaned his great head on his hand and for a few moments was in deep meditation apparently. Then he spoke up:

"You're afeared, now, Pedro, ain't you, that this Halftrigger who 'cordin' to all accounts an' 'cordin' ter his look, too, is a reg'lar cutthroat, will foller yer erbout an' ef he fin's you've gone pardners with us, will stick er knife in yer?"

Pedro nodded.

"I don't think," resumed Pike, "that any uv us five is afeared uv Halftrigger. We've fit Injuns and bars an' starvation and purty nigh everythin' else, an' we ain't ter be stood off by a critter like him. Now, we want ter do this thing in reg'lar business-like fashion an' know jest whar we stan'. Boys, you've heard Pedro's tale about the gold. You've all said you believed it. You've also heard what he said about Halftrigger. You know he's a bad chap. He may get a gang an' try to lay us out. Shall we j'ine with Pedro, become pardners with him an' help him git that gold, or shall we keep clear uv the hull thing?"

"We'll go with him!" all of us exclaimed, instantly.

"You hear 'em?" said Pike, with a satisfied smile. "No flinchin' about this crowd uv mine, I tell you."

The Manila man nodded his head again and again to show his pleasure.

"We must ratify our treaty!" exclaimed Henry, with enthusiasm. "Draw your pistols, boys!"

Influenced by the fever for gold and Henry's romantic enthusiasm, we drew those necessary implements, and following his lead, waved them around our heads with magnificent flourishes. Then we clicked all five muzzles together as men click their glasses at a banquet when they are going to drink a toast.

"Now," said Henry, "hurrah! for Pedro and his river full of gold, and may good luck be ours!"

We repeated the words after him, and then, when this somewhat boyish burst of enthusiasm had subsided, we sank into our accustomed seats on the nail kegs.

Pedro seemed to comprehend the nature of our compact.

"Ah, we stick together!" he said. "We divide the trouble. I take you to the gold, and you do the fighting, if fighting must be done."

There was a general laugh at this, and Pike said, good humoredly:

"All right, old fellow. We'll take that part uv the job on our hands. Fightin' don't seem to be in your line uv business."

Pedro was not at all offended at this frank remark. In fact he made no pretensions whatever to courage.

Pedro said he slept in a little cuddy hole in a back street, and we decided to escort him home, as he seemed to see Halftrigger's shadow everywhere. But before going we arranged he should join us early in the morning, and then, our preparations having been completed, we would start at once for the gold.

Starboard Sam, Bonneau and I undertook to see Pedro safe in his own home.

The night was rather clear and though it was late, we passed many men in the streets, some sober, some drunk, some quiet, some noisy.

"Ef on our way to your place we should meet your frien' Halftrigger," said Sam to Pedro, "I guess we kin take keer uv you."

Pedro uttered something that sounded like a prayer. Sam's remark was wholly in jest, but as we turned a corner into the narrow little street or rather alley in which Pedro lived, a large man sauntered out of the shadow of some buildings and, standing at the edge of the sidewalk, looked fixedly at us. Then he cocked his head defiantly on one side and sang:

"Oh, my name is Captain Kidd
As I sailed,
Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed,
And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed, as I sailed."

Pedro shivered with dread and shrank back behind us

"Eh! ye'er thar, Pedro, are ye?" said Halftrigger sneeringly. "I see ye're gittin' new frien's in this country an' are a-desartin' yer old ones. Now, Pedro I say, it's mighty onkin' in yer to treat an old an';

faithful shipmate like me in this slightin' manner. What do you mean by it anyway, Pedro?"

Pedro did not reply. Indeed, I think the man was too much frightened to utter a word. But Sam spoke up:

"I don't see whut business uv yours it is, Mr. Halftrigger, ef Pedro leaves his old fren's an' gits new ones. You see Pedro's taste is risin'."

"Oh, it's you, one of that hunter's gang, is it?" said Halftrigger. "When I left you last night I was a-hopin' it would be the last time I'd ever see any of you. My taste is a-risin', too."

I thought it was time to put in a word, and I said:

"Come on, Sam. What this man does is nothing to us, and what we do is nothing to him. There is no need for us to waste time here."

"Them's fine words uv yours, my gay cocksparrer," said Halftrigger, "but they don't go down with me. I'm afraid you're a-leadin' my frien' Pedro inter wickedness. An' ez I'm his guardeen, seein' he's so fur from home I kain't trust him in the hands uv sech tough sinners ez you be, beggin' yer pardin, gen'lemen, for sech plain speakin', seein', however, ez it is necessary under the sarcumstances. Come along o' me, Pedro, an' I'll take you home to your mother."

He leered viciously at Pedro, who shrank still further back behind us.

"Come along, Pedro," continued Halftrigger, with the same malicious grin, "'cos ye're out mighty late."

"Never mind him, Pedro," said I, taking a step forward. "You're going with us."

"Oh, so he's j'ined your gang, hez he?" said Halftrigger. "I guessed ez much when I saw yer comin' up. He's told yer about thet little fin' o' gold he's made, hez he? An' he's taken this crowd inter partnership, a-leaving me out in the cold. Now, Pedro, I wouldn't a thought that uv ye. Goin' back on an old shipmate in thet sort o' fashion. Pedro, how could ye a-done it?"

Halftrigger laughed and hummed another line of his song, as if the whole matter were the merest trifle. But his covert glance at us was murderous.

"You seem to be frank at least," I said.

"Ain't I right," he replied. "Hezn't he told you about the gold?"

"Yes, he hez," said Sam, "but I don't see how that concerns you."

"It concerns me jest this much," said Halftrigger. "Half uv thet gold is mine, 'cos I wuz Pedro's fust pardner, an' in course it huts me mightily to hev to give it up. But sense you gen'lemen hev took my place, I guess I must give in."

His whole appearance belied his words, for he had set his fist, and certainly none of us believed him for a moment. He gave us a deep bow and moved for us to pass on, saying:

"Gen'lemen, I wish you luck, an' I hope thet Pedro an' all o' ye won't furgit Hank Halftrigger, a poor fellow, who ye hev cut out o' his fortin'. Come on, Pete. This is Spanish Pete, gen'lemen, a friend o' mine, who feels about this thing ez I do." As he spoke these words a short, thick, dark man walked out of the shadow and joined him. I noted the new-comer well. Halftrigger bowed to us again.

I interpreted his bow as a menacing gesture, but said nothing, and we walked on and left them there, and the last we heard from them, as the darkness shut them out, was the defiant words of Halftrigger's pirate song.

We went on to Pedro's door, but we found the little man too much frightened to be left there alone. So, after a short consultation, we decided to take him back with us to our quarters and keep him there. We returned by another route in order to avoid Halftrigger, not on our own account, but for the sake of Pedro. We saw nothing of him, and when we reached our place we gave Pedro a pallet in the corner, and soon were asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

GONE!



We hastened our preparations the next morning for the journey after the gold of the hidden mine. Weapons were the first and most important consideration in those times, for a man's life was at risk wherever he went, and it was his own business to defend it. There were few chances that anybody else would do it for him. A weakling had no business to be in California in the first flush of the gold fever. We had the rifles and pistols which had served us so well on the plains, for we never knew when we would have to use them again.

We laid in a plentiful store of ammunition, and then we bought six stout mules, of a rather dwarfed and stumpy kind, more like donkeys or burros than the fine big mules one sees in the East. But they were faithful little beasts, and they were as tough as if they were made of so much wrought steel. These animals were for combination uses. We would ride them part of the time—that is, when we needed rest—but the chief duty for which they were reserved was to bear back to San Francisco, on their backs, all that beautiful gold of which Pedro talked with so much enthusiasm. We made up in packs the few mining tools which we would need, and then strapped the baggage across the backs of the mules.

These purchases nearly exhausted our supplies of money, and we were anxious to get away from San Francisco as soon as possible and enter the wilderness, where it would cost us nothing to live.

Pedro stuck close to us while these preparations were being made. He helped a little, but he was not an adept at such things. Probably he would have been of more use aboard ship.

When everything was nearly ready we left the mules at a stable and went to a restaurant to get a good square dinner before leaving San Francisco. Pedro did not wish to go with us. He wanted to prepare one of his own foreign dishes just to suit himself, and he said he would do it at our room. So Pike and I took him there and, promising to return for him soon, went back to the restaurant.

As we were the only people in the place, we talked very freely about our forthcoming adventure, which we hoped, and believed, too, would make us all rich men. We were in great spirits. Even the saturnine Pike talked boyishly of the mule-loads of gold we would bring back to San Francisco.

He mixed us a fine toddy—a Kentucky mint julep, he called it—and we drank to Henry's toast:

"Here's to the hidden mine, and may it not be hidden long from us!"

And enthusiastic little Bonneau added:

"And may we find gold enough to buy all ze beautiful Paris and divide it among ourselves, if we want it!"

To which toast we drank as heartily as to the first, though none of us, save Bonneau, had ever seen Paris.

The dinner over, Pike suggested that he and I go for Pedro, and then start at once for the country. So we walked around to the room, and as we pushed open the door, Pike called out cheerily:

"Wa'al, Pedro, my boy, all's ready now, an' we're off fur that gold."

There was no reply, and Pike exclaimed in astonishment:

"Why, whar's Pedro?"

The Manila man was not in the room.

"By gosh," said Pike, "I'd never a-thought that little feller would get up spunk 'nuff to go out uv this room by hisself. He'll be shore ter think every man he met wuz Halftrigger. I guess sence he's gone thar's nuthin' fur us to do about it but to set here and wait tell he comes back."

I thought it very curious that Pedro should have

gone out, and was annoyed, too, as he was delaying us. Still there was nothing to do, as Pike said, but sit down and wait for him. I was just about to make myself comfortable on one of the nail kegs when some marks attracted my attention. Scrawled across the head of the keg with a piece of chalk were these words:

“ Pedro sezs he’s sorry to part with sech fine gents as ye are, but he’s made up his mind that his old frien’ Hank Halftrigger is the the truest and best frien’ he’s got, and that he’s sorry fur havin’ deserted him. So he’s repented in time and jined him agin to carry out future good works. Your obedient servant,

HANK HALFTRIGGER.”

All the man’s devilish impudence and wickedness flashed upon me, and I fear I uttered something very much like an oath.

“ Wa’al, I’ll be flabbergasted!” exclaimed Pike, sinking down on a keg, while a look of consternation overspread his face.

There was a cause for consternation. Our guide and the real owner of the gold, for he had found it, was gone and was in the hands of his enemy. Never, even in the first moments of our surprise, did I think that Pedro had gone willingly with the sailor. His fear and detestation of him had been too evident. The whole thing was plain to me. Hank Halftrigger had watched us, and when he saw that Pedro was left in the house alone he had entered and bullied the poor wretch, until, frightened out of his senses, he had gone off with our enemy.

“ What fools we were ever to have left him alone for a minute!” I said.

“ You’re callin’ us by the right name, boy,” said Pike. “ I wish you’d take that piece uv chalk Halftrigger hez left on the floor thar and write ‘ fool’ right across the middle uv my forehead. I want it in great big letters ‘ F-o-o-l.’ I don’t think I kin feel satisfied until that word is thar.”

I did not obey Pike’s request, but for the time I was dazed at this sudden overturning of all our fine plans.

“ What are we to do?” said I, weakly.

"I think we'd better git the rest uv ther boys and hold a council uv war on this here thing," said Pike. "We're pards you see, and all ought to have a hearing."

This was sensible advice, and it was acted upon immediately. Pike remained in the room, while I went after the others. They were as much dismayed as we had been when they heard the news.

"Now, boys," said Pike, when we all gathered in the room, "you know just what happened. What are we ter do?"

"I don't think thar's but one thing fur us to do," said Starboard Sam, "an' that's to hunt up that pirate and rescue Pedro."

"That's the way I think," said Henry. "Pedro's life is safe, even from that villain Halftrigger, because he knows the secret of the mine. Besides he is not a child to be kidnapped and carried off from the city without anybody finding it out."

"It seems that he was kidnapped from this room very handily," I said.

"That's a different matter," replied Henry, "but now that we are here on guard, I don't see how he can lug him out of the city and escape our observation."

"The kid's cuttin' to ther core an' I think ef we watch good, Halftrigger won't slip past us. It's settled that we've got to git Pedro back, ain't it. I aint fur givin' up 'till this chase fur a minute," said Pike.

"Nor I!"

"Nor I!"

"Nor I!"

"Nor I!"

"This from the others.

"W'ad it'll be mighty curious," said Pike, "ef we kain't find that little beathen ag'in. Ef the critter hed any sent my spunk hisself, he'd break loose an' come back an' jine us. But I don't suppose we must 'spect such luck ez that. Why, he'd shake ez ef he felt a Mississippi River chill the minute Halftrigger raised his little finger."

We might have made a noise about the kidnapping

of the Manila man and have notified the city authorities, but that, we feared, would involve the disclosure of the secret of the gold. Then half the town would be trying to beat us to the mine. That would never do. We were agreed on that point. We had no fears for Pedro's safety, for his life was as valuable to Halftrigger as it was to us.

We unpacked our baggage and brought it back to the room. Our mules we left at the stable, for we hoped that we would need them again in a day or two. Then we began at once to search for Pedro. For several days we hunted through every part of the town. We went through all the saloons and dives, but nowhere could we find a trace of Pedro and Halftrigger. They could not have disappeared more completely if they had been sunk to the bottom of the sea. Halftrigger was known at several places, but none of the occupants had seen him for some time. We were compelled to be very guarded in our inquiries for fear of attracting intrusive and unpleasant attention to our affairs. Still we were able to ascertain, as we thought, that no persons answering to the description of Pedro and Halftrigger had left the city. We were forced to the conclusion that they were still there, though they had managed to elude our search in some manner.

"I'm clean beat," said Pike, on the morning of the fourth day, "an' I'd a never thought a thing like it could a happened. The idee of a man allowin' another man to carry him off an' keep him hid just ez ef he wuz a monkey or a parrot."

Pike's features expressed the most intense disgust, and I think if he could have found Pedro then, glad as he would have been to see him, he would have given him a trouncing.

"I vote we let 'em go," resumed Pike, presently.

"What do you mean?" I asked in surprise. "Give up the gold and let that fellow Halftrigger have it?"

"Not by a darned sight," he replied, "but ez we kain't find em, what's the matter with our strikin' out on the hunt on our own hook. We've got that diagram Pedro drawed fur us, an' I'm willin' to bet that

if we follow his descriptions we kin find the dry river bed, and then the gold."

"But would that be treating Pedro fairly?" Henry asked. "The gold is really his by right of discovery, and, besides, he is in the power of Halftrigger, whom he fears and hates. Ought we to leave him there? It seems to me there are two reasons, each a very strong one, why we should remain here and continue the search for him either until we find him or ascertain that he has gone."

"I guess you're right about it," said Pike, scratching his head. "We won't go back on the little feller, even ef he ain't got no more grit than a baby."

We continued the search for two days without result and then Starboard Sam made a proposition:

"I'm thinkin', lads," said he, thet Halftrigger will try to get out o' this town by water. I wonder we didn't think of it afore. It's easy 'nuff fur him and his crew to git a boat, take Pedro with 'em, and then after goin' outside the bay, drop down the coast a bit an' lan'. Ef they slipped past us thet way we could never find a trace o' them."

This view of the case impressed us all. It would be the natural thing for Halftrigger, who had spent most of his life on the water, to take to it again in case of an emergency.

Consequently we agreed to begin a patrol of the water front also the next morning. We took the chances on his slipping out before that time.

This Pike and I did, while Henry, Sam and Bonneau continued the search through the town. There was plenty of shipping about San Francisco then, barks, barkentines, schooners and all sorts of vessels, the names of which I don't know, for I have been a landsman all my life. Some were loading for the Sandwich Islands, some for Mexico and others for up and down the coast. Using one excuse and another, we asked the masters of the coasters whether they were going to take any passengers. Sometimes the answers were civil and sometimes they were very uncivil. But invariably we persisted and got the information. Of

course, it would have been easy enough for a master to have deceived us, and we were compelled to form our opinion of what they said from the manner of the men.

Our bad luck continued throughout the day, but the next morning we resumed the task as diligently as ever. It was near the noon hour, and we concluded to knock off for a bit and get something to eat. As we turned away from a rickety wharf on which we had been standing Pike said:

"From the way that feller over thar is dodgin' about he's hidin' from somebody, jest ez Halftrigger an' his crowd are hidin' from us."

"What fellow?" I asked, for I had not noticed any one who was attempting to evade observation.

"Don't you see him over thar," said Pike, "dodgin' along by that wooden fence?"

As he spoke he pointed a long forefinger, and I had a good look at a dark, thick figure just as it turned a corner. But that one look set all my pulses beating.

"That's Spanish Pete! The man was with Half-trigger the other night," I whispered hurriedly to Pike, as I started to follow the fellow. But here the veteran hunter's coolness and caution held me back.

"Hold on, Joe, my boy," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "We won't let that varmint know we're follerin' him. Go easy now."

I felt the justice of his caution, for I would have rushed off helter skelter after the Spaniard. Pike took the lead, and, sauntering along as if we had no cares on earth, we reached the corner around which we had seen the Spaniard disappear. There was a long, straight stretch of street before us, and our man was not fifty feet ahead, slouching along and casting suspicious glances about him.

"Keep well behind me," said Pike. "The fellow has never seen me afore, and he mustn't hev a chance to recognize you. Don't 'pear to be a pardner uv mine, but slouch along ez ef you never seed me afore. Now foller, an' it's a dollar to a nickel we find out somethin' worth knowin' about

this gang we're tryin' to run down. But be shore you watch what you're about, an' don't let him by any chance see you."

Pike sauntered carelessly along, and obedient to his instructions I kept the big form of the hunter between our quarry and me. For more than half an hour we moved through the crowded streets, Pike following the Spaniard, while I followed Pike. Our course lay near the bay, and at first through a rather thickly populated part of the town. The Spaniard would stop occasionally and look about him as if he feared he was being followed. Then I would keep well behind Pike or shrink into a doorway, while the hunter, with better powers of acting than I ever gave him credit for before, would stalk along in the gawky manner of a countryman among strange and interesting scenes. The Spaniard must have noticed Pike more than once, but apparently his suspicions concerning him were not aroused—at least not then.

We approached presently the outskirts of the town, and here the Spaniard stopped for a longer time than usual. I had stepped behind a shanty which luckily was near, in time to prevent his noticing me. But he made a long survey of Pike, and even at the distance I could see a suspicious look on his sinister face. He hesitated for a minute or two and then he came towards Pike.

Pike stood in the street staring about him with the open-mouthed interest of a green countryman. The Spaniard came up and abruptly asked:

"Why do you follow me?"

An expression of stupid wonder spread over Pike's face.

"Say, now, stranger, that is mighty cur'us people in this town. What fur do you think I follow you?" drawled Pike.

"That is what you have been doing," said the Spaniard with emphasis.

Pike leaned against an empty dry-goods box and laughed such a long and loud laugh that the Spaniard's black eyes snapped with anger.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked. "I see nothing that is amusing."

"Thar be such cur'us people in this cur'us town," said Pike. "I've come all the way from ole Missouri to fill my pockets full uv gold that people all say is jest layin' 'roun' loose in Californy, waitin' and hopin' fur people to pick it up. An' when I come out to look at the town, jest havin' arriv, you say I'm follerin' you. What fur, stranger, do you think I'm follerin' you? Hev you got a gold mine somewhars that you want to keep hid from everybody; I don't reckon you'd be so skairt 'bout people follerin' you ef you didn't hev somethin' uv the kind."

The Spaniard looked keenly at Pike, but the hunter's expression was as vacant as a calf's. He stood awkwardly, his great, burly form hanging on its frame as loosely as the clothing on a scarecrow. He thoroughly looked the role he was playing, that of a heavy lout.

"I know nothing about any gold," said the Spaniard. "I wish I did."

"I tell you what," said Pike, with an appearance of great enthusiasm. "You look like a right smart feller. Less me an' you be pardners, an' find enough gold to fill a house. I'll give you half."

"I believe you are a fool," said the Spaniard, bluntly.

"Shucks! that don't make me mad," said Pike with a vacuous grin. "Lots uv people back in ole Missouri hev told me that same thing. I'm used ter that, I am, an' you kaint hurt my feelin's."

Then Pike laughed uproariously, and snapped his fingers, making a noise like the cracking of a whip lash.

"I am not hunting for gold," said the Spaniard disdainfully, "and if I were I would not want a fool like you to help me."

So saying he turned and strode away.

"Guess I threwed him off the scent that time," Pike called back to me.

"I must compliment you on your acting, Pike," I

said, "I did not know it was one of your accomplishments."

"We'll talk about that another time," said Pike. "Now we've got to track that feller to the headquarters uv the gang, which will be hard to do 'cause he's on the watch, an' we can't foller him ez we've been doin'. Here, you, boy you, come here!"

Pike addressed the latter words to a ragged, stumpy, but keen-faced boy of about twelve, who was loafing near.

"What d'ye want, mister?" asked the boy, who was a street Arab of the most pronounced type.

"Do you see that man ahead?" asked Pike, pointing to Spanish Pete, who was still in view.

"Yep," said the boy laconically. "Wat's de matter wid de cove?"

"I want you to foller him."

"W'y don't yer do it yersef?"

"We don't want him to see us. You foller him. Don't go near him, but don't let him git out uv yer sight. Then we'll foller you."

"What's it worth?" asked the boy.

"Five dollars," said Pike pulling out a gold half eagle.

"Fork over," said the boy.

Pike handed him the coin. He looked at it critically a moment, thrust it into his pocket and said:

"You're white, pardner. I'll swing to that feller if he foots it till ter-morrer night."

"Don't let him know you're followin' him," said Pike.

"I ain't ez soft ez that," said the boy scornfully, as he darted after the Spaniard, whose figure was now growing indistinct.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT WE FOUND.



THE boy played his part with skill. He slouched along, skipping stones now and then at some object, and then thrusting his hands in his pockets and whistling. But he never lost sight of his man. At first we staid so far behind him that Spanish Pete was lost to our view, but for the sake of caution we moved up two or three times to see the Spaniard still stalking on ahead. Thus we formed a kind of chain of observation, and as we were at one end of the chain and the Spaniard was at the other, we felt safe from further scrutiny from him.

The Spaniard's course still led near the edge of the bay, and soon we passed out of the town. He must have noticed the boy whistling and skipping stones but the sight of a ragamuffin was not likely to attract attention. He stopped and looked back two or three times, as if he wished to see whether Pike was following him. The advantage of having the boy as a proxy was evident.

For an hour we walked steadily on.

"What do you think of it?" I asked Pike.

"The chase is gittin' hot," he replied. "No doubt uv it. That feller wouldn't walk out here jest fur his health. They've got a camp out here somewhars an' that Spaniard is leadin' us to it. I hope the boy won't lose him."

"No danger!" I said, "that youngster is too smart for anything of that kind."

We were in the country now, in a quite lonely region, too, and the boy was walking so fast that it was an effort to keep in sight of him, for he skimmed over the ground like an antelope. By and by he stopped near the brow of a little hill and beckoned to us. While he waited we hurried up.

"Thar's your friend in the cove down thar," he said, "an' he's got company, too. I guess this is his stoppin' place."

Standing behind some trees, which offered good concealment, we looked over the brow of the hill. Below us was a little cove or inlet of the bay, almost concealed by a dense and overhanging foliage. At the verge of the water we saw Spanish Pete, Halftrigger and a third man whom neither of us had ever seen before. This third man had nothing special in his appearance. He was just such a thug as we could find loafing around any of the San Francisco dives. But he was a big, strong fellow, and his weapons were not concealed. We looked eagerly for Pedro, but he was not there. Tied to a bush was a boat with a large sail. The boat seemed to have room enough in it for a dozen persons.

"What luck!" whispered Pike to me. "They mean to go down the coast in that boat. Wa'al they kin go, but they won't take Pedro with 'em ef we kin help it, an' I think we kin."

"I guess the trail's ended for me here, ain't it, pards?" asked the boy. "Is my job over?"

"Yes," said Pike, "and you've earned your money, too, sonny."

"All right," said the boy, "I don't know what your lead is, but luck to you, pards."

He waved his hand nonchalantly, walked back in the direction of the town and we never saw him again.

Halftrigger and his friends were making up packages and stowing them in the boat. They were so much engrossed in their occupation and evidently had so little fear of observation that they talked quite freely and in unguarded voices. We were not near enough to hear all they said, but we caught enough to learn that the departure would be made that night, and that Pedro and two others would join them in the cove.

"An' then," we heard Halftrigger say exultantly, "we'll be off after the gold, an' that hunter fellow an' his gang can suck thar thumbs an' cry, ef they want ter."

Then in his glee he sang his favorite pirate song.

"Pedro ud like ter go off with that hunter's gang ef I'd let him," said Halftriggerger in a louder voice than usual; "but he won't get the chance. We need Pedro in this little job we've got on hand don't we, Pete? Sooner than let him get away I'd give him a few inches of this."

He held up a formidable dirk as he spoke, and laughed with real enjoyment. The Spaniard laughed, too, and said:

"He'll not get away from you."

"Not now," added Halftriggerger, "but when he's taken us to that mine of his things will change. We won't need Pedro half so bad then as we do now, eh, Pete?"

Then all three of the men laughed hideously. I saw that Pedro's rescue would be for his own sake as well as ours.

It was now within an hour of sunset, and Pike, leaning over to me, whispered:

"I'll stay here an' watch 'em, Joe, while you go back after the rest uv the boys. You kin lead 'em straight to the place, kaint you?"

I nodded my head.

"An' tell 'em to come purvided," said Pike, "far thar's no tellin' what'll happen to-night. Halftriggerger ain't got no scruples about bloodlettin', an' the others with him look jest ez bad. Now, be off with you, an' don't bother erbout me. I kin take keer uv myself. You'll fin' me here when you come back."

Fortunately I found the remainder of our party at the room, and my news set them on edge with excitement. We made our preparations in two minutes, and then we started back to the cove. It was dusk when we left the house, but I had no difficulty in finding the way. We trudged along, silent but watchful, and soon drew near the cove.

As we cautiously climbed the hill overlooking the water we heard the sound of voices, and I discovered Halftriggerger's among them. I had feared that Pedro and the others might arrive, and that the whole party would

depart before my return, but the voices reassured me. As we approached the brow of the hill Pike's sibilant whisper greeted us:

"It's all right," he said, stepping from the shadow of a tree trunk. "Pedro an' the others haven't come yet."

Pike took his natural place as commander of our party, and we disposed ourselves about the hill. The darkness and the thick foliage afforded effective concealment, and we had no fear of premature discovery. The moon came out, and its bright light fell on the party below us in the cove. While lying in the shadow ourselves we could watch all their movements with ease. They finished their arrangements and sat down in the boat to wait for the others. Some time passed thus, and Halftrigger began to grow impatient.

"I wonder what's keepin' the lazy dogs," he said, with a look of anger on his sinister face.

"They will be here very soon," said Spanish Pete.

Halftrigger growled, but made no intelligible reply.

Another half hour passed and Halftrigger was in a ferocious temper.

"Them fellers need shakin' up," he said, rising, "an' I'll do it fur 'em. I'm goin' to meet 'em and hurry 'em along."

The other two offered no objection, and Halftrigger, stepping heavily, as if he would like to crush the laggards under his feet, came up the hill in our direction.

"What shall we do?" I whispered to Pike who was crouched within two feet of me.

"Let him pass," he replied. "We ain't got no reason fur stoppin' him now, fur he'll be back soon with the rest uv his crowd."

Halftrigger passed very near us, the moonlight falling on his evil face and deepening its repulsive look. We heard him for some time tearing along through the undergrowth. Then there was silence on the hill and in the cove, for Spanish Pete and the other ruffians ceased to talk. In about three-quarters of an hour we heard footsteps in the direction whence Halftrigger had gone. Pike put his ear to the earth and said:

"Thar's a lot uv 'em. That's purty sure to be Halftrigger, with Pedro and the rest uv the gang."

I was nervous with excitement, and I asked Pike what was to be our plan of operations.

"We'll hev to wait an' see." He merely replied.

The noise of footsteps approached, and presently we could discern a number of figures. The size and swinging gait showed that the first was Halftrigger. Behind him came a little man, who was soon near enough for us to see the face of Pedro. The others, five or six of them, were hulking fellows. One looked like a sailor and all were well armed.

"Come along, Pedro," said Halftrigger, taking the Manila man by the arm. You're in the han's o' your best fr'en's, an' we're goin' to give you a nice little sail fur the benefit o' yer health. You've been kinder feeble and pinin' lately, an' we think too much o' you ter let yer waste away."

Then he laughed a creepy laugh, and I could see the Manila man pull back, though Halftrigger brought him up again with a jerk.

"Now, boys," said Pike, in a low tone to his command, "when I rise up you follow, an' wait my orders."

The men were nearly on us when Pike rose from the bush, and we did likewise. The gigantic form of the frontiersman towered directly in front of Halftrigger, and he started back with an exclamation, in which surprise and anger struggled for the mastery. He looked around and glowered at us, but we stood still, awaiting Pike's orders.

"What are you doin' here?" he asked, in a voice thick with passion.

"We've come for our friend, who you've got thar," said Pike calmly, pointing to Pedro.

The Manila man's joy at our appearance was unbounded, and he would have rushed over and joined us, but Halftrigger put his hand on his arm and held him so tightly that his face was contorted with pain.

"Why are you puttin' your nose into what's none o' your business?" demanded Halftrigger.

"I'm not goin' to talk long," said Pike. "But we

want Pedro, thar, and he'd ruther go with us, ez you know, and you're trying ter kidnap him."

"Seems ter me you're talkin' 'nuff, anyway," rejoined Halftrigger. "You've got a big 'nuff gift o' gab to be a sea lawyer. S'pose I don't give Pedro up, what then? I've got more men than you've got."

"All right," said Pike. "If you want to make trouble erbout it an' use pistols an' sech like unpleasant tools, do it, but I guess you'll fin' that my crowd is better at them things than your'n is."

Halftrigger looked us over, but he saw that we had the advantage. We stood facing him and were ready. Two of his men were on the other side of the hill, and with divided forces he was taken at a great disadvantage. It seemed that a violent discussion of the matter could end in but one way.

Then in the moonlight I saw Halftrigger's expression change. His face relaxed, and at last he burst into a laugh.

"Wa'al, lads," he said in a hearty tone, "you've beat me this time. I'm willin' to acknowledge when I'm beat, an' I like a good enemy. None o' your half-an' half sort o' fellers fur me. I've done my best to carcumvent ye, but it wuzn't ez good ez your best, an' I failed. I don't bear malice, let's shake an' fergit all."

He held out his hand, and before I knew what I was doing I was shaking it heartily.

"Go along with yer friends, Pedro," he said, giving the Manila man a push in our direction. "I ain't got no more claim on ye. My title to yer services is no good an' I give ye up."

There was even a kindly ring in Halftrigger's voice. Pedro hastily came over and ranged himself behind us.

"Ye'll find me ez fair ez a friend ez I wuz ez an enemy," continued Halftrigger, "an' in departin' I'd like to say I wish ye luck. The gold's your'n an' I hope Pedro 'll take ye to it straight an' shore. Come on, lads."

He beckoned to his followers, and they strode down

the hill towards the boat. I was so astonished at the man's change of manner that I could think of nothing to say.

"Don't trust him," Sam whispered to Pike; "he's a pirate still, an' when we start fur that gold we've got to watch fur Halftrigger an' his gang."

Halftrigger reached the boat and said something to the others waiting there. Then they got into the boat, and as they hoisted the sail Halftrigger called to us in a cheerful voice:

"Luck to you, lads; an' to you, Pedro, 'specially!"

The strong breeze blowing over the water filled the sail and the boat sheered off. Halftrigger was standing up like a commander among his men. The moonlight was bright and we could see every movement he made. He was intently watching us as we stood on the brow of the hill.

Suddenly Halftrigger bent over and took something from the bottom of the boat. When he straightened up again he held a rifle in his hand. In a loud voice he shouted:

"That's fur you, Pedro!"

He raised the rifle as quick as a flash and fired; Pedro gasped and sank to the ground. His face looked ghastly in the moonlight.

I think that every one of us uttered some exclamation of horror at the treacherous deed, and then we rushed to Pedro's aid. Blood was coming from his mouth, and the last summons was already written too plainly on his face.

After he had taken one look at Pedro Pike drew a pistol and, running forward, fired at Halftrigger. But the boat was sailing rapidly and the distance was now too great. The bullet splashed in the water and fell twenty feet short of the mark. Halftrigger held up his empty rifle and waved it derisively at us. Pike ground out a curse, but he could do nothing.

We propped Pedro up against a tree, but the bullet had gone through his chest, and he had but a few minutes to live. Though in his death agony, he looked gratefully at us.

"Go, find the gold," he gasped, pointing off in the direction in which the hidden mine lay. "Halftrigger has description of place, too. But it was all mine, and I give it to you."

"How did Halftrigger obtain that description?" I asked in surprise.

"He—he frightened me," gasped the dying man. "Said he would kill me if I didn't tell him, and I—I told. Go, you get to the mine first. I, who found it, give the gold to you."

Then Pedro's head fell over and he died as easily as a little child, the moonbeams filtering through the leaves and throwing a silver light over his dead face.

"Poor fellow!" said Pike, looking down sadly at him, "he didn't hev backbone 'nuff fur Californy, but he meant right."

Out on the bay the boat containing the murderer and his fellow-ruffians had dwindled to a speck and was soon out of sight.

"We ought to dispose of the body," said Henry.

"Yes; an' ez soon ez we do that," said Pike, "we'll start fur the mine. It's our'n now. Pedro left it to us, an' we'll beat Halftrigger thar or somethin' 'll break."

There was no dissenting voice. The gold fever bubbled as vigorously as ever in our veins.

Two of us went back to the town and obtained picks from our miner's packs, and with these we dug a grave and gave Pedro decent burial on the very hill where he had fallen. We covered the fresh earth with leaves and shrubs, and it was daylight when we reached the town again.

But we did not stop for rest and sleep that day. As soon as we could put our packs on our mules we were off for the hidden mine.

CHAPTER VI.

WE LEAVE FOR THE MINE.



OUR departure from San Francisco attracted little notice. Parties were leaving every day for the mines, and as we had not sought to make acquaintances during our stay in the town, I imagine that we were not greatly missed. Now and then some one would hail us as we passed, but

always we had a ready reply.

"Which way, boys?" called a man who was leaning against a post enjoying the sunshine.

"Off there," answered Pike, making a wide circular sweep with his hand. His "off there" indicated any point of the compass a man might choose.

"Must have a fine prospect, you are so secret about it," retorted the man, good-naturedly.

"Nuff fur the hull uv 'Frisco,'" replied Pike. "You jist wait thar a'ginst that post till we git back, so we'll know whar to find you, an' we'll give you your share. Fill every pocket you've got full uv gold."

"All right," called the man. "You'll find me right here with my Sunday clothes on and a double set of pockets in 'em."

We had more than one such encounter as this, but they meant nothing. It was merely the easy familiarity of the town. Soon we left the houses behind us, and were out in the open. We meant to skirt the bay for a considerable distance and then we would make a bee line across the country—that is, if the mountains and rivers would let us—for the hidden mine.

The stimulating breezes and the charming and picturesque region through which our route lay soon had their effect upon us and our spirits rose. I am afraid the death of poor Pedro did not weigh as heavily upon

us as it should have done. But he had been so lacking in spirit and all the characteristics of a man that somehow we could not regret him greatly. As Pike truly said when he lay dying at our feet the night before, he did not have backbone enough for the California of that day.

We were all on foot, while the mules carrying the baggage and part of our arms trotted along by our side. Pike and I were in front. On this expedition, as on our former one, when we crossed the plains, Pike looked upon me as his lieutenant, and I dropped naturally into that position. Indeed, Pike himself had never been made captain of the party by election, but had become such because of his supreme fitness and with our silent but unanimous consent and approval.

"You've got Pedro's diagram of the mine safe, haven't you?" I asked of the hunter.

"Yes," he said, slapping his waist, "it's right here, next to my hide, an' the man who gits it away from me will hev to lay me out fust."

In reality I did not think a great deal of the diagram, as it was so crude. We could follow Pedro's verbal directions almost as well, but I thought it best to keep it in our possession.

"I guess that cutthroat, Halftrigger, hev got er copy uv this," said Pike. "Pity Pedro hadn't had more backbone. He might be alive now an' joggin' erlong with us."

"What do you think of our chances for beating Halftrigger?" I asked.

"Fust rate," replied Pike. "All the good thar boat could do 'em wuz to git 'em out uv 'Frisco an' our reach. They kaint foller no river to thet mine. They've got to lan' somewhars purty soon an' cut across country, same ez we're doin'. They've got jest the same information about the mine that we hev, and it'll be nip an' tuck atween us who gits thar fust."

"We'll do our best, won't we?" I said.

"You bet we will," replied Pike, cheerily, "fur we're boun' to beat them fellers. You know it's been said that possession is nine p'int's uv the law. Wa'al,

out here in this new and wil' country it's 'levin p'int's out uv ten—that is, ef you're strong 'nuff ter keep possession after you've got it. An' ef we fin' that mine afore Halftrigger an' his gaug do, I guess we'll keep possession. They won't beat us out of it, eh, boys?"

As Pike said this he looked around at us with a smile of satisfaction. We were in fact a stout party, for Henry and I were now men in everything but years, and all of us had been sharpened and toughened in the great school of experience. It was Starboard Sam who replied to Pike's query.

"Not much, Cappen," he said. "Not with this crew. We won't let any swab like that Halftrigger cut across our course. If they try to scuttle this craft we'll give 'em a broadside and blow the daylights out of 'em."

In an excess of high spirits Sam threw his legs across the mule he was leading and, kicking him in the sides with both feet, trotted up to the head of our troop. Sam's mule was a brindle-colored, mild-eyed animal of uncertain age. He looked as if he had long since lost all interest in this sublunary sphere, and shambled along with his head sunk almost to the ground, as meek and lowly a creature as I had ever seen. Sam had named him Hannibal.

"It's because there's no fight in him," he explained, "an' I want to help him out a little with a name."

When Sam on his long-eared Bucephalus had taken the lead, he raised his hat and, describing a magnificent flourish with it, began to sing:

"It oft times has been told that the British seaman bold
Could flog the tars of France so neat and handy, oh!
But they never"—

The song ended at "never." I do not know whether it was due to disapproval of Sam's vocal effort or to the spirit of general cussedness which is so strong in all mules, but the meek Hannibal stopped abruptly and rose to a neat perpendicular upon his forelegs. With equal abruptness Starboard Sam quitted the back of his mule, described a lofty and beautiful circle in

the air and alighted on a bunch of soft grass some feet in front of the mule.

Hannibal stood stock still, regarding his dismounted master with large, melancholy eyes. The sailor, who was unhurt, returned his gaze with angry interest.

Pike threw his great head back and laughed until the hills echoed with his stentorian guffaw. Everybody shared in his merriment save the unlucky Starboard Sam.

"Ah," exclaimed the vivacious Bonneau, "zee Yankee sailor ees zee great horseman, but he come kerchunk zees time. He not know how to ride ze long-eared cheval. Behold how a Frenchman manage zee fiery steed. En avant, Napoleon! En avant!"

With these words, Bonneau leaped on his own mule, which he had named in honor of the great French Emperor, and began to belabor him with a stout stick in an endeavor to urge him to a rapid pace.

Napoleon was surprised, but his presence of mind, like that of the great man for whom he was named, did not desert him. He was equal to the emergency. He took four or five mighty leaps forward, which shook up the little Frenchman so severely that he threw both arms about Napoleon's neck and embraced him with as much vigor as if he had been a long lost brother.

Then Napoleon reared up on his hind legs and began to whirl around as if he were made to revolve on a pivot. Bonneau's hat flew off, then his gun followed, and even his pistol was shaken out of his belt. Fortunately the fall did not discharge either.

"Help! Help!" shrieked Bonneau. "He ees shaking me into zee leettle pieces. I cannot hold on much longer. He will keel me! Ah-h-h!"

As he uttered this long "Ah-h-h!" Bonneau's grip on Napoleon's neck gave way and he was launched into the air as if he had been fired from a gun. He flew off at a tangent and landed in a bush. He pulled himself out in a moment, sprang to his feet and with great presence of mind exclaimed:

"Ah, that was one great jump I made! Eet save my life! Zee Frenchman always know what to do!"

"A jump!" exclaimed Sam, indignantly. "You mean he slung you. Why, you went like a ball fired out o' one o' the old Constitution's long twenty-four's."

"Ah, Monsieur Sam," said the Frenchman, "eef you say nozzing about my deesaster, I veel say nozzing about yours; ees eet a bargain?"

"Better do it, Sam," said Henry, trying to smother his laughter, "for Bonneau held on longer than you did. You get the advantage."

The old sailor's face smoothed over and he burst into a laugh, in which all of us joined. Then he and Bonneau gave their hands on it and the bargain was made, though Pike, Henry and I insisted that it had no reference to us.

Hannibal and Napoleon, those long-suffering creatures stood in the grass as mild and innocent in appearance as two doves, and apparently awaiting the return of their masters, who had left them so abruptly. But Sam and Bonneau were distrustful. They would not mount again, but walked along beside their animals.

"It is safer to lead than to drive two such illustrious personages as Hannibal and Napoleon," commented Henry.

"You're a sailor, Sam, an' you're a Frenchman, Bonneau," said Pike, "an' though you're promisin' material, both uv you hev got lots uv things to learn yet, speshully about mules, with which animals I hev been associated all my life, seein' ez my father put me to ploughin' with a mule on his farm in Missouri afore I was ten years old. Mules, gen'lemen, are the most onsartin' uv all God's creatures. You may think you may know a mule. You may work with him fur years, an' he may be ez rig'lar an' gentle ez a lamb, but some day he'll open your eyes, ef he don't break your neck. Put no trust in mules. Mules is all right in thar place, but don't trust 'em."

"I veel nevaire do it again," said Bonneau. "Napoleon, from this day you have lost zee confidence of Pierre Bonneau, of la grande nation."

This episode was brief. Though we found plenty of

time for talking as we trudged along, we made excellent progress. Neither did the intentness of our purpose deprive us of a proper appreciation of the beautiful country that we were now traversing. On one side of us was the silver sheen of water. On the other the country, like a velvet carpet tinged to nature's colors and sprinkled with trees and flowers, rolled and billowed away. Cutting the horizon line rose the mountains, misty and dim, while the skies that curved above us were the deepest and most vivid blue I ever beheld.

"It's a poor sort of a man," said Henry, "who could not feel young and fresh in such a country and under such a sky as this."

"Even zee leetle Napoleon zere feel eet," interjected Bonneau. "Zat ees why he throw me so very hard."

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW FACE.



We pushed on for some days, and now began to find that the aspect of the country was changing. It became more sterile and more mountainous. Flowing water was scarcer, and as a precaution against thirst we refilled our leather bottles every time we came to a stream. At first we met a stray wanderer or two, and we passed one party searching, like ourselves, for gold, but after the first week we saw nobody.

As our packs of provisions had been lightened somewhat and we were growing footsore from the long journey, we increased the burdens of our mules very often. That is, at times we compelled them to carry us as well as our baggage. Despite their diminutive stature they were able to support the additional burden, for we gave them plenty of rest and grass and water. I verily believe one of those tough little creatures could have carried a whole house on his back, had any one been able to put it there.

We camped one evening in the partially dry bed of a little river. There were some pools of water glistening in the channel not far away, and while Bouneau was cooking our supper I strolled along this channel. I knew that gold was found frequently in such places, and it occurred to me that I might have luck enough to discover some bits of it. I had informed myself sufficiently, and had seen enough of the metal in San Francisco, as it is deposited by nature, to know it when I met it.

Looking and poking among the sands I strayed some distance from the camp. It was a winding channel,

and glancing back I found that a hill quite hid the rest of our party from view. But as it still lacked some time of sunset, I continued to search.

Presently, across the muddy channel from me I noticed some particles gleaming among the sands. Instantly with enthusiasm I took them to be grains of gold, glittering as if they were highly polished five-dollar gold pieces. In my eagerness I started helter skelter across the channel. At the first step my foot sank somewhat, but I scarcely noticed it until, with each succeeding step, my foot sank deeper and then I knew that I was mired in a quicksand.

I was not much alarmed at first, and endeavored to turn back and pull myself out of the slough, but I sank deeper, and the sand and mud seemed to press around my legs like the earth around a coffin. I was buried above my knees, and at every effort I made to drag myself up something seemed to seize me by the feet and pull me further downward with a power that ridiculed my feeble muscles.

I struggled and fought and tore at the sand with my hands as if I were mad, but the soft stuff pressed closer around me and drew me further down. I shouted for help, hoping the boys at the camp would hear me, but no answer came to my cries. I might as well have shouted to the rocks that stood up gray and grim on the distant mountain side.

I struggled until I was exhausted, and then I stood upright and gazed around me in the faint hope that I might see some one coming to my rescue. But nowhere was there a sign of human life, and as I felt myself sinking lower and lower I gave up hope.

I had faced danger and death before, but never a death like this which now threatened me. I had heard of the Apache Indians who buried their captives in the earth to the neck and then left them there to die of heat, hunger and thirst, or to be torn to pieces by the wolves, but my fate seemed even worse, for I was sinking down, down, down, and when my friends came to find me there would be no trace of me left. I was unable to bear longer the sight of the white clouds and

the green grass in the distance, and I closed my eyes, waiting thus for the engulfing sand to do its will.

"Hold up your arms, so my rope can fall down around your body!" shouted a loud voice.

I opened my eyes and saw a man who carried a coil of rope over his shoulder running down towards me. I noticed very little about him just then save that he was a stranger, but I shouted aloud in joy and eagerness, and in the revulsion the blood flew back from my heart.

"Throw up your arms," he shouted again, "and I will save you!"

Up went my arms. The stranger stopped at the edge of the sand, took the coil of rope from his shoulder, whirled it around his head and then threw it towards me. The stout coil hissed through the air and then the loop dropped down over my head, grazed my arms and, encircling me, fell upon the sand.

"Now, young man," shouted the stranger, "brace yourself, if you don't want to be pulled in two. When I haul on this rope something is bound to give way. It will be you or it will be the sand. I can't yet tell which."

"Pull away," I cried, "I'll take the chances!"

The rope tightened around my waist and even cut into the flesh, but I clinched my teeth together and uttered no complaint.

"Pull! Pull!" I shouted.

"Don't worry," he returned. "I'll pull hard, and I've got good muscles, too."

He put his feet against a stone and dragged on the rope with powerful arms. The hard coil compressed my chest and almost cut off my breath, but with a feeling of the most intense joy I realized that I was slipping from the tenacious and deadly clutch of the sand. I was slowly rising.

"My, my! but this is hot work," he cried.

Then he stopped and wiped the perspiration from his face.

"Pull on! Pull on!" I shouted.

"Never fear," he said, coiling his rope around the stone, "I've got you tight and fast. You can't slip back. I want to give you a little rest, for I thought I heard a joint giving way."

In a few moments he began to pull again. I felt the sand slipping from me. Its grip around me loosened, and presently, half dragged by the rope, I scrambled over the treacherous river bed and reached solid earth again. For a full minute I lay there weak and exhausted, while the man looked down sympathetically at me.

"A very close shave my young friend," he said. "I do not know what adventures you have had in the course of your life, but doubtless none of them has brought you nearer to death than that."

As I revived I noticed for the first time his grammatical language and well-modulated voice. Then I sat up and looked at him more critically. He was middle-aged, tall and strong, and had a fine, clean-cut face. The clothing was that of a frontiersman, but the face was not.

"You have saved my life," I said.

"No doubt of it," he replied. "Your remark is not original."

"I don't know who you are," I said, "but I thank you as much as words can express the thanks of one who is under such heavy obligations."

"I am under obligations to you," he said, "for you have furnished me with a pleasant bit of excitement and have also enabled me to feel that pleasing glow which one experiences only when he has done a great service to a fellow-being. I am in your debt, sir."

I looked curiously at the man. He observed my inquiring gaze, and it seemed to gratify him.

"I arouse your curiosity," he said, with a smile. "You are wondering who I am. You behold in me the Hermit of the Hills."

I stared harder than ever, which seemed to contribute to his amusement. Then he added:

"You are almost as much in the dark as ever. Well, I am not a man of mystery. My name is James Shel-

don, formerly of New York City, U. S. A., and if you will first tell me something about yourself and how you came to be stuck in the sand there on your way through to China I will give you further information about myself.

I explained briefly who I was and to what party I belonged, suppressing of course the story of the hidden mine, merely saying that we were gold hunters. Then I told how I became mired in the quicksand.

"That is what gold does for people sometimes," he commented.

"But take me to those friends of yours," he said, "it has been so long since I have enjoyed good society that I really think I could appreciate it very much now."

The man's manner, as well as his language, was good, and his expression was certainly frank and open. I had no hesitation in taking him to our camp, and as I had now fully recovered my strength I led the way.

"Have you seen much of wild life, my young friend?" he asked as we walked along.

I told him that I had made a long and adventurous journey with my companions across the plains.

"And what do you think of man's life in the wilderness, unhampered, and perhaps, I may add also, unmarred by artificial restraints?"

I could not see the bearing of these questions, but I answered that the wilderness certainly had its charms and also its inconveniences.

"A diplomatic answer," he said. "Well, I will not press the question at present, for behold the camp-fire of your friends. That coil of smoke warns us that we are about to enter the presence of our kind."

The boys, who were making themselves comfortable in the grass, sprang up in surprise both at my bedraggled appearance and my approach with a stranger.

"Gentlemen," I said, somewhat in imitation of the man's own manner, "allow me to make you acquainted with Mr. Sheldon, formerly of New York City, to whom I owe my life."

Then I called the names of my companions in turn

while Mr. Sheldon made a ceremonious bow at each introduction. All of them stared at him with considerable amazement and I felt as if I were taking part in a kind of stage show.

"My introduction to our young friend here," said Mr. Sheldon, "was somewhat rapid and rude. I found him sticking in a bank of sand and boring down as if he intended to reach China before morning. Fearing that he would suffer some discomfort, if not an absolute loss of breath through such a singular journey, I put an end to it with a rope and considerable muscular exertion. In proof of my statements I call your attention to the convenient coil of rope which now adorns my shoulder, and doubtless our young and mutual friend here will furnish you with further elucidation and confirmation."

"His words are longer'n a stump speech," I heard Pike mutter.

I told the story of my adventure, and all the boys warmed to the stranger.

"I chanced to be taking the air in my front yard," said Mr. Sheldon, "and I saw young Mr. Fielding here get mired in the quicksand. I ran for a rope, which I found convenient, which I must say was a great piece of luck for your friend. The remainder of the story he has related already to you."

"Do you mean to say," asked Pike, "that you her got a house somewhar around here? I thought these parts wuz uninhabited."

"I have a house, and a very good one, too," said Mr. Sheldon, "though, perhaps, it is somewhat different in character to what you would expect to find. Your surmise as to the uninhabited character of these parts is nearly, if not quite, correct. I believe that I have no neighbors, and I do not see how I could fail to find it out, if I had any. But, gentlemen, I perceive that I have aroused your curiosity somewhat, and as you have eaten your evening meal and there is still some share of God's sunlight left us, I will take you with me if you will be so complimentary to me as to go, and I will show you my habitation. I would not

issue this invitation to many persons, but I have been rather taken by the appearance of this company."

Naturally, we were quite willing, even eager to go, for the man's manner was certainly enough to pique curiosity. Feeling sure that the mules would not be molested during our absence, we left them grazing at the end of their lariats and followed Mr. Sheldon.

He led the way past the sand bank in which I had so nearly disappeared, and then to a gently sloping hillside which lay some distance beyond. Sheltered by the surrounding hills and mountains, a grove of trees, magnificent in size and girth, far excelling anything I had ever seen in the forests of the East, had grown upon this slope. They rose so high that they seemed to support the sky like pillars.

We uttered exclamations of surprise and admiration.

"I see you admire my park," Mr. Sheldon said.

"Your park!" Henry exclaimed.

"Certainly," said Mr. Sheldon. "Doubtless you have read, for you have the face of a studious youth, of the noblemen's parks in England, and how the owners consider the sturdy and spreading oaks their chief ornament. I verily believe that there is not one among them all that will compare in grandeur and picturesqueness with mine. What are their stubby trees to my noble monarchs, which tower to the very heavens!"

He made a grandiloquent gesture, and in concert we answered that he was surely right.

"And," added he, with a laugh, "I may say further, that the poorest of all these parks is much more expensive to its owner than my noble grove here is to me. In fact, mine costs nothing. Nature is my landscape gardener. She does the job to perfection and never sends any dunning bills for it."

We listened in silence, for the man was a great puzzle to us all.

"That is enough about the park at present," he said. "I will now conduct you to my mansion, which stands in the midst of this admirable park, though, doubtless you have not noticed it yet."

He led the way again, and about the centre of the

grove he stopped in front of a tree which seemed to be larger than all its fellows.

He tapped the tree with his right hand, and turning to us said, with swelling chest:

"Behold the mansion of James Sheldon, formerly of New York City! How different from the costly homes that adorn that great metropolis! And yet in some respects it may be not inferior to any of them." Observing the look of wonder upon our faces, he said:

"No, I am not insane. The life of a hermit has not affected my mind. But when I put my hand upon this tree, I did, in fact, put my hand upon the shrine which incloses my lares and penates. Lares and penates, I will say by way of explanation, in case you never studied Latin, means household gods. Go around with me now, and I will escort you through my hospitable door."

He led the way to the other side of the tree, and we saw an aperture in the trunk about two feet in width, and extending from the ground to a height of about four feet.

"Stoop, gentlemen, and follow your leader," cried Mr. Sheldon.

He bent over, disappeared through the aperture, and we plunged boldly after him. We found ourselves in a kind of half light, and saw Mr. Sheldon standing before us.

"Behold the *res angustae domi!*" he said, waving his hand about, "though I can't say it is so very narrow, either."

We stood in an immense hollow. All the heart of the tree had decayed to a height of twenty-five or thirty feet, making a spacious room with a lofty dome. The light entered through numerous slits in the bark, all high up, and which escaped our notice when we were outside, because of the deep convolutions of the bark. The floor was covered with bark and hides, and various utensils and other articles were scattered about.

"Not a bad house, eh?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

His pride in his abode was manifest, and we hastened to compliment him on it.

"Why, it is just like the stories I have read in books," said Henry.

"Quite so—quite so, young man," said Mr. Sheldon, complacently. "When I was a lad I used to picture myself living in a tree, but I never really imagined that it would come true, or could be quite so comfortable as it has been."

Then he bustled about with all the pride of an industrious housewife and showed us his arrangements. In one corner was a rude oven built of stones, with a kind of pipe made of rough hide leading to a slit in the wall.

"It's not a masterpiece of workmanship, I'll admit," said Mr. Sheldon, "but it carries off the smoke pretty well, crude as it looks."

On the opposite side of the hollow was a rough table, and various garments—some of cloth and some of skin or fur—were hanging against the wall. In one place I noticed that some books were stowed, and in a secret recess Mr. Sheldon showed us a half dozen rifles, several pistols and a fine store of ammunition.

"Now," said Mr. Sheldon, when we had finished this little tour around his quarters, "that is as much as we can see for the present. I would ask you to spend the night here with me, but doubtless you want to look after your camp and your mules. I have been very open with you in showing you my abode, but I think you are honest men. My ability to read faces has always been one of my chief causes for pride, and in return I must ask you to come and take breakfast with me. It will not delay your journey very much, and besides I will tell you my story, which may interest you. I assure you that you will not have cause to regret your acquaintance with me. Shall I prepare for you?"

"We'll come," said Pike, speaking for the crowd. "You can expect us early."

In truth, our curiosity concerning this strange man was at the acutest pitch, and we were willing even to risk the chance of Halftrigger stealing a march on us in order to see more of him.

“Then, gentlemen,” said Mr. Sheldon, in his ornate way, “I wish you a good night, and I shall expect to have my eyes gladdened by the sight of you early in the morning.”

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD FACES AGAIN.



WHEN we started the next morning to take breakfast with Mr. Sheldon in his unique domicile, Henry said, humorously:

"We saw some queer people in 'Frisco and now we've met a hermit. I wonder what this journey will bring to us next."

"Hank Halftrigger," said Pike, sententiously.

In the hurry and interest of the events of the last few days I had thought little of the sinister sailor, and his memory was brought back to me with unpleasant force. But it was the fiery little Frenchman who spoke up.

"'Eet ees all right," said Bonneau. "Let Monsieur Halftriggaire come and bring with him whomsoever he pleases. With le Capitaine Pike to lead us shall we not beat him off?"

"Right you are, messmate," said Starboard Sam, giving the Frenchman a hearty slap on the back. "An' you an' me will be right thar when it comes to the pinch, won't we, Frenchy?"

"Vy you hit my back so hard?" cried Bonneau. "You do make my teeth rattle. Vy not save such heavy blows for ze enemy?"

"Shut up, Frenchy," said Sam, with a grin.

The fact was the two men, though incessantly berating each other, had become chums, for they were somehow congenial, and the Frenchman recognized the sterling qualities of the American as readily as the American perceived that the Frenchman was endowed with similar characteristics.

As we ascended the hillside in the fresh and vivifying morning air we found Mr. Sheldon awaiting us at his front door.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said, with the utmost suavity. "Our repast is ready to be served. We could have eaten, perhaps, in more comfort under the shade of one of these trees than inside the trunk, but I fancied that the entertainment in the former case would lack the picturesqueness and novelty which must accompany it in the case of the latter. *Entrez vousz.*"

None of us, except Bonneau, understood his French, but the gesture that accompanied it was expressive. So we entered, and our host followed us. The preparations that had been made for us gave us a pleasant thrill of surprise. Spread out upon two boxes was a show of civilized tableware and even a bit or two of napery. Appetizing odors added to the attractiveness of this corner of the room.

"You see I am not a bad housekeeper," said Mr. Sheldon. "Now you shall see also that I am not a bad cook. Be seated at the banquet board."

We found that he had not made an empty boast of culinary skill. He had bread, several kinds of game, cooked with great skill, and what we appreciated most of all, coffee with an aroma and taste that were divine.

"Ah," said Bonneau, leaning back and patting his stomach with a great sigh of satisfaction, "eet ees easy for me to eemagine zat I am eating ze dejeuner back in zee beautiful Paris. Monsieur Sheldon ees one great cook et un parfait gentilhomme."

"Thank you, Monsieur Bonneau," said Mr. Sheldon, "that compliment coming from a Frenchman is not without its value, and I assure you it is fully appreciated by your humble servant. But, gentlemen, as I perceive the edge is taken off your hunger and we can sip our coffee at our leisure, the time has come for me to tell my story. I perceive that your curiosity has been awakened, and I assure you I am not averse to gratifying it. Shall I proceed?"

"Yes! Yes!" we clamored.

Mr. Sheldon raised the tin cup that contained his coffee to his lips. Then, putting it down, he said:

"Thus spoke Aeneas from his lofty couch.

"That, gentlemen," he continued, "as doubtless my young friend on the right with the studious face recognizes, is the introductory line which a fine romancer who lived a number of years ago used when he was on the point of making his hero spin a wondrous tale to a handsome lady of high degree and her attendants. But I assure you my tale is of a very different character, and is not wondrous at all, as you will soon have an opportunity of perceiving.

"I have told you already that I am from New York City. I was born there, and as I inherited plenty of money and no troublesome relatives, I grew up pretty much as I pleased. But when I became a man and had no occupation and no ambition I found that I had more time than I knew what to do with. Everything became a bore and I found my fellow-men the worst bores of all. Some people are born with a desire to be alone, and I suppose I am one of them. At last I went on a long hunting trip and then I found what suited me exactly. The pursuit of game interested me and filled up my time, and there were no other men to tire me with their talk. I extended my trips further and further and hunted bigger and bigger game until at last I came around the isthmus and into California, which was then Mexican territory, and here I have been almost continually since then.

"In one of my hunting expeditions I found this hollow tree, and a little work made it as snug and nice a home as I wanted. Then I became a kind of hermit and voluntary Robinson Crusoe, though be it understood distinctly that I am not a disappointed man. I have not been jilted by any woman. I am not undergoing any penance for any sin. I do not have any especial hatred of my kind. I have not taken any oath never to live in civilized places again. If at any time I feel a desire to return to civilization, as I probably will, I shall go at once. There is no romance about me at all. I am merely a rover, a lazy sort of a fellow following his own fancy, and I am glad to add that I have a sound conscience, a most wonderful

appetite and digestion to match. I may add also that I am reasonably happy, and I find this world a pretty good place to live in. So, gentlemen, unlike most hermits, I am entitled to your congratulations instead of your sympathy."

"But it is evident that you like the comforts of civilization, or at least a portion of them," said Henry. "How do you manage to obtain them?"

"I have been up to San Francisco several times," said Mr. Sheldon, "and there is nothing easier than to buy what I want, load up three or four mules and bring my supplies down here. Besides, I make a dicker sometimes with a passing immigrant train or mining party. And, by the way, I wish to express my regret at these confounded gold discoveries, which threaten to ruin my happy hunting grounds and break up my comfortable Robinson Crusoe life unless I move across the Sierras, where the climate and country are not so good, and I might not find such a snug, ready-made house as I have here."

"But when you go off on a long cruise," broke in Starboard Sam, "ain't you afraid pirates will find your ship and plunder and scuttle it?"

"Plunder my home in the tree, you mean," said Mr. Sheldon. "When I am about to start on a long journey I secrete all my more valuable possessions in a little cave I found in the mountain side. As for the remainder I trust to luck. Only once has any one sought to intrude upon me here."

"How was that?" I asked.

Mr. Sheldon took another sip of his coffee, laughed unctuously and then answered with great deliberation:

"It was one moonlight night last spring, when I came in from a long hunt, and was so tired that I fell sound asleep the moment my head touched my bed of furs. I was awakened in the night by a great scratching at my door. Looking out I saw a large family of grizzly bears trying to effect an entrance unasked. But, as you perceive, my door is too narrow for a grizzly bear unless it be a very small one, and I was in no danger whatever. I could lie abed and shoot them

as they endeavored to thrust their noses in at the door, but it was such tame sport that I would not have fired a single shot at them had I not been forced to kill two in order to induce the others to go away."

Mr. Sheldon told his story with so much zest that I could see he enjoyed his own little eccentricities and liked to parade them. He had some vanity, but he had saved my life, he was hospitable and interesting, and we liked him. He was a comfortable hermit in a comfortable hermitage.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Sheldon, "we have reached the coffee, which, by the way, is quite as good as any your French friend there or any of his countrymen could make, despite all their boasted skill in cookery. I propose that we drink a little toast to each other's health in this fluid in the absence of champagne."

We drank the toast with an enthusiasm heightened by the excellence of the coffee, and just as we put down the tin cups which had contained the inviting drink, Pike exclaimed:

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"I heard a gunshot as shore as shootin'!" said Pike.

He hurried outside, followed by all of us.

"Thar's no doubt about it," said Pike. "Look at the mules down thar! They've got thar ears perked up. They've heard somethin' more than the wind."

We listened attentively, and presently we heard the distant but distinct report of a pistol shot, followed in a moment by another.

"A careless party of gold hunters, probably," said Mr. Sheldon.

"Suppose we find out," said Pike.

I knew that Pike had Halftrigger and his crew in mind.

"Your proposition is a sensible one," said Mr. Sheldon. "In this part of the world a man ought to know who his neighbors are, if he have any, and we will proceed to discover the cause of those pistol shots."

Even as he spoke we heard the report of another shot.

"It's jest as well to be cautious in a wild country like this," said Pike, "so part of us had better stay here an' look after the mules an' things, while the rest uv us go on the scout."

It was quickly arranged that Pike, Mr. Sheldon and I should go on the expedition. The others, much to their discontent, had to stay behind and watch the things.

Pike had marked the direction of the shots, and seizing our arms, we hurried off. Pike took the lead and stepping with lightness, warned us to do likewise. There was a very serious look on Pike's face and I was still sure that he, as well as I, had Halftrigger in mind. Our course led down the valley and thence among some trees and up a gentle acclivity.

We heard no more shots as we passed along, but Pike said he was confident that we would have little trouble in ascertaining the cause of the reports. When we came out of the grove, which like a curtain had screened the landscape beyond from our view. Pike pointed to a thin blue line across the sky and said:

"It's easy enough to find the people we are lokin' fur. They're over thar."

The thin blue line was smoke, and it came from another grove of trees which lay a short distance beyond the hill.

"It is as I thought," said Mr. Sheldon. "Some party of miners."

"I don't think so," replied Pike. "The fact is, Mr. Sheldon, we know that a bad crowd from Frisco wuz comin' out this way, and I've a notion this is it."

Then Pike, inspired by Mr. Sheldon's frankness and evident honesty, gave the thread of our story, which he was able to do in a few words, suppressing the principal facts about Pedro and his violent death.

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon, when he had finished, "this becomes interesting, and considering the scarcity of travel in this part of the country it is altogether probable that your enemies are in the grove

down there. In that event we should approach with great caution."

The column of smoke issued from the far edge of a grove, and as the latter was plentifully interspersed with undergrowth, it was easy to stalk the camp which yet lay concealed from us. When we reached the undergrowth we dropped upon our knees, and Pike, still leading, crawled in the direction of the smoke.

Soon we heard a chatter of voices. With a muttered word of caution Pike sank lower and listened. Presently he turned and looked significantly at me. I knew what he meant, for I detected one voice that I knew rising above all the others. It was Halftrigger's. We crawled a little closer, and through the tangled warp of the undergrowth we looked down into a little glen. In the centre of the glen a fire was burning, and scattered about it in lounging attitudes were a number of men. Just beyond the blaze, his face, looking more sinister than ever with the firelight flickering on it, was Halftrigger. Near him sat Spanish Pete and the one whom he had called Steve.

It seemed from the fact of his having such a strong party that Halftrigger must have expected trouble with us. Evidently he had a crowd of congenial spirits around him, for all looked like the devil's children. Crime was written upon every face as indelibly as the epitaph is cut upon a tombstone. In truth, a mongrel lot were they. There was one man with a brown face, bare feet and great rings in his ears whom I learned afterwards to be a Moor.

Halftrigger was speaking in a loud tone and there was an angry flush on his face.

"You're the most careless crew o' scamps I ever had under me," he was saying. "Here you go drinking whiskey and firin' off pistols jest to make a noise, when ye may be tellin' them who we don't want to know it that we're about. Curse me ef I haven't a good mind to throw the whole pack o' ye overboard an' go an hunt the gold by myself."

At this there were loud murmurs from the other men and protestations of future good behavior.

"When ye make a promise," said Halftrigger, "ye won't keep it. Who took ye on this cruise? Who made ye partners in the profits that we're goin' to make? I did it for the secret is mine. Now, I'm capt'in here, an' by the livin' Jehosephat, ef ye don't obey my orders I'll heave every infernal scoundrel o' ye overboard an' leave ye to swim fur yerselves. You hear me, don't ye?"

His fierce energy seemed to make an impression upon his cutthroat band, for they cowered before him and made many promises.

"Wa'al, now, see that ye do jest eggzackly as I tell ye," said Halftrigger, rearing up his gigantic form, "or by the old Nick I'll break ye in two as I would a scrap o' wood."

Then he swaggered over to the other side of the fire, snapping his fingers and singing:

"Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
As I sailed."

Spanish Pete, who seemed to act as the lieutenant of the band, asked if they were not approaching very near to their destination.

"'Bout two days' journey, now," said Halftrigger. "I don't know the exact spot, but I don't think we'll have much trouble in findin' it; that is, unless we meet that infernal hunter an' his gang. But ef we do meet 'em there is a strong crowd of us, an' this wild country out here don't tell any more tales than the sea does."

Halftrigger made a sinister gesture with his forefinger and laughed. Spanish Pete joined him in the laughter. I understood what they meant, though I had know'n already what to expect in case these fellows should get the upper hand with us.

"Do you think we will meet with them Captain?" asked the Spaniard.

"More'n probable," replied Halftrigger. "'That's the reason I let all these fellows here into the secret. You don't suppose I brought 'em along just because I'm so good I want to make 'em rich an' happy, do you?"

Halftrigger laughed in a sneering way, and the Spaniard made no answer.

"I would infer that the gentlemen out there who talk so lightly of assassination are those for whom you are looking?" whispered Mr. Sheldon in my ear.

I nodded.

"And I would infer also," continued Mr. Sheldon, "that the persons of whose futures they dispose so lightly are your party."

I nodded again.

"My advice to your friends, then," continued Mr. Sheldon, "is that of a distinguished American, to trust in the Lord and keep your powder dry."

I nodded a third time.

Halftrigger and his lieutenant were now discussing the direction in which the hidden mine lay.

"We're to go up the dry bed of a river and beyond a curve," Halftrigger was saying when his words were interrupted by a curse and the sound of a blow.

At the far edge of the glen two men had risen suddenly to their feet and were facing each other with knives in their hands. They were truculent ruffians, and what the quarrel was about I know not, but they were bent upon murder. They began to circle around each other like two fierce beasts, each in search of an opening for a blow.

Halftrigger ran across the glen and struck up their knives with the butt of his pistol. Then he hurled them back, exclaiming :

"Haven't you men any more sense than to fight each other when we're out on a cruise. Kain't you save your knives for your enemies 'stead o' whettin' 'em on each other? What d'ye s'pose I brought you along fur? I've a good mind to hammer the brains out o' both o' ye with the butt o' this pistol o' mine—that is ef ye've got any brains in them skulls o' yours."

Halftrigger looked powerful enough and determined enough to carry out his threat, and the men shrank from him.

"He struck me," said one.

"He called me a liar," said the other.

"Probably both o' ye are liars on general principles," said Halftrigger. "I kain't say ye've got truth written very plain on them countenances o' yours. But that don't matter. Put up your knives."

The men sullenly put their weapons back in their belts, and Halftrigger added, significantly tapping the barrel of his pistol:

"Now you keep 'em until I tell you to use 'em or I'll let you have a dose out 'o this that'll make you seasick."

"An amiable commander and an amiable crew," commented Mr. Sheldon.

With one more threatening glance Halftrigger turned away from the two men. It would have been evident even to the most casual observer that he was the master villain in that crowd of villains.

We listened a few minutes longer, and we gathered from the conversation of the desperadoes that they intended to push on in a half hour for the hidden mine. They feared that we were ahead of them, and the tenor of their talk indicated that we had inspired them with a wholesome respect for our courage and physical prowess, wherefore I experienced much satisfaction. Curious, is it not, that man, no matter how highly civilized he may become, is more sensitive about his courage than anything else.

Pike presently gave us the signal to withdraw, whispering that we had learned about all they had to tell and that it was time for us to be on the march.

We began to creep out of the thicket, but before we had gone a dozen feet Mr. Sheldon incautiously brought his full weight down upon a stick and it broke with a sharp snap.

The sound was distinctly audible in the glen and the desperadoes were startled by it.

"What noise was that?" exclaimed Halftrigger.

"Sounded like a stick breaking," said one of the men.

Halftrigger drew a pistol, started toward the undergrowth, and then paused as if uncertain.

"Ef he comes into this brush," said Pike, "I'll put a bullet through his heart and risk a fight with his gang."

He drew his pistol as he spoke, and his determined manner showed that he had taken his resolution.

"I think it was merely some wild animal in the brush, Captain," said the Spaniard.

"Well I'll give it a scare, whatever it wuz" said Halftrigger. "Some o' the fellows hev been firin' pistol shots already, an' another won't hurt."

He raised his pistol and fired into the underbrush. The bullet clipped a twig over my head and, passing on, buried itself in the hillside. We lay still and Halftrigger returned the pistol to his belt, apparently satisfied. Then we resumed our retreat and were soon out of the undergrowth.

On our return to the tree we explained our expedition and its incidents more fully to Mr. Sheldon. We invited him to share alike in our adventures and the gold that we might find. But he shook his head.

"It is a temptation, I will admit," he said, "but I must continue my role of hermit. But I will say that if at any time you need assistance and any of you can reach me or can send me a message here do not hesitate to do so. Mr. Halftrigger means you mischief, and though I am not a bloodthirsty individual it would not rest heavy upon my conscience if I were compelled to send a ball through his head."

CHAPTER IX.

A MISADVENTURE.



WE FELT that we had no time to lose, as it would now be a race for the mine between our band and Half-trigger's. And it was a race, too, in which we did not intend to be beaten. The power of gold is wonderful. It inspires men—good men, too, sometimes—to their greatest efforts.

Our kindly host, though refusing to accompany us, took the greatest interest in our success, and helped in our hurried preparations for departure.

"Don't let that scar-faced scoundrel beat you," were his last words to us as we left him, with our mules trotting by our side. While on the march we studied Pedro's diagram with the greatest care. It dealt in generalities more than particulars, we were compelled to admit. Much turned upon Pedro's idea of a day's journey. If he had reckoned such a measure a few miles greater or less than we did, our calculations might suffer a serious upsetting. This fear of a mistake grew as we approached the end of our twentieth day's journey. It became a certainty when, at the close of that day, we halted in a barren plain, in which we could nowhere find running water.

"Wa'al, I swan!" said Pike; "here we are. We hev travelled twenty days, 'cordin' to Pedro's directions, but we don't strike what he said we'd strike. We wuz to come to a little river runnin' through a narrow valley. We took it down jest ez he said it. But we don't see no river. We don't even see no valley."

"But Pedro's instructions were indefinite," said Henry. "We have followed the direction he indicated as nearly as possible, but still it would be easy to go wrong, as we probably have done."

"I thought that river would set us right," said Pike. "A river oughtn't to be a hard thing to find."

But talk as we pleased, the fact remained that we had gone wrong in some manner. It was our business to endeavor to right ourselves, and that, too, very quickly. Beyond the plain we could see a range of low mountains or high hills, whichever we chose to call them. The river might lie just beyond the range, and we soon decided to push on in the night until we crossed the plain.

We reached the base of the range about midnight, and camped there until morning. After a hurried breakfast we began the ascent, which was not great and which caused us but little trouble. The sure-footed mules, with their heavy burdens upon their backs, trotted along as if they were born mountain-climbers and made nothing of such a small ascent as the one before us.

In a couple of hours we had reached the crest and in another three-quarters of an hour we were half way down the other side. Henry, who was in advance, uttered a cry of joy, and, pointing ahead, exclaimed:

"Behold the river!"

Down in a narrow valley we could see clear water shining among the trees, and we had no doubt it was the river that we were seeking.

We hurried down the slope and soon stood upon the banks of the river. It was a beautiful little stream. It plashed over many pebbles, and the trout darted about in its clear waters.

"This must be the river," said Pike. "It must be, sartin shore. But we've got to go along its banks until we come to another little river that runs into it. Now, which way must we go—up stream or down stream? Thar's whar the rub comes in."

It was a perplexing question, for while we might be going in the wrong direction Halftrigger's band might reach the same stream and, going in the right direction, forestall us.

At first we thought of dividing into two parties, one to go up the river and the other to travel in the opposite

direction, but we quickly dismissed the idea. Pike said it would be bad policy to divide and weaken our forces, as we were likely to come to blows with the Halfriggers. It would be better for us to take our luck together. Then we had to decide upon which direction to pursue first, and nobody wished to say.

"We'll leave that to luck, too" said Pike, drawing his hunting-knife. "I'll pitch up this knife, an' when it falls whichever way the p'int inclines most, whether up stream or down stream, that's the way we'll follow."

Pike tossed up the knife, and we watched it fall with as much interest as if the fate of the world turned upon it. Down fell the knife, and it lay parallel with the river, its blade pointing down stream.

We lingered no longer than was required for Pike to pick up his knife and return it to his girdle, and then we hastened down the river. It flowed with many crooks and turns in its narrow channel, and twice we came to little cataracts. Trees and thousands of wild flowers grew on its banks, but we had no time to admire such things as these. We were too anxious to find the river's tributary, which would serve as an easy guide to the hidden mine.

But the day passed and we came to no such tributary. The sun was going down behind the mountains, but in our anxiety to find the second river we continued our progress by moonlight until midnight. We were still unsuccessful, but we were forced to stop for rest and sleep.

"'Twon't do to tucker ourselves out," said Pike.

We threw ourselves upon the earth, and, though we were sore in spirit over our failure to find the second stream, soon went to sleep, leaving it to the mules to warn us of an approaching foe, if any should come.

We were up again at sunrise and Pike was in favor of pushing on down the river.

"We might hev been two or three days journey out of the course when we come to the water," he said, "an' tain't wuth while to give up this route until we're shore we're wrong."

So we went on again. The valley through which the river flowed, narrow already, was now becoming narrower. Presently it flowed through a pass in which we barely found a footing for ourselves and the mules beside the stream. But beyond this it broadened out and the hills on either side were low.

"I think I will climb one those hills over there," I said, "and take a look about us. From that elevation I may have the good luck to see the river for which we are looking."

"All right," said Pike, "take your gun along, an' be keerful uv yourself. When you get through you can follow on down the stream after us."

The hill to which I referred lay about an eighth of a mile to our left, and attained a considerable elevation. I was some time in climbing it. When I had nearly reached the summit I looked back and saw that my friends had disappeared in the foliage which lined the river's bank. But I felt no apprehension on that account, as I had merely to follow the course of the river to overtake them.

Arrived at the summit I found that I had a splendid view of a wide expanse of beautiful rolling country, stretching away to the southward. Far off among the trees I saw what looked like a thread of silver. It was very distant, and could be seen but faintly, but I believed it to be a water course, and with youthful enthusiasm and confidence in our luck, I believed it was the water course for which we were looking.

I wished to be certain of what I saw, in order that I might not be the bearer of false news to my companions, and I cast about me for means of ascertaining. I stood on the very apex of the hill, and in looking around for further vantage ground, my eyes alighted upon some tall trees that grew near. What would be easier than to climb one of them. From its lofty boughs I might easily discern the nature of the distant silver thread that aroused my hopes. It was a good idea I thought, and I put it into effect instantly.

I leaned my rifle against a tree, and drew myself up with vigorous muscles. From bough to bough I went

until I had ascended a great distance, and then I stopped to sweep the horizon line with my eyes. Yes, there was my silver thread, now grown to a silver rope, so clear and so sparkling in the sunlight that it was water, unmistakably.

I was about to begin the descent when a loud chorus of harsh disagreeable laughter came up to me. I was so amazed that I almost lost my hold on the tree. Then a voice shouted:

"Come down out o' that, young feller, an' don't you make any noise an' try to call your shipmates, or we'll blow you into Kingdom Come! Now, look lively and come along!"

I looked down and saw the malicious face of Halftrigger grinning at me. Nor was he alone. Around him stood the whole of his band, and every one of those evil faces expressed derision.

"Ain't he a fine 'un," said Halftrigger. "Caught jest like a squirrel up a tree, an' Pete, if he calls out, bore a hole through him with his own rifle."

The Spaniard was covering me with my own weapon, and a half dozen others had their pieces raised also. I was helpless. My pistols were in my belt, and I might possibly have brought down one of the gang, but I would have been shot to pieces the next instant.

It was more with a sense of shame than of danger that I saw how foolish I had been to climb a tree. It was a childish trick. Never had any one been caught in a more ridiculous plight. If ever I got back to my companions I should be ashamed to tell them how I had been trapped. Halftrigger's men had a right to jeer at me.

"Come down, now," shouted Halftrigger, still grinning, "we're waitin' to shake hands with ye, we're so glad to see ye. My, my, what a spry youngster it is to climb up a big tree like that, jest like a sailor goin' up the mast. But come along, sonny, we're waitin' to see ye."

I went down the tree with much sheepishness. I feared to face the ridicule of my captors. And in truth they greeted me with a roar of laughter.

Halftrigger took my pistols from my belt, and as the other men still covered me with their rifles, I could make no resistance.

"Ef the rest o' your crew are ez easy game ez you are," said Halftrigger, "this'll be nuthin' but a pleasure excursion fur us."

I made no reply, for I could see that the men took pleasure in annoying me. After the first flush of mortification was over I steadied my nerves, and determined to conceal my thoughts from that leering crowd.

"Whar's the rest o' the crew," asked Halftrigger.

"Don't you think it would be much better for you to go and find them," I replied:

"Oh, we'll find 'em when we want 'em," replied Halftrigger, "an' I guess when we do we'll settle 'em jest ez easy ez we've settled you."

"I doubt that," I replied. "I saw one of them hold you safe."

"You mean that hunter fellow," said Halftrigger, scowling. "He wuz quick with his pistol, I'll admit, but I've got him in my log, and when the accounts are cast up at the end o' the v'y'ge, I guess I won't be the loser."

He showed his teeth in a manner that did not indicate a feeling of brotherly love for Pike. But I had no fears for the hunter, who had distinctive qualities, the chief of which was his ability to take care of himself.

"Which way hez your crew gone?" asked Halftrigger again.

"You will not learn that from me," I replied emphatically.

I saw that I had nothing to gain by courting the man's favor, a policy at which my nature would have revolted under any circumstances.

"All right, my fine young gen'leman," said Halftrigger, "say what you please and keep what you please to yourself. Make the most o' your time."

I shuddered at the covert threat in the man's words, but I do not think my face expressed fear.

"Bind his arms, Pete," said Halftrigger, "and I guess we might as well sail ahead. An' you, Hassan, walk by the new member o' our crew thar, an' ef he gets to thinkin' he's too good fur our comp'ny an' tries to leave, let him taste the feel o' your knife."

Hassan was the man whom I have mentioned before, and he sidled up to me, with his hand on the handle of the crooked bladed knife he carried in his belt. The man had the face of a murderer if I ever saw one, and he looked as if he would have welcomed a chance to use his crooked blade on me.

"Hassan 'll stick to you like a leech," said Half-trigger with his detestable grin. "You couldn't hev a better mate."

He gave the word and the men started down the hill-side, following a course which if persisted in would bring them to the water I had seen. I guessed that they, too, had seen it, but I asked no questions.

I meditated upon the probability of a rescue. The two parties were now in the same neighborhood and on the same trail, and it seemed inevitable that they would come in contact. But it would be four against heavy odds now, and I feared the result. I was aroused from these reflections by the Moor, who began to talk to me, speaking as good English as I did.

"Do you not wonder what is going to become of you?" he asked, thrusting his villainous, leering face close to mine. "By the beard of Mahomet, I would if I were in your place."

I made no answer.

"In my country," he continued, "in the land of the Faithful, they would make you a slave, and when you flinched from the task you would have the bastinado. By Allah, the bastinado is beautiful for the unbelieving dog. How he writhes and shrinks beneath it!"

The man inspired me with loathing, and I shrank away from him, but he followed me.

"You do not like it," he said, "but perhaps our Captain can try the bastinado even here. Would you cry out—would you struggle beneath it?"

"Shut up, you heathen scoundrel," I exclaimed.

"I don't think you will have a chance to witness such a pleasant sight."

"Then, maybe, you would like this better," he said, drawing his yataghan, as I believe they call those crooked knives, and jabbing me in the side with the handle.

The blow pained me considerably.

"You cowardly brute," I cried, "don't you see my hands are tied?"

As an answer he jabbed me again with the handle of his weapon. Then I kicked him so violently on the shin that he uttered a cry of pain. He reversed the knife and I believe he would have used the blade upon me, but Halftrigger's attention was attracted by the cry and he made him put the weapon back in his belt.

"Never min' about finishin' him now" he said, "the job kin wait."

But the Moor gave me a truculent look, and I knew my kick had added to his natural desire for my blood. But for the time being he ceased his amusement at my expense and walked in peace at my side.

We travelled at a rather lively rate. The men had no pack animals. How they had found provisions and how they intended to carry away the gold in case they found it I do not know. About two hours of steady tramping brought us to the water-course, which was much like the stream we had left behind, though smaller. Whether it was the same river, reappearing after a wide curve, or the tributary for which all of us were looking it was impossible yet to tell. It might turn out to be neither.

Halftrigger, whom I was watching as closely as I could, seemed much perplexed.

"This ought to be the right water-course," he said, doubtfully, to Spanish Pete, "but we've got to get the lay o' the country before we're sartin about it."

"We can afford to take our time, Cappen," said the Spaniard. "We're too strong for anybody else to stop us. It will soon be night, and I suggest that we go to the top of that hill there and camp."

"Good enough," said Halftrigger, looking at the

hill that the Spaniard pointed out. "Thar's wood up thar, an' here's water down here, an' I guess we might ez well make a night o' it."

The hill was small and conical in shape, with a number of large trees growing upon its crest. Halftrigger looked over the ground critically and announced his satisfaction. Then they prepared their camp with great expedition. A fire was built, some meat was produced from their pockets and cooked over the coals. It seemed to be a matter of indifference with them whether any one saw the smoke of the fire or not.

"Mebbe your friends will see that smoke," said Halftrigger to me, an' come to your rescue. They kin come any time they want to, an' we'll try to make 'em welcome."

The man was endeavoring to taunt me, and I replied with a gesture of contempt.

"All right," he said. "Hey it your own way. We're all just a-waitin' to jump around an' do what you order us to do. Any commands for me, Cappen?"

He put on such an humble and beseeching look that all the men laughed. I was indignant, but there was nothing I could do.

They unbound my hands and gave me some food, but after I had eaten it my wrists were tied together again. Halftrigger posted two sentinels on the hillside and then he and Spanish Pete entered into a long discussion about the location of the mine, going over Pedro's instructions about the two rivers and the dry channel. They did all this in my hearing, knowing that I had as much information on the point as they did. I believe they thought I had more, for Halftrigger turned to me and said, insinuatingly:

"D'ye think ye could take us to that mine afore any body else gets thar? Ef ye could we might be disposed to be a little easy with ye an' overlook bygoness."

I love life in the way that every healthy man ought to love it, and I might have led Halftrigger on into some kind of proposition, but I seemed to read treachery in everything he did. I could not bargain with

such a man, and I replied that I would not take him there if I could.

Halftrigger dropped the matter without any comment.

CHAPTER X.

STARS OF THE NIGHT.



THE arrangements for preventing my escape in the night were simple, but I was bound to confess to myself that they appeared to be very effective. My wrists were already tied together behind me. Another thong was passed around them and then made fast to a sapling. I had a play of about three feet, but I was tethered as if I had been a horse, with far less than a horse's power of action.

We had nothing but mother earth to sleep upon, but it was no hardship in that warm, dry and balmy climate. All the men, except the two on watch, stretched themselves on the ground around me, and the heavy breathing of some and the snoring of others soon told me that they were asleep.

My mind turned naturally to my situation and the probability or improbability of escape. The chances were too heavily in favor of the latter to afford me much cheer. But I still had hope and faith in Pike. That the big borderer would desert me was not to be imagined for a moment. I knew that the boys had begun long ago the search for me, and I was more than half convinced that Pike had divined already the whole story. But there seemed to be no chance for a rescue on that night. The little hill on which we lay was a natural fort, and Halftrigger's desperate and determined band could easily defend it against the violent assaults of a force ten times as large as ours. And a secret rescue seemed out of the question, with the vigilant sentinels on guard.

I had resigned myself as best as I could to my situation and was wooing sleep, when again I saw the

sinister face of the Moor close to me. He had crawled along the grass like a snake, and when he approached me he sat up.

"You cannot sleep?" he said.

"Perhaps I could if you would not plague me with your villainous presence," I replied.

But the man still hovered about me like a hyena.

"You are fearful for your life," he said, "and would ask mercy from the captain if you thought you could get it."

"That's a lie," I replied, and I turned over my side, not wishing to see him or have further talk with him. But he came around and faced me again.

"You gave me a blow to-day," he said, "and I belong to a race that never forgets that."

"I would give you another—a half dozen more—if I were not tied," I replied angrily.

"You are very brave," he replied, "when you think the captain will protect your life for the present."

"The man's taunts inspired no fear, but they wearied me excessively, and I refused to reply.

"You will be put to death in three days, two days—maybe less," he said; "and I hope the hand of Hassan will be chosen to perform the deed."

I closed my eyes, and this sign of inattention, together with my failure to reply seemed to anger the man, for he said in a slightly higher voice:

"Rather than miss the pleasure, Hassan would do the deed now. By the beard of Mahomet, he would!"

There was a silence for a moment, and then I felt something chilly and keen against my neck. I opened my eyes and saw that the Moor had drawn his knife and had put the blade against my throat. He drew it along so lightly and delicately that the skin was not severed.

"Ah," he said, purring like a cat, while his face showed the pleasure he felt, "how the blood of the Christian dog would spurt over my fingers were I to press upon the blade! Truly the most blessed gift of Allah to the Faithful is the right to take the lives of their enemies. The blood of the unbelievers is beauti-

ful in the sight of the followers of the Prophet. It smooths the way to Paradise."

I would have cried out, but there was something snakelike in the eyes of the man that held me silent. He played lovingly with his weapon, now passing his finger over the keen edge, then drawing that edge along my neck until I was seized with a damp chill. But he never drew blood.

"If you cry out," he said, "I will kill you. I will, by Allah! and take the chance."

I believe that he meant it, and even when the power of my mind over myself returned I would not utter a word for fear he would plunge his weapon into my throat. I had read somewhere that the East Indians are often seized with a sudden madness and rush about killing any one who may come in their way. This man, too, seemed to have the blood-lust in his eyes, and as I knew that he also wished revenge for the blow I had given him I was resolved not to tempt him to a sudden stab.

My nerves were on the verge of collapse when there was a thrashing in the grass, and Halftrigger, who was lying near, squirmed about, and at last began to drag his gigantic body up into a sitting posture.

When he heard the noise the Moor sank down and slid away from me like a serpent.

Halftrigger rose slowly to his feet and stepped over towards me. I was devoutly grateful for the interruption. Of the two villains, Halftrigger and Hassan, I greatly preferred Halftrigger just then.

"All safe thar, are you?" said he. "Haven't deserted the ship yet?"

"How do you expect me to get away tied up like this?" I answered. "I would go quick enough if I could."

"I've no doubt o' it," he said with a sardonic laugh, "an that's jest what I'm guardin' ag'inst."

He looked at my thongs, and seeing that they were as hard and fast as ever, stretched himself on the ground, and his strident snore soon told that he was asleep again.

The Moor did not come back to torture me. He had propped himself in a semi-sitting posture against the trunk of a tree about fifteen feet away and had gone to sleep with his mouth open. His lower jaw had dropped down, and the man's face as he slept was even more repellent than when he had leaned over me and tortured me with his knife.

Scattered about, in whatever attitude their search for ease had caused them to take, were the other men. The moonlight peeped through the trees and showed their faces, which were not pleasant to look upon. I caught occasional glimpses of the two sentinels further down the hillside, but the only noise I heard was the wind.

I shut my eyes again and tried to sleep. I had slept more than once before in the face of danger, but I could not do it now, and opened my eyes only to look upon the star-dotted heavens and the recumbent forms of the sleepers.

The night was bright. Some little white clouds now and then drifted across the face of the moon and hid a star or two for a moment, but they were mere flecks in the blue vault and failed to dim its clearness.

In an effort to induce sleep I fell to counting the stars, beginning with those that hung low down on the horizon.

Off to the west was another hill somewhat similar to that on which we lay. It seemed to be distant a half mile, more or less, and in my impossible task of counting the stars I had swung around until I reached this hill. Here my eyes lingered on a star of unusual radiancy and power which hung so low that it seemed to crown the crest of the hill instead of hovering above. It burned with such a steady flame that I took it to be one of the fixed stars.

Then I saw the star disappear as suddenly as if it had been extinguished by the hand of God. I shut and opened my eyes again to clear them of any film that might hang over them. But my sight did not deceive me. Where the star had burned against its background of sky only the cloudless blue was now seen.

I looked and looked again, and suddenly the star reappeared as brilliant and steady as before.

The phenomenon stirred me strangely, and I raised myself as far as my rope would permit to look.

The star shone for half a minute, and then in a twinkle of light it vanished. But I still watched in the belief that it would come again. There was a longer interval, but suddenly it flashed upon the brow of the hill in precisely the same spot as before.

As I looked a second star appeared by the side of the first. At the distance at which I lay they seemed to me to be separated by not more than a hand's breadth. Even had the heaviness of sleep been upon me the appearance of the second star would have driven away all such feelings. It could be no optical illusion, for the second, like the first, burned with a full and steady light.

I watched to see both disappear, as the first had twice done, but instead there was a flash of light and a third star had risen and swung beside the other two.

I am no astronomer, but I knew enough about the heavens to be amazed at what I saw. Like beacon lights the three stars burned on the hill, and presently a fourth came out and took its place in the row with the others. The distant hill lay so dark in the murk of the night that I could not tell where the earth and the fringe of trees began, but out of the dusk the stars shone like four gleaming spear-points.

As I was divided between wonder and admiration the meaning of it all burst upon me. It was a guess, but it was a guess that was forced upon my mind with the intensity of conviction. Four stars in the night! Four friends waiting to help me! The lights which I had taken for stars were four torches on the far summit of the hill, and Pike and Henry and Bonneau and Sam were there signalling to me and trusting to fortune that I would see and to instinct that I would know what they meant. I no longer doubted that my capture and every movement of my captors since then were known to my companions, and the unerring eye

of Pike had traced us and his fertile brain had devised the signals.

As I read the fiery signals my heart swelled with triumph and pride. I felt that my four companions, with the redoubtable Pike at their head, would be more than a match for Halfrigger and his numerous allies, desperate as their courage might prove and reckless as I knew them to be.

Not until you have passed through many dangers and trials with them and have found them always staunch and true can you ever know how men may be knit to you. Then their brave deeds are like your own, and you share in them with an equal pride. It was thus I felt as I lay in the night on that hilltop in the wilderness among the sleeping desperadoes and watched the distant lights swung aloft by the muscular arms of those who were waiting to shed their blood for me if need be.

I turned over on my side and looked at the spot where I knew Halfrigger lay.

"Ah, you sea-villain and cutthroat!" were the words that rose to my lips though they were not uttered. "How many of this band would risk a hair of their heads to save you?"

Then, after this little burst of triumph, I looked anxiously down the hillside to see if the sentinels had noticed the signals. I knew that the men were provided with whisky and that most of them had been drinking the strong stuff since we had stopped to camp. I hoped the senses of the sentinels were so steeped in it and their eyesight so blinded that they could not read the meaning of the lights as I had read them, perhaps that they would not be able to distinguish them from the stars, at all.

In the dim light I could see one of the sentinels standing beside a tree in a listless attitude. If he had seen the signals he gave no indication of it. But while I watched him Halfrigger roused himself again. After many yawnings he pulled himself to his feet, and then called to the nearest sentinel.

"Anything moving, Harkins?" he asked.

"Nothing, Capten," said the man, coming up, with his rifle in the hollow of his arm. "Everything is as still as a graveyard."

It was time to change the watch, and Halftrigger called to the other man also. He made a similar report, and Halftrigger told them they could go to sleep, while he awakened two others to take their places on guard.

I feared that the new men, sobered and refreshed by sleep, would see the lights on the distant hill, but when I looked again my stars were gone, and the hill itself was almost invisible.

I pretended to be asleep then, but when I heard Halftrigger's snore, I opened my eyes again and looked for the stars, but saw only the darkness. Then I knew they would not reappear. I alone of all who lay on the hill had seen them, and the luck which is hard luck sometimes was good luck this time.

By and by I, too, fell asleep, and slept without dreams.

CHAPTER XI.

A TRAGEDY.



HE shove of a heavy foot awakened me.

"Here's a bite for you to eat," said Halfrigger, "an we're goin' to be a-cruisin' mighty quick."

My wrists were unbound again, and they were not rebound after I had taken my food.

"We'll keep you in the middle o' our gang as we march along," said Halfrigger, "an' I guess you won't git away. Ef he tries to run, boys, plunk him."

The command was addressed to the assembled party, and there was no doubt of their willingness to do as he ordered.

"I guess Hassan, thar, would jump at sech a chance," continued Halfrigger, looking towards the Moor, "ez I've seen him castin' pleasant glances at you. How about it, Hassan, my lad!"

The Moor grinned and tapped the handle of his knife.

"Hassan is one o' the disciples o' Mohammed," said Halfrigger to me, "and he ain't had our Western advantages. He thinks it lawful to stick that crooked knife o' his atween the ribs o' the infidel. So mate, you'll kindly overlook any little bloodthirsty demonstrations on the part o' Hassan."

I knew this talk was intended to arouse my fears and to torment me, and I concluded to adopt my former course on such occasions and say nothing.

But Halfrigger seemed to be highly delighted with himself that morning, and evidently intended to make me a target for what he thought to be his wit.

"Heard anythin' from them friends o' yours that you deserted so 's to ship with me?" he asked.

I was somewhat startled at first, for I feared that there was a meaning in the words, and he had seen

the signals of the night before. But a moment's reflection convinced me that it was a mere coincidence.

"No," I replied. "But I have no doubt I will. I am in your company, and they are sure to pay you their compliments."

"Oh!" he said, "will they? Well, we will have to make room for them, an' they may come in handy, too. We'll need diggers when we git to whar all that gold is. Me and my mates kin lay in the shade while you and your mates dig fur us. Why, that'll beat slave-drivin' all-to pieces, an' then, when all the work is over, we kin put you an' your mates away so nice an' handy!"

I knew very well what he meant, but I was not a child to be frightened with that sort of thing. I replied, with a steady countenance, too, that the shoe would more likely be on the other foot.

"Not while I'm in command o' the ship," said Halftrigger.

Just then Spanish Pete announced that everything was ready and we started. The party was well armed every man having a rifle and a pistol, while most of them were provided with knives also. They were certainly capable of making a very formidable fight. They straggled along loosely, but they kept a vigilant watch on me and for possible enemies. Halftrigger walked near me, and nothing escaped his wary eye. But I soon saw that the party suffered from a serious disadvantage.

Halftrigger, its commander, was a sailor, and knew nothing about wilderness trails. His men were afflicted with a similar ignorance. It was more by blundering luck than by skill that they had adhered to the course which Pedro had mapped out, and they still felt very uncertain of their bearings.

Halftrigger, under the pretence of friendliness, tried to elicit some information from me. This gave me a cue. So long as he thought my life valuable to him he would not put an end to it. Every day's delay was worth a fortune to me. I answered very guardedly, intending to convey the impression that I knew a great

deal, and for an adequate return might be induced to part with my information. I did this merely to lead him on, for as I have said before I knew that good faith was not to be expected from such a man as he.

"Wa'al, my lad," said Halftrigger, with a pretense at joviality, "you'd better make the best o' your bargain. I've riled you a bit now an' then, but you'll fin' my bark is sometimes wuss than my bite. Besides you know when I git that gold I'll be in a mighty good humor an' I'll feel like doin' suthin fur my frien's. I think the mine is hereabouts; do you?"

I replied that the indications favored his opinion.

"I think we'd better go down this stream," he said. "Maybe we'll strike the dry river bed that Pedro told about, an' ef we don't I guess we'll find out whether we're off our bearin's or not."

I said that I thought it would be well for him to ascertain just where he was. He took this to indicate my indorsement of his theory, and accordingly directed the march down the stream. We plodded along for several hours. The sun was very bright and warm and as the stream was a mountain torrent, the way was rough. The men grew impatient, and there was much grumbling, some of which was directed at Halftrigger.

"I say, Cappen'," said one to Halftrigger, "I thought we wuz gittin' purty close to that gold. Are we goin' to tramp over these mountains and valleys forever?"

"Ef you don't wan't to go along with us," said Halftrigger, "you needn't, you kin stop right whar you are, an' we'll divide your share o' the gold among the rest o' the boys. I guess they won't grumble."

There was a laugh at this and for a while there were no mutterings, but eventually these were heard again. I also saw the gleam of more than one whiskey bottle, the contents of which the men poured down their throats when Halftrigger turned his head the other way. I did not know whether to rejoice or to be alarmed at this. Intoxication would weaken the party, but at the same time in a drunken fury they might put an

end to me, for I knew well that few of them would be restrained then by Halftrigger's motives of policy.

About noon we stopped for rest and food, and two men who went out after game were fortunate enough to shoot a deer about four hundred yards from the stopping place. The animal was quickly skinned and cut up, and a portion of the meat was cooked. The other was saved for future use. Halftrigger's men were not nearly so well equipped as ours, and would be compelled to rely chiefly upon hunting, for supplies of provisions.

Halftrigger allowed only an hour for the halt, and the march and the mutterings of discontent were resumed at the same time.

There had been more sly guzzling of whiskey, and two of the men, Masters and O'Leary, the very same that quarreled the night we were watching from the bush, were pushing each other about in a rough, drunken sort of humor. Halftrigger several times ordered them to keep quiet, and they obeyed until his attention was diverted from them, when they resumed their horse play.

We had come to a place where the narrowing of the valley had compelled the river to contract its width. There had been a consequent deepening of the channel, and the water rushed through the pass in a strong black torrent, like a mill race.

"Look down there Tim," said Masters to O'Leary, as we entered this defile, "that's a fine deep current, isn't it? How would you like to be pitched over in there? It would give you a good bath, which you know you need, for you ain't had one since we left 'Frisco."

The suggestion seemed to awaken an idea in O'Leary's dull, sodden brain. He leered at Masters, and replied:

"Ye're a wiser man, Masters, than I took ye to be. A douse of that would do us both good, and faith it would baptize us and prepare us for the world to come. So come along, Jimmy, boy! In we go, you and me!"

He approached Masters with a drunken stagger, seized him around the waist and jerked him to the edge of the rushing stream.

"Come along, Jimmy, lad," he said in a thick voice. "Do us both good. Let's get baptized. Both need it."

The danger of the men was so apparent that I stepped forward instinctively to pull them back, but I was too far away to reach them.

Masters, who was not so thoroughly steeped in liquor as his companion, wrenched away from the edge of the dangerous torrent and his face turned white and ghastly.

"Look out, Tim! Look out! Why it's death, it's death, man, to go overboard in that water!" he cried.

"All right," laughed O'Leary, in drunken glee, "we don't fear death, you an' me. We brave men. Come on, Jimmy."

He seized Masters, and, being the stronger man of the two, dragged him to the brink. Two or three others sprang forward and seized Masters also. With a mighty jerk they wrenched him from O'Leary's clutch.

O'Leary, with his hands grasping at the empty air, shot over backward into the stream. There was a heavy splash and he disappeared like a cannon-ball beneath the water. But he reappeared, his face changed and gray with fright. The cold water must have sobered him partly, as he shrieked for help.

"Save me, for the love of God, boys!" he cried. "I ain't ready to die. Save me!"

But the men stood on the brink, dazed by the sudden catastrophe. Nor is it likely that any of them, even if he had kept his wits about him, would have dared the dangers of that wild torrent for the sake of O'Leary.

"Save me, boys! Save—" shrieked O'Leary, and then his voice was lost as the torrent swept him under again.

When he appeared he was a hundred yards further down the stream, and the leaping currents and the whirling eddies dashed and tossed the body from which the life was choked and beaten. Then there was one glimpse of a ghastly face, over which the stringy hair

hung like seaweed, and it was sucked under again, to reappear no more until we encountered it a mile further down, where the stream spread out over the level land, lying peacefully in a little cove.

"We'll leave him thar," said Halftrigger, "an' I guess you men don't need to be told now to let the whiskey bottle alone. Our party is one weaker, but I reckon we won't miss him."

This cold comment was O'Leary's sole funeral service. In his drunken frenzy he had rushed to a foolish death, and those who had stood by were not wont to waste their time on dead men.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER SIGN.



ALFTRIGGER'S men were as hard-ened a set as ever I saw, but O'Leary's death had a depressing effect upon them. The complaints and the oaths and the unseemly jokes and the horseplay ceased for a while. They plodded along in sullen silence. But even their leader showed his bitter disappointment at finding nothing that answered Pedro's description of the country surrounding the hidden mine.

"What ef that feller wuz lyin' after all!" he said. "S'pose that gold o' his wuz jest a ghost story. Ef 'twas, then the bullet I sent into his cowardly carcass wuz the best job I ever did in my life, an' I've finished up some jobs purty clean in my time."

"You have seen some strange adventures in distant seas, I suppose?" I asked, for I always had much curiosity concerning this man.

"Wa'al, rayther," he said, his face glowing with evil pride. "I wuz never no slouch at takin' advantage o' opportunities, and the South Seas are wide and free."

"I should think the narration of some of them would be extremely interesting," I suggested.

"Not much, sonny," returned Halftrigger. "I don't think there's much danger o' you tellin' tales out o' school, but I've got suthin else to do on this cruise besides spinnin' yarns."

Shortly after this we came to a spot which Halftrigger selected as the camp for the night. It was in a small grove in a wide valley. The valley was clear of undergrowth, and no enemy could approach without attracting the observation of a sentinel who was not unusually dull.

The river at this point was too deep for fording, and as the grove grew upon its edge, we camped beside the water. Halftrigger made dispositions similar to those of the preceding night. He stationed two sentinels, and the others scattered themselves about on the grass as they chose. My hands were bound again, and another cord passed around my waist was tied to a stout sapling.

"Thar's enough o' rope thar," said Halftrigger, "to let you roll over in the river, but you won't float off as O'Leary did. But you'll drown jest as purtily."

After these pleasant remarks Halftrigger stretched his mighty length upon the ground and went to sleep. The others were quick in following him to the land of Nod, for the day's arduous journey had tired them.

As before, I was slow to feel drowsiness. My alarming situation was not conducive to sleep, and now that night had come I expected another sign from Pike. My knowledge of his persistent character and skill in the wilderness, and what I had seen the night before, had given life in my brain to this idea. In the day I had laughed at myself and tried to get rid of the notion, but it would stick. I had told myself that the four lights of the night before were a mere phantasy, the figment of an imagination distorted by my surroundings and anxiety. But as the darkness came on again my reasoning powers were unable to cope with my anticipations. Imagination ruled me, and in spite of myself I looked forward with confidence to what calm thought would have told me I had no right to expect.

It was thus, with nerves strung to the highest tension and every sense keenly alert, that I prepared myself to watch and wait. The rope which held me to the sapling was long enough to enable me to turn about and encircle the entire horizon in a search for signal lights. But we were now in a wide plain, and nowhere was I able to see a point of vantage from which Pike might act. Hour after hour passed, though with leaden feet, and there was nothing but the semi-darkness of a moonlight night and the

heavy stillness of the plain, broken only by the splash and gurgle of the river.

Midnight came, the guard was changed and still there was nothing. My disappointment caused me to fall into a most unreasoning and bitter mood. I was vexed and angry with my friends. But I was soon able to control this feeling, and condemn myself for being so foolish.

Then giving up the hope of seeing a signal, I lay and listened to the voice of the flowing river, which sounded so soothing and so peaceful in the night. I rolled to the edge of the bank and gazed at the water.

Bathed in the moonbeams, the river looked like a great sheet of molten silver. Far beyond, under the dim and starshot sky, I could see the shadowy outline of mountains.

There was something uncanny in the loneliness, the mystery and the grandeur of the wilderness. For how many ages had that silver river flowed on unseen by man!

I turned my eyes again from the mountains and the sky to the river. Then I noticed a dark splotch on the sheet of silver. The splotch was moving, floating on the surface of the stream. It came swiftly along with the current, and struck against the bank almost under my resting place. It rebounded lightly and, floating off down the stream, passed out of sight. But I saw what it was. Five sticks bound together with a withe made that splotch on the molten silver river.

It was nothing for pieces of wood to be floating along the surface of a mountain stream, but the withe indicated the hand of a man. Before I could think much about it there was another dark splotch, and again five sticks bound together as the others had been, floated by.

Four stars last night! Five sticks to-night! Had we another friend? Had Pike found a new ally? If so, who was he?

I never for a moment doubted the warning. I felt as sure that the sticks came from the hand of Pike, and were meant as a message for me, as I was sure that I was a prisoner in the hands of our enemies.

A third time, a fourth time, and a fifth time a bundle of five sticks floated by. Then they ceased. I lay awake long afterwards puzzling over the identity of our new ally. Some wandering trapper or hunter, perhaps some one Pike had known long before, I concluded at last. Then I went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.



HALFTRIGGER and Spanish Pete drew aside the next morning and began an earnest discussion. I guessed it was about the mine and what they thought the best way to find it. But while they were talking the man Masters, who had gone some distance down the river, returned on a run to the grove.

"Cappen! Cappen!" he called out. "There's somebody comin'."

Halftrigger was considerably startled, as in fact the rest of us were also.

"Somebody comin'," he exclaimed. "What d'ye mean, Masters?"

"It's just as I say, Cappen," he replied. "There's a man comin' up the stream and he's headed straight for us."

He pointed in the direction he had mentioned, and about a quarter of a mile away we saw the figure of a man approaching us carrying a gun over his shoulder.

"A hunter, I guess," said Halftrigger.

The man came on, rapidly walking with a steady swinging step. He never veered at all from his course, but came straight for the grove. As he came nearer I recognized him, to my great amazement. It was Mr. Sheldon, the genial hermit.

I would have shouted a warning to him, but it was too late. He was under the guns of the Halftrigger party now and would have to rely upon his own strength or diplomacy. He was near enough to see the men. Halftrigger's gigantic form was outlined clearly among the trees, and the hermit could scarcely avoid noticing him and knowing him, for he had had

abundant opportunity to examine every feature of the man the night we lay in the bush. But he came on steadily, and as he entered the grove Halftrigger, after making a sign to his men to keep silent, stepped forward.

"Ship ahoy!" he called out, assuming an air of joviality. "Luck to you, stranger. We don't see many o' your like in this part o' the world."

"Good morning to you," said Mr. Sheldon, in his gay, off-hand manner. "I saw the smoke from your fire some distance away, and as it was the first evidence I've had in a month that I was not alone in these wilds I thought I'd pay you a visit."

"Glad to see you, stranger," said Halftrigger. "Come in an' take pot luck with us. Might I ask you what your name may be?"

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Sheldon, "my name is Henry Barnes, and I've been down here all spring and summer on a hunting expedition. I've liked the country so well and I've had such good sport that I've dawdled away months here."

"That's frank and hearty," said Halftrigger, telling the thing that was not with as much ease and grace, as Mr. Sheldon did. "My name's Todd; Bill Todd of San Francisco, and me an' these lads here o' mine are out lookin' for gold. We've got no perticklar idea whar it's to be found, but we thought ef we loafed around long enough we might find it."

"Not a bad idea," said Mr. Sheldon, leaning on his rifle and sweeping the camp with a keen glance. His eyes rested on my face for a moment, and then passed on as if he had never seen me before and had not the faintest idea who I was. But his eyes roved around the camp a second time, and alighted on me again. I noticed a faint movement of the eyelids, and then his glance passed on, the warning unnoticed by all save myself. But I had guessed already that Mr. Sheldon had come into the camp as a spy, and I needed not the caution. I gave no sign of recognition. But I waited with a great anxiety to see what course Halftrigger would adopt. Knowing the des-

perate character of the sailor and his men, I feared danger to Mr. Sheldon, though I could not see that they had anything to gain by molesting him. Never having seen him before, they could not guess his designs in coming among them.

"Been long in this valley, mate?" asked Halftrigger, maintaining his friendly and familiar air.

"A few days only," replied Mr. Sheldon, "but I've knocked around in pretty lively fashion in that time."

"Is that so?" said Halftrigger, his eyes lighting up. "Then maybe you kin help me an' this gang o' mine out o' our scrape. We don't know much about travelin' aroun' in this kind o' country. Leastways I don't, fur I've been follerin' the sea most o' my life. So we've got kinder mixed up an' don't know just whar we are."

"Any information that I may have is at your disposal," said Mr. Sheldon, politely.

"Whar does this river go to?" asked Halftrigger. "I kinder had an idea that it run into another river somewhars hereabouts."

"I am very sorry that I cannot give you any information on that point," said Mr. Sheldon, "but I have not followed its course far enough to see."

"Oh, well, it don't matter," said Halftrigger, though his face showed disappointment. "It wuz jest a guess o' mine an' I wuz wantin' to see whether I wuz right."

Of course, it was easy enough for me to divine what Halftrigger was endeavoring to do. He thought he could gain from an unsuspecting hunter sufficient knowledge to guide him in the search for the hidden mine.

"Fine stream," said Halftrigger. "Come across many rivers in these parts?"

"I've seen several," replied Mr. Sheldon.

"Some o' 'em run dry," said Halftrigger. "I've come across two or three river beds ez dry ez powder. 'Spect you've seen some o' the same kind round here, hev'n't you?"

Mr. Sheldon also must have understood the meaning of Halftrigger's questions, but he answered lightly in the negative.

During this dialogue I stood near the river's bank. After eating my meagre breakfast I had not been rebound, and there was nothing in my appearance that would cause a stranger to ask questions about me. Nevertheless, Mr. Sheldon turned his eyes upon me, and said to Halftrigger:

"I notice that one of your party is very young. Your son, perhaps, though he does not look like you."

"Yes," said Halftrigger, with a grin that he could not hide, "that's my only son, Frank. His mother died when he wuzn't but two years old. I guess I've led him a purty hard life, bein' ez I'm a rovin' chap an' sailor man. But now that he's getting on to be a man hisself he kin hustle, and besides he'll git whatever I hev after a while. You ain't got anything pertickler against your old dad, hev you, Frank?"

I forced myself to answer that he had invariably treated me well. I admired the grim humor and cool assurance of the villain.

"Those sentiments do credit to you both," said Mr. Sheldon. "Parents and children should be true to each other, and so should friends. Now, you may think I am talking boastfully, but I never desert a friend of mine. If he is in trouble or danger I am ready to risk all for him. I will be true to him to the last."

He let his glance rest lightly upon me again, and I understood.

"You talk mighty big about yourself, stranger," said one of the men, a sulky brute named Fisher.

Mr. Sheldon put his thumb and forefinger around his right eye, forming a circle through which he looked at Fisher.

"My friend," he said, "you have rather a heavy face, and I have no doubt your education is deficient. Nevertheless I am compelled to inform you that you are ill-mannered."

"Wa-al, it don't make no difference," growled the man. "I don't see no use o' jawin with you. You kaint do us no good."

"Perhaps not, nor am I aware that you can do me any good," returned Mr. Sheldon, with perfect coolness.

"Don't min' him, Mr. Barnes," said Halftrigger, who evidently had no desire to seek a quarrel. "Tom got out o' bed back'ards this mornin' an' he ain't feelin' in good humor."

Most of the men laughed, but Fisher was determined not to be appeased. He had been the leader among the malcontents, and he seemed to have his mind set upon picking a quarrel.

"We don't know who this man is," he said, "an' we don't know what he is up to."

"Nor do I know who you are, nor do I care," said Mr. Sheldon. "I would infer from your appearance and manner, however, that your proper place is behind the walls of a penitentiary. I dare say that with strict discipline you might be made of some use there."

"Be keerful how you call me hard names," said the man, savagely. "I ain't used to standin' 'em from nobody."

Halftrigger advanced once more in the role of peacemaker, but Mr. Sheldon waved him back.

"I thank you for interfering in my behalf," he said, "but I am fully able to protect myself from this sulky fellow."

Fisher had been sidling up towards Mr. Sheldon and suddenly drew a knife and lunged at him. There was an involuntary cry, for the act startled the men, hardened villains though they were. But Mr. Sheldon sprang to one side as quick as a flash, and the knife-blade merely cut the empty air.

The man had put so much impetus into the blow that he lurched forward when his knife met no resistance. Mr. Sheldon thrust out his foot. Fisher tripped on it and over he went, falling as clumsily as a calf. The knife flew out of his hand and stuck in the ground ten feet away.

Mr. Sheldon took his gun from his shoulder, cocked it and put the muzzle against the head of the cowering villain.

"I would blow your brains out," he said, "but the result would defile this beautiful landscape. Get up, and restrain your murderous propensities in the future."

He let down the hammer of his gun and put the weapon back on his shoulder.

As the lumbering fellow struggled to his feet Mr. Sheldon's right foot suddenly shot out and landed with a terrific impact on the broadest part of Fisher's anatomy. The blow seemed almost to lift the man into the air, and he uttered a cry of pain and wrath.

"Don't try it, my friend," said Mr. Sheldon, as Fisher put his hand down in his belt for a weapon; "I would send a bullet through you before you could draw it."

All the bandits, including Halftrigger himself, were dumbfounded by Mr. Sheldon's coolness and boldness, and not a hand was lifted against him.

"I must say, stranger," said Halftrigger, "that you take your nerve with you."

"Your fellow there," said Mr. Sheldon, "attempted my life, and when he failed his was forfeit to me. I have given it back to him. He has no right to complain."

Fisher sat down on a fallen log and glowered at Mr. Sheldon, but he was afraid to make a hostile movement, for Mr. Sheldon kept an eye on him, while he held his rifle in such a position that he could cover Fisher in the twinkling of an eye.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Sheldon, "I see that I can be of no service to you, and I do not want to bring discord into your camp. So I will bid you good day."

He turned and walked away, whistling a lilting air.

When he was about forty yards away Fisher began to draw a pistol from his belt.

"Drop that!" said Halftrigger, savagely. "Fisher, you show such poor judgment that I don't know

whether you are fit to belong to my crew. I don't scruple at a little bloodlettin' any more'n you do. You ought to know that, but sech things should be done with jedgment. It's mighty hard to wipe out bloodstains, an' 'taint wuth while to make 'em, 'less you've got suthin' to gain by it. 'Taint wuth the risk. Now, we never saw that feller afore, an' 'taint likely we'll ever see him ag'in. What's the use o' wastin' powder an' ball or dullin' your steel on him? You've got to be a philosopher in these things, Fisher, or you'll never git along."

After this somewhat lengthy speech, Halftrigger turned away as if the last word had been said and the argument was closed. All the men except Fisher seemed impressed by the soundness of his views on the subject of "bloodlettin'." But Fisher still sulked, though he did not draw his pistol.

Mr. Sheldon never looked back, but walked steadily on until he disappeared over a swell of the earth. Like the desperadoes, I was deeply impressed by his coolness and courage, and I also felt sure that he was the fifth stick in the bundle that had come floating down the river the night before.

"It's time to be movin'," said Halftrigger, briskly. "Buckle yourselves together, fellers, an' come along."

All the men rose and stood waiting for Halftrigger to lead on, except Fisher.

"Come on, Fisher," said Halftrigger, "or you'll git left."

"That's all right," said Fisher. "That's what I want. I'm tired of this crowd, anyway."

"See here, Fisher," said Halftrigger, who had a dangerous glint in his eye. "I've had enough o' this foolin'. Speak out plain. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm jest as tired of the foolin' as you are," said Fisher, bluntly, "an' I kin speak out plain, too. I say you're no cappen. You've got us down here in the wilderness an' you don't know where we are, an' you don't know how to git us to that mine. You let that feller who hez jest gone run over me, an' a cappen

ought to stan' by his men. I've hed my say, an' more'n one o' the boys agrees with me."

Halftrigger looked around at the silent group. I knew he would assert his authority, for he was the superior villain, but I wondered in what manner that assertion would find expression.

"So you're tired o' our comp'ny, are you, Fisher," he said, in a soft and wheedling voice, "an' you're stirrin' up a mutiny in the crowd, eh?"

"I don't say that," replied Fisher.

"Oh, no," replied Halftrigger, "but you left it to be guessed, an' don't you know that to stir up a mutiny in a crew is a mighty dangerous thing?"

"We ain't at sea," said the man.

"No," said Halftrigger, "but we're in the wilderness, whar we've got to stick together an' obey the capt'in. An' I'm the capt'in, Fisher."

Fisher began to get alarmed at Halftrigger's tones, which now sounded like the purring of a big cat.

"See here, Halftrigger," he said. "You kain't frighten me."

As he spoke, he dropped his hand upon the butt of the pistol that swung in his belt. Halftrigger sprang forward, whipped out his own pistol, and sent a bullet crashing through the man's skull.

Fisher staggered to his feet and faced Halftrigger for a moment, the black blood trickling down his face from a hole in his forehead. He tried to speak, but only gibbered. Then he toppled over, and when the men reached him he was dead.

"Ef thar are any more rebels here," said Halftrigger, holding his smoking pistol in his hand, and looking around with flashing eyes, "jest let 'em say so."

No voice was raised. The men were thoroughly cowed by his ferocious energy. Halftrigger replaced his pistol in his belt and added:

"Now, don't any o' you furgit who's capt'in here. Don't furgit it, I say. You don't want to be reminded of it the way Fisher wuz. Now, are you ready to go with me an' stan' with me through thick an' through thin? Speak up!"

"Yes!" said all the men, and I doubted not that they meant it. Halftrigger had shown that he was a master villain, and there was no one now bold enough to dispute his sway.

"He kin rot here," said Halftrigger, contemptuously kicking the corpse of Fisher. "Ez I told him, he had no jedgment, an' he's paid the price."

He gave the word, and we started once more down the river. I was the only one who turned to look back at the dead body in the grass.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CRISIS.



THE bloody beginning of the day shocked me to the uttermost and filled me with gloomy anticipations. An untoward event at any time might turn Halftrigger's sanguinary fury upon me as it had been turned upon Fisher. I was soon to see, also, that their continual failure to find the mine was to have an evil effect upon the temper of the leader, as well as upon that of the men.

We had tramped for several hours along the banks of that river which seemed to roll on forever without leading to anything that would promise a reward for so much travel, when Halftrigger said to me:

"Ef you know anythin' more about this mine an' the way to git to it than we do, it'll be healthy fur you to let it out. We're gittin' tired o' the eternal walk, walk, an' never gittin' nowhar. Fur all we know, we may be goin' further from the mine every day."

"Aye, that we are!" growled one of the men. "I never set out to walk to the Atlantic Ocean."

"Keep silent," said Halftrigger. "Let me do the talkin'. Don't you know yet that I'm captin o' the ship?"

The man shrank back like a frightened child, and made no further attempt to enter into the conversation.

I told Halftrigger that I knew no more about the mine than he did, and I gave him this assurance with earnestness and emphasis, for his manner had begun to arouse my apprehensions. I appeared to convince him that I was not concealing anything from him, but he began to cross-examine me then about my friends.

"Do you reckon that hunter feller and the others with him hev found the mine?" he asked, casting a sidelong but keen glance at me.

I answered truthfully that I did not think so.

"Wa'al, I don't know that it would make much difference," he said, "fur I guess we could wipe out that gang without much trouble."

We stopped rather longer than usual in the middle of the day, for Halftrigger was now in a state of uncertainty, and spoke of leaving the river and searching for some other stream which might turn out to be the one Pedro had meant. Two of the men were sent out to examine the country and report on its character. They returned in the middle of the afternoon without having found anything that would guide the party in their search.

But they brought some news that was not pleasing to Halftrigger. They had seen proof of the presence of another party in the neighborhood. Some charred sticks in one place indicated an abandoned campfire, and some footprints of new arrivals in the soft earth at the crossing of a brook was evidence that these people, whoever they might be, were not far away.

Halftrigger's countenance was overcast at this news. I supposed—in fact, I was convinced—that the footprints were those of my own party, and I believe that Halftrigger's surmise was the same. I thought the discovery the two men had made was an unfortunate chance, and it added much to my apprehension. I alone had seen Pike's signals, and Halftrigger's previous manner had indicated a belief that he had shaken off our party.

"Ef we're going to have a fight," said one of the men, "I don't see any use uv our loadin' ourselves up with freight that we can't use."

As he spoke he looked significantly at me.

Hassan, the Moor, who spent half of his time watching me, grinned at me hideously, and stroked the haft of his knife with his right hand. His whole manner seemed to say that if the "useless freight" were put out of the way, he asked the privilege of doing the job.

Halftrigger made no reply. He could not have misunderstood the allusion, and his failure to rebuke it seemed to me to be proof that my uneasiness was well grounded. He called Spanish Pete aside, and they talked with much apparent earnestness. The other men flung themselves on the grass, and awaited the result of the debate, seemingly without interest. The Moor drew himself over towards me, and, taking advantage of the preoccupation of the leader and his lieutenant, began to indulge in some grim gestures for my amusement and edification.

He drew his knife and made rapid motions with it as if he were sharpening the blade on some imaginary article. Then he began to stab and slice with the knife, his face all the time expressing the most intense enjoyment. Then he put it back in its sheath and changed himself into the person who had been sliced and stabbed. He writhed about and twisted himself into strange shapes, distorting his countenance until the sweat broke out on it. Then he turned his eyes up, gasped for breath, shuddered violently, and stiffening his form, fell over on his back and lay quite still.

It was ghastly and repulsive, and I tried to look away, but despite my will the man's contortions held my gaze. After lying as if he were dead for at least a minute, the Moor sprang lightly to his feet, and looking at me, laughed with horrible glee.

"How does the Christian dog like it?" he asked. "Cannot he see his approaching fate?"

I did not answer, for I had decided to pay no attention to him when he made his attempts to annoy me. But he went through the performance again for my benefit. I believe that this man should have been a professional executioner. Perhaps he had held such a place in his own sanguinary country.

Halftrigger and Spanish Pete were still talking when one of the men approached them, and pointing to the southwestern sky, said:

"Cappen, I guess the fust thing we'll have to do will be to look out for that."

I followed the line of his outstretched finger and saw some purple clouds lying low on the horizon.

"I've been watchin' 'em grow for the last fifteen minutes," said the man; "an' I guess we're goin' to get a wettiu'."

Rain was very unusual at this season of the year in California. I had not seen any since I left San Francisco, but I thought the man was right in his prediction. So did Halftrigger.

"I've no min' to git a wettin'," he said, "an' I don't guess any of you boys want it, either. You don't 'pear to be overfond o' water, inside or outside. I guess we'd better make fur them trees over yonder and shelter ourselves."

He pointed to a strip of forest, the nearest in sight, though a full mile away. Ordering me to keep in the middle of the band, we started at a lively pace across the plain.

The gathering clouds, which soon filled a corner of the sky, were very dark and threatening, but we had plenty of time to gain the shelter of the grove. The trees were large, and as they grew close together and had an abundance of foliage, they seemed sufficient to protect us, at least in part.

Standing under the trees we watched the clouds gather and grow. They piled upon each other in heavy black masses, and so much of the sky was obscured that a dusk as if of the twilight fell over the grove. But the passing of the day also contributed to the darkness.

"We'd better make ourselves ez comfortable here ez we kin," said Halftrigger, "fur the night's comin' with the rain. We've got to anchor right here till tomorrow. Jumpin' Jehosaphat, but we're goin' to hev a storm!"

There was a heavy roll of thunder, followed by an intensely bright flash of lightning, and we cowered behind the gigantic trunks of the trees for shelter from the coming storm.

"Looks like the advance guard of a monsoon in the China Seas," said Halftrigger.

Another flash of lightning rent the growing dusk. The atmosphere was close, heavy and oppressive, and it was of such a dead stillness that not a leaf, not a blade of grass quivered. Halftrigger wet his finger and held it up.

"Not a breath stirrin'," said he "but we'll hev it soon. I've seen the like o' this many a time at sea."

The thunder again rolled heavily and the lightning played over everything, tinging the grass, the trees and our faces with its lurid hues. I watched these mighty manifestations of nature with feelings of awe akin to superstition. The men were silent and uneasy.

All the heavens were now overcast by the night and the clouds, but the incessant blaze of lightning lifted the inky veil and revealed the plain and the distant mountain. Presently the thunder and the lightning ceased for a moment, and I heard a sound like the distant groaning of the mountains. It grew louder rapidly, the wind sprang up, and there came a swish of rain. The next instant the storm was upon us, screaming and tearing over the earth.

The lightning and the thunder ceased abruptly, as if the ammunition of heaven were exhausted, and we stood in intense darkness. But the wind, in gust after gust, beat upon us like the waves of the sea. I heard a snapping and crashing as the boughs of the trees were torn by an irresistible force and their leaves slapped my face, as the same force dashed them past me. A more violent gust threw me to my feet, and as I struggled up the earth was upheaved as the roots of the tree under which we stood were drawn up by the overthrow of the forest giant.

The roar of the tree in its fall sounded above the clamor of the storm, and I heard also cries of alarm or pain. As the tree fell clear of me, I dashed away in the forest, alive to my opportunity and thrilling with the thought of escape. The lightning began to play again, and looking back, I saw those who had been my captors running about with scared faces and beckoning to each other. Even as I looked Halftrigger saw me, and the lightning was hardly quicker than he, when he

snatched a pistol from his belt and fired. The blaze passed, the inky blackness of the night fell again, but his bullet sang so close to my head that my ear burned as if it had been scorched by fire.

I did not stop for another look back but rushed on, tripping over stones and fallen boughs, my face scratched and my clothing torn by the undergrowth, but forgetting them all in the chance for escape which had come so suddenly to me. The sound of shouts and pistol shots reached me, but no more bullets sang their song in my ears.

How long I rushed on, careless of limb, I know not, but when I stopped at last for breath and looked back again by the lightning flash, I saw no pursuers. I had lost them in the mazes of the forest. With the storm still shrieking over my head I returned a silent thanksgiving for this escape, which seemed like a miracle, and then, wet, scratched, bleeding and buffeted about by the wind, but alive with joy and hope, I resumed my flight.

In the wildness and muddle of the storm I had nearly lost all idea of direction, but I followed the course that I had been pursuing as well as I could, satisfied that it would take me away from the band. The force of the wind decreased presently, and a pelting rain set in. It was cold, and bit to the bone, but there was no danger now of being dashed to death by flying timber or being crushed under a falling tree. With the lightning no longer to aid me, I stumbled many times, and had one or two bad falls, but I minded them little. After the company I had endured the last two or three days and the ghastly prospect that had been before me, I could welcome almost any physical evil, if only freedom came with it.

For a long time I ran through the thick woods and underbrush. Occasionally I stopped to listen for the sounds of pursuit, but the only noises I heard were the driving of the rain and the moaning of the wind, which had now lost the wrath of a tempest. At length I began to feel the buffetings I had endured and the strenuous exertions I had made, and I leaned against

the trunk of a tree to seek some measure of shelter from the rain, which carried the breath of the North in every gust and set me shivering as if with a chill.

The mossy trunk afforded tolerable shelter both from the rain and its cold breath, until a lull in the tempest and the clearing of the clouds would enable me to see my way. I was not compelled to wait long for the change I desired. In a half-hour the rain ceased almost and the wind sank into a mere whisper. Some stars twinkled through the breaks in the clouds, but the light was not sufficient for me to see more than twenty feet away. The forest around was dense and had been much torn by the tempest.

Dazed by the tangle of forest and storm I had even forgotten the direction in which I had come, but I left the tree and began my flight again, trusting to chance to take me the way in which I ought to go. I almost cried aloud with pain when I took my first steps. Drenched and chilled by the rain, my joints had stiffened when I leaned against the tree. My nerves tingled as if pins had been thrust into my flesh and I tottered like a child just learning to walk. But the trouble wore off in a few minutes and I plodded on, my wet clothes flapping around me.

By and by the clouds gathered again and the thunder was once more rolling and the lightning flashing, the one as loud and the other as vivid as before. The storm had gathered its strength for a second effort, though the wind did not blow with the same violence. I turned my back to the rain and made my way through the bushes over ground that was now becoming very rough. I slipped once and rolled with a splash into a brook, which had been swollen by the rain into a mountain torrent. I was swept down a few feet, but with a mighty effort I regained my footing, struggled to the bank and pulled myself out by some bushes that grew at the water's edge.

I drew myself out on the far side of the brook and this chance encouraged me. We had passed no such water course in the day, and the luck to which I trusted, evidently had been guiding me away from

Halftrigger's men. If the brook only grew, as these mountain torrents sometimes do when a cloud-burst comes dashing down upon them, it might, for the night at least, prove an impassable barrier between me and the desperadoes.

I paused awhile on the brink of the brook and listened attentively for the sounds of pursuit, but the storm drowned all other noises. The blaze of the lightning across the sky revealed nothing but the dripping forest. Conscious that my best course, even aside from motives of safety, was to walk, walk, walk, and keep the blood stirring, I set out again on a road that I knew not, to a destination I knew not what.

The violence of the rain had diminished somewhat, but the bombardment from heaven's artillery was magnificent and awful. The thunder was like the crash of great guns one after the other, and the streaks of lightning across the sky were so rapid and so brilliant that I threw my hands involuntarily before my eyes to shut out the blinding glare. Fearing that a tree would be struck by a bolt and thrown down upon me, I sought the more open places of the forest.

In front of me I saw a small hill that seemed to be bare, and I ran forward to gain its summit. In a minute I stood upon the desired crest and as I stumbled against a stone a form seemed to rise out of the ground and confront me.

There was a burst of hideous laughter which even the thunder did not drown, and as the lightning played across the sky I saw the grinning face of Hassan, the Moor, within a foot of mine.

There are some blows which fall with such heavy weight that they deprive you for the moment of thought and action. I stood like one turned to stone, staring at the Moor, triumphant in his success and malice.

The Moor stared back at me, but his faculties were not paralyzed like mine. He thrust his hand in his girdle and drew the crooked bladed knife which he loved like a child. Then grasping my arm, with the other hand he swung the knife aloft.

He poised his weapon for a moment while his cruel

face writhed in laughter. Then he seemed to throw all his strength into the arm for the blow, his face was distorted into one more grin, and the next instant a blaze of light flashed between us. The blade of the upraised knife melted to the very haft. The face of the Moor turned black beneath a blow dealt by a hand mightier than that of man. His form shrivelled up before me, and then, my eyes swimming in a red glare, my own senses left me and I fell to the earth.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHANCES OF A NIGHT.



WHEN my eyes opened again I wavered for a while on the verge of consciousness. My senses were heavy and dull, and memory had left me. My eyelids drooped again, but with a supreme effort of the will I summoned back my lost faculties, and with slowness and pain climbed to my feet. Even then my senses sought to wander, but the human will in me triumphed.

When I got the shadows and dimness out of my eyes I looked up at a sky from which the clouds had gone, leaving a million stars to twinkle in their place. Around me was the dripping forest, and the cool wind came, fragrant with the breath of the summer night.

I looked down and there at my feet was that which brought back full recollection to me. The body of the Moor lay upon its back. The scorched and blackened face was upturned to the stars and in his right hand he still clutched the handle of the knife that had drawn the lightning. It was a death such as he deserved.

It took me some time to overcome my repugnance and to touch the body, but I resolved to search it for weapons or food, or anything that might assist me in the wilderness. It was at last, with many shudders, that I turned the thing about, in order that I might look in the pockets. But I found nothing except some pieces of cooked meat, which I hastily appropriated. Weapons there were none. He had been armed only with the knife which he loved.

Then I left the stark and cold body without a feeling of pity, for the man in his life had inspired me with the most unutterable repugnance, and I could not forget it in his death. But every feeling of prudence

told me to hasten from the spot. Where Hassan was the others could not be very far away. Perhaps the same merciful Providence that had saved me from Hassan's knife had saved me from their discovery. I must have lain senseless a long time, for the storm was now over and the heavens were bright.

I was weak and dizzy with the exposure and the events of the night, but I rubbed my arms and legs so vigorously that a fair degree of circulation was soon restored. Then I walked away, taking a random course, still trusting in that Providence which had protected me so well thus far.

After the storm the night seemed to wish to make amends for so much violence. The stars never twinkled more brightly, and the wind was like the odor of a flower bank. Though the water from the trees dripped upon me and my feet frequently sank in the soft earth, my clothes began to dry, and the vigorous exercise warmed me. Though I was still in a sorry plight, alone and unarmed in a vast wilderness, my spirits, with all the elasticity of youth, began to rise rapidly. Hope never dies at twenty, and lifted up by this revulsion of feelings, I swung along full of confidence, and even expecting that some infallible fortune would guide me to Pike and my friends before morning.

From this castle-building I was recalled by the sound of voices. At first I thought it was but the wind playing with the leaves, but a more attentive ear showed that the sounds were made by human beings. Reason told me that it must be one of two bands, either Pike's or Halftrigger's. But the chances favored the latter, for Pike would not allow his men to travel through a forest making as much noise as a troop of cavalymen.

I looked around for some place of concealment, for the night was now so bright one could scarcely hope to escape the observation of a keen eye at short distance. Near me was a large tree which had been overturned by the storm. The tearing up of the roots had made a deep hole, overhung by the bunch of roots and mass of earth which still clung to the tree. I thrust myself into the hole, and found it such an admirable

place of concealment that I would be invisible to a person standing near enough to touch me, while I could watch those without in perfect security.

I had scarcely made myself comfortable in my lair when several figures emerged from the denser shade of the forest and walked directly towards me. Then I was thankful, indeed, for my covert, for in the clear moonlight I recognized instantly the gigantic form of Halftrigger. Behind him came Spanish Pete and all the others, save Hassan, who would never again follow his leader in crime, at least not in this world.

Halftrigger held something in his hand, and I saw with surprise that it was the haft of Hassan's dagger. The men halted about twenty feet from me, and Halftrigger said in petulant tones:

"The fellow hain't fur from here, boys. Hassan had this knife in his hands when the lightning' struck him, an' I guess he wouldn't hev had his knife drawn ef he hadn't been ready to strike somethin'."

"We saw the tracks of some one leading away from the spot," said Spanish Pete, "but we lost them in the grass."

"That's so! That's so!" said Halftrigger. "Thet Fieldin' wuz shorely thar, an' I'd give a double han'ful o' gold ef I had it, to git my han's on him ag'in. We've had nothin' but bad luck since we come across him. We've lost three o' our men, good men, too, they'd be in a pinch. Hassan was a bloodthirsty heathen, an' he didn't hev the right sort o' control o' his feelin's, but he wuz never afeard and we'd a had use fur him."

"Fortune has been against us to-night, Captain," said Spanish Pete.

"No doubt o' it! No doubt o' it!" said Halftrigger. "The waves hev been too strong fur us. It wuz thet infernal storm thet did the business. It scattered us ez a monsoon in the China Seas sends the junks a-flyin'."

"What do you propose to do, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete.

"Tain't wuth while to try to get any more rest to-night," said Halftrigger, "an' I think we'd better

beat about the woods until day lookin' fur Fieldin'. Ef we don't fin' him we'll strike out ag'in fur the mine, an' leave him here to starve or to be et up by wild beasts."

"Do you think we will be able to find the mine?" asked Spanish Pete, in a doubtful tone.

"Fin' it! o' course we will," said Halftrigger, adopting a sanguine tone. "I think myself we've been follerin' the wrong river. In the mornin' we'll strike out across the country an' see ef we kaint strike another. More'n likely that'll be the right one, an' then the devil will be in it ef we kaint follow Pedro's directions an' fin' that mine, an' then, Pete, my lad, when we carry dead loads o' gold back to Frisco, you an' me and the lads here, won't thar be times, sech howlin' times, and we'll be ez rich ez kings, all o' us, Pete, an' we'll wear clothes ez fine ez an admiral's, an' we'll live like lords."

The men drew close to him as he spoke and their faces flushed with the gold fever.

"You lead us, Cap," said one, "an' we'll stick to you till we fin' thet gold and get it back to Frisco."

"I'll take you to the place," said Halftrigger. "Depen' on me fur that."

In their talk the men had come nearer and nearer to my covert, and when Halftrigger uttered his emphatic assurance he was standing so near me that I could have reached out and touched him with my hand. Still the hiding place was so good that I felt secure from observation. But just at this moment Halftrigger leaned against a root which the fall of the tree had thrust up into the air like a spear. His weight caused a mass of earth clinging to the root to fall, and this mass striking another mass over my covert, knocked it away, disclosing my face.

"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Halftrigger, jumping back in alarm, thinking that he had almost stepped upon a wild beast, "what hev we here?"

Surprise acts differently at times, and fortunately at this critical moment I retained my self possession. With one bound I sprang from the hole. Snatching

up a handful of the fallen earth I dashed it into the face of Halftrigger, and while he was gasping and spitting out the stuff and rubbing it from his eyes, I leaped like a deer over the uprooted tree and was away through the forest.

Halftrigger was sputtering about and the other men were dazed by the sudden apparition. I think they took me at first for a wild man or some such mysterious occupant of the forest. Spanish Pete was the first to recover from the shock.

"It's the prisoner! It's Fielding!" he shouted. "Fire on him! Fire!"

There was a rattle of pistol shots and the bullets clipped about me, but I ran on untouched.

"After him! After him!" shouted Halftrigger. "Bring him down boys! Don't let him get away ag'in!"

I cast one fleeting glance behind me and saw the whole party full tilt after me, most of them holding their smoking pistols in their hands. The love of life put lightning in my heels, and I sprang over the ground with a vigor and speed that would have astonished those who knew me. I darted between the tree trunks, leaped over the fallen brushwood and paused not for the twigs and low-hanging boughs which seemed to reach out to grasp my clothes. But my pursuers hung on and ran as fast as I did. They fired again several times, but, running so swiftly in that uncertain light, it was impossible to take good aim, and the bullets did not even whiz near me.

As I sprang along my incautious foot caught a protruding root and I rolled down a gully. There was a shout of triumph behind me, but I was up again as light as a feather, and, springing out of the gully, I ran on, sending back a defiant cry. But the accident had enabled the men to gain so much upon me that more than once I could hear their heavy panting breath.

"Stop!" shouted Halftrigger, "or I'll bore a hole through you with a bullet."

But I had little fear of that. Their marksmanship

was bad, and, moreover, I believed all their pistols now to be empty. Instead of stopping, I strained every nerve to increase my speed, and, though my heart was almost bursting with the exertion, I had the satisfaction, when I looked back, to see that I had made a considerable gain upon them. Then I eased up a little in order to save my breath.

For ten minutes or more the distance between us was unchanged. I could hear the heavy rush of the men and occasionally a curse from one of them as a swinging branch struck him a painful blow in the face.

"Spread out, lads; we've got him now!" HalftrIGGER suddenly exclaimed, in a voice rendered jerky by his exertions.

I did not understand what he meant, but when I ran a few feet further and looked up it was all plain to me, and my heart went down like lead. Stretching directly in front of me and shining through the trees was the river. It was broad and looked very deep.

"We've got him on a lee shore! Close in lads!" shouted HalftrIGGER. "It's been a stern chase an' a long an' a hard un, but we've won!"

Another minute would have brought me to the river. I made a sudden turn to the north—that is, up stream. Those of my pursuers who had spread out in that direction closed in to head me off, and the others turned to follow. But I whirled suddenly on my heels as if on a pivot, and dashed down the river. I gained several feet by this trick, but still it would not have sufficed to keep me from being cut off had not the river, a short distance further down, curved eastward. I turned with it and ran rapidly along its bank. I gained a little breathing space, but as I summoned my strength for another effort I saw that two of the men, avoiding the curve I had made, had succeeded in gaining enough to head me off. If I had possessed a pistol, I would have fired upon them and made a fight to drive them out of my path. But I was unarmed, and, of course, I would be powerless in their grasp.

Again I heard HalftrIGGER call encouragingly to his men, and assure them that they had me now, and this

emboldened me to make a last desperate resolution. Taking one look at the broad, shining river, I leaped far out from the high bank and disappeared, like a diver, head first beneath the water.

As I sank I heard cries of surprise, and I caught a glimpse of the startled faces of the desperadoes. Then the water closed over me. Swimming and diving are among my accomplishments, and, though I was impeded by my clothing, I struck out with strong arms down the stream, bearing towards the further bank. I stayed under water until my head began to buzz and roar, and then I came up panting for breath.

I dashed the water from my eyes, and saw Halftrigger and three of the men standing on the shore a considerable distance up the stream. The others had plunged into the river, and were swimming directly for the opposite shore. Evidently they thought I would strike for the further bank, and my tactics took them by surprise.

"Thar he is! Thar he is!" shouted Halftrigger, as he caught sight of my head on the surface of the stream.

He was reloading his pistol, and as soon as he saw me he began to hasten the task, at the same time running down the bank. I watched him with the tail of one eye, while I floated easily with the current.

It required but a slight exertion to keep me afloat and moving with the stream, and I rapidly recovered my breath and strength. Halftrigger was swearing profusely as he fumbled with the pistol and was unable to load it as fast as he wished. The three swimmers had reached the further shore and were climbing up the bank. The other men were following Halftrigger, but in the excitement and hurry of the chase they were forgetful of their pistols and made no effort to reload them. I saw that I had only the leader to fear for the present.

Halftrigger uttered an exclamation of satisfaction presently and raised the pistol to take aim. I watched him until his eyes glanced along the barrel, and then I sank as if lead had been tied to my heels, the report of

the pistol ringing in my ears as I went down. Again I swam a long time under the water, and then I came up like a whale for breath, I saw Halftrigger some distance behind me, reloading his pistol with as much haste as he could make. The men who had crossed the river were tearing along the further bank, and now I had two forces threatening me. But we seldom have either good fortune or bad fortune unmixed, and now a bit of good fortune impeded the movements of my enemies. Dense undergrowth began to line either side of the river, and they made their way through it with difficulty, swearing loudly in their vexation.

The lucky interposition of the bushes enabled me to make some gain on my pursuers, though they were still able to keep me in sight. Meanwhile I tried to devise a plan that would help me to escape. Unless the thick undergrowth proceeded for some distance along the bank it was obvious that I would soon be overtaken. Then the men could come into the water and take me or shoot me from the shore at their leisure. It was not a comfortable prospect. But while I was thinking my enemies were thinking also.

"Circle aroun' the undergrowth!" shouted Halftrigger to one of the men on the further shore, "an' get ahead o' him. Then, when he comes down, pop him with a bullet."

The man to whom he gave the command at once bore away from the stream to escape the impeding undergrowth. Just then the river narrowed somewhat and the banks rose to a considerable height. A strip of bushes and trailing vines grew at the edge of the water and climbed up the bank. A hurried glance disclosed all this. Then I was compelled to watch the men, for I saw some of them had their pistols ready and were going to fire upon me again.

"Jest one o' you shoot," called out Halftrigger, "an' then ef he dives, the other pop him when he comes up."

This was the last spur to my thoughts and I formed my resolution. I watched the man who was taking aim and again I repeated as successfully as before the

trick of diving to escape the shot. But instead of floating down the river I turned and swam up stream, though maintaining a diagonal direction that would bring me to the further shore.

I had inhaled a deep, long breath before I sank, for I felt that my fate turned upon the success of this manœuvre. I swam until the whole river seemed to roar in my ears. Then when my outstretched hands struck against a hard substance I raised my head slowly from the water. With infinite relief I felt branches and soft leaves rubbing against my face, and when the water dripped from my eyes I found I was lying against the precipitous bank, and my head, which alone protruded above the water, was buried in a mass of bushes, weeds and vines. This growth interlaced and was so dense that I could not see. But parting some of the mass with extreme caution I peeped out.

Some distance further down the men on either side of the river were watching its surface for my reappearance, and had begun to utter exclamations of disappointment when they failed to see me. The one who had the loaded pistol held it outstretched, ready to use it when the opportunity came. Halftrigger also had finished loading his weapon and was waiting for me.

"What's become o' the feller!" exclaimed Halftrigger in an impatient voice. "He kain't swim forever like a fish."

"He hasn't come up, that's certain, Captain," said Spanish Pete, "or we would have seen him."

"Perhaps he's drowned," hazarded one of the men.

"I don't believe it," said Halftrigger. "I think it's a trick. We'll watch here a bit longer. But I'll fin' out what the trick is or I'm not a sailor."

They watched for fully five minutes. The man who had undertaken to head me off called from further down the river announcing his failure to find me there. Then Halftrigger decided that they must go into the stream and search for me, one remaining on either bank with loaded pistols in case I made a dash.

"Take your knives in your teeth," he said. "The fellow is unarmed, an' you kin settle him easy."

Halftrigger took the lead and plunged into the water, swimming about with his knife clinched between his teeth. The others followed, and they began to search along the base of the banks, though some distance below me. I might have left the water, but they would see me inevitably as I climbed up the bank, and a bullet would tumble me back. I had secured a good footing on some stones and was standing in the water up to my neck. I pressed back against the bank, holding my head under a projecting stone. The thick foliage in front completely concealed me and I hoped to escape detection.

The men splashed about in the water, swimming here and there and calling to each other. At last, led by Halftrigger, they bore up the stream and came near to my hiding place.

"He must be 'long here somewhar," called out Halftrigger, "an' we'll fin' him, livin' or dead. Look well in them bushes, lads."

I sank lower and lower, until the water almost bubbled into my mouth. Several of them passed above me and began to thresh among the bushes and grass that grew at the water's edge. Halftrigger came within a yard of me. I could see the great burn on his face glowing in the moonlight, and his whole expression was one of disappointment and anger.

"Captain, he must have had a cramp and drowned," said Spanish Pete to his disappointed leader.

"But we'd see somethin' o' the body," objected Halftrigger. "Keep up the search."

They were all above me now, but not far enough away for me to make a dash. I hoped that the search would lead them still further on, but presently one of the men swam back down the stream and began to prod among the grass and bushes very near me. He held his knife in his teeth, and was examining the bank as closely as he could in the moonlight.

I had escaped so much search already that this man did not greatly arouse my apprehensions. If the keen eyes of Halftrigger passed by me in vain this fellow was not likely to be more successful. He swam within

four or five feet of me and then paused as if undecided. Halftrigger was calling to the man to come on upstream, and the fellow seemed to me to be ready to obey, for his face was turned toward me and in the direction of Halftrigger.

Perhaps he would have gone, but in my eagerness to crouch still further back, if possible, my foot slipped on one of the stones and made a slight gurgling sound in the waters. The man turned instantly, parted the mass of bushes and weeds in front of my face and his glowing eyes looked into mine.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRUGGLE.



FOR a moment we gazed at each other's faces, and then—why I know not, though I suppose it was the instinct that often guides us in moments of the acutest peril—I reached out both hands and grasped him by the throat. The cry that was rising to his lips was crushed back in my grip, and the knife fell from his teeth into the water. He seized me also, but I had a great advantage, for I stood on the bottom, while he floated in the water.

In that supreme moment there was no time to think of mercy, and for once I sought human life with the ferocity of a wild beast. Pressing with all my might I drove the man down beneath the water. Even as he sank his face was ghastly with fright and the eyeballs were protruding. But still I pressed him down. The water bubbled over his head where he sank, and he writhed about in the stream, but I held him with a strength that was unnatural and irresistible.

Half-trigger and his companions were calling to each other not far away, but I lay back against the cliff, and I felt the muscles swelling like whipcords in my arms as my fingers sank into the throat of that man who would never draw the breath of life again. There was no need of such exertion, as he was fast drowning, but it was the result of the excited impulse I had received. At last he ceased to struggle, and the body swung limply with the current in my hands.

Holding to that ghastly thing I covered back in the bushes, for the danger had not yet passed. Half-trigger and his men were coming back down the stream.

I dared not let the body go, for I feared it would

float to the surface and be seen by Halftrigger. But after the deed was done and the impulse that caused it was over I was seized with a sudden horror and repulsion. I shivered and the shiver did not come of the water. Clutching that body I felt as if I had my hands thrust in a grave, and only the love of life prompted me to retain my hold.

Halftrigger passed near me again on his way down stream, and the others followed close behind. When they had gone some yards beyond me I pushed the body among the bushes, where it stuck, and then I washed my hands in the flowing water.

Halftrigger and his men went perhaps fifty yards down the stream and paused there, as if undecided.

"What do you think of it, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete.

"Looks ez if we would hev to give up the chase," Halftrigger replied. "It beats me how he escaped us."

"I think, Captain," said Spanish Pete, "that my theory that he is drowned and is sticking somewhere among the rocks or roots is correct."

"Pears like it," replied Halftrigger. "I guess we'd better quit the water. Tain't wuth while to hunt here forever. Are you all here?"

There was a minute of silence and then Halftrigger called in a loud voice for Kurtz.

Kurtz was the man whom I had drowned. Halftrigger waited a little and then called again loudly and impatiently. Of course, there was no answer.

"What's become o' the fellow?" exclaimed Halftrigger.

They had gone near the shore and were standing where the water did not reach above their waists.

Halftrigger hailed the men on the bank and asked if Kurtz had come ashore. They replied in the negative.

"Maybe he's drowned," said one of the men, "just as the prisoner was. Maybe there's a whirlpool or something of the kind here."

Halftrigger did not reply, and I inferred that the suggestion had made an impression upon him.

"Shall we leave him, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete. "I guess we must," said Halftrigger, with a kind of growl. "Ef Kurtz is drowned he's drowned, an' nuthin' kin un-drown him. Ef he ain't drowned he kin come on and jine us. Good God, what's that?"

I heard a splashing in the water, and Halftrigger dragged something to the surface.

"By the great horn spoon," he exclaimed, "it's Kurtz, and he's dead!"

The men clustered together, and the confused murmur of their voices came up the stream. My carelessness had betrayed me. The current had gradually and noiselessly drawn the body from the bushes, and it had floated with the stream until it struck against Halftrigger himself.

"Lads!" exclaimed Halftrigger, swearing a great oath, "Kurtz didn't come to his death altogether by drownin'. Look, here's the mark o' fingers 'roun' his throat. He's been strangled to death!"

As if by a common impulse, the men began to re-ascend the stream, and I saw that it was not a time for me to linger. I dived again and swam up stream as fast and as long as I could. I came close to the bank, up which I instantly clambered. I made so little noise that the men did not see me until I stood on the summit. They set up a shout, but fickle fortune, which had so often been against me, was now in my favor.

The night had turned darker, and the woods lining the river were dense. I sprang into the shadow and darted off at right angles from the stream. Only the man who stood on my side of the river was in a position to give chase, and either I was too swift for him or he was rather wary about overtaking me alone, for I soon left him out of sight. He fired one shot at me, which whistled wide of the mark, and then I dived into the deep woods.

I had but one idea, and that was to get away from the dangerous vicinity of the desperadoes. I determined to keep straight ahead; wherever that might lead me. I had seen enough of the forest and wilderness to know that one may wander about a zigzag course or

even in a circle when he thinks he is following a straight line, and against this I guarded. I guided myself by one of the planets, which shone with a fixed light low on the horizon, and pushed forward with it always before me.

I ran at the top of my speed as long as my breath lasted, and then I confined myself to a walk only long enough to recover the lost breath.

Breaking into a run again I soon came to the edge of the forest. I paused there for a moment to listen for the sound of my pursuers' footsteps. But I heard nothing to indicate that they were near, and I felt sure I had shaken them off, and moreover, that they would be unable to follow me in the night through the thick woods.

The plain appeared to be two or three miles broad. Beyond it rose a low range of mountains, wooded to the summit. To follow the course marked out by my star would lead me directly across the plain and I determined to follow it. The plain would afford me no hiding place, but even should the men by any chance trace me to the edge of the wood I believed that I had sufficient lead to gain the mountains far before them.

So I entered the open and ran straight towards the mountains, adopting the long, loping stride which I had seen Pike use with so much effect on the prairie. Excitement, the hope of saving my life, buoyed me up; and I felt strong enough for many more hours of exertion. Occasionally, as I ran along, I looked back, but saw nothing in the dim light.

I soon crossed the plain and reached the first slopes of the mountain. Day was just breaking as I cast myself at the foot of a big tree for a short rest. A slender bar of light appeared in the east. It broadened and the horizon was spangled with gold. The great round globe of the sun came peeping up from behind the earth, and soon his rays fell like millions of little golden arrows over mountain and plain.

I now had a good view of the plain, which extended to north and south further than the eye could see. On the other side was the belt of forest from which I

had come, and I could mark the very place at which I had left it. There was nothing visible on the plain, and I felt assured that Halftrigger and his men had been unable to follow me.

Rising again, I began the ascent of the mountain. It was much broken up by ravines and gulches, but I clambered across them, and in less than an hour was at the summit. Beyond was a country similar to that I had left behind. Plain and low range of mountains alternated.

I sat down on a rock while I examined the country, and I decided to go about half way down the further side of the mountain and seek rest and sleep in some hiding place there. My clothing had dried long since, but I felt cold.

When I rose to my feet numberless pains shot through me and racked my bones. My head began to swim around, and I was sickened by a nausea. Over-exertion, I thought, and concluded to rest a little longer. I sat down again on the stone and felt better, though the symptoms did not depart entirely. Then I got up again, but I found myself so weak that I was almost exhausted by the effort. The swimming in the head and the nausea began with greater violence than before, but I summoned my will and determined not to yield.

I started down the mountain side, but I reeled about like a drunken man. My sight grew dim, and I was seized with a fit of shivering. I leaned against a tree for support. At my feet lay a piece of bough. I picked it up and, breaking off the twigs, used it as a walking-stick. I limped painfully along for a few yards until I came to a tree under which the turf grew soft and long. It was inviting; it looked as if it were prepared as a bed for a weary man. I tried to pass it, but the turf smiled at me, and, dropping my stick, I threw myself down upon it.

I remember looking up at the blue skies, which seemed to be waving about as if the earth were rocking in an earthquake, and then my eyes closed, and I sank

into a sleep that was haunted by all the phantasmagoria of nightmare.

When I awoke the sun was hanging in the centre of the heavens, but I saw it through a red mist, and it had increased many times in size. The mountain and the trees and the plain had changed. The trees took on strange and exaggerated shapes, and the mountain was higher and steeper than it had seemed in the night.

I sprang to my feet and was surprised at my strength. I had feared that I would be ill, but, pshaw! Sleep had removed the danger of that. My head was no longer heavy. It was as light as air, and I felt the hot blood leaping in my veins. I thrilled with a strange exhilaration. I felt that I was capable of high and lofty deeds, and longed for the opportunity. Though I was alone in the wilderness, I felt very glad that morning of my strength and hope. I sang a verse of Starboard Sam's favorite song of the Constitution and the Guerriere, and I followed that with Halftrigger's pirate stave.

I found my stick where I had thrown it when I lay down to sleep, and resumed the journey down the mountain side. But it was not necessary to drag myself along now. My feet were as light as my head, and I noticed that I was stepping very high, which I took as another proof of the strength that I had found so wonderfully. With what life-giving potion had the good fairies dosed me as I slept? I felt so vigorous and so bold that I could have faced Halftrigger and his whole band, and in excess of spirits I roared out the old sea songs again, and all the other songs that I could remember.

The slope of the mountain on this side was very gradual and the journey to the plain was long. When half of it was done I sat down on a rock to decide what course to pursue when I reached the plain. But my brain refused to be troubled with such a trifle. Somehow I could not collect my thoughts. Ideas and impressions passed through my mind, but they came and went so fast that I was bewildered by their variety.

There was a rustling sound among the boughs of a tree overhead, and I saw a large, tawny animal gazing at me. He was crouched down on the bough apparently ready to spring. I had never seen a mountain lion before, but I knew from descriptions I had heard that this was an animal of that kind. But I felt no fear. Rather, I rejoiced at the opportunity to show my strength and courage.

I began to sing Halftrigger's pirate song at the top of my voice. I shouted out:

"Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
As I sailed,
Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
And God's laws I did forbid
As I sailed,
As I sailed, as I sailed."

Then I grasped my stick in both hands. I rushed forward, and leaping up to reach him, struck at the animal with all my might. I laughed in exultation when he sprang from the bough, and casting back one look of affright, fled down the mountain side.

"Thus will I drive my enemies before me!" I exclaimed grandiloquently, shaking my stick at the disappearing form of the animal.

After this exploit I pursued a more leisurely course down the mountain. Though I had eaten nothing for many hours I felt no hunger and wondered why it was so.

Presently I noticed with some alarm that my strength seemed to be abating. My pulse was not so high and my spirits fell also. But I thought it would soon pass and I began to sing again. When I was half through the verse my voice failed and my knees began to quiver with weakness.

A cold, shivering fit came over me, and I sat down, hoping that it would soon pass. The color of the skies had changed from a bright blue to a dark gray. There was no longer any sunshine, and as my cold and weakness increased all my courage and high spirits slipped away from me.

The revulsion was sudden, but it was complete. In my weakness and loneliness I felt like a little child. I

trembled all over and a cold sweat broke out upon me. I fell into a state of collapse, physically as well as mentally, and sank nerveless upon the ground. I lay there until some traces of resolution came back to me, when I dragged myself painfully up again and made another effort to advance.

In this effort I was assisted by a great fear which lay hold of me. What if my pursuers were near? The thought affected me as danger had never affected me before. Was my courage giving way after enduring so much? I resolved that I would not be a coward, but even as I summoned my courage I glanced fearfully back up the mountain. That set me trembling again and I seized my stick and started in a limp and halting way down the slope.

But my fear grew as I proceeded. Despite myself I looked back again and again, and my dim sight created strange shapes behind me. I touched my hand to my forehead. It was hot and the veins were swollen, but my strength seemed to grow again and I began to run.

As I ran all the events of the night before passed in my mind. Again I saw Halftrigger and his cutthroats swimming about in the river after me with knives in their teeth. Such men would never abandon the pursuit. They might even now be close behind me. What noise was that?

The world was spinning around, and I was so dizzy that I could barely keep my footing, but I turned for one glance. I saw a gigantic figure dart from behind a tree and other figures followed it.

"Halftrigger!" I cried aloud, and, borne up by an unnatural strength, I ran like the wind down the mountain. But the men followed. They ran as fast as I. They shouted to me, and their words stung me like taunts. After so many escapes and so much suffering, they had overtaken me again, but I would not fall into their hands without a struggle.

The earth was spinning around faster than ever, but I sped on with light foot. Another swift glance over my shoulder showed that I had not gained on my pur-

suers, and that giant figure still led the van. They kept up a shouting, which only spurred me to greater effort. But my overtaxed muscles began to yield. The men gained upon me fast, and, though my own strength decreased, the earth now seemed to be whirling around like a newly spun top. My last remnant of strength deserted me. I was spinning around and around with the earth, and I fell senseless just as a pair of powerful hands reached out to grasp me.

CHAPTER XVII.

MY CAPTORS.



OI, YOUR head up zere and take zee soup! Eet ees zee best I have made in zees many months, and Pierre Bonneau ees one great cook, he ees, eef he do say eet heemself. Now zat ees zee goot boy. Swallow heem all down—yum, yum, yum,—zen you get back zee life and zee

muscle."

"He's comin' right through it, shore's I'm a sinner, Bonneau. But he's been on the rocks, an' more'n once I thought he'd gone down fur good. I'll save him yit."

"You save heem! You Yankee salt-water braggart! You one gran' fraud! I save heem! I, Pierre Bonneau, zee great cook! I make zee soups and all zee ozzer good zings, an' when I pour zem down heem and he feel zem teckling his throat, so nice and so soft, he take hol' of life again an' pull heemself right back into zee world. I, Pierre Bonneau, save heem! Do not forget zat, Monsieur Braggart Starboard Sam!"

"Shut up, you French bullfrog! You may beat me cookin'; I ain't gifted that way, but I'd like to know who helps git the things fur you to cook! I'd like to see you doin' it! You'd starve ter death ef you wuz by yourself out in this country!"

It was such a dialogue as this that saluted my ears when consciousness returned. I opened my eyes wide, as much in astonishment as in pleasure at the sound of those well known and friendly voices. I would have sprung to my feet, but I found I was unable to raise myself even a few inches.

"Lie still! Lie still!" said Bonneau. "Vat you exhaustin' yourself for ven here we are ready to do anyzing you want. Lie still and hol' your mouth open and drink zee soup, now!"

I opened my mouth obediently, and Bonneau tipped a liquid into it out of a tin pan. The liquid had a grateful taste, and I feebly asked for more, wherefore Bonneau was hugely delighted, and rewarded me with a fresh supply.

"Come here, come here!" shouted Starboard Sam. "The lad's hisself agin."

In a moment both Henry and Pike were standing over me, delight writ large on their faces.

"Yes, he ees heemself again," said Bonneau, "and he has zee appetite of one greezzly bear."

"Wa'al, that's a mighty good sign," said Pike, "but don't give him too much. You don't want to start him to travellin' back'ards."

I looked at them all in amazement, I feared that it was a phantasy; some creation of a disordered mind. At length I managed to ejaculate:

"Halftrigger!"

There was a resounding and hearty laugh from all, which increased my amazement.

"I don't think I look much like Hank Halftrigger in anythin' 'xcept size," said Pike, "but you took me fur him sartin shore on the mountain side up thar, which ain't to be wondered at, seein' that you wuz wild with fever, an' woud hardly hev knowed an elephant from the side uv a brick house ef you'd a met 'em both in the road."

I began to understand.

"Then I've been sick?" I asked.

"Sartin, shore," said Pike. "You've been downright sick, an' you ain't over it yit, either, though you're out uv danger. Why, boy, you've jest been a ragin' wild with fever, an' sometimes it's been ez much ez both your brother an' Bonneau could do to hol' you on that bed uv boughs thar. Once you dragged 'em both right off thar feet, an' you've been talkin' all sorts o' wild talk about swimmin' about in a river an' drownin' a man, an' people shootin' at you in the water, which none uv us know nuthin' about."

I was silent for a while. I am not so religious, perhaps, as I ought to be, but I breathed a prayer of

thankfulness that in my delirium I had wandered into the hands of my friends and not into those of my enemies.

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"This is the eighth day," said Pike, "and this is the first time since we chased you down the mountain side that you've spoke a sensible word."

"Yes, an' he has talked enough," broke in Bonneau. "I am zee doctor here, and zee patient must not be exhausted. Now, all you go away, and Monsieur Joe, you go to sleep. I, Pierre Bonneau, command it. Shall I have all my beautiful work spoiled? Sapristi, non."

They left me, and I quickly fell into a deep and refreshing slumber. I awoke with a ravenous appetite, and Bonneau soon appeared with more soup, all of which I drank.

"Now you have zee right look," said the little Frenchman. "Your eyes are bright and your color ees coming back. You will soon be strong again, and I, Pierre Bonneau, with my skill, have done ect."

I felt so much stronger that I was able to sit up, propped against a tree. We were camped in a grove at the foot of the mountain. A brook splashed and bubbled over the stones near by. A fire burned under one of the trees. Further off the mules were grazing at the ends of their lariats. I had been lying upon a blanket spread over a bed of soft boughs. It was a grateful scene of rural peace and ease.

"Our part is soon explained," said Henry. "When you went up on the hill to examine the country we became alarmed at your long absence. We followed you, and Pike found the trail of many footsteps. We guessed that you had been captured by Halftrigger's band, for we knew of the presence of no others in that vicinity. This guess became a certainty when Pike stalked their camp that night and saw them all and you among them. We followed all the time, waiting for a chance to rescue you. We signalled with torches one night, hoping you would see and understand. The next day we met Mr. Sheldon on a

hunting expedition, and Pike signalled again by sending sticks down the river, but this time the signals indicated that we were five instead of four. Then Mr. Sheldon, as you know, went boldly into their camp the next day. We lost them the night of the storm, when it was all we could do to keep together, and we knew no more about any of you until we saw you running like a wild man down the side of the mountain and Pike overtook you after a long chase. The spot where he caught you is not 500 yards from here, and here we've been ever since. Mr. Sheldon is out now hunting, but will be back in an hour or two."

Then I told my story, to which they listened with breathless interest and many ejaculations from Bonneau and Sam.

"It wuz standin' so long in the water that give you the fever an' sent you off your head," said Pike. "'Taint no wonder, either. Anybody would hev give in under all that."

"Do you know what has become of Halftrigger and his band?" I asked.

"They wuz across the mountain over thar two or three days ago," said Pike. "I scouted a bit and lay near 'em in the brush, an' they wuz still bent on findin' the gold, but they didn't know much which way to go. They've hed so much trouble that they're purty badly broke up."

"And we've lost a week lying here!" I exclaimed. "All on my account, too! If I'd exercised even common care I would never have fallen into their hands!"

"Never you min' about that," said Pike, soothingly. "All uv us make mistakes sometimes, an' we ain't lost nuthin' yet. We've got ez good a chance ez ever, fur in a day or two you'll be strong, an' then we'll be off after thet gold ag'in. We're boun' to hev it or bust a b'iler."

"We've fared much better than our rivals," said Henry, "for here we all are in good trim to resume the expedition."

"Never say die!" said Starboard Sam. "The ship

is stanch, the wind is good, an' we're boun' to come into port yet. What d'ye say, Bonneau?"

"Will we get zere?" exclaimed Bonneau. "Oui! Ze great Napoleon become ze Emperor of France because he find ze crown of France lying on ze ground and he pick it up on ze point of hees sword! We will be great and brave, too; we will clear ze way to ze gold wiz our swords, n'est ce pas, mes braves? Oui! Hurrah!"

Weak as I was I caught some of Bonneau's enthusiasm, and I could see that the others also were affected by it. Even Pike's usually calm eye flashed. The old fever in us all had not abated.

"We'll stay on this cruise," said Starboard Sam, "ez long ez we've got a plank under us an' a rag to set to the win'. All the bloody pirates in Christendom kain't turn us from our course."

"Those are brave sentiments, and I like to see you express yourselves with so much vigor and pluck," said a clear voice behind me.

I turned and saw Mr. Sheldon approaching with his gun on one shoulder and a haunch of venison on the other. He flung the venison down, leaned his gun against a tree and approached me with outstretched hand and a frank smile.

"Ah, my young friend is himself again," he said. "Truly I am delighted, for I have feared more than once in the last few days that this gold hunt would end for you in six feet of earth."

My story was told over again for the benefit of Mr. Sheldon, and he commented freely upon it.

"Upon my word," he said when I had finished, "this is quite a chain of adventures. Your friend Mr. Halftrigger seems to be as bold and resourceful a villain as I have ever met, and I have seen some fine scamps in my time. I foresee also that you will have more trouble from these same gentry, since two bodies directed towards the same point must inevitably come in contact. Now gentlemen I must confess that all this interests me, interests me very much; nay I am interested more than a consistent hermit should be in

things which savor so much of the passions of man." Pike and Henry laughed and looked as if they knew what was going to come next.

"Nevertheless, I yield to this curiosity," continued Mr. Sheldon, apparently not noticing Pike and Henry, "and I have a proposition to make to you gentlemen. I wish you to renew your invitation to me and ask me to join your gallant company on this expedition. I care nothing about the gold, but I would like to assist in foiling Mr. Halftrigger and his assistants. I will defer in all things to Mr. Pike, who is the natural leader of the expedition, and I do not think you will have any complaint to make of me."

With one voice we welcomed the new recruit, for his coolness and assurance had impressed us all.

"Well, that is settled," said Mr. Sheldon, "and now, Monsieur Bonneau, with your kind permission I will sample some of your best venison steaks, for I have had a long tramp to-day."

The evening meal was ready, and all except myself helped Mr. Sheldon to dispose of it. As I was the invalid of the party I had eaten my share, especially prepared for me, already. Good as my own appetite had been, it was a weak exhibition compared with that of my companions, though it must be admitted that Bonneau's cookery was enough to tempt even one who had been satiated with delicacies.

The appetizing odors of venison and other toothsome products of the wilderness filled the grove. Nor were the culinary appliances so rude as one might think they would have been under the circumstances. We had put some small pots and pans and tin cups and plates in the baggage that we carried on our mules, and Bonneau did the rest.

The camp had been pitched with much skill. The grove in which it lay was small, and there was nothing else near enough to permit a concealed enemy to reach us with a rifle shot. No one could cross the open unless the night should be very dark, and escape observation, if ordinary caution were exercised.

"Being duly enrolled as a member of this organiza-

tion," said Mr. Sheldon, as he paused between mouthfuls, "may I be permitted to ask what are our plans?"

"Depends on Joe thar," said Pike. "Soon ez he kin travel we'll be a-movin'."

"Two days, three days," said Bonneau, "and all hees strength be back. He ces young and strong, and get well, tres vif."

I was glad to hear this, for I chafed at the restriction my illness put upon our party. I started to speak, but Pike held up his hand.

"Hush thar," he said. "What's happened to you might a-happened to any uv us. It wuz jest chance that it wuz you, an' we don't want to hear any more about it."

"Three days at furthest and we will be moving; is it not so?" inquired Mr. Sheldon.

"That's what we calkylate on," said Pike.

"Which way will we go?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"I'm thinkin'," said Pike, "that this last river, the one that Joe spent the night in, dodgin' them pirates, is the one that we've been lookin' fur. I guess we had blundered out uv our course when we struck the fust one."

"As the first seems to have been the wrong one, the chances that the second is the right one are increased," said Mr. Sheldon.

"Then I'm in favor," said Pike, "uv crossin' this mountain an' follerin' that river down stream till we strike the signs uv what Pedro told us about. Then ef we don't fin' anythin' we'll come back an' go up stream."

Everybody agreed with Pike, and the journey over the mountain was to be begun as soon as I was strong enough for it.

"What if we meet Halftrigger?" asked Henry.

"I guess ef we do Mr. Halftrigger will hev to take care o' hisself," said Starboard Sam.

"As the subject of Halftrigger is mentioned," said Mr. Sheldon, "I am very sorry to tell you some unpleasant news."

This announcement created a stir among us, but Mr. Sheldon gratified our curiosity at once.

"In my hunt to-day," said he, "I passed over the crest of the ridge, and I found that a third party of gold-hunters was in the vicinity. These newcomers were eight in number, and, in my opinion, they are quite as select a lot of cutthroats as Halftrigger's own men. I talked with some of them, and though they offered me no harm, I am too good a judge of character to be mistaken in my impressions. I also discovered that after I left them they met Halftrigger, and I am of the opinion that the two bands have fraternized and united against us. Moreover, they are likely to attempt our destruction, and it behooves us to be exceedingly careful."

This was unpleasant news indeed, as Halftrigger's force was now much increased, and I knew the man too well to think that he would omit the opportunity of attacking us if we came in his way. Still, there were six of us, determined and well armed, and we felt able to take care of ourselves.

As the night bade fair to come on very dark, Pike took every precaution against a surprise. A watch was to be kept during the night, himself and Mr. Sheldon bearing the burden of it.

The mules, six in number—we had retained the one intended for Pedro—were tethered on the outskirts of the camp. Then we sat for some time under the trees and talked. But by and by all except those who were to keep the watch retired to their blankets. I was among the first to go to sleep, and awakened after a long nap to find that the fire was smoldering and that the night was very dark. Mr. Sheldon was on guard, standing among the trees with his rifle in hand. He began to pace about presently and, coming near me, I spoke to him.

"Ah! awake, I see, my lad!" he said. "Well, I am not sorry, for this darkness is gruesome and lonely."

I could agree with him very well on that point, and I told him how we had lost one of our four companions,

who was on guard at night, when we were crossing the plains.

"Not a very pleasant recollection," said he; "not one calculated to encourage cheerful feelings in the mind of a sentinel. I very much fear that your friend Halftrigger will try to exterminate us, for I am sure that he is a revengeful kind of a fellow, and must soon learn of our presence in his vicinity. As I said this afternoon, I would not have joined you had I not thought that event probable."

"We are all glad to have you, Mr. Sheldon," I said, "but you say you care nothing about the gold we may get. Why is it that you voluntarily incur so much risk?"

"You mean, why does danger have such an attraction for me? You might as well ask why men go to war, why they stick their heads in the cannon's mouth, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred for no reward at all. I do not suppose that any one can explain except by saying that it is a characteristic of human nature. There is a little bit of the gambler in us all, and if his own life is the stake a man has a more intense interest in the game; that is, until enough of the cards have been played to tell him that he will lose, and then it is too late to draw back. I suppose every man thinks when he begins that he is bound to be the winner and the other fellow the loser. Now, coming out to California hunting for gold is but a gamble, and nine out of ten fail to find the gold, but so long as the tenth man finds it, the world will crowd in his trail."

"Then," I said, "you think going into a new country in search of fortune is a risky business."

"Certainly it is," he replied; "even if the emigrant is not a gold hunter, but a farmer in search of fresh lands to till. The same amount of labor that he expends in the subjugation of the wilderness would earn him a competence in an old and well-settled region. All successful pioneers are men whose frames have been warped by years of unremitting toil."

"Rather odd, isn't it," I said, "that people should always be rushing to new countries?"

"Not at all," said he; "not at all. It is the same old blessed phantom of hope that has been beckoning the human race on for these thousands of years and will continue to beckon it on for many other thousands of— Hist! Did you hear that?"

"'Twas only a mule whinnying," I replied.

"Yes, but even when a mule whinnies there is some cause for it," he said. "I tell you, I don't like this darkness. It affords too good concealment for an enemy."

We listened for several minutes, but heard no unusual sound. Mr. Sheldon tried the hunter's trick of lying down and putting his ear to the ground, but he said he could hear nothing except the click of the mules' teeth as they cropped the grass. I wished to dismiss the matter as a trifle without significance, but Mr. Sheldon remained uneasy.

"I have half a mind to wake Mr. Pike," said he. "He is a more experienced borderer than I. There, do you hear that mule again!"

One of the mules to our right emitted a loud bray, which in the stillness of the night sounded like a signal of alarm. The noise awoke Pike, much to the relief of Mr. Sheldon. He communicated his suspicions instantly to Pike.

"Its wuth while to take a look," said Pike. "Mules are mighty watchful creturs, and that animile may be wantin' to let us know that somebody is prowlin' about the camp. I'm goin' to do a bit uv scoutin' an' I want you to keep a good watch here."

Pike thrust a pistol in his belt and, creeping over the ground like a snake, proceeded in the direction from which the noise had come. We watched his form until it grew dim in the darkness and then disappeared.

"I am glad he has gone to examine," said Mr. Sheldon. "It takes responsibility off me. I may be over-suspicious, but the presence of that scoundrelly band in the neighborhood has a tendency to arouse one's apprehensions."

"If there is anything wrong out there," I said with confidence. "Pike will find it."

We waited about fifteen minutes without hearing any noise. Then a dark form appeared itself near me with such suddenness that I thrust out my hand instinctively for the rifle that lay beside me.

"Never min' about that," said Pike; "it's only me, you needn't shoot."

"What did you find?" Mr. Sheldon and I asked in the same breath.

"Nothin'," he replied, with some disappointment. "I've scouted all aroun' the camp, an' ef an enemy's been thar he's got off ag'in. I believe he's been thar, too, fur the mules are restless an' oneasy."

"Do you think it was anybody from Halftrigger's camp?" I asked.

"It must a' been," said Pike, "but I didn't think he hed anybody who knew enough 'bout scoutin' and trailin' to creep up on us."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Sheldon, "some one in the new crowd he has got has—"

The sentence was unfinished, for we heard a heavy, muffled sound, as of some one dealing a blow, and the next instant a wild, shrill scream of mortal agony startled us all. Bonneau, Sam and Henry leaped to their feet, staring around with half-opened eyes.

"You fellers stay here an' guard the camp agin' a surprise," cried Pike, "an' I'll see what made that noise."

He snatched up a torch from the smoldering fire and darted off among the trees. In my excitement I forgot my weakness, and feeling myself for the present a privileged character, I followed him. We could make no mistake about the point from which the cry came. It had been too loud and too full of pain and fright to permit us to go wrong. In a moment we were brought up by one of the mules, which was grazing contentedly in our path. It was Bonneau's animal, Napoleon.

Napoleon looked up at us, blinked his eyes at the torchlight, nodded his great ears three or four times,

as if in salutation, and resumed his congenial task of grazing.

"That cry came from right here as shore as I'm a white man, and this mule ought to know somethin' about it," said Pike.

A deep groan was the reply to his comment.

Pike turned the light until it fell upon some bushes which grew near. The flaring blaze revealed the figure of a man thrust in among the bushes as if he had been hurled there by some irresistible force. He was doubled up like one suffering from an acute fit of the colic.

Pike took hold of the man, dragged him out of the bushes and stretched him face upward on the ground. The mule looked at the prostrate form, gave a contented bray, and resumed his grazing.

The man was senseless and breathing with difficulty. He groaned repeatedly. He was an ill-favored fellow, his face having all the marks of dissipation and crime.

"Here's what happened to him," said Pike.

He pointed to the impression of a dirty hoof upon the clothing that covered the man's stomach.

"He came too close to Napoleon," I said.

Pike nodded.

"You've guessed it," he said. "More'n likely he was tryin' to steal Napoleon. Good mule! He's a good sentinel an' he's took the law in his own hands too."

"What are you going to do with the fellow?" I asked.

"Take him back to the camp fire an' examine him," said Pike. He'll come to, directly. But fust you watch here while I'm gone, an' be ready with your pistol ef he wakes up an' tries to make a disturbance. I'll see ef any more uv his kind are about."

Pike beat about in the woods for half an hour, and came back, announcing that the man had been alone.

"I don't see how I missed this feller when I searched the first time," he said.

The man was still unconscious, though now

breathing with more ease. Pike took him by the shoulders and dragged him back to the camp fire where Bonneau, Sam and Henry were waiting, their anxiety much aroused by our lengthy absence.

"You haven't hauled on the line fur nothin'," said Starboard Sam, as we came into the light.

"No," replied Pike. "we've had a visitor. We don't know much about him yet, secin' that he had a little discussion with Napoleon afore he reached us an' Napoleon's argyments were too strong fur him. Fact is Napoleon's argyments had chain lightnin' in 'em an' our fri'nd here is speechless, knocked out, kerflummexed."

"Ah," exclaimed Bonneau, "once again do I say Napoleon ees one great cheval! He think deep and he strike hard. Beware of zee four-footed Napoleon!"

"I dare say, Bonneau," said Henry, "that this fellow will think your advice is sound, if he ever recovers his thinking powers."

"He's comin' to now," said Pike.

The man sighed deeply several times, and his eyes opened. He stared at us in a dazed manner, and at length he sat up.

"Cuss that infernal mule!" he said, "I thought a pile driver had hit me in the bread basket."

"You shouldn't fool aroun' the heels uv other men's property on dark nights," said Pike.

"P'r'aps not," said the man, who showed considerable coolness, "but what are you goin' to do about it?"

"Don't know yet," said Pike. "Depends on yourself, I reckon'."

He beckoned to Mr. Sheldon, and they withdrew and talked earnestly for a little while. The man showed very little concern.

"You seem to have a pretty comfortable sort of camp here," he said to me.

"It does well enough," I replied.

"I rather like the looks of it," he said.

"Wouldn't mind if I stayed awhile."

I did not reply, for at this moment Pike and Mr. Sheldon returned.

"What's your name?" said Pike.

"Tom Bliss, at your service."

"Well Tom Bliss, whar do you come from and what wuz you doin' prowlin' around our camp?"

"See here, boss," said the man, with a cunning leer, "what am I to get for answering all these questions? Am I to be treated with the consideration to which a gentleman is entitled?"

"We won't lay up anythin' you say agin you," said Pike, "an' will consider all we kin in your favor."

"That's a little ambiguous, as the lawyers would say," replied the man, "but you look like a pretty square lot and I'll trust you. Fire away."

"I assure you," said Mr. Sheldon, "that frank answers will be to your advantage."

"All right," said the man. "I'm in your hands. Fire away."

"You belong to Halftrigger's band, don't you!" asked Pike.

"Yep," replied the man.

"It's true then, that he's got reinforcements."

"Right again, I'm one of 'em."

"You were sent by him to spy on us?"

"Yep."

These answers were frank and satisfied us all. Then the man added:

"While I was reconnoitering your camp. I concluded that I would take a mule, especially as we need such animals, but I over-reached myself. That is always the way in this world. A man tries to do too much and he gets the wind knocked out of him."

He said this in such a lugubrious tone that we could not keep from laughing.

"Where are Halftrigger and his men now?" asked Pike.

"Over the mountain about four miles away!" replied Bliss.

"I presume," said Mr. Sheldon, "that your leader has no very friendly intentions towards us?"

"He's not losing flesh for fear you are not in good health," said Bliss, with a grin.

"I suppose you know that he is engaged in the same business that we are?" remarked Mr. Sheldon.

"Guess I do," returned Bliss. "He told us that when he wanted us to join his gang. We're after the same gold mine, and whoever gets there first will own it."

"Now, Mr. Bliss," said Pike, "we're goin' to keep you here till mornin', an' then we'll let you know what we're a'-goin' to do with you."

"All right," said Bliss, with inimitable coolness, "and as there is nothing important on hand just now, I think I'll take a nap. I'm no night-hawk and, as I've been up late, I'm sleepy."

He stretched himself on the ground near the fire, and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

"One may sleep well, even if he does not have a sound conscience," said Mr. Sheldon, as he looked at the recumbent and unconscious figure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PATHS CROSS.



PIKE and Mr. Sheldon kept guard through the night and the rest of us were up with the sun. Bliss was in gay spirits, or at least appeared to be, and ate his breakfast with an appetite that seemed able to withstand the wear of ages. Bonneau gazed at him in wonder and admiration.

"You like my cooking?" he asked.

"You are a jewel, Mr. Freucher," said Bliss, "and if ever this party falls into the hands of Halftrigger I shall recommend that you be saved in order that you may continue to exercise your talents, but in a larger field."

"Ef that should happen you might not be thar to know anythin' about it," said Starboard Sam, who was provoked at the man's coolness.

"I am in the hands of your friends," said Bliss, saluting.

"We've decided what to do with you, Bliss," said Pike, when the breakfast was finished.

"I am waiting patiently," said Bliss.

"We're goin' to keep all your arms which we took last night, an' now that you've had your breakfast, we must ask you to git. Ef you'll cross the mountain thar I dessay you'll find your friends without much trouble."

Bliss looked somewhat surprised, but he arose and walked away in the direction Pike had pointed out. When he had gone about twenty feet he turned, lifted his flap-brimmed hat and said:

"Gentlemen, you've treated me white, much whiter than I expected or deserved, and I shall report your consideration to Capt. Halftrigger."

He turned and began the ascent of the mountain and we watched him until he reached the summit and passed out of sight beyond it.

"Odd fish," said Mr. Sheldon. "Wouldn't be surprised if he had a streak of good concealed somewhere among his many streaks of bad."

A half-hour later Pike called us together for consultation. He said he was in favor of our moving at once, and he gave cogent reasons in support of his proposition. He said that the location of our camp was now known to the enemy, and since we wished to avoid trouble if possible, it would be necessary for us to move. He thought I would be able to ride one of the mules. The truth of his reasoning was so apparent that all of us agreed with him without further discussion, and in a half-hour we had packed up and were on the march.

We followed the base of the mountain for five or six miles, moving at a pretty rapid pace. I was mounted on a mule, and youth and a vigorous constitution enabled me to recover my strength so rapidly that I was not at all fatigued by the journey. Pike took the lead and we followed him without question. After a short rest we began the ascent of the mountain, the slope of which was but gentle at this point. In two hours we reached the summit, which was covered by dense forests.

Climbing a high rock, we had a splendid view of the valley beyond. Through the centre ran the river, fringed by trees, which, however, were not numerous enough to hide the ribbon of water. Pike examined the valley with keen eyes.

"I don't see anythin' uv em," he said, "though they might be among them trees over thar. Do you fellers see anythin'?"

We strained our eyes in a search for signs of the enemy, but we saw neither the brigands nor indications of their presence. After some consideration Pike decided that we should remain where we were until night-fall. Then under the protection of the darkness we would make the descent of the mountain and pass

down the valley. This would probably save us from a collision with Halftrigger's men.

"I'm huntin' gold and not a fight," said Pike, and so said we all.

When night was well spread over the earth we began the descent of the mountain, but found the slope much greater than on the opposite side. Nevertheless we experienced little difficulty. The sure-footed mules picked their way along in the dark, and the men, except myself, followed close behind. As for me, I was on the back of the largest and strongest mule, and it was nothing more than a pleasure excursion.

"I think I'll get sick, too," said Starboard Sam, enviously, just after he had stumbled over a stone and bruised his shin, "an' then maybe I'll be taken aboard a tight, shore craft like that ar mule. How does it feel, Joe, to be settin' up thar so comfortable like?"

"Pretty good," I said. "I'm sorry for you, Sam, but I guess you'll have to walk. The other mules have too much baggage to carry without taking you up."

"That Starboard Sam ees one lazy sailor," said Bonneau. "He too lazy to do anything but eat the fine victuals I cook and tell ze great yarns about hees adventures at sea. Hear heem talk one would think he ze Flying Dutchman heemself."

"Shut up, Frenchy," said Sam, "abusin' your best friend. Ef you don't I'll give you a shove that'll send you rollin' clear down the mountain an' right into Halftrigger's camp."

"Eef you do," said Bonneau, "I come right back up here and show you how a French gentleman take his r-revenge."

"Dry up thar," said Pike, "we've got to be cautious goin' along here. Besides, you Yank and you Frenchman kaint make us think you're quarrelin'."

Which was a fact, for, as I have told already, Sam and Bonneau were sworn chums.

"We're approachin' the foot of the mountain now," said Pike, "an' we don't want to run across them other fellers. I don't think there is much danger uv

it, but tain't wuth while to run chances when you kin keep from it."

We advanced in a silence broken only by the sound of our footsteps. My mule was ahead of the column, but I could see nothing in front of me but the trees which lined the mountain side, and through them faint glimpses of the valley.

The silence was broken by a scrambling, sliding sound, a cry of wrath and pain and the thud of a heavy fall.

"Help lads! Help! Come an' pull me out o' this," cried Starboard Sam. "I think I've bruk every bone in me body on these confounded breakers."

"Not so loud; not so loud!" said Pike, in a warning voice.

"An' do ye expect a man to keep silent when he's bein' run through a sassidge mill?" cried Sam.

Pike repeated his warning in a more emphatic manner, and we pushed forward cautiously until we came upon the sailor, who was lying by the side of a huge rock. He had stepped on some loose stones, which had slid under his feet. Then he had lost his balance and rolled down the mountain until he was brought up by the boulder.

Pike pulled Sam to his feet and thumped him all over.

"You ain't hurt," he said, chuckling at Sam's mishap. "All your bones are whole. You ought to know that the best way to git down a mountain ain't to roll down it."

"I thought the mountain had rolled down on me," said Sam, who was also feeling of his bones and rejoicing at their unbroken condition.

"Be more keerful," said Pike, as we began the descent once more. But in a few more minutes we were at the foot of the slope in a rather dense growth of trees and bushes. Very glad, too, we felt, for the descent had been by no means easy, except for me.

"That was a rough v'y'ge," said Starboard Sam, looking back at the mountain which rose up like a huge wall in the darkness, "an' I'm right glad I'm in port."

"Hush, thar," said Pike, "I don't know whether you're in port yct."

He stood in a listening attitude.

"Hev ye sighted a strange craft?" asked Sam.

"No," replied Pike, "but I think I hear one."

I listened also, but at first I could hear nothing.

Presently a slight murmur came to my ears.

"That's the sound of many voices, men talkin'," said Pike, "an' I don't see who it could be 'cept Half-trigger an' his band. I'm thinkin' that in tryin' to dodge 'em we've run right into that gang. You fellers keep mighty quiet now, an' we'll see ef we kin hear anythin'. That'll tell us more about 'em."

Our little cavalcade had halted in a thicket and the mules stood by quietly and contentedly while we put our ears to the ground.

"I hear the tramp uv heavy feet ez well ez the sound uv voices," said Pike, "an' it's all gittin' louder. They're comin this way. We've got to dodge 'em, an' I guess this is ez good a place ez any to dodge 'em in."

Under Pike's cautious instructions we shoved back further into the thicket where we would be completely concealed, though we might see any one passing.

"Vat will we do wiz ze mules?" asked Bonneau.

"Leave 'em alone," said Pike. "We've got to trust to luck that they don't make any noise, which they ain't likely to do 'less you fellers git to foolin' with 'em an' provokin' 'em. Keep mighty still now, for they'll soon be passin' us."

The sound of men's voices was now distinctly audible and there was also a threshing about in the undergrowth. A gigantic figure came into the moonlight, and I looked once more upon the hardened lineaments of Half-trigger. Close to him were Spanish Pete and the man Bliss, and behind them struggled the whole band, most of them swearing at the difficulties of the night march.

Half-trigger had come into an opening among the trees and bushes and he paused to rest. His followers, taking advantage of the opportunity, threw them-

selves on the ground, panting after their exertions like dogs that had tired themselves out while running.

"Do you think that we'll strike 'em afore day an' that they won't be expectin' us?" asked Halftrigger of Bliss.

"Sure as you live, Captain," said Bliss, "if we keep on moving. It's a tough climb up this side of the mountain, but we ought to make it easy before day. They'll be there, I have no doubt, because the boy that escaped from you is too sick to move."

"It's a good thing we started so soon." Henry whispered to me.

"Yes," I replied. "When Pike says do a thing it's safe to do it."

The men were all well armed. Every one carried a rifle, and the pistols of some were visible in their belts, while it was a certainty that the others had similar weapons concealed about their persons. The new men in the party, the second band which had joined Halftrigger, were of the same general type as the first, seared with dissipation and evil passions, the very scum of the mongrel multitude that had been flung by the gold excitement upon California. But they were a stalwart set, and led by such a man as Halftrigger, it was evident that they could be very dangerous.

"Ef it wuzn't fur that boy," said Halftrigger, "I think I'd let them fellers go. But we've had too much trouble over him, and I don't like to stop with a thing half done. 'Tain't my way."

"And you must remember, also, Captain," said Spanish Pete, "that we need their mules and tools and provisions. In fact, we are bound to have them, for what can we do without them?"

"That's so," said Halftrigger. "Your head's level, Pete. Business ez well ez our feelin's demand that we wipe out that crowd, an' I don't think it'll be long afore we do it."

"We ought to catch them sound asleep," said Spanish Pete.

"Maybe so," said Bliss, "but you want to be very careful how you slip up on their mules."

Halftrigger laughed loudly. It was evident that Bliss had related his adventure with the heels of Napoleon.

"I hope your stummick ain't still painin' you, Bliss," he said.

"I can't say that it is," replied Bliss, "but I am not sure that my digestion has not been permanently impaired. Remember that I am entitled to my choice of victuals hereafter in consideration of my weak stomach, a weakness that I have incurred while in the service of the cause."

Every word of this dialogue was as distinctly audible, as if it had been addressed to us. In fact, we were not thirty feet away. We crouched very close, and were in the greatest suspense lest the mules would make a noise and draw the cutthroats upon us.

"Hev your weapons to hand," whispered Pike, "so ef they make a rush upon us we'll be ready. I b'leeve we could beat 'em with the darkness to help us."

"Captain, when we find all that gold and get back to San Francisco with it, what do you intend to do?" asked Spanish Pete.

"I hadn't give much attention to the wind-up o' the cruise," said Halftrigger, "but since you've mentioned the subject an' it's atween friends, I don't mind sayin', I take to the sea natural-like, you know, Pete, an' when I come into my fortun' I'll go back to it, though I'll be a most splendiferous object then to look at. I'll have me a yacht built, an' she'll be all white wood an' brass metal an' clean canvas, an' I'll rig myself out in a uniform all red an' blue cloth an' gold epaulets, that would make an admiral slink off to his cabin confessin' that he'd been outdone. Then I'll hire me a crew of stout fellows with likin's the same as mine. An' I'll put a Long Tom an' a swivel or two aboard the yacht an' some rifles an' pistols an' cutlasses an' other convenient tools away in her cabin. An' then I'll h'ist my flag an' sail away for the South Seas, whar thar's any lot o' pickin's an' purty brown gals an' a 'casional tradin' ship that you can quietly over-haul an' scuttle an' nobody but your-

self ever know what happened. I tell you, Pete, that's the part of the world fur a man with blood in him to live in. An' standin' on my own deck, with a crew o' bold dogs aroun' me an' plenty o' the yellow boys that tinkle stuck away where nobody but me could put his han' on 'em, I'd be a king—a real king, I tell you, Pete; not one o' your half-way sort, but an out-an'-outer. An', Pete, I'd live, I tell you, I'd live!"

The moonlight fell on Halftrigger's face, and his eyes blazed with enthusiasm as he spoke, while the great burn across his cheek deepened in color until it was the tinge of blood. All the pirate, all the human devil in the man, was roused at the picture of happiness he had drawn for himself.

"An' what do you intend to do, Pete?" asked Halftrigger at length, lowering his voice.

"I shall go back to Spain," said the Spaniard. "I have an enemy there who was more powerful than myself, but gold will raise me above him. He shall be dealt a blow. My hand will not hold the knife, but my gold will hold the hand that does. Then I will go to Madrid, and I, too, will be prince, perhaps not just in the way that you will be, Captain, though I shall enjoy myself as much."

"I guess you've been disapp'inted in love, Pete," said Halftrigger, "an, it's your successful rival that had better look out for you."

The Spaniard did not reply to this shot, which probably hit the mark.

"What are you goin' to do with your millions, Bliss?" asked Halftrigger, who seemed to be in a jovial mood.

"I won't go sailing on any yacht, for the sea makes me sick, and I won't go to Spain, either," said Bliss, "but I'll go straight back to New York City. I know a place there where they run one of the stiffest poker games on this universe. I ought to know, because I've been up against it. I'll sit down at that game with a roll of \$100 bills as big as your arm in every pocket, and I'll play, and I'll play until the luck comes my way, for it's bound to do it at last, and

then I'll break everything in the game except myself. Then I'll buy diamonds as big as walnuts and I'll stick 'em in my shirt-bosom and my shirt-cuffs and I'll stroll down Broadway with my sparklers flashing and everybody looking at me."

"Your programme ain't half bad," said Halfrigger. "Ef I git tired o' the yacht I may try a cruise o' that kind myself."

How like children we are in our castle-building, even when we have cast off all semblance of childish innocence and sin is burnt in us!

"Now that we've had a rest," said Halfrigger, "it's time to git to business again. Now fur a pull over the mountain, fur we've got a job on our hands that must be settled afore day."

One of the mules moved, put his foot on a twig, and it broke with a snap. Halfrigger stopped and looked about him.

"Be ready, boys," whispered Pike, "but don't make no movement till they find us."

"Did you hear that noise?" asked Halfrigger of Spanish Pete.

"Sounded like a stick breaking," said Spanish Pete.

"Some wild animal, I guess," said Bliss; "but whatever it is I guess we can leave it, because we've got to be hurrying if we reach their camp before day."

"I guess you're right," said Halfrigger. "Come on, lads."

He led the way up the mountain side and they soon disappeared in the darkness. We heard them for some time talking and stumbling among the rocks, but these sounds grew fainter and at last ceased.

"That's sailin' past your enemy in the dark," said Starboard Sam.

"Good luck is nearly always mixed with bad luck," said Pike, "an' this is our good luck. While they're lookin' fur us over the mountain thar we'll be makin' tracks down the river, an' I think it'll be a good many days afore we see 'em, ef we ever see 'em again. I guess they're purty well lost now, an' I doubt ef they'll ever be able to set themselves right ag'in."

"When the captain ain't got no compass an' he don't know the stars, it's hard to tell where he'll fetch up," said Starboard Sam.

This was a comforting reflection, and I really believed we had shaken off Halftrigger's crew at last, and would be permitted to pursue our search for the mine unmolested.

"Start up the mules, boys," said Pike, "an' let's be trampin'. We want to make the most o' our time while we're kivered by the darkness."

We pushed our way out of the thicket, and in a short time had reached the river. It flowed in a fairly direct course to the southwest, and we proceeded rapidly along its banks, following the course of the current. When the day broke we had marched many miles, but we did not stop until nearly noon. Though we were protected by a grove of trees, Pike even then would not allow us to light a fire for fear the smoke would disclose our location to some of the cutthroats watching from the mountain summits.

"We kain't be too keerful," he said.

But we took abundant rest and refreshment of cold provisions, and then we resumed our journey, watching hopefully for the tributary stream, which was to be the first sign that we were on the right path.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEAD RIVER.



WHEN night came we were a long distance from the spot where we had passed the desperadoes in the darkness and we felt reasonably safe from any pursuit.

"Thar's nobody in that lot that's scout enough to trail us by our footsteps," said Pike. "I guess they've swooped down on our old camp, an' ez they didn't fin' we wuz thar, they've been scratchin' thar heads an' puzzlin' thar brains ever since to find out whar we hev gone. I'd like to see some uv thar faces just now."

Pike laughed long and heartily at the thought of the desperadoes' disappointment.

"This will interrupt their air-castle building for a little while at least," said Mr. Sheldon. "Meanwhile I think we ought to reach the second river that Pedro told about to-morrow or the day after at furthest, that is if we are on the right trail."

"Oh, we'll find it, never fear," said Henry, whose sanguine temperament always made him optimistic. "Pike here says that everybody has both good and bad luck. We've had our bad luck, and our good luck is coming now."

"You may be right about it," said Mr. Sheldon, who seemed to be impressed by this view of the matter. "At any rate, a few days will disclose whether you are right or wrong."

Nevertheless we were a very cheerful company and hope possessed us all.

Next morning we began a slow and careful descent along the river bank. It was slow and careful in order that we might watch the opposite shore, also for the tributary stream.

"If we are hurried and careless," said Mr. Sheldon, "we might pass the mouth of one of these mountain streams without seeing it, for often they are almost completely hidden by a growth of trees and shrubs."

Owing to this circumspection our progress was slow.

But the character of the country changed. It showed an increasing dryness. The mountains in the distance seemed almost bare, and, save along the banks of the river, all things were parched and brown. We were coming into a country which partook of the characteristics of the desert. But we were encouraged rather than discouraged by this circumstance. In a thirsty country such things as dry river-beds are most often to be found, and that was one of the signs for which we were looking.

When the sun was in the zenith we halted for food and water. Our mules grazed on the stubby grass, while we sat in the shade of a tree and munched the dried meat which we carried in our haversacks. I had just bitten off a big piece when I heard a hiss, accompanied by a noise which sounded like the rattling of dry sticks together, and saw a large snake coiled near me. His head was thrust out from the centre of the coil and was swollen and ghastly with venom. I have a horror of snakes—an inborn repulsion. I was paralyzed by this feeling and sat quite still for a moment.

Mr. Sheldon, who was nearest me, seized his rifle and brought down the barrel heavily upon the coiled mass of venom. The serpent's back was broken by the blow, but it writhed about in its fury and stung itself. We were watching it, when we heard again the sound like dry sticks rattling together, and Henry exclaimed, excitedly:

"We are attacked by an army of snakes! Look at them! Look how they come!"

The sandy bank swarmed with the hideous reptiles. Imitating Mr. Sheldon's example, we seized our guns and, holding them by the stock, killed the serpents or broke their backs as fast as they came. But the swarm seemed endless. The air was filled with their rattling and hissing, and the snaky smell made us sick. The

slain were scattered everywhere, but there seemed to be no diminution in the number of the living.

"I don't think it would be at all to our discredit to beat a masterly retreat," said Mr. Sheldon. "I am of the opinion that we have infringed upon a corner of the snake territory, and we can well afford to abandon it."

"Good 'nough!" said Pike. "This is hard work, an' dangerous work, fur nuthin'. Grab the mules, an' we'll scoot. Darn all snakes, I say!"

We snatched up our things, seized the mules by their lariats, and away we ran. Some of the serpents followed us a short distance, but soon abandoned the pursuit and returned to their own territory.

"Thar's a stretch uv broken, rocky ground down thar," said Pike when we stood upon high land some distance away, "and the snakes probably live in it."

"Zen zey are welcome uv eet," said Bonneau. "I do not want to invade ze domain of ze great American rattlesnake any more."

"The reptiles down there are bad enough," said Mr. Sheldon, "but you should see the bloated rattlers of the Great Staked Plain. I was once down there on a hunting expedition with friendly Comanches and we saw some of those serpents seven or eight feet long and so swollen with venom that they were as large around as my ankle. I believe there was enough poison in one of those serpents to kill every man in California, if it were properly distributed."

"Then a man going down there could get some fine snake stories to tell, could he not?" asked Henry.

"But mine's a true story," replied Mr. Sheldon, with a smile. "I may have exaggerated the amount of poison, but not the length and circumference of the serpents."

This aroused Starboard Sam, who began to tell some wondrous tales of snakes he had seen in the East Indies, but just when he was in the middle of an adventure bigger than any other that was ever heard of, Pike, who had been examining the horizon, interrupted him, exclaiming:

"Boys, ez I live I believe that's the little river over thar fur which we're lookin'. Ef my eyes ain't playin' me false jest under the horizon on the same side of the river that we're on thar's another stream runnin' into this one."

Our eyes followed his long forefinger and we saw the faint line of blue and silver that he indicated. It would have escaped the observation of all except Pike had it not been pointed out to us, but even to our amateur eyes it looked like water.

We were agog with excitement on the instant, but Pike told us not to hurry.

"Ef it's the river," he said, "it won't run away. An' then ag'in, it might be one river an' not the right river. Best not build your hopes too high, an' then you'll be saved a lot uv disapp'intment ef things turn out wrong."

But though the cautious hunter wanted to restrain our hopes from rising too high, I could see that he, too, believed we had found the right stream.

We descended the hill and moved swiftly across the plain. I had recovered my strength so rapidly that I was now quite able to walk most of the time, and with the gold fever rising again I forgot that I had ever been sick. On the lower level we were unable to see that welcome blue and silver streak, but we knew the direction, and we travelled steadily until the falling of dusk, when we came to the banks of what we had believed to be the second river, and which proved to be such. It was a small stream, just large enough to be called a river, and had rather high banks. It answered in every respect to Pedro's description, and we had no doubt it was the stream he had designated.

All of us, except Pike and Mr. Sheldon, were for pushing on up the stream that night, but they would not allow us to go. They said we needed a good night's rest, and it would be better to travel by daylight than in the darkness. So we were forced to content ourselves as best we could and wait. But the gold fever was still rising, and it was late before I could close my eyes in sleep.

Daylight was just breaking over the mountains when we finished our frugal breakfast and started up the new river.

"Whether we're on a false scent or not is an important p'int, an' it'll soon be settled," said Pike. "Half a day's journey, Pedro said, an' then we'd come to a rocky hill. Just beyond that wuz the dry bed of a river, up which we wuz to go half a mile, an' then we'd strike the gold."

"That's it," said Henry, "and the gold's there and we'll get it, never fear."

We were all in a stew of anticipation as we plodded along the banks of that little river. Even the mules, usually so stolid and dull seemed by some mysterious influence to catch sparks of our excitement. They pricked up their ears and pranced along at a great rate. Finally Napoleon opened his mouth and gave utterance to an extremely loud and prolonged bray.

"He scents zee gold!" exclaimed Bonneau. "Napoleon sees one great mule, and he lead us on to zee grand triumph."

Everybody laughed, but we did not cease to press on in high humor. I frequently looked up at the sun. Pedro had said a half day's journey up the river. When the sun reached the zenith we ought to come in sight of the hill. Bearing in mind the words that he had said, I paid more attention to the sun than to the ground we were travelling over.

Up went the great round ball, sailing along the arch of the sky. Higher and higher it soared, until at last it hung directly over us and the noon hour had come. I looked eagerly ahead, but nothing that resembled a dry riverbed broke my line of sight. I felt a chill of apprehension. What if we had gone wrong, after all? But I said nothing, for the others, in their eagerness and anticipation, had forgotten that the appointed time had passed.

An hour further on and the river made a turn. We had passed the curve when Starboard Sam, who was in advance, put his hands to his mouth in speaking-trumpet fashion, and shouted:

"Land, ho! Yonder's our port, boys, or I'm a Dutchman!"

Sure enough, about two hundred yards further on was a brown ribbon across the plain. It was a sunken bed of sand, and even the most inexperienced of us knew it was a dry riverbed. If we had doubted before, all such apprehensions disappeared now. Everything had fallen out so perfectly in accordance with Pedro's instructions that no room was left for doubt.

In a short time we came to the junction of the dry bed with the stream, and turned and followed the former. The plain at this point was narrow and less than a half a mile brought us into rolling ground, where our progress was slower. From the summit of one of the swells we saw a black wall of mountain rising in front of us about ten miles away.

"Winter snows melting on those mountains fill this riverbed sometimes, I have no doubt," said Mr. Sheldon.

We were too intent on the chase—for such it was—to dispute with him or to agree with him in words.

A few minutes further and we uttered a simultaneous shout of joy, for straight ahead of us, not a half mile distant, rose a conical, precipitous hill.

"That's the last landmark Pedro told about," said Pike exultantly, "an' nothin' can throw us off the trail now." We quickly traversed the half mile between us and the hill. As Pike said: "We jest et up the ground." There was no path between the riverbed and the base of the hill, but the bed itself, which had been baked hard by the summer sun, made a good enough road for us. We led the mules down into it and found that it curved around the hill just as Pedro had described it. The plain beyond narrowed very much, and there was a rapid ascent towards the mountain chain, which lay directly in front of us and only a few miles away.

We followed the riverbed until we had gone a half mile, as nearly as we could calculate. There we halted.

"'Less Pedro was yarnin', the gold is in the groun'

right here," said Pike. "Maybe we're standin' over it this very minute."

"Of course we are," cried the enthusiastic Henry. "Here it is—millions of it just waiting and pleading for us to dig it up."

"Get a pick," said Starboard Sam, "an' let's see."

The sailor would have gone to work as soon as he could get a pick from the baggage, but Pike stopped him.

"It'll soon be night," said the cautious hunter, "an' I think we'd better be arrangin' our camp. We're expectin' to stay here some time, an' we must make ourselves tolably comf'able. Besides, thar's the danger uv Halftrigger droppin' down on us, an' we must hev some kind uv defense ready. Let the gold be fur the present, an' we'll settle ourselves."

The valley where we stood was not over a half mile broad, and was bare and sunburnt. It sloped back towards hills of considerable height, on the summits of which the trees grew in abundance.

"I'm thinkin'," said Pike, "that we'll hev to build a hut up thar. The mules will hev to hev pasturage, which they kin fin' on the hillside, and we'll hev to fin' water fur drink an' washin' out the gold."

We recognized at once the importance of these conditions, which had slipped our minds in our eagerness until Pike reminded us of them. Leaving Henry, the sailor and the Frenchman with the mules in the valley, Pike, Mr. Sheldon and I ascended the western slope, and our delight was unmeasured when we found a fine spring gushing out of the side of the hill. It flowed into the dry riverbed further up, and the water sank in the sand there.

"When we speak of good or bad fortune," said Mr. Sheldon, "we must remember we could have no better fortune than this. We'll need water in washing out our gold, and we can easily build a flume which will carry this stream to whatever point we desire."

I carried the gratifying news back to the others, and they were soon at the spring slaking their thirst. We spent the night there, and the next morning began to

look around us. Pike thought we ought to build a hut, and as we had axes and timber was abundant, he took Bonneau and Sam and went to work. Mr. Sheldon, Henry and I shouldered our picks and went down to the river bed to look for gold.

All of us except Mr. Sheldon were utterly ignorant of gold mining, and even he knew but little.

"I suppose I have picked up one or two stray bits of information on the subject since I have been in California," he said, "but I do not know whether I can put those bits together in such a shape that I can make use of them. I think we are after pocket gold. In ages past it has probably been washed down from the mountains by this river in the wet season and buried here under the drifts of sand. I know nothing about indications, and I suppose we had better dig down in the river bed right here."

Choosing what we thought to be a likely spot, we sank our picks deep in the bed of sand and dug industriously for more than two hours, skipping about from place to place. The only hard substances our picks struck were occasional stones, and besides these we turned up nothing but sand.

"I didn't expect to strike a chunk of gold the first blow of the pick," said Henry, "but if we are not turning up Pedro's nuggets before to-morrow night I'm no prophet."

We pecked in the sand all day and succeeded only in making ourselves hot, tired and dusty. When the evening came we shouldered our tools and went back to the crest of the hill, where the housebuilders were toiling.

"Shell out your gold," said Pike, "for I know you've got your pockets full, an' you've got to divide fair."

"You may have all the gold we've found to-day," I replied. "We won't claim any of it on our account."

"I knowed that," said Pike. "I could tell from your faces that you hadn't had any luck, an' I didn't think you'd hev any. You couldn't expect to drop down on that gold the fust time you sunk your pick

in the sand. But it's thar, it's safe, waitin' fur us, an' don't you furgit it."

But if we had accomplished nothing, Pike and his two assistants had done enough for us all. They had been wielding the axe with great vigor, and the ground was covered with stout poles cut in measured lengths.

"Why! are you going to build a town?" asked Mr. Sheldon in surprise.

"No," replied Pike, with a satisfied grin, "but I propose to set this party up fur housekeepin' an' also fur keepin' an enemy at arm's length in case sech an enemy comes. This is to be our fort ez well ez our risydence."

We understood Pike's precaution. He expected the Halftrigger party to find us eventually, and that we would have to fight. Though the remainder of us would have preferred to hurry on the gold hunt, his judgment was so sound that no contrary voice was raised. Bonneau had supper ready for us, and as we ate Pike outlined a plan of procedure which he submitted for our approval. His idea in brief was to build a hut by raising bullet-proof logs to the height of about seven feet and then to cover it over with canvas which he had brought along in the expectation of making into tents. This, he said, should be erected at the very verge of the fountain, in order that we might not be cut off from a water supply in case we were besieged. Three days, said Pike, would be sufficient in which to raise the walls of the hut, and we could equip the interior at our leisure.

"But I want to take a day off myself," said Pike, "an' I wuz intending to do it to-morrow. Sam an' Bonneau know how to go ahead with the work on our cabin, so I've been reckonin' on spendin' a day scoutin' about to see ef our enemies are anywhar near. What do you say, boys?"

Of course we agreed with him, for we had superlative confidence in his judgment, and very early the next morning he shouldered his rifle and departed. The remainder of us, letting the gold hunt be for the day, worked on the house. We elected Mr. Sheldon

superintendent of the building department, in the absence of Pike, and we toiled with a right good will. A bit before dusk Pike returned and said he had discovered no evidence that we had neighbors. Two days later he went on another such expedition and returned with a similar report.

Five days after it was begun our cabin was completed, and Mr. Sheldon proudly said it was "a triumph of the art of the builder and architect." It was roomy enough for all of us, and we stored in it all our provisions and spare tools, arms and ammunition. It was arranged also that while the others were seeking gold one man should always keep watch on the crest of the ridge. From that lookout station one could see for many miles in every direction.

Our arrangements for habitation and defense being completed, we set to work in earnest to hunt gold.

"We will turn up ze whole river bed from cend to cend, if necessaire, to have zat gold," said Bonneau.

That was the way all of us felt about it.

We had not neglected the gold hunt altogether while we were building the house, but this was our first thorough attempt to discover Pedro's hidden store of gold. We went up and then down the water course and delved first here and then there, as if we were bent upon fulfilling Bonneau's sanguine assertion. For a week we pried into the secrets of the riverbed. We dug in spots all the way back to the hill, and up and down, covering a distance of more than a mile, but we found nothing resembling gold to cheer us or lighten our labors. Day after day we worked in the hot sun, with sweating faces and blistered hands and declining hopes. Nobody would make any complaint, but we read plainly enough in each other's faces the sickening fear that our gold hunt had been somehow a great mistake.

I think it was on the evening of the ninth day of our unrewarded labors, a more than usually warm and weary day, that Pike threw down his pick, uttered a a singeing oath and exclaimed:

"Fellers, it looks after all ez ef that Pedro wuz lyin', jest made it all out uv his head!"

We maintained a glum silence, for such was our fear, though we disliked to admit it. Pike shook his head slowly for some time and then brightened up a bit.

"I guess I ought to take that back, boys. I reckon I hev done Pedro a wrong. He's dead, now, poor feller. He didn't look like a lyin' sort uv chap, an' he stuck to the tale with his last breath. The gold wuz about the last thing he spoke uv. No, boys, Pedro wuz in hard earnest."

"He could not have made up the story," said Henry, ever ready to catch any shred of hope, "and the gold must be near here somewhere. I'm sure it is."

"Then ef you're so sartin shore," growled Starboard Sam, "I wish you'd show us whar it is."

"I still believe that Pedro spoke the truth," said Mr. Sheldon, "though he might have been mistaken about distances, or something else that has misled us. We are disappointed and in a bad humor now, but there is not much occasion for it. The gold is hereabouts, and we will find it eventually. We ought to rest awhile and let our courage come back to us. Now our supply of provisions is getting low. I propose that we spend some days in hunting, and then when we have accumulated a plentiful supply of meat we can come back to this task with fresh zest."

This suggestion pleased us all. We stored our tools and prepared for a hunting expedition. Although we had failed to find gold we were not in a bad plight. We had a good house, plenty of ammunition, pleasant weather and no ties calling us back to civilization. We were vigorous with health and strength, and life had its pleasures.

When we reflected over these things we were able to swallow some of our chagrin and started on the hunting expedition in fairly cheerful spirits.

"We have hunt ze gold and find nozzing," said Bonneau. "Now we will hunt ze game and see eef we cannot find something."

Then we laughed and felt better.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HIDDEN MINE.



FEW days devoted to hunting refreshed us and improved our tempers. Deer were fairly abundant in the vicinity, and we killed and cured our winter's supply of meat, for we intended to carry out Bonneau's threat of digging up the entire riverbed if necessary in order to find the gold. While on these expeditions we also kept a wary watch for our enemies, but we found nothing to indicate that they were near.

On the fifth day of our change of programme I took my rifle and strolled along the riverbed. I intended to follow its course for two or three miles and then bend off into the mountains.

I noted, not without amusement, the marks of our fruitless labors. The sand was thrown up in great patches here and there as if we had intended to turn the riverbed bottom side upward. About a mile from the hill which had been our chief landmark I came to a place where the banks were steeper than usual. Their shelving surface was sprinkled with short, stubby shrubs, and changing my plan, I climbed up the slope by means of them, thinking that I might find some game in the vicinity.

Just as I pulled myself up to the crest of the hill I saw a pair of gleaming yellow eyes intently regarding me. There was a thick undergrowth of vines and weeds, and from this mass two eyes flashed like two coals of fire.

I knew that the eyes belonged to some fierce wild beast, but the undergrowth was so dense I could not see the body at first. Taking a step or two nearer I secured a better view, and discovered the long, lank and crouching figure of a mountain lion. Now, I was

not hunting mountain lion, but since this big fellow had thrust himself in my way I was too much of a sportsman to let the opportunity pass.

With my rifle cocked and my finger on the trigger, I edged around for a better position. The animal growled and followed me with his blazing eyes. He was drawn up ready to spring, and though I feared that he would make his leap before I could get into position for a shot, he did not stir.

I moved around until the lion's head was in full view. Then I raised my rifle to my shoulder and poised it for a good shot. There was a spot of reddish hair between the animal's eyes, and I aimed at it. I pulled the trigger, and as the rifle cracked the lion gathered himself in a great bunch and shot through the air towards me. He struck me on the shoulder. My rifle flew from my hand, and I tumbled over backward.

In seeking vantage ground for a shot I had moved very near the edge of the shelving bank. When the lion struck me both man and beast were near the verge. The superior momentum of the lion carried him past me. He bounded off my shoulder as if he were a huge rubber ball and shot down the bank ahead of me. I grasped instinctively at the shrubs which grew on the sandy slope. My weight jerked them by their roots from the thin soil, but they broke the rapidity of my fall, and when I leaped lightly and unhurt to my feet I found the lion lying stone dead beside me. My bullet had struck him on the red spot between the eyes just as he was preparing to spring, and the impulse which he acquired before the bullet ended his life had lifted him into the air and hurled him against my shoulder.

Satisfied at having made a good shot, I turned my attention to myself and was amazed to find that I was still grasping a shrub in each hand. They had been torn up by the roots, and when I looked down at them I found several lumps, one or two of which were nearly as large as my fist, clinging to the roots. I detached the largest lump, brushed off the dirt, and then I opened my mouth and uttered a yell of delight.

I was not much of a miner, but I knew enough to know that I held in my hand an almost pure nugget of gold. I brushed off the others and found that they, too, were gold, mixed to some extent with other substances, but as pure as one ever finds it in the earth.

I scrambled up the bank to the place where I had pulled up the shrubs and, scratching with my hands in the sand and gravel, found more lumps. Then I could contain my feelings no longer and I uttered another shout of delight.

I had found the hidden mine.

Pedro's tale was true, and by the sheerest accident I had found the gold which its original finder was never to enjoy.

In my pleasure and excitement I started in a run to our hut. When I had gone two hundred yards I found that I had left my rifle lying on the bank where it had fallen when the lion struck me. Somewhat ashamed of myself I hurried back, recovered the weapon and started again, but at a more deliberate pace this time, for our house.

My chest expanded with my sense of importance, but I grew cooler as I approached our place. It chanced that all the boys were at home, and I saw them sitting on the logs in front of the house. I had carefully brushed off all the dust my clothing had gathered when I went down the bank, and I walked up, stepping as briskly and as high as a yearling colt just turned out to pasture.

"Hello," said Henry, "Here comes Joe, empty handed, too, and walking as if he didn't care either. How high and mighty we are to-day."

"Well," said I, lying down comfortably where the grass was thickest and longest, and speaking in a drawling, lazy manner, as if I did not care whether school kept or not, "I'm getting tired of this thing, fellows."

"Why, what's got into the boy's head?" said Pike in surprise. "Gettin' tired of what, Joe?"

"Why, all this hunting for gold and never finding it," I replied.

"We have been hunting game and not gold for the last two or three days," said Henry.

"I know, I know," I replied, "but the gold's the main thing. That's what we are here for."

"Don't we know that?" said Mr. Sheldon. "What of it?"

"Are we any nearer to finding the gold than we were, when we first came to this spot?" I asked.

"No," replied Pike, "but are you losin' your nerve, Joe? Why, you're the last one I expected to see cave in like this!"

The others stared at me in wonder, but I kept my countenance.

"I suppose we are to begin digging again in a day or two," I said, pulling carelessly at the long stems of grass.

"That was our intention," said Mr. Sheldon.

"I have been thinking a good deal about this matter," I said, and I have concluded that you fellows are of no account as gold hunters."

"Can you do any better?" asked Henry.

"I might," I replied, "but just watch me smash that butterfly that's hopping on the grass there, by Pike."

The butterfly, gorgeous in his many hues, had alighted on the grass at Pike's foot. I thrust my hand in my pocket, pulled out the largest nugget, and tossed it carelessly at the butterfly, missing him, as I had expected, at least six inches. The insect flew away and the nugget rolled up against Pike's foot.

"Are you carrying stones as big as my fist around in your pockets to throw at butterflies?" asked Henry.

"There seems to be as much profit in that as in anything else we are doing," I replied.

"Pretty large missile for so small a target," said Henry.

"Why, this is big enough to throw at a deer," said Pike, picking up the nugget; "it's big enough an' heavy enough to bring down a full-grown stag ef you could only hit him right. Why, what in thunder is this?"

Pike was looking at the nugget with staring eyes.

"Oh, nothing much," I replied, carelessly. "Merely a queer-looking stone I've found. Thought maybe you'd like to see it. I've brought along a lot like it."

I pulled the other nuggets out of my pockets and tossed them over towards the boys as if they were so much dirt. Then I stretched myself out at full length and pretended to close my eyes, as if I were tired, bored and sleepy. But I kept the corners open and watched the boys.

Pike's exclamation had drawn the attention of the others, and every one held a nugget in his hand, examining it with growing excitement.

"Why, this is gold, ez shore's I'm a livin' sinner!" cried Pike, turning the nugget about in his hands.

"And this lump, too, is gold, or I am as much of a sinner as you are," said Mr. Sheldon.

"Thar's no doubt about it," said Pike, "it's gold, shore. Here, let me see the rest uv 'em."

They began to examine the nuggets all together, and agreed that they were gold, the yellow gold for which men risk their lives. Then they turned to me for explanations, but by this time I was sound asleep—or at least pretended to be.

"Here you, Joe," cried Henry, "where did you get these? Why, if he hasn't gone to sleep! Here, wake up!"

But I began to snore.

"Turn him over and beat him on the back," said Pike.

Sam and Bonneau turned me over, and when they had hit me a thump or two I opened my eyes, yawned, sat up and exclaimed apparently in great heat and indignation:

"What's the matter with you fellows? Can't you let a man who has worn himself out tramping and hunting get a little sleep?"

"Where did you get these?" asked Pike, holding up two of the nuggets. "Do you know these are gold?"

"Gold!" I replied. "Oh, I guess you're joking. There isn't any gold about here."

"He is only 'possuming," said Mr. Sheldon. "Sit up and tell us about it."

I dropped my assumed indifference and told the story.

"It's Pedro's mine, shore!" said Pike. "What fools we wuz not to dig in the bank ez well ez on the river bottom!"

"It doesn't matter," said Henry; "we've found it after all."

They were all eager to see the place, and I was not loth to show them the way. Nobody was willing to stay behind, and we left the hut unguarded, trusting to luck to find it all right again.

When we arrived at the spot we found the body of the lion lying as it had fallen, and in a few moments we were scratching in the sand and gravel of the cliff for more gold. Nor did we fail to find it, either. Nugget after nugget was turned up to the light, and we even found them at the very verge of the riverbed, not fifteen feet from a spot in which we had been digging a few days before.

"I guess this is the place where Pedro struck the gold," said Henry, "and he miscalculated the distance from the hill, which I would say is much nearer a mile than half a mile from here."

This, no doubt, was the truth about the matter.

We ceased our labors only when the darkness compelled us to do so, and then, with our pockets filled with the little chunks of gold, we took our way back to the hut, chattering in our glee like so many children. We were gold-struck, and we clinked the lumps together and began to calculate how long it would be before we would have as much gold as our mules could carry.

But even then we performed one more task before going.

"This mountain lion didn't mean you any good," said Pike, pointing to the carcass, "but his jump at you was a mighty lucky thing fur us, shore. Ef it hadn't been fur it we might never hev found the gold. So I think out uv gratitude we orter give him decent burial."

We speedily dug a deep hole in the sand in which we interred the body, and then, shouldering our picks, went home. We found that the hut had not been disturbed, and the mules were grazing peacefully on the grass near by.

Sitting in the shadow of the evening, we arranged our plans for working the mine, if mine it could be called when the gold was found so near the surface. The distance from the hut was not great—within easy hearing of a gunshot—and we decided that one of our number should always be on guard at the hut, and to signal at once for help in case enemies came. We would also store the gold in the hut.

"How does it happen," asked Pike, after the more serious matters had been disposed of, "that this gold is lying thar in lumps so near the surface?"

"I have heard often about such cases," said Mr. Sheldon, "and this is in accordance with my conjecture of what the truth would prove to be when I first saw this ancient water-course. All this gold has been washed down from the mountains by floods of hundreds of years ago perhaps. Why so much of it lodged at this particular point I cannot say. Probably there was in those times some obstruction there, such as a curve in the bank."

"Eet makes no defference how eet got zere!" exclaimed Bonneau. "Eet ees zere, and zat ees ze good zing for us, and, what ees ze better zing for us, eet will not be zere much longaire, for we will dig eet all out—evaire lump—and zen Pierre Bonneau will be one grate Frenchman, worthy to be covered all over wiz ze gold braid like a Marshal of France and to be ze companion of ze grate Napoleon himself, eef only zat mightiest of men was alive."

"Will you go back to Paris when you get your fortune, Bonneau?" asked Henry.

"For a while," said Bonneau, "to walk up and down the Boulevard des Italiens and through the Place de la Concorde, but not forevaire. Pierre Bonneau will always be a Frenchman, but he ees a ceetizen of ze world also. After a leetle while he come back to find

out what have become of ze long-legged hunter and ze big, lazy sailor, Starboard Sam, and all ze ozzers wiz whom he has travelled and shared ze dangaires of ze great wilderness."

"Bully for you, Bonneau," said Henry. "I knew you wouldn't forget us."

"Nevaire!" said the Frenchman, emphatically, and we knew he meant it.

The next morning we left Bonneau on guard at the hut and the remainder of us did a very hard day's work at the mine. We found that the gold was in scales and flakes as well as in lumps, and required washing out. So in the course of the next few days we built a flume and carried the water from the creek to the mine. It was a rude structure, but as we had a fine fall for the water it sufficed for our purpose.

When our flume was completed we made rapid progress. Nobody ever worked more industriously than did we. As fast as we cleared out our gold we put it in stout little canvas bags. These bags, when filled, weighed about ten pounds apiece, and with much exultation we watched their number grow. The gold in many cases was mixed with stone, but we calculated that when the final process of separation took place at least half of what these little canvas bags contained would be pure gold. And we soon saw from the way our treasure in the hut grew that there was enough to make us all rich for life.

"How long do you reckon it will take us to clean out the mine?" asked Starboard Sam one day.

This was a question that none of us could answer, but we agreed that as soon as we had a load for our mules we would leave what remained to whomsoever might find it, and start with our treasure to San Francisco. A mule load of gold apiece ought to be enough, Mr. Sheldon said, and we did not dispute his assertion.

Those were happy days for us all. The accumulation of money may be a sordid thing, but nevertheless one has a very comfortable feeling when he knows that his bank account, or what is equivalent to it, is growing. Our hut was now filling up so fast with the little

canvas bags that Pike said one evening, after we had surveyed our treasure:

“Boys, I think we kin take our time about our work after this. We’ve got purty nigh as much now as our mules kin conveniently carry.”

“Won’t some o’ them lads in ’Frisco open their eyes when they see us comin’ jest loaded down with gold,” said Starboard Sam. “Why, we’ve got a reg’lar shipload o’ prize-money here.”

CHAPTER XXI.

A SIGNAL FROM BONNEAU.



OUR mine at last began to show signs of exhaustion, but that fact brought to us no affliction. We were not grasping after the whole world, and there was enough gold for us all stored in our hut. We had begun to talk of our departure for San Francisco, when one morning all of us except Bonneau left for the mine. The Frenchman excelled the remainder of us so much as a housekeeper that it usually fell to his part to remain at the hut, an arrangement in which he acquiesced with willingness.

We had thrown off our coats and were absorbed in our labors when we were aroused by the report of a rifle shot. Pike started up, alarm stamped on his face.

"Didn't that shot come from the hut?" he exclaimed.

"Undoubtedly," replied Mr. Sheldon.

Even as the latter spoke, there was the sound of a half-dozen reports, coming like a ragged volley. We looked at each other, and Pike uttered the thought which had come instantly to the minds of all of us:

"Halftrigger!"

A rifle-shot was to be the signal for help from whomsoever might be on guard in case danger came, and we had no doubt that the first report was intended as such by Bonneau. The human mind is a curious thing, and we felt little surprise when we heard the sound of this shot, though our success in finding the gold had caused us to forget Halftrigger and his band for the time.

"Grab your guns, boys, an' come on!" cried Pike.

We had never neglected to bring our rifles and pistols with us, and they were lying on the bank only a few feet away. We seized them and, led by Pike, ran towards the house. We were much alarmed. We feared both for Bonneau and the safety of our gold. What

if the desperadoes had killed or captured Bonneau, seized the hut and now held all our treasure!

Our view of the hut was cut off by the shoulder of the hill, and we slackened speed before coming into view, in order that we might avoid an ambush. Pike stole forward, made a brief reconnoissance and returned with news that the coast was clear. Then we ran to the top of the hill and found nobody in sight.

The hut appeared to be undisturbed, and nowhere in the vicinity were there indications of intruders. For all we saw, Bonneau might have been inside the hut, peacefully engaged in his cooking. But we knew the shots meant something serious, and were not deceived by these appearances of quiet.

"What do you think of it?" asked Mr. Sheldon of Pike.

"Either they've taken Bonneau an' the hut," said Pike, "an' are waitin' inside fur us to come up whar they kin plunk us, or Bonneau has fortified himself in thar, hev'in' druv 'em off. But we'll find out mighty soon. I think we kin go a little closer without comin' in range uv the hut."

Obeying the suggestion, we walked forward. The grass was rather thick and long at this place, and as I was watching the hut for movements there I stumbled against something and barely saved myself from a fall. I turned to see what the obstacle was, and beheld the face of a dead man upturned in the grass. The others, attracted by the noise of my stumble, had seen the ghastly object at the same moment.

I recognized the face of one of Halftrigger's men. There was a bullet-hole through the forehead, and the body was still warm.

"I guess this is Bonneau's work," said Pike. "The Frenchmen must hev been outside an' some distance from the hut when he saw 'em comin'. I didn't think he wuz sech a good shot."

There was a loaded pistol in the man's belt, and Pike took it out and put it into his own pocket, saying he would probably find use for it. Then we turned our

attention once more to the hut. We watched it for many minutes, but we could discover no signs of life. We could see that the rude door which we had made was tightly closed, and we were sure the place was not without a tenant. But which, Bonneau or the desperadoes?

Our position was in some respects unfortunate. The cabin stood about two-thirds of the way up the slope. The crest of the hill was wooded. Riflemen could easily lie concealed there and spread themselves out in such a manner that we could not approach the cabin without exposing ourselves to their fire, granting that such men were concealed there. Thus whether in the house or on the hill they held us at an advantage.

"If Bonneau is in there we ought to let him know of our presence," said Mr. Sheldon.

"Yes, ef he's thar," said Pike, "but ef he isn't thar an' our enemies are thar instead, 'taint wuth while fur us to make ourselves marks fur thar bullets. No, we've got to wait fur a sign uv some kind."

The situation was most puzzling, and there was nothing to do but wait. Waiting is a trying business at best, and it was almost unbearable now as our anxiety about Bonneau and our gold was increasing. We lay in the long grass, which concealed us very well. Pike scouted about a bit, but there was not enough grass and undergrowth for him to approach either the hut or the crest of the hill to see whether the enemy were concealed in either place.

We lay for two or three hours, staring at the hut and the trees beyond until our eyes grew weary. During all this time there was a silence that oppressed us. The cabin stood in the opening, as innocent in appearance as if it had never harbored anything that savored of danger. We expected to see a gun muzzle thrust now and then from a loop-hole, but no such sight greeted our eyes.

"Suppose they have killed Bonneau and taken the treasure and gone?" suggested Henry.

"'Tain't possible," said Pike. "They never could hev gethered up the mules an' our gold an' hev got

away so quick and so clean after the firin' uv them shots."

"But the mules are gone," said Henry.

This was a fact. They usually grazed on the grass near the hut, and they had seemed so much content with their surroundings that we had ceased to tether them. But they were gone now.

"The gang is here, shore," said Pike emphatically; "either in the cabin or on the hill. The mules may hev been skeered by the shots an' run away. Besides bein' so much stronger than we are in numbers, I don't think that crowd would run away, even ef all the gold had been packed on the backs uv the mules waitin' fur 'em. I think I'll try the old hat trick an' see ef anythin' will come uv it. It kain't hurt nutlin' anyway."

He crawled considerably nearer to the cabin, put his hat on the muzzle of his gun-barrel and thrust it up until the crown showed above the grass. It remained exposed within fair rifle-shot of the cabin for a full minute, but there was no response. No shot was fired. No gun-muzzle showed through the loop-holes. Pike showed the hat again and again, but the result was always the same. Finally he came back to us and expressed his disgust at his failure.

"It leads me to believe that the cabin is deserted," said Mr. Sheldon, "and that the bandits have gone with our gold."

"No, no," said Pike earnestly. "You are mistaken. Thar's somebody in thet cabin, but whether it's Bonneau or Halftrigger's gang is more'n I kin tell. Ef it's Bonneau he thought the hat was on the head uv one uv the gang, an' concluded to save hisself fur a rush. He's got everythin' to gain by waitin', fur he knows we'll come to his help. But ef the gang is in thar they don't want to warn us, but are waitin' fur us to come up. No, we mustn't take sech a risk ez to walk up to that cabin door, turnin' ourselves into targets ez easy to shoot et ez a barn. I guess we'll hev to wait fur night now, an' that won't be so very long."

The sun was about three hours high and we had made up our minds that there would be no developments until it went down behind the hills. Acting upon that supposition, we sought as comfortable positions as we could find in the grass, though we were on our guard to prevent the silent approach of an enemy.

We were resting thus when Pike told us to look closely at the cabin.

"'Thar's somethin' movin' on the roof," he said.

The roof of the cabin was nothing but bark and thin canvas. It could hardly support a man's weight, and we did not believe that any one would be so bold as to thrust his head through. Consequently we awaited developments with eagerness.

Something that looked like the end of a stick was projecting through the roof, and was being twisted about in a queer fashion, as if an effort were being made to enlarge the aperture. This effort became a success, for suddenly an object shot high above the roof and remained stationary. Pike uttered a low whistle and followed it with an exclamation:

"Wa-al, I'll be darned!"

A pole projected about ten feet above the roof. To the end of the pole was tied a piece of white cloth about a foot square and about six inches below was fastened another piece of cloth of about the same size. A slight wind blew out the small pieces of cloth, and they fluttered like streamers at a masthead. In an upper corner of the first strip were daubed a number of spots, and horizontal stripes were drawn in the remainder of the space.

The lower strip as we could see when the wind fluttered it out, was made of three separate pieces of clothing. The top piece was red, the middle one white and the lower one blue.

"What in thunder does it mean?" asked Pike.

Henry was laughing and we turned to him in wonderment.

"Why, don't you see?" he replied. "It's Bonneau holding the fort and he's telling us so. That strip of cloth at the top is the stars and stripes, or, rather, an

attempted imitation of it. The strip below it is the red, white and blue, the tri-color, the flag of France. The red is a piece of Bonneau's handkerchief, the blue is his hat lining, and I guess an undergarment furnished the white. Bully for Bonneau! He hasn't got brains for nothing."

"Why, it's all ez plain ez the nose on your face, now that it's explained," said Pike.

"Since Bonneau has signalled us there is no reason why we should not signal back to him," I said.

"How?" asked Pike.

"Why, as you did to me when I was a prisoner. There are five of us. Hoist our five hats where he can see them, and he is quick-witted enough to know what it means."

We adopted this suggestion, raising all five of our hats in a row on our gun barrels. Before the hats were in sight a half minute the pole containing the flags was waved about and jerked up and down.

"He understands us and is applauding," said Henry.

"Trust Bonneau!"

We took down the hats presently, and then the flags also disappeared. The experiment seemed conclusive to us, and we were greatly cheered, for we felt sure that Bonneau was alive and holding the fort and our gold with it.

"We must manage to join Bonneau in thar somehow," said Pike, "fur the gold's thar, and that's what we've got to fight fur, and ef our enemies don't know we are here they at least kin guess it, and they'll try thar best to keep us out uv the house."

The report of a rifle fired from the cabin interrupted Pike's remarks. A whiff of smoke on the far side rose above the roof and floated away.

"That shot wuz fired towards the summit uv the hill," said Pike. "Them outlaws are thar in the woods, shore."

The truth of Pike's assertion was confirmed instantly by several shots from the woods. We heard the bullets go kerplunk against the logs of the cabin. But Bonneau was content evidently with his single shot.

This demonstration was succeeded by complete silence. We sunk into easy attitudes again and awaited the coming of the night. But darkness was not far away now. The long shadows began to fall across the grass and the hills crept up between the earth and the sun. The outlines of the cabin grew indistinct, and soon the little fort was nothing but a darker blur in the darkness.

"We must try to creep up to the hut now," said Pike, "but we must be awful keerful, boys, 'cause in the darkness Bonneau himself won't know whether we are friends or enemies, and he might plunk one uv us with a bullet. Come along now, and don't make any more noise than you kin help."

Following Pike, we began to crawl on all fours towards the cabin, stopping at frequent intervals to listen for suspicious sounds. The darkness was now so heavy that we could not see the wood in which we supposed the outlaws had been concealed throughout the day. But Pike was uneasy, and expressed his fears in a whisper to me.

"I hope," he said, "we hev started ahead uv our enemies. Like ez not they are creepin' up on the cabin, too, and thar's no tellin' which will git thar fust. Be keerful, boys! Be keerful!"

We passed out of the stretch of grass and reached the space of earth in the centre of which the cabin stood. Additional caution now became necessary, and we crouched as close to the earth as was possible without entirely checking our forward movement. The darkness had increased, and although we were within a hundred feet of the cabin, it's outlines were so faint that they would have escaped our notice altogether had we not known the cabin was there. We were not a hundred feet distant from it when Pike whispered: "Close up boys. We must keep mighty nigh each other in this darkness, 'specially as we may hev to make a rush fur it. We want to know our friends from our enemies. Come on in a bunch, now."

We were huddled up like a covey of partridges. Nevertheless, we managed to make some progress. But

the deep silence puzzled Pike and added to his uneasiness. After putting his ear to the ground and listening he whispered discontentedly :

"This is too easy and smooth to last. Knowin' that we must be about somewhars, Halftrigger ain't the kind uv man to go to sleep. I'd give one uv them bags uv gold to know what trick that feller is up to."

But we were approaching the cabin and the cautious Pike ceased to whisper. Soon we were within twenty feet of the door, when Pike motioned to us to halt.

Evidently he was at a loss how to communicate with Bonneau. The cabin was not more than twenty feet away. I wondered what Bonneau was doing. His position was one of extraordinary difficulties. In the thick darkness it was possible for a wary enemy to come even to the cabin walls unseen by him. A violent attempt to burst the door might be the first warning to him of attack. I did not envy the Frenchman's situation.

Pike, looking like a huge bullfrog, began to crawl towards the house again and we obediently followed. In five minutes we were able to reach out our hands and place them on the log walls. Before attempting to signal Bonneau Pike put his ear to the earth again and listened. I was closest to him, and when he raised his head he whispered to me :

"This hez been a close race, by the Eternal. I hear the voices uv men who are crawlin' about on the other side uv the cabin, an' uv course it's them outlaws."

This news was communicated quickly to the others, and all recognized how critical our position had become. If we made any noise in an attempt to attract the attention of Bonneau it would also be heard by the outlaws and bloodshed would follow. We pressed close against the logs and shrank into as small a space as possible. Fortunately, the darkness of the night and the shadow of the walls together were sufficient to conceal us from any one more than a few feet away.

I put my head to the ground, and though my ears had not the trained acuteness of Pike's, I was able now to hear a shuffling noise on the other side of the

cabin, which I knew was made by men crawling about. Once or twice also I thought I heard whispers, but I was not sure. I wondered what Pike would do in this emergency. He was a man of many resources, but the danger was so threatening it could well prove too much even for the wisdom of Solomon.

Uttering a faint and slightly perceptible h-sh-sh as a warning for us to remain motionless, Pike began a snake-like creeping towards the corner. But he had got only a foot or two when another form appeared around the side of the hut. It was that of a man crawling on his hands and feet. He stopped when he saw Pike. Apparently we escaped his notice, as we lay in the shadow so close up against the cabin. Pike stopped also and began to make gestures with great vigor. He waved the man back, and his motions indicated some pressing reason why the other should retreat.

We could not see the man's face, all except the outlines of his figure being hidden by the darkness, but he paused as if impressed by Pike's actions. I thought Pike's boldness and readiness caused him to mistake the hunter for his leader, Halftrigger, as the two men were nearly of a size, both being very large.

Seeing that he hesitated, Pike approached a little nearer to the fellow and made very violent gestures. Then the man turned about and crept out of sight around the hut. Pike returned to us.

"I guess that feller saved his life when he went back 'roun' the corner," he whispered. "I'd made up my mind ef he found us out to blaze away at him with a pistol, holler to Bonneau to open the door and then hold the gang off with our weepins or die tryin'. But we kain't wait any longer. Another feller may come pokin' his nose 'roun' the corner thar any minute and we mightn't be able to fool him so easy."

He crept to the door of the hut and, placing his powerful hand against it, shook it slightly. Then putting his mouth to a loophole, he whispered: "Bonneau! Bonneau! Open the door! It's me, Pike, and your friends! Let us in! Hurry up! Hurry up!"

Though these words were in a whisper, they were uttered in a sharp, sibilant tone which an attentive listener in the hut could hardly fail to understand. In a moment, and to our great joy, the answer came:

"Eet ees all right! Bonneau knew you would not desert him and has been expecting you! When I unbar the door and open it, run in, jump in for your lives, for ze brigands are on ze ozzer side of ze house, and zey thirst for our blood and our gold!"

There was a slight rustling inside the hut, a sliding sound as the heavy bar was lifted out of place, and then the door—or, rather, shutter—was shoved aside. At the same moment a gigantic form appeared at the corner of the house. We had risen from our crouching posture and were in a group at the doorway, where we were no longer protected by the shadows.

"By the great hornspoon, it's them!" cried the new-comer. "Come on, boys; wipe 'em out—every last son-of-a-gun!"

Halftrigger raised his pistol and fired point-blank at us. But the light was so bad that his bullet swished past us and buried itself in a log. I was nearest to him and threw up my rifle and fired a return shot, but a second man, who suddenly appeared around the corner, received the bullet, for he uttered a howl of pain, followed by a scorching curse.

Then the whole band came swarming upon us. There was a volley of shots, the thud of bullets, cries of pain and the sharp command of Pike, "Git in! Git in, ez quick ez you kin!" I heard Pike counting, "One, two, three, four," All our party were inside except Pike and myself. I paused a moment, but the hunter seized me by the shoulder and fairly hurled me into the hut. Then he sprang lightly after me. There was a rush of feet close behind us, but instinctively reaching out in the darkness I seized one side of the heavy door, and as three or four of us grasped it at the same time, we threw it into place. But a dozen heavy bodies were slammed against it like a battering ram, and we were borne almost off our feet. Nevertheless, nerved by desperation and the knowledge of

our great danger, we swung to the door and with a mighty effort pushed it back into place.

"The bar, Bonneau! Quick, quick; the bar!" cried Pike, "or they'll beat us down!"

Never did I rejoice so much in my youthful strength as on that occasion. I set my heel against the floor and my back against the door and strained until my bones felt like cracking. Beside me the mighty form of Pike was pushing and heaving in an effort to bear up against the accumulated mass of the bandits.

"Shove, lads! Shove!" cried Haltrigger on the outside. "A good shove all together and down goes this door!"

"Hurry up, Bonneau! Hurry up with that bar!" cried Pike again. "If they push all together we kaint hold the door!"

"Yes, Yes!" cried Bonneau, "but zee door is pushed in several inches and I cannot get ze bar in ze fastenings! You must push eet back!"

We made one more prodigious effort and bore the door back. Then the bar fell in its place, the door was tight and fast, and exhausted by our strain we sank panting on the floor.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE HUT.



WE WERE so much exhausted by our great efforts that we lay for a minute or two on the floor struggling for breath. Our enemies quickly discovered that something more than human strength was holding the door, and abandoned the attempt to force the entrance. There were a few moments of silence, followed by a rattling volley of rifle and pistol shots. The bullets thudded like hail against the walls. Then a loud voice sang :

“ ‘Oh, my name is Capt'in Kidd,
As I sailed.
Oh, my name is Capt'in Kidd,
And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed.
As I sailed, as I sailed.’ ”

“ Let him sing on,” said Pike, grimly, “ but it's well fur him it's so dark or his singin' an' his sailin' might be cut short by a plug uv lead. You fellows lay low, thars a crack or two in the door that ud let a bullet in. Is everybody here ? ”

It was so dark in the hut that we could not see each other, and Pike began to call the roll :

“ Mr. Sheldon ? ”

“ Here ! ”

“ Starboard Sam ? ”

“ Here ! ”

“ Bonneau ? ”

“ Here ! ”

“ Joe Fieldin' ? ”

“ Here ! ”

“ Henry Fieldin' ? ”

“ Here ! ”

“ Wa'al, that makes it right, shore. We're all in. Anybody hurt ? ”

There was no answer.

"I'm shore somebody got hurt," said Pike. "I heard a screech or two, an' they didn't come from the other crowd. Who wuz it? Speak out."

"A bullet clipped my shoulder, and it made me cry out, but it's nothing," said Henry. "It's already stopped bleeding, and I hardly feel it."

"That's one," said Pike; "who wuz the other? Thar wuz another, I know, 'cause I heard him. Speak up!"

"I guess it wuz me," said Starboard Sam. "I got my ear burnt. One o' them pirates put his mark on it with a piece o' lead, but it don't matter. I never wuz purty, anyhow, an' I ain't goin' to set up for beauty at my time o' life."

"We'll hev to see to them scratches presently," said Pike. "Are you all right Bonneau?"

"Oui, oui," said the little Frenchman. "Nevaire felt bettaire in my life, and I have held ze little fort against all ze robbaires. I feel like a Marshal of ze great Napoleon. I am one mighty warrior."

"You've kivered yourself with glory, no doubt, Bonneau," said Pike. "How did it all happen?"

"I was busy cooking," said Bonneau, "for I knew you would be very hungry when you come home after ze hard digging so many hours in ze rivaire. I have ze fire burning on ze ground near ze hut, and I bend ovaire to push ze chunks togezzer, when crack! zip! bang! goes a gun in ze woods down ze hill. A bullet come along, and its breath fan my face, which is very uncomfortable and very trying for ze nerves. I look up and see a great gang of robbaires, led by one big man, come running towards me. I jump towards ze hut. I seize my rifle and shoot. One of ze robbaires give a great cry and fall over in ze grass. Ze ozzers fire bang! bang! bang! bang! and still come running. Ze bullets fly all around me and make one, two, three holes in my clothes, but not touch me. Zen I jump inside ze hut and close and fasten ze door. Robbaires afraid to come up in ze daylight. I know you come to help, and by and by I signal to you. You understand

vairy well and signal back. In ze night I expect both you and ze robbaire to come, and I wait until I hear you whisper through ze crack."

"You've done well, Bonneau, mighty well," repeated Pike, with emphasis. "You've held the fort and the gold with it."

"Ze gold ees all right in ze cornaire here," said Bonneau.

"The fust thing we must do," said Pike, "is to fix them cracks in the door so no stray bullets kin come in."

He secured a couple of loose timbers and, fastening them to the door, closed the dangerous apertures. Then, fumbling about in the dark, he examined Sam's and Henry's hurts and pronounced them trifling, not even worth binding up. These matters attended to, we sat in the dark with our rifles in our hands and waited for some movement on the part of our enemies for we felt safe and sanguine now. The stout walls of the cabin were complete proof against bullets, and we thought ourselves able to beat off any number of brigands. We had plenty of food and all the supplies which miners usually carry, and the fountain was only a few feet from our hut. Pike would be skillful enough to devise some means for us to reach the water without exposing ourselves to shots, and we were well situated to stand a siege of considerable duration. There was only one thing that I dreaded, and I told Pike of my fear.

"Suppose they try to set the house on fire," I said, "and burn it over our head. What will prevent them from doing that in the darkness, when we cannot see to shoot them as they approach?"

But Pike's reply was reassuring.

"It kain't be done," he said. "The timbers uv the house are too heavy and solid, and besides they're uv a wood that don't burn easy. I ain't afeard uv anythin' uv that kind."

Pike walked to one of the loopholes, which we had left when we built the house for just such an emergency as this, and peeped out. I imitated his example at another loophole, but I could see nothing.

"What do you think has become of them, Pike?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"Hard to say," replied the hunter, "but I've an idee some uv 'em are still sneakin' along by the walls uv the cabin whar we kain't git at 'em without goin' outside. Now, ef this place wuz built like the old-fashioned block-house we'd soon send 'em scatterin' like brush afore a cyclone. Them forts were two stories, with the upper story projectin' out over the lower. Then the defenders could shoot straight down at anybody crouchin' ag'in' the walls. But, never mind, they'll git away afore the daylight comes."

Having failed to see anything, I had taken my eye from the loophole and put my ear to it instead, thinking the sense of hearing might detect something that the sense of sight had failed to reveal. The experiment was a success, for I heard a noise that sounded like a groan. I called Pike's attention to it and he put his ear to a loophole also.

"I hear it," he said. "It's somebody groanin'. Like ez not it's some one uv the gang that fell when the shootin' match come off at the door. I guess he's hurt too bad to get away. Listen at that!"

The groans became much louder. It was no longer necessary to apply one's ear to a loophole to hear them. Apparently they proceeded from a point within a few feet of the door.

"Poor devil," said Pike, "he's in a tight fix, an' I feel sorry for him."

The groans increased; and still listening intently at the keyhole, I heard a faint voice gasp out a request for water. No other sound disturbed the stillness, and the man, whoever he was, began to breathe stertorously, while his occasional cries for water pierced us like so many knife-blades.

"Can't we do anything for him, Pike?" exclaimed Henry. "I can't stand to sit here and listen to him."

"It's hard," said Pike, "it's mighty hard, but what kin we do? We kain't go out thar to him."

Henry said no more. We listened to the man's moans until at last Pike himself said:

"Boys, I think it's a sin to let a feller critter, no matter what he is, lay out and suffer like that. He's layin' right afore the door; an' ef you fellers are willin' to take the resks with me, we'll open the door an' try to drag him in. What d' you say!"

All of us answered in the affirmative.

"Now, come close up to the door with me every one uv you," said Pike. Bonneau, you and Sam lift the bar an' Mr. Sheldon you an' Joe go out with me an' git the man. The minute we drag him in shut the door and put the bar back, and be shore you're darned quick about it, Sam, you and Bonneau. Now!

The bar was thrown up and the door opened. We sprang out and saw the figure of a man lying not five feet from the door. We seized him, dragged him inside and Sam and Bonneau shut the door behind us and dropped the bar in place.

"We wuz too quick fur 'em that time," said Pike, "even ef they wuz watchin'. Now we've got to hev a light here."

The latter was not such a difficult matter. We had funk and a flint and dry sticks of wood and in a few moments we succeeded in igniting one of the sticks. The man was lying on his side and still groaning. I turned him over on his back and disclosed the features of the man Bliss. His face was distorted by pain and ghastly in hue. Pike shook his head when he looked at him, and I knew his gesture meant that Bliss had received his last call.

The man groaned and in a feeble, quavering voice asked for water.

All our canteens filled with water were in a corner, and while Starboard Sam raised the man to a sitting posture Bonneau put the water to his lips. He drank thirstily, greedily; and when Bonneau at last took the canteen away he looked gratefully at us. He was shot through the chest and bleeding internally, but the water refreshed him so much that he was able to speak.

"You're treating me white, boys," he said feebly, "and it isn't the first time either. I ought to have belonged to this crowd instead of to the other."

"Why did you join Halftrigger?" asked Henry.

"I don't know," replied Bliss. "Because the devil was in me, I suppose. I don't pretend to be good. I've done nothing all my life but loaf and gamble and worse. I've had good impulses now and then, but the impulses wouldn't hold out."

"Oh, well you can have another trial," said Henry, with an effort at cheerfulness, "and perhaps your next good impulse will last longer."

"Maybe," said Bliss, with a faint smile, "but it won't be in these parts. I've got my ticket. I know very well what a bullet through the chest means. I won't see another sunrise. But I've done you a good turn, boys. I've—"

The blood in his throat choked him and he was unable to speak again for a minute or two.

"You've done what?" asked Henry anxiously.

I've helped you—maybe saved all your lives," said Bliss. "It was me who crawled around the corner of the house and saw all of you crouched under the wall. Your leader there motioned me back, and you thought he made me believe he was one of our party, but he didn't. I knew him, but you had done the white thing by me once before, and I went back and said nothing. I kept Halftrigger on the other side of the house until you got the door open. Even then, when we made our rush, I managed to get in the way of the others and delay them."

"What a pity," exclaimed Henry, "that one who wished to be our friend should fall by our own hands!"

"No," said Bliss; "none of you gave me my dose. It was Halftrigger. He was about to shoot you down with his pistol when I tripped him. He turned and shot me through the chest. He left me to bleed to death there on the ground. And, boys, I don't know that I'm sorry that it's all happened, as—as—as"—

He was interrupted again by a fit of coughing and spat up blood.

"Have you any message that you would like to send back to old friends, or relatives in the East?"

asked Henry. "Perhaps we will be able to send it through for you."

Bliss shook his head.

"No," he replied. Everybody at home that I care for is ashamed of me; for good reasons, too, I guess. Better let me pass away unnoticed."

He began to cough again, and visibly was growing weaker fast. Bonneau held the canteen again to his lips, but he was able to drink but little.

"You don't think hard of me, boys?" he gasped.

We replied "no" altogether.

The damp began to gather on his brow.

"Lay him down, Sam," said Pike.

The sailor lowered him gently to the floor. For a few minutes he breathed with great difficulty. Then he ceased to gasp, and when we looked more closely at him he was dead.

"He hed his good streak," said Pike briefly.

Bonneau arranged the body and spread a white cloth over the face of the dead. For some time we sat in a sombre silence by the light of the sputtering torch.

"What are we to do with the body?" asked Starboard Sam finally. "We kain't put it outside ez we'd drop a body overboard at sea, and we kain't keep it in here, ez we may hev a long siege."

"Why, bury it," said Pike.

"Bury it! Whar?" asked Sam.

"Right whar it lays," said Pike. "Thar couldn't be a better place."

The solution of the difficulty was very simple. The floor of the hut was made of bark only. Some of our mining picks were in the cabin, and we had only to remove the bark, dig down and make a grave.

An hour later we began this task. While we were digging the grave the bandits began to fire on the cabin. The bullets pattered against the walls, but we continued our labors, knowing that the thick timbers afforded us ample protection.

"Let 'em waste thar ammunition," said Pike.

"They'll need it afore they git through."

"From what point do those shots come?" I asked.

"From the hill," said Pike. "They're in the woods up thar."

Thus, amid the fusillade from his late friends, we lowered Bliss's body into the grave and covered it with the earth. When the grave had been smoothed over and the light flooring replaced, Henry cut these words with his hunting knife in the soft bark:

"HERE LIES THOMAS BLISS;
HE HAD HIS GOOD STREAK."

"Nobody will ever see that except ourselves," said Henry, "but it tells the truth, nevertheless."

A few stray shots were fired by the bandits after we had completed the burial, but they soon relapsed into silence. The night had lightened a little, and Pike and Mr. Sheldon, examining the approaches to the cabin on every side through the loopholes, announced that they could see nothing of a hostile nature. Pike said that, in his opinion we had nothing now to apprehend that night, as in the limited period of darkness that remained the outlaws would not have sufficient time to devise a method of attack.

All of us were now veteran campaigners, and, believing that the stirring events of the night were over, we divided our party into relays, and part slept while the others watched. I was among the last to answer the next day, and when I opened my eyes and rose to my feet I was informed that there had not been the slightest demonstration from the enemy.

"They hev'n't made a sign," said Pike, "but they're in the woods up thar, shore. Mebbe they want to make us think they've gone, and then, ef any uv us go out they'll plunk us. Ef they wait fur that they'll hev to be mighty patient."

The cabin was within easy rifle-shot of the wood, which was unfortunate. But, in building it, we had to choose between two positions for a location. By coming to the head of the brook, where our water supply could not be cut off by turning the channel, we placed ourselves within range of the wood. But, if we avoided the wood, we ran the chance of losing the

water. So we had considered it better military judgment to stick to the water and risk the wood.

In spite of the proximity of the fountain, this question of water supply began to trouble us. I found that our canteens were half empty already, and unless we practiced very strict economy there would not be enough to last twenty-four hours longer. Pike shook his head and then looked out at the fountain which was plashing and bubbling not a dozen feet away.

"It would be shore death to try to reach the water," he said. "From the woods up thar they could sweep the space between us an' the spring. I wouldn't ask a fairer range myself. But we've got to reach that water somehow or other, boys, fur I think we're in fur a long spell uv waitin' here. We kin do without a good many things, but we kain't do without water."

Pike pondered the matter over for a while and his troubled countenance showed his perplexity. The water seemed to sparkle more brightly than ever now that it was just beyond our reach.

"If we cannot devise any better plan," I suggested, "suppose we wait until to-night, and then slip out. We can take the chances of filling our canteens and getting back safely."

"Of course we kin do that," said Pike, "ef we kain't think uv anythin' better, but it's resky, and besides, our canteens don't hold enough to last us long, an' then we'd hev to slip out ag'in an' run more resks. We must fin' some better way."

"I think I have a plan that's simple and perfectly safe, though it will entail considerable labor," said Mr. Sheldon.

"What is that?" we asked in some surprise.

"This is a military question," said Mr. Sheldon, who liked long words and long sentences, "and it arises from the state of seige in which we find ourselves. Now, in case of seige, engineering science becomes of the utmost importance to beseigers and beseiged. Therefore, it becomes necessary for us to avail ourselves of the skill of the engineer."

"We know that," said Henry, "but where are we

to find the engineer? And granting that he could be found, how are we to bring him to our assistance?"

"Both questions are easily solved, my dear boy," said Mr. Sheldon. "Of course we cannot go out of this house in search of an engineer. That is apparent to us all. The conclusion remains that if we are to find an engineer at all we are to find him among us. Having found him here, of course we do not have to bring him here, for he's here already. Do you follow me?"

"Certainly, certainly," we said, with some impatience. "What's the scheme?"

"I am getting to that," said Mr. Sheldon, with as much deliberation as ever and with an air of satisfaction. "Now, I have found the engineer. Behold, he is myself! That is, I furnished the suggestion, but all of you must help me put it into practice.

"But what's the scheme?" exclaimed Henry. "How are we to get to that water without exposing ourselves? That's what we want to know!"

"Easiest thing in the world," replied Mr. Sheldon. "We'll tunnel to it!"

"Tunnel to it!" we exclaimed.

"Of course, of course," replied Mr. Sheldon. "The tunnel is one of the simplest and often most effective devices of warfare. We have some of our mining tools, picks and shovels in the hut. Six stout fellows, such as we are, can very easily dig a tunnel from the floor of our cabin to a point under the bed of the river. Then the water will seep through into the trench and form a pool at which we can fill our canteens at our leisure and as often as we please and in perfect safety. Why, gentlemen, we have such a snug place here, and we will be so completely supplied when that tunnel is dug that our enemies will not be able to do more than amuse us. It will be a summer's diversion. How glad I am that I joined your party! I was glad already, but this is another and very weighty reason for my rejoicing. I would not have missed this seige for all the gold in the corner there."

When he had delivered himself of these lengthy sent-

ences Mr. Sheldon, leaned back and smiled in a manner that showed how mightily pleased he was with himself. It was a pardonable bit of vanity.

"By thunder, that's a good idee," exclaimed Pike, slapping his thigh so hard that the report sounded like a pistol shot. "Why didn't I think uv it myself."

"That's one time I beat you, Mr. Pike," replied Mr. Sheldon, "and as such a thing does not happen often, I must treasure it."

"All right," said Pike, with a laugh. "I don't lay it up ag'in you, 'specially ez I guess I'll profit ez much by the scheme ez you will."

The simplicity and effectiveness of Mr. Sheldon's idea was apparent to us all. Only one thing could prevent its success, and that was the interposition of a stratum of rock. But Mr. Sheldon said the slope of the hill was so gentle at that point that he did not think we would be stopped in such a manner.

"Taint wuth while to guess on that p'int," said Pike, "fur thar ain't any better time than the present to find out what the facts are. S'pose we take our picks and shovels an' go to work? Mr. Sheldon, ez this is your idee, an' I guess you know more about sech things than any uv the rest uv us, you'll hev to boss the job."

First we made another critical examination of the vicinity, and again we could discover no evidence of activity on the part of our enemies. We could not see any figures in the woods, but we had no doubt about the presence of Halftrigger and his men.

"I'd like to hev a good look at 'em," growled Pike. "Halftrigger must be hatchin' some sort uv scheme to git at us. P'raps he don't know how well we're fixed, an' thinks he kin starve us out."

This was a likely supposition, but with our tunnel complete we could laugh at any such attempt of Mr. Halftrigger's.

Having completed our reconnoissance, we set to digging. In accordance with the desire expressed by Pike, Mr. Sheldon took charge. We removed the bark flooring in a corner of the cabin nearest to the spring,

and began to sink our trench at an angle of forty-five degrees, sloping towards the spring. We intended when we reached a depth sufficient to prevent the earth from caving in upon our heads to proceed horizontally, but we secured a considerable depth first in order to prevent accidents.

All of us took turns at this work except Pike, who was busy watching for signs of the enemy, and we made the dirt fly. We had become seasoned at this sort of business while getting out the gold, and we burrowed into the earth with a rapidity worthy of real mining engineers. In fact, the idea tickled us so much that we were like so many boys, and Mr. Sheldon was the biggest boy of us all.

"Bravo, my lads, bravo!" he exclaimed as the mound of earth beside our pit grew fast. "What a good thing it is to have strong arms and backs and lungs so that nothing can prevent us from keeping on tunneling until we reach Frisco? Then we can come right up in the middle of the city with our arms full of gold. Wouldn't we astonish the natives, though! And wouldn't Halftrigger and his men be astonished, too, if after waiting about a month to become convinced that there was no danger in it they entered our hut to see what became of us and found out which way we had gone?"

"I have no doubt," said Henry, as he thrust a spadeful of dirt from the pit, "that both the people of Frisco and Halftrigger would be astonished. But, meanwhile, what are we going to do with all the dirt that we are piling up here?"

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Mr. Sheldon.

Nevertheless, the disposition of the displaced earth was a question of importance. We could have opened the door wide enough to throw it out without exposing ourselves to any shots—at least while the daylight lasted—but we did not wish the outlaws to get an inkling of what we were about.

"We might build an inside wall with it," said Pike. "You're strong on military matters, Mr. Sheldon, an' I guess you know that earth makes the best kind uv

breastwork. What's the matter with our strengthenin' our fort? We kain't tell when we'll need stronger walls. We kin pile all this dirt up beside the logs until it rises ez high ez our heads. It'll narrow our space in here, but I guess we kin stand that."

"Good enough," said Mr. Sheldon. "I see no better plan, and we'll fortify as you suggest."

While some of us worked in the pit, the others heaped the earth against the walls. Thus we carried on our labors until night came, without disclosing the intentions of our enemies. We had made excellent progress, and Mr. Sheldon reckoned that our tunnel had passed already beyond the cabin walls.

"If we are not interrupted water will be flowing into this hole before to-morrow evening," he said.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DANGER.



ONNEAU had prepared a plentiful supper for us, and we ate with the appetite which only hard toil gives. Our supply of provisions was so large, thanks to our recent hunting expeditions that we saw no reason to spare the steaks. As we ate Pike cast occasional glances through the loopholes. He announced, by and by, that a drizzling rain, was falling, and the indications pointed to a dark night.

"I'm sorry uv it, too," said Pike, "fur ef Halftrigger means to attack us the darkness will help him."

"Do you anticipate any demonstration from our enemies?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"Kain't say," replied Pike, making use of his favorite expression; "but I rather think they will try suthin'. I kain't figure out jest how they'll come at us, an' that's what bothers me. I guess, however, we'd better keep on with the tunnel to-night, ez soon ez everybody is rested good, fur 'twon't hurt to hev it ready jest ez soon ez possible."

Pike looked uneasy, and I asked him if he really thought the outlaws would be able to storm and carry our fortifications.

"Things 'pear to be in our favor," he replied: "but thet Halftrigger, though an infernal villian, is a mighty shifty feller, an' I don't think he's been so quiet all fur nothin'. Anyway, we've got to keep a mighty sharp watch to-night."

As soon as we had taken our rest and had given our suppers a chance to be digested a little work was resumed in the pit. I was excepted, however, from the list of laborers at Pike's request.

"I want you to help me watch through these loop-

holes, Joe," said Pike. "I guess you've got about the keenest eyes in the party, next to mine, and we need sent'nels to-night."

But it came on so dark that we could not see twenty feet from the hut. Pike growled more than once and by the sputtering light of the torch that we had ignited I could see his face express great dissatisfaction.

"I don't like this a bit—not a darned bit," he said. "It gives them fellers too great an advantage fur thar tricks and schemes. What tools did we leave down thar at the mine when we made the break fur the cabin!"

"Four picks, three shovels and two axes," I replied.

"I'm sorry fur that," said Pike. "I wish we'd thought to bring them things away with us."

I wondered what he had in mind, but, as he seemed inclined to be taciturn, I asked him no questions.

The rain was still falling in a fine drizzle, and a wind which sprang up whipped it about. Occasionally a dab of spray was driven through the loophole and lashed me in the face. Pike was glum and silent. The only noise in the cabin came from the tunnel where one man cast up the loose earth that the diggers threw back. Their faces were smeared with dirt and they looked in the imperfect light like so many ghouls toiling in a graveyard.

"What time do you think it might be?" asked Mr. Sheldon, poking up his head from the pit.

"'Bout ten, I should say," replied Pike. "Thar ain't no moon nor stars to-night to go by, but I guess I ain't fur wrong."

"Well, we are making good progress," said Mr. Sheldon. "If we keep on this way, we will reach water ahead of time."

"Any signs of rock in the way?" I asked.

"None," he replied, "and, after thinking it over, I must admit that it is rather strange, for we would have right to expect rock at less depth than we have gone on a hillside like this. Probably the washings of earth from the hilltop have been accumulating at this spot for centuries. But, however it may have

happened, it's a piece of good luck, which will offset some piece of bad luck."

"I hope that offset uv bad luck won't come soon," said Pike.

He spoke in a gruesome tone, which was very unusual with him, for Pike was one of the most courageous and hopeful of men. Mr. Sheldon noticed it as quickly as I did.

"You speak like a prophet of evil," he said. "Are you fearing some disaster?"

"I'm feelin' ez ef somethin' wuz goin' wrong," said Pike. "I know it's tarnation foolish in me to talk like a skeary young gal, but I kain't shake off thiet feelin'."

"Just watch our engineering operations, then," said Mr. Sheldon, cheerfully, "and you'll be so much struck with our skill and progress that you will forget your premonitions."

"It'll pass off directly," replied Pike. "I guess it's like a chill; stays with you fur a while an' then off it goes. Mebbe that's what's the matter with me. Guess I've got some malarry in my system an' it's gone to my head."

The big hunter struck his head as if to indicate his dissatisfaction with himself for a feeling that he considered unmanly.

"It's a tarnation bad night," he said, peering out at a loophole, "the wind's lashin' the rain aroun' and it's turned cold enough to give a feller the shivers. What in thunder wuz that?"

There was a dull whirring and rushing through the air, followed by a heavy thump, and a tearing noise among the bushes down the hill side, below the cabin.

Pike had his eye glued to a loophole.

"Do you see anythin'?" he cried, his voice betraying an excitement that was uncommon for him.

"Nothing but the darkness," I replied, without removing my eye from my own loophole.

"Neither kin I," said Pike. "Thunder, but thar it is agin!"

Whir-r-rr, swish-h-h-h went something through the

air. Smash it came against the earth, and then there was a tearing noise in the bushes below the cabin like that we had heard before.

I was puzzled and alarmed.

"Perhaps it's your premonitions coming true," I said to Pike.

"Mebbe it is," growled the hunter, "but it beats me whut makes that noise. I've tramped plain and mountain many a year and seen some strange things, but this caps 'em."

"Shall I tell them of it?" I asked, nodding my head towards the pit where the others were at work so far below the surface that the sounds could not reach their ears.

"No," replied Pike. "Let 'em work away. They kain't tell any more about it than we kin, an' ef we need 'em we kin call 'em quick enough."

He went around to the various loopholes and tried to pierce the darkness with his keen eyes. But he could not see any more than I could, and that was nothing.

"Confound such a pitchy night, anyway," he growled. "It comes jest at the wrong time. Thar's devilment afoot an' no way to tell what it is. What do you think it wuz, Joe, that made them ar noises that we hev heard twice?"

I shook my head and Pike turned again discontentedly to a loophole.

"I've morn'n half a mind," he said, "to take my gun, go outside and do some scoutin'."

"Don't do that," I urged, "for we'll be sure to need you here. Whatever may be the danger that menaces us, we've got to hold this fort, it seems to me."

Pike appeared to be impressed by my words.

"I guess you're right," he said. "We'd better stay here an' face it together, whatever it is. Listen; thar it goes it agin!"

We heard the whir and the swish and then as we listened for the thump down the hill side there was a rending and crashing over our heads, a heavy mass of something smashed through the roof of our cabin as if

it had been made of paper, dashed down upon a heap of earth beside the entrance to the pit, extinguished the torch that we had stuck there, and then rolled with a heavy thudding sound into the pit.

The loose earth had been dashed into our eyes by the impact, and gusts of cold rain whipped through the hole in the roof and into our faces. A bit of earth had also been driven into my mouth, and I strangled and coughed and spluttered.

"Are you hurt, Joe?" came Pike's eager words. "Hev you been hit? Whar in thunder is thet tarnation torch? I thought somethin' wuz going to happen an' it's happened, but it beats me yet what it is."

I sought to answer, but I still coughed and spluttered, because of the mud stuck in my throat and I was unable to make articulate reply. Pike scrambled around in the darkness after the extinguished torch, and there came a hubbub from the pit. Some one struck against a hard object and fell, uttering a cry of pain.

"Confound it!" cried a voice that was Mr. Sheldon's. "I'd like to know in the name of all the saints what I've hit against. I believe I've broken my leg, too. Say, you fellows, what's happened? Why is the light out and the pit mouth half blocked up?"

Then the voices of Henry, Bouneau and Sam were heard chiming in, and just then I got the dirt from my throat and recovered the use of my vocal organs.

"Something strange has happened," I replied, "but we don't know yet what it is. Wait till we get a light."

But Pike had found the torch, and as I spoke he ignited it with his punk and steel. It burned in a feeble, sickly way, but it cast enough light to show the interior of the cabin and our pallid faces.

The mound of earth beside the mouth of the pit had been dashed about as if it had been smitten by a thunderbolt. In the roof was a hole big enough to admit the bodies of two men at once, and the rain sweeping through it had already turned a part of the loose earth on the floor into mud. All the boys had crawled out of the pit and stood rubbing their ankles and staring at each other.

"I guess we'll see now what in thunder thet thing wuz thet come through the roof like a tornado," said Pike.

He held the torch over the mouth of the pit, and there, lying on the bottom we saw a huge round stone or boulder that would have weighed at least fifty or sixty pounds.

"Wa'al, I'm kerflummixed!" exclaimed Pike. "War in thunder did thet come from, and how in thunder did it git here?"

"Some device of Halftrigger's is responsible for it, you may be sure," said Henry.

"That's what I'd guess," replied Pike, "but how is it done!"

None could answer. But we had indubitable proof that our enemies had prepared for us some new and formidable danger. We lifted the stone out of the pit and looked at it.

"Ef thet had hit any uv our heads it would hev smashed it ez ef it had been an eggshell," said Pike. "It wuz jest the same ez a cannon ball."

"Our fort is not strong enough to resist artillery," said Henry.

"Not ef many more such chunks uv rocks ez this hit it," said Pike. "It wuz luck thet none uv our heads wuz in the way thet time."

I was about to make some answer, but we heard the whirring of a fourth missile in the air. We listened in dread, expecting the hut to be struck again, but the missile swished past, and we heard it rolling through the bushes down the hill.

"Now, boys," said Pike, "we've got to put our heads together an' do sumthin'; we're in a tight fix, fur when one uv them big rocks comes true to its aim we ain't got no way to fend it off."

"In case our house is smashed down over our heads," said Henry, "why not take to our tunnel? It's a subterranean house, and we could hold it against all comers, at least until we had time to think of something else."

"Burrow like a prairie dog," said Pike. "'Taint a

bad idee, but I guess we'd better fur the present stop diggin' towards the water, fur it wouldn't be comfortable ef we wuz threatened at one end in the tunnel an' the water should come in at the other. I like water, but I don't like too much of it at once."

There was wisdom in Henry's suggestion, and we placed our spare ammunition and gold in the tunnel. While we were doing this we heard the whizzing of another stone, but fortunately the cabin was not touched. Meantime the interior of the place began to present a bedraggled and sorry appearance. The wind was still strong, and the rain was driven through the hole in the roof with such force that it reached every corner of our little house. The floor was carpeted with sticky mud, and the water was soaking through our clothing, chilling us to the bone. The damp more than the danger depressed our spirits, and Pike, with the remark, "It won't do to let this go on no longer," cast his eyes up at the roof and began to make calculations.

"We've got to stop thet hole," he said, "or we won't be in no condition fur fightin' when the time fur fightin' comes."

It was now that Starboard Sam's experience as a sailor became of value. He cocked his head on one side, shut one eye and surveyed the roof critically with the other.

"We've got deer hides," he said, "an' some canvas an' some balls o' string, an' I wish I may go to Davy Jone's locker afore mornin' comes ef I kaint fix thet hole in a jiffy and make this place weather tight agin."

There seemed to be a cessation in the bombardment, and Sam began his work. He took a deer hide and spread over it a piece of thick canvas, fastening the two together with a piece of string run through holes around the edges.

"I want to hev a double thickness," he said, "so's to be shore no water kin get through. Now some of you fellers lend me a hand an' hist me up."

Three of us seized him and lifted him up until his head was against the roof near the edge of the hole.

"Stiddy, now, stiddy," he said, "an' I'll have the neatest tarpaulin over this hole you ever saw."

"Be keerful you don't poke your head out," said Pike, "or some uv them sneakin' scamps may be near enough to see it, an' put a bullet through it."

"Trust me," replied Sam, "I ain't no land lubber. I think too much o' my life fur that, an' I ain't in no hurry to desart such good company ez I'm now in."

He thrust the mat he had made through the hole and spread it over it. The cords with which he had bound the skin and the cloth together, had long swinging ends, and he ran these through the timber joists and quickly drew the matting so tight and so fast that not a drop of water came in. Then he knotted the string around the joists and surveyed his work in triumph.

"Did you ever see a neater job?" he cried. "Everybody ought to be sailors and then they'd know things. Gosh, is this a shipwreck?"

The last exclamation was drawn from him by a thundering crash against the walls of our cabin, which made the little building shake like a man with the palsy, and startled us so much that we dropped Sam and he rolled like a big india-rubber ball into the pit.

We waited in the momentary dread of seeing the cabin tumble down on our heads. It rocked to and fro as if in a storm, but it was a stout structure, and after its rocking had subsided into a quivering it straightened itself up and stood as steady and as strong as ever. We raised a hearty cheer when we saw that the danger had passed for a time, and Sam who was puffing and blowing and pulling himself out of the pit ejaculated:

"Hooray, she's a good craft, an' stood up like the old Constitution in a blow. But what did ye drop me fur, boys?"

"Ze Yankee sailor should be glad to have no bones broke," said Bonneau. "Monsieur Sam one great man to keeck."

"Lookout, I don't kick you, Frenchy," replied Sam.

"Both uv you save your kicks fur them that need 'em," interrupted Pike, who knew, however, that the

men were not quarrelling and were the best friends in the world. "Its lucky fur all uv us that we built our cabin stout and an' strong, I guess that stun hit at the corner thar whar the timbers jine, or somethin' would hev' give way."

"What guarantee have we," asked Mr. Sheldon, "that the next missile will not crash through the walls?"

"None," replied Pike.

"Can we sit here and wait for our fort to be smashed in pieces over our heads and our heads to be smashed at the same time perhaps?" continued Mr. Sheldon.

"Not by a tarnation sight," replied Pike.

"Then what are we to do?" asked Mr. Sheldon. "I confess that I am at the end of my wits and have nothing to suggest."

"We've got to be a-doin'," said Pike. "Thar is no doubt about that, an' I've got a scheme which may help us. How's the weather now, Sam?"

"Not quite so nasty ez it hez been," replied Sam, who was peering through a loophole, "the wind hez died down a bit, an' thar ain't more'n a handful o' rain."

"Ez dark ez ever?" asked Pike.

"Black ez my hat," returned Starboard Sam. "Couldn't see any kind o' craft twenty feet away less it had signal lights burnin'. 'Twas jest sech a night ez this we took the pirate schooner, *The Hawk*, off the coast o' Hayti in '21, when I wuz in the old *Enterprise*. We cum near smashin' right into her afore either knowed the other wuz nigh. She tried to escape under the cover o' the dark, but we hed the lights a-burnin' an' the rockets a-flyin', an' some eighteen pound shot twixt wind an' water soon settled the bizness fur that bloody craft. She went down head foremost in a hundred fathom o' the saltiest kind o' sea, and we wuzn't able to save more'n 'leven o' her crew fur the gallows. But on the whole, considerin' the state o' the weather, we thought it about ez neat a job ez we ever turned out, an' we wuzn't no slouches at that sort o' business, either."

"What is the scheme that you have determined upon?" asked Mr. Sheldon of Pike.

"I'm goin' to find out whar them stuns come from," replied Pike, "an' see ef I kaint put a stop to thar comin'."

"Do you mean to leave the hut?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"Yes," replied Pike; "it's got to be done. It's resky, but we're boun' to take resks now. I'm goin' out, an' I'm goin' to take Joe with me. He's about the best scout among you. Mr. Sheldon, you're to take command here while I'm gone, an' I want you to keep a mighty good watch through them loopholes, an' ef any more stuns come flyin' agin the house an' it gets too hot fur you, take to the tunnel, but put it off to the very last. When you hear a howl like a wolf's outside open the door like lightnin' fur it'll be me an' Joe wantin' to come in. You may hear shots, but don't open the door until you hear the wolf howl or some other sign that you know will be from us. Keep your guns an' pistols handy, an' be ready fur anythin' that may come."

Pike spoke with great seriousness, and we knew the garrison too well to fear that they would neglect any of his warnings. I was glad that I was selected to go with Pike, for however dangerous the undertaking might be it would be a relief from the severe strain to which we were exposed in the cabin.

"See that you keep your gun an' your pistol an' your ammunition dry," said Pike to me, "fur when you want your weepins you'll want 'em tarnation bad."

We made another long and careful examination through the loopholes, but were unable to see anything unusual. Then Pike said:

"Come along, Joe."

Bonneau lifted the bar, the door swung open, then quickly closed behind us and we found ourselves outside in the darkness and the rain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE OUTER DARKNESS.



WHEN THE last sound of the bar falling heavily in its place behind the door died away, I realized fully the perilous nature of the enterprise we had undertaken, and for a moment wished myself back in the hut with our comrades. But I put my will in command of my nerves and resolved that I would go wherever Pike would lead. It was but a brief chill, and then I steadied myself and waited for Pike's orders.

"Stan' close in the shadow of the wall," whispered the hunter. "I want fust to see ef I kin hear any uv the scoundrels near us."

He resorted to the familiar device of putting his ear to the earth, moving about in the shadow of the cabin, and listening first at one place and then at another.

"Thar's nary a sound," he said, "an' I don't think any uv 'em is nigh. I didn't think it anyway, but it's best to be shore."

"Where do you think they are?" I asked in a whisper.

"Up on the hill thar in the woods," replied Pike, "but come on now, an' be ez light with your feet ez ef Injuns was huntin' you, and you didn't want 'em to fin' you."

He led the way, bent over at a sharp angle, and trying to penetrate the darkness, which, however, was too heavy even for his trained eyes. I followed so close behind that I could have touched him with my hand. We were going towards the valley, directly away from the supposed camp of the outlaws on the crest of the hill. I wondered somewhat at this, as it was our business to spy upon them. But it was an inconvenient time for asking questions and, besides, Pike was a

man who understood what he was about. I looked back once towards our hut. The outlines of the building were lost in the darkness. But there was a faint light twinkling like a little star through one of the loopholes. This, too, soon disappeared. We reached the trees which skirted the base of the hill. Pike stopped.

"Be extry keerful here," he said, "fur some uv our inemies might be loafin' about."

A smash among the boughs of the tree under which we stood was the answer. Twigs and other fragments fell upon us, and a great stone struck among the bushes some feet beyond us.

"It seems that we are not as safe from the bombardment here as we were in the cabin," I said.

"You're right," said Pike, "but that was a tarnation poor shot at the cabin. It must hev missed it full fifty feet. I think we'd better go down in the bottom, or we'll git our heads smashed by one uv them rocks."

We made our way very carefully among the trees and undergrowth, until we reached a point that we thought, from the way they had been striking before, was out of the range of the dangerous missiles. Then we halted again.

"My plan," said Pike, "is to approach them fellers from the rear, an' see what sort uv trick they're up to. They won't be expectin' us, thinkin' that we're all in the cabin, an' we ought to git nigh enough to see what sort of deviltry they've invented. Au' after we've seen that we'll know better how to carcumvent 'em. Be shore to keep your weepins dry, fur I'm thinkin' we'll hev some need fur 'em."

We went up the valley, or rather, the river bed, a considerable distance, passing by our mine on the way. Pike stopped to look for the tools, which we had abandoned in our rush to the cabin. After scrutinizing the place as well as he could in the darkness, he felt about with his hands, and then announced that all the tools were gone.

"It's jest az I thought," he said. "Halftrigger and his men hev took 'em an' put 'em to use. That

wuz one uv our mistakes. We ought to hev took them tools with us when we run to the cabin."

When we were two or three hundred yards beyond the mine we crossed the ridge, and, coming around in a circle, were now behind the outlaws, if, as we supposed, they were in the wood on the crest of the hill overlooking our cabin. We began the ascent, stopping every few yards to listen. The rain had now ceased and the darkness had lifted a little bit. The side of the hill on which we now were was well wooded and the undergrowth was thick. It offered good concealment, and, therefore, was favorable to our movements.

We were half way up the hill when we saw a light shining ahead of us. It flickered in the wind and seemed to be just under the crest of the hill.

"That's the gang," said Pike, as we halted in a thicket. "That's thar camp fire, an' the job that's cut out fur us, is to git near enough to see 'em without them seein' us. Now, Joe, jest imagine you're an Injun creepin' upon his wust enemy to git his scalp. We've got to crawl fur it, and when I hiss like a sarpint stop right in your tracks. Be keerful with your gun."

He dropped upon his knees and began to crawl through the grass and bushes. I followed close behind, managing my gun with some difficulty, for it is not easy to turn your hands into paws and use them for carrying purposes at the same time. But Pike's progress was as easy as if that were his natural method of locomotion. First he would part the bushes with one hand, next take a careful look ahead and then move forward a yard or two. A pause to listen for sounds from our enemies would ensue, and then our jerky advance would be resumed.

After a quarter of an hour's crawling we heard voices. We were too far away to understand the words, but we knew we were very near the outlaw camp. Moreover, the light had grown much more distinct.

"They built their fire on this side of the hill so we couldn't see it from the hut," said Pike, "though it'll

give enough light fur 'em to work by on top uv the hill. I hope none uv them skunks will be stealin' 'mong the bushes here an' run ag'in us."

A half dozen feet further on we came to a gulch two or three feet deep. It ran transversely along the hillside and seemed to lead directly towards the bandit camp. The bushes were not only very thick on either side of it, but almost met over it and formed an admirable way of approach for us. Pike stepped carefully into it and watched me as I followed without breaking a twig or loosening a gravel, a performance in which I felt some pride, as it justified Pike's confidence in my abilities and accomplishments as a scout.

When we had gone a few yards up the gulch Pike halted. He was directly in front of me and his bulky frame cut off my line of sight. But he pressed to one side, and pointing through a small opening in the dense foliage that surrounded us, said in a low whisper:

"Now you kin see the secret uv them stuns flyin' through the air at the cabin."

About forty feet from us a fire of a half dozen brands was burning. Lounging near it in easy attitudes were three or four of the brigands, but twenty feet higher up and on the crest of the hill the scene was far more interesting. All the remainder of the party were gathered there, the gigantic figure of Halftrigger towering among them. A half dozen were talking at once, though not in loud tones, and Halftrigger was gesturing and giving orders.

Two stout saplings of equal size and about a foot apart grew at the crest of the hill. The outlaws had trimmed all the boughs off of them and had cut out the tops also. Then they had bent the tough but elastic trunks far back, until the upper ends almost touched the ground. Three or four feet from the ends and for a distance of about a half yard they had plaited withes or stout strings of bark backward and forward between the two saplings.

"Don't you see how it is?" said Pike. "It's smart enough, confound 'em! I'll bet Halftrigger wuz the one that thought uv it."

I did see how it was, for the outlaws were giving even then a practical demonstration of the uses of this crude machine. It was like the catapults or ballistæ, or some other machines of ancient times, which I had heard Henry tell about, for he liked to revel in the old histories. Seven or eight of the outlaws had just bent the sapling back, and two others had taken a large stone from a heap which lay near. The matting of withes on which they placed the stone held it in place, and it was obvious that when they loosed their hold on the saplings they would fly back and the stone would be hurled straight away down the hill, as if it were a ball fired from a cannon. It was ingenious and effective, much too effective for our comfort and safety, and the only trouble in operating it was in regard to the accuracy of the aim.

"It's jest a big spring gun, or ruther a tree cannon," whispered Pike, "but it's mighty lucky fur us they can't tell very well whar thar ball is goin' when they fire it."

I thought the name tree cannon was very appropriate.

Though the fire was some yards away, it shone on the faces of the men who were operating the tree cannon. Spanish Pete seemed to be the head of the party that was holding the tree down, while Halftrigger had stationed himself behind them, and was calculating as well as he could where the stone would strike. We were near enough to hear and understand every word they said.

"What do you think of that now, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete. "Will it smash 'em?"

"I think not, judgin' by the way the last un struck," replied Halftrigger. "Pull a leetle 'roun' to the right. Thar, that's more like it. But don't let go yet. I want to take a few more squints. I know egg-zackly whar that cabin stands, an' I want to figger it out so's I kin make a dead shot."

"We are bound to smash up the cabin if we keep on, are we not, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete, who seemed to be in an excellent humor with himself.

"You bet," replied Halftrigger, who also was in a jovial mood. "Great old scheme o' mine, wuzn't it, these saplin's. It ain't real artillery, but it's the next thing to it. I'll gamble them swabs in the hut wuz surprised nigh about ez bad ez Tim Grady when the shark took him when that fust rock come smashin' among 'em. We know we've hit the cabin twice, because we've heard the rocks strike, and ef we keep on shootin' we're bound to hit it more times, an' ef we keep on hittin' 'em we're bound to bring their house down arter awhile. The more I think o' that little scheme o' mine with the saplin's the more I admire it. Hank Halftrigger hez got somethin' in his head yet."

Then the big ugly villian, as he shut one eye cocked his head on one side, and sighting the tree cannon as if it had been a real cannon, began to chant his evil lay:

"Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
As I sailed.
Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed,
As I sailed, as I sailed."

"Now I think you've got it about right, Pete," he continued. "Let 'er go, lads, all together, when I count three."

"One!

"Two!

"Three!"

As he uttered the word "three" the men released the saplings. The tough trunks bounded back to the perpendicular, their proper position, and the stone was driven through the air with a roar and a swish. Halftrigger listened intently, and then uttered a cry of disappointment.

"Missed ag'in, by the great hornspoon!" he cried. "Though I think that must hev gone mighty near the house. I'm afeared the saplin's wuz bent a liddle too far 'roun' to the right. Wa'al, we kin try ag'in. Pull 'em down ag'in, lads."

Some of the men scuttled like monkeys up the saplings, and swinging themselves from the tops bent them back to the ground. Two more brought another of the larger stones and began to put it in place.

"I suppose you expect to get at that gold before many hours, don't you, Captain?" asked Spanish Pete.

"You bet," replied Halftrigger. "It's good ez our'n already. When we smash the cabin all we've got to do is to make a rush. They may drop one or two o' us, but we've got to take our chances on that, an' then it'll be all over. Why this is jest too easy, Pete. It's such a cute trick we're workin' with them saplin's, I haven't had half ez much enjoyment out o' a leetle bit o' business since we made the crew o' the Dutch brig walk the plank off the east coast o' Timor. I wuz aboard one o' the tightest craft in them seas, Pete—never mind what her name wuz—an' we took the Dutchman after a short spell o' fightin' in which we lost four o' our best men. When they give up only seven were left alive aboard the Dutchman, 'cludin' the capt'in. They had showed sech spunk that we thought we'd treat 'em like gen'lemen. So we blindfolded 'em an' made 'em walk the plank one after another right thar an' then afore we divided the spoil that we found aboard the ship. Oh, it wuz fun I tell you, Pete, fur after the fust man had gone down in the water the sharks come all a-crowdin' roun' the ship and a-pokin' up their shovel noses so much ez to say 'we're a-waitin' fur the next un.' An' they'd grab 'em almost afore they'd walked off the plank into the water, an' fight over 'em an', tar each other, ez well ez thar prey, an' they fairly kivered the sea with blood 'round the ship."

I shivered with horror at the recital, and I could hear the big hunter grinding his teeth together in wrath.

"I could shoot him full uv holes with more pleasure than I ever sent a bullet after a deer," he growled.

The pleasure of anticipation seemed to heat the brain of the master villian and make him voluble.

"Pete," said he, "thar's one among them swabs in the cabin that I'd like to hev for my own partic'lar

meat. I mean thet infernal hunter fellow—Pike they call him. To feel my knife slippin' atween his ribs would do me so much good that I'd jest grin all over. He's stopped me two or three times already, and Hank Halftrigger don't like to be owin' anybody anythin'."

"Nobody will dispute your rights when it comes to settlin' up, Captain," said Spanish Pete.

"They'd better not, replied Halftrigger. "Not quite so fur to the right this time, lads. That last shot didn't miss 'em more'n a yard or two an' I think we'll get 'em this time."

He was squinting down the hillside now. The rain had ceased and the clouds had lifted so much that it was probable he could see the house. Thus aided, and profiting by his former experience, Halftrigger might be able to strike the cabin. We knew it could not stand many such blows as the two it had received already.

Pike touched me on the arm.

"Joe," he said, "the time hez come for us to take a hand in the game. 'Tain't wuth while fur the fun to be all on one side."

"What do you propose to do?" I asked.

"Are your nerves stiddy?" he asked.

I replied with some pride that I believed they were.

"Wa'al, they had orter be," replied Pike, "fur I'm goin' to try a game that's mighty desprit, but I believe it's the only thing that's left that'll save us. You see, it's jest ez Halftrigger says. Ef they keep on firin' them stuns at the cabin they're bound to smash it arter a while, an' then ef we try to stan' our groun' they're likely to wipe us out through power uv numbers. We might git away ef we made a break fur it, but then we'd hev to leave the gold fur which we hev resked so much, an' we ain't the men to do that, I take it."

"No, no," I exclaimed, "we will not leave the gold, not on any account."

The gold fever is a powerful disease, and there are few medicines strong enough to cure it.

"I knowed how you all felt," replied Pike, "an' so we've got to beat them fellers off, an' break up thar fun

with thar tree cannon. We've got to fire on 'em jest az they stan'. Thar are two at the ends uv the saplin' that are doing most uv the holdin' down. You take aim at the nigh one an' I'll shoot at the fur one. I'd like to take the head scoundrel, Halftrigger, but I kain't get a good bead on him on account uv them saplin's, an' besides we hev to take the men who are holdin' the saplin's so ez to stop the tree cannon business. Now, wait till I give the word to fire an' ez soon ez you've pulled the trigger foller me, steppin' ez light an' ez fast as you kin. It's resky, tarnation resky, but it must be done."

The last words Pike addressed to himself in a soliloquy rather than to me. Obedient to his instructions, I aimed at the man at the end of the nearest sapling. It is repugnant to one's feelings to take human life, and most of all to take it from ambush when your victim is unsuspecting. But these men were simply so many ravenous wolves seeking to devour us. Not one of them would be in the least bit merciful were we to fall into their power, and the saving of our lives depended upon the taking of theirs.

When I looked down the sights of my rifle at the face of the man whom Pike had marked off for me, most of my scruples disappeared. It was a pock-marked, scarred and thoroughly villainous countenance. The nose had been slit by a great gash, probably received in some barroom fight, and lay almost flat on his face. Everything human and redeeming had been banished from that countenance. Only the brute was left.

"Hev you got your aim, Joe?" asked Pike.

"Yes," I whispered.

"I think she's about right now, boys," said Halftrigger; "but let me take one more squint. I want to be sartin to smash 'em this time."

"Fire!" said Pike in a sharp whisper.

We pulled triggers so nearly together that our rifles made but a single report. The man at whom I had aimed threw his hands to his head, reeled away from the tree and then fell over on his face. Pike's man

sank down in a lump. The others, startled by the flash and crack of the guns, released the trees and they flew back in place, while the stone, which had not yet been quite adjusted, slipped from the matting and fell to the ground. The band seemed dazed by the sudden catastrophe, and even Halftrigger lost his presence of mind for a moment.

"Come on," said Pike, gathering up his rifle and stealing silently, but swiftly, away among the bushes. A dozen steps and we heard a wild shout of rage and execration, and then the whole band came tearing through the grass and bushes after us.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT SHORT RANGE.



IN THE supreme moments following our flight and rapid pursuit by the horde of outlaws I felt but little alarm. The night was dark, the thickets were dense and my confidence in Pike was great.

"Listen how they t'ar up the groun'," said the big hunter, who chuckled in his satisfaction. "They're wuss nor a whole troop uv bull buffaloes. They'll hev to do better than that ef they ketch us. Bend ez low down ez you kin, Joe, so ez they won't see your head above the bushes."

We ran down the ravine about twenty yards, and then turned abruptly to the left, running parallel with the course of the hill.

"They kain't follow us in the dark," said Pike. "They've run to the p'int from which they heard the shots, an' they'll try to get track uv us thar, an' while they're doin' that we'll see ef we kain't work a little scheme which is a sight more important to us than the shootin' uv them two fellers. Still, I think when we wiped 'em out we raised the moral average uv the population uv Californy."

We heard the cries of the outlaws for some minutes, Halftrigger's voice rising occasionally above the din. Then the noises ceased abruptly, and we heard nothing but our own breathing.

"Halftrigger hez stopped thar jabber," said Pike. "He know'd they couldn't keep up thet foolishness ef they wanted to find us. Don't furgit to step mighty light an' to keep bent low down."

In a few minutes Pike changed our course again, and bore off towards the crest of the hill. I wondered what he meant to do, but it was not a time to waste

one's breath in asking questions. Arrived at the crest of the hill he turned again, and now, to my great surprise, was heading back towards the tree cannon. We were within fifteen yards of the place by my calculation when Pike stopped so abruptly that I ran against him.

"Jest flop down here a minute," he said, "an' we'll do some spyin'."

Obeying his own command he sank down in the grass and I imitated his action.

"Don't you see them saplin's?" said Pike, pointing ahead.

Following the line of his index finger I saw the two young trees that were such a menace to us.

"Now, what's that shinin' on the groun' thar by 'em?" asked Pike.

"That's one of our axes," I replied. "It's the very one, no doubt, with which they fixed up that catapult or tree cannon as you call it."

"An' you don't see any uv them fellers nigh, do you?" continued Pike.

"No," I replied; "in their excitement and hurry to overtake you and me they've left their cannon and their camp-fire unguarded."

"That's jest what I wuz hopin' would happen," cried Pike, exultantly, "and by the eternal it hez happened. Now foller me quick an' we'll put an end to the best part uv thar game."

Rising to his full height he ran to the saplings, with me close upon his heels. We almost stumbled over the two dead bodies that lay in the grass, but we did not stop to look at them. Pike handed me his rifle, snatched up the axe and with two powerful blows, into which he put all the strength of his mighty shoulders and arms, the job was done. Each sapling was cut more than two-thirds of the way through about a yard from the ground. If any one attempted to bend them again they would break short off.

"Thar'll never be another stun fired with them," exclaimed Pike as he threw down the axe.

Crack! bang! whizz! whizz! zip! zip!

From the other side of the camp-fire two rifles were discharged at us, but the light was imperfect and the aim was hasty; and though the bullets sang in our ears as they passed we were untouched.

"Up with your rifle, Joe!" cried Pike, "and hold 'em back."

He seized his own rifle from me and it leaped to his shoulder. The light of battle was flaming in the great hunter's eyes. He was in his element now, confronting a visible danger. The outlaws were issuing from the wood in a confused horde, and had begun a great shouting at the sight of us. Two had fired already, with the unsuccessful results I have described.

But even as they were preparing again Pike's own rifle spoke and the foremost man, tearing at his chest where the bullet had entered, fell in the undergrowth. I fired also, but I was hasty and excited and the bullet missed.

"Better luck next time, Joe," cried Pike. "Now let's foot it, and we'll save the loads in our pistols fur close quarters, ef they overtake us."

He dashed over the crest of the hill, curving away from the house, and bent his course toward the river bed, running like a deer. Some scattering shots were fired at us, but all flew wide of the mark, and as we had passed over the hill before our pursuers reached its crest a few jumps hid us from their sight.

At first we ran along without any regard to noise, smashing among the undergrowth and kicking loose stones about. But when we had gone a hundred yards Pike make a sign and we slackened our speed and became as noiseless as the creeping panther. Then we changed our course again, slanting still further towards the north. Pike was in buoyant spirits. He chuckled in his peculiar way and said:

"Joe, old boy, this hez been a great night's work. Halftrigger wuz smart with his tree cannon, but I think we've been jest about ez smart in spilin' it.

"But suppose they find other saplings and put them to the same use," I suggested.

"The chances are a thousand to one agin' it," said

Pike. "They've got to hev two at the right distance from each other and growin' in the right place. No, you needn't hev any fears on that p'int. We've sp'iled the artillery business fur good."

We ran on some distance further in silence. We had dropped our pursuers. The darkness of the night, the thickness of the undergrowth and the surprise were all in our favor. We had nothing to fear except from their first volley, and luckily we had been untouched by that.

I noticed that our course was taking us further and further from the cabin.

"Would it not have been a good idea," I asked, "to have run for the fort and taken refuge there with our friends."

"Yes, if we could hev' got into the place all right," replied Pike, "but we wuz too close fur it. It's likely that them robbers thought we'd try to do that an' made thar fust break fur the cabin. So, ef we hed gone thar we would hev been shot down while we wuz makin' the signals an' the boys wuz tryin' to let us in. No use in throwin' our lives away."

When we had gone about a half mile from the hut we slackened our speed, and a hundred yards further we stopped entirely.

"Let's squat in the bushes here and listen awhile," said Pike. "Remember we've got to think uv the boys in our cabin ez well ez ourselves, an' we don't want to git too fur away. Besides, it's purty safe here. None uv them fellers kin git within twenty yards uv me without my hearin' em'. Now, if they wuz Injuus it might be different, fur they kin crawl an' make no more noise than sarpints. But these fellers ain't hed enough woods trainin' fur that."

I was glad to stop, for I was almost out of breath, and after the exciting events of the night my nerves needed rest.

"What time do you think it might be?" I asked Pike.

"Wa'al it might be most any time," said Pike chuckling and putting his emphasis on the "might." "It

might be sunrise and it might be sunset, but it ain't neither. I guess it's closer to midnight than to anythin' else. Perhaps it's a leetle after that hour."

I was surprised. Only four or five hours since sun set, and so much had happened in that time. To quote Pike, "things wuz a-movin'."

"We've hed better luck in this scheme than I hed hoped fur," continued Pike; "better than we hed a right to hope fur. But we ain't through yet by a jugful. Halftrigger an' all his men are shore to be hoppin' mad over this. We've wiped out three uv thar gang, smashed thar artillery an' knocked all thar plans a-windin'. If Halftrigger is the man I take him to be he'll die now afore he gives up."

I had no doubt that Pike's words were true, and our danger was still very great.

"Halftrigger seems bound to get that gold," I said.

"Yes," replied Pike, "an' we're boun' to keep it."

We were beginning to feel refreshed, and were able to breathe freely again, when we heard a rifle shot in the direction of the cabin.

"Thunder," exclaimed Pike, "what's up now?"

Before I could answer we heard a rapid volley of shots all off towards the cabin.

"Thar must hev been a dozen guns fired thet time," said Pike.

"What does it mean?" I asked, repeating Pike's own query.

"I think it means," replied Pike, "thet Halftrigger is attackin' the cabin. He must hev thought that we managed to git in somehow, an' now he's tryin' to take the cabin an' wipe us all out in one grand rush. Any-way we'll soon find out. Come on, Joe, we've got our work cut out fur us agin. We must take a hand in this here thing."

It seemed to me that we were to be forever prowling in the darkness among the bushes, either hunting the bandits or being hunted by them. But plainly it was necessary to undertake a new movement, and without a word I arose and followed Pike. Once more we were compelled to resort to creeping.

"I say, Pike," I whispered after we had gone a few yards, "if this sort of thing keeps on and we have to be always crawling and creeping, I'll forget how to walk erect on two feet like a man."

"Ef you go to walkin' aroun' here like a man," replied Pike, you'll soon be in sech a condition that you'll never do no crawlin' nor walkin' either, agin. You'll jest stretch yourself out on the groun' with a bullet through the top o' your head ornamentin' the mounting side with your corpse."

We heard other shots as we crawled along and Pike's theory that the cabin was besieged was soon turned into positive assurance. We had approached so near that our ears told us beyond the possibility of a doubt, that some of the shots proceeded from the cabin.

"See that!" exclaimed Pike, as by the light of a flash of flame that burst from its side we saw the cabin ahead of us. It was though an opening in the foliage that we caught this glimpse, for we were yet some distance away.

"They must hev made a rush on the house," continued Pike, "for shorely the boys wouldn't be firin' away at random in the dark, an' wastin' thar ammunition like that!"

We approached a little closer and waited to hear more shots, but instead there was silence.

"I wish they'd open ag'in," growled Pike, "an' that would tell us whar they are. 'Tain't well fur us to go any further now, fur we might pitch right into the middle uv a hornet's nest afore we knowed it."

Nevertheless, in spite of Pike's cautionary remarks, we kept edging up, edging up, until we had cut down the distance between ourselves and the house nearly half. I had a theory that the bandits were on the hill above the cabin because all their attacks had been made from that point, and the higher ground was the natural position for a besieging or attacking party. This opinion was confirmed by our failure to stir up any of the hornets as we slowly and cautiously approached the cabin.

I told Pike of my theories and he agreed with me.

He was also confirmed in his belief that the Halftrigger party believed us to be in the house, though he did not think they had relinquished the attack.

"I'm goin' to take the resk an' go near enough to git a sight uv thet cabin ef anythin' happens," said Pike, and I was more than willing to share the danger with him, for if great events were going to occur, I wished to be at the centre of them.

We were now lying almost flat upon the ground, but we managed to worm along until we could get an indistinct view of the hut. We could see a formless shape standing up in the darkness, and that was all, but we knew it was the hut. We considered it rashness to go any further, and we stopped there to await developments. Pike once more resorted to his favorite method of placing his ear to the ground and listening. I did likewise, but my hearing had not been as well trained as Pike's. I relied more upon what he might discover than upon myself.

We lay there in perfect quiet for more than half an hour, and I had begun to believe that the besiegers had retired when Pike said he heard both footsteps and the murmur of voices.

"Somebody's approachin' the hut," he said, "an' they're approachin' it fast, too. I think it's another attack, an' we must help beat 'em off, too. But steady, boy, we must lay here till we find out what thar plan is."

I was trembling with excitement, but I managed to hold myself in hand, though I also could now hear the murmur of voices and the rapid tread of heavy footsteps. There was no doubt that a party was approaching the cabin, and as Pike said, approaching it with much speed, too.

"I wish the boys inside the cabin could hear that," muttered Pike, "but we've got the advantage uv 'em ez thar are no walls between us an' the noises."

The tread of the footsteps lightened presently.

"They're gittin' more cautious," said Pike. "They want to hide thar mischief, but I reckon we're out here, Joe, an' kin take a hand in this thing."

We advanced still further, until we came to the edge of the undergrowth, and I was about to continue my onward crawl, when Pike's heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and he whispered :

"Not yit! Not yit; we must save ourselves till needed."

Just then the moon came from behind a cloud and threw a pale but clear light over the shoulder of the hill. Its brightest beams fell upon a dark line of men who were approaching the cabin in a peculiar halting manner, as if they were carrying a great weight.

"They're tryin' the old Indian way uv batterin' down a door," said Pike, "an' they've got a log thet's big enough fur it. Thet's sartin."

The bandits, with their united strength, were supporting one of the large fragments of the fallen tree trunks that were plentiful along the hillside. It was plainly their object to smash the door with the piece of timber, and it's weight would enable them to do so unless driven back by the defenders. The besiegers were not more than ten paces from the cabin when we first saw them, and it was time for the besieged to open fire. In fact I wondered that we had not heard already the sound of their rifles, and Pike evidently shared my surprise, for he exclaimed impatiently:

"What are the boys about? Ef they wait much longer these fellows will be on em' afore they kin fire a shot. Besides ef they git too close they kain't git thar guns to bear on 'em through the loopholes."

This was a difficulty which I had forgotten. If the besiegers succeeded in getting close up under the walls it would be impossible for the fire of the beseiged to harm them.

But our apprehensions in regard to the vigilance of the beseigers were put at rest, for at that moment a rifle shot flashed from a loop hole, followed by another and another, and then another. One of the outlaws fell and others seemed to be hit, but they raised a great cry and rushed forward. The heavy timber struck the house with a crash. "Fire on 'em Joe! Fire on 'em!" cried Pike. "They missed the door that time! Ef they hed hit it it would hev been druv in."

As he spoke he fired his own rifle, and the discharge of my weapon was but a few seconds behind his. Then we drew our pistols and sent two more shots among them. This unexpected and terrible attack seemed to daze the outlaws. They dropped the log and retreated from the door. As they did so they came within range of the marksmen in the cabin, and the pistol balls began to pop through the loopholes. Taken in front and in flank, they fell into a panic. They fired confusedly at the cabin and then broke and ran towards the summit of the hill.

"Firin' by moonlight ain't the most sartin thing in the world, but I guess they lost three or four uv thar men in that leetle brush, an' they won't hardly come agin to-night," exclaimed Pike.

"Now what are you and I to do?" I asked.

"Git back in the cabin," he replied. "But we kain't make a start jest yet, for in this imparfect light the boys would take us fur some of the gang an' shoot us down, but we mustn't wait long, fur we must act while them fellers are feelin' ez ef lightnin' had struck 'em."

We waited about five minutes, and then Pike imitated the howl of a wolf with such perfection that I sprang aside as if I had been bitten by the beast.

"Hev you forgot the signal?" asked Pike. "Remember it wuz to be the howl uv a wolf. I expect the boys are glad to hear that, too, for it'll let 'em know that at least one uv us is alive an' kickin'."

He repeated the cry and then rising we walked confidently towards the house. I knew the defenders would be watching through the loopholes and I thought they would be able to recognize us despite the poorness of the light. Pike led the way to the door, and as it swung open before us the voice of Starboard Sam said:

"Come in, lads, the sight o' ye is good fur sore eyes."

It was an invitation that was quickly accepted and then the door closed once more between us and our enemies.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PROPOSITION.



WHEN THE heavy bar that defended the door was put in place, Bonneau held up a torch which illumined the little room.

“Both here!” he exclaimed, “and both without a wound! Ah, thees ees one great moment for we have zee fear zat we never see you again!”

“Yes,” replied Pike, “we’re all right, an’ how hev you boys come through it?”

We had been casting hurried glances about as soon as we entered to see in what manner the defenders had fared. My first thought was of Henry, but he was apparently unharmed, and so were all the others except Mr. Sheldon, who had a strip of cloth tied around his left arm.

“A trifle,” he said, in reply to our inquiring glances. “A stray bullet came in at a loophole when they made their first attack and barked my arm. And you; what success did you have? Did you achieve the object of the sally?”

I told the story of the tree cannon, and our success in ruining it, and they listened closely, making many comments.

“It was a clever device,” said Mr. Sheldon, when I had concluded, “but you have spiked their cannon. Had it not been for this sally I believe they would have destroyed our fort. We heard the report of your guns and were in a state of great suspense. Then the assault upon us came, and again you saved us with your flank attack.”

“Wa’al, we’re all back here ag’in together,” said Pike, “an’ I think Halfrigger hez hed enough fur this night. So I vote fur havin’ a bite to eat an’ some rest.”

Two of the party were detailed to watch at the loopholes, and then we ate strips of meat which Bonneau brought forth from the larder. It did not fall to my lot to keep watch, and thoroughly exhausted by the labors, the excitement and the dangers of the night, I lay down upon the floor and instantly went to sleep.

When I awoke it had been daylight some time, and I found that work had been resumed on the tunnel. This was by Pike's orders. He said that the outlaws after their failure and losses of the night before would endeavor to starve us out, and it was necessary to provide at once for our water supply. Two hours after the work had been resumed we secured a fine flow of water in the tunnel, and no longer had any fears on the score of thirst.

While this work was in progress Pike was in his favorite position at the loopholes, scanning the country.

"I hev'n't seen any signs uv 'em," he said, "an' I don't see none uv the dead either. I guess they managed to carry off the fallen."

"What do you think of our position now after last night's victory?" I asked.

"It could be a sight wuss," said Pike, "but all the same, they've got us cooped up here, an' ef they choose to wait in the woods thar an' ambush us I don't know when we kin git out. Thar must be at least a dozen or fifteen uv 'em left, an' they kin keep a good watch on us fur days an' days. Still we kin stan' it jest ez long ez they kin."

Our quarters were close and stuffy, and we were discommoded by the large quantity of earth that we had brought up from the tunnel, but we were prepared to hold the fort as long as our enemies threatened us. It was my place, as Pike's assistant, to help keep the watch through the loopholes, and while I was looking towards the crest of the hill I saw a man issue from the wood. I called the attention of Pike who was watching on the other side of the house to the figure. He looked through the loophole and exclaimed:

"Halftrigger!"

There was another loophole on the same side of the

house, and I put my eye to it. As the figure came nearer there was no mistaking it for any other than Halftrigger's. He held up a stick, on the end of which a white rag floated, and came on steadily.

"Thet white rag means a truce, I reckon" said Pike. "I guess he wants to hev a talk with us."

Halftrigger approached our fort with as firm a step and as calm a face as if he and its defenders were old friends about to be re-united. Though I knew him to be a consummate villain, I could not restrain my admiration of his hardihood. Nor did Pike.

"Pity sech a fellow should take up with robbers an' cutthroats an' be the wust uv 'em all," he said.

Halftrigger looked as jaunty as ever. He had stuck a sprig of a crimson mountain flower in his hat, and swung his shoulders in a way that was quite gay and debonnaire. When he was about fifteen yards distant he halted and hailed us.

"Hello, in the house thar, my beautties!" he called. "I hope you're well an' sassy this mornin' an' are in humor fur o' bit o' conversation with a friend."

"What do you want?" asked Pike, through the loophole.

"I ain't no sea lawyer," replied Halftrigger, "an I kain't talk through a timber wall. Come out whar I kin hear ye."

"You'll hardly expect us to put ourselves in your hands," replied Pike.

"But I've put myself in yours," replied Halftrigger. "Why don't you meet me half way?"

"But you know that we are men uv honor," replied Pike, "an' wouldn't shoot at you when you come by yourself carryin' that white rag. We don't know the same about you."

"You're not ez polite ez an admiral," replied Halftrigger, without any show of ill-humor, however, "but I guess I kin stan' it. 'Spose you open your door an' stan' thar. Ez you don't trust us you could close it afore we could make a rush. Now, I'll call my lieutenant an' we'll come up an' talk to you about some propositions I've got to make."

We were clustered at the loopholes, and after a little consultation we decided that we would accept the proposition. Pike hailed Halftrigger and told him to bring on his friend. Halftrigger beckoned in the direction of the wood, and Spanish Pete appeared and joined him.

"Don't open the door much," said Pike, "for we don't want 'em to ketch any idea of our tunnel."

Then Pike, Mr. Sheldon and myself stepped outside, the others remaining to hold the door. But we stood in front of the door, ready for action at the first sign of treachery.

"Glad to see ye, gen'lemen," said Halftrigger. "Hope we've been able to keep ye from sufferin' from dullness. This gen'leman who hez jest joined me is Mr. Peter Mendoza, born in Spain an' ez tidy a lad ez one could wish to hev with him on a cruise."

"What is it that you want to say to us?" asked Pike.

"Don't hurry me," replied Halftrigger. "I'm a-comin' to that. I hope you hev noticed what a fine day it is, gen'lemen; how invitin' it is, I might say, for a lot o' hearty lads sech ez us to meet together an' discuss a proposition like friends."

"Wa'al, let us know what you've got to say, an' less not jabber all day about the weather," exclaimed Pike, impatiently.

"Oh, well, ef you're in sech a hurry," said Halftrigger, "an' want us to drop ail the ornaments o' conversation, which do so much to season the discourse o' friends, I'll come to the p'int. We've been a-scrappin' an' a-shootin' at each other over a lot o' gold which you think is your'n, but which we think is our'n by rights."

"Well, I must say you have all your assurance with you!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon.

"Sartinly! sartinly!" replied Halftrigger, with a polite bow. I never travel without it. Now, to come back to what I wuz a-goin' to say when the gen'leman interrupted me.

"Thar seems to be a dispute about the ownership o'

this gold. But it's in your han's jest at this time. Moreover, you're inside the house and we're outside. We kain't git in an' you kain't git out. So thar you are. Now I'll admit that so fur we haven't been very successful in this engagement. You spiked our artillery fur us in great fashion last night. But I don't lay it up ag'in you. Also you druv us off, an' we lost some o' our men. But we're still mighty strong, an' you kain't come out o' your fort without our poppin' you over. So we'll jest hang back in the woods thar an' wait fur you. Your food an' water will soon give out, an' then you'll hev to surrender. But I'm willin' to play fair, even when I hold all the cards. So I'll make you an offer."

"What is your offer?" asked Pike as Halftrigger paused.

"It's this," replied Halftrigger. "All the gold that you've got in thar is our'n, but you've made sech a good fight fur it thet we're willin' to stop all the fightin' an' let you take one-third o' the gold, bein' ez you're the smaller party, while we take two-thirds."

This proposition was made with a coolness and assurance that astounded us all, and before we had time to reply Halftrigger continued:

"After the division is made far an' squar, 'cordin' to the terms, I'll see that you get off safe, an' that none o' the boys pester ye."

Now I for one was indignant at such a proposition I was not willing to make a division of the gold, even if we could have trusted Halftrigger, and I believed that he would cut our throats without mercy if he got us in his power. But I waited for Pike to do the talking.

"Wa'al I must say, Mister Halftrigger," said Pike slowly, "that you'd make a mighty good hoss swapper. You'd never furgit to ask enough. Now, ez fur that gold you speak of, it's all our'n."

"Oh, we kain't agree on that, an' so we won't argy it," said Halftrigger lightly.

"No, we won't argy it," said Pike, with emphasis. "But ez fur dividin' it with you, I don't see no call fur

us to do that. In fact, I'm dead ag'in it. Before I'd give a single lump to you I'd fight it out here to the last notch. But I've got pardners, an' they've got a right to be heard. What do you say, boys?"

"You've stated the case exactly to my liking," said Mr. Sheldon. "Never divide."

"It's ours; let's keep it," I said.

We were very near the door, and the boys inside must have heard all that we said, for such exclamations as these came to us:

"Mille tonnerres! Give up a part of ze gold to ze cutthroats! Nevaire, a thousand time, nevaire!"

"Blast my eyes! The gall o' that pirate! Give up our prize money after we've worked fur it an' fit fur it! May I be blowed to Davy Jone's locker ef I'm willin'."

"Do as Pike says and stay here and fight it out!"

"You hear what the boys say?" said Pike, grimly; "an' what they say they think. I'm afeard, Mr. Halftrigger, that you're comin' to the wrong folks, ef you think we're goin' to give up our own."

Spanish Pete's countenance lowered, but Halftrigger's bearing lost no whit of its gayety or buoyancy.

"It wuz merely out o' kindness an' softness o' heart that I made the offer to you gen'lemen," he said. "I allus hed a tender heart—too tender fur my own good, I guess. Ef it hadn't been fur a streak in me thet's ez soft ez butter I reckon I'd got along better in this bad world. But I kain't help it. I reckon I wuz jest born that way, an' we never git our reward fur bein' good an' kind an' tender an' condescendin'. I think, gen'lemen, you've made a great mistake. Sence you won't give up to us part o' our gold I guess we'll hev to take it all, an' that's onpleasant. People may git hurt, an' thar may be some blood lost, which is all mighty jarrin' on the feelin's uv a soft an' merciful man like me."

"I guess you'll hev to stan' it ez best you kin," said Pike.

"Perhaps, mate," said Halftrigger, "when thar's a gnawin' in your stummick an' your throat feels like

a piece o' burnt wood, an' you kain't git meat, an' you kain't git water, you'll think better o' this. It'll be mighty hard on you to set thar in that cabin an' see the water a-bubblin' an' a-splashin' an' a-shinin' in the sunlight not twenty feet off, an' not a drop to wet your inside with an' to drive the burnin' away. I heard a feller read a poem once about a shipwrecked sailor floatin' along, with his mate lyin' dead o' thirst on the bottom o' the boat, an' himself a-ragin' with the torture an' a-cryin' out: 'Water, water, everywhar, an' not a drap fur me to drink.' Wa-al, that's the way you'll feel. You won't dare to come outside o' this cabin, fur the moment you poke your head through the door, zip-zip will come one o' our balls, an' that'll be the end o' ye."

Halftrigger dropped his expression of suavity, and his eyes shone with malignity. We might have been awed somewhat by his ferocious energy if it had not been for the comfortable recollection of our tunnel and its unfailing water supply, upon which we could draw as easily and safely as if no freebooter were within a thousand miles of us.

"We haven't yet reached the degree of suffering upon which you dwell so delightfully," said Mr. Sheldon to Halftrigger, "and perhaps we never will. And I may add that I don't think your descriptions have any terrors for us."

"All right," said Halftrigger. "I've give you a chance. I've been willin' to sacrifice my interests to help you along. I've done my dooty ez a tender and merciful man, an' ef trouble comes o' your obstinacy, my conscience won't pester me about it."

He bowed to us, beckoned to Spanish Pete, and the two, turning away, walked up the hill and disappeared in the woods.

"There goes the finest representative of cool villainy that I have ever met," said Mr. Sheldon.

We re-entered the cabin, fastened the door, and began to speculate as to what Halftrigger's next proceeding would be. But Halftrigger made no movement, either on that day or the next day, and we chafed

greatly at our confinement in the close little cabin. Of course, we could have shouldered our rifles and gone away, risking the chances of a combat with our enemies, but that would have necessitated the abandonment of all our gold, except what we could carry on our persons, and not one of us felt any inclination to do that. Once or twice we opened our door a little and showed a hat at the crack, but the outlaws were on watch, for they fired at the hat every time. Half-trigger must have wondered how we managed to get water, but he made no more propositions to divide the gold. Our manner had indicated too clearly the futility of such attempts.

On the second night Pike stole out on a scouting expedition. When he came back he reported that the outlaws had formed two camps. They retained their old place, and also had taken possession of our tools, and part of them were there digging for gold.

"They seem to be makin' theirselves at home," said Pike, "jest ez ef they would stay here a year."

"We will have to go out and fight zem all and kill zem all, and zen take our gold away," exclaimed the impatient little Bonneau.

"But even if the field were clear," said Henry, "we could not take the gold away, as we have lost the mules."

"We could manage that ef we hed thet gang out uv the way," said Pike.

Our situation was inexpressibly annoying, but we could not devise any method of changing it. Several days later Halftrigger appeared again with his white flag and accompanied by Spanish Pete. Pike and I, as before, met him in front of the door.

"Atter thinkin' it over, I've decided to give you another chance," he said. "You see, you kain't git away with thet gold, nohow, an' 'tain't wuth while to try it. But since you've made me wait, I guess I'll hev to come down from my first offer. I kain't allow you more'n a fourth o' the gold now."

"You're wastin' your breath," said Pike. "The gold's our'n an' we're goin' to keep it. Besides, you

would be shore to git killed. We'll wait a while longer an' see ef somethin' don't turn up."

On the day following this little conversation the outlaws resorted to the old Indian device of the burning arrow. We guessed that they had made their bows and arrows at Halftrigger's suggestion, and under his instructions. But they were not skillful enough to prepare a weapon that threatened us with a serious danger. In most cases the blaze of the arrow was extinguished by its own flight, and the two or three that alighted on the roof still burning failed to do any harm. The blaze, after spluttering feebly, would go out. The arrows were fired from the top of the hill, and once or twice I thought I saw the figure of an outlaw among the trees. I wanted to fire at these shadows, but Pike would not let me. He said it was not worth while, and after an hour of fruitless experiments the outlaws gave up the attempt.

The outlaws maintained an intermittent search in the riverbed for gold. Frequently we could see all of them gathered at our mine, some digging and the others lolling about and looking on. They seemed to be enjoying life, too, for often they indulged in horse play which we had no doubt was intended for our benefit. They expected, so we thought, to stir our bile to such an extent that we would make some rash movement. But in this expectation they failed, as they had failed with the burning arrows.

Nevertheless, our situation was growing more irksome daily. We were wondering when the end would come, and what that end would be.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE UNEXPECTED.



THINK it was on the thirteenth day of our imprisonment, for imprisonment it had come to be, that we were discussing for the thousandth time the all-important topic, that is, how to get away with our gold.

"We might put the gold in the tunnel," said Henry, "fill the dirt in and smooth it over again. After a while we could come back and get it."

"'Twouldn't work," said Pike. "Halftrigger knows we've got the gold, an' he'd never give up the sarch till he found it. It looks, boys, ez if we'll hev to go out an' make a fight with 'em. But I hate to do that, for the odds are all agin us."

"What matters eet!" exclaimed Bonneau. "Have we not fought ze Indians and whipped zem? And have we not fought ze outlaws and whipped zem, and cannot we whip zem again? Sacre nom de guerre!"

"Yes, we might whip 'em, Bonneau," said Pike good humoredly, "but while we're doin' it you might get the top uv your head shot off, an' then all the rest uv us would feel sorry."

It had turned very hot that day, and the atmosphere in our little cabin was close, oppressive and foul. We longed for the wider space of out-of-doors. It was tantalizing, too, to see all the outlaws down in the riverbed at the mine. They had thrown the picks aside and werè scattered under some trees that grew at the edge of the riverbed.

"What are they doing?" I asked of Pike, who was watching them intently through a peephole.

"Playin' cards by the Eternal!" exclaimed Pike, "or at least they hold in thar hands what looks like

cards. Wa'al they do take things easy, they do, an' the hull gang is thar, too, every one uv 'em!"

"And think of us sweating ourselves to death in this little hole!" said Henry.

"But remember, lad, that we've still got what we come after—the gold," said Starboard Sam.

In an hour or more the heat became so oppressive that we opened the door and all went outside. All of the outlaws were down in the riverbed, for we knew their exact number, and consequently we had no fear of a shot from ambush.

"If weather signs are the same here that they are in the East, I'd say this heavy heat means rain," said Henry.

"Maybe they are the same," said Pike, "fur I've seen a little streak uv lightning' over thar."

He pointed up the valley to the range of mountains that walled it in at that end, and we saw the lightning playing apparently along the crest of the mountain. It was not vivid, but was more like what we call heat lightning or summer lightning back in the East.

"The rain may be a-getherin' up thar," said Pike, "an' ef so I hope some uv it will come our way. It's hard to breathe now."

"It cannot come too soon for me?" exclaimed Bonneau. "I melt all away wiz ze heat, and soon zere be nozzing left of me but one little spot of grease."

"Poor Bonneau!" said Henry. "Wouldn't you like to be sitting up on top of that distant mountain crest now, Bonneau? The breeze would strike you there, and the nice cool drops of water would fall on your face. Ah, it would be so pleasant up there Bonneau!"

"Will you stop that!" cried Bonneau. "You only make me feel ze worser. Mon Dieu! cef ees too much."

"Look at our enemies down there," continued Henry. "They make themselves comfortable in the shade, and see how they are absorbed in their card games!"

The outlaws were sitting in a cluster, and seemed to

be completely oblivious of our near presence. But I turned my eyes away from them to watch the pranks of the lightning over the distant mountains.

"Not a bit uv wind stirrin'," said Pike, who wet his forefinger and held it up.

"Reminds me o' some o' the days I've seen when I wuz cruisin' out in the Malay seas," said Starboard Sam. "You'll never know real heat till you go out there, an' your vessel lays becalmed on a scorchin' sea with a sky o' burnin' brass above you. The sails hang down like dishrags. The pitch runs meltin' from the seams. You expect every moment fur the woodwork to start a-blaizin', and you lay on the deck a-pantin', your tongue hangin' out like a dog's. That's the sort of heat that wilts a fellow an' makes him a baby. Your muscles turn into jelly an' you feel ez ef you didn't hev strength enough to raise your biscuit and pork to your mouth."

"I believe that is a storm getherin' over thar, shore enough," said Pike, pointing again up the riverbed to the distant mountains.

The flashes of lightning had grown more numerous and also much brighter. They were no longer the weak effervescence of summer. Broad bars of deep red light would burst over the peaks and tinge them with their fiery hues. Curious grayish clouds were assembling. The rumbling of distant thunder came through the breathless air.

"That must be a fine storm on the mountains up there," said Henry; "but since it's so lively, I believe that on the whole I prefer to be down here."

"Ef that storm will jest whip its tail around in this direction an' cool us off a little, I won't object," said Sam.

"I'd say it's rainin' mighty heavy up thar on the mountain tops," said Pike, who was keenly watching these meteorological phenomena. "See them dark lines. The water must be comin' down by the barrels full all at once."

The gray clouds had opened and the mountain tops, distant as they were, seemed to be enveloped in a tor-

rent of rain. There was one clap of thunder much louder than the others, and then the lightning began to fade and the clouds to dissipate.

"The thick uv it is over," said Pike, "an' it'll begin to dwindle down now."

As the outlaws were still engrossed in their card-playing, we remained outside the hut and watched the clearing atmosphere over the mountains. By and by there was a breath of a breeze which felt like balm on our cheeks. We inhaled great draughts of the cooling air and expanded our lungs.

"It's the effect uv the storm up thar," said Pike, "it's set the air a-stirrin' an' cooled it off."

We sat some time longer, enjoying the whiffs of air and casting occasional glances at the brigands down in the riverbed.

"This is rather pleasant," said Henry. "I think I'd like to take a nap on the grass here. I hope you fellows will wake me up if our friends in the valley there make any disturbance."

"Wake you up!" said Bonneau. "W'y, of course. But zere ees something coming down ze valley now zat you will want to see. Vat a queer country and vat queer things we see in it! Vat ees zat, Monsieur Pike? Vat ees cef?"

He pointed up the valley, and as our eyes followed the line of his finger, we sprang wonderstruck to our feet. A huge, yellowish wall of something was rushing down the channel, spouting foam and bearing trees upon its crest. At the same moment its heavy, steady roar struck our ears.

"Great God!" exclaimed Pike. "It's a mountain uv water sweepin' down the valley!"

The outlaws, roused from their sport by the roar of the torrent, sprang up, but the next instant it leaped upon them and blotted them out. We had one fleeting glimpse of men whirled up by the yellow flood. Then it sucked them down again, and the torrent roared and raged down the valley, and lapped almost to our feet.

Awed and stricken even to dumbness by the tre-

mendous cataclysm, we stood as if we had lost the power of motion, while the turbid sea rushing by spouted its yellow foam upon us. Henry was the first to recover speech, and he uttered in solemn tones the words :

“ And behold the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth ! ”

“ Aye,” said Starboard Sam, “ it’s like the storm an’ the wreck at sea, that claims some and lets others go. They’ve been taken and we’ve been left.”

“ We have been delivered from our enemies as if by a miracle,” said Mr. Sheldon. “ Don’t you think we’d better go further back up the hill? The rising torrent may claim us, too, and sweep us away after the others.”

“ No,” said Pike, whose manner indicated that he was deeply impressed by the scene, “ we’ve seen the torrent at its flood. It’s likely to go down now.”

“ Once again I say vat a queer country and vat queer things we see in eet ! Vat ees eet all, Monsieur Pike; did zat great ocean of water drop from the skies ? ” exclaimed Bonneau.

“ It come from the skies in the fust place,” said Pike, “ ez I suppose all the water comes from thar. But what we’ve seen wuz a cloudbust or freshet in the mountains. Some big cloud on that range over thar whar we saw the clouds an’ the lightin’ hez busted wide open, an’ all the water droppin’ out at once hez come rushin’ down this valley here. We might hev expected that somethin’ uv this kind would happen here some day. It might ‘a’ been a hundred years afore it come, but it wuz shore to come at last. Water hed run down this valley afore, an’ we might ‘a’ knowed it would run down ag’in. Boys, the hand uv the Almighty hez come down; an’ it hez crushed our enemies.”

Pike spoke in tones of solemn conviction, and for some time no one of us said another word. As Pike had predicted, the flood rose no higher, neither did it diminish. The slope of the valley at this point was considerable; and the water swept by with great rapidity.

"Nuthin' could live in that," said Pike, "it would be hard to tell which death claimed Halftrigger an' his men fust, drownin' or bein' dashed to pieces."

The water was covered with great masses of debris. Trees that had been riven up by the roots floated in the flood.

"That's the way our gold was brought down here," said Mr. Sheldon. "Hundreds of years ago such floods as this washed it in chunks and scales from the mountains and deposited it in the valley there. Other floods covered it with rock and sand, and the drift of ages helped to conceal it."

"'Stead o' waitin' for another hundred years," said Starboard Sam, "that flood hez come in the nick o' time fur us."

An hour later the waters began to recede, though slowly; and when evening came on there was still a mighty stream flowing through the valley. The night was not dark. The moon shone over the muddy waters, and we sat very late by the side of the cabin, talking over the events of the day and the changes it would make in our plans.

"The torrent will run down by to-morrer," said Pike, "an' then I think we'd better see jest whut it's done. After that we kin hunt fur our mules. They must be 'roun' in these parts somewhars. Since thar's good grazin' they're not likely to wander fur. An' its mighty important that we find em' too fur, ef we do we'll load the gold on 'em right away an' streak fur Frisco."

When we awoke the next morning we found only a brook or creek a foot or two deep flowing in the channel of the ancient river. But the entire valley was littered with mud and wreck. Moreover the power of the water had torn great gullies here and there and the channel was so much changed that it bore little resemblance to the sun-baked trough in which we had dug our gold.

We followed the course of the brook, poking along through the debris. Presently we found one of the picks that the outlaws had been using in the mine, and a little further on we saw a spade sticking in the mud

and the sand. Then my foot kicked against something that was soft to the touch, and I stepped back with a shiver, for despite the mud that was plastered all over the object, I recognized it as the dead body of Spanish Pete.

The body was lying upon its face, and, as we did not want to touch it, we turned it over with our sticks. As we did so we noticed that the back was broken.

"Hit by a piece uv timber," said Pike, tersely.

He attempted to turn the body again with his stick, and something in the pocket of the coat clanked. Pike inserted his hand and drew forth three or four little lumps of gold. I thought of the Spaniard's castle in the air as he had described it one night that I was not likely to forget, and then of the sudden ending of his castle building and himself.

Pike bent over and replaced the gold in the dead man's pocket.

"It wuz his," he said, "let him keep it."

We placed some dripping boughs over the mud-stained face and walked on. A few feet further we found another dead body. This was not bruised, but the man who was lying face upward was almost buried in the sand. On the hillside we found another body, which the fierce current had cast completely above high water mark. But the back of the head had been crushed in by the impact of some heavy object. It was probably another who had been struck by a floating timber when the torrent dashed down upon them.

"That feller might ez well hev been hit by a thunderbolt," said Pike. "That water wuz comin' down with a swing like that uv Niagary."

The bodies were scattered all along the channel. Two or three lay in the brook that still remained the ghost of yesterday's mighty storm. Most of them were bruised and crushed. Finally we counted fourteen bodies. There should have been a fifteenth, and the one missing was Halftrigger's.

"Do you suppose he could have escaped from that wild storm," asked Heury,

Pike shook his head.

"I don't think it," he said. "He wuz a strong man an' a quick un, but no mortal could fight agin' all that water comin' so suddin' an' so fast any more'n he could beat back the waves uv the Pacific Ocean. No, I guess his body hez been carried on so fur that we kain't ever find it."

The remainder of us came to that conclusion also, and we gave up the search. Then we got our picks and spades and gave decent burial to every one of the fourteen bodies. Those men had been our deadly enemies, but, inasmuch as a power mightier than any other had enabled us to triumph, we felt that we owed that one last kindness to them.

On the second day the little river that was left after the flood ran dry, and soon the old water course was baking again in the sun, and the sand and the dry earth took the place of the mud.

The most important thing for us to do now was to find the mules. We divided into parties and searched among the hills and valleys for them. Bonneau and I went over the ridge back of our house. On our way we passed the two saplings with which Halftrigger had made his tree cannon. I marked the great gashes in their trunks where Pike's powerful arms had driven the axe, and found the axe itself lying in the grass.

"Zem trees are dying already," said Bonneau, "but ze villains who used zem against us have gone first."

There was good grazing and water also in the valley beyond the ridge and we hoped to find the mules there. But we tramped about for many hours without any success. I sat down on a rock to rest and Bonneau went on ahead to examine a glen which at the distance looked pleasant. I heard a shout of joy presently, and saw him waving his hand towards me with all the vehemence that was characteristic of the little Frenchman. I guessed that he had found the mules, and sincerely hoped that my guess was right. I rose and hurried towards him.

"Come on! Come on!" cried Bonneau. "I will show you a sight that will make your heart laugh. Look zere! look zere, and admire and rejoice!"

I had reached the edge of the glen and he pointed through the trees. There grazing on the high rich grass that the trees encircled were our mules, every one of them, as round and as fat as butter balls.

"Behold!" cried Bonneau. "See zee patriarch in ze centre. Het ees Napoleon, and he ees ze fattest and ze shiniest of zem all. See how glossy his coat ees. Ah, ze sassy diable."

Napoleon raised his head and contemplated us with mild dignity. Then he opened his mouth and emitted a tremendous haw-haw-haw, which Bonneau said was intended as a welcome for his master. We had come provided with lariats and did not have as much trouble as we feared in securing the mules. When we had haltered them all Bonneau climbed upon the back of Napoleon.

"Now, Napoleon," he said, "you must work. You have been playing while your master has been fighting for hees life. Now your master will play and you will work. You are one proud beast and you have been living high, but now your holiday is ovaire."

"Look out for him, Bonneau," I cried. "Remember how he treated you once!"

The mule threw his ears back and his heels up, but Bonneau was on his guard this time, and though Napoleon whirled around like a windmill he was unable to shake off the tenacious little Frenchman. When he saw that he could not succeed in his attempt Napoleon, with that wisdom of a mule which often passeth human understanding, submitted meekly and trotted off in the direction in which Bonneau wanted him to go.

"Behold, I conquer!" exclaimed Bonneau. "Napoleon must submit to my will. I am ze great Frenchman!"

Seeing that he was successful I mounted one of the mules myself, and a couple of hours later we rode up to the house in triumphal procession, leading the others behind us. The boys were there and we had an ovation which filled Bonneau's soul with tumultuous joy.

"Bully for you, Bonneau," said Pike. "You found 'em an' you're entitled to the credit. Now, Bonneau, you'll finish the best day's work of your life ef you'll cook us some of your venison steaks in your very best style. Then we'll celebrate our good luck in gittin' our mules back."

Bonneau, in a most wonderfully good humor with himself and the rest of the world, prepared the juicy steaks, and then surprised us by producing from some secret recess a flask of rare old peach brandy. Mr. Sheldon mixed a toddy with a little sugar that we had saved and some cool water from the spring. He prepared this in our canteens, for we had no glasses. Then, holding his canteen aloft he cried :

"Here's to our luck, boys !"

"Here's to our luck," we repeated.

We clanked our canteens together and then drank the toddy at a draught.

"I think we'd better go to sleep now," said Pike, and we followed his advice.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PARTING AND A MEETING.



WE BEGAN to prepare for our departure. The first and greatest thing was to arrange for the carrying of the gold to 'Frisco, and the finding of the mules we thought had solved the problem. But when we brought out the little canvas bags with their precious contents, and made them into packs which would not chafe the backs of the mules too much, we found that we had nearly twice as much as we could carry on such a long journey. For a while we were in a quandary, as we did not like to leave any of our hard-earned treasure behind, but at last Mr. Sheldon suggested that we bury what we could not carry on this journey. We adopted his idea, and buried it in the side of the hill, smoothing over the earth carefully and then covering it with squares of turf. Then we felt that it was safe until such time as we might return for it.

A portion of the gold being buried, there was nothing left for us to do but depart, and we had agreed to start on the following day, when Mr. Sheldon gave us a great surprise.

"Boys," he said, "I shall leave you this afternoon."

"Leave us!" cried Pike in astonishment. "Why, what's that fur?"

"I've been thinking it over for a day or two," replied Mr. Sheldon, "and I guess I must be off for my house in the hollow tree. The gold hunt is over, and we're well rid of all our enemies. I never really cared for the gold myself, but when I found that the other fellows were trying to beat you out of it it fired my blood, so to speak, and I determined to stick to you, because I liked you, until the crisis was over. It is over now

and I must be off. I want to see that my house is all right and that everything is in order."

We knew that Mr. Sheldon was a very eccentric man, but we were also fully aware of his many sterling qualities and of the great interest that he had taken in us, and the valuable aid that he had given to us. So there was an outcry against his declaration. But he would not be persuaded.

"Boys," he would say, "I am solitary by nature. I dislike the company of my fellows. I don't know any other party that I would have stayed with as I have stayed with you. I like every one of you and you are my friends, but my house is waiting for me."

"But one-sixth of the gold is yours," said Pike. "What shall we do with that?"

Again Mr. Sheldon surprised us by obstinately refusing to take a single lump of it. He said he had plenty of property, back in New York City, more than he knew what to do with, and he did not want a cent more. We urged him, but could not move him.

"Wa'al," said Pike at last, "we'll put one-sixth of it to your credit in a bank at 'Frisco, an' it'll be thar when you want it."

"I'll never claim it," said Mr. Sheldon.

That very afternoon he left us. He would not even take one of the mules. Each of us wrung his hand at parting, for we knew he was a true friend. Then he threw his rifle over his shoulder and walked off towards the northwest. We watched him until he disappeared over a distant hill.

"What a queer man," said Henry.

"Yes," said Pike, "but he's made of ra'al gold."

We felt much sadness over the departure of Mr. Sheldon, for we had become attached to him, but other events raised our spirits too high for us to be affected by it long. The shadow caused by the great tragedy of the flood also soon passed, but hardly ever have men been happier or more hopeful than were we when we made our last preparations for the journeys to 'Frisco. We had won our treasure through many dangers, and we looked forward to the enjoyment of it. It is true

that we were compelled to leave half of our wealth behind, but we believed that it would be secure until we came again.

"Guess the price o' gold will go down when we git to 'Frisco," said Starboard Sam, "fur ef I ain't mistook greatly, we'll flood the market."

"Never mind about that, Sam," said Henry, "gold is gold always, and you'll find a market for yours."

"The fear o' thet hez never troubled me," said Starboard Sam, "but I'm wonderin' what I'll do with all my money. Guess I'd buy the old frigate *Constitooshun*, thet I've sailed and fou't in so much, but the Guv'ment wouldn't sell her. Say, *Bonneau*, how'd I look in the uniform o' a admiral, covered all over with gold buttons and gold epaulets so heavy they'd hold my shoulders down, an' a whoppin' big three-cornered hat on my head a-pacin' the quarter-deck o' thet big frigate, an' a-sailin' 'er wharever I pleased, an' a-makin' the Britishers, and the Dutchers an' the Frenchers an' the Spanishers an' everybody keep out o' my way?"

"You would be one great man. You would be like an emperor. You would be as magneificent as ze great *Napoleon heemself*," said *Bonneau*, admiringly.

"I don't know but what I'll try it," said Starboard Sam, reflectively. "I might make the Guv'ment an offer fur the *Constitooshun*, an' ez I'm one o' them that fit in her and helped to make her famous, the Guv'ment might think well o' the matter, an' let me hev her, bein' ez it's me."

The idea was so pleasing to Starboard Sam that the smile of content did not depart from his face for many hours.

At last we started. We decided to leave the cabin in a tolerable state of equipment, ready for the next wanderers who might come along.

"'Tain't wuth while to t'ar anythin' down," said Pike. "We've hed luck at this here place, an' ef any feller comes wanderin' along after we've gone we ought to leave things ez comf'ble fur him ez we kin."

So we left some furs, and some dried meat in the

cabin. Then we fastened the door in such a manner that the wild animals could not force it, gave the word to our mules, and started off at a lively pace for 'Frisco.

Pike, who always had a good idea of direction, figured out the point on the horizon beyond which San Francisco lay, and we bent our course towards it. Our journey to the mine had been zigzag, but we decided that we would not waste any time on the return trip through wandering from our course.

Although we were anxious to turn our gold chunks into gold coin we did not hurry. We enjoyed the beautiful weather, and the scenery, which often was very picturesque. Seven or eight hours a day was about all that we devoted to marching. Sometimes we would stop to hunt game. Nevertheless we made steady and good progress, and were free from apprehension of any kind until the night of the fourth day after we had started. We had encamped by the banks of a little brook, and were aroused about midnight by the squealing of the mules. We made a careful examination, though we failed to discover anything at that time. But the next morning up the stream, about thirty yards from the point at which we had encamped Pike saw the print of some footsteps in the mud of the bank. As no one of us had passed that spot he knew they must have been made by a stranger. The mud was very soft, and the shape of the footprint had changed so much that Pike was unable to tell anything except that a man had been there.

I knew from the way Pike shook his head when he saw the footprint that his apprehensions were aroused, and my own experience was sufficient to tell me that it was not a matter to be passed over lightly. We had such a precious convoy of treasure that we were bound to be very cautious, and the knowledge that another or others had been so near to us in the night was not reassuring.

"Ef the mud hadn't settled around his footmark so much," said Pike, "I might tell more about it, but ez it is I kain't even say whether an Injun or a white

man hez trod here. Still it must hev been a white man, fur 't don't think thar are Injuns in this part uv the country."

Pike endeavored to trace the footprints further, but the ground was so hard that the stranger had left no other marks. We spent two hours searching the vicinity, but achieved no result save failure. Pike was the only one of us upon whom the matter weighed long.

"Some stray hunter who passed near us in the night, I guess," said Henry, and I soon came to the same conclusion.

On the following night we were aroused again by mules. But this time we did not even find a footprint. Nevertheless we felt sure that the mules would not have given a false alarm, and our apprehension returned. We had no fear for ourselves, but the possession of the treasure made us uneasy. Now, for the first time in all our lives, we felt the burden of wealth. We dreaded lest in some manner we should be robbed of our gold. We decided to resume our night watch, but there was no alarm on the third night.

Two days later we entered very mountainous country. We could have avoided the mountains by making a wide curve to the south, but we thought it would save time to press straight on over them. The range was bare and cut by mighty ravines, down which we would drop stones and no sound would come back.

"I wonder eef eet has any bottom at all?" said Bonneau, after one of these experiments.

"S'pose you drop down and see, Bonneau," said Starboard Sam with a grin. "I'll take care o' your gold until you come back to claim it."

But Bonneau declined the invitation with great emphasis.

We travelled for a day on the mountain, and then we began to fear that we had made a mistake. The way was continually growing steeper and more difficult. Sometimes it led dangerously near the precipices, and at last we were brought up by a sheer wall of stone. We halted, and for a while were in doubt whether to

seek some new road or return as we had come and make the long journey around the mountain. But Pike did not like to go back without one more attempt to make the passage. So leaving Bonneau and Sam with the mules, Pike, Henry and I turned to the right, and passing in front of the wall sought a path around it. We succeeded in this attempt, and then decided to go further and see what other obstacles we might meet. In order to facilitate the search we separated.

After I left Pike and Henry I toiled along, the hot sun and the steep way making me very tired. I had been alone about three-quarters of an hour when I found my path suddenly barred by a chasm mightier than any I had encountered hitherto. It was decidedly a case of no thoroughfare. But before turning I decided to take a look over the precipice.

I knelt down, and holding tight to a projecting rock, thrust my eyes an inch over the edge and gazed into the awful depths. Far below, how many hundreds, even thousands, of feet down I could not guess, I dimly saw the stony bottom of the chasm. As I gazed I began to have a curious, uneasy, swimming sensation in my head. I felt as if some unknown power were pulling me into that tremendous abyss. Then I felt a desire to hurl myself down, but I conquered it with my will and drew back, pale and panting, from the verge. As I did so a harsh voice behind me said:

"I hope you like the looks o' things down thar, young gen'leman, but I wouldn't advise you to git in the habit o' peepin' over precipices like that, a mile deep. It's mighty tryin' to the nerves. I wouldn't do it myself, an' I ain't eggzackly chicken-hearted. My wust enemies never said that o' me, no, not they:

Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,

As I sailed.

Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,

And God's laws I did forbid.

As I sailed,

As I sailed, as I sailed."

I whirled around in alarmed surprise, and stood face to face with Halftrigger.

"Yes, it's me," he said tauntingly, "Hank Half-

trigger, riz from the dead. Ain't ye glad to see sech an old friend ez me. Why don't ye fall on my neck an' weep with joy. I never saw a feller who wuz ez ongrateful ez you' pear to be fur the marcies o' a divine Providence. Here I've cum back right out o' the grave itself, so to speak, an' ye ain't got a word o' welcome fur me."

He was seated on a huge stone with his knees drawn up almost to his chin. Across his knees lay a large pistol, the butt of which was clutched in his right hand. I noticed that the pistol was cocked, and if it were discharged the bullet would come in my direction. I had seen Halftrigger's face before when it was full of evil, but never did it express gratified malice more fully than it did then.

"I must 'low that you 'pear to be surprised and kinder tonguetied," he said. "I guess thet's the reason you don't show your joy at the sight o' me ez you ought to. Thought that avalanche o' water thet cum tumblin' down frum the top o' the mountain had smashed me all up ez it did the rest o' the boys, did ye! Wa'al I'll 'low thar wuz cause for sech a notion gittin' into your head, but by the great hornspoon Hank Halftrigger wuzn't made to be swiped off the face o' the earth by a splash o' water, d'ye hear me? Hank Halftrigger wuz made fur better things."

"What do you want?" I asked, recovering my tongue at last.

"I want to talk, to you, sonny," he replied, "an, while I'm doin' it don't you put your hand down to your pistol or up to your gun. I don't want no sech interruption to our conversation. An' ef you try it I'll hev to blow a nice big round hole through you with this pistol o' mine, which you kin see is trained right on you and ready fur action. An' I guess you've seen enough o' me to know that I'm a man what keeps his word."

He had changed his tone somewhat, but it was still mocking. Out of the corner of his eye he watched every movement I made.

"Well, what do you want to say?" I asked.

"I jest wanted to remind you," he said. "Thet I wuz keepin' an eye on you fellers, an' thet I intended to see thet you didn't git away with my gold."

"The gold is ours," I said.

"Wa'al, wa'al, thet's a good joke!" he replied. "I see you fellers still stick to thet. Why, it's all mine. All my pardners hev gone an I've inherited thar shares. I guess thet's good law on both sea and land. Wa'al, I'm not a-kickin' over your bringin' it along, 'cause it saves me a lot o' trouble, an' I'll claim it afore I git to 'Frisco."

"What's all this to me?" I said. "I don't care to listen to it."

"But you'll hev to," he replied. "I wuz hopin' I might meet some o' you to-day, an' I'm glad it's you. I've seen rather more o' you than I hev o' the others, an' it'll be nice to begin with you."

"Begin with me? What do you mean?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, you'll see soon enough," he replied.

Then he added. "Come here!" in a voice so fierce and masterful that I obeyed him before I knew what I was doing.

He seized me by both arms, and his hands gripped me as if they were made of steel.

"It means," he said, throwing off his taunting mask, "that your time hez come, my fine young lad. I've no doubt you'd like to git to 'Frisco with all thet gold an' enjoy it, but you'll never do it, nor will any o' your frien's. I'll follow 'em till I wipe out the last one o' them, an' then I'll take the gold myself. Who would know how to spend it better than I would?"

He paused to laugh in my face. Then he continued:

"I'm glad I found you lookin' over the cliff thar, 'cause thet's the way you're goin'. It's such a nice an' easy way to settle you, like tossin' you overboard in a storm. Besides, it's so far down you won't make any noise when you strike solid ground that'll alarm any o' your frien's ef they are near."

He raised one hand to my throat and choked back the cry that I tried to utter. Then he began to shove me towards the verge. I was very strong and agile,

but I was powerless to cope with his gigantic mass of bone and muscle. I could not reach the weapon in my belt, nor could I wrench myself from his grasp.

The mountain and the skies began to swim around me, and I saw myself a shapeless mass lying on those dim rocks below.

"Oh, you may fight, an' you may fight," snarled Halfrigger, "but you kain't he'p yourself, an' I tell you, ay fine lad, I'll enjoy seein' you a-whirlin' an' a-whirlin' away down thar till at last you strike on the stuns."

"Not so fast with your whirlin' an' your whirlin'!" growled a deep voice behind us.

Halfrigger dropped me as if he had been shot. But the next instant he struck me such a heavy blow on the head with his fist that I reeled and fell against a stone. As I fell my ankle turned under me and I was unable to rise again.

Halfrigger's face was drawn with fury and thwarted malice as he faced about. A figure as gigantic as his own towered up before him and the voice of Pike said:

"I reckon' you'll deal with me."

Neither man had time to draw a weapon, but they sprang at each other like two grizzly bears, and in a moment they were writhing and dragging each other over the stones. They sank to their knees and then fell flat upon the ground and whirled over and over again. Then they struggled back to their feet, still clasping each other in a powerful hug.

It was an awful and magnificent sight to see these two men so grandly endowed by nature strive for the mastery. One moment they approached the verge; they drew back again. First I saw the glowing face of Pike, then the lowering visage of Halfrigger was turned towards me. Sweat dropped from each and I heard the great joints of the men's frames cracking as they compressed each other with all the powers of their muscles. Neither uttered a word while this fearful struggle was in progress. They saved their breath and strength for the need which was the utmost.

I sought to rise, but my ankle would not support my weight. Then I drew the pistol from my belt, but the forms whirled before me so fast that I dare not fire for fear of hitting Pike. I groaned in agony as I was compelled to lie there and watch the struggle pass before my eyes without being able to raise a hand to help my friend.

They writhed towards the cliff again, each gasping like bears in a mortal hug. They were within three feet of the verge, then within two feet of it, and I thought both were going over. I tried to close my eyes and shut out the sight, but the lids refused to obey my will. Nearer they came to the brink, and then with a loud cracking sound the edge of the overhanging rock on which they struggled split off like a piece of slate, and the two men sank down with it. Their bodies shot out of sight, but a pair of large bronzed hands clutched the shelf of stone.

Though wrenched by pain I jumped forward, how I know not, and seizing the wrists to which the hands belonged pulled upward with all my might.

"Further over, boy! further over!" gasped Pike "Git me by the shoulders.

I reached down, seized him by the shoulders and dragged with all my strength. Thus assisted he slowly drew his huge bulk up until he lay once more upon the brink, though he looked like a ghost.

"You've saved my life, Joe," he said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Yes," I replied, "but I would never have had the chance if you hadn't saved mine first."

"Halftrigger!" said he, shudderingly. "Hez he fell all the way down thar?"

Holding to each other like two children we looked over into the abyss. A hundred feet below us Half-trigger swung. His fall had been broken to some extent by the rough face of the cliff, and he had managed to grasp a projection.

As we looked down he looked up and our eyes met. He glowered at us savagely and defiantly. Then, in a voice as gay as ever, he sang:

“Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
As I sailed:
Oh, my name is Captain Kidd,
And God's laws I did forbid,
As I sailed,
As I sailed, As I sailed.”

When he finished the song he loosened his right hand, shook it at us and then shot downward as swiftly as a bullet, his body whirling over and over until it struck on the stones in the dim space below, where it lay motionless and shapeless.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE END CROWNS THE WORK.



WE WERE still gazing into those frightful depths when a cheery voice called out:

"What on earth are you two fellows doing with your faces over the edge of that chasm as if you had been glued there?"

I roused up and replied:

"I'm looking at Hank Halftrigger, Henry."

"Hank Halftrigger," he replied. "Why he's dead."

"Yes," I replied, pointing over the chasm. "He's dead and his body is lying down there."

The expression on Henry's face was one of mingled amazement and perplexity, and then I quickly related the whole of the tragic tale.

"I'd advise you, then," was Henry's first comment, "to get back from the edge of that cliff. It has split off once with the weight of Halftrigger and Pike, and another piece might go with you."

We hadn't thought of that, and drew back somewhat ashamed of our carelessness. By going further down the mountain we found a slope, which we descended into the canyon. By that means we reached the body of Halftrigger. But it was such a crushed and hideous object that we covered it up with loose stones as quickly as we could and left it.

"What a pity," said Pike, as we turned away, "that such a feller ez Halftrigger should hev turned out bad. What a great hunter and scout he would hev made. He never knowed what it was to flinch."

"Yes," said Henry, "he was a magnificent villain."

We found the others much worried over our long absence, but their worry changed to astonishment when we told them the cause of it.

"That pirate, Halftrigger, ag'in!" exclaimed Star-

board Sam. "Why Cappen Kidd hisself wuz nothin' but a swab to him. Are you shore he's dead?"

"No danger of his ever rising again in this world," said Henry. "His career is over."

We camped on the mountain that night and resumed the journey the next morning. We found the remainder of the way over the heights not so difficult as we had imagined, and soon emerged into the plain below.

In due time we reached San Francisco again. As we entered with our loaded mules some troublesome questions were asked by the loungers, but those were days when a man could keep his business to himself, and we adhered to that policy. We merely replied that we had been "up country and thought we had some dirt with gold in it."

We deposited our treasure with the strongest banking and gold dealing firm in San Francisco, and started the next day for the cabin in the mountains to secure the remainder. We reached it without event, but we found that the door had been opened and the cabin occupied by some one else. Henry was the first to enter, and when he looked around he exclaimed:

"I'm glad you told us to leave the meat and other things here, Pike. Look!"

He pointed to the wall. Some one had cut there with a pocket-knife in rude letters the following:

I DON'T KNOW WHO IS THE BOSS OF THIS SHANTY,
FOR I COULDN'T FIND HIM, BUT I'VE FOUND FOOD AND
REST HERE WHEN I WAS PRETTY NIGH GONE. I'M
NOW ABLE TO GO ON AGAIN, AND HERE IS THE PROOF
OF WHAT I OWE AND FOR WHICH THE BOSS CAN COL-
LECT IF WE EVER MEET.

JOHN P. WHITNEY,

FORMERLY OF POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y.

SEPTEMBER 12, 1850.

"I thought suthin' o' that kind might happen some day," said Pike, "but I didn't think it would come so soon. That ought to make us feel good in our consciences, boys."

The gold had not been disturbed, and a day's hard

work enabled us to take it all out again and get it ready for transportation on the backs of the mules. We were eating breakfast the morning before our departure when a loud voice hailed us with :

"What ho! my gallant companions! How goes it with you? Still in the gold business, I see."

We looked up and to our unbounded delight saw Mr. Sheldon approaching.

"I thought I would find you here," he said, as we crowded about him to shake his hands. "I calculated that you were about due on the return journey, and, as I began to get lonesome a bit, I thought I would come down for a sight of you."

He accompanied us on the return journey to Frisco, and we passed by his tree home, where we spent a day of rest. We would not let him leave us this time and almost by force as it were took him on with us to San Francisco.

Our gold panned out much better than we thought it would. In fact, nearly all of the two mule-train loads was precious metal, and when we came to divide the proceeds we were amazed at the amount of our wealth. We forced Mr. Sheldon to take a part. He wanted to refuse again, but when he saw we would be very much offended if he did not take some of the treasure he consented at last. But he would take only half a share, and we were compelled to compromise with him on that basis. So we divided the money, for we had sold the gold by weight, into eleven parts, Mr. Sheldon taking one and the other five two parts apiece.

There was plenty for us all. I have now the little memorandum book in which I set down my share, and here it is—\$313,215.21. That was a great fortune for those days, a very great fortune indeed for one so young as Henry or I to possess, and when all the details were attended to and the money was safely in the bank to our credit we felt as rich as Rothschild himself.

A few days later Mr. Sheldon left us again for the wilderness, and we heard from him occasionally through wandering hunters of game or gold, and he always sent us his warmest regards.

The next day after Mr. Sheldon's departure Pike, Henry and I were walking down one of the main streets of San Francisco when we saw two men of very conspicuous appearance approaching. They were dressed with a magnificence that attracted the attention of everybody, and their bearing possessed a dignity that befitted the splendor of their raiment. They wore tall and very shining silk hats. The buttons on their rich black broadcloth suits were many and large, and fine diamonds sparkled on their fingers and in their shirt fronts.

These two resplendent figures stopped in front of us and bowed very low. Then one of the men, his whole manner betokening his importance, spoke as follows:

"Messieurs, je vous salue! Allow me to have ze pleasure and ze honaire to introduce to you my friend et bon camarade, Monsieur l'Admiral Samuel Sargent, of Nantucket, Massachusetts, Les États Unis. He ees ze most deesteenguished American Admiral. He has fought in more zan forty wars and he has taken more zan seexty ships in single combat. He ees ze terror of ze seas and hees name ees ze terror of ze world. Monsieur Pike, Monsieur Joseph Fielding, Monsieur Henry Fielding. I have ze honaire and ze pleasure of making you acquainted with my great friend, ze Admiral Sargent."

The "Admiral" bowed again with great dignity and condescension and we bowed with humility. Then the Admiral spoke as follows:

"Gen'lemen, I hev sailed over all the seas an' visited all the ports o' the earth, an' never hev I found a finer shipmate than my friend here, the French gen'leman, with whom I now wish to make you acquainted. We've shipped together on some hard cruises, and we've been mates in many dangers. Gen'lemen, it warms my heart to be able to introduce to you my friend, Monsieur Pierre Bonneau, of France, Prince of Paris, Duke of Versailles and Count of the Seine. Prince, these are my friends, Mr. Pike and Joe and Henry Fielding."

The Prince bowed and we bowed back. Then we

turned and walked with these illustrious personages up the the street.

"How long do you mean to keep this thing up, Sam, you and Bonneau?" asked Pike.

"We don't know yet," said Starboard Sam, "but we wanted to see how it would feel. We're rich, you know, now and can do as we please."

Pike uttered no word of criticism. He knew, as we all knew, that Sam and Bonneau were fully aware of the value of money and would take care of their fortunes. This they soon showed, for after purchasing their splendid outfits of clothing they were very careful with their means and rather leaned towards the side of economy.

We remained in San Francisco for some time uncertain what to do. It was no longer necessary for us to work for our bread, but we did not like to be idle. While we were hesitating Bonneau and Sam came to us and said there was a ship sailing soon for Panama to connect with another from the other side of the isthmus for New York. They believed they would go on her. Bonneau wanted to visit his relatives in France and to tell the tale of his wealth and distribute some of it among the most needy of them. Sam had similar designs on Nantucket.

"Why not go along with them to New York," said Henry, "and see something of the great world?"

Bonneau and Sam instantly clamored for us to make the trip.

"Will you go, Pike?" I asked.

"I'll do it," said the hunter, with emphasis. "I've been explorin' the wilderness for most uv my life; now I'll explore a big city, an' see what happens."

We made our preparations very quickly, and all took passage on the same vessel.

As a sunlit evening faded we passed out of the Golden Gate. Pike, Bonneau and Sam were below arranging their baggage. Henry and I stood in the stern of the vessel, taking a last look at the bay. As the houses sank from sight and the lights glimmered and went out, I said:

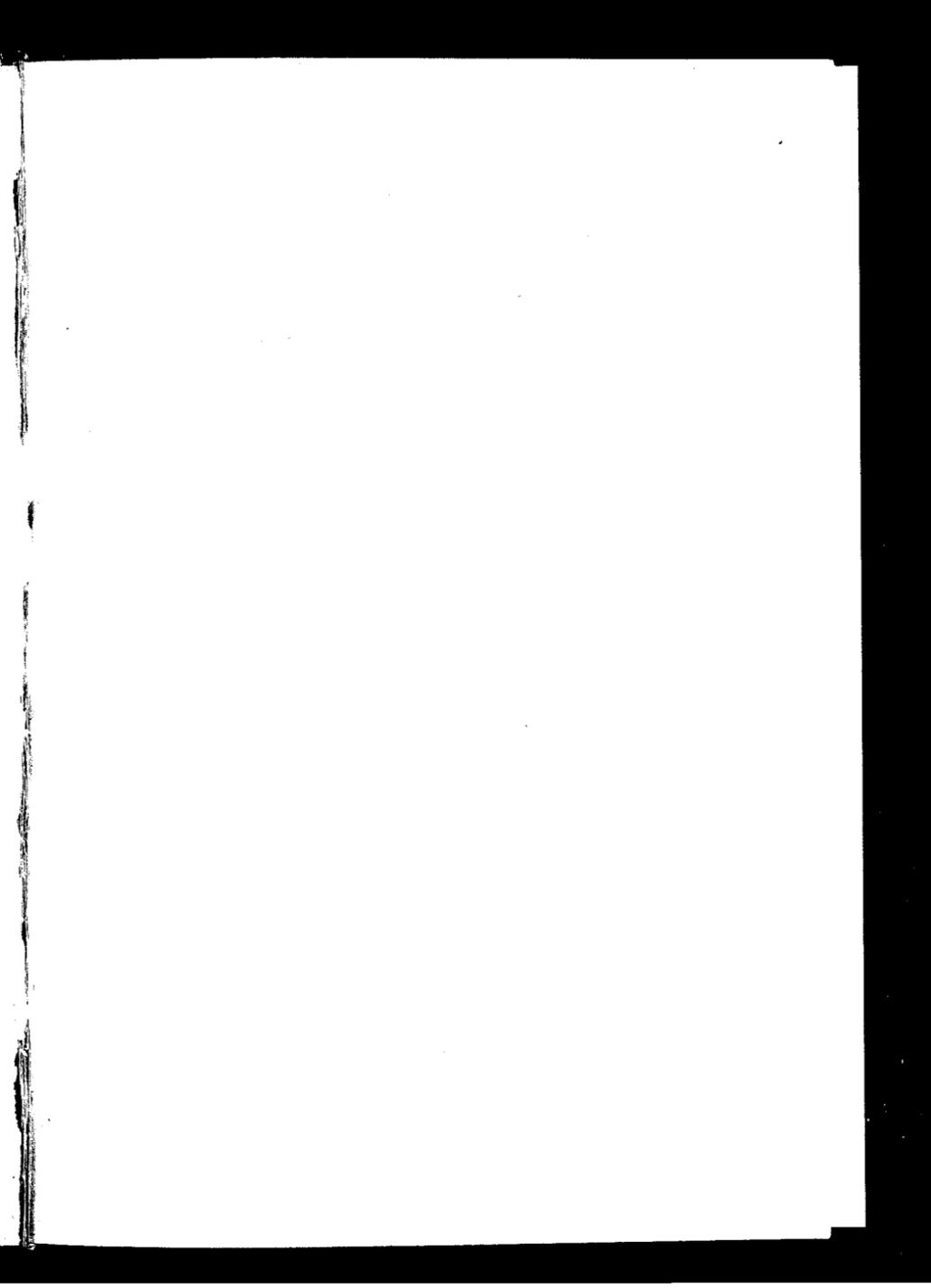
“ We have been through many dangers, Henry, but we have succeeded at last.”

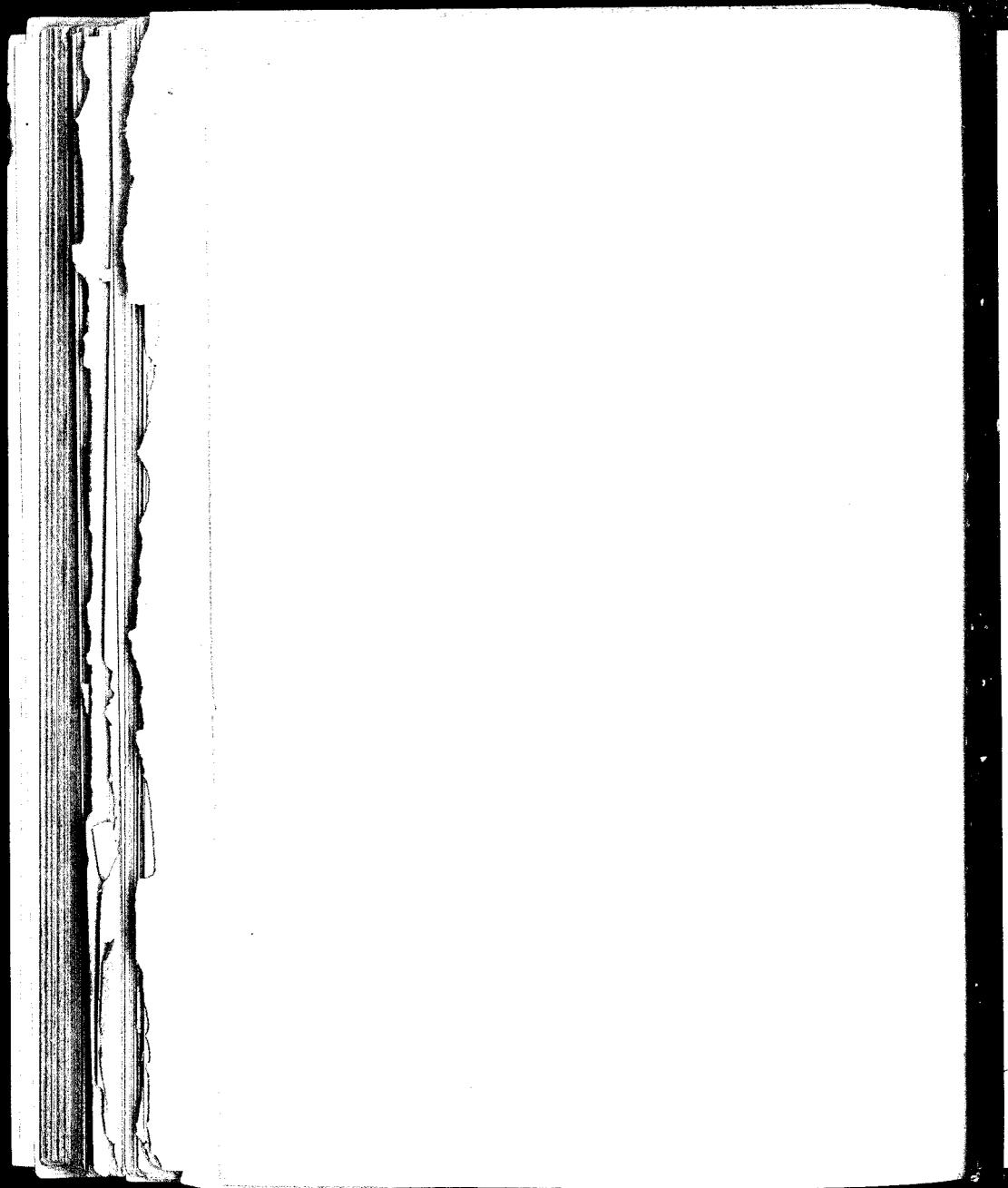
“ Yes,” he replied, “and Providence has been with us through all.

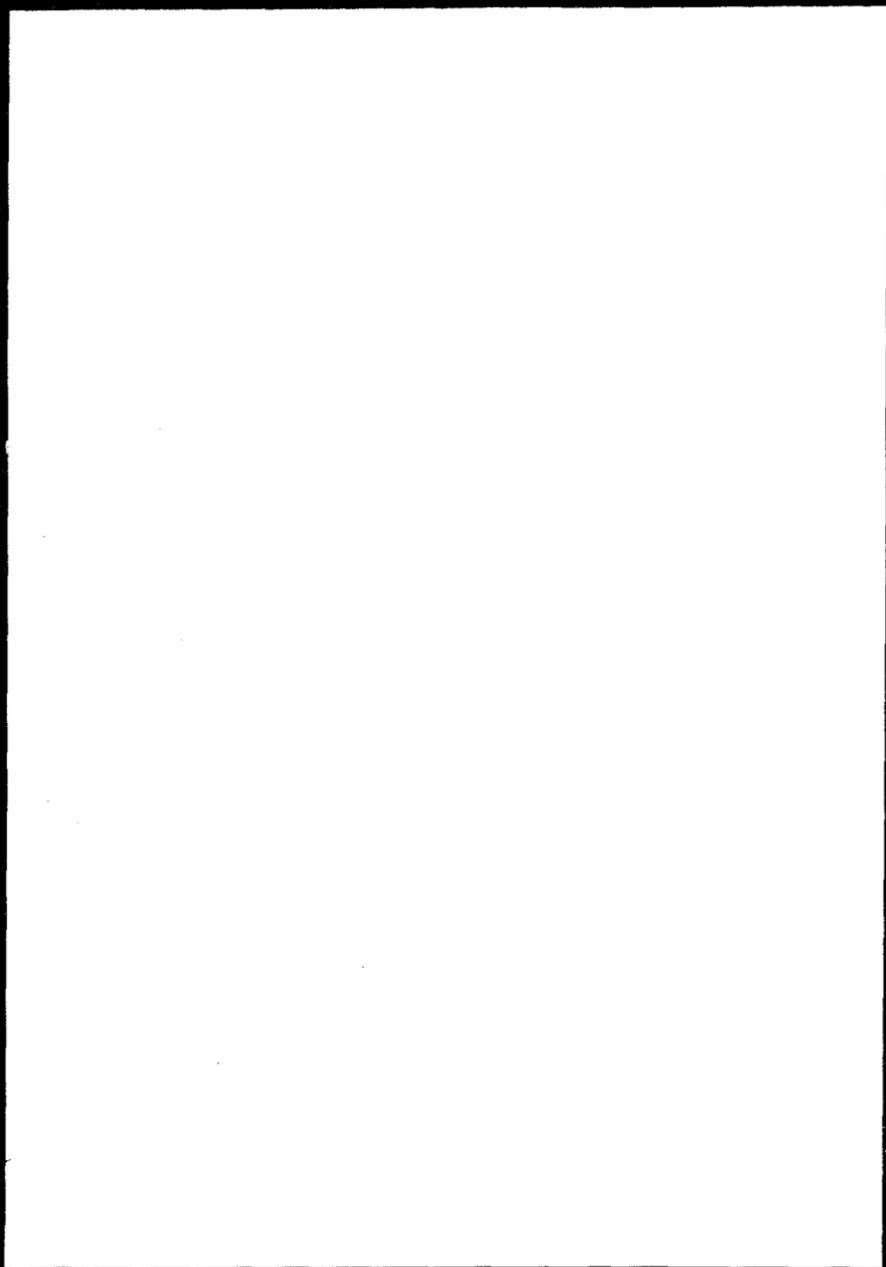
Then the night came upon the waters and the stars began to twinkle through the darkness.

(THE END.)

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