

The
X BAR X BOYS
at
NUGGET CAMP

JAMES CODY FERRIS

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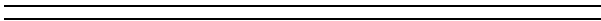
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“OFF TO NUGGET CAMP!”

The X Bar X Boys at Nugget Camp. (Page 62)

THE X BAR X BOYS AT NUGGET CAMP

BY
JAMES CODY FERRIS

AUTHOR OF "THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH,"
"THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP," ETC.

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WESTERN STORIES FOR BOYS

By JAMES CODY FERRIS

THE X BAR X BOYS BOOKS

THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH
THE X BAR X BOYS IN THUNDER CANYON
THE X BAR X BOYS ON WHIRLPOOL RIVER

THE X BAR X BOYS ON BIG BISON TRAIL
THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP
THE X BAR X BOYS AT NUGGET CAMP
(OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION.)

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The X Bar X Boys at Nugget Camp

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THE X BAR X BOYS AT NUGGET CAMP

CHAPTER I

A DANGEROUS CAST

By the time Roy Manley shortened the stirrup that had loosened and slipped down two holes, his brother Teddy was nearly out of sight behind the hunch-backed rise of ground. Roy heard a faint yell as pony and boy disappeared completely.

“Got lightning grease on his heels,” he grumbled, struggling with the stirrup. “Belle, why don’t you take Nell in out of this sun? You and Curly get one on each side of her, and cart her along.”

“Cart me along!” Nell Willis responded indignantly. “Think I’m a bag of potatoes?”

Belle Ada, the girl Roy Manley had addressed, laughed merrily. She was Roy’s sister, a dark-haired, dark-eyed daughter of the plains, thirteen years old, with a gift for practical jokes that was often extremely disconcerting.

Belle Ada, with her two brothers, had been visiting the 8 X 8 ranch, belonging to Peter Ball, a close friend of the two brothers and of their father. Some time before Nell Willis and Ethel, or “Curly,” Carew, had come from the East to see their aunt, Mrs. Ball. Whether it was due to their liking of Western scenery or to the fact that the X Bar X ranch—where Teddy

and Roy lived—was within riding distance, is a question still to be determined; but at any rate, they stretched their visit from one month into many months.

They were rapidly growing to look upon the great spaces of the West as their real home. But an incident, such as had just occurred, served to show that they had not quite earned the title of cowgirls.

Nell had been thrown. Her mount stopped suddenly, and the girl had taken the shortest route to the ground, fortunately landing free of the horse and unhurt aside from a severe shaking up. The pony tossed his head, rolled his eyes significantly, and streaked in the general direction of Chicago, Teddy hot on his trail. Roy's stirrup had taken that moment to slip.

"Be good now, Nell," Roy admonished. "You put an awful dent in mother earth, you know. Yay—there she is!" He gave the strap a final tug and then vaulted into the saddle. "If Teddy catches that bronc while his big brother is playing nursemaid to a horse, I'll never hear the last of it. Got to get me a new pair of stirrups. Get in out of the sun, Nell! We'll have you—"

"Never mind about the sun!" Nell called. "You rope yourself tight to Star and keep your feet out of the stirrups!"

It is doubtful if Roy heard the remark, however well directed it was, for he had given his pony a quick jab with his heels and was dashing toward the hills behind which his brother had disappeared. Seventeen is not an age which will gracefully admit the superiority of another, even though that other be a brother. Roy wanted very much to catch Nell's runaway pony before Teddy did.

He bent low over Star's neck and watched the little spurts of dust fly up as the pony pounded over the dry earth. To his ears came the low murmur of Rocky Run River, a stream which skirted both the X Bar X and the 8 X 8 ranches. The spring sun was melting the mountain snows, and the river was at its highest point.

"If Teddy heads him in the right direction, he can corner him," Roy muttered. "And that means I'll arrive just in time to be late. Blame that stirrup! If it had been Curly's horse it wouldn't be so bad. But I ought to catch Nell's bronc— instead of Teddy catching him."

He did not explain this enigmatical statement, even to himself. It just occurred to him, and re-occurred with added force as the moments passed. He, and not Teddy, should capture the runaway.

"But what chance have I?" he murmured. "I can't—Sweet daddy, there he is! There he is! He must have doubled back!"

In the distance Roy caught a glimpse of a riderless pony, tail straight out in the wind.

"Here we go, Star!" Roy shouted. "Take him down! Atta baby!"

Star, quick to sense what was wanted of him, swung toward the runaway. He seemed to feel something of his rider's anxiety, and his breath came more swiftly as he settled down to the task.

Now the other pony saw them, and hesitated, head held high, forefeet straight as poles. Then he bobbed toward the ground as though he were making a bow and was off like a shot.

It never entered Roy's head to think what had become of Teddy. He was too intent on one thing—catching Nell's pony and bringing it to her.

“All right, Star,” Roy muttered. “A little of the old fight now.”

He sat in the saddle as though he were part of the horse, a centaur come to life on the plains of the West. As his steed's feet tapped the ground, to draw apart and then tap again, the boy's body moved back and forth with a rhythm that was beautiful. Not once was the motion interrupted.

“There he goes—straight for the river!”

It was impossible to tell at that distance whether or not Roy was gaining on the runaway. At times he seemed closer, then a clump of trees would block the boy's view, and when he again caught sight of the horse it would appear as though he had lost ground.

“Somethin's got to happen pretty quick,” the boy said aloud. “He can't go far to the left when he reaches the river on account of the rocks. He'll have to take the right trail. That means a good long chase unless he gets winded soon—and I don't think he will. Star, old boy, we've got to work!”

The horse nodded his head to shake a bit of foam from his lips, and Roy chuckled. It looked as if Star had understood and agreed.

“So you do know what it's all about? Well, I won't talk any more—might disturb you. Anyway, you don't have to answer me. Just you go along, and we'll have a speech making contest when this thing's over—you and me.”

It was characteristic of Roy to think of the unusual even at a moment like this. The idea of him and his horse standing

opposite each other and discussing the pros and cons of a question struck him as extremely humorous, and he snickered loudly. Star raised his head inquiringly, and as he did so the pony in front changed its direction and headed for the left.

Roy was jolted out of his mood. The left! That meant the rocks!

“Is he crazy enough to try to get out that way?” Roy ejaculated. “He’ll burst his fool head open, if he does! Reckon I have to reach him before he takes a dive! Be a fine thing for me to tell Nell her pony is waiting to be made into sausages. Step on it, Star!”

To one who did not know the pony, it would seem that Star had already done all the “stepping on it” he was able. But now he drew his ears just a little closer to his head, bunched his muscles a little tighter, and flashed ahead.

This time it was apparent the pursuers were gaining. The white spot on the runaway’s flank was plainly visible.

“Now we have it! Now we have it! Now we have it!” Roy grunted, the words keeping time with the beat of the pony’s feet. “Into the rocks he goes, and in we go after him. ‘Into the valley of death rode the six hundred!’ ‘Mighty is he who wields the sword, but mightier still—’ I forget the rest of that. Good start, though.” He was talking aloud, not conscious of what he was saying, finding the effort necessary to pronounce the words a relief to his pent-up emotions.

Ahead were the rocks, black and forbidding, out of keeping with the placidness of the rest of the scene—a strange contrast to the gentle sloping prairie. At some time in the formation of the earth this portion was fated to retain the characteristics of the early terrain while the surrounding landscape was calmed by some giant hand. Silhouetted

bluntly against the sky, the rocks were the bane of cattlemen who had to skirt them in a wide path instead of following the river directly.

Their edges bordered on the water and in storms the river roared sullenly over their shiny backs. Frequently cows were found dead at their base, who, coming to drink, had slipped and been drawn into the turmoil.

“Pretty looking sight,” Roy muttered, glancing toward the black mass. “Just the place a crazy horse would head for. Yep—there he goes!”

The runaway had reached the first of the rocks, and, without stopping a moment, sprang for the lower ledge. Roy fancied he heard the hoofs scrape as the steed pulled himself up.

“We’ve got to do that pretty soon,” the boy said. No thought of abandoning the chase came to him. “Get out the old ground-grippers, Star.”

He came to the ledge, and pulled upward on the reins. With a little whinny Star tensed his muscles and sprang. The ledge was on a level with his chest, but it is one thing to clear a barrier, another to mount it. For a moment it seemed as if the horse and rider must slip back, but, with a supreme effort, the pony forced himself up and stood trembling on the rocky shelf.

“That’s the first of them,” the boy breathed. “Watch it, Star! Take it easy. We can’t rush this.”

As a mountain climber tests the ice before trusting his weight to it, Star touched each bit of rock before placing his hoof on it. Sharp corners and jagged points of rock surrounded them. A misstep would mean a painful, if not fatal, injury.

“And we’re not at the worst part yet,” the boy murmured. “Wait till we reach the edge. Where in thunder is that horse? If he—”

A sound came to his ears, a sound of breaking rock. He waited, and heard a splash.

“Missed that one. He’s not far off, at any rate. All right, Star—up we go!”

He hoped the runaway was standing still, perhaps frightened by the stone his feet had dislodged and sent into the river. He should come into sight soon.

The river roared louder with each step Star took, and the boy knew they were approaching the edge, with a sheer drop to the water below. Higher and higher Star mounted, and at last stood with his forefeet braced against a stone, his widened eyes staring into the depths. They had reached the edge.

Not fifty feet from them was the runaway bronco, his head moving from side to side in bewildered fright, his whole body trembling violently.

Roy whistled softly.

“That way, Star,” he whispered. “Easy, now! Just a little more—”

His hand was on his rope that hung from the saddlehorn. If he could ring the bronc, the rest would be easy, for the pony was much too frightened to resist. He could lead the animal down safely.

Pulling the reins ever so slightly, Roy brought Star to a halt. He was near enough to throw. Carefully he poised the lariat. His knees gripped Star’s side.

The rope whistled overhead, straightened out like a snake. True was the throw, and truly the noose landed, full over the pony's neck.

Then, from below, came a yell of exultation.

“Atta baby, Roy! Great stuff! I knew you'd make it! I waited until—”

The pony, with the rope about his neck, jerked as though he had been stung with fire. A shrill cry, almost human, burst from him. He leaped forward.

“Roy! Roy! Cut loose! Don't let him—Oh-h-h!”

It was too late. Star, trying vainly to keep his balance, toppled outward, and Roy, in full view of Teddy, hurtled toward the river that hissed over the waiting rocks below!

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

THE thoughts that flashed through Teddy Mauley's brain as he stood below watching that terrible fall will never be known. If he had not called out, the runaway would not have jumped and dislodged Roy. He, Teddy, was responsible. If Roy was killed—

To say that a man's life whirls through his mind a moment before death is to state that which has been said many times. It may be that his senses are sharpened to such an extent that he can appreciate things in one second that otherwise would take him many minutes to think of. But here Teddy stood at the base of the mass of rocks. He was in no personal danger. Flash, his horse, was close beside him, his head tilted to one side, his eyes regarding his master calmly.

In that tiny space of time, while Roy, hands outstretched, was dropping toward the river, there came to Teddy in a swift panorama the events of the last hour—Nell Willis thrown from her pony; Teddy taking up the chase; his capture of the bronco; the realization that Roy, and not he, was the logical one to take the horse back; the wait for his brother and the driving back of the runaway so that Roy would see him and take him to Nell; then following Roy to this place, watching him mount the rocks and rope the pony; and finally, the cry that Teddy could not hold in check—the cry that sent Roy to

A terrible wave of intense suffering passed through Teddy, shaking him from head to foot. His brother! Roy!

There was one little ray of hope, and even before Roy struck the water, Teddy seized on it fiercely. Seven feet from the base of the rocks the water had hollowed out a deep pool. Not more than five feet across and about ten feet long—then the rocks again. If Roy hit this, he had a chance. If!

With eyes that burned, Teddy watched his brother's descent. He was out from the cliff, far enough out perhaps to reach the deep pool. "Let him be saved, Lord! Give him a chance!"

Then, with horrible suddenness, boy and horse struck. High in the air rose the white spray. Through it Teddy could see a dark form and he heard the shrill scream of the pony; a cry once heard never forgotten.

As a man is awakened from a trance, the sound shocked Teddy into action. He flung himself into the saddle. His hand flailed the bronco's side. Flash, hunching his hind legs, sprang forward.

"Down to him, Flash! Down to him! We've got to—"

The horse understood. Oblivious of his own safety, he plunged headlong toward the rocky beach and toward the boy and horse struggling in the water. Teddy, in a passing moment, knew that the runaway had, after all, remained safely on the ledge above.

As the boy neared the spot, he saw with a heartfelt prayer of thankfulness that Roy had cleared the rocks and had fallen into the deeper part of the river.

Even before Flash had reached the water's edge, Teddy had his rope in readiness. If Roy were conscious, he could grab the end and be pulled ashore. If not—

Then Teddy saw his brother. The rushing waters calmed for a moment and disclosed Roy, his hand still clutching the bridle of his pony, lying inertly on the surface of the pool, kept afloat by that grip alone. His face was upward, a red streak showing across the forehead.

Teddy uttered not a word. His lips were bloodless and pressed tightly together. He slid swiftly from the saddle.

Without a single waste motion he uncoiled his rope and tied the loose end of it about his waist. The other was fastened to the saddlehorn. Between the shore and Roy was a fierce current, and it was into this that Teddy threw himself. Flash, his neck craned forward, stood like a rock a little distance from the turbulent stream.

Everything was fighting Teddy—the stream, the rope about his waist, and a growing sense of panic, a fear that when he reached his brother it would be too late. But he kept on, scarcely daring to hope, swimming with a fierce determination to see it through. Now he could hear the breathing of Star. Now he saw the drawn, grey face of his brother. Now he could reach him!

The current released its clinging swirls from his body, and Teddy floated in the comparative stillness of the pool. His arm encircled Roy's shoulders. For one long moment he gazed into the face of him who had been always at his side, who had shared every danger with him—his brother.

“Roy!”

The pallid lips moved. The eyes opened.

“Teddy, old boy—all right, Teddy—let's get—”

A great sob forced the breath from Teddy's lungs.

“Roy! Thank God! Oh, Roy, I was afraid—”

“Not this time, old boy! Still kicking. Only I feel—funny.”

“Now, Roy, let go the bridle. That’s it! All right, kid. Here we go. Don’t move. I have you. Don’t shake your head. Easy, kid—easy! Let yourself slide. A-a-a-atta baby! Here we go, now. Star’s all right. He’s just watching you, that’s all. I have you, kid. Easy, big feller—just a little—”

They were out into the stream. Holding his brother with one hand, Teddy pulled on the rope with the other. Flash braced his feet and stood firm. The current drew them down hungrily, but Teddy fought toward the shore. Closer, closer—he felt the rocks under his feet—and then Roy was laid gently on the ground and Teddy was bending over him, the tears coursing unashamed down his cheeks. Roy was safe.

It might be wise for the moment to leave these two alone. We won’t hear the first words that Roy said to Teddy, nor shall we hear Teddy’s answer. We sha’n’t watch Teddy’s hand meet his brother’s in a firm grip, nor shall we see the look that passed between the boys. It is better to leave the curtain drawn.

We may, instead, say something of these two who have just gone through such a vivid experience. Teddy, one year younger than his brother, was in his sixteenth year. His life had been spent mainly on the plains, as had Roy’s. Their father, Bardwell Manley, was the owner of a large cattle ranch, the X Bar X, and when he took his sons out of school to help him with the management of it, they were anything but sorry. They were born to the life of the cattle rancher and loved it. On the plains they were receiving a better education than many who attend college.

In the first book of the series, “The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch,” it is told how Teddy and Roy Manley captured a

band of cattle rustlers after many trials and adventures. The friends they made in those hazardous days stayed with them through other exciting times, and, in the book just preceding this, called “The X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up,” they reached the peak of every cattleman’s desire—first prizes at the rodeo. At the same time they saved their father from some cattle swindlers, and succeeded in establishing themselves more strongly than ever in the hearts of the cowboys at the X Bar X.

Their two friends, Nell Willis and Ethel Carew—officially friends of their sister, Belle Ada—shared in many of their adventures. It was while visiting the girls at the 8 X 8 that the runaway, with the consequent disaster, took place as has been set down.

Now we might steal a quick look at the two boys, who stood on the banks of Rocky Run River. Star had been rescued—Teddy roped him from the shore, and Flash drew him from the water. Miraculously, he was unhurt except for a few minor cuts and scratches. He trembled until Roy, weak, but standing upright, placed his hand on the pony’s neck.

“Needs some liniment,” Roy said, and laughed a little. After that one pregnant moment when Roy was brought to the shore the boys studiously avoided any mention of the incident, so close to tragedy, or of the rescue.

“Reckon he thinks it’s Saturday,” Teddy replied, laughing himself, albeit somewhat shakily. “Snakes, I’m wet! Good thing my skin doesn’t leak.”

“I’ll tell a maverick,” Roy chuckled. “Take you to think up that one. Now then! Yep, she’s stopped bleeding.” He put his hand to his head. “Glad of it—I don’t want to take the pony

back to Nell looking like the Spirit of '76. Say, by the way
—”

“Take a look,” Teddy interrupted. He motioned with his hand, and Roy turned.

Gazing at them calmly from level ground was the runaway pony. His saddle was still on.

“Well, you big, animated hunk of limburger!” Roy exclaimed. “Think it’s a joke, do you? Go on, tell a funny story now! Wait a second!” He walked toward the horse and stopped suddenly. “Say, Teddy, if it’s all the same to you—”

“You bet,” Teddy answered quickly. “I’ll get him. Better for you to keep quiet. You can ride him home.”

He started for the pony and led him without resistance to Roy.

“Here’s the creature, Roy, that started the whole thing,” he muttered. “Want to ride him? I’ll lead Star.”

“You bet I want to ride him!” was the vehement answer. “Say, what happened to you, Teddy? You had a long start on me.”

“Lost him,” Teddy said laconically. Not for worlds would he have told his brother that he had captured the horse and turned him loose so that Roy could have the glory of taking him to Nell. “He got away from me. Come on, let’s get started. Feel O. K. now?”

“Little damp,” Roy responded, and grinned. He climbed into the saddle. “Try to act up now, you bronc, and see where it gets you! All right, Teddy. We’re off!”

CHAPTER III

MYSTERIOUS RIDERS

THE two Manley boys rode back slowly, Roy glancing over his shoulder toward the rocks just before they were lost to sight. Teddy saw the gesture, and grinned.

“How high is the top of that cliff from the water, Roy?” he asked.

“One hundred feet; maybe less.”

“And how high was it when you were falling?”

“Seventeen and three-quarter miles.”

Teddy nodded. “I believe you have made a great discovery, Roy. Of course, some one else may have thought of it ahead of you. I seem to remember a man by the name of Einstein who made a crack about relativity—”

“That had to do with motion,” Roy answered seriously. “You see, he said that all motion is relative. For instance, suppose two trains are moving at the same rate of speed and you’re sitting in one of them. If there were no stationary objects near, it would be impossible to tell—”

“Oh, the sun shines bright in my old Kentucky ho-o-ome!” Teddy sang loudly. “ ’Tis summer, the darkies are gay. And the little tots play in the cabin round the do-o-o-ore! For my old Kentucky ho-o-o-o-o-ome—”

Roy leaned toward him casually, stretched out his arm and caught Teddy just under the fifth rib with his open hand. The “h-o-o-o-o-ome” was ripped apart, the pieces being expelled by a vigorous “ooof!”

“And no insurance,” Teddy grunted regretfully. “The home that had sheltered those people all these years, to be broken up by a careless blow of a calloused hand! My! My! Here, Flash, cut that out! Roy, hang on to Star for a second.”

He looked at his brother. Roy’s face was white and his eyes had little crinkles of pain at the corners.

“What the mischief?” Teddy demanded. “Your head, Roy? That was a pretty mean sock you got. Here, you tie this handkerchief around it—or let me. Go on, now, mind, little brother.”

“Guess I shouldn’t have been so funny, whacking you that way,” Roy muttered, and smiled weakly. “I don’t want that thing on my head, Teddy. If Nell sees me coming all tied up she’ll think something happened.”

“And nothing did happen—we’ve just been to a tea, and you got a little damp trying to do a six beat crawl in the punch bowl,” Teddy said sarcastically. “Listen to me, bucko! They’ll know you took a spill. How can they help knowing? But what of it? Tell ’em you got out all right—crawled ashore. Remember that? You crawled ashore.”

He glanced at Roy significantly.

If any one else had saved his life and Roy were asked to say nothing of it, he would have refused immediately. The smallest recompense one may offer to his rescuer is to acknowledge the debt publicly. But between these two there was no such formality. They were not concerned with what others thought of their relationship to one another. Calmly each accepted the full devotion of his brother, knowing that his own was accepted in turn. Thus, when Teddy signified that he did not wish known the part he had played in saving Roy, the other agreed at once to keep the true story hidden.

“All right, I crawled ashore,” Roy said. “And if you feel like playing doctor, go right ahead.”

He edged the pony toward Teddy and submitted to the ministrations of his brother. When the large handkerchief had been tied about the cut, Teddy removed his hat and placed it lightly on his brother’s head. Roy’s own hat was floating somewhere in Rocky Run River.

“It won’t hurt you with that bandage on,” he declared. “And this sun is pretty strong. No, leave it tilted that way.”

“Yes, doctor,” Roy replied meekly. “Anything you say. Now they’ll think I’m a gunman.”

“You look like a pirate,” Teddy laughed. “How does that bronc ride, Roy?”

“Pretty steady. Shakes now and then, that’s all. Jiminy! I didn’t notice that long scratch on Star’s hind leg.” He glanced down at the pony Teddy was leading. “Let me take him for a while.”

“No, you’ve got enough to attend to,” Teddy insisted. “Star’s all right. Needs a good rubdown, that’s all, and he’ll soon get it. We’ll be at the ranch in fifteen minutes.”

“Meantime—” Roy pulled his pony to a halt and began searching through his pockets.

“Money?” Teddy asked. “Forget it. If you had any in your pockets, it’s gone. Besides, what can you buy for eleven cents?”

“Not money,” Roy replied. “It’s—ah, here we have it!” He pulled a sodden mass from one of his pockets. The gleam of tinfoil showed as he held the object proudly up.

“For the love of Pete, what’s that?” Teddy gasped. “A first-aid kit?”

“Chocolate!” Roy exclaimed. “Real, honest-to-goodness chocolate—even if it is a little mildewed. Here, take a piece.”

“Not me,” Teddy said firmly. “I like my chocolate in a cup or dry—but not half and half. You go ahead and eat it.”

“I will,” Roy answered, munching on the candy. “It’s good, too.”

“*Is it?*” Teddy commented. “Well, that’s nice.”

He could think of nothing else to say, and the two boys rode for a while in silence. The chocolate gave Roy added strength, and gradually his cheeks were resuming their normal color, that peculiar reddish brown that comes to the faces of men who live in the open. There is nothing more sickly looking than to see a man whose skin is tanned go suddenly pale beneath it.

“You know,” Roy said after a few minutes, “I would have been after this bronco as quickly as you, only my stirrup slipped.”

“I thought something happened. I—er—thought I had him when he doubled back and got away again. Hope Nell didn’t get hurt when she fell off.”

“She didn’t,” Roy assured him. “Wanted to know if I thought she was a bag of potatoes when I suggested that Belle and Ethel carry her in. Or maybe I did say cart her in.”

“You probably did. From a youth you were given to the use of the correct expression in the incorrect place.”

Another period of silence. Then, from Teddy:

“Well, I’m glad of that.”

“Huh?”

“That she didn’t get hurt when she fell off. Just continuing the conversation. How’s your head feel now?”

“Is by me Ho Kay! Such is the resilience of youth that—”

“Applesauce! Snakes, it’s getting hotter by the minute! I’m nearly dry. And that reminds me—”

“Yes, I thought of that, too,” Roy said meaningly. “How’d you get wet watching me swim to shore?”

“Well, I waded in and helped you, then. That’ll pass.”

Both Roy and Teddy knew the real reason for not saying anything about the rescue. In the first place, Nell Willis would berate herself for having fallen off, and so, consequently, having exposed Roy to danger. In the second place—and this Teddy realized more than Roy—there would be small glory to Roy in having to be dragged from the river. And after all, it was Teddy’s fault, for his cry startled the runaway. For these and other reasons the boys judged it best that none but themselves should know the true story.

Ahead of them now was the hill that over-topped the 8 X 8 ranch. Within ten minutes they would be greeting the girls.

Suddenly Teddy, who was ahead leading Star, held up his hand.

“Got a question to ask?” Roy said laconically. “Well, go ahead. But remember teacher isn’t here to—”

“I heard a yell,” Teddy interrupted shortly. “A funny yell.”

“A funny yell?” Roy noticed the seriousness of his brother’s face and did not carry the joking further. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it sounded like a yell for help. Pipe down a second while I listen.”

The horses were brought to a halt. The boys remained silent, but heard nothing but the murmur of the river in the distance.

“Reckon I was mistaken,” Teddy said finally. “I must be hearing things. What say we get a wiggle on? You feel all right?”

“Sure! Step on it. Don’t worry about me. That chocolate brought me around.”

They swung their mounts into a trot. Both Star and Flash were well schooled, and could trot as well as any Eastern pony. Nearly all Western steeds will go right from a walk into a gallop, since there are few times when a trot is demanded of them. The Western stirrup is usually too long to allow “posting,” which is the peculiar rising and falling of the rider to co-ordinate with the pony’s motion.

At the foot of the hill was a small clump of trees, the only shade visible for miles around. Teddy headed for this.

“Any special reason?” Roy inquired.

“For going this way? Well, it’s no longer, and that yell—if it was a yell—came from this direction. We might take a look—see?”

“Check! We shall investigate the ghostly sound.”

The boys were intent on this new experience now. The fall into the river was forgotten for the moment. Roy scarcely realized that his head was injured, yet was forcibly reminded of the fact when he took off his hat to rub an itchy place.

“Man’s yell?” Roy asked after an interval. They were approaching the trees.

“I thought so. Not shrill enough for a woman or a girl. And it couldn’t have been a cat.” Teddy was referring to a mountain lion, not a house cat.

Coming into the shadow of the trees, Teddy halted again, as a man does who is uncertain of things around him. The

woods were about a quarter of a mile deep, tapering off at one end like a triangle.

“Going to ride through?” Roy asked.

“Might as well.” He urged Flash forward. “Maybe—”

The sentence was never finished. So close to them that they started violently, as did their horses, came a cry:

“Don’t! For heaven’s sake, don’t shoot! I haven’t got it with me, I tell you! I—”

The roar of a gun cut the voice short. It died out in a groan. From the point of the triangle two men rushed into the open—two men, riding hard and leading a third horse.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD MINER

A BOXER who has trained his muscles to react automatically and to dodge a blow from an antagonist almost before it has started, does not consciously order his knees to bend or his body to shift. Those things happen without deliberate volition, simply because the habit has been formed. Thus, when Teddy and Roy heard that shot, they crouched low in their saddles and jumped their mounts forward without the loss of a second. It was Star's bridle pulling him that caused Teddy to hesitate and to give thought to the best procedure.

Roy flashed ahead, intent on the pursuit of the men who, undoubtedly, had been engaged in the commission of something they wanted to keep hidden.

He was actually gaining on them when he heard his brother shout:

“Roy! Come back here! Here's a man dying!”

Roy pulled up his pony. The two men gave a quick glance to the rear and swung to the right, mounting the hill. They evidently thought the chase had been abandoned.

“Never mind about them, Roy! I need help here!”

Roy yanked the bronco's head in the air and turned him as on a pivot. He could hear his brother, but could not see him.

“Where are you?”

The question remained unanswered, for at that moment Roy reached the edge of the trees and saw Teddy.

The boy had dismounted and was leaning over a figure stretched out under a pine tree. The two ponies stood near by.

“Right, Teddy! Be with you in a second.”

Roy slid from the pony before it had come to a full stop. Then he was at his brother’s side and staring down at the body of a man—a miner, from his clothes—who lay breathing noisily, a thin trickle of blood running from his neck and spreading over the blue denim shirt.

“Got it good,” Teddy whispered. “Afraid he’s going to pass out pretty soon.”

The man was past fifty, from his grey hair, and nearly sixty from the lines creased deeply in his face. His eyes were sunken, the cheeks hollow, betokening much hardship. About six feet tall he was, with long arms that now lay like rods of flesh at his sides. The fingers opened and closed convulsively, then quieted.

As Roy bent toward him, he thought how much this unfortunate reminded him of Pop Burns, an old hand on the X Bar X. Tall, thin, grizzled, same facial characteristics, same broad forehead and large ears.

“Enough to be his brother,” Roy muttered.

Teddy nodded, understanding the remark.

“Does look like Pop,” he said in a low voice. “Gosh, he’s bleeding.”

Roy tore the handkerchief from his head and, using another and smaller one for a pad, he bound up the wound. Unskilled as the boys were in matters pertaining to surgery, they saw that the jugular vein was not severed, but that the blood came from smaller vessels beneath the skin.

“He’s got a chance if we can stop the bleeding,” Roy declared. “I wonder why—”

The man groaned and opened his eyes. They stared up at the two boys unseeing, and after a moment closed again.

“Wants to say something,” Teddy muttered. “Lie still, sir. You’ll be all right. Just lie still.”

Roy shook his head. The man’s face was growing greyer every second.

“We’ve got to get him out of here! Teddy, there’s only one thing to do. You ride like the mischief for the ranch and get Mr. Ball or somebody to bring a car. See if you can bring some aromatic spirits of ammonia. I’ll wait here.”

“Right!” Teddy wasted no words, but swung himself into the saddle. “Suppose they come back?” he called suddenly, as Flash started.

“Go on!” Roy yelled. “I can take care of myself!”

Teddy raised his elbows and Flash galloped away. In a moment horse and rider were out of sight.

Roy sat down on the ground beside the man, stretched his left leg out, and carefully raised the man’s head. Using his leg as a cushion, he managed to elevate the head and shoulders, so that the flow of blood somewhat diminished. As he did so, he noticed that there was no gun in the holster that lay by the man’s side.

“Murderers!” he muttered viciously. “Took his gun away and then shot him. Fine bunch! Something tells me we’re going to have a look for the boys who did this job. I think I’d recognize ’em if I saw ’em again.”

He touched the bandage lightly and observed that the bleeding had almost stopped. There was a dark stain on his

leather chaps and on the ground near the man's head.

“Lost plenty. They sure tried their best to finish him. They took his bronc, too. Maybe they had it in for him. Looks like a miner to me. Poor old geezer!”

He was talking aloud without realizing it, and, of a sudden, the man's lips began to move. Roy bent closer.

“Take it easy, old boy,” he said soothingly. “Don't try to talk. We'll soon have you fixed up.”

“Did they—did they—”

The voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

“Everything's all right,” Roy insisted. “Don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to talk later. Just lie still now.”

“—get it?” The lips moved, then were quiet.

Roy thought the man had lapsed into unconsciousness again, but the nostrils were twitching.

“They didn't get anything,” the boy said stoutly. “And we'll get them, too, as soon as you're fixed up!” A quick suspicion flashed through his mind. This was a robbery. The man had been carrying a sum of money and had been waylaid and robbed. Little as he knew about the case, Roy realized that the thing to do was to relieve the man's mind as much as possible.

“It's safe,” he said, talking as he would to a child. “They didn't get it. Forget about that. It's all right—all right.”

“I'm—I'm thankful!”

The whole body seemed to relax still more and the chest rose and fell with better regularity. Roy looked swiftly about him.

“Teddy ought to be back any minute,” he said to himself. “Maybe I'm lying to this fellow, but it's for the best. He

won't have a show if he starts to fret about what he lost.”

The minutes passed. Roy's leg stiffened and a painful cramp seized his thigh. But he moved it not an inch. The least motion might start the bleeding again, and the longer the flow of blood was arrested, the better chance the man had for recovery.

Finally, after what seemed weeks of waiting, Roy heard the exhaust of a car and a screeching of brakes as it came to a stop just outside the fringe of trees. A man came running toward him.

“Bug Eye!” Roy called softly. He held up his hand. “Take it mighty easy,” he said. “The bleeding's stopped. We don't want to start it again.”

“Who is he? What happened? Snakes, he sure looks done in!” Bug Eye, a puncher on the 8 X 8, bent over solicitously, a look of awe on his face. Bug Eye was young and impressionable. Every emotion showed plainly on his frank features.

“Don't know,” Roy answered. He glanced toward his brother, who, at that moment, came upon the scene.

“Couldn't find Mr. Ball. Got Bug Eye and a car as soon as I could,” Teddy explained. “Told Curly to see that a bed was fixed up. They've already telephoned for a doctor. Nell thought it was you, at first—had an awful time convincing her it wasn't. She wanted to come with us. Say, what's the orders? Are we—”

“Have to get him to the car,” Roy said swiftly. “One of you hold his head and shoulders while I get from under.”

Bug Eye placed his arms about the man's body and held him while Roy removed his leg. The circulation had stopped,

and when he tried to step forward he would have toppled over had not Teddy caught him.

“Asleep,” Roy declared, slapping and pinching the leg. “Be all right in a second. Now!” He straightened. “This isn’t going to be any cinch, Teddy. Bug Eye, you kneel down and get your arms under his legs. Teddy, you get next to Bug Eye, and support his back. I’ll watch his head. Careful, now! Easy!”

Inch by inch they raised the unconscious man, and then walked with him toward the car slowly, for the least jar might start a hemorrhage.

“Who shot him?” Bug Eye whispered.

“Don’t know who they were. I saw ’em, though.” Roy stopped and frowned for silence. He did not want the man to hear what really had happened, in case he were able to listen.

The auto Teddy had brought was a touring car with a large rear seat. The top was down.

“Good,” Roy said, as he saw it. “In the back with him. You go first, Bug Eye, then get out the other door. That’s it.”

They lifted the man and, under Roy’s direction, succeeded in placing him on the rear seat, Teddy still holding his body and Roy his head. Bug Eye released his hold on the legs and slid out the opposite door.

“I’ll tie the broncs to the back,” Bug Eye stated. “They can easy follow at the speed I’ll be goin’.”

So intense was the moment that the puncher neither noticed the cut on Roy’s head nor the condition of Star. He fastened the ponies to the top supports, and then got behind the wheel.

“As easy as you know how, Bug Eye,” Teddy cautioned. “Watch for every bump and slow down. All right. Let’s go!”

The starter whirred, the motor awoke, and the car began to move. Roy studied the man’s face anxiously. He and Teddy tried to hold the body so that it was absolutely immovable, but that was impossible. The plains are vastly different from a macadamized road. Try as they would, the boys could not keep the man from shifting a little.

The right arm moved and the hand clutched at the pocket.

“What’s he want?” Teddy whispered.

Roy did not answer. When the man lay quiet again, he touched his side lightly. The pocket was empty. As he held him, Roy could feel that there was nothing resembling a bag of money or gold about his person. The trousers were of khaki, and, unlike the trousers of a cow puncher, fitted tightly.

Roy looked at his brother and his lips formed the words:

“Whatever he had is gone, Teddy.”

He hesitated a moment. The man was limp, obviously unconscious. There was no danger of his hearing now.

“He’s been robbed,” Roy said.

CHAPTER V

BELLE ADA'S NERVE

“THEN—” Teddy Manley began, and stopped. “I see,” he said after a minute. “They plugged him, robbed him, and took his bronc.” His voice was low—bitter. “The spirit of the West! Romance! Well, we can do very well without that. Blamed cowards!” He clenched his fist. “Why couldn’t they take his money and call it a day? What did they have to—murder—him for?”

Roy placed a hand on his brother’s arm.

“Take it easy, boy,” he said slowly. “Talking won’t do a bit of good. We’ll have to wait and hear his story. Then, perhaps —”

The fire gradually died out of Teddy’s eyes. He realized that his brother was right, that it would do no bit of good to avenge the wounded man mentally. There would be time to take up the chase of the highwaymen after their charge was delivered into the hands of a doctor.

They reached the 8 X 8 without the man regaining consciousness. Mrs. Ball, a motherly woman who had within her the courage of the plains, was waiting for them at the door of the ranch house. She hurried forward as she saw the car pull into the yard.

“Where is he?” she exclaimed, although she plainly observed the figure in the rear. “Now, then—”

Bug Eye brought the car to a stop and Mrs. Ball fairly leaped to the running board.

“The poor soul! The poor soul! The doctor will be here any minute. I sent the girls upstairs and told them to stay there. This is no sight for them. Bug Eye, you take them horses to the back. All right, boys, bring him into the front room. I fixed the cot.” She looked again at the sunken cheeks of the old man. “Ah, the poor soul!” she muttered. “He’s going to have a bad time of it!”

Carefully the Manley boys lifted the sufferer out and bore him into the house. Nell and Ethel, wide-eyed, were leaning over the banisters. Belle Ada was sitting composedly on the top step. She saw Roy, and noticed the cut on his forehead.

“I’m going down,” she announced definitely. Wisely, she said nothing to the others of her brother’s injury. “You two stay here. No use crowding around him.”

Nell nodded, rather white of face. She had no wish to view the proceedings from a closer point.

Belle walked down the stairs calmly and when the man had been laid on the cot she approached Roy.

“What happened to you?” she asked in a low voice.

He turned swiftly.

“Nothing of any account, Sis,” he answered. “Tell you later. I got hurt a little trying to catch Nell’s bronc. Say, you’d better get some water boiling.”

Belle started toward the kitchen without a word. She was not unused to emergencies.

Mrs. Ball was doing all in her power to make the man comfortable. As the two boys stood there, contemplating the figure on the cot, the front door opened and the doctor entered, followed by Mr. Ball.

One glance Peter Ball took at the wounded man.

“Stranger,” he said briefly. “Miner, from his clothes. All right, doc, he’s yours. We’re waitin’.”

The doctor, a young chap but newly arrived in that section, seemed a trifle nervous. He set his bag on the floor and opened it. The moment he started to work, however, his nervousness disappeared. His entire thought was concentrated on the case before him.

“Boiling water,” he said sharply. “Where is it? Should have been ready!”

“It is,” a girl’s voice replied. “Here.”

Belle handed him a kettle and placed a basin at his side. Strangely enough, although the young doctor had scarcely looked at the others in the room, he glanced swiftly up at Belle and smiled.

“Thanks,” he said. “I didn’t mean to speak shortly. But I’ve got to work fast.”

The bandage about the man’s neck was removed and a thick stream of blood welled out. Mrs. Ball grew white, and leaned against her husband.

“I guess—after all—” she faltered.

“Out you go, honey, with me,” Peter Ball said simply. “This ain’t for you. There’s enough in here as it is.” He led her to the stairs and up.

The doctor looked swiftly about him. “I need some one—” he began, and fixed his gaze on Belle.

“Could I?” she asked eagerly. “I’m not afraid, you know.”

“I know you’re not,” was the quiet reply. “Now, boys, if you’ll just leave us alone for a while—I could work better. Mind?”

“Sure not!” Teddy answered heartily. He watched his sister for a moment, then turned to Roy. “Let’s go,” he said softly. “Belle is all right.”

They walked across the room and out of the door. Bug Eye was leaning against the railing, his eyes wide with anticipation.

“How is he? Find out who he was? Is he hurt bad? How much was he robbed of? Say, I bet—”

“Get a cinch-strap on that tongue of yours,” Roy said calmly. “Feels like a wind coming up.”

“Aw, but listen,” the puncher protested. “I want to know —”

“So do we,” Teddy interrupted. “But we don’t, yet. The doc’s in there fixing him up. By the way, Roy, when he comes out—” Teddy nodded significantly.

“Forget it!” his brother exclaimed. “You mean this scratch? I can’t tell it’s there.”

“Say, jingo, I never noticed that!” Bug Eye declared excitedly. “They get you too, Roy?” The puncher at this moment resembled a small boy who has just seen a circus wagon tip over. “When did that happen? The blamed polecats! Well, scorch my pants—”

“Switch over—you’re on the wrong track,” Roy said, with a grin. “This has got nothing to do with—him.” He jerked an expressive thumb. “I fell into the river and struck a rock. Teddy helped pull me out. That’s why we’re both rather damp. That’s all!”

“Oh,” said Bug Eye weakly. “I see.”

“Well, you old galoot!” Teddy cried. “I actually believe you’re disappointed! I bet you’d rather have him shot,

wouldn't you? Say, you have a fine nerve!"

"That ain't so!" Bug Eye protested. "I thought maybe—"

"I know. I was only kidding," Teddy said in a lower voice. "But we have other things to worry about now. I'd like to find out how much he was robbed of, if he was robbed." He walked toward the corral, a little distance from the ranch house. "Let's sit," he suggested, and climbed to the top rail.

Roy and Bug Eye followed Teddy's example.

"Say, one of the boys is fixin' your bronc up," Bug Eye said suddenly. "He's got quite a few scratches, Roy."

"I'm going to have a look," the boy said quickly. "Be back soon." He jumped to the ground.

Teddy and Bug Eye watched him go.

"He'll go an' do the very same thing to Star that Jules Kolto just did," Bug Eye said musingly. "Sure loves that bronc. Well, Teddy?"

"You want the story?" Teddy answered, grinning. "It isn't very long. Roy and I were coming in from capturing the pony that Nell got spilled from. As we were passing those woods, we heard a yell. Then a shot. Then we found him. The rest you know." He said nothing about his rescue of Roy, believing, and rightly, that Bug Eye was too excited over the wounded man to make any inquiries.

"Say, you think he's gonna cash in?" the puncher demanded.

Teddy shook his head.

"Can't say. I sure hope not. But he's got a mighty bad wound—right through the neck. How the bullet missed the jugular vein I don't see. He sure had Providence looking after him."

“Old guy, ain’t he? Looks like a miner. Think he’s any relation to Pop Burns?”

“Oh, you noticed it too, did you? He certainly looks enough like him to be his brother. Wonder what his name is?”

“Maybe we’ll never know that.” Bug Eye kicked somberly at a lower rail. “It’ll be bad business if he cashes in his checks.”

“Forget that kind of talk,” Teddy said sharply. “I have an idea that he’ll pull through.” He hesitated a moment. “Say, what’s the doc’s name?”

“Ring, I think. Don’t know his first name. Seems like a good feller.”

“He does, for a fact.” Teddy examined his thumb carefully. “Hope Belle won’t get sick, helping him. She’s not so old to be doing that sort of thing.”

“Belle is plenty there,” Bug Eye exclaimed decidedly, if not too clearly. “She won’t welsh.”

“Anyhow, I’ll take a look and see,” Teddy said suddenly. “I think it would be all right to go in now.”

He and Bug Eye climbed to the ground and started for the house. As they neared the entrance, Belle appeared at the door. Her cheeks were a little pale, but, otherwise, she was perfectly composed.

“He’s conscious,” she said clearly. “And Doctor Ring says he has a good chance. Where’s Roy?”

“Looking after Star. How do you feel, Belle? Did you—”
She shook her head.

“Didn’t bother me in the least. I’m thirteen, you know—almost fourteen. Say, Teddy, you and Roy are wanted inside.”

She held the door open. “The man who was hurt has been asking for you.”

CHAPTER VI

STOLEN NUGGETS

TEDDY MANLEY, lines of anxiety in his face, went into the parlor. The doctor saw him and motioned him to one side.

“Listen, Teddy,” he said quickly; “the way things look now, he’s got a chance—a slim one, but a chance. Whoever put that bandage around his neck probably saved his life. But he’s worrying about something—wouldn’t tell me what it was. We can’t have that. He needs everything in his favor if he’s to pull through. Understand?”

Teddy looked at the physician.

“It’s this way, doc,” he answered in a low voice. “He’s been robbed. Now, suppose he asks me where his money—or whatever he had with him—is? What’ll I say?”

Doctor Ring thought for a moment. The man’s face was turned to the wall.

“Tell him the truth,” the doctor said suddenly. “We can’t lie, although if it meant saving a patient’s life I’d lie like Ananias. But he’ll ask to see the money if we tell it’s been saved. We can’t take a chance on that. Tell him the truth.”

“Right.”

Teddy went slowly toward the cot. As the man heard him coming, he turned his whole body and stared at the boy. The neck was swathed in heavy gauze, making it impossible for him to move his head.

“Well, sir,” Teddy called cheerfully, “how are things?”

The bloodless lips moved and a disappointed look came into the eyes.

“That’s not the one,” the man whispered. “He looks like him, but he ain’t. I want—” His breath caught, and he stopped, his bony hands clenching.

“Where’s Roy?” Belle asked quickly. She was standing beside Teddy. “Can’t somebody get him?”

But there was no need for that. The screen door whined and Roy entered. As the man on the cot saw him, his face lighted up.

“Come here,” he whispered weakly. “I want to—ask—”

Roy glanced toward the doctor for directions, and received a nod. He went to the side of the man.

“I’m glad to see you’re better,” he said simply. “What was it that you wanted to ask me?”

The man’s hand tapped the coverlet impatiently.

“That’s right,” he breathed. “You’re the—one. Listen, boy—listen—” He raised up on one elbow, and the doctor crossed swiftly to him.

“None of that,” he said sternly. “You promised to keep quiet if I let you see him. Lie back, now.”

“Right—you’re the doctor.” A mirthless grin twisted the thin lips. “I’ll be good. Listen, boy!” He took a deep breath. “Where’s my nugget?”

“Nugget!” Roy started back. “Is that what you—what nugget?” he asked blankly.

“My nugget! My nugget! The one I worked for, slaved for, fought for! Where is it?” The eyes were burning.

“I’m afraid—” Roy hesitated. “Say, what’s your name?”

“Decker. Jerry Decker. I’m a miner. I had a nugget with me that was worth—” He stopped. “Some smaller ones, too,” he continued in a toneless voice. The excitement seemed to

drain his strength. “My nuggets—where are they?” he finished faintly.

Roy glanced down at him pityingly.

“Mr. Decker, your nuggets are gone,” he said slowly. “You’ve been robbed.”

“Robbed!” The word was wrung from him. “Robbed! The nuggets I worked for—slaved for! Worth—”

His eyes opened wide, his whole body tensed. Then, with a sigh, he relaxed. The eyes closed. The corners of the mouth went down.

“Watch it,” came a voice behind Roy. It was the doctor. “Get his arm out from under that blanket—quick!”

Roy, understanding, did as he was told. There was a swift jab of a hypodermic needle. In a moment the breathing resumed, the pulse fluttered.

Doctor Ring watched the face anxiously.

“I was afraid of that,” he said softly. “It was too much for him.” There was a moment’s silence. Then the lips moved again, and a faint flush of color came to the cheeks.

The doctor gave a “whew!” of relief.

“He’ll come out of it now,” he said finally. “It’s better to have it over with. Besides, he may have needed just that stimulus to help him fight. Now he’ll get well just to recover his nuggets.” His tone was hopeful. Plainly he had been in doubt as to whether or not he had done the right thing in letting Roy see and talk to the patient.

Roy walked to the other side of the room after giving one more glance at the unconscious man. At that moment Mr. Ball descended the stairs.

“How’s he comin’?” he whispered. “Any better?”

The doctor nodded.

“I think so,” he replied. “I’ll have to stay here for a while yet.”

“All right,” Peter Ball remarked. “I sure hope he makes out. What happened to him? Miner, ain’t he?”

Mr. Ball, Teddy, and Roy went into the yard. Bug Eye was waiting for them.

“He’s a miner, and he’s been robbed,” Roy declared. “Name’s Jerry Decker.”

“Robbed! Jumpin’ catamounts! What’s he been robbed of?”

“Nuggets, he says,” Teddy replied. “He was just going to tell us how much they were worth when he went off again. Wonder where he was mining.”

“The most likely place would be Nugget Camp,” Mr. Ball said. “They been placerin’ around there for the last ten years, but I never heard tell of anybody gettin’ rich from it.”

“Nugget Camp!” Bug Eye burst out. “I know where that is, boss! Say, I heard tell around town of a strike bein’ made there. But nobody seemed to know who made it. Nugget Camp, hey? So that’s where he come from!”

“Well, I’m only guessin’,” Mr. Ball admitted. “But that’s the only minin’ place anywheres near here.”

“That’s where he came from, all right,” Teddy asserted. “He must have been on his way to town when he got shot up and robbed.” He stopped, and looked over at Mr. Ball. “Do you think there’s a chance—” he began.

“We’ll try it,” the rancher interrupted quickly, sensing what Teddy meant. “They’re probably out of this vicinity now, but

we owe it to that poor old geezer to have a look, anyhow. Bug Eye, get my bronc. You're comin', too."

"Sure, boss!" the puncher answered eagerly. "Right away?"

"Right away. I'll tell my wife." He walked swiftly toward the house.

"Looks like business," Teddy declared. "How'd you find Star?"

"O. K. Jules Kolto fixed him up for me. He'll be all right to ride. Take some of the stiffness out of him. Come on, let's get going."

"Hey!" Mr. Ball called from the porch. Then, as he recalled the sick man within, he motioned with his arm. When Teddy and Roy approached, he said: "We'll get some chuck first. Might be a long ride."

He, Teddy, Roy, and Bug Eye ate together. In the middle of the meal Mr. Ball saw the cut on Roy's head, as the boy unwittingly brushed back his hair. The rancher heard the story of the spill into the river and insisted that Roy should see the doctor before the party started.

So with a strip of adhesive tape covering the wound, Roy mounted Star and waited for Mr. Ball to give the signal to start. The doctor had declared that Roy's cut was superficial, and there would be no danger in riding.

"All set, boys?" Mr. Ball called. He had provided Teddy and Roy with dry clothes—although their own were nearly dry by that time—and with guns.

"All set, boss," Bug Eye answered. "Let's go!"

The three girls, Nell, Ethel, and Belle Ada, waved to them from the porch.

“Good luck!” Belle called softly.

With a swirl of their hats the boys leaped their broncos forward. The hunt was on.

They made for the clump of woods where Decker had been found.

“That’ll be a starting point, anyhow,” Mr. Ball asserted. “We may strike something there that’ll help us. Otherwise, it’ll be like lookin’ for a needle in a haystack.”

“Sure will,” Teddy agreed. “Baby, I’d like to come across those waddies!”

“I’ll tell a maverick!” Roy ejaculated. “Knocking off an old man after robbing him, then taking his bronc!”

There was little more said until they reached the woods. Roy showed just where they had picked Decker up, and even the marks where his body had lain, his head supported by Roy’s leg.

“We saw ’em come riding out of there,” Teddy declared, pointing to the edge of the trees. “See—where it makes sort of a triangle?”

“Uh-huh,” Mr. Ball responded. “Which direction did they take?”

“Swung to the right. Teddy yelled at me then, and I turned back. Oh, they’re well on their way by now.”

“Afraid so.” Mr. Ball had dismounted, and was examining the ground intently. “Suppose you fellers get off an’ take a look around. May spot something.”

“Clues, hey, boss?” Bug Eye cried excitedly. “Snakes!”

“Yea, clues. Make believe you’re a detective.” The rancher stood directly on the place where Roy had told him Decker was lying. Then he faced about.

“This way they went,” he said, more to himself than to the others. “You can see the hoofprints of their broncos. One, two, three ponies.”

“They took his so he couldn’t follow, I reckon,” Teddy said.

Mr. Ball did not reply. He walked slowly forward.

Presently he uttered an exclamation and stopped. Then he bent to the ground.

“What is it, boss—find somethin’?” Bug Eye asked eagerly.

Mr. Ball nodded.

“Take a look,” he said in a queer voice. “Never saw one of these out here before.”

The others grouped about him. He held something up to them.

“Know what it is?” he said quietly.

Bug Eye shook his head. Teddy and Roy answered nothing.

“It’s a German pistol—a Mauser,” the rancher said deliberately. “One shell has been fired.”

CHAPTER VII

THE GOLD RUSH

“A GERMAN gun out here! We’ve found our clue!” cried Bug Eye excitedly.

“So,” Teddy mused, “a Dutchman shot Decker!”

Mr. Ball shrugged his shoulders.

“Germans are not Dutchmen,” he corrected. “An’ just because we find a German gun is no proof that a German did the job. Of course, he might have—the signs point that way. Don’t know any one who owns one of these things. No real puncher would ever handle one. The balance ain’t so good.” He hefted it in his hand. “I seen plenty of ’em,” he mused. “A plenty!”

Roy glanced at him. Mr. Ball had been a captain in the infantry during the war, and had seen action in France. He never talked about his experiences on the other side.

“Well, we got somethin’ to go by!” Bug Eye burst out. “Snakes, a real German gun! What do you suppose—”

“Don’t go flingin’ words away regardless,” Mr. Ball said dryly. “Actually, we don’t know an awful lot more than we did before. But this might help—it might help.”

“What’s the plan now?” Roy asked. “Do we start to search for ’em?”

“Well—” Mr. Ball looked down again at the weapon he held in his hand. “It’s gettin’ late,” he went on. “We can’t just roam around like a bunch of steers, hopin’ to run across the waddies who shot Decker. I think—” he deliberated. “I think

we'd better go back. When you boys got to head for the X Bar X?"

"To-morrow morning," Roy replied. "Dad expects us."

"O. K. Then we'll hit for home now. I want to think this thing out."

They made a further search, but found nothing else, and shortly afterward headed their ponies toward the 8 X 8. Nothing was said of their discovery when they reached the ranch.

The wounded man was no better; but he was no worse. Doctor Ring had left after giving positive directions that Decker was to talk to no one. Thus the boys were still wondering how much he had been robbed of.

Early the next morning Roy, Teddy, and Belle started for home. Decker seemed stronger and was able to take some milk through a tube. Neither of the boys saw him again before they left, obeying the doctor's instructions.

"Thanks again for catching my pony," Nell called to Roy as he was riding out of the yard. "Maybe I'll do as much for you some day!"

"Maybe," Roy laughed. "In the meantime—take keer o' yo'self!"

"Say good-bye to Doctor Ring for me!" Belle exclaimed.

Teddy and Roy turned to look at her.

"So-o-o!" Teddy drawled. "That's the way the land lies, does it?"

"Well, well," Roy mocked. "Our icicle sister going to be a nurse! Hm! Did you notice the doc's eye-lashes, Teddy? Such nice, splendid ones!"

“And he’s got a wonderful voice,” Teddy went on. “It’s thrilling! It makes you feel—oh, just like—”

“Oh, hush up!” Belle cried, her face a fiery red. “I could tell plenty about you two, if I wanted to! Curly, Teddy told me the other day that you—”

“So long! Got to be going now! So long! So long! Sorry to rush away like this!” Teddy seized Belle’s bronco by the bridle and led him out of the yard. The boy was talking loudly, trying his best to drown out his sister’s voice, but she managed to shout, “were the prettiest girl he’d ever seen!” before he succeeded in taking her so far away that her words would not carry to the interested listeners.

The bout was declared a draw, and the two brothers and the sister went on their way with grins on their faces. The talk naturally veered to the happenings of yesterday, and Belle told what had occurred while she was helping Doctor Ring.

“Mr. Decker talked a lot,” she declared. “Mostly about Nugget Camp. He spoke about—”

“Then it *was* Nugget Camp!” Teddy interrupted. “Maybe he made a real strike!”

“I think he did, because he was babbling of ten and twenty thousand dollars,” Belle said seriously.

“Twenty *thousand!*” Roy gave vent to a long whistle. “That’s *some* money!”

“Did he say his nuggets were worth that much?” Teddy demanded.

“No, he didn’t. But I gathered that’s what he meant.”

“That is a big loss,” the boy remarked. “No wonder he was worried. Me, I’d be worried, too. Poor geezer! After working for maybe two years then making a strike—and he gets

robbed of it! Not only that, but he may even die in the bargain.”

“I really think he’ll recover,” Belle said. “He’s thin, but he’s lived in the open most of his life. His stamina is good. He lost a lot of blood, but—”

“A-ha, words of wisdom!” Teddy laughed. “So doc said all this, did he?”

“Well, what if he did?” Belle answered, raising her chin defiantly. “It’s all true!”

“Sure it is,” Roy comforted her. “I certainly hope he pulls through. Moreover, I hope we get his nuggets back for him.”

The morning was clear, the air keen, and each of the three rode as though this was the thing they wanted most of all to do—ride and breathe and live. They were at a period in life when the world showed itself to be a particularly wonderful place. Every bird that winged overhead, every cloud that veiled the sun for a moment, every breeze that blew, seemed to exist just for them.

And how were they to know that circumstances were about to fling them into a maelstrom of activity, that the next few weeks were to be charged with excitement?

Even as they rode, talking calmly, the events of the past fading almost into insignificance beside the wonder of the morning, a rider approached them. He was coming swiftly, his pony kicking up little spurts of dust.

“Some one’s in a mighty hurry,” Teddy observed.

They reined in, watching the horseman.

“Looks familiar,” Roy remarked. “Say, by golly—”

“It’s Jim Casey from home!” Teddy exclaimed. “Wonder if anything happened?” A frown came to his face.

“Oh, I hope dad’s all right,” Belle breathed. “Do you suppose he’d be sent after us?”

“He’s got something over his shoulder,” said Teddy. “Looks like a pick or a shovel. Hey, Jim! Yo-o-o!”

The rider came closer, and stopped his pony, stiff-legged.

“What-a-ya say!” he yelled. “Heard the news?”

They saw then that it was a pick Casey had on his shoulder. Hanging from his saddlehorn was a bundle of clothes.

“What news? What happened? Everything all right at home?” Roy asked quickly.

“Sure, as far as I know! It ain’t that!” Jim, a tall, well-built puncher, of about thirty-five, swung the pick down. “It ain’t that. Nothin’s happened there. But some place else there has!”

“Well, what?”

“A gold strike! A bonanza! At Nugget Camp! Millions of dollars lyin’ around loose! Me, I’m on my way to stake a claim. One guy found a nugget worth—oh, fifty thousand! Maybe more! Boy, we’ll all be rich!” He was prancing his pony around excitedly. “I told yore pop I was goin’, an’ I am! What’s the use of workin’ for wages when you can lean over an’ pick up gold! Hey?” He paused, breathless.

“At Nugget Camp, you said?” Teddy asked, looking at the cowboy strangely.

“That’s what! An’ I’m goin’ to be one of the lucky ones. No passin’ up a chance like that for yours truly!”

“But listen—” Roy began, when Jim Casey cut him short.

“I’d like to, Roy, but I ain’t got time. There’s lots goin’ out. I want to get a good claim. So long! Wish me luck!” and

he was off.

“Well, what do you know about that!” Teddy said slowly. “One of our own men got the fever!”

“And he’s a man we can’t spare, either,” Roy remarked. “There’s plenty of work to be done around the ranch just now. Hope he’s the only one. A strike at Nugget Camp!”

“That’s where Mr. Decker found his nuggets!” Belle exclaimed. “There must be some truth in it, Roy.”

“Oh, I suppose there is.” He was frowning intently at the ground. “But I sure hope the other boys don’t get bitten by the gold bug. We need every man we have.”

“Oh, there’s always one or two who want to make money easily,” Teddy replied. “Jim will come back soon enough. I bet he got a fine razzing for leaving the ranch.”

“Well, I hope he’s the only one,” Roy said again. “Nugget Camp—a played-out placer station! And they find gold now!”

“And see what it’s brought already!” Belle said indignantly. “A poor old man gets shot and robbed, all because of the gold! Oh, I hope nothing else will happen!”

“Gold brings trouble, always,” Teddy mused. “If the word gets around—and it looks as though it had—that a strike has been made out here, it’ll mean the riff-raff of the West will be down on our necks. Gamblers, swindlers, gunmen—”

“Lucky we started to-day and not to-morrow,” Roy said, as they urged their horses forward. “Dad will need us, now this thing has come.”

“Oh, it isn’t as serious as all that,” Teddy remarked easily. “It’s true that Jim was a good man, but we can get along without him if we have to. Anyway, he may be back soon.”

“Yes, that’s all right as far as it goes,” Roy declared. “But suppose more of them decide to quit and go gold hunting? Then where’ll we be, with the fall coming on? We need—”

“Who’s that?” Belle interrupted. “Another rider—no, two of them! And they’re coming fast!”

The boys, startled, not knowing what to expect, looked up. Bearing down upon them were two horsemen, partly hidden in a cloud of dust. The wind shifted, the dust cloud parted, and Teddy gave a cry.

“It’s two more from home, Roy, as sure as you’re a foot high! It’s—”

“Nat Raymond and Gus Tripp! Well, for the love of Pete! To think that those two—” He stopped, overwhelmed.

The riders, with picks, shovels, and kits hanging from their saddles, rapidly approached. As they came within hailing distance the boys heard a yell that caused them to draw breath quickly. It came from Gus Tripp.

“Yey, Teddy! Roy! Come on, join the rush! Head in with us! Jim Casey’s gone, an’ the rest are goin’!”

“Where?”

The answer was already known to them even before Gus shouted:

“To Nugget Camp!”

CHAPTER VIII

POP LAYS DOWN THE LAW

BELLE, Roy, and Teddy Manley rode into the ranch yard of the X Bar X. They had been away for three days, and Teddy looked about him to see if anything had changed—that gesture we all make when coming back to a place we love after being absent for even a short while. It is a gesture not so much of inquiry as of reassurance.

Yet, as his eyes searched the familiar outlines of the buildings, something did seem different. True, Sing Lung stood at the door of his cook house, a broad grin on his face. That grin was a permanent fixture. The corral, toward the rear, embraced with its wooden arms the usual number of horses. The ranch house offered a friendly welcome.

Yet, with all this, there was an air of strangeness about the place. Teddy sensed it, as did Roy and Belle. Yes, things *had* changed.

“Howdy, Sing!” Teddy shouted. “What’s the good word?”

“Good wold, he fly coop,” Sing replied, waving his hand expressively. His grin faded somewhat. “Yo’ daddy want see you boys inside.”

“I reckon,” Roy breathed. “There’ll be plenty to talk about, too. Right, Sing!” he said aloud. “Come on, Teddy, let’s get our broncs some water. Belle, you hop off and run in to say hello to mother and dad.”

Belle nodded, and slid from her horse. Teddy and Roy watered and fed the ponies, then hastened toward the house. Their mother met them at the door.

“Have a nice visit?” she asked, smiling, although her eyes appeared tired. Her golden hair was greying just the tiniest bit. Roy, his chin on a level with his mother’s eyes, seized her in his arms.

“Hello, Mumsey!” He kissed her tenderly. “Boy, I’m glad to see you!”

“Hey, push over!” Teddy exclaimed. “She has another son, you know!” He took her gently from his brother and bending his head rubbed his cheek against hers. “Hello, old girl,” he said softly. “How’s everything?”

“Stop—you’re mussing me!” Mrs. Manley laughed. “My goodness, such polar bears as I have for children!” Her eyes were shining now, the tired look gone from them. “Now sit down like good boys and get something to eat. Unless—” she motioned with her head. “Want to see father?”

“Yes,” Teddy replied laconically. “We’re not hungry—at least I’m not.”

“Goes for me, too,” Roy declared. “Say, Mom, where is dad?”

“In his office. He’s waiting for you.”

Teddy kissed her again, and, followed by Roy, started toward the next room, beyond which Mr. Manley had his small office. As Teddy opened the door, his father, who had been sitting at his desk, a corn-cob pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth, arose.

Once in a while one sees a man who instinctively reminds one of the plains, of bucking broncos, and of ropes snaking through the air to settle over the horns of a steer. He seems the very spirit of the West. In a parlor or drawing-room or on Broadway, he appears out of place. One is apt to mutter,

“How’d he get so far from home? Wonder where he left his pony?”

Such a man was Bardwell Manley—tall, lean, and with that peculiar power about him that hovers over those who are simple and direct men; a mustache that drooped, the ends coming below his mouth on either side; steel-blue eyes, that could twinkle with humor or narrow into two pin-points of light; a skin that stayed brown all the year round.

He thrust out his hand and gripped the hand of Teddy, then of Roy.

“Boys,” he said quietly, “I’m glad to see you. Both all right?” Just that. Yet there was a world of meaning in the simple words.

“Great, Dad,” Roy answered. “Feeling fine!” He waited. “Mother looked a little tired,” he said finally.

Mr. Manley frowned. “I know,” he said softly. “We’ve been a little worried. The thing came so quick—say, had grub?”

“Not hungry,” Roy stated. “We ate a big meal before we left and Mrs. Ball put us up a snack to eat on the way home. We’ll wait for supper. It’s four o’clock now.”

“All right.” He almost sighed the words. “Well, you might as well sit. Everything all right at the 8 X 8?”

“Yea, everything’s all right, except—”

“Except what?”

“Well, Teddy and I were riding yesterday, trying to catch a runaway, and we heard a yell then a shot. We found a miner, fellow by name of Decker, with a bullet through his neck. Brought him back to the ranch and got a doctor. Don’t know whether he’ll pull through or not. He was robbed.”

“Robbed! What of?” Mr. Manley leaned forward.

“Of some nuggets,” Teddy said casually. “Worth quite a bit of money, from all indications. He was mining at Nugget Camp.”

“Mining at—” Mr. Manley’s face took on a tinge of red. “So that’s it,” he muttered thickly. “Listen, boys. I have something to tell you.”

“I think, Dad, we know it already,” Roy said gently. “You mean about Nat and Gus and Jim pulling stakes?”

“Yes. How’d you know?” Mr. Manley looked at them quickly.

“We met ’em on the way as we were riding in. Jim was pretty excited, and so were the others. Just what does it mean, Dad?”

“It means we’re in sort of a hole, for the time being,” Mr. Manley answered bitterly. “Oh, I can’t really blame ’em. I’d probably do the same thing myself. You see, late last night a puncher rode in and started a wild story of how people were gettin’ rich at Nugget Camp. No one believed him at first, but he pulled out a pocket full of nuggets. Then he told how some old feller—the one you found, I reckon—came across with a pan worth fifty thousand. I reckon that’s a bit exaggerated, though. So he got robbed! Boys, I don’t like the looks of things—not a little bit, I don’t!” The frown came again to his face. “Something tells me we’re in for some mighty dirty weather.”

“And then three of our men hit the trail?” Teddy asked.

“Uh-huh, three; and another just an hour ago. You missed him.”

“Four men gone!” Roy gave a long whistle. “That’s past the joking stage. And there’s plenty to be done just now, isn’t there, Dad?”

“Plenty! Well, we’ll have to get along, that’s all. You boys will have to take the range.”

“Sure, we will!” Teddy said heartily. “Feels good to get back on the job again. Now don’t worry about this, Dad. Things will shape up.”

“I reckon,” Mr. Manley agreed, and grinned. “Or you two will shape ’em up, hey?”

“Right!”

“Now you can go an’ talk to the boys if you feel like it. Pop Burns didn’t go—said they’d have to give him a guarantee before he’d believe in any strike. He’s seen too many of ’em.”

“We want to ask Pop something, anyway,” Teddy said. “That man we found, Decker, looks enough like Pop to be his brother. He hasn’t got any relatives around here, has he, Dad?”

“Not that I know of. Better ask him. All right, boys. I guess I’ve finished—the powwow’s over.” He turned back to his desk. Teddy and Roy walked slowly out the door and into the yard.

“He’s worried, whether he admits it or not,” Roy declared when they were out of earshot. “If any more leave we’ll be in a nice fix.”

“Let’s see who’s around the bunk-house,” Teddy suggested. “Maybe Pop will be holding forth.”

He was right in this assumption. As they reached the bunk-house an argumentative voice came to them:

“You waddies think you’re so all-fired smart, wantin’ to hit the trail just ’cause some hombre picks up a pan of fool’s gold! Listen, an’ bend yore ears this-a-way. I may not be an expert at math-a-matics. I’m a leedle shy on geography. Sometimes I misspell a word—sometimes. But I do know somethin’ about *minin*’!”

“That’s Pop,” Teddy asserted. “He’s laying down the law!”

“I’ve seen fourteen rushes,” Pop went on, “in one place or ’nother. Fourteen! An’ in thirteen of ’em the boys came back licked. Done up, frazzled, socked in the nose! Savvy? Only one of ’em was successful!”

“Yea, but listen, Pop,” a voice interrupted. “We got proof! Didn’t that galoot show us the stuff? Didn’t he swear that a big strike had been made? Didn’t—”

“You tell ’em, Pop!” Roy exclaimed, and he stepped toward the group. “What’s the big argument?”

“Here now—here now—Teddy, Roy! You come here an’ listen to what these bozos are tryin’ to get away with! Boys, I’m sure glad to see yuh!”

Pop, the oldest hand on the X Bar X, as bald as the day he was born and as lean as a piece of gristle, waved toward them.

“Boys,” he shouted, “we got news for you! These here spavined, sway-backed, horny-handed sons of toil say they’re gonna toss up their jobs and go out to Nugget Camp an’ pick up golden dollars! Speak up, boys—let’s hear yore opinions!”

CHAPTER IX

ROY MAKES A STATEMENT

TEDDY and Roy Manley exchanged glances. Pop was, in effect, asking them to give their definite approval or disapproval of the rush toward the new gold fields. Whether or not the men would take their words to heart was another question. It might be that with a simple sentence they could stop the stampede and save the remainder of the men for the ranch.

But were they justified? Could they honestly say they knew the claims at Nugget Camp to be worthless and that the cowboys would only be wasting their time if they threw up their jobs and went mining? Could they?

Roy was thinking hard. As the elder brother, it would be his place to answer Pop's appeal, and he knew Teddy was leaving the decision to him. Again the thought occurred—even if it were in his power to stem the rush by telling the men there was little or no gold at Nugget Camp, did he have that right? Would it be honest?

“Seems you've been saying about all there is to say, haven't you, Pop?” Roy asked quizzically, more to gain time to think than for any other reason.

“Rolls off 'em like water from a duck's back,” Pop said in a disgusted tone. “Can't tell these hombres nothin'. They was all born wise an' have been gettin' wiser every day of their lives, accordin' to them. I tell 'em somethin' an' they give it the merry ha-ha. By golly, I *have* seen fourteen rushes! That's somethin', ain't it? How many have you fellers seen?” He

glared at the assembled punchers, his eyes afire under the tightly stretched skin of his forehead.

“Now, Pop, we ain’t disputin’ yore word,” Rad Schmill said uneasily. “But, snakes, if these here reports are *true*—”

“But they *ain’t*, blame it! They ain’t!” Pop shouted. “Listen, Roy! Have you heard anything of some old miner strikin’ it rich at Nugget Camp, then gettin’ robbed of his nuggets? Likely story, ain’t it!” Pop sneered. “If it *was* true I’d hear about it first thing, ’cause I got a cousin that’s been pannin’ that section for goin’ on two years now. All he ever made out of it was enough gold to fill his back tooth where he bit into a hickory nut without peelin’ it first. Well, Roy?”

The boy hesitated no longer. There was but one thing to do—tell the truth and trust to the loyalty of some of the punchers to stay on the ranch until the boss could get others to fill their places. Two men they could be sure of—Pop Burns and Nick Looker. Nick was not in this crowd.

“Well, Pop, I’ll tell you,” Roy said slowly. “Part of the story’s true. Teddy and I both saw the man who was robbed—in fact, we carried him to the 8 X 8. He was a pretty old geezer. Can’t say how much he was robbed of, because he went under before he could tell us. The doctor’s opinion is that he has a chance to pull through. The bullet caught him in the neck.”

Pop was gazing at Roy with a surprised, hurt stare.

“So it did happen, after all!” the old man muttered. “Say, boys—” his voice was toneless—“what was his name? Do you know?”

“Decker,” Teddy replied.

Pop sprang to his feet.

“Decker! What was his first name?”

“Jerry, I think. He looks sort of like—”

“Jerry Decker! My cousin! That poor old washed-out bronco-forker! Jerry Decker!” Pop shook his head sadly. “Listen, boys—” he looked at them appealingly. “How bad’s he hurt?”

“Pretty bad, I’m afraid, Pop,” Roy said seriously. “Tell you—I’ll go in and telephone to the 8 X 8 for you and find out how he is now.”

“Wish you would, Roy. I wish you would.” Pop appeared dazed by the news. “An’ say—” his eyes flashed—“who done it? Got any idea a-tall?”

“Not any definite one,” Teddy said. “We did find something that might help.” He told about the German gun. “But I never heard of any Germans around here except that family over near Sanborn’s Point. They wouldn’t hurt a fly. Never saw any more law-abiding people.”

“No, it wasn’t them,” Pop agreed. “A German gun, hey! Baby, I hope—” He clenched his fists. Then his mood changed and he glanced at Roy. “Say, would you mind—”

“Right away,” Roy declared. “You wait here.”

The punchers crowded about Teddy as Roy walked toward the house. He answered their questions as best he could, thankful that their minds were somewhat diverted from the idea of leaving immediately by their curiosity over Pop’s cousin.

Supper would be ready in half an hour. Other men drifted toward the bunk-house, tossing saddle blankets under their beds, pouring water into tin basins and removing, somewhat, the traces of their alkali trade. The talk was subdued,

strained, as though each was waiting for the other to say something that remained unsaid. They greeted Teddy heartily, and exchanged a few words with him. Pop, sitting on the top of the three steps that led into the bunk-house, moved his form slightly as each puncher brushed by him and offered an unintelligible grunt to all remarks.

Nick Looker arrived, and, seeing Teddy, thrust an arm about the boy's shoulders. These two were such friends as one often sees in the West—friendship based, not only on a sincere liking one for the other, but also on an appreciation of the other's worth. They had been together for six years, ever since Nick, a mere youngster, had thrown his fortunes in with the X Bar X. He was in his early twenties even now. In build he resembled Teddy—rather tall, sinewy, broad of shoulder and narrow of hip. In feature he was what the young cow puncher is supposed to be, but scarcely ever is, high cheek bones, thin nose, deep blue eyes set wide, sensitive mouth, firm chin.

He and Teddy, as they stood there, framed against the reddening evening sky, were a picture to capture the eye of an artist.

“And the mommer bear said to the little bear, ‘well, it’s about time you showed up, you tyke; where you been till this hour in the mornin’?” Nick exclaimed, grinning.

“Visiting,” Teddy said, answering Nick’s grin with one of his own. “Seen quite a lot of excitement lately. Say, Nick—” He moved his head slightly. Nick understood and walked to one side.

“I suppose you know what’s up?” Teddy asked seriously.

“You mean about that gold strike? Yea, I know. But it don’t mean nothin’ to me. The story’s around that some old geezer

made a find—a big nugget—an’ that he got knocked off an’ robbed. Me, I don’t see much to it.”

“But it’s true, Nick!” Teddy watched the cowboy’s face.

“True?” Nick’s eyes opened wide. “Somebody did make a strike an’ got robbed?”

“Uh-huh. And, what’s more, it was Pop’s cousin.” Teddy told the puncher of finding Decker. “So, Nick, it isn’t all wind,” he finished.

“Well, bust my boilers!” Nick said slowly. “Pop’s cousin! What do you know about that? Snakes, I hope he makes the grade! Have you heard—”

“Here comes Roy now,” Teddy interrupted. “He just ’phoned to the 8 X 8 for news.”

Roy’s face was reassuring as he approached them. Pop leaped to his feet and ran forward.

“Let’s have it, Roy,” he said anxiously. “What’s the news?”

“He’s better,” the boy answered. “Much better. The doc’s just been there, and, unless infection sets in, he’s got much better than an even chance.”

“Boy, I’m glad of that!” Pop sighed. “I ain’t got many relatives left, an’ I sure like to keep track of ’em an’ make ’em last as long as I kin. Thanks, Roy!”

The old man walked toward the rear of the bunk-house. The boys watched, saying nothing until he was out of earshot.

“That hit him sort of hard,” Teddy remarked. “I never knew Pop Burns had a cousin.”

“Neither did the rest of us,” Roy said. “Well, Nick?” He thrust out his hand. “How’s everything?”

“Well enough, considerin’,” Nick replied. “This here life is sure tryin’ on a feller, ain’t it?” He grasped Roy’s hand

firmly, then released it. “Golly, somethin’ happenin’ all the time! Last week Nat Raymond caught his pants on a nail in the flour barrel an’ tore ’em pretty. Couple of days ago Hank Foley, over at Eagles, lost his false teeth an’ a bronc stepped right plumb on ’em. Now Pop’s cousin goes an’ gets shot up. An’ the boys are talkin’ about leavin’ here an’ headin’ for Nugget Camp. Snakes!” Nick drew a deep breath.

“Not only *talking*, they’re *going*,” Teddy declared. “Nat Raymond, Jim Casey, and Gus Tripp have taken up their beds and—rode. They’re heading for Nugget Camp now. The boys here—” he lowered his voice. The three were talking some little distance from the bunk-house. “The boys here were listening to Pop tell them how crazy they’d be to join the rush. But I don’t think they were agreeing with him. Then he asked me what I thought about it, and lucky for me I had to go in and ’phone.” He stopped and turned his head, gazing hard at the fast greying hills. Night was rushing upon them.

“Why, you could tell ’em there was nothing to it,” Nick said wonderingly. “I bet they’d calm down then. Or some of ’em would, anyhow.”

“That’s just it,” Roy declared. “There is something to it!” He hesitated, then spoke more quickly. “There’s no doubt that a strike has been made at Nugget Camp. I’m sure of that.”

“You are?” Nick demanded interestedly. “Then—”

“And where one strike is made, another is likely to be found. That field has been hanging fire a long time. I barely remember—it’s such a long time ago—when they opened it up. Just like now, some one found a rich deposit of gold. Then it got the name Nugget Camp. From that time until now a few prospectors have been messing around with it. But they had no luck. Then here comes a man who finds a small

fortune. At least, we think he had quite a load with him when he was shot down. By golly—”

Teddy gazed at his brother in surprise.

“Well, why by golly? It’s true—all you’ve said. What can we do? If the boys want to go, we can’t stop ’em. This is a free country. We’ll have to do the best we can, that’s all.”

“I was thinking,” Roy went on slowly, as though Teddy had not spoken, “that I’d like to join that rush myself.”

CHAPTER X

SILENT PACKS A GUN

DURING the next few days there was much to be done on the X Bar X. Three more men left for the promised land, and Mr. Manley had to recruit some help from other ranches, where the fever seemed to hit more lightly. Mr. Ball sent him three, among them Bug Eye. There were but four of the original punchers left on the X Bar X. Two of these were, of course, Pop Burns and Nick Looker.

Teddy and Roy were doing the ordinary work of wranglers, plus their job as bosses. Mr. Manley made frequent trips to Eagles, as he was negotiating with buyers in Chicago for the sale of a large herd of cattle on the hoof.

Finally the deal was completed and arrangements were made to ship the beeves the following week. With the additional hands Mr. Manley anticipated no real trouble in cutting out the cattle and getting them into the cars. Before the day set for the work to begin, he gave Pop permission to go to see his cousin, Jerry Decker, who was still at the 8 X 8.

Pop started early one morning and returned at nightfall. Bug Eye, Roy, and Teddy were sitting on the top rail of the corral as he drove into the yard, his tall, skinny figure looking strangely ghostlike in the dusk. He dismounted, watered, and fed his mount and turned it into the corral.

The boys waited for him to speak first.

“Well,” he said finally, removing his hat and slapping the dust from his legs, “I see the ranch is still runnin’.”

“Just about,” Teddy answered. “How’s your cousin?”

“Better in health, worse in spirits,” Pop replied. “He got taken over the ropes for plenty, that bird did.”

“How much?” Bug Eye asked eagerly.

“Just twenty thousand dollars’ worth of nuggets,” Pop drawled.

“Twenty thousand!” Roy repeated. “What a haul!”

“An’ that’s at gov’ment valuation. He had his own testin’ apparatus, an’ a accurate scale. Knew just how much his nuggets were worth. Now he’s lying’ with a hole through his neck an’ twenty thousand gone,” Pop finished bitterly.

“Tough luck, all right,” came from Teddy in a sympathetic tone. “Bet he worked hard for ’em, too.”

“Well, as to that, there’s two ways of lookin’ at it. He stuck at that camp till he made his strike, an’ that took two years. On the other hand, he didn’t have no trouble at all in pickin’ up the nuggets.”

“Then it’s a fact that—” Bug Eye began.

“Oh, the monkey wrapped his tail around the flag-pole,” Pop sang loudly. “Do-do-do-do, do-do do-do!” He stopped and looked around him. He saw no one, and came closer. “Suppose you waddies swim down from there an’ we’ll have a talk,” he said meaningly.

The boys jumped to the ground. Evidently Pop had something on his mind. When they were gathered about him, he said:

“Now listen. I had a long talk with Jerry. I saw the gun that knocked him off, too. An’ I’ll remember if I ever see another like it. All right! Jerry told me that Nugget Camp was the richest strike that’s been made within a thousand miles of here—ever! He said that!” Pop’s voice was low, deadly in

earnest. “An’ if the boys on this here ranch hear about it, there won’t be enough left to get up a good rousin’ game of solitaire! Think that over!” He stuck his hands deep in his pockets. “Think that over an’ lose some sleep!”

There was a moment’s silence while the import of Pop’s words sank in. Perhaps only to one—Roy—did they mean anything but anxiety as to when the news would be circulated. But Roy’s mind was running on another track. He appreciated, of course, that the business of ranching would be seriously interrupted if any more hands left, if the new men joined the rush. But he saw further than that. He saw a chance for him and his brother to enlist in a new series of adventures, and at the same time with a possibility of getting rich.

“And what do *you* think about it, Pop?” Roy asked at length. “Any pronounced opinions on the subject?”

“You mean about goin’?”

“I mean about the chances of striking gold at Nugget Camp.”

“Oh!” the old puncher rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, if you really want to know, Roy—I think the chances are pretty blame good!”

“What about you telling the boys that they’d be crazy to leave here and head for Nugget Camp?”

“Oh, well—” Pop moved uneasily. “I hadn’t heard what Jerry had to say then. An’, anyhow, we couldn’t afford to lose ’em all in a bunch. It gave ’em somethin’ to think about an’ slowed ’em up sufficient so’s we could get some new hands. Not that the ones we got are any wonders,” he added musingly. “But they’ll do, an’ they ain’t nuts over gold.”

“So there’s somethin’ to the story,” Bug Eye said slowly. “Nugget Camp ain’t just a basket full of fool’s gold.”

“Not any,” Pop said positively. “Jerry wouldn’t kid me about a thing like that. He believes in it all right. Twenty thousand gone!” Pop shook his head sadly. “I wish I had those galoots here for a minute and a half,” he declared bitterly. “A hole in the neck’s nothin’ to what they’d get. An’ say, Teddy an’ Roy, Jerry wants me to be sure an’ tell you how much he’s thankful for you two fellers bringin’ him in. If it hadn’t been for you he’d be pushin’ up the daisies right now. An’ then some!” Pop looked keenly at the brothers. He was at all times undemonstrative, and the boys took the look for what it was intended—the old puncher’s heartfelt thanks.

“Glad we were there,” Roy said. “But I’m sure sorry it happened. It means that a nasty bunch are getting into the district. Over at Nugget Camp—”

“Things will be spinnin’ out some lively,” Bug Eye drawled. “Well, there’s plenty to be done to-morrow. Me, I’m goin’ to catch some sleep.”

With a gold-mining camp springing up within riding distance of the X Bar X, the work of cutting out cattle for delivery seemed especially prosaic. But it had to be done, and, early the next morning, Teddy and Roy were in the saddle.

It was Mr. Manley’s idea to take one herd that had gathered near Harver’s Gully and round them up and drive them to the railroad yards. There were about six hundred head in the herd. Of these, about one hundred and fifty would be sent back to the range for one reason or another—some might have calves not yet weaned and some would not come up to

specifications. It meant a good three or four days' work, and Mr. Manley felt keenly the loss of his regular punchers.

Among the new hands were two who had more or less drifted in. They told Mr. Manley that they were out of a job—"temporarily." Both looked to be real punchers, and Mr. Manley took them on. One of them, called "Silent" by his partner, was a surly, ill-tempered fellow, who continually wore a frown. He mixed not at all with the others and spoke only to his friend, and then in monosyllables. The nickname "Silent" fitted him like a glove.

Roy and Teddy found that he was especially antagonistic to them. He accepted their orders with a scowl, but as long as he did his work they said nothing. This was no time to be particular. They had to take what they could get, and be glad of it.

His partner was more friendly, and soon became one of the gang. He, also, did his work well, and to careful questions concerning "Silent" answered that "he was kinda queer." In the West a man is taken at his face value, and if he wants to keep to himself, that's his own affair. Silent and Jack Conroy were accepted as part of the X Bar X outfit. On the payroll Silent was down as Hap Neville.

The round-up of the herd at Harver's Gully started in clear weather. Pop Burns stayed at the ranch with Mr. Manley, and Teddy and Roy were in charge. Nick and Bug Eye rode with them.

Just before they left the X Bar X, Teddy noticed Silent strapping a rifle case to his saddle. Later this was filled with a weapon.

"Any special reason?" Teddy asked easily.

Silent looked over at him with a frown. The puncher was about twenty-five or six, although the lines in his face seemed to add a few years to this total. He was short and stocky, and anything but handsome.

“Any objection?” Silent demanded. His tone was hostile.

“No, I reckon not—but there isn’t much sense to it.”

“My business,” Silent growled.

Teddy looked at him for a moment.

“As you say, it’s your business,” he said slowly. “But if you’re intending to use it on anything except animals, then it’s my business. Take me?”

Silent did not reply, but went on with his preparation. Teddy watched him.

“What kind of a gun is that?” he asked suddenly.

Silent spun around, a look of fury on his face.

“Listen here, you!” he snarled. “I’ll take your orders when it’s part of my job. I’m gettin’ paid for it. But I’m not gettin’ paid to answer questions! Understand?”

Teddy’s eyes narrowed. He stepped toward the man.

“You just forget I’m a boss,” the boy said deliberately. “I’ll forget it too. There’s little room in this outfit for a bird like you. But you know how we’re fixed. We have to take what comes. Now, if you crave action, drop that cinch-strap and —”

“Hey, Teddy!” It was Pop, yelling from the ranch-house porch. “Yore dad wants to speak to you!”

The boy did not turn immediately. Instead, he stood staring at Silent.

The puncher released his hold on the strap, but he did not face about.

“Fade,” Silent said briefly. “I’m busy.”

“You can be a lot busier,” Teddy declared. “Maybe we’ll talk this over later.”

He went slowly toward the house. Pop was waiting for him, a quizzical look on his face.

“Talkin’ to that human phonograph?” he asked.

Teddy nodded.

“Some,” he answered dryly. “Wants a going over, I’m afraid. I hate to make trouble, but that bird isn’t going to be any dove of peace around here.”

“Yea, I know.” Pop regarded Teddy closely. “Take it easy, son,” he said quietly. “You’ll live longer. Yore dad’s waitin’.”

CHAPTER XI

THE FIGHT

THE first day on the range drew to a close with every man too tired to do much talking. A meal from the chuck wagon restored their spirits somewhat, but blankets were spread early and the full moon arose and shone on the still forms of sleeping cow punchers.

Teddy did not resume his argument with Silent. When it was necessary for him to speak to the wrangler he did so tersely and received nods in answer. By noon of the second day the cattle were well bunched and on the way to the cars, just above Eagles.

Wednesday morning, the third day out, their job was nearly completed. There remained simply the loading.

Silent, dismounted, was waiting beside the runway to prevent the cattle from swerving as they were driven up and into the cars. Roy had told him that it would be safer mounted, but Silent grunted and Roy shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

The puncher carried a double-thonged whip in his hand, a short, wicked looking instrument. Suddenly Teddy, who was standing near, saw him slash down with it and catch a cow full across the back. A red weal sprang up and blood dripped from where he had struck.

Teddy, his cheeks burning, leaped from his horse and seized the puncher's arm.

"Let's see that whip!" he cried, and yanked it toward him. Silent stood quietly, a sardonic look on his face.

In the ends of the whip-thongs were set jagged pieces of tin, and to give them weight just behind them were sewed lead “sinkers.”

Teddy, as he saw them, clenched his fists, and tossed the whip from him.

“So that’s it!” he exclaimed, and leaped. His first blow caught Silent on the side of the face.

The puncher drew a sudden breath and shook his head to clear it. Then he went into the fight.

The punchers of the neighborhood still talk about that scrap. Teddy, ten pounds lighter than his antagonist, danced about, now getting in a blow and stepping out, then in again. Silent fought with short, vicious swings. One of these caught the boy fairly on the jaw, and he went down.

Roy rushed toward him, as did Nick and Bug Eye.

“Keep back!” Teddy yelled. “This is mine!”

He scrambled up and returned to the attack. The tide of battle now had taken the fighters some distance from the cattle, which was fortunate, otherwise one of them might have been stepped on or gored.

The other punchers stopped their work to watch. The cattle were quiet, and there was no danger of a break. From all directions the railroad men came running, quick to sense excitement. There was soon a circle of yelling men about the two battlers.

“Sock him, Teddy, sock him!” Bug Eye shouted. “Atta baby!”

“Stick in there, Silent!” Jack Conroy implored. “I’m with you, anyhow! Let him have it!”

Roy said nothing. He was watching the fight intently.

Teddy got in a straight right to the stomach, then a left to the face. But as he did so Silent crossed him and sent Teddy staggering with a left that cut the boy's cheek. Both were breathing hard.

“Back at him, Teddy!” Nick yelled hoarsely. “Another to the bread-basket!”

This was what Teddy did. He set himself, and drove his right fist into Silent's “bread-basket,” otherwise his stomach. Silent gave ground and the circle opened. Teddy, seeing his chance, rushed in and planted a right to the jaw.

But Silent did not fall. He gave more ground, and then, so suddenly that no one was aware of it, he was in front of the cattle, between them and the runway which led into the car that was being loaded.

There was a shout of warning. The cows, frightened at the strange figure that was catapulted before them, moved restlessly, and one of them started forward.

Silent saw the beast coming, but could not avoid those menacing horns. Those near him heard a groan, and the puncher thrust out his hands, as though to ward off the impending danger.

But it was Teddy, who was closest to him, Teddy, whose face was dripping blood, that saved Silent's life. There was but one thing to do, and Teddy did it.

He left his feet and made a football dive toward Silent. His outstretched arms swept the puncher from under the hoofs of that cow—from under the sharp hoofs that would have trampled the puncher in another moment. The cow went on up the runway and into the car. Teddy and Silent hit the ground together, and were pulled from further danger by ready hands. The fight was over.

The contestants were led into the shade of the station, and Roy put his hands on Teddy's shoulders.

"Let's see," he said.

The cut on Teddy's cheek was red and angry looking, but not deep. Silent was a bit worse, as one of his eyes was closed and he seemed unable to walk straight. But he staggered over to Teddy.

"Buddy," he said breathlessly, "thanks!"

Teddy nodded. "All right! Say—" he hesitated. "What was the idea of hitting the cow with that thing?"

Silent touched his chin tenderly.

"Baby, you sure can sock! Oh, that cow? I saw her duck her head. She'd have started a break in another second. I had to take her mind off it quick. Sometimes cows are like that. Hey, I ain't apologizin'!" This last rather frantically. "What I done, I done! Only, I never hit a cow with that thing unless there's danger. I reckon—" he drew a deep breath—"I'll sit down."

Teddy stared at the man a moment. Somehow he seemed different, as though there was something in him that had not been apparent before.

"You didn't do it just out of meanness, then?"

Jack Conroy stepped forward.

"Mean?" he shouted. "Silent, mean? Say, buddy, he's the kindest—"

"Buckle it up!" Silent tersely ordered from his place on the ground. "This ain't no debatin' society."

The men wandered away. Nick and Bug Eye returned to the cows. Teddy bent down and thrust out his hand.

"Want to shake?" he asked quietly.

Silent got to his feet and eyed the boy in amazement.

“You mean I ain’t fired?”

“Not any! I didn’t get the idea, that was all. I thought you did it for fun.”

Silent grasped Teddy’s hand.

“Buddy,” he said feelingly, “you’re O. K. with me. I owe you plenty.” He grinned. “Besides this here eye an’ jaw, I mean. Reckon I had ’em comin’ to me.”

The hands gripped and parted. There was that pause that so often comes when two people suddenly meet as friends. It was Roy who broke the silence.

“Personally, I’d recommend a visit to the old pump for both of you,” he said dryly. “You’re enough to scare any cows.”

“Let’s go,” Teddy suggested quickly. “There’s some water behind the station. I have a clean handkerchief that’ll do for a towel.”

“An’ with that he walks off,” Conroy snickered. “Baby, wasn’t that a scrap? Never saw the like. Fightin’ fools, them two. Silent, he ain’t no slouch, let me tell you. Yet your brother certainly laid him out pretty. Laid him out, an’ saved his life. Say, listen, Manley.” His tone grew more serious. “Some people get a wrong slant on Silent. They think he’s ornery. He ain’t, nothin’ like it. He’s just naturally quiet. Most people think his breakfast soured on him. But if you’d had your brother shot down before your eyes, an’ seen your old man try to get the killers an’ stop a bullet hisself, I reckon —” he stopped in confusion. “An’ I promised Silent I wouldn’t say nothin’ about it!” he declared regretfully.

“Did that happen to Neville?” Roy demanded.

“It sure did. They had a cabin about three hundred miles from here—him, his dad, an’ brother. Then—well, here he is.”

“Who shot them?”

“Oh, a couple of waddies. Silent saw ’em, him lyin’ on a cot burnin’ up with fever. He tried to get ’em, but, shucks, what could he do? They robbed the shack of a thousand dollars in gold that old man Neville had just bought from a miner and vamoosed. So here I am, an’ here Silent is.” He turned away.

“I see,” Roy mused. “So that’s it? How long ago did this happen?”

“Three months.”

“Man, that’s tough lines!” Roy breathed. “Poor fellow! He’s alone now, is he?”

“I’m with him,” Conroy flung back. “An’ I aims to stay with him, too! Well, I reckon I’d better help with them cows.”

CHAPTER XII

A CRACK AT FORTUNE

THEY were back at the X Bar X again. The cattle had been loaded and sent rumbling toward Chicago. Things were quiet, and the punchers, except those who were riding fence, occupied themselves with jobs about the ranch.

Mr. Manley observed Teddy's face, took a look at Silent, and said nothing. He knew. And when he saw Teddy and Silent throwing a jackknife into a small ring on the side of the bunk-house, trying to see who could come closest to the center, he grinned widely and said to Mrs. Manley, who stood with him on the porch of the ranch house:

“See it, Barbara? Reckon Teddy's made a new friend.”

Mrs. Manley smiled and laid a hand on her husband's arm.

“Bardwell,” she said, “men are inexplicable creatures! Teddy and that other—Silent, they call him—had a fight, didn't they?”

“And from all accounts it was some scrap! Why?” He was chuckling.

“It seems so strange that it should need that to bring them together. I should think—”

“Now, watch out for that thinkin' business. People have been known to get headaches that-a-way,” the rancher chuckled again. “A good scrap once in a while is better than a spring tonic. Say, Mother—” his voice became serious —“Teddy and Roy haven't said much, but I've got a hunch they're hankerin' for something—or rather, to take a little trip.”

“A trip? Where?”

“Well—” he turned toward her—“if you ask me, I’d say they were achin’ to take a crack at Nugget Camp.”

“The place where that man—Pop’s cousin—was shot? Bardwell, we can’t let them go there!”

“Now, sweetness, you got that wrong!” Mr. Manley protested. “Decker didn’t get shot at the camp. He was ridin’ *away* from it when he was held up. There’s no real danger. An’ the work here is pretty well under way. It would certainly be a grand experience for the boys.”

Mrs. Manley nodded and smiled.

“If you say so, Bardwell—and they aren’t really children any more, are they?”

“Children!” The long mustache trembled and a twinkle came into the blue eyes. “Children! Well, Mother, if you think they are—but we’ll let that go. Then you don’t mind if I tell them?”

“About Nugget Camp? No, Bardwell, as you say, it will probably be good for them—only I do hope they’ll be careful.”

“Now, Mother, you know they will! Never failed to come through anything they started, did they? You watch ’em carry home a hat full of gold!” He strode down the steps and went toward Teddy and Silent. They heard him coming and turned.

“Where’s Roy?” Mr. Manley asked.

“Helping Pop do something or other,” Teddy replied. Silent stood a bit to one side, his face expressionless.

“I’ve got something to tell him—to tell you, too, for that matter. Things pretty well cleaned up around here?”

“Yes, sir.” Teddy realized that his father knew exactly the condition of the ranch and recognized in the question an implication of his responsibility. Teddy and Roy were the real bosses of the X Bar X. Mr. Manley had put the affairs of the ranch into their hands.

“Well, then, I reckon it’s about time you an’ Roy took a trip, hey?” And Mr. Manley grinned.

“A trip?” Understanding came quickly. “You mean Nugget Camp?”

“Uh-huh. What about it?”

“I guess you know how much Roy and I would like to try it,” Teddy said eagerly. “But we haven’t said anything—we were needed here.”

“Yea! But now that we’ve got that shipment off, things are easin’ up some. So, if you want to—”

“If we *want* to! Wait till Roy hears this!” Teddy glanced over toward Silent. “Say, Dad,” he said awkwardly, “could you spare Silent here?”

“Silent?” Mr. Manley gazed at the puncher. “You want to go too?”

“Well, you see it’s this way,” Silent answered uneasily. “I heard there was two fellers hangin’ around Nugget Camp, that—I want to meet.” His voice became tense. “That I want to meet real bad! An’ if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to go along with Teddy an’ Roy, if they go. I’ve a reason.”

Mr. Manley nodded. Roy had told him privately the story of Silent’s recent tragedy, and the man understood and sympathized with the grim puncher.

“I reckon we can fix that,” he said after a moment. “Here’s what I thought. Suppose you, Teddy, an’ Roy an’ Nick make

up a party an' stake a few claims. I can spare you-all, I reckon. Four will be just about right. An' you can start to-morrow, if you want to."

"That's great, Dad!" Teddy exclaimed. "Silent, let's get Roy."

The two hurried off, Mr. Manley watching them go. His eyes were tender, his lips half open.

"Teddy," he muttered, "come back the way you go!" and he went into the house.

When he heard the news, Roy was as excited as his brother. Bug Eye declared that he was going straightway to ask Mr. Manley for time off.

"He don't need me now," the puncher from the 8 X 8 declared. "I might just as well go with you fellows. Say, I know what! My boss said I could take a vacation soon, an' here's where I take it! I was plannin' to head for Nugget Camp myself, then when Mr. Ball heard from yore dad, Teddy, he asked me to fill in here, an' of course I did. But things are easy—lettin' up. So I can go, me an' my Tin Lizzie! You wait!"

He ran toward the ranch house to interview Mr. Manley, and returned in five minutes with a broad grin on his face.

"O. K.," he said loudly. "I'm with you! To-morrow mornin' early I starts for the 8 X 8 to get an outfit."

"Say, Bug Eye, while you're there, ask Jerry Decker a few questions," Roy suggested. "Where is a good place to locate, and so forth. He ought to know. He was at Nugget Camp nearly two years."

"An' get him to tell you how much fun gold minin' is," Pop, strolling up at that moment, said dryly. "Let him tell you

about the picnic he had!”

“We’re not going for fun,” Teddy asserted. “Anyhow, Pop, you said there was a good chance to get some gold.”

“Oh, I ain’t goin’ back on that. Silent, here, knows somethin’ about minin’. Don’t you, Silent?”

The puncher nodded. “A little,” he said briefly. “I been on a few rushes.”

“Jack Conroy gonna stay here?” Pop asked.

“Yep.” Silent lit a cigarette. “I asked him to. The whole ranch can’t leave.”

“You’re right as rain there,” Pop agreed. “Then it’s you, Teddy, Roy, and Nick?”

“Bug Eye is figuring on coming too,” Teddy said. “Going to bring his flivver—hey, Bug Eye?”

“So that’s why you said you was goin’ back to-morrow,” Pop mused. “All I heard was the part about askin’ Jerry to tell you where to locate. Well, you’ll need all the advice you can get! It’s no joke, livin’ in a minin’ camp. Plenty can happen, an’ then some.”

“Maybe that’s the reason we’re going,” Teddy said, grinning.

“Me, I’m gonna’ get rich!” Bug Eye boasted. “Rich as Creosote. You-all heard of him, ain’t you? He found a whole hill full o’ di’monds!”

“Save it for some cold night at Nugget Camp,” Teddy advised. “We’ll need all the entertainment we can get.”

“Somethin’ tells me you’ll have plenty of entertainment,” Pop grunted. “I gotta be goin’. Got things to do. See you before you leave.”

“Queer cuss,” Silent declared. It was the first observation he had made in some minutes. “Good guy, though!”

“I’ll tell a maverick he is!” Roy agreed. “Pop’s all right. Don’t you forget, Bug Eye, to ask Jerry Decker a few questions. I wouldn’t bother him much if he isn’t feeling all right, but Pop told us he was much better.”

“Sure, I know,” Bug Eye declared. “Leave it to me. Yay boy! Nugget Camp! Gold! By golly, I’m gonna get me three new flivvers!”

“And then retire and live on the fat of the land, I suppose,” Teddy put in. “Anyhow, we’ll take a crack at fortune!”

“Here’s hopin’ she smiles,” the puncher muttered. “In fact, I wouldn’t kick if she grinned wide enough to split her mouth. See you later, boys!”

CHAPTER XIII

OFF TO NUGGET CAMP

THAT evening the sole topic of conversation on the X Bar X was the intended trip to Nugget Camp.

Strangely enough, the fact that Teddy and Roy and a few others were going did not tend to excite the rest of the punchers, or cause them to throw up their jobs and head for the gold fields. They felt, perhaps, that good jobs did not grow on every sagebush, and the reputation of the X Bar X ranch for fair treatment of the hands and for excellent food was known far and wide. Most of the new men decided to stay on, and let those who would test their luck in other lands.

Jack Conroy, when he learned that his partner, Silent, was going, at first declared his intention of accompanying him. But Silent took him to one side, and the result of the conference was that Jack remained at the ranch.

Pop, as garrulous as ever, spent the evening in telling those who would listen of the many times he had participated in gold rushes.

“Course, I knew more about it than most of them waddies,” he would say. “An’ as soon as I see those funny specks of yeller stuff I’d tell ’em to locate there. You bet they did, too.” He would hesitate a moment, and, reaching back, would tap the bunk-house wall. “Some of the rock was as soft as this wood. Softer, some of it.”

“And they found the gold?”

“Well, they did an’ they didn’t. I mind one time—”

But this was too much for his audience. It was the fourth time he had let loose that “Well, they did an’ they didn’t.” The punchers felt justified in ringing down the curtain, which they did by the simple process of tipping over the bench Pop was sitting on.

Teddy and Roy, who had been listening, wandered toward the house.

“I kind of wish he was coming with us,” Teddy chuckled. “Make it a little livelier.”

“He’ll be better on the ranch,” Roy replied. “Dad wants some one he can depend on. Boy, it sure is a grand and glorious feeling to know we’re going to take a crack at gold mining! And something tells me we’re going to be successful, too! Well, let’s see now—a house on Fifth Avenue, New York, a winter place in Florida, a shooting box in Canada for the fall months, a château in France, a—”

“Hey, how many seasons you think the year’s got?”

“Oh, well, personally, I’m going to live right here all year,” Roy said simply. “I just want those things, in case.”

“Uh-huh,” Teddy grunted. “You find the gold first. Baby, I’m tired! Let’s hit the hay. We have plenty to do to-morrow.”

In truth, there was “plenty to do” before the young prospectors could start for Nugget Camp. Bug Eye left early for the 8 X 8, and arranged to meet the others at the new strike within four days. Then Teddy and Roy began their preparations.

There were four of them from the X Bar X going—Teddy and Roy Manley, Nick Looker, and Silent Neville. Silent, who had been mining before, was called into consultation.

“Besides the broncs, we’ll need, say, three mules,” he declared. “That’s for our packs an’ stuff.”

“Going to take sluice-boxes?” Nick asked. Sluice-boxes are troughs, in sections twelve feet long, with screens and retaining cleats over which the gold-bearing material is worked by means of a constantly flowing stream of water.

“No. Not necessary. We can make them when we get there. What we need most are shovels, picks, pans, a few saws, some canned stuff, blankets, lanterns, and—say, what sort of a district is this Nugget Camp? Any timber around? Any water?” Silent inquired.

“Both,” Nick answered. “I rode through the place about eight months ago.”

“O.K. Then that’s settled. Now, how about sleeping? You got any tents?”

“Dad’s got two, I think,” Roy declared. “But they’re not so new.”

“They’ll do, I reckon. Two is better than one big one—easier to put up an’ better sleepin’. Long as we’re takin’ tents, we might as well cart a few folding cots.”

“I bet Dad’s got cots some place around,” Teddy asserted. “He used to do a lot of camping.”

“Then I reckon we’re all fixed up. Where can we get the mules?”

“Slim Bannister’s got a hoss farm ’bout ten miles away,” Nick said. “Got some mules there. He sells pretty cheap.”

After all was decided upon, Mr. Manley looked over the list and went to his office. When he returned he handed Roy a few bills of large denomination.

“Grub stake,” he said casually. “You pay me back when you strike it rich.”

“Right,” Roy answered. Mr. Manley grinned. His son was taking it like a veteran. None of this “thanks, Dad” stuff. All business.

“I suppose we go fifty-fifty?” the ranch owner asked innocently. “I reckon that’s the usual.”

“Sure,” Roy agreed. “Fifty-fifty. You’ll have four times as much as this when we get back.” He stuck the money into his pocket.

Mr. Manley nodded gravely. “Nothin’ like confidence,” he said. “Go ahead now. Don’t let me keep you. When you’re all set, come in an’ say good-bye to your mother an’ me.”

“You bet we will!” the boy exclaimed, relaxing for the moment. “And you know what this means to Teddy and me, Dad. I’m not going to—”

“Get along now,” Mr. Manley interrupted. “They’re waitin’ outside for you!”

He clapped his son on the shoulder and turned to his desk. Roy, head up, his eyes shining, strode toward the door. What a father he had!

Nick rode over to Bannister’s place and bought three mules. The moment he returned with them, the loading began. Mr. Manley considered Silent’s time of employment ended, so the puncher was relieved of all duties on the ranch. He superintended the preparations, as befitted his experience. Nick, while he knew something about mining from hearing the cowboys talk of it, had never actually lived in a mining camp.

At last the hour for departure came. The brothers, mounted on Star and Flash, were in the lead. Behind them came the three mules, well laden. Then Nick and Silent brought up the rear. It was a two or three days' journey to Nugget Camp. Each man had a canteen of water on his saddle, besides a rifle, and on each belt hung a revolver.

Mr. and Mrs. Manley, Belle Ada, Pop, and Jack Conroy were on hand to see them off. Teddy and Roy had already said their goodbyes to their parents, both being cautioned against "wet feet, sleeping on the ground, and sitting in a draft when overheated" by Mrs. Manley. They grinned, and promised to do their best to obey all instructions.

"Hey, Teddy, bring me back a gold bracelet!" Belle called. "One with my initials on it."

"Where you think we're going—shopping?" Teddy replied. "Sure you don't want a gold watch instead?"

"Bet you bring Curly something," Belle rejoined mischievously. "All right—you wait! I know somebody who —"

"You'd better go to visit the 8 X 8, and see your friend Doc Ring," Roy called. "He's still making calls there, I understand, to treat Jerry Decker. Bet he misses you!"

"We'd better vamoose, after that crack," Teddy laughed. "Come on, let's go! So long, people!"

"So long! So long, Silent! Good luck!"

"Good-bye, boys!"

"So long, Dad, Mother! We'll be rich when we get back!"

"Hey, Pop, you keep my bunk for me!" This from Nick. "An' get a bushel basket ready to carry my gold in!"

“I got a pint measure that’ll do as well,” Pop replied shortly. “Anyhow, good luck to you.”

Teddy glanced over at Silent. The puncher was gazing straight ahead, as though he heard nothing of what was going on around him.

“What are you planning to do?” Teddy asked.

“Huh? Who, me?” Silent appeared startled. “Oh, you mean if I find gold?” He thought for a moment. “I tell you, boys,” he said finally. “There’s other things besides money in this here world. An’ there’s other things besides gold in a mining camp.” He touched his gun with his hand, then looked at the mules. “Get along there, you!”

CHAPTER XIV

SOME SHOOTING

By eleven o'clock the Manley boys and their companions were twenty miles from the X Bar X, and on the first leg of their journey to Nugget Camp. The day was cool, and the riding was pleasant, even considering the slow pace they had to take on account of the mules. Silent himself seemed more cheerful and talked freely of mining conditions and what they might hope to find at the gold camp.

"Course, it won't be like a new field. It's been a mining camp before this, ain't it?"

"Yes, it has," Teddy answered. "But those who worked it barely made a living wage. Now that this has happened—"

"It'll start the fireworks," Nick drawled. "I reckon we'll see Gus and the others. Hope so. Gus owes me three bucks."

"Three bucks will be like nothing to you, once you start picking nuggets off the ground," Roy laughed. "I understand they charge five dollars for a can of beans."

"Not me, they won't," Nick declared forcibly. "I can get along without beans. Hey!" This to one of the mules. "Think you're in a peerade? Step along there!"

"Don't get him excited," Roy cautioned.

"He's got our food on his back. Good thing those cans don't leak."

"That reminds me—I saw one of 'em with what looked like a hole in it," Nick said suddenly. "I meant to tell you when we were loadin', only I forgot. It's right on top." He urged his pony close to the mules, and, reaching down, felt

with his hand along the side of the bag carrying the canned goods. “Uh-huh! She does!”

“Then let’s get it out,” Roy suggested. He dismounted and carefully untied the bag. The faulty can was near the top, and he found it without much trouble. “Tomatoes,” he said, holding it up, after tying the bag again. “Don’t leak much, though.” He climbed into his saddle. “But I guess it isn’t so good, after air gets to it.”

“You’re right there,” Silent said mildly. “Might as well chuck it away. Let’s see it.”

Roy threw him the can. He looked at it, and nodded.

“Well, it’ll make a good target,” he declared. “O. K.?”

“Go on, pepper it,” Teddy said. “Let’s see what you can do.”

The puncher rode on ahead and hitched up his belt. He held the can in his right hand and drew back his arm.

“Let ’er ride!” Nick shouted.

Silent threw the can into the air. Then, so quickly that the eye could not follow him, he dragged his gun from the holster. The crack of the revolver awoke the echoes. Five times he fired, as fast as his finger could pull the trigger. The can bounded about in the air as though attached to a string.

“Wow!” Teddy gasped. “What a man!”

Silent stared at his smoking gun.

“I may have missed once,” he said casually. “I’ll take a look.”

He slid off his pony and walked to where the can lay.

“Yep,” he said sorrowfully. “Only five holes in it. One of ’em was there before. I missed a shot.”

“Well, for the love of Pete, you gousin’ about missin’ one in five?” Nick exclaimed. “Let’s see the can!”

Silent handed it to him. Nick’s eyes opened wide.

“Five nice, clean holes! Hey, you didn’t miss any! One of yore shots hit the hole that was in it already—it made it bigger! Look!”

Teddy and Roy went closer and gazed at the can. For every hole where the bullets went in, there was a corresponding one in the other side—one with the tin bent inward, one with it bent out—and as Nick had said, there was a hole directly opposite the original perforation.

“Five out of five!” Roy said admiringly. “Say, puncher, where’d you learn to shoot?”

“Didn’t learn. Had it drilled into me.” Silent responded. “My dad—” he stopped, and turned his head away. In a moment he had recovered himself and went on in an even tone: “My pop was one of the best shots in the West. So was my brother. They’re both dead now.”

“Yes, we know,” Roy said quietly. “Conroy told us.”

“He did?” Silent jerked around, his face pale. “I asked him—Well,” and his shoulders sank, “then you know. But it was my trouble, an’ I was aimin’ to keep it to myself. Hang it! For some reason, though, I ain’t sorry that you found out. Funny, that, ain’t it?” His face wore a puzzled look, as a child’s does when it cannot understand some emotion.

Teddy laid a hand on Silent’s shoulder.

“I reckon, Silent, it’s because you know we’re friends of yours,” the boy said. “I’m sorry—and that’s all I can say. If we ever get a chance—”

“Sure, I know,” Silent responded awkwardly. He got back on his horse. “You’re all right. Just my tough luck, that’s all. I got an idea, though. An’ you might as well know that’s the reason I wanted to hit Nugget Camp. I might get a look at a certain two waddies.” His voice grew bitter. “Two waddies who shoot men down in cold blood an’ who sport queer lookin’ guns.”

“Queer looking—” Teddy began, when Roy motioned to him for silence.

The incident served to depress the spirits of the party somewhat, and Nick, realizing this, took the opportunity a jack-rabbit afforded him to lighten their mood.

“Two bits I catch him!” he shouted. “Watch them mules!”

He brought his hand down sharply on his pony’s flank. The rabbit was about a hundred yards ahead, running easily.

“Wow!” Nick yelled. “Let’s go, bronc!”

The bronc went. At least, his head went up and his rear lowered. Nick spread his arms wide and slid gently to the ground.

“Well, you ole leather-bustin’ sidewinder!” Nick exclaimed in pretended anger. “Who told you to do that?”

The others watched him with amusement. A half smile came to Silent’s lips.

“Now look-a-here, you.” Nick went close to his pony and whispered into his ear. The horse nodded several times, aided by Nick’s hand on the bridle.

“Understand now? Then let’s go!”

With a bound Nick landed in the saddle. He yanked off his hat, slapped the pony—and promptly slid again to the ground. By this time the rabbit was miles away.

The horse stood quietly, eyeing his master with a surprised look in his eyes. Nick, from the ground, shook his fist wildly.

“So that’s it, hey? All right, then! All right!”

He leaped to his feet. As a man might toss a bag of meal, so Nick threw himself across the saddle, his arms on one side, his legs on the other. The pony, with a snort, started to run. But not in a straight line. His course was a circle, with the boys in the center. Faster and faster he ran, his master bouncing up and down.

Teddy, Roy, and Silent burst into a roar of laughter.

“Get some glue, Nick!”

“Want a rope?”

“Stick to him, kid!”

“Oh, what a bouncing baby boy!”

But Nick did not stick. The fifth time around he released his hold and catapulted to the ground, landing on his shoulders. The pony stopped stiff-legged, sliding three feet.

Nick rubbed his head, sat up, and stared at the horse, that stood a short distance away.

“Honey!”

The pony moved not.

“Sweetie!”

The horse still stood.

“Snookums!”

No sign from the bronc.

“Black Bottom, you ole, lantern-jawed, hook-eyed, son of a sea-cook, if you don’t trot over here so pronto that yore ears lay back I’ll knock yore fool carcass so far—”

The horse whinnied, bobbed his head, and walked over to Nick. Then he bent one knee in supplication.

“Atta baby! *Now* we’re all right! Hold still!”

Nick arose and climbed slowly into the saddle.

“Needs coaxin’,” he said, grinning. “You gotta talk nice to him if you want him to do you favors! Come on, baby—we’re off. Get along there, you mules, you!”

CHAPTER XV

HORSEMEN IN THE STORM

DARKNESS found the four riders with a little over a third of their journey completed. They selected a camp site near a running stream, and after watering and feeding the horses and mules they built a fire for the evening meal.

Silent, of his own accord, took charge of the cooking, which consisted mainly in boiling the coffee, frying bacon, and heating a can of beans. He had a way with him, however, and the food took on a certain flavor that agreed eminently with the boys' palates.

"Was a cook, once," Silent explained laconically, when complimented on the success of his meal. "In a cow camp, where the waddies either got good food or the cook had somethin' comin' to him. Believe me, you *gotta* learn to cook in a place like that."

"You sure sling a wicked fryin' pan," Nick muttered, his mouth well filled with bacon sandwich. "Than which I have tasted no better. Snakes, my back's itchy!"

"Oh, I meant to tell you," Teddy said casually. "There's an ants' nest on the other side of the tree you're leaning against, Nick."

"An ants' nest!" Nick leaped to his feet and shook himself violently. "So that's it! I thought I felt somethin' crawlin' around my lily white skin. Why didn't you tell me about it tomorrow morning, Teddy?"

Teddy grinned and went on with his eating. After a few violent moments Nick seated himself again, but this time at a

distance from the tree.

“Certainly is noisy,” Roy remarked. “Listen!”

“What for?” Nick leaned forward, straining his ears.

“Just wanted to see if I could find out which leg that grasshopper was fiddling on. I can’t, though. Man, what a racket this silence makes!”

Those about him realized fully the sense of Roy’s remark. The silence really did “make a racket!” It crowded in upon them, beating a weird tune just over their heads. The night air pulsated with an intense stillness. It was Nick who, with a single sentence, shattered the mystery of it.

“I reckon,” he said calmly, “she’s goin’ to rain.”

Silent, squatting cross-legged a short distance from the fire, nodded in agreement.

“Before twelve to-night,” he declared.

“Stars are still out,” Teddy objected. “Millions of ’em.”

Roy arose, walked away from the fire and into the darkness of the woods. The camp had been pitched just on the edge of a small forest, through which ran the brook.

“Yes,” he called back after a moment, “lightning in the west. Wind’s blowing this way. We’ll get it, all right.”

“Then we might just as well tie them broncs up a little tighter,” Nick advised. “What do you think, Silent—shall we move ’em toward the open, or is it just as well to let ’em stay where they are?”

“Why move ’em?” Teddy broke in. “They’re all right there. But we can fasten ’em up a little better. Yes, sir, it is going to rain!”

A vivid flash of lightning just then lit the heavens for a moment, and those watching could see banks of clouds

hastening to cover the stars. But as yet the thunder could not be heard.

Nick and Roy went to see to the mules and horses, while Teddy and Silent prepared the camp for the coming storm. The supplies were piled in one heap and covered with tarpaulins. A few stakes were driven along the edges of the stretched canvas, in case a strong wind should tear at the covering. The tents had not been set up.

“And that’s fixed!” Teddy exclaimed, as he straightened. “Bet we don’t get much sleep to-night.”

“It’ll be over by one, maybe,” Silent said. “Six hours’ sleep is plenty. That is, unless you want to start before seven.”

“Seven’s all right,” Roy agreed. “We need some rest. Feel that hot wind? It won’t be long now.”

A mutter of thunder rolled through the distant hills and the wind stopped as though a fan had been shut off. The storm was approaching rapidly.

“Well, I’m not goin’ to sit up an’ wait for it,” Nick declared. “I’m no welcoming committee, not me! Here’s where I go bye-bye.”

He spread his blanket on the ground and prepared to roll himself up in it. Just as he stretched out comfortably the first huge drops of rain plunged to the earth.

“Nice, agreeable weather,” Nick grumbled, sitting up again. “Durin’ the day it didn’t rain. Oh, no! Had to wait till everybody wants to go to sleep. Just like a baby, keepin’ people awake all night. Where’s them raincoats?”

“Ought to be under the edge of the tents,” Teddy replied. “I’ll look.”

“Here they are,” he said a few moments later. “Grab ’em.”

The raincoats, actually rain capes, were the most useful articles that the prospective miners carried with them. Not only would they serve for under-blankets, when the ground was wet, but, tied by each of the four corners to stakes set in the ground, made admirable bath-tubs, since they were of real rubber. The bottom would rest on the ground, of course.

But it was for another purpose they were to be used now, and the purpose for which they were originally intended—to keep out rain. The storm was collecting its powers, ready to hurl them toward the little band of adventurers gathered on the edge of the wood.

As the drops beat toward the earth, some of them struck the fire, hissing loudly. In another moment the watery bombardment would be well under way.

“Duck your heads,” Nick yelled, “ ’cause here she comes!”

“I should say!” ejaculated Teddy.

With a roar, the tempest pounced upon them. Tightly as the ponchos were wrapped about their bodies, some rain penetrated them, and the boys huddled beneath the branches of a tree.

“Better come out of that!” Silent shouted. “Better to get a little wet than to have one of those babies catch a bolt of lightning an’ fall on yore neck!”

“Some sense to that,” Roy agreed. “Anyway, I’m about soaked now.”

He stood away from the tree and threw back his head, the rain beating full in his face.

“Boy,” he gasped, “that’s wonderful! Some rain!”

“You just naturally crazy?” Teddy asked. “Wow! There goes a Big Bertha!”

A blinding flash was followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder. The bolt had struck near by.

“Them mules tied tight?” Silent yelled.

“Yep. They can’t get away without pullin’ the trees with ’em!” Nick shouted in answer. “Baby, listen at it!”

The wind swept through the woods fiercely, bending the branches toward the ground. The lightning was continual, enabling the wayfarers to see, a little distance from them, the animals crowding together for mutual protection. The horses’ pride was forgotten in the stress of the moment, and they fraternized with the mules.

“If Pop were here now, he’d call this a gentle shower, I suppose,” Teddy remarked. “Thank goodness we brought these coats! We’d be drowned without ’em. Even as it is, I’m no arid desert myself.”

The ground was gradually turning to a swamp beneath their feet, and Nick groaned when he thought of his lost rest.

“Somethin’ terrible,” he muttered. “Me, I’m delicate! Need the best of attention an’ regular sleep. My pop always told me ___”

Roy, who was standing near him, seized him by the arm.

“Nick,” the boy said tensely, “do you hear something that has nothing to do with the storm?”

The puncher listened.

“A crashin’ in the bushes,” he answered, in a puzzled tone. “Sounds like a couple of horses threshin’ around. They ain’t our broncs, I know, ’cause they ain’t in that direction. Maybe ___”

A flash of lightning illuminated the scene and Roy saw his brother standing perfectly still, his hand to his side.

“You hear it too?” Roy called.

“Yes, I sure do. Some animal, that’s sure. The noise is getting nearer.”

The crashing in the bushes did sound closer. It was a noise distinct from the storm, another sort altogether.

“Stick together,” Silent advised suddenly. “Something’s comin’.”

Their eyes glued to that spot of blackness before them, the boys waited, hands on revolver butts. Across the sky ripped a jagged stroke of lightning.

By its light the watchers saw a strange sight. About fifteen feet from them, framed in a network of dripping trees, were two horsemen. Their steeds were prancing wildly about, savage with fright. On one of the broncos was a man who sagged in the saddle, a man whose hat was gone and whose arm was bandaged rudely to his side. He held weakly to the reins with his other hand. His face was pallid, expressionless.

“Greyhound,” the other man shouted, “buck up! I can’t manage yore pony! This nag of mine—”

He stopped. Another flash of lightning had revealed the group in front of him, four men, each with a gun in his hand.

“Greyhound,” the man yelled again, “turn yore bronc! You gotta turn him! Watch out!”

A horse neighed shrilly, weirdly in that stormy darkness. The crack of a whip on flesh. A frantic crashing in the brush.

“Greyhound,” came faintly, “you gotta—”

Then the men were gone. The noise of their departure faded out. The storm resumed its rightful rule over the forest.

The four campers stood as though changed to stone. Was it real, this they had just seen and heard? Could they have been dreaming?

Silent it was who broke the spell. His voice came harshly, through set teeth.

“I stood there,” he gritted out, “I stood there an’ watched ’em! Me, I watched ’em get away! I knew ’em! I knew ’em in a minute!”

He took a deep breath and fought for self-control. When next he spoke his voice was toneless, dead.

“I reckon,” he said slowly, “the storm’s about over. It didn’t last long. Nope, not long.”

He walked toward the canvas that sheltered their supplies. As he bent down to examine the covering, Teddy heard him mutter:

“Not long! Not half long enough!”

CHAPTER XVI

HIS NIGHT TO HOWL

IF there was doubt in the listeners' minds concerning the meaning of Silent's remark, there was also doubt in the mind of the one who had uttered it. Actually, it meant nothing more than that the man was in the grip of a strong emotion and his tongue seized upon the phrase it had last spoken. For in those two horsemen, the two riders who had appeared like specters out of the night, Silent Neville had recognized the slayers of his father and brother.

Gradually the rain decreased, finally it ceased altogether. The fire was relit. Blankets were hung near it to dry. The animals were looked to. A pot of coffee was put on to boil.

Teddy walked to where Silent stood, staring into the flames. All around them they could hear the drip, drip of the water from the trees. Every now and again a distant roll of thunder, echoes of the departing storm, came to their ears.

"Forget it, Silent," Teddy said in a low voice. "It's all over. You'll get your chance again."

"Never like that, I won't," Silent responded dully, shaking his head. "Right there they stood, an' me with my hand on my gun. Right there."

"It happened too fast," Teddy declared. "None of us had time to do a thing. Besides—" he stopped, then went on: "Funny, but I seem to have seen those two waddies before. Roy!"

"Yea?"

"Those two look familiar to you?"

“Well, Teddy, they did look like the rascals who knocked over Jerry Decker. But I only had a quick look. I can’t be sure.”

“That’s it! That’s who they were!” Teddy exclaimed excitedly. “Boy, they have got something to answer for!” He felt Silent’s hand upon his arm.

“They’ll answer to me,” the puncher said tersely.

“Right,” Teddy said. “Think there’s any use in—”

“Huntin’ them to-night? Not a chance. They’re miles from here already. They sort of knew who I was, I think. But I’ll get ’em some day!”

The remainder of the night passed uneventfully. The boys got about five hours of solid sleep and awoke with the sun streaming in their faces. Breakfast was eaten, and they set out again for Nugget Camp. Their second day was uneventful and the night passed quietly.

It was their intention to reach the mining camp by evening of the third day, and by hard riding they did it. The last of daylight was fading in the west when they got their first view of the place which was to be their headquarters for the next month or so.

The story of the vicissitudes of Nugget Camp had interested the Manley boys, since several times during the past fifteen or twenty years strikes had been reported there and a new rush started, only to dwindle to nothing when miners found the place practically empty of gold. The gold which they did discover had to be worked hard for, not taken in nuggets. For the last five years the name Nugget Camp had been almost a joke.

Then this new tale was circulated—of a man finding a huge fortune—and immediately those about the countryside, forgetting the many times “wolf” had been cried before, dropped the tools of their trade and headed for the gold field. Shacks which had been deserted for years once again had occupants. Tents sprang up like mushrooms. Two gambling houses were already under way, and saloons, officially “speakeasies,” flourished. The law had wisely let the camp govern itself, except for supervision over crimes of violence, for it would need a garrison of soldiers constantly on guard to make a refined city out of Nugget Camp.

This was the scene that confronted the four riders as, with their three beasts of burden, they approached the gold field. It was evening, and miners, some of them with their wives and children, sat on upturned buckets or boxes before the doors of their tents. Lanterns were hung on poles for street lights. At the far end of the camp were the gambling houses and saloons, and from that quarter came sounds of revelry—the whining strain of a violin, the heavier notes of an accordion. A miner carrying a bag of food in his arms stumbled into a tent, evidently having made a visit to a speakeasy on his way home. Dogs ran about, sniffing at the pile of cans which were thrown behind some of the tents. The work of the day was over. The miners were taking their rest.

Teddy, who was slightly ahead of his companions, suddenly exclaimed:

“Say, isn’t that Gus Tripp in front of that tent?”

“Looks like him,” Roy responded. “Hey, Gus!”

The man turned his head, then sprang to his feet.

“Teddy! An’ Roy! Hey, Nick! Well, for Pete’s sake!” He ran over and shook hands heartily with the new arrivals,

expressing his pleasure at meeting Silent. “Say,” he went on eagerly, “when’d you get in? Just now, hey? How’s everybody back home?”

“O. K.,” Roy answered. “We got that bunch of beeves off to Chicago, and things are sort of quiet now. That’s how come you see us here.”

“I’m sure glad you came,” the puncher declared heartily. “You know, Roy, I felt mean leavin’ the ranch that-a-way. But snakes, I had to! If I let a chance like this slip by—”

“I know,” Roy laughed. “Dad understood. Said he didn’t blame you a bit. Said he’d do the same thing himself if he could. How you making out?”

“Find any big nuggets?” Nick broke in eagerly. “Real big ones?”

“Naw,” Gus responded. “Nary a nugget. Been gettin’ a fair amount of dust, though, by pannin’. Only that’s not what I came out here for.”

“It’s slow, but sure,” Silent said quietly. “The other is just luck.”

“An’ that’s just what I’m lookin’ for,” Gus declared. “Lady Luck! She can soak her socks in my coffee any time a-tall. Say, where you guys stayin’ to-night?”

“We’ve got to locate some place,” Teddy answered. “How about near you?”

“Fine! That spot big enough?” He pointed to a bare place at the side of his tent. It was amply large enough to accommodate the two tents.

“Fine,” Teddy asserted. “What do you say, Roy?”

“Suits me. Let’s get the mules unloaded.”

By the light of lanterns, the packs were removed, the tents spread and raised. Teddy and Roy had one, Silent and Nick the other. The mules were outspanned some distance from the street, and the horses were tied, after feeding and watering them, nearer the tents.

“Jim Casey an’ Nat Raymond got a tent over on the other side,” Gus told them when they had finished their labors. “They’ll be glad to hear you came. Say, ain’t you fellows hungry?”

“Hungry!” Nick almost shouted. “I could eat a brass doorknob—in fact, two brass doorknobs. Let’s get goin’.”

Since the new arrivals had not yet set up cooking stoves, Gus lent them his, and during the preparation and eating of the meal they told Gus of their adventure of the first night.

“One man shot, you say?” the puncher asked interestedly. “Now, that’s queer. Nat told me a man was shot a couple of days ago up at Hagerman’s—that’s one of our beauty spots, where you can get a drink of poison by askin’ for liquor. He pulled somethin’ funny.”

“Well, we can’t say whether this bird was shot or not,” Nick declared. “He was hurt some way, though. Maybe he got tossed off his bronc.”

“What sort of place is this, Gus?” Teddy asked. “I mean shall we tote these things”—he motioned to the gun at his side—“or not?”

“Well, it’s the only kind of life insurance we got,” Gus drawled. “I’d sort of hang on to ’em, if I was you. An’ the first thing in the mornin’ you boys’d better stake yore claims. There’s more people comin’ in here every day. Tell you, the best place, to my notion, is about one hundred an’ ten above discovery. That’s a quarter of a mile from here. Not many

fellers locate near there, but I got a hunch it's due for a strike, even if it is far up."

"We'll try it," Teddy agreed. "Have you a claim near there?"

"Yep. But that ain't no proof there's gold there, 'cause I haven't made out so well yet. But you wait. I tell you I got a hunch, boys."

The meal was concluded, and Teddy and Roy decided to take a walk around Nugget Camp, to get their bearings. Silent and Nick concentrated on a game of double solitaire.

"Well, we're here," Teddy remarked, as the two strode down the street.

From the end of the street, where the gaming houses were located, came a wild shout.

"Somebody's out for a good time. You'd think the men would leave their wives and children at home with that stuff going on." Roy motioned to a tent outside of which sat a man, a woman, and two young girls. "But I suppose a lot of them pulled up stakes and hit out for good, with no intentions of returning. I'll bet a lot of them will ride on within two weeks, broke."

Teddy nodded. "That's the luck of the game. Say, wouldn't it be great if we could strike it good and rich and go home with a couple of thousand apiece? Baby! I'd like to be able to hand a bag of nuggets to dad and say: 'See what your dutiful sons brought to you from afar. Here is ten thousand; take it and buy a race-horse.' "

"You know what dad would say to that," Roy laughed. "He'd ask you who lent it to you. Anyhow, it's nice to think about. Snakes! what is this, a free-for-all?"

They were opposite a large wooden shack, well lit, from which came excited cries. Suddenly a man burst through the door.

“Me, I am a bear, an’ it’s my night to howl!” he roared. “Who deposed the Russian Czar? Me, I done it! Who won the war? Me, again! And who is goin’ to—goin’ to—” he hesitated and took a deep breath. “I forget just what, but I’m goin’ to do it,” he muttered. “Right now, too!”

He turned, and saw Teddy and Roy. Slowly he pushed his hat back on his head, and by the light of a lantern which hung from a near-by pole the boys could see a livid scar running the length of his forehead.

“Ah, the Duke of York an’ his maid in waitin’,” he called ironically, bowing low. “Ladies, I greet you! Welcome to Buckingham Palace. What ho, the guard! Where’s the Lord Mayor? Where’s that Lord Mayor? He’s never around when I want him! I’ll have to do somethin’ about that. I’ll dock his pay, that’s what I’ll do! Yes, sir! Well, then I’m the welcomin’ committee. An’ here’s the way we welcome guests!”

Suddenly, without a word of warning, he drew his revolver and shot into the ground at Teddy’s feet!

CHAPTER XVII

THE LUCKY SHOT

THE attack was so absolutely unprovoked, and so sudden was it, that Teddy and Roy stood there while the bullets dug up the earth.

“Dance!” the man roared. “Step out, boys, afore I raise my sights on this here weapon! Dance! You hear the music? Well, don’t let it go to waste!”

At the sound of the revolver, men who had been making merry inside rushed from the hall. They saw the gleam of the gun and saw also that neither Teddy nor Roy was obeying the shouted commands to “dance!”

“Maryland, what do you think you’re doin’?” some one called.

“I’m givin’ myself a private show,” was the answer. “Strictly private!”

He had shot four times and had two bullets left in the gun. The four shots had followed so quickly on one another that the sound seemed continuous.

Then it was that Roy awoke. Slowly, with no attempt at haste, he drew his own revolver. Those watching from the steps of the dance hall saw him level it carefully.

“You,” he said quietly, “drop that gun!”

“Huh?” Maryland, to give him the title which had just been applied, stared at the boy. Was this kid, this half-baked kid, trying to face him down? Him, the terror of the mining camp?

“You heard me,” Roy went on, still in that even-toned voice. “I said drop the gun!”

“I’ll drop nothin’!” Rage came into Maryland’s face. “You fool kid, think you can get away with that? I’ll—” he jerked the revolver up. “By golly, I’ll—”

Once, only once, did Roy’s revolver speak. But Maryland’s weapon flew from his hand as though it had been pulled with a cord. One minute there stood a bullying braggart of a man whose gun was his champion; the next moment in his place was a frightened dazed wretch, his face white, rubbing the hand from which Roy had shot the revolver.

“I’ll admit,” Roy declared calmly, “that that was a lucky shot. I aimed at your wrist.”

A look of complete bafflement spread over Maryland’s features. He looked at the gun lying in the road, then at Roy, and then at the crowd on the steps of the hall.

“Don’t do no more shootin’,” he muttered. “I feel kinda sick.”

Roy and Teddy both grinned at this. The men on the steps roared with laughter.

“So you’re sick, Maryland?”

“Try a little gun grease—a spoonful after meals!”

“Maryland, my Maryland!”

The former gunman shuddered and glanced at Roy. There was a strange light in his eyes.

“Kin I,” he said, “get my gun? You got me licked.”

“Go on, get it,” Roy said shortly. “But you’ll give us no more funny work. My brother and I are out for a walk, and we intend to continue it. Understand?”

“There’ll be no more shootin’,” Maryland asserted. “I’m sober now—I wasn’t before.”

He walked toward his gun and picked it up. Then, while the boys watched him, he re-entered the hall, a different man than when he had come out. The crowd dispersed, after shouting congratulations to Roy for his nerve and marksmanship. The whole affair was taken by most of the men as a matter of course, just an item in the life of a mining camp.

“I reckon you got your welcome,” Teddy remarked, as he and Roy left the glow of light for the darkness of the farther end of the street. “They’ll know you now.”

“Maybe. You know, that was a lucky shot. Maryland was drunk, and there was no telling where his next bullet would go. I really tried to put his arm out of commission. But it served—hitting his gun.”

“Sure did!” Teddy agreed. “Maryland! That’s a fine name for a man!”

“I don’t believe he’s such a terror as he thinks he is. Did you hear the crowd jeer him?” asked Roy musingly.

“Yes. He’s the kind who goes wild all of a sudden and needs a good sock on the jaw to bring him to. No real harm in him when he’s sober, I guess. Golly! this is a real sure-enough mining camp, isn’t it? We no sooner get to it than we have to use guns. I suppose every man is his own police force here.”

“With reservations. The toughs know that if they shoot up the place the military will enter and put this camp under martial law. So they have to watch their step.”

“Uh-huh. Boy, I’m tired! What say we hit the hay? Lots to do to-morrow, and early, too.”

They turned and retraced their steps. As they passed the hall in front of which they had made the acquaintance of Maryland, they noticed that the noise had quieted somewhat. A number of men were coming down the steps on their way home. The evening festivities were over. Wise men sought their bunks, so that they might be alert in the morning for whatever gold Lady Luck might bring them.

Silent and Nick were still at their game of double solitaire, played in the tent under the yellow glow of a smoking lantern.

The brothers stood over Silent, gazing down at the box the two were using for a table.

“How you coming?” Teddy asked.

“Fair. Say,” he sniffed, and touched Roy’s gun.

“Practicing?”

“What? Oh, you can tell it’s been fired? No, Silent, it wasn’t practice.” He told him and Nick of the occurrence.

“We’ve got to expect those things, I reckon.”

“Uh-huh, reckon so. Nick an me’ll bunk here—that the idea?”

“That’s it. Well, pleasant dreams.”

Teddy and Roy walked out of the tent. Their shelter had been set up about ten feet away. They found their way to it and lit the lantern. Then, perhaps because they should have turned in immediately, they sat and talked until the flickering wick of their lantern recalled the time to them.

During their life on the plains, Teddy and Roy had slept under the stars about as often as under a roof. It was anything but a new experience to them, and yet, to-night, sleep seemed far from them. They lay on their cots, still talking.

“You know the reason Silent was so anxious to come out here?” Roy asked. Then, answering himself: “Oh, that’s right—he did tell you, didn’t he? Well, I’ll bet we never see the two horsemen again.”

“Now, my hunch is just the opposite,” Teddy replied. Turning on his side and reaching down he trailed his fingers through the grass. “I’ve got a feeling we’ll meet them again—and soon.”

Roy made no comment to this. After a moment:

“How about that fellow that peppered away at our toes? We have an enemy there, too?”

“I don’t think so,” Teddy declared. “He’ll forget all about it to-morrow. Me, I’d be willing to let it slide. Aren’t you?”

“Might as well.” Quiet now, except for the sounds of the night—a gentle wind rustling the trees, the insects grating out their songs, the stream gurgling in the distance.

“Wonder how Jerry Decker’s coming along,” Teddy said finally.

“And I wonder if Belle is at the 8 X 8,” said Roy. “If that doctor is still visiting Decker, she’ll sure be on hand.”

“And how she likes to be kidded—*not!*” Teddy laughed. “Anyway, I still have to catch her at a loss for a come-back. Say, Roy, it was mighty fine of dad to let us leave the ranch with so many of the hands gone.”

“I’ll tell a maverick!” Another period of silence. “But he can spare us now. And we may find gold.”

“Not only may, but will. Nothing like confidence. If we caught those scoundrels who robbed Decker, I wonder if we could get his nuggets back for him? He needs ’em. What a rotten break he got!”

“I’ll say! After working all that time, too! It would be different if he came like most of these others, and was lucky enough to strike it the first day or so. ‘Easy come, easy go.’ But his gold didn’t come easy. He worked for it.”

“And how! He deserved to find a fortune. And then to be robbed of it! Sure is tough luck.”

Roy pulled his blanket a bit closer about him. The night was chilly, with a hint of fall. Gradually, the eyes of Teddy and Roy closed, their breathing became regular. Jerry Decker, the two horsemen out of the storm, the thought of to-morrow with gold waiting for them, the encounter with Maryland—all these began to whirl around in their heads, each thought overlapping the other, none assuming any importance, and, finally, nothing. They slept.

CHAPTER XVIII

DISCOVERY

THE clatter of a frying pan against the cook stove; the swish of canvas on canvas as tent flaps were rolled back; the bubbling of coffee; the good-natured cries of men keen for the coming day's labor—this was morning at Nugget Camp.

As Teddy and Roy tumbled from their blankets, the crisp air quickened their motions, and within five minutes of getting up they were splashing water over their faces and necks—cold, breath-taking water, from tin basins. Then a satisfying breakfast of bacon, flapjacks, coffee, eggs and corn bread. The corn bread they got from Gus Tripp, and cooked the rest themselves.

There is a feeling of great, unreasonable joy that comes to those who, in a high altitude, arise early in the brisk weather of late August, to watch the sun toss its beams over the tops of the mountains and breathe in deeply of the tingling air. The world is changed. Sights and sounds assume a new significance, a deeper meaning. A man will clap his partner heavily on the back or yell suddenly in his ear or shoulder him off the trail—all for no reason at all.

And breakfast, eaten beneath the light blue of the early morning sky—breakfast, with fragrant, crisp bacon, the smell of wood burning in the stove or fireplace, the aroma of coffee

“A breakfast,” Nick said, reaching for the last slab of corn bread, “than which there is no whicher. Boys, you see what's under my feet?”

The other stared down. Nick had his feet on a little mound of earth.

“That,” the puncher went on, “is the world. Me, I’m sittin’ on top of it. Savvy? Yay, boy, what a meal!”

“Like it?” Silent asked. Since he seemed to be an expert in the culinary art, he was unanimously elected cook.

“I’ll tell a maverick!” Roy declared fervently. “Best I ever had. Makes you feel all pepped up, ready to carry loads and loads of gold without feeling the weight.”

“Uh-huh,” Teddy remarked dryly. “Without feeling the *weight*—you got that part of it right, anyhow.”

The dishes were cleaned, cots made up, and the tents put in order. When, finally, the horses were saddled and all was ready for the start, Gus decided suddenly to take along a rifle and a box of cartridges.

“You never can tell,” he remarked in explanation. “Me, I’m a great believer in proverbs.”

Nugget Camp was cupped in a sort of bowl among the mountains. Two large streams and one small one watered the district, and a large amount of timber grew near by, which in itself was an unusual occurrence. Seldom are gold and timber found allied.

Gus’s claim was but a short ride from the tents, and as he trotted along, ahead of the boys, he waved to several of his newly made friends.

“There’s a bird you ought to know!” he exclaimed suddenly, pointing. “See if he remembers you. Hey, Maryland!”

“Howdy, Gus! How they comin’?” Maryland looked straight at Roy and Teddy with no sign of recognition.

“Forgot you completely,” Gus chuckled. “It’s easy to figger how he was feelin’ last night. Don’t hold it against him, boys. When he’s sober he’s O.K. Trouble with Maryland is, he can’t control his thirst.”

“Just what I said,” Teddy asserted. “Or Roy said it, or somebody.”

“Sure, we’ll forget it ever happened,” said Roy. “We knew he was pretty well under the weather. Say, Gus, where is that claim of yours?”

“There she is,” Gus answered proudly, pointing. “See her?”

A short distance away, at the foot of a small hill, was a well-worked plot of ground. Four piles of stones were its boundaries. Near the center a stick of wood was driven in the ground, a paper nailed to the top.

“What’s she say?” Nick demanded.

“This claim located and filed by Gus Tripp—me—August twenty-second,” was the reply. “It’s about the only claim this far up except Maryland’s. That’s his over there.”

“What’s he do, stick a shovel into it every so often?” Silent asked.

“Yea, that’s about it. She ain’t been worked much, has she? Well, that’s Maryland. Now, boys, I tell you. This here camp has been quieter than I thought it would be, an’ I reckon that’s because the news hasn’t really got around yet. But somethin’ tells me that to-morrow or next day you’ll see plenty of excitement near here.”

“So we better get located quick, hey?” Nick said.

“That’s it. Here! How about taking a claim right next to mine?”

“Sure! That’s a good idea,” Roy agreed. “How do you stake it?”

“Just like I staked mine. Take stones or stakes an’ set ’em out. Make it just the size of mine—that’s regulation. Come on, let’s go.”

They dismounted and tied the ponies to a tree.

“You pace it off, Teddy,” Roy suggested. “In line with Gus’s.”

The claim was paced and stones placed at each corner. Suddenly Gus exclaimed:

“Hey, I forgot! Don’t you want four claims, one for each? Sure you do! Then we’ll incorporate it—wow, that’s a word for you!—we’ll incorporate it in one big claim. That’s legal. Here, I’ll pace it for you.”

This was done.

“Now, the thing to do is to go to the filing office—that’s at the end of the street near Mike’s Place—and register your claim. At the same time you can leave an assay sample—some of the ore—to see how much it’ll assay to the ton.”

“Can’t we do that later?” Teddy asked. “We’ve got to get some more shovels and picks first. And we’ve got to get out some real sample dirt, not this top soil.”

“Yea, later’ll do for that. This is one hundred an’ eleven above discovery, because mine’s a hundred an’ ten. Funny, all the other waddies went below discovery. They have over six hundred claims staked down there. But I’m bettin’ this is just as good. Who’s goin’ to ride in an’ file this?”

“I’ll go,” offered Silent. “An’ I’ll bring back a mule with some stuff on him. We might as well get to work.”

“Hope to tell you!” Nick exclaimed eagerly. “Let’s see that shovel, Teddy! Me, I’m startin’ now!”

“A pick’s what you want, first along,” Gus declared, tossing him the last named article. “Look! See how I started to dig the shaft in my claim? She ain’t down so far yet, but I’m aimin’ to sink her lots deeper.”

“Well, I’ll be goin’,” Silent said. “Be back as soon as I can.”

While Silent rode back to camp, the Manley boys and Nick inspected the shaft that Gus had sunk. By its side were some cut timbers, which, Gus explained, would soon become a windlass—“when I sinks her a little lower ’n she is now.”

“Exactly how much gold have you found so far?” Roy asked.

“Hum—about, maybe, a hundred bucks’ worth at a liberal estimate. That’s not so bad.”

“It’s not so good, either,” Nick asserted. “Well, boys, here she goes—the first one!”

He swung the pick over his head and sunk the point into the earth.

“Wait a second!” Teddy, taking the top from his canteen, poured a libation over the pick as it stuck in the ground.

“For good luck,” he said, grinning. “All right, Nick, go to it!”

When Silent returned there was quite a sizable hole to show for Nick’s diligence. While he dug, the others busied themselves with the cutting of some timber for sluice-boxes and a windlass.

“Filed ’em,” Silent said laconically. “Two bucks the guy charged. That’s all. Now we can dig through to China.”

“You got any choice as to claims?” Nick asked, resting from his labors and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“Nope. Not any. I’ll take the furtherest one, or any other. Don’t make no difference,” was Silent’s reply.

“All the gold we find we split,” Roy declared, coming up at that moment. “Even shares O.K.?”

“It is with me,” Silent responded. “Hey, Nick, suppose you help me unload this here mule.”

The work of mining went on. Gus had his own claim to work but now and then he would walk over to see how his neighbors were making out. By lunch time the hole had reached a depth of ten feet.

“Let’s knock off,” Teddy suggested. “I’m hungry.”

“Wait a couple more minutes,” Roy suggested. “Hey, pull up!”

Roy was digging from the bottom of the shaft, filling with dirt a basket that Silent had brought, and Teddy was engaged in pulling up the basket by means of a rope tied to the corners, and emptying it.

“We’ll have to board that up this afternoon,” Silent declared, stopping for a moment the construction of a sluice-box. “We don’t want no accidents to happen.”

“You mean a cave-in?” Nick asked. “Say, we will have to watch out for that! Be a fine thing if—”

“Don’t get so blamed close!” Silent interrupted. “Roy’s down there. Want to shower him with dirt?”

“Yea, that’s right,” Nick agreed, stepping back. “Jiminy, I
—”

Whatever it was that he was going to add remained unsaid, for at that moment the soil at the top of the hole began to slide.

“Golly! I knew that should have been shored up!” Silent shouted. “Roy, get out of there!”

“Coming!” was the answer. “Who’s tossing stuff at me? Hey, don’t do that! I can’t—”

The voice stopped, cut off as though by a heavy curtain. The edge of the hole crumbled away and shot down into the shaft—and Roy was underneath.

“Roy!” Teddy shouted hoarsely. “Roy! You fellows, come here! Run! Quick! He’s buried!”

The little landslide stopped as quickly as it had begun. Now the hole was barely three feet deep.

Teddy leaped into it and began frantically to dig with his bare hands. “Get him!” he was yelling. “We’ve got to get him before he suffocates!”

Nick jumped to Teddy’s side, and his shovel ate into the earth. Silent, with rare presence of mind, ran for Gus, to obtain more shovels.

“We’ll make it,” Nick panted. “He’s not so far down!”

“That was my fault,” Teddy almost sobbed. “I leaned over the edge, and all of a sudden—”

Gus, bearing two shovels, arrived on the scene. As best he could he helped Nick and Teddy dig, while Silent shoved back the earth from the edge of the hole so as to prevent another cave-in.

“Careful,” Nick panted. “We’re gettin’ near him. If you feel your shovel strike—”

“Watch it!” Teddy shouted. “Look!”

A hand burst through the earth, and opened and closed frantically. Roy was still conscious, and just below the surface.

“Go it!” Teddy shouted. “Don’t hit his head with the spades!”

More of the wrist appeared, then the arm. Then, with a sob of relief, Teddy was wiping the dirt from his brother’s face, while Roy gasped in the precious air again. He was saved, though still buried to his shoulders.

It was some moments before he could speak. Nick and Gus continued to dig, carefully, so they would not injure Roy. In all, his head had been covered with the heavy, damp earth about three and a half minutes.

“Boy, that was a close one!” Teddy babbled. “Roy, are you all right now? Swallow any of that dirt? You can breathe all right, can’t you?”

With his free hand Roy brushed the soil from his hair. The first words he said were:

“Did some one mention food?”

“Hot dog, there’s a guy for you!” Nick exclaimed. “You stick to it, and we’ll have you out in a minute. Legs all right?”

“Little weak, or I could get out myself now,” Roy answered. “Snakes, that was sudden! Oh, by the way—”

Standing up to his armpits in dirt, Roy managed to get his other hand loose. The fist was closed.

“Here’s a souvenir,” he said, grinning. “Take a look!”

His hand opened. For a moment Nick and Gus stopped digging. Silent peered down from the surface.

In Roy's hand lay a large, yellow-colored stone, studded with darker rock. Nick saw it, and gave a yell.

"A nugget!" he shouted. "A nugget, and a blame big one! Silent, have a look! Boy, you sure hit it!"

"I reckon," Silent drawled, "that you have. From the looks of things, that there is worth about two hundred bucks."

CHAPTER XIX

THE STRANGER

FORGOTTEN now was the fate Roy had just escaped by the narrowest margin. Forgotten was the terrific labor that had been necessary to extricate him. Forgotten was everything except that piece of yellow-studded rock that lay on Roy's palm.

"Pay dirt!" Nick gasped. "Pay dirt, by golly! Two hundred bucks—in one handful—"

"Nick, for Pete's sake, if you're going to lay down on the job, let's have the shovel and I'll dig myself out!" Roy said, grinning weakly. He was recovering rapidly from his unpleasant experience. "Think I want to sleep here?"

"Snakes, I forgot about that!" Nick seized the shovel again and continued his labors with energy. Roy, still clinging to the nugget, was finally brought to the surface. What had seemed the beginning of a tragedy had turned into a stroke of marvelous luck.

"Here's how it was," Roy explained, as he sat on the ground. "I heard some one yell overhead, and—"

"That was Silent," Nick interrupted.

"And then the next thing I knew a clod of earth hit me on the shoulder. I thought some one was kidding me. The next second the walls started to cave in. A big chunk slid off and buried me up to my knees. I yelled, and tried to get out quick, and then I saw this nugget in the hole where the dirt had slid from." He held the odd-shaped rock in his hand and gazed at it. "Yes, sir," he went on, "I saw the nugget and made a grab

for it. Then the whole world hit me on the head and shoulders, and the rest you know.”

“Yes, we know,” murmured Teddy.

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody no good,” Nick orated. “An’ it’s a bum landslide that don’t uncover somethin’. Well, Roy, you sure have had your initiation as a miner.”

“Personally, I’m going back to camp and remove some of the initiation,” Roy answered, with a laugh. “I suppose you waddies will be right here?”

“We’ll be right here,” Teddy replied. “Where there’s some gold there’s sure to be more. What you going to do with the nugget, Roy?”

“Take it to the assay office.”

“That’s a good idea,” Silent approved. “Leave it there to be tested.”

“She’ll test up plenty,” Gus declared. “Two hundred is about right, I reckon. You all right now, Roy? I’ll get back to my claim.”

“And whatever that nugget measures, you’re in it,” Roy called. “Lucky for me you were around. We didn’t have enough shovels. I’d have been there yet. Thanks, Gus—a lot.”

“Toss it away,” Gus replied, with a grin. “What’s the idea, thankin’ me? I had a little exercise, that’s all.”

Alone, Roy rode back to the tent, washed and changed his clothing. His head ached, but aside from that he felt no effects from his experience. Later he took the nugget and left it at the assay office.

When he returned to “One hundred and eleven” he found that the hole was even deeper now than it had been before.

But to prevent a re-occurrence of the cave-in, timbers cut from trees were driven into the ground against the walls.

“That’s what should have been done before,” Silent remarked, as he saw Roy. “I was goin’ to suggest it, but thought I’d wait a while. I’ll know better the next time.”

“We all will,” Roy declared. “How you making out?”

“Struck nothin’ yet. Give us time. We will.”

The work went on all that day and the next, the shaft growing ever deeper. Nick was engaged in the construction of a makeshift windlass when he heard a voice:

“Hey!”

The others heard it too, and stopped to listen. It seemed to come from behind a pile of cut timber.

“Hey! Blame it, how about—”

“Who is it—Gus?” Teddy asked.

“No, there’s Gus over there. I don’t know who it is. Maybe —”

“Hey! My flivver’s busted! But I got here, by golly, on two flats an’ a busted wheel! I got here!”

A figure stepped into view. Teddy let out a shout.

“It’s Bug Eye! For the love of Pete! What’d you say, Bug Eye?”

“Not much!” The puncher approached, grinned ruefully, took off his sombrero and bowed low.

“Greetings to you-all,” he said. “I bring with me the dewy freshness of the early morn, good luck from my boss, an’ one broken-down flivver. Howdy, Gus! How you fellers hittin’ ’em?”

“Gradually,” Gus replied. “What’s new?”

“First, I want to know if you found anything,” Bug Eye declared, rolling a cigarette. “Me an’ my flivver—which, by the way, lies yonder in the cornfield or some place—has come to you a-thirst for knowledge. Tell me, pretty maiden, hast found any gold?”

“Roy picked up a nugget worth five hundred,” Nick declared. “Five or six hundred.”

“Or even two,” Silent corrected, with a chuckle. “But he did find one.”

“Baby! Then there is gold? An’ I was afraid it was a fairy tale! Hot potato, here’s where I locate! Gold, hey? Well, split my esophagus!” He blew on his hands eagerly. “Gold!”

“How are things at the 8 X 8?” Roy demanded. “How’s Jerry Decker?”

“Better. Your sister is stayin’ there a while, Roy. Me, I think she’s hipped on the doc. Yea, Jerry’s better. He said if you heard of or seen a buck-skin bag with the initials G. D. burned in it, to grab it, because that’s what he had his nuggets in when they were stolen.”

“Any trace of the thieves?” Teddy asked.

“Nary trace. I don’t suppose you boys—”

“Have anything to eat? We have! A buck-skin bag, with his initials in it?” Roy rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, that’s something. We’ll be on the lookout.”

He did not tell Bug Eye of their adventure on the way to camp, since to do so would be to involve Silent. Simply he described, as best he could, the two men who had been seen riding away from the figure on the ground, who later proved to be Decker. The description was strengthened by the quick view he had had of the two horsemen the night of the storm.

“Well, I reckon they’ll steer clear of Nugget Camp for a while,” Bug Eye stated. “It would sure please the old coot if we got his gold back for him, though. Where’s them eats?”

It was past mid-day, and the miners decided to knock off and return to the tent. When Teddy suggested to Bug Eye that he lock his flivver or anchor it to a tree, the puncher replied:

“Boy, Columbus hisself couldn’t move that machine! She’s sot, that’s what she is! An’ there she’ll stay till I makes a fortune here.”

“Figgerin’ to move it before Christmas?” Nick asked.

“Uh-huh! Long about Thanksgiving I’ll solder on my boots an’ head for the East, if I can get somebody to help carry my nuggets.”

When Bug Eye was told how Roy had made his “strike,” the cowboy whooped in amazement.

“Is that the custom here?” he demanded. “You got to be buried before you hit pay dirt? Then here’s the little man what starts a new system. Me, I leans down an’ picks ’em up. Yay, bo!”

They were in the tent now, sitting before a meal of Silent’s concoction. Nick, who was nearest the entrance, suddenly turned, a fork full of beans half way to his mouth.

“Who is it?” he called.

The tent flap parted and a man stuck his head in. None of them had seen him before.

“Howdy, gents,” he said. “You new here?”

“Just arrived,” Roy answered. “Come in. Have something to eat?”

The stranger, a tall, big-boned man in rough clothes, entered.

“Not me,” he answered. “Had mine. Say whose flivver is that ’bout quarter of a mile to the north?”

“She answers to the name of Lizzie, an’ she comes when I call her,” Bug Eye replied. “Why?”

“Want to sell it?”

“Now, I ain’t thought much about it,” the puncher answered slowly. “She’s got two flats an’ a busted wheel.”

“Give you seven hundred.”

“Seven hundred!” Silent, sitting on an upturned box, looked at the man closely. “Is she worth that?”

“She is to me. Well?”

“Certain, you can have it for that price,” Bug Eye declared. He frowned slightly. Three hundred would have been an exorbitant figure.

“O.K.” The big man nodded. “Here’s the cash.” He drew a roll of bills from his pocket. “Five hundred, five-fifty, six, seven hundred. Right?”

“Yea, it’s right, all right,” Bug Eye said. “But don’t you want a bill of sale or somethin’?”

The stranger laughed.

“A bill of sale, out here? No! Then the flivver’s mine? Got a key?”

“Key’s in it. How come you want it so bad?”

“Got to have somethin’ to cart my stuff. I can fix them tires an’ the wheel. You see, I made a strike ’bout two hours ago. Figger I got near twelve thousand bucks.”

“Wow!” A look of amazement came to the faces of those listening. “Twelve thousand bucks! Where’d it happen, stranger?”

“Ah—that I ain’t sayin’. But I’d be much obliged if one of you’d help me load. Look, I got a wheel that I bought a week ago—an auto wheel, I mean. I want to get out of this camp as soon as I can an’ get the stuff to a safe place. If you—”

“I’ll help you,” Nick volunteered. “Want to start now?”

“Yea, I’d like to. My tent’s down the road a piece. You got some tools in the flivver, I suppose. I can have it fixed up in no time. An’ I’ll pay you what you want for your trouble,” nodding toward Nick.

“Hey, nothin’ doin’! I don’t want no pay. Come on, let’s go. All right?” The puncher looked over at Roy.

“Sure, go ahead! See you later.”

Nick followed the man from the tent. When they had gone, Teddy turned to his brother.

“Well?” he said.

“Uh-huh—that’s the way I feel about it. Seven hundred dollars! I reckon that isn’t much to him, though. Say, did he strike anybody as being—sort of queer?”

“He did me,” Silent remarked quietly. “The way he came in an’ how he told about his strike. Most people wouldn’t do that. An’ how’d he know where the flivver was?”

“Unless his claim is near yours,” Bug Eye put in.

“It isn’t,” Teddy declared. “Gus told us ours were the only claims that far up. I wonder—” he stopped, then went on: “I wonder if he could have been taking a look at ours?”

“What for?”

“Oh, just curiosity,” Teddy said evasively. “But if he’s trying to pull something funny, he won’t get far with Nick.”

“I’ll tell a maverick he won’t!” Roy arose. “Well, let’s get back to work. Snakes, suppose you hit pay dirt for twelve

thousand dollars! Would you go into a stranger's tent and ask for help to cart the stuff?"

"I would not," Silent asserted. "The whole thing looks fishy."

They wandered out of the tent into the open. Gus, who had finished his meal—he had refused to join them on the plea that there were some things he had to do in his own tent—was told of the stranger's offer and Nick's accompanying him to help load his gold.

"That waddie is goin' to get hisself in trouble one of these days, bein' so kindhearted," Gus said. "Load the gold! Where to? What for?"

Teddy shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't say. We'll know more when Nick comes back. Come on, boys—we have work ahead of us."

They mounted their ponies and started again for their claim. But as they rode they were thinking, not so much about gold, as about the tall stranger and his request for help.

CHAPTER XX

BUNCOED

NICK and the stranger, who said his name was Jimmie Allen, walked toward Allen's tent. It proved to be quite a distance from Nick's shelter, and not directly on the street, but set back slightly from the others.

"Here she is," Allen said. "Not as nifty as some I've seen, but she serves the purpose." He looked at Nick. "You been to a minin' camp before?"

"Once—a long time ago. Don't remember much about it. Why?"

"Thought you looked familiar, that's all. Now here's the plan. I figger on cartin' this stuff to the flivver now, fixin' the wheel an' tires, an' headin' out. I'll leave the rest of this stuff right here—" he waved his hand at the tent—"because I'll be comin' back."

"Where's the gold?" Nick inquired.

Again the man looked at him sharply. Then he laughed.

"You interested in that, hey? Well, there she lays." He pointed to a heavy box in the corner of the tent. It had a padlock thrust through two heavy staples.

"In there," Allen went on. He walked to the box, knelt, and unlocked it. "Have a look!"

Nick bent over eagerly. Within the box were many bags, bulging with rock. Certain it was that they would be too many for one man to carry, at least without every one's noticing it.

“We’ll divide ’em up an’ get goin’,” Allen stated. “I’ll take the wheel.” There was an auto wheel lying against the side of the tent, and he thrust his arm through the spokes. “Put the bags in your pockets—we don’t want the whole camp to know what we’re doin’.”

“Right.”

Nick lifted the bags gingerly, realizing that he held considerable wealth in his hands. When his pockets were filled, Allen took the rest.

“Suppose you get your bronc, now—I should of thought of that before,” Allen declared. “You get your bronc an’ meet me here. Then we’ll ride out to the flivver together. You got a gun? Yea, I see it. O. K!”

“Well, shall I take these things now?” Nick motioned to his pockets. “Wouldn’t it be better to leave ’em here till I get back?”

“Naw, take ’em along. You look honest enough.” Allen laughed, a trifle loudly. “I’ll wait here.”

Nick nodded, and left the tent. He felt uneasy with so much gold on him. But who knew he had it? Besides, there wasn’t any danger of a hold-up in broad daylight on the main street of the mining camp.

He reached the place where he had left his pony, and saw that the other broncos were already gone.

“Back to the shaft,” Nick thought. “The flivver is near there, so maybe I’ll meet ’em on the way.”

Allen was walking impatiently up and down before his tent when Nick returned. The puncher thought he detected relief on the big man’s face as he came into sight.

“Was he afraid I’d run away with the stuff?” Nick wondered. “Well, I can’t blame him for bein’ a bit nervous. I have about six thousand dollars’ worth of nuggets with me, I should say at a rough estimate.”

Allen mounted his own horse, and the two set out, side by side. They did not pass the miners, taking another route, with Allen leading. Nick wanted to ask him how he happened on the flivver, but he refrained. After all, it was none of his business.

The “Lizzie” was in a cleared space, just off the trail. As Nick looked down the road it had come, he easily understood how the wheel had become broken and the tires punctured.

“What did that fellow do—bring himself an’ nothin’ else?” Allen asked, as he dismounted.

“Well, we had planned to meet him here. We brought all the stuff on mules,” Nick explained. “That’s why there’s nothing in the flivver. Goin’ to get at that wheel now?”

“Soon as I get rid of this stuff. Here, put the bags in the back seat. Or wait, hand ’em to me.”

He reached out, and Nick deposited two of the bags in his large hand. Allen hefted them.

“There’s steak an’ lamb chops an’ clothes an’ plenty of shows right in this here bag,” he said musingly. “The old pay dirt!”

“You sure hit it,” Nick responded absently, bringing out another bag. “If I have half that luck I’ll be satisfied.”

“Well, we can’t all—” Allen stopped, and his fingers caressed the bag. A queer look came over his face.

“Hey, wait—” he began, and suddenly opened the bag. His eyes widened and an exclamation burst from his lips.

“Well, you double-crosser!” he roared. “Stick ’em up! Stick ’em up, quick!”

His gun was out and pointing at Nick’s forehead.

“You blamed double-crosser!” Allen shouted again.

“What the mischief—” Nick stuttered, his hands over his head. “What’s the idea? What’s the big idea?”

“I’ll show you what’s the idea!” Allen, his face contorted with rage, thrust the bag under Nick’s nose. “Look at that! Take a good look! Nothin’ but ordinary rock! Thought you’d get away with it, did you? Thought I’d find it out when I was on my way? You knew I was plannin’ to start now. You dirty double-crosser! An’ I thought you was honest! I trusted you!”

“Well, you’re barkin’ up a wrong tree now, mister!” Nick responded hotly. “Whatever’s in that bag you put in! I ain’t had it out of my pocket since you saw me put it in! An’ that’s straight!”

“Yea, a hot story that is! Know any more good jokes?” Allen paused and narrowed his eyes. “I reckon,” he said meaningly, “you know what happens to a thief in a mining camp?”

Nick did not reply. Suddenly the whole thing was plain to him. Allen had been waiting for this chance until a new man came into camp and he could work his little game. There was never any gold in the bags. But Allen had declared, before witnesses, that he had twelve thousand dollars’ worth. That would be good evidence before a jury of miners. Everything was in his favor and against Nick.

“Well, what you got to say?” Allen taunted. “What a fool you are to think you could get away with a thing like that! I sure gave you enough chance—you had the gold with you

when you went to get your bronc. Plenty of chance to change it for rock. Maybe you thought I'd just toss these here bags in the car without lookin', hey?"

Nick stared at him calmly.

"Allen," he said, "it won't go."

"Huh?" Allen's face grew red. "Won't go? You're blamed well right it won't go! Where's my gold?"

Nick, his hands still in the air, shrugged his shoulders.

"Do whatever you're goin' to do, an' get it over with," he answered briefly. "You know I ain't got your gold—that there never was any gold in them bags."

"Oh, I do, hey?" Allen sneered. "Well, I had two of the bags myself. You took most of 'em, because I had to carry the wheel. How come there's gold in the ones I got?"

"Listen, Allen," Nick said coldly. "I don't know what you're gettin' at, but whatever it is let's have it without wastin' all this time. You figgered this thing out pretty good. When I went to get my bronc, you probably emptied the rock out of the bags you had an' put some gold in, just enough to make it look real. Then, with me carryin' these bags around, you figgered you had a good case against me—that I had time to take the gold an' put rock in. That's what you want other people to believe. Well, all right. Now what?"

Allen gazed at him for a moment. Then he smiled sarcastically.

"Great talker, ain't you? We'll see how much talkin' you'll do later on. Come on, now, get goin'!" His voice sharpened. "Get on your bronc an' head back for camp!"

"To camp?"

“You heard me! An’ one break an’ I plugs you. Wait a second.” Allen leaned forward, pulled Nick’s gun from its holster and tossed it into the bushes. “All right! Get goin’!”

“Can’t figger this,” Nick muttered, getting on his pony. “Oh, you know blame well I won’t make no break. If you want to go back to camp, that’s up to you—only I don’t see what it’ll get you.”

“You don’t, hey?” Allen laughed shortly. “I know what it’ll get you—a rope around your neck!”

“Yea?”

The ponies moved off. Suddenly Allen, who was riding behind Nick, his gun still out, exclaimed:

“Listen, you! Hold up a minute.” He urged his pony forward and went close to Nick. “Now I ain’t a vindictive cuss,” he said softly. “All I want is my gold. It won’t do me no good to have you strung up. So—” he hesitated. Then: “I’ll give you a chance. I shouldn’t, but I will. By rights I ought to ride you in an’ let the boys at camp fit a necktie on to you. That’s what I ought to do. But I’ll give you a chance. You get my gold back from wherever you put it an’ we’ll call it off. You had about ten thousand dollars’ worth. You give me ten thousand in cash or in gold, an’ I’ll forget all about it. See?”

Like a flash Nick saw the game. Fool, fool that he was not to have caught on before! Framed! Framed as pretty as any one ever was!

As he thought of how he had fallen for the ruse, he laughed bitterly.

“You’re a clever guy, Allen,” he said. “Blamed clever. There’s one thing you overlooked. I haven’t got ten thousand

dollars or ten thousand nickels, either. You crazy, or somethin’? Where’d I get ten thousand dollars?”

Allen shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s up to you. If you don’t want to give me my gold back, maybe your friends will lend you the money—to save you from hangin’. Those Manley boys can get the cash—an’ they will, too. It ain’t pleasant to see a pal doin’ a Black Bottom on a hunk of air.”

The blood rushed to Nick’s face.

“You dirty hound!” he gasped. “Blackmail! So that’s it! You did know your stuff after all, didn’t you? Had it all planned out! Well, by golly, you take me to camp an’ see how much good it’ll do you! Think you can convict me on your word alone? How can you prove there was gold in them bags?”

“Go easy on them names!” The eyes behind the gun narrowed. “You see, stranger, we don’t need much proof in this here camp. Four or five witnesses heard you offer to help me cart the gold. A friend of mine was standin’ outside my tent when you walked off with the bags. You didn’t see him, but he was there, sure enough. The boys around here are sort of hair-triggered. Man, I got enough proof to hang you ten times over!”

“Hey, what’s this talk about hangin’?”

Nick and Allen turned quickly at the sound of the voice. It was Bug Eye, and he had his pistol leveled straight at Allen’s heart.

“You drop that gun, bozo!” he said sharply. “Drop it quick!”

CHAPTER XXI

ALLEN'S GUN

THE gun fell from Allen's fingers. It struck the pony on the neck, and he shied. Bug Eye moved his bronco forward.

"Now we'll have a little conversation," he went on. "Nick, what's it all about?"

"It's about robbery, that's what it's about!" Allen broke in. "Your little playmate took the gold I trusted him with and substituted rock! Look!" He pulled from his pocket the bag that Nick had handed him. "Plain, ordinary rock!"

"He done what?"

"He stole my gold, that's what he done!"

"Bah!"

Contained in the exclamation was all the contempt that Bug Eye could give it.

"Nick never stole nothin'. I don't know what the game is, but—"

"It's blackmail, Bug Eye," Nick said quietly. "Allen thinks he's got me for stealin' gold that he never had. Says if I get ten thousand bucks from Teddy or Roy or from the boss, he'll call it off."

"Ten thousand bucks!"

"Well, there was that much gold in the bags he had!" Allen said defiantly. "If I don't get the gold, I want the money!"

"Uh-huh." Bug Eye regarded Allen silently. Suddenly he grinned.

“Nick,” he said, “slide down an’ pick up the gun this here waddie just dropped. I notice you lost yourn. Then, my lad, we’ll take a little ride. Allen, you ride ahead. We’ll see what the rest have to say to this! No, not toward camp—over to little ole One Hundred an’ Eleven! The boys are waitin’ there. To the left, Allen. We’ll have a debate on this here subject!”

Bug Eye had ridden toward his flivver to see if he had left anything of value in the car, telling those at the mine he would be back in half an hour. He kept to his word—he was back within the time set and with him rode Nick and Allen, the latter under surveillance of Bug Eye’s gun.

When they approached the mine, Teddy and Roy were erecting a makeshift windlass that Silent had constructed. They looked up in surprise as they saw Bug Eye with his gun out.

“What’s the trouble, Bug Eye?” Teddy called.

“Well, it’s a long story,” the puncher replied. “You, Allen, slide off that bronc!”

Muttering to himself, the man obeyed. Things were not shaping up as he had expected.

“Now, boys, we’ll have that debate,” Bug Eye said smoothly. “Gather ’round, gents, an’ listen to a tale. Hey, Gus! You might as well be in on this too.” He waited until Gus came up, his eyes wide with wonder. Bug Eye and Nick were off their ponies, standing before Allen.

“Nick, suppose you start the proceedings,” Bug Eye suggested. “Make it short an’ snappy.”

“I will.” Nick jerked his thumb toward Allen. “This here hombre, boys, claims I stole the gold he said he gave me. We

went to his tent, an' I put some bags in my pocket. Then he asked me to get my bronc, which I did, an' we rode over to the flivver. When we gets there he pulls his gun, shows me there's rock in the bags I had, and claims I grabbed his nuggets. Reckon that's about all."

"When I came up he was talkin' about hangin'," Bug Eye said gently. "Hangin', Roy. Nice, pleasant word, ain't it?"

"By golly, you'll see how pleasant it is!" Allen flared. "This feller stole my gold, ten thousand dollars' worth, an' I want it back or the cash for it! You waddies think you're pretty great, don't you? Well, by golly, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing, and little of that," Roy broke in quietly. "Nick, did you see any gold in the bags you took?"

"Not any, Roy. I never opened 'em. First time I seed what was in 'em was when this bird opens one, and shows me some stones. That's all I know about it."

"How can you prove there was gold in 'em?" Teddy demanded.

"'Cause the ones I carried still have gold in 'em, for one way! How come he happened to pick the only bags that had rock, like he says?"

"When I went to get my bronc," Nick said, "Allen threw out the rock from the bags he had an' put some gold in, enough to make it look real. When I took the bags there was stones in all of 'em."

"Think you'll make the boys at camp believe that?" Allen sneered. "Likely I'd ask you to help me carry a load of stones, ain't it?"

"That's what you done!" Nick exclaimed hotly. "You framed me, that's what! But you won't get away with it!"

“You want to go before a jury of miners with that story?” Roy asked. Silent, while all this was going on, regarded Allen carefully.

“Either that or ten thousand bucks! If this bird don’t get me back my gold, he’s got to get the cash. An’ he knows where he can get it, too.”

“He means from your dad, Roy. He thinks he’d give the money to save me from hangin’.”

“He would, as far as that goes,” Teddy declared. “You know that, Nick. But let’s talk this thing out. Allen, you don’t really think you have a chance to succeed with this plan of yours, do you?”

“Plan or not, I want my ten thousand bucks,” the man answered stubbornly. “A friend of mine, who I’ll find when I need him, was standin’ outside the tent when this bird walked out with my nuggets. That’s one witness. Then all of you heard me say I had twelve thousand worth of nuggets, an’ I wanted help to carry ’em to the flivver. Look, didn’t I give seven hundred for the flivver without battin’ an eye? Think I’d do that if I hadn’t struck it pretty rich?”

“Man, you sure got things figgered out,” Gus said. “But what makes you think we’ll testify? We’re not crazy, you know!”

“Oh, you’ll testify all right. The boys’ll see to that.”

“Ah, they will, huh?” Gus exclaimed. “They won’t see to nothin’, let me tell you! Why, you ornery, low-down—”

“Take it easy, Gus,” Roy advised. “It won’t do any good to talk that way. Listen, Allen. You may have friends in this camp, but we have, too. Four or five of our men from the X Bar X—and I guess you heard of that—are around here some

place. We haven't seen 'em yet, but they won't be hard to find if it comes to a show-down. Now my advice to you is this, and I mean it. You slide out of here as quick as you can. Get on your pony and vamoose. We won't follow you or try to make trouble for you. And that's my advice." A moment's silence. "Well, are you taking it?"

Allen stared at Roy. For a second those about him thought he was going to back down. But suddenly his face grew red and he shouted:

"That's your advice; is it? Well, you can take your advice an' hang yourself with it—see! I want my ten thousand bucks, an' I'll get 'em or your friend here will do a little dance in the air! An' that's my advice—take it!"

"You—" Nick began, and stepped toward Allen, his fist clenched. But before he could strike Silent seized him by the arm.

"Wait a second," the puncher said quietly. "Where'd you get that gun, Nick?"

"This one?" Nick pulled the weapon from his holster. "Why, it belongs to our little friend here. He took mine an' threw it into the bushes, so when Bug Eye came I took his. Why?"

Silent turned the gun over in his hand. Teddy and Roy saw it and started forward. They did not speak, however, but waited for Silent.

The puncher's eyes were on the gun as though he had never seen one like it before. In truth, it was not a Western weapon. It was unlike anything cowboys carry.

Finally Silent raised his eyes and there was a strange light in them. When he spoke his voice was low, almost a whisper.

“I reckon,” he said slowly, “this here farce ends now. Allen—” this word was snapped out, “this your gun?”

Allen, his face white, did not answer. He seemed fascinated by the look in Silent’s eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me—I know.” Silent took a step forward. “Allen, you ever heard the name—Greyhound?”

“Greyhound!”

The word burst from Allen’s lips. He staggered back, his hand to his head.

“Watch him, boys!” Silent roared. “Watch him!”

Allen gave one leap and gained his saddle. Frantically he dug spurs into his pony’s sides and the maddened beast sprang high.

“Take him off!” Teddy yelled. “Look out, Silent!”

Silent, his lips in a straight line, raised his weapon. At that moment Allen jerked his horse’s head cruelly and the bronco swerved into the cowboy, knocking him down.

“You blamed fools!” Allen yelled. “Think you could get me? So you know Greyhound, do you? Well, he’s where you’ll never find him! So long, you washed-out nursemaids!”

He brought a quirt down sharply on the back of Bug Eye’s pony, then did the same with Nick’s.

Although later, on looking back to this scene, Teddy declared they should have had time to draw a gun on Allen, at the time, events seemed to follow one another with such lightning-like rapidity that no one thought of this. Before they could fire a single shot the two ponies that had been hit ran in opposite directions and Allen was among the trees, away.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE TRAIL

SILENT picked himself up slowly and those who looked at him saw that his face was of a peculiar grey color. The gun was still in his hand.

“Too late,” he said briefly, to Nick’s excited suggestion. “Got no ponies. Can’t chase him on foot.”

“We’d better get those broncs quick,” Roy said. “They didn’t go far—just far enough,” he added.

“That gun—” Teddy began.

Silent nodded. “Same kind. I never saw Allen before. He’s a pal of the skunk who—he’s a pal of Greyhound’s. This is a German gun.”

“We’ve seen one like it before,” Roy declared. “Do you mean to say that man—and the others—are German?”

“Not any,” Silent replied. His face gradually resumed its normal coloring. “They got these here weapons from a mail-order concern. They ain’t registered. When you use guns for killin’,” he said in a low voice, “it’s better to get ’em through the mail instead of over a counter.”

“Killin’!” Gus exclaimed. “Did that guy Allen kill somebody?”

“It seems to be a habit,” Silent went on, “for a guy with this kind of a gun to use it on humans. A habit! Well, boys—” he drew a deep breath—“Reckon I’ve finished minin’ for a while. Now let’s get those broncs. I can see one of ’em—yep, the other, too—from here.” He pointed. “Over by that bush. They got together.”

“You mean you want to go after that fellow—after Allen?” Roy asked.

“That’s what. Sorry to leave you, but—”

“You’re not leaving us,” Teddy stated distinctly.

“Huh?” and Silent looked up.

“We’re coming with you. There’s a little matter we have to settle with certain parties—who sport guns like this. Roy, I reckon I’m speaking for you, too?”

“I’ll tell a maverick you are!” Roy exclaimed. “As you said some time back, Silent, there are some things more important than finding gold! Now let’s see.”

Roy, having made the decision, immediately made plans for carrying it out. Although the others, with the exception of Teddy, were older than Roy, somehow it did not seem strange that they looked to him as leader.

“How about this,” Roy went on, speaking quickly. “Some of us have got to stay here. At least one. Bug Eye—”

“I thought so,” Bug Eye broke in, grinning ruefully. “All right, Roy, you’re the boss. Anyhow, that’s the best plan. I’ll do a little mining while you guys are away. Me an’ Gus, we’ll hold the fort here.”

“You got the idea, Bug Eye,” Roy replied. “Come on, Silent, let’s round up those broncs. Then we’ll get back to the tent.”

The horses were easily caught. Bug Eye decided to ride back to camp with them, and see if he could in any way aid their preparations.

One thing they counted on, and that was that Allen would not ride out of that locality. He would join his friends, and the boys had a notion that “Greyhound” was encamped some

place near Nugget Camp. It seemed logical to imagine him lying in wait for miners who had made a strike and were carrying the dust or nuggets to a safer place. Thus it was, or so Roy thought, that he had shot down Jerry Decker.

There were several crimes to be laid at the door of this same Greyhound. First, the robbery and slaying of Silent's brother and father. That in itself was a cold-blooded deed. Why they hadn't killed Silent as well while he was lying ill on his bed, the Manley boys could only guess, but probably it was that they knew he was in no condition to follow them.

Then the shooting of Jerry Decker. There was little doubt in Roy's mind, or in Teddy's either, that the same hand had directed both, if not actually committed the two deeds. Both were equally vicious, done with an entire disregard for human life.

Finally, Allen's attempt to frame Nick and get from him ten thousand dollars. True, this was markedly different from the other crimes. Allen was not Greyhound. He was, as Roy and Teddy suspected, a member of the gang, and a weak member at that. A swindler rather than a robber. But his use of the German Mauser branded him as being a comrade of Greyhound.

That night of the storm Greyhound had been within their reach, but had escaped, wounded as he was. Gus had told them of a man who had been shot in a barroom fracas, and, by the description, it was Greyhound.

This, then, was how the situation stood. The boys had but slender clues to go by—the gun, the wounded man, the fact that they believed Greyhound to be still in the vicinity. Yet with these clues they determined to search for and *find* Greyhound and Allen.

By four o'clock they were ready for the start. Each man carried both a revolver and a rifle, with much ammunition. Food, a canteen of water, a blanket and a rubber poncho apiece completed their packs.

Bug Eye stood before the tent as they mounted.

"You fellows are goin' on a long journey," he said quietly. "Good luck to you!"

Something besides the usual expression of a wish was in that sentence; something that showed a realization of the dangers of the journey. These men were not starting out on a jaunt. They were on the trail of a desperate criminal.

"So long, Bug Eye," Roy called. His voice was low, even. "Take care of One Eleven."

"Have a big nugget ready for you," the puncher promised. "Well, so long!"

"So long!"

Four riders trotted down the street, past the long line of tents, and out upon the brown turf, heading toward the mountains. Greyhound would not be in the open. The home of bandits was among the hills.

For the first five minutes there was absolute silence. Each was busy with his own thoughts. How would this thing end? Would their party be intact on the return journey or would one of their number bear mute testimony to Greyhound's shooting ability and cold, calculating character?

It may be that none of these riders actually analyzed the emotion which prompted him to leave Nugget Camp and venture forth in pursuit of one with whom none of them except Silent had any personal concern. Certainly, the idea of

telling the authorities and letting properly authorized men take up the chase, was neither appealing nor feasible.

The nearest home of the law was Hawley, a distance of some seventy or eighty miles. True, there was law of a sort at Eagles, and at some of the other smaller towns, but not sufficient to cope with this situation. Thus, whatever was done must be accomplished by citizens imbued with that spirit which protests forcibly at such depredations as were laid to Greyhound.

After those first few, serious moments, when joking was laid aside out of an unconscious respect for Silent and not from any personal sense of fear of the future, the mood of the riders quickly changed.

“Tell you,” Nick declared, “I’m glad we met up with the Monseer Allen! ’Cause why? ’Cause Bug Eye got seven hundred bucks out o’ him an’ he’s still got his flivver.”

“Never thought of that,” Teddy remarked. “That bird was a regular con man, wasn’t he? Took a chance on losing some money to get a lot back. And if it hadn’t been for Silent here, noticing the gun in Nick’s holster, he might have succeeded.”

“Or he could have caused plenty of trouble for me,” Nick mused. “He sure had me comin’ an’ goin’. That was quite a scheme of his. Never heard of it before. Did you, Silent?”

The puncher shook his head.

“Never did. It’s a new one to me, an’ I thought I knew all about swindling games worked in mining camps. He must have gotten that from some bird from the East—New York or the like.”

“That’s the way it struck me,” Teddy broke in. “It’s an Eastern trick, sure enough. Crooks out here don’t go to that

much trouble. If they want to rob a man they do it, and that's that."

"He must have planned his little trick for quite a while," Silent asserted. "Look how he had everything figured out. Why, even givin' seven hundred bucks for the flivver was part of the plan. That would go to show he had struck it rich, or he wouldn't be throwin' his checks around so regardless."

"I wonder if he did have a friend who saw me come out of his tent? I'll bet that part was a bluff. An' it blamed near worked, too! Wonder where Nat Raymond an' Jim Casey were all the time we've been in camp? I thought sure we'd see 'em."

"Away over on the other side," Gus said. "We may see 'em yet."

"Boy, we're sure getting into the mountains now!" Teddy looked about him. "And whenever I see mountains I get hungry."

Roy laughed, the first real laugh he had had since Bug Eye had ridden in with Nick and Allen.

"We'll go a little farther till we strike a good spot, then camp. There ought to be a brook running through here."

Darkness was nearly upon the party when it came upon the brook, which was probably the same stream that flowed near Nugget Camp. All dismounted and began preparations for the night.

Silent again assumed his role as cook, although there was little he could display his art with. Beans, bacon and bread, with coffee to drink, made up the meal.

The fire flared cheerily among the dark forest trees and the four gathered close around it, for the night was cool. They

were well into the mountains that overlooked Nugget Camp. Somewhere about, they suspected, or hoped, Greyhound had his headquarters. As they sat talking, having finished supper, each rested his hand carelessly on the butt of his revolver.

“Sure is quiet,” Nick remarked. “Hope nothin’ disturbs me to-night.”

“Don’t worry,” Teddy said. “Those fellows aren’t—”

A snapping overhead as of a twig breaking. A swish through the air. The embers of the fire were scattered by a stone which fell among them and bounded out again—a stone with a paper tied to it.

CHAPTER XXIII

GREYHOUND

“WATCH the broncs!” Silent yelled. “The feller that threw that is close!”

Teddy leaped to his feet, his revolver in his hand. The ponies were tied a little distance from the campfire, and he stumbled toward them through heavy underbrush.

“Take the left, Nick!” Roy exclaimed. “I’ll follow Teddy. He’s likely to get a bullet through him, rushing around like that! Get away from the light of that fire!”

Nick rolled, pulled out his gun, and found himself against a tree. He got quickly to his feet.

“Don’t shoot, no matter what you see,” Silent yelled hoarsely. “Teddy an’ Roy are out there—you might hit them.”

But Teddy had reached the horses, and Roy was at his side.

“Didn’t get ’em,” the boy panted. “What do you say we—”

“For the love of Pete, Teddy, we haven’t got a chance in this darkness! There may be half a dozen men around here, waiting for us to separate so they can pot us off. Let’s stick together, anyhow.”

“Where are the others?” Teddy had one hand on Flash’s neck. “We’ll never get this chance again, Roy! Shall we let that scoundrel get away? Snakes, we could track him! Easy!”

“Not so easily! Now listen. Let’s see where Nick and Silent are. Then we’ll have a look at the paper—tied to the stone.”

There was a crashing in the brush near them and both boys faced quickly about, their guns leveled.

“Speak up!” Roy shouted sternly. “Who’s there?”

“Nick,” came the answer. “Silent with you?”

“No, I thought—” Roy, raising his voice, called: “Hey, Silent! Over this way!”

They waited. There was no reply.

“He’s around some place,” Teddy said anxiously. “If any one is waiting to knock us off, they know where we are, so a little more noise won’t hurt. Hey, Silent!”

Still no answer. They listened carefully to hear if any one was walking near them, but no footsteps disturbed the stillness.

“Maybe he stumbled and fell,” Roy suggested. “We’ll have to go back. Leave the broncs—no, we’d better tie ’em close to the fire where we can watch ’em.”

They untied the horses and led them slowly toward the campfire. They fastened the animals about ten yards from it.

“Silent,” Teddy called again. “Hey, Silent!”

“If he hit his head and knocked himself cold, he’s lyin’ around here,” Nick said. “He yelled to me an’ I saw him go for the bushes, an’ that’s the last. You don’t think—” he paused suggestively.

“Well, they didn’t shoot him, that’s sure,” Roy declared. “We’d have heard the shot. And I don’t think they knifed him, because something tells me Silent could take care of himself in a game of that sort.”

“But what in thunder happened?” Teddy exclaimed impatiently. “He’s gone, hasn’t he?”

“He’ll come back,” Roy declared with a confidence he did not feel. “In the meantime—” he stopped and picked up the

stone. Breaking the string that held the paper to it, he glanced down. Teddy heard him give a grunt.

“What is it?”

“Here—bring it to the fire, so you can see. What do they think we are? Kids, to be scared by a thing like that?”

Holding the paper so the firelight flickered upon it, Teddy and Nick, who leaned over his shoulder, read two words, printed:

LAY OFF

Below was a rude picture of a dog, evidently meant to be a greyhound.

“Lay off!” Nick repeated. “Yea, we’ll lay off all right! By golly, I’d like to have my hands on the feller who wrote that!”

“So that’s Greyhound’s signature,” Roy mused. “Well, I must say he picked a good one. A dog! Let’s have the paper, Teddy.” With a sudden motion he tossed it into the fire. “And now, we’ll have a look for Silent.”

“Wish we had a few electric flashlights,” Teddy muttered. “Silent may be lying near us and we’d never know it.”

“We’ll have to take a chance,” Roy said firmly. “Keep your guns ready. Come on now. Don’t spread. Stick together, and we’ll cover what ground we can. Move in a circle.”

For two hours the three searched in the vicinity of their camp, walking in ever widening circles. At the end of that time they returned, to find the fire nearly out. Teddy wearily replenished it, and threw himself on the ground.

“No good, I reckon,” he said hopelessly. “He’s not around here. What’s the plan now, Roy?”

“Nothing, Teddy,” Roy replied in a tired voice. “We’ll have to wait, that’s all. Try to get some sleep.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, I’ll sit up for a while. Then I’ll wake you or Nick and you can watch. There ought to be some one to keep a lookout.”

“All right.”

Teddy drew his blanket around him, and Nick did the same. Roy sat upright, his back against a tree, his revolver in his lap. The rifles were still in their cases by the pile of saddles. A revolver was the only effective weapon in this situation.

Roy found it difficult to keep his eyes open. Several times he caught himself nodding and jerked his head upright again. How long it was before he heard that noise in the bushes he never knew. It may have been an hour or more, it may have been only a few minutes. But, as he sat there, there came to his ears the crackle of twigs, as if a man were treading on them.

“Teddy! Nick!” he whispered. “Snap to it! Here’s—”

The two sleepers awoke and went quickly to where Roy was sitting. The fire at that moment flared up and the light showed them a man standing perfectly still not ten feet away.

“Silent!” Nick yelled. “It’s you!”

“It’s me,” came the answer. “Don’t let no bullets ride.” He stepped forward. They saw that his face was drawn, his eyes haggard.

“Where have you been?” Teddy asked quickly. “What happened?”

Silent waved his hand.

“Nick, will you put on some coffee?”

“Sure, sure!” Nick hastened to comply. Silent seated himself by the fire, his head in his hands.

“Anything wrong?” Roy demanded. “You hurt?”

The head shook a denial.

“Not hurt—just tired.” He took a deep breath. “Roy, I found it.”

“Found what?”

“Greyhound’s camp. It’s about seven miles from here. I tracked the guy who threw that note—I tracked him miles. He had a pony a little way out from here. I had to run then. Run behind the bronc, for seven miles! Snakes!”

“Here,” Nick said. “Drink this!” He held out a tin cup filled with hot coffee. “That’ll fix you up.”

Silent buried his nose in the cup without a word. Hot as the liquid was, he finished it without raising his head.

“Baby, that’s good,” he declared, and his voice was stronger now. “A little more, Nick, if you have any left.” Suddenly he flung his chin up. “Say, did you guys hear what I said? I found Greyhound’s camp!”

“I reckon you know the answer to that?” Roy said quietly.

“Well, I was hopin’, boys—I was hopin’. You’ll go with me now?”

“We will, Silent.”

He thrust out his hand and gripped Roy’s.

“Fellers, what I’m wantin’ to say I can’t, ’cause I’m not built that-a-way. But I guess you understand.” He stopped and turned aside. “One more swig of coffee an’ I’ll be with you.”

“Let’s get the saddles on,” Teddy said swiftly. “Nick, you see what you can do for Silent an’ we’ll saddle your bronc. Give him something to eat if he’ll take it.”

“Nothin’ to eat,” Silent declared. “One more cup of coffee, that’s all.”

Then, when the horses had been saddled, they set out in the darkness.

Silent, veteran plainsman that he was, knew the way was clear to him. He had gone over the route on foot, and could not mistake it, even in that blackness with only a hint of moon shining through clouds to relieve it. Their path, with Silent leading, was up hill.

“Before we get there, we’d better have a plan of action,” Roy declared. Unconsciously his voice was lowered, as though there were those about who might hear. “How many men are in the camp Silent?”

“Four. But I think there’s another that I didn’t see. They have a tent with the broncs tied near it. A cliff of some sort rises at the back.”

“They can’t get through that way?”

“Don’t see how.”

Roy thought for a moment before he spoke again.

“Silent,” he said, “there’s one thing I’ve got to say. We’re not riding these men down to shoot them like dogs, even though that’s what they are. We’re going to round ’em up and take ’em back to camp.”

“I see, Roy.” Silent’s voice was a monotone. “Reckon you’re right. But when I see the skunk who shot my dad an’ brother in cold blood—”

“I know, Silent,” Roy broke in. “But we’re not like that, see? We can’t do it!”

“Nope, we can’t.” Silent swallowed audibly. “You got my word, Roy.”

“That’s the fight! It’s best, Silent—you know that.”

“Yea, I know that, Roy. All right. That’s over. Now here’s what I think we ought to do. It’ll be morning soon, and the best time to get those rascals would be at dawn when there’s light enough to see, but not too much.”

“That seems good to me,” Roy agreed. All thought of fatigue had fled from him and from his companions. Their blood was racing fast.

“O. K. Then that’s settled. We’ve got an hour yet—maybe two. When we come close to their camp I want you to get off your bronc an’ take a look at it. That’s so you’ll know the lay of the land. We won’t have to go so close, but there’s not much danger—they’re all asleep now. Greyhound thinks he’s hot stuff—doesn’t even need a guard.” A thin smile curved Silent’s lips.

They rode for some time longer, then Silent called a halt. They were near the camp of the outlaws.

“Come on, Roy,” Silent whispered. “You fellows wait here. We’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“And if you’re not?” Teddy asked in a low voice.

“We will be. Let’s go!”

Silent and Roy dismounted and were off. Nick and Teddy awaited them impatiently, every minute seeming like an hour. But finally they returned, and again mounted their ponies. The first faint blush of the false dawn tinged the east.

“Well, boys—” Roy turned and faced the others—“reckon it’s about the zero hour. I saw enough of the camp to think we can get the rascals without getting hurt. Silent will be on one end of the line and I’ll be on the other. Teddy, you and Nick can ride in the center. Keep about ten feet apart. Just beyond here there’s a clearing, and we’ll ride through to that. The tent is right in the middle. Go easy at first, and keep together! Soon as we reach the clearing, Silent is going to fire a shot. Use your revolvers—rifles will be no good. But don’t shoot any one—unless in self-defense. We want to capture these fellows, not kill ’em. All set?”

“We’ll keep as much as possible to the protection of the trees,” Teddy said. “It would be pretty easy for those men to pot us from inside their tent.”

“We’ll have to chance that,” Roy replied. “Well?”

“Let’s go!”

Quietly, silently they rode through the woods. In the east the sky was becoming grey. Birds were awakening. Nature stretched, and yawned.

Suddenly the clearing was before them. The tent stood like a white, sluggish animal that had fallen asleep there. A few feet behind the tent was the cliff. Five horses were tied to trees near by. Roy was thankful for the light which made all this visible.

In another moment the signal would be given. A gun was raised.

Crack!

Silent’s revolver had spoken.

“Come out of there, you guys!”

“Come a-runnin’!”

“Greyhound, we want you!”

A head poked from the tent flap and was as quickly withdrawn. A rifle came next, with a man behind it.

Teddy took aim and fired. The rifle dropped from the man’s hand. His right arm hung useless.

“Getting to be expert at that!” Teddy yelled. “The next one who pulls a gun goes down! Found out we mean business, hey?”

“Greyhound!” Silent roared the name. “Greyhound, come out o’ that!”

“I’m comin’!”

The wounded man who stood holding to the flap of the tent was thrust aside. A figure, one arm in a sling, burst into the open. In his uninjured hand he held not a revolver, but a rifle!

“Somebody want me?”

The rifle was raised—with one hand Greyhound raised and aimed it. His finger touched the trigger and Silent’s hat sailed off.

Silent, head up, face grim as death, leveled his gun.

“Greyhound,” he shouted, “you’re finished!”

The gun was aimed straight at the outlaw’s breast. He stood not ten feet from Silent, a perfect target. But he did not move. Then, slowly, Silent’s gun was lowered.

“You can’t reload,” Silent said simply. “I’m a different breed from you, Greyhound. I give you back your life.”

Teddy and Roy stared at the man called Greyhound. He stood not less than six feet four, with huge shoulders and arms. Alone in that clearing he stood, defying them all. At least, Greyhound was not a coward.

“Drop that rifle,” Roy called sternly. “Drop it, and tell your men to come out here with their hands in the air!”

For a moment rage came over the face of the man. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s the use?” he muttered. “It’s over. Come out, boys—we’re done for. Leave the guns behind.”

He tossed the rifle carelessly to the ground. His eyes were fixed on Silent’s face.

“You ain’t goin’ to shoot?”

“No, Greyhound, I ain’t goin’ to shoot,” Silent replied slowly. “There’s others that you have to settle with. Roy, he’s your prisoner.”

One by one the bandits filed from the tent, their hands held high. Teddy counted five, including Greyhound. All were accounted for. The man who had been shot stood by the tent, groaning.

“Nick, search ’em,” Roy said. “Then let that baby who’s making all that noise sit down.”

Nick obeyed. Two of the outlaws had guns, and he tossed them away.

“How about their broncs, Roy?”

“They’ll ride those back to Nugget Camp.”

“Here!” Teddy dismounted, and went toward the tent. “Nick, let’s use a bit of this rope. They won’t need it any more.”

Together he and Nick stripped the tent of its ropes, and bound the hands of the prisoners, all but the injured man. Greyhound’s well arm was tied behind his back. Then they were ordered to mount their ponies.

From his horse Greyhound glanced carelessly at Silent.

“Reckon we swing—hey?” he asked, sneeringly.

“You’ll get a fair trial,” Silent said harshly. “If you’re guilty you’ll swing.”

“If we’re guilty!” Greyhound laughed loudly. “Well, boys, it was fun while it lasted! I told you hard luck followed me, but you thought I was kiddin’. I wasn’t. Now, you guys—” he turned toward Teddy—“there’s one you missed. He’s hidin’ under a blanket. It won’t be hangin’ for him, so he might as well come out. His bronco is tied down the trail a piece. Allen!”

From the tent came a pitiful figure, white-faced in the lightening dawn. It was the swindler from Nugget Camp.

Nick eyed him frowningly.

“Allen,” Greyhound said, “here’s some friends of yours. Want to take a little ride with ’em?”

“Don’t kill me!” Allen moaned, trembling violently. “Don’t shoot me! I’ll tell you everything! There’s fifty thousand dollars’ worth of gold in this tent! You can have it all, but don’t shoot!”

“That, boys, is our bootblack!” Greyhound exclaimed, laughing loudly. “What he says is true. You might as well have the gold. I’ll leave it to you in my will.” He laughed again. “If that fellow Decker we shot a month ago is still livin’, some of it belongs to him. He sure worked for it.”

“Jerry Decker!” Teddy cried. “Then he will get his nuggets back!”

“There’s some of it comin’ to you, too,” Greyhound went on, nodding toward Silent. A puzzled frown came to his face. “I can’t understand it,” he muttered. “I can’t understand it a-

tall! There you stand with a gun an' me in front of you, me the feller who killed your folks, an' you don't shoot!"

"We're not like you, Greyhound," Roy said shortly. "We're not murderers."

"Murderers?" The man repeated the word, as though he did not understand. "Oh, that's what I am, hey? Well, maybe you're right. Well, that's all." His voice dropped. He turned wearily to Roy. "If you're ready, we may as well start."

Head down, shoulders bent forward, he started down the long trail just as the sun tossed the first beams over the hills.

CHAPTER XXIV

READY TO QUIT

MEN crowded to the flaps of their tents, chewing in haste the last of their breakfast. Others slammed open the doors of rude slab-sided shacks, some holding in their hands coffee pots which they had been about to set on the stove. Many of the miners of Nugget Camp, who had already eaten their morning meal and were on the way to work their claims, stopped and stared at the cavalcade on its way down the one main street.

“What is it, boys?”

“Some kind of a pee-rade, I’ll gamble!”

“But what for?”

“Must be the start of a circus!”

Thus the comments that greeted Roy, Teddy and their friends as they rode along, closely guarding Greyhound and his gang.

“Hey, what’s the parade for?” some one sang out.

“Robbery and murder!” answered Roy, with a grim face.

“Robbery?”

“Murder?”

The words were enough to set the whole camp astir had it not already been galvanized into life by the sight of the armed men guarding the others on horses.

“Watch out, fellows!” warned Teddy in a low voice. “Some of their friends may try a rescue!” He nodded toward the prisoners.

“Friends!” ejaculated Roy. “They won’t have any friends when we tell what happened—and when they hear Silent’s story.”

So it proved. Feeling ran high against the outlaws and there were a few reckless spirits in Nugget Camp who would have taken the prisoners from the X Bar X boys and strung the criminals to the nearest trees. But wiser counsel prevailed.

Luckily there had come to camp that morning a deputy sheriff on some other mission. But when he saw the prisoners and heard the story, he quickly swore in other deputies to aid him and, taking charge of the prisoners, soon had them as safely housed as was possible in that rough country.

“And to think you fellers caught them!” murmured more than one rough old miner, as what Roy and Teddy Manley had done became broadcast about camp. “Sufferin’ hoptoads! Some nerve!”

“Not much nerve needed when we knew what had happened to Silent,” remarked Teddy.

The excitement did not last long—excitement was too readily made to order in Nugget Camp—and when the prisoners had been taken away with the promise of justice being meted out to them, the new prospectors went back to working their claims.

But they did not forget the boast Allen had made about the quantity of gold concealed in the lair of the outlaws, and when they had time to investigate, Roy, Teddy, and their friends went back to recover it.

Allen had not been wrong. A large quantity of gold dust, some almost pure nuggets, and a large quantity of ore as thickly studded with lumps of gold as is a Christmas pudding

with plums, was collected. Most of it had been stolen at different times from miners who had made lucky strikes and who had foolishly talked too freely of their good fortune, or else who, as foolishly, “hit the red-eye trail” and became so helpless that they fell easy prey to the thugs in Greyhound’s gang.

Among the pile of nuggets were some marked in a peculiar way, and these, it developed later, were the property of Jerry Decker. Though the amount was not quite as much as he claimed (due, perhaps, to toll taken by the bandits) it was a goodly sum, and when news of the recovery of it was sent to the injured man it did more to restore him to health and strength than all the doctor’s medicine.

“Well, fellows, we’ve got to work harder than we’ve been doing,” Roy announced one night as the prospectors gathered about the campfire. They had been gradually sinking their shaft deeper and deeper, and had cut several lateral tunnels, timbered with much labor and no little risk, but, so far, all the gold they had taken out had not paid them for their work—not even counting the first big nugget found.

“Work harder?” groaned Teddy. “My back’s ’most broken now, and as for my hands—I’ll be lucky if I can ever hold the reins again,” and he held up his blistered palms.

“Don’t give up!” begged Gus. “Lots of times, when everything seems like to be peterin’ out, a man may make a lucky strike.”

“Well, it’s got to come pretty soon for me, or I’ll pull up stakes and go back to riding fence,” announced Teddy.

“Are you really serious about that?” asked his brother.

“I sure am. This gold rush doesn’t mean as much as it did at first.”

Truth to tell, Nugget Camp did appear to be “petering out.” It had been famous in its day, and might be again, many days hence. But just now, aside from a few sensational finds of rich nuggets here and there, most of the miners, including the X Bar X boys, were not making a living at it. About the only ones who were really taking in anything were the proprietors of the gambling joints and the various “hotels.”

“Oh, don’t give up yet,” begged Roy, as he and Teddy prepared to turn in that night. “They don’t really need us back at the ranch, and we might as well give the wheel of fortune another turn or two.”

“Oh, I’m not quitting—completely,” said Teddy. “As for them not needing us—”

“I get your drift, as the hill said to the snowbank!” broke in Roy, with a chuckle. “You mean—”

“If you say ‘girls’ I’ll attack you with this!” and Teddy held up a slippery cake of soap he had just been using at the wash basin.

“Let it go at that!” wisely rejoined the other.

“I’ll stay one more week,” was Teddy’s final decision.

That last week the prospectors worked as they had never worked before. They dug until far into the night, taking advantage of the bright moon, and excavated by means of lanterns lowered into the shaft. They built new sluice-boxes with closer cleats and panned their clean-up every other day with great care.

Yet the little pile of yellow grains remaining after all the gravel and dirt had been washed away, was pitifully small compared with the terrible exertions that went into that shaft and the tunnels.

“Well, this is the end of the week,” remarked Teddy one evening after the routine clean-up, and he looked at the small quantity of gold that resulted. “I’m through!”

“Yes, I guess we might as well call it a finished job and quit,” agreed his brother grimly. “Old One Eleven didn’t pan out as expected. Oh, well, we’re not out much—only our time and trouble.”

“That’s all,” agreed Teddy. “And we cleaned up that gang and got back a lot of gold for others, if we couldn’t wash out any for ourselves. Well, we’ll pack up in the morning and hit the trail for home.”

CHAPTER XXV

ONE ELEVEN COMES THROUGH

“ALL set!” called Teddy early next morning.

“Let ’em ride!” echoed Roy.

Breakfast was finished and the prospectors were ready to break camp. Nat Raymond and Jim Casey had come over to help their former cow-punching comrades take down the tents and pack the duffle for the trip home. Nat and Jim were just as disappointed in their claims as were the X Bar X boys, and were also ready to quit.

“This here place is a fake!” Nat grumbled. “Good thing your dad promised us back our jobs,” he said to Roy and Teddy. “But the worst of it will be sittin’ on the fence listenin’ to Pop say: ‘I told you so!’ Snakes!”

Bug Eye, who was rolling up blankets, snickered.

“Boy! Me? I’m not kickin’! I got seven hundred bucks out o’ this here little ole camp, lemme tell you!”

“Well, we sure had an exciting time,” Teddy commented. “Nick, hand me those ponchos, will you? Hey, who’s this coming?”

Toward them came running a figure, waving his hands wildly.

“Now what’s eatin’ that guy?” Silent asked wonderingly. “Looks like a windmill on wheels!”

“It’s Maryland!” Roy declared. “Remember him, Teddy? Yes, it’s Maryland, all right!”

“Thought he was on the wagon,” Gus said. “Boy, he’s sure kickin’ up the dust!”

Maryland, his face red from his exertions, stumbled toward them.

“Hey,” he yelled. “Hey! Hey!”

“Charleston!” Nick roared. “Hey-hey yourself!”

“Listen, fellers! Listen!” he panted fiercely, trying to get enough breath to talk with. “Listen! Don’t pull up stakes! I got somethin’ to tell you!”

“Well, for Pete’s sake, spit it out without all that ‘hey-hey’ business!” Bug Eye exclaimed. “Let’s have it!”

“Well, I been workin’ on my mine—it’s near yours! I dug on a slant, instead of straight down, an’ the first thing I knew I came out in the shaft you fellers sunk. But not in any of your tunnels—a different one.”

“That’s O. K.,” Roy said easily. “You’re forgiven. Take the shaft and build yourself a house with it.”

“No, but listen, you fellers! That ain’t all! I struck gold! Plenty of it! Reams of it! An’ most of it is on your claim! An’ *that’s* why I ran down here, bustin’ my windpipe, to tell you!”

“Gold!”

Teddy and Roy started forward.

“Well, may I be pinned by the seat of my pants to a clothesline for the rest of my natural life!” Nick blurted out. “Our last day here, an’ gold is found on our claim!”

“And then some more!” Maryland went on excitedly. “There’s enough to make us all rich! By golly, she’s lying around in bucketfuls!”

“I see you-all read romances,” Silent said calmly. But even he was thrilled at the news. “Bucketfuls, hey? I reckon that means about fourteen carat alloy. Well, Maryland, you done us a favor!”

How much of a favor Maryland had actually done was not known until the boys reached their claim. And, strangely enough, Maryland had not exaggerated. He had struck a pocket exceptionally rich in gold, and the soil about it promised further deposits. Silent declared the yellow stuff already unearthed would total nearly forty thousand dollars.

“And that’s the beginning,” he said. “Now, how about stakin’ a few claims for the boys at home before the rush starts? I want to get one for Jack Conroy, my partner. An’ I suppose you want one for your dad?”

“Sure do,” Teddy replied. “Say, we’ll give Pop one! Then let’s see what he has to offer! Baby, if that doesn’t quiet him, nothing will!”

The claims, adjoining One Hundred Eleven, were staked, Gus, Nat, and Jim Casey abandoning their old diggings and locating near the new ones. Gus’s prophecy had come true—they had struck gold.

And what a reception Teddy and Roy received when they reached home! Before leaving Nugget Camp they sold some gold, receiving a certified check. This check Roy, followed by Teddy, bore to his father.

“Remember the grub stake you gave us?” Roy asked, as Mr. Manley looked at him quizzically. “What did we say then?”

“Well, you mentioned somethin’ about me gettin’ it back four times over,” Mr. Manley replied. “Of course, I know you didn’t mean that, so—”

“Take a look!” chuckled his son.

He thrust out the check. In red perforated figures were the numerals \$25,000.

“For the love of Pete!” Mr. Manley gasped. “Four times! And then some! Boys, you sure hit it! Wait till I show this to your mother! Twenty-five thou—well, you bloated bankers, you! Do the boys know about this?”

Teddy winked.

“Tell you, Dad,” he said, grinning, “I want to wait until Pop gets in front of something soft, then I’ll flash it on him. He’ll keel over like a split flagpole!”

And, it might be added in passing, Pop did.

“Did you bring me that gold bracelet?” asked Belle Ada as she greeted her brothers in the flush of their success.

“Bracelet?” cried Teddy. “I—now—”

“We’ll get you one made of platinum first chance we get,” broke in Roy.

“I reckon you-all can leave that to me!” chuckled Jerry Decker, who had been brought over to X Bar X ranch to enjoy the celebration. “Guess it’s customary fer a patient to give his nurse a leetle somethin’, ain’t it?” he appealed to Mr. Manley.

“Of course!” agreed the rancher.

Later, when Jerry had gone back East and bought with his nuggets a little farm, a registered package came for Belle Ada. It contained a wonderful bracelet with two diamonds in it.

“They’re bright like your eyes,” Jerry wrote in the note that accompanied the gift.

Belle Ada smiled happily.

“And here’s a registered package for you too, Pop,” said Roy.

“For me! Quit your joshin’!”

“No, really! Guess your cousin sent it.”

It was a watch and chain from Mr. Decker. Pop strung it across his cowhide vest proudly and wore it continually after that, on a horse or off.

“Read this, Roy!” called Teddy to his brother one day when the mail had come in, bringing several papers. He tossed the sheet to his brother.

On the front page was an account of the trial and conviction of Greyhound and most of his gang. They were wanted for many other crimes than the robbing of Jerry Decker and the killing of the father and brother of Silent Neville, so there was no need for the ranch boys to give any testimony.

“Twenty years for Allen,” mused Roy. “He’ll sit in his cell a long time.”

“Whew! I wouldn’t want to be Allen!”

“Me, either! Come on, I’m crazy for a ride! Beat you around the corral!”

A little later a cloud of dust hid the X Bar X boys and their ponies.

THE END

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[The end of *The X Bar X Boys at Nugget Camp* by Roger Garis (as James Cody Ferris)]