Henty George Alfred

Redskin and Cow-Boy: A Tale of the Western Plains

George Henty

Redskin and Cow-Boy: A Tale of the Western Plains

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23146763
Redskin and Cow-Boy: A Tale of the Western Plains:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45617

Содержание

George Alfred Henty
Redskin and Cow-Boy: A Tale of the Western Plains

PREFACE

My dear Lads,

There are but few words of preface needed to a story that is not historical. The principal part of the tale is laid among the cow-boys of the Western States of America, a body of men unrivalled in point of hardihood and devotion to work, as well as in reckless courage and wild daring. Texas, which twenty-five years ago was the great ranching state, is no longer the home of the typical cow-boy, but he still exists and flourishes in New Mexico and the northern States and Territories. The picture I have given of their life can be relied upon, and its adventures and dangers are in no degree coloured, as I have taken them from the lips of a near relative of my own who was for some years working as a cow-boy in New Mexico. He was an actor in many of the scenes described, and so far from my having heightened or embellished them, I may say that I have given but a small proportion of the perilous adventures through which he went, for had I given them in full it would, I am sure, have seemed to you that the story was too

improbable to be true. In treating of cow-boy life, indeed, it may well be said that truth is stranger than fiction.

Yours sincerely,
G. A. HENTY.

CHAPTER I.
AN ADVERTISEMENT.

Cedar Gulch was, in 1851, a flourishing camp. There had been some good finds by the first prospectors, and a rush had of course followed. In many cases first discoveries proved illusive, but it was not so at Cedar Gulch. The ground turned out well, and although no extraordinary finds were made, the average was good all over the bottom, and there were few who were not doing fairly well.

The scene was a busy one. Several hundreds of men were hard at work on the flat, which in winter was the bed of a wide stream, but which in summer was a mere thread of water among the rocks, scarce enough for washing purposes.

Everywhere were piles of stones and rubbish that had been brought up from the shafts; men toiled at windlasses; others emptied the buckets as they came up into swinging troughs or cradles; others again kept these supplied with water, and swung or rocked them, taking off the large stones that the motion brought to the surface, while the slush and mud ran out at the lower end. New-comers moved about watching the work with eager eyes, wishing that they had had the luck to get there among the early arrivals, and to take up a claim, for every foot of ground far down the valley had already been occupied, and there was now

no getting into a claim except by purchasing a share or altogether buying out the present holders.

One of the claims that was doing best was held by three men who had worked in partnership for the last two years, and who had been among the first to arrive at Cedar Gulch. They were known among the others as English Bill, Sim Howlett, and Limping Frank. Sim Howlett was perhaps the leader of the party. He had been one of the earliest gold-diggers, and was a square, powerfully built man. He was a man of few words, but the words when spoken were forcible. He was by no means quarrelsome, but was one whom few cared to quarrel with, even in a place where serious quarrels were of constant occurrence, and where revolvers cracked so often that the sound of a fray excited but little attention.

English Bill was a tall wiry man, hot of temper, but a general favourite. Generous with his money, always ready to lend a helping hand to anyone who was down on his luck, he also was a capital worker, and had, in spite of his rough clothes and the use of language as rough as that of his companions, a certain air which told that, like many others in the diggings, he was a gentleman by birth. Why these two men should have taken up with Limping Frank as a comrade was a matter of surprise to those who knew them. They were both men in the prime of life, while he was at least ten years their senior. His hair was already white; his face was that of a student rather than a miner, with a gentle and almost womanly expression. His frame was slight,

and looked altogether incapable of hard work, and he walked with a distinct limp, the result of a bullet wound in the hip. And yet there were men in the gulch who, having known the trio at other diggings, declared that they would rather quarrel either with English Bill or Sim Howlett than with Limping Frank, and as some of them were desperate fellows, and noted pistol shots, their report was quite sufficient to secure respect for a man who otherwise would have been regarded with pity or contempt.

Very little of the hard work of the partnership fell upon Frank. He cooked, looked after the shanty, did what washing and mending to the clothes was necessary, and occasionally came down and assisted to work the cradle and sort the stuff. They generally addressed him as doctor. Not that he made any profession of medical knowledge; but he was always ready to give his services in case of sickness, and many a miner had he pulled through fevers which, had it not been for his nursing and care, would have proved fatal.

"I can't make out what yer mean by saying I had best not quarrel with that little old atomy you call Limping Frank," a big, powerful fellow who had recently arrived at the camp said to one who had been talking over with him the characteristics of several of the miners. "I ain't very pertiklar who I quarrels with; but what on arth there can be in that little chap to make one keep clear of him beats me. Can he shoot?"

"You bet," the other replied. "He could put a bullet plumb between your eyes ten times following, the length of the long

saloon up there. There ain't no better shot nor quicker anywhere on the slopes."

"But he don't look as if he could speak up for himself," the other said.

"No; and he doesn't speak up for himself, though his mates would be ready enough to speak up for him if anyone said anything to him. There is nothing quarrelsome about him. He is always for peace and order. He is a sort of Judge Lynch all to himself. He has cleared out one or two camps I have been at. When a chap gets too bad for anything, and takes to shooting over and above what is usual and right, 'specially if he draws on quiet sort of chaps and becomes a terror, then Limping Frank comes out. I was down at Dead Man's Gulch when there was a gang of three or four men who were a terror to the place. They had stretched out seven or eight between them, and Texan Jack, as the worst of them was called, one day shot down a young fellow who had just come into camp, for no reason at all, as far as any one knew.

"I happened to be in the saloon five minutes afterwards, when Limping Frank came in. Texan Jack was standing drinking there with two of his mates, laughing and jawing. You would scarcely have known that little chap if you had seen him then! He had been nursing a mate of mine only the night before, and as I had been sitting near him I thought what a gentle sort of face he had – more like a woman's than a man's. But now his eyes were wide open and his lips closed, and there was just a set look in his face that I

knew meant mischief – for I had seen him once before when his dander was up – and I put my hand into my back pocket for my pistol, for I knew there was going to be a muss. He stopped in the middle of the room, and he said in a loud, clear voice that made every one look sharp round, 'Texan Jack, murderer and villain, we have borne with you too long. If you are a man, draw.' Texan Jack stared with astonishment.

"'Are you mad, you little fool?' he said.

"'Draw, or I will shoot you down as you stand,' Limping Frank said, and the Texan saw that he meant mischief. Frank had no weapon in his hand, for he was not one to take an advantage. The Texan carried his weapon up his sleeve, but quick as he was with it, Frank was as quick, and the two pistols cracked pretty well at the same moment. Frank got a ball in the shoulder, but the Texan fell dead with a bullet in the centre of his forehead. His two mates drew in a moment, but Frank's revolver cracked twice as quick as you could count them, and there were just three bodies lying dead in a heap. Then he put up his pistol, and said in his ordinary quiet voice, 'I don't like these things, but we must have peace and order. Will some of you tell the others that they had better git.' And you bet they did git. Limping Frank never said another word about it, but got his arm in a sling, and half an hour afterwards I saw him quietly cooking his mates' dinner while they were both standing by blowing him up for starting out without them to back him."

"What did he say?" the new-comer asked.

"I heard him say, 'It is no use your going on like that, mates. If you had gone down he would have got his friends, and then there would have been a general fight, and several would have got hurt. When you have murderers like these you don't want a fight – you want an execution; and having a sort of natural knack with the pistol, I took it upon myself to be executioner.'

"There was another case, although it didn't happen at the camp I was at, in which a woman was murdered by a half-breed Mexican. I did not hear the circumstances, but it was a shocking bad case. She left a child behind her, and her husband, a little German, went clean off his head.

"Next morning Limping Frank was missing. All that was known was that he had bought a horse of a man who had come in late the night before, and was gone. His two mates looked high and low for him, but said at last they guessed he would turn up again. It was well-nigh two months before he came back. He brought back with him a watch and some trinkets that had been stolen from the murdered woman, and it seems that he had followed the fellow right down into New Mexico, and had shot him there. The man who told me said he never made any talk about it, but was at work as usual the morning after he came back. I tell you I would rather quarrel with Sim Howlett and English Bill together than I would get that little man's dander up. He is a peacemaker too, he is, and many a quarrel he has smoothed down. At one camp we were in we made him a sort of judge, and whenever there was a dispute about claims, or tools, or anything

else, we went to him and he decided, and no judge could have gone into the case fairer or given a better judgment; and though, in course, those he decided against were not pleased, they had to put up with it. In the first place, the camp was with him; and in the second, there ain't much use disputing with a judge who can shoot as straight as he can, and is ready to do it if necessary."

The three partners had finished their day's work, and sat down to a meal of tea, steak, and corn-cakes that Limping Frank had prepared for them.

"We shall have to be moving from here soon," the Englishman said. "Another week and our claim will be worked out. We have not done badly, on the whole. The question is, had we better buy up somebody else's claim and go on working here, or make a start for some fresh field?"

"I vote for a move," Sim Howlett said. "I don't say the claim hasn't panned out well, but there is no excitement about it. The gold lies regular right through the gravel, and it is almost as bad as working for wages. You can always tell within an ounce or so what there will be when you come to clean up the cradle. I like a bit of excitement. Nothing one day and eight or ten ounces the next."

"It comes to the same thing in the long run," the Englishman said. "We don't get very much forwarder. Grub costs a lot of money, and then what there is over and above slips through our fingers somehow. The gambling-tables take a large share of mine; and your weakness for champagne, Sim, when you

break out about once a month, makes a hole in yours; and as to Frank's, he spends half his in getting meat for soups and wines and medicines for his patients."

"What is one to do?" Frank said apologetically. "One cannot see people die for want of ordinary necessaries. Besides, Bill, you give away a lot too."

"Only my money is not so well spent as yours, doctor."

"Well, no, I don't think it is."

"I suppose it comes to the same thing in the end. I don't want to lay by money. What should I do with it if I had it?"

"You don't want to lay by money because you are strong, and can go on earning it for years yet; and you both know very well that if you had a hundred thousand dollars you would chuck it all away in six months."

Sim Howlett laughed aloud.

"Perhaps you are right, doctor," English Bill said. "But if your argument means anything, it means that we are fools for working as hard as we do."

"Not at all," the doctor said gently. "You don't earn more than you want, as is shown by the fact that you lay by so little, and that we haven't more than enough dust in our sack to keep us for a month or two if we don't happen to strike it in the next claim we take up. No; I think we earn just enough. If you earned three times as much you would go three times as often to that cursed gambling-table, and it would be bad for your temper. If Sim earned three times as much he would go on the spree three

times as often, and it would be bad for his health. If I were to earn three times as much, I should have three times as many patients to attend to, and I couldn't stand such a strain; so you see we are just right as we are," and he nodded pleasantly to his two comrades.

"You are the most perplexing beggar I ever came across, doctor," the Englishman said, "and I have seen some rum specimens during the twenty years I have been knocking about in the States."

The little man nodded as if it had been a compliment.

"I know, Bill. That is what I think myself sometimes; there is a tile just a little loose somewhere."

"Not at all, not at all," Bill said hotly; while Sim Howlett growled that he would like to hear any one else say so.

"Not off, you know," Frank said, "but just a little loose. I know, dear boys. You see my machine gets muddled up. It may work right enough sometimes, but the chances are that a cog has got bent, or that there is a little twist in a crank, and the thing never works quite even. It just catches, you know – rattles now and then. You may look it all over as much as you like, but you cannot spot where it is. You say it wants grease, but you may pour bucketfuls over it and it makes no difference. There" – and he broke off – "they are at it again up in that saloon."

Two or three pistol-shots rang out in the evening air.

"Things are not going on as they ought to," he went on quietly. "That is another machine that wants regulating. There are more

bad men in this camp than there ought to be."

"Don't you worry yourself," Bill said hastily. "You cannot expect a mining camp to be a sort of paradise, doctor, and all the bad men kept outside. Things have been going on pretty smooth of late. It has been quite a peaceful camp."

"I don't like the ways of that man Symonds the gambler," the doctor said meditatively, with his head a little on one side.

"He is a bad lot," Sim Howlett agreed; "but he is going. I heard tell yesterday that he said he was going down to Frisco at the end of the week; and if he doesn't go, Bill and I will get a dozen other fellows to go with us and tell him that he had better git, or the air of this camp is likely to be unhealthy for him."

"Well, if that is so we need not think any more about it," the doctor said. "I dreamt last night I saw him with a bullet mark in the centre of his forehead; but perhaps that was a mistake, or the mark will not come at present. It will come sooner or later," he added musingly, "but perhaps not for a good time yet."

"Well, well," Sim Howlett broke in, "we are wandering about like green hands lost in a sage-bush. We started by talking about whether, when we have worked up our claim, we shall stop here or foot it."

"If we foot it, where do you propose to go, Sim?"

"I heard this morning that they are doing well in that new place they call Gold Run. Then, again, you know we have always had a fancy for a month's prospecting up at the head of the Yuba. The gold must come from somewhere, though nobody has ever

hit the spot yet."

"I am ready to go where you like, Sim," the doctor said; "but as I have often told you before, you miners are altogether wrong in your notions, as any one can see with half an eye by the fact, that whether you are down here in the bottom of a gulch, or whether you are up on those flats, 2000 feet above us, you always find gravel. Now those flats were once the bed of a great river, that was when the mountains round were tens of thousands of feet higher than they are now; they must have been all that or there would never be water enough for such a river as that must have been. That river must have rolled on for thousands of years, for the gravel, which you can see in some places is 500 feet thick, is all water-worn; whether it is big boulders or little stones, it has all been rolled about.

"Well, in time these mountains were all worn away. There wasn't water then for the big river, and the water from the hills, as you see them now, began to cut fresh channels, and this Yuba, which is one of them, lies a thousand feet below the old gravel bed. In some places it has crossed the old bed, and the gold that came down from the former mountains into the gravel has been washed down into these valleys. You will never find, as you all dream of doing, a quartz vein stuck full of gold. There may have been veins like that in the old mountains, but the quartz veins that you find now, and lots of them have been assayed, are all very poor; they have got gold in them, but scarce enough to pay for working even when they get the best machinery. I fancy gold

goes off with depth, though why it should I cannot say, and that these quartz veins which near the surface had big nuggets, and were choke-full of small stuff, just pettered away to nothing as they went deeper. That is why I think, Sim, that you will find no quartz reefs worth working anywhere now, and why you are less likely to find much pay dirt in the upper gorges, because the water there has not gone through the old gravel fields as it has in its windings lower down."

"But according to that, doctor, we should find it richest of all if we were to sink in the bed of the river down by the plains."

"Not at all, not at all, Bill. From the point where the Yuba's course leaves the old gravel bed of the big river and makes its own way through hills down to the plains it has picked up no more gold. As you know the big nuggets are generally found pretty high up, as was natural they should be, for as soon as the new river washed them out of the old bed they would sink down in some convenient hole; and as in the course of ages the Yuba cut down deeper and deeper, they would go down too. Their weight would prevent their rolling far; the light stuff would wash down, moving onwards with the sands and gravel. And so, as you search lower down, you get better surface washings, but find less coarse gold."

"I dare say you are right, doctor," Sim Howlett said yawning, "so we won't go prospecting up in the hills, though some nice little finds have been made up there in spite of what you say. I vote we leave it open until we have cleared up, and then look round. A new rush may be started before a week is over, and if

we are ready to move at once we may manage to take up claims in the thick of it; if one isn't pretty early at a new place, one may just as well stay away altogether. There is the horn. The mail is late to-night. I will go out and see if I can get hold of a Sacramento paper – one sees all about the new places there. Not that one need swallow all they say, for the lies about what is being got are tremendous. One fellow strikes it rich, and then they put it in that every fellow in the camp is making from four to ten ounces a day. I believe most of these lies come from the store-keepers. Of course, it is to their interest to get up a rush to places where they have set up their stores, and if a newspaper man comes along they lay it on thick. Well, here goes;" and throwing on his wide-awake, Sim Howlett sauntered off.

In a quarter of an hour he returned with a newspaper. "Here you are, Bill, you may as well do the reading. I am out of practice, and the doctor is not to be depended upon, and will miss the very bits we want to know."

Taking the paper the Englishman read the columns devoted to reports from the mining camps. A stranger would have thought from the perusal that every miner on the Pacific slope must have been making a fortune, so brilliant were the accounts of the gold that was being obtained in every mining camp. "*John Wilkins and party obtained at their week's clear-up 304 ounces of gold, including many fine nuggets. Many others have met with almost equal good fortune; the sand on the shoulder is panning out very rich.*"

Such was a sample of the descriptions. The three men were unmoved by them. They knew too well how untrustworthy were the reports. Many were, as has been said, the work of the store-keepers; others were the invention of miners desirous of disposing of their claims to new-comers, and shifting to more promising regions. Little was said of the fabulous prices of provisions, of the fever that decimated some of the camps, of the total abandonment of others; and yet even the miners, although knowing by frequent experience that no dependence could be placed on these reports, were prone to cling to the hope that this time they were correct, and the roads were thronged by parties who, having failed at one camp, were making their way to a distant location of which they had heard brilliant reports, and who were met, perhaps, on their way by parties coming from that very camp to the one they had just quitted.

"It sounds well," the doctor said with a quiet smile when the reading was concluded.

"Sounds be blowed!" Sim growled. "They are thundering lies. What do they say of this camp? – read it again, Bill."

"*It is difficult to get at the exact state of things at Cedar Gulch. Men who are doing well are always reticent as to their earnings; but there is little doubt that all are doing well, and that while those working in companies are obtaining very large results, the average through the camp is not less than from two to three ounces a day.*"

"The camp is not doing badly," Sim remarked. "There are mighty few here who ain't earning their grub. I don't believe there

is one who is making from three to four ounces a day, not regular. Of course if he comes on a pocket, or strikes the bed rock, he may earn a good bit over that, ten times as much perhaps in a day; but take it all round, an ounce, or at most an ounce and a quarter, would be the outside."

English Bill nodded. "I should say an ounce at the outside. There are scores who ain't earning half an ounce regular, and there are a few who have to run into debt for their grub. Well, there is nothing very tempting in that lot of notices. We have tried a good many of them in the last two years, and at any rate we have got another week before we need make up our minds. I expect it will come again, Bill, to what it has come to half a dozen times before. Write all the names on a piece of paper, put them into a bag, let the doctor draw one, and go for it. It is as good a plan as another, and the doctor's luck has always pulled us through."

Sim and the Englishman stretched themselves upon their blankets and lay there smoking, while Limping Frank squatted down by the side of the solitary candle and began to look at the small portion of the paper devoted to general news. This was soon finished, and then he ran his eye over the advertisements. These principally related to articles in demand by miners – patent rockers and cradles, picks and shovels, revolvers and bowie-knives, iron houses for stores, tents, clothing, waterproof boots, and flannel shirts. Then there was a column of town lots in Sacramento, notices of steamers starting for San Francisco,

notices of stolen horses, offers of rewards for the capture of notorious criminals, and advertisements for missing friends.

"Bill," he said presently.

"Hello!" said the Englishman with a start. He had just laid his pipe down and was already dozing.

"Didn't you once say your name was Tunstall?"

"Yes, that's it, though I have pretty well forgotten it. What is it?"

"Well, there is an advertisement here that may relate to you."

"What is it, say? I haven't been running off with a horse, or shooting a sheriff, so I don't know why they are advertising for me."

"*Five hundred dollars reward. The above sum will be paid by James Campbell, attorney, San Francisco, to any one who will give him information as to the whereabouts of William Tunstall, who was last heard of four years ago in California. The said William Tunstall is entitled to property in England under the will of his brother, the late Edgar Tunstall of Byrneside, Cumberland.*"

"That's me," the Englishman said, sitting upright and staring at the doctor. "Well, well, so Edgar has gone, poor lad! Well, I am sorry."

Sim Howlett had also roused himself at the news. "Well, Bill, I was going to congratulate you," he said; "but that doesn't seem the light you take the news in."

"No, I am not thinking of money," the other said. "I could have had that long ago if I had chosen to take it. I was thinking

of my brother. It is twenty years since I saw him, and I don't suppose I should have ever seen him again any way; but it is a shock to know that he has gone. It never was his fault, and I am sorry now I held off so. I never thought of this. It has come to me sometimes that when I got old and past work I might go back to the old place and end my days there; but I never thought that he would go before me. I am sorry, mates, more sorry than I can say."

"How was it, Bill?" the doctor asked. "Don't tell us if you don't like; it is no business of ours. Here in the diggings there are few men who talk of old times. Their eyes are all on the future, and what they will do with their wealth when they gain it; but no one asks another as to his past history. The answer might sometimes be a pistol-shot. Here we three have been living together for more than two years and not one of us has wanted to know what the others were before we met. It is quite an accident that I know your name. You gave it when you gave evidence as to the murder of that old German that we hung Red Hugh for. It struck me it was an odd name then, but I never thought of it again until I saw it in the paper. And you said once – it was Christmas Day, I remember – you said there was a home for you in England if you liked to go to it."

"I will tell you the story," the Englishman said. "I would have told it to you long ago, only there was nothing in it to tell you. It was just what has happened ten thousand times, and will happen as often again. My father was one of the largest land-owners in

Cumberland. I was his eldest son. We never got on well together. He was cold and haughty, a hard landlord, and a despot at home. We should have quarrelled earlier than we did; but I was sent to Rugby, and often did not even come home for the holidays, for I had a good many friends in those days. I went back when I was eighteen, and was to have gone to college a month or two later. I made a fool of myself, as boys do, and fancied I was in love with one of our tenants' daughters.

"Some meddling busybody – I always thought it was the parson's wife, for she drove along one evening just as I was saying good-bye to the girl at the stile – told my father about it, and there was a frightful row. For once he got in a passion, and I lost my temper too. It was really a harmless flirtation, I think, and would have died out when I went off to college. However, when my father swore that if I ever spoke to her again he would turn me out of the house, I said he might do as he liked, and that I would marry her when I came of age. He ordered me to leave the house and never see his face again; said that I was no longer his son, and might go to the devil, or words to that effect. So, being just as obstinate in my way as he was in his, I went, and never did see him again. Of course, I went first to see the girl. She was frightened out of her life when she heard of what had happened, said that her father would be turned out of his house, and all sorts of things, and at any rate she would have nothing more to say to me.

"So I walked to Liverpool, and took my berth in the first

sailing ship to the States. My brother Edgar, who was two years younger than I, was away at the time. We had always been capital friends. Ten years later, when my father died, he advertised for me, and, the name being an uncommon one, someone pointed it out to me, and I answered. He wrote most affectionately, and lamented that our father had died without forgiving me, and had not only cut me entirely out of his will, but had, knowing his affection for me, inserted a clause that should he endeavour to alter the purport of the will, or to hand over by deed or otherwise any part or share of the estates to me, the property should revert at once to a distant relative. Edgar said, however, that he had consulted his lawyers, and they were of opinion that this clause in no way affected his power to dispose of his income drawn from the estate, and that he proposed to share this equally with me.

"I wrote back that while I was obliged to him for his offer I should not accept it, for, as the property was not entailed, our father had a perfect right to leave it as he liked. He had left it to him, and there was an end of it. We exchanged several letters, but I was just as obstinate as my father had been. I was too busy or too lazy for letter-writing. Somehow no one writes here, and then one is constantly on the move. Anyhow, I had one or two letters from him which I never answered. The last was three or four years ago. And now he is dead, and I suppose has left me some of the property I would not take during his lifetime. Of course I was a fool, and an obstinate fool, all along, but one never acknowledges this until it is too late."

The others made no remark for some time.

"Well, anyhow, Bill, you ought to go down to Frisco and see this lawyer."

"I will think it over," the other said as, after relighting his pipe, he lay back on the blankets again; "there is no hurry for a day or two."

No further mention was made of the matter until the claim was cleared up, but that evening Bill returned to the subject. "I have thought it over, and I suppose I had better go down to Frisco. I don't think I shall take this money. I should be like a fish out of water in England, and should be miserable there. If I take anything it will be a thousand pounds or so. I should sink that in buying a snug little place on the foothills, and I should put somebody on to work it and plant it up with fruit-trees or vines, or that sort of thing, and then some day when I get too old for knocking about I shall settle down there; and I needn't say that my home will also be yours, mates. I sha'n't be much more than a week away. I shall come back here, and if you hear of anything before I return leave a line with the store-keeper telling me where you are off to. I have my kit packed, and if I start in half an hour I shall catch the night coach as it comes along past the top of the gulch."

Sim Howlett made no comment, but simply observed, "I expect you will find us here." But just as Bill was starting the doctor put his hand on his arm and said, "Don't do anything hasty, mate. You see you made rather a mess of your life by putting

your foot down before when it seems there was no occasion for it. There is never any good comes of making up your mind in a hurry when there is no need for it. When you see a man slipping his hand round towards his back trouser-pocket, I allow that is not the time for thinking. You have got to act, and to act mighty sharp too, or you will get a bullet in you before you have drawn; but in a thing of this sort it makes no difference whether you decide now or six months hence. You need only write and say that you are found, and ask for particulars and so on, and when you have got them you can take your time about giving an answer. Many men before now have refused a good thing and been sorry for it afterwards. Your brother, according to your own account, has acted kindly and well towards you. Why should you refuse what he wished you to have, merely because you think that it ought to have come to you in the first place? That is all I have to say, Bill;" and he walked slowly back to the tent, while Bill started at a steady pace up the long steep hill from the gulch to the plateau above, along which ran one of the principal roads from Sacramento through the mining district.

"We shall miss him, Sim," Limping Frank said as he and his mate lighted their pipes after their meal that evening. "It seems kinder lonely without him after sitting down regularly for two years now."

"He ain't gone yet," Sim growled, "and I don't think as he is going. What Bill said he will stick to, you bet."

"Oh, yes! he means what he says, Sim. Bill has gone away

from here with the fixed idea of going down there, writing a letter or two, coming back here, waiting for his money to come over, investing it in a farm, and going on working with us just as before; but, bless you, it is one thing to make up your mind and another to carry it out."

"What is to prevent his carrying it out, doctor?"

"Lots of things, Sim. When a man once gets mixed up in a will, or in any kind of law business, he ceases to be a free agent."

"Ceases to be what, doctor?"

"Well, he ceases to be his own master. Bill thinks he has only got to go into a lawyer's office, and say, – 'Here I am. I am the chap mentioned in that advertisement. I dare say my brother has left me a good lot, but I don't want it. Just write and tell them to send me on five thousand dollars, that's all I want out of it. I am going back to Sacramento to-morrow. When the money comes pay it into the bank there for me.' Then he thinks that he will have a day's spree at Frisco, and come back by steamer next day."

"And why shouldn't he? What is to hinder him?"

"Well, it won't be like that, Sim, at all. When he goes in and says 'I am William Tunstall,' the lawyer will say, 'I am heartily glad to see you, sir. Allow me to congratulate you;' and he will shake Bill by the hand, and Bill will say to himself, 'This is just as it should be. Five minutes will do this job. I will go out and look up two or three friends who are in from the mines, and we will have a bottle of champagne a-piece over this business.' Just as he has thought that over the lawyer will say to him, 'Of course you

are in a position to prove that you are the Mr. Tunstall advertised for.' Bill will say, 'Oh, yes! here are my brother's letters.' Then the lawyer will smile and nod and say, 'Most satisfactory,' and then he will add, 'Of course, you are in a position to prove that you are the person to whom these letters were sent? Of course, I don't doubt it for a moment, but letters do get lost, you know, and fall into other people's hands. In a matter of this kind we must proceed in a legal and business way.' Then Bill will say, 'Of course, I can prove that. There is Sim Howlett and Frank Bennett, my mates. They know I am Bill Tunstall.' 'They knew you before you came out here, I suppose?' 'Oh, no! but they have known me for two years.' 'Known you as William Tunstall?' 'Yes, of course,' Bill will say, beginning to get riled. Then the lawyer will point out to him that we can only say that he called himself Will Tunstall, and that as the last of these letters he has got is dated earlier than that it comes to the fact that there is only his word to go upon, and that the law requires very much stronger proofs of identity than this. Then Bill will get mad, and will say the money can go to the deuce, and that he sha'n't trouble any more about it."

"What then, doctor?" Sim Howlett asked as his companion stopped.

"Ah! well, that I cannot say. He may come straight off without doing anything more, or the lawyer may get him to talk it over. As to that I cannot say; but you may be quite sure that if Bill is to touch a penny of the money left to him he will have to go back

to England to prove who he is, and it is like enough he may not succeed when he gets there. By what he says he was only at home just occasionally during his school holidays. He was little more than a boy when he left, and after twenty years' knocking about on the plains and here it is like enough he may not be able to find a soul to recognize him."

CHAPTER II.
TERRIBLE NEWS

WILLIAM TUNSTALL returned to Cedar Gulch the very day upon which his mates began to expect him. Having finished up the work in their claim on the previous day they strolled up the hill to meet the coach on the chance of his coming.

"Well, mate, how goes it?" Sim Howlett asked.

"Well, it doesn't go at all, Sim."

"How is that?"

"Well, the lawyer was civil, and all that, but if I had let him he would have made me believe that I was not Will Tunstall at all. I showed him my brother's letters, which ought to have satisfied anyone, and he hinted that these might have come into my possession anyhow, that Tunstall might be dead, or that his kit, with these letters in it, might have been stolen."

"That is the very thing the doctor said he would be after," Sim Howlett exclaimed in great admiration at the latter's perspicacity.

"I suppose he didn't say he thought so, Bill?" the doctor asked.

"No, he knew better than that, doctor. He kept on saying that he was quite satisfied, but that other people wouldn't be satisfied. Then he asked about references, who could I refer to? Could I refer to anyone who had known me as William Tunstall before the date of these letters? I said that I had been knocking about on

the plains and doing trapping and Indian fighting for years, and that I was known as English Bill, and that I did not suppose there were half a dozen fellows ever did know my name, and that, for aught I knew, they had all been scalped, shot, or hung long ago. He said, in that case I should have to go to England to prove my claim. I said I would see the claim at the bottom of the sea first, and then I left him.

"I met some fellows, and made a night of it, but in the morning the lawyer turned up at the hotel just as I had finished breakfast. I had told him the hotel where I was staying. He said it was no use being hasty. I said I wasn't hasty, and we were near having a row again. Then he said that he had only had instructions to find me, and did not know how much was left me under the will, or anything about it, except what he had put in the advertisement. At any rate he would write to the people who had instructed him in England and tell them that a gentleman representing himself to be William Tunstall had called, and that he possessed letters from the late Mr. Edgar Tunstall. That in the present state of affairs I declined to make the voyage to England for the purpose of proving my identity, but that he had my address, and could communicate further with me upon receiving instructions from them.

"I told him to say that I didn't want the money, and was not going to put myself out one way or the other about it. He listened, and shook his head, just the way the doctor does when he don't agree with you. Then he remarked that he would not do anything

rash if he were in my place. I told him it was no odds to me whether he would or would not, and as I had just time to catch the steamer I wasn't going to waste any more time jawing over it, so off I came, and here I am. Well, what is doing here? Has there been any fresh rush?"

"Nary one. The doctor and I think we cannot do better than stay here. I was talking with Halkett and his partners this afternoon. They don't get on well together. Halkett said they would sell out if they could get a fair price. They are getting out about six ounces a day. No great thing, but they are only half-way down at present. It is in four shares, for two of the gang are on day wages. Of course, I said that it wasn't much of a thing to buy, as they were only getting an ounce a piece, and besides, the shaft is badly timbered. Still, if they would say what they wanted for it we would talk it over with you when you got back. Halkett was evidently anxious to sell, and said they would take a hundred ounces for it right out. Of course I said that was too much, but I think it is a bargain, so does the doctor. They have got through the worst half, and there is the best behind. It don't always turn out rich on the bed-rock here; it didn't with us. Still, there is the chance of it; and if it only keeps as it is now, and we take on a couple of men to work with us, we should, after paying them and keeping ourselves, be making three ounces a day anyhow, and it will take us a couple of months to get to the bottom, and perhaps more."

"How do we stand after the clear-up, doctor?" for Frank was

the treasurer of the party.

"We got twenty ounces at the last clear-up, and we had eighty-nine before, so if we give him his price we should have nine ounces left."

"It will take fifty or sixty dollars," Sim Howlett said, "to make that shaft safe. Halkett is the only one of the lot that knows anything about that, and it has been done in a very slovenly style. I shouldn't like to work down there until we have strengthened it all the way down. I told Halkett the other day that if he didn't mind it would be caving in. I think that is partly why they are selling."

"Well, I think we couldn't do better than take it, Sim; but you must get them to knock a few ounces off, otherwise we shan't have enough to repair the shaft, and from what you say we must do that before we go to work in the bottom. Let us go and make a bargain at once."

"That will never do, Bill," Sim Howlett said; "that would look as if we had made up our mind to take it, and they wouldn't come down an ounce. No, no, we will have our meal, and wait an hour or two, then I will stroll round to Halkett's tent and say that as we calculate it would cost a heap of money to make the shaft safe we do not see our way to it, though we might otherwise have taken to the job. Then you will see to-morrow morning, when they knock off for breakfast, Halkett will come round here and make some proposal."

So indeed it turned out. Soon after breakfast Halkett came to

the tent door. "Look here, boys," he said, "I want to get out of this lot. The men I am working with ain't worth shucks. The three of them don't do a fair man's work, and I am sick of it. But I have been talking to them, and they won't take less than twenty-five ounces a share, and they have been talking to some men who have pretty well made up their minds to give it. If I had the dust I would buy the others out, but I haven't. If you will buy the other three out at their terms I will keep my share and work partners with you. I have got enough dust to pay my share of retimbering the shaft. What do you say?"

The doctor had gone off to take some broth to two of his patients. The other two looked at each other, and then Sim Howlett said: "Well, this is how it stands, Halkett. My mate here and I would have no objection to work with you; but it is this way: we and the doctor have chummed together, and have never taken anyone else in with us, partly because we are quite content as it is, and partly because the doctor can't do his share of the work – he hasn't got it in him. We don't want to go away from here now, and we have dust enough to buy your three partners out. I suppose we should want to work four at that shaft. I don't know what you have been working six for, except that three of your lot are of no use."

"That is about it," Halkett said.

"So you see we should have to take on a man to do the doctor's work."

"Well, you would have to do that if you worked it yourselves."

"So we should," Sim Howlett assented. "What do you say, Bill?"

"Halkett's proposal seems a fair one, Sim; it seems to me we can't do better than accept it. We must consult the doctor, Halkett. He is sure to agree, but we should not like to do it without speaking to him; that would not be fair. But you may consider it a bargain."

"Very well, I will go back and tell them I have made the agreement with you. Then I will come back and bring you fifteen ounces of dust, which is all I have got; I don't want them to know that I am going to stop in it. If I do, like enough they will cut up rusty, so I want you to make it up and hand the hundred ounces over clear; then they will hand me my share, and I can give you the other ten ounces. They will leave the camp as soon as they get their money. Somebody has been blowing to them about a find he has made prospecting among the hills, and I fancy they mean going off with him, and it would be no use letting on that I am going to stop in the partnership until they have gone. They are just the sort of fellows to think that I had been somehow besting them, and if they said so there would be trouble, and I don't want to do any of them harm."

The doctor on his return fell in, as a matter of course, with his mates' arrangement.

At dinner-time Halkett and his partners came in, and the dust was weighed out and handed over to them. Sim Howlett and Tunstall spent the afternoon in making a careful examination of

the shaft, and in deciding upon the best plan for strengthening it. Halkett's former partners left a couple of hours after they got the money, and on the following morning the new proprietors of the claim set to work. The first step was to make an arrangement with a man who had horses, to haul timber from a little saw-mill that had been erected two miles away, and as soon as this began to arrive, the work of strengthening the shaft was set about. It took the three men, and another whom they had taken on at daily pay, a week, and at the end of that time it was pronounced safe against any pressure it was likely to have to bear.

The advertisement in the Sacramento paper had been noticed by others than by those for whom it was intended, and there happened to be among the miners who had worked at various times in the same diggings with William Tunstall another who had been on the jury when he had mentioned his name. He did not, however, notice the advertisement until a day or two after the newspaper had arrived in camp.

"There," he said to some mates who were sitting round the fire, "that is just like my luck; there is five hundred dollars slipped clean through my fingers because I did not happen to see this here paper before."

"How is that, Jones?"

"Why, here is five hundred dollars offered for information as to the whereabouts of William Tunstall."

"And who is William Tunstall? I never heard of him."

"Why, English Bill; that is his name sure enough; he gave it on

a jury we served on together. I told him then I had never heard the name before. That is how I came to remember it."

"Well, why are you too late? Why don't you write off at once and say he is here, and claim the money?"

"Because he is gone, mate. Sim Howlett asked Black Johnson yesterday, when I was standing by, if he knew of a good man he could take on for a week's work, as he was single-handed, for of course Limping Frank don't count in the way of work. I asked him if English Bill was laid up, and he said, No; he had gone the night before down to Frisco. I wondered then at his starting just before they had cleaned up their claim. Now it is clear enough, he had seen this advertisement."

"Bolted?" one of the other men asked.

"Bolted! no," Jones said in a tone of contemptuous disgust. "You don't suppose English Bill has been cutting anyone's throat, do you? or robbing some digger of his swag? No, he has gone down to Frisco to see the chap that put this into the paper. Why, look here," and he read the advertisement aloud; "he has come into a fortune, I expect. They would never have taken the trouble to advertise for him if it hadn't been a big sum. You bet English Bill has struck it rich; like enough it is a thundering big ranche, with two or three hundred thousand head of cattle."

"They don't have estates like that in England," another digger put in. "I was chatting with an Englishman at Holly Creek. He said land was worth a heap there, but it was all cultivated and hedged in, and he didn't suppose as there was a man in the whole

country who had got as much as five thousand head of cattle. However, cattle or not, I expect it is a big thing English Bill has come in for, and we shan't see him in here again."

The news spread quickly through the camp. It was discussed by the men as they worked the rockers, by the gamblers up at the saloon, and in the tents when the work was done. Sim Howlett was soon questioned, but was surly, and little could be got from him. Limping Frank was no more communicative. He was accosted frequently, as he went from the tents with his soups and medicines, with "Well, Frank, so I hear your mate has come in for a big thing, and gone down to Frisco. Jack Jones saw the advertisement for him in the paper."

"If Jack Jones saw it, of course it was there," the doctor said with his quiet smile; "couldn't have seen it otherwise, could he? Yes, Bill has gone off. I am glad to hear that it is a big thing; hadn't heard it before. It will be a surprise to him, for he didn't expect it would be a big thing. Didn't think it would be worth troubling about, you see. However, I daresay he will be back in a week or two, and then no doubt he will tell you all about it."

Cedar Gulch was greatly disappointed when English Bill reappeared in his ordinary red shirt, high boots, and miner's hat, and went to work on the following afternoon as if nothing had happened. There had been a general idea that if he came back he would appear in store-clothes and a high hat, and perhaps come in a carriage with four horses all to himself, and that he would stand champagne to the whole camp, and that there would

be generally a good time. He himself, when questioned on the subject, turned the matter off by saying he had not thought the thing worth bothering about; that he could not get what there was without going to England to fetch it, and that it might go to the bottom of the sea before he took that trouble.

The only person to whom he said more was the man who ran the gambling-table. Things had been lately going on more quietly there, and the gambler had postponed his departure to San Francisco. Bill Tunstall spent, as the doctor said, no inconsiderable portion of his earnings at the gambling-tables, and had struck up an acquaintance with Symonds. The latter was, like many of his class, a man of quiet and pleasant manners. For his profession a nerve of iron was required, for pistols were frequently drawn by disappointed miners, flushed with drink and furious at their losses, and the professional gambler had his life constantly in his hands. The accusation, "You cheated me!" was the sure signal for one or two pistol shots to ring out in sharp succession, then a body would be carried out, and play resumed.

Symonds bore no worse reputation than others of the class. It was assumed, of course, that he would cheat if he had the chance; but with a dozen men looking on and watching every movement of the fingers, even the cleverest gambler generally played fair. These men were generally, by birth and education, far above those with whom they played. They had fallen from the position they had once occupied; had, perhaps, in the first place been victims of gamblers, just as they now victimized others; had been

cast out from society as detected cheats or convicted swindlers; but now, thanks to nerve, recklessness of life, and sleight of hand, they reaped a fortune, until the bullet of a ruined miner, or the rope of Judge Lynch, cut short their career.

Symonds was not unpopular among the miners. He was liberal with his money, had many times spared men who, according to the code of the diggings, had forfeited their lives by an insult or by a shot that had missed its aim. He had often set men on their legs again who had lost their all to him; and if there was a subscription raised for some man down with fever, or for a woman whose husband had been killed in a shaft, Symonds would head the list with a handsome sum. And yet there were few men more feared. Magnanimous on some occasions, he was ruthless on others. He was a dead shot, and handled his pistol with a lightning speed, that in nine cases out of ten enabled him to fire first; and while he would contemptuously spare a man who was simply maddened by ruin and drink, the notorious bully, the terror of a camp, a man who deliberately forced a quarrel upon him, relying upon his strength or skill, would be shot down without hesitation.

Thus in nine cases out of ten the feeling of the communities among whom he plied his vocation was in his favour. While he himself was a dangerous man, he rid the camp of others who were still more obnoxious, and the verdict after most of these saloon frays was, "Served him right;" but as a rule men avoided discussing Symonds or his affairs. It was dangerous to do so, for somehow he seemed always to learn what was said of him, and

sooner or later the words were paid for.

Will Tunstall knew that he was a dangerous man, and had no doubt that he was an utterly unscrupulous one, but he himself never drank while he played, and was never out of temper when he lost, therefore he had no reason whatever to fear the man, and Symonds had always been civil and pleasant with him, recognizing that there was something in him that placed him somewhat apart from the rough crowd. He met him one afternoon soon after his return.

"Is it true all this they are saying about you, Bill?" Symonds asked.

"Well, it is true enough that I was advertised for, and went down to Frisco to see a man there about it. Of course it is all nonsense as to what they are saying about the value of it. It is some family property that might have come to me long ago if I hadn't kicked over the traces; but I am not going to trouble about it. I shall have all the bother and expense of going to England to prove who I am, and I wouldn't do it if it were ten times as much."

"Come and have a glass of cham, Bill. My own story is a good deal like yours. I daresay I might be master of a good estate in the old country now, if I hadn't gone a mucker."

"It is too early to drink," Will said; "if I did drink it would be just a cocktail. The champagne you get is poison."

"Just as you like. By the way, if I can be of any use to you let me know. It is an expensive run home to England from here, and if you have need for a thousand dollars, I could let you have them.

I have had a good run of luck this last six months. It would be a business transaction, you know, and you could pay me a couple of hundred for the use of it. It is of no use losing a good thing for the want of funds."

"Thank you, Symonds. I have enough to take me home if I have to go; but I am very much obliged for the offer all the same."

"It is business," the other said carelessly, "and there are no thanks due. If you change your mind let me know; mind I owe you a cocktail next time we meet in the saloon."

The gambler went on. Will Tunstall looked after him with a little wonder at the offer he had made. "It is a good-natured thing to offer, for, of course, if I went to England he could not make anything out of me beyond the interest of the money, and he would get more than that putting it on house property in Frisco. He is a queer card, and would look more at home in New York than in Cedar Gulch!"

The gambler's dress, indeed, was out of place with the surroundings. Like most of his class he dressed with scrupulous neatness; his clothes were well made, and fitted him; he wore a white shirt, the only one in the camp, and abstained from the diamond studs and rings, and heavy gold watch-chain that was generally affected by professional gamblers. He was tall, as tall as Tunstall himself, though not so broad or so strongly built; but his figure was well knit, there was in his walk and action an air of lightness and activity, and he had more than once shown that he possessed an altogether unusual amount of muscular strength.

"It is a pity that the fellow is what he is," Will Tunstall said when he turned away; "what a soldier he would have made, with his strength, and pluck, and wonderful coolness!"

This little conversation was followed by several others. Somehow or other they met more frequently than they had done before, and one evening, when there was no play in the saloon, Symonds asked him to come in and have a chat with him in his private room at the hotel. For some time they chatted on different subjects. Symonds had brought out a box of superb cigars, and a bottle of such claret as Will Tunstall had not drunk for years, saying carelessly as he did so, "I always carry my own tipple about with me. It would ruin my nerves to drink the poison they keep at these places."

After a time he brought the subject round to the legacy. "I have been thinking over what you said about not going back, and I think you are wrong, if you don't mind my saying so. What have you got to look forward to here? Toil and slave year after year, without ever getting a step further, living all the time a life harder than that of the poorest labourer at home. It is well enough now, I suppose. You are seven or eight and thirty, just about my own age; in another ten years you will be sorry you let the chance slip. Of course it is different with me. As far as money goes, I could give it up now, but I cannot go back again. Men don't take to my sort of life," he said with some bitterness, "unless they have got a pretty bad record behind them; but I shall give it up before very long, unless I am wiped out first. Then I'll go and settle in

South America, or some place of that sort, buy an estate, and set up as a rich and virtuous Englishman whose own climate doesn't agree with him."

Then he carelessly changed the subject again, but it was reverted to once or twice in the course of the evening, and before Will left he had said enough to enable his companion to gather a fair estimate of the value of the property, and the share he was likely to have of it.

The new claim turned out fairly well, improving somewhat in depth, and yielding a good though not an extraordinary profit to the partners. Some four months after Will Tunstall had been down to San Francisco, he received a bulky letter from the attorney there. It contained an abstract of his brother's will. This left him half the property, with a statement saying that he considered it to be his brother's by right, and inclosed with it was a copy of a letter written a few days before his death. It ran as follows: —

> "My dear Will, – You have wandered about long enough. It is high time for you to come back to the old place that you ought never to have left. I shall not see you again, for I have long been suffering from heart-disease, and the doctors tell me the end may come any day. I have had the opinion of some of the best authorities, and they all say that, thanks to some peculiar wording in the will, which I don't understand in the slightest, the prohibition to divide with you is only binding during my lifetime, and that nothing is said that restricts my right to leave it as I please. I don't suppose

the contingency of your surviving me ever entered into our father's mind, and probably he thought that you would never be heard of again. However, you see it has turned out otherwise. You have wandered and roughed it, and gone through dangers of all sorts, and are still, you tell me, strong and healthy. I have lived quietly and comfortably with every luxury, and without a day's trouble, save my terrible grief when my wife died, and the ever-constant regret that you were not here beside me; yet I am dying, but that enables me at last to redress to some extent the cruel wrong you have suffered.

"I have left you half the estate, and it makes me happy to think that you will come back again to it. I have appointed you sole guardian of my boy. He is only twelve years old, and I want you to be a father to him. The estate is large enough for you both, and I hope that you may, on your return, marry, and be happy here; if not, I suppose it will all go to him at your death. In any case, I pray you to come home, for the boy's sake, and for your own. It is my last request, and I hope and believe that you will grant it. You were always good to me when we were boys together, and I feel sure that you will well supply my place to Hugh. God bless you, old fellow! Your affectionate brother,

Edgar."

With these documents was a letter from the solicitors to the family saying that they had heard from their agents at San Francisco that he had presented himself in answer to their advertisement, and had shown them the letters of the late Mr.

Edgar Tunstall. They therefore forwarded him copies of the will, and of Mr. Tunstall's letter, and begged him to return home without delay, as his presence was urgently required. They assumed, of course, that they were writing to Mr. William Tunstall, and that when he arrived he would have no difficulty whatever in proving his identity.

"I think I must go, boys," he said as, after reading his brother's letter three or four times, he folded the papers up, and put them in his pocket. "My brother has made me guardian of his boy, and puts it so strongly that I think I must go over for a bit. I don't suppose I shall have to stop; although the lawyers say that I am urgently required there; but, mind, I mean to do just what I said. I shall take a thousand pounds or so, and renounce the rest. A nice figure I should make setting up at home as a big land-owner. I should be perfectly miserable there. No, you take my word for it, I shall be back here in six months at the outside. I shall get a joint guardian appointed to the boy; the clergyman of the place, or some one who is better fitted to see after his education and bringing up than I am. When he gets to seventeen or eighteen, and a staunch friend who knows the world pretty well may be really of use to him, I shall go over and take him on his travels for two or three years. Bring him out here a bit, perhaps. However, that is in the distance. I am going now for a few months; then you will see me back here. I wish I wasn't going; it is a horrible nuisance, but I don't see that I can get out of it."

"Certainly you cannot, Bill; it is your plain duty. We don't

go by duty much in these diggings, and it will be pleasant to see somebody do a thing that he doesn't like because it is right. We shall miss you, of course – miss you badly. But we all lose friends, and nowhere so much as here; for what with drink and fever and bullets the percentage wiped out is large. You are going because, in fact, you can't help yourself. We shall be glad when you come back; but if you don't come back, we shall know that it was because you couldn't. Yes, I know you have quite made up your mind about that; but circumstances are too strong for men, and it may be that, however much you may wish it, you won't be able to come. Well, we shall be clearing up the claim in another two or three days, so it could not come at a better time if it had to come."

The work was continued to the end of the week, and then, the last pan of dirt having been washed, the partners divided the result. Each week's take had been sent down by the weekly convoy to the bank at Sacramento, for robberies were not uncommon, and prudent men only retained enough gold-dust by them for their immediate wants. But adding the dust and nuggets acquired during the last and best week's work to the amount for which they had the bank's receipt, the four partners found that they had, after paying all their expenses, two hundred and fifty ounces of gold.

"Sixty-two ounces and a half each," the doctor said. "It might have been better, it might have been worse. We put in twenty-five each four months ago, so we have got thirty-seven ounces

each for our work, after paying expenses, and each drawing half an ounce a day to spend as he liked. This we have, of course, all of us laid by."

There was a general laugh, for not one of them had above an ounce or two remaining.

"Well, it isn't bad anyhow, doctor," William Tunstall said. "Sixty-two ounces apiece will make roughly £250, which is as much as we have ever had before on winding up a job. My share will be enough to lake me to England and back."

"Yes, provided you don't drop it all in some gambling saloon at Sacramento or San Francisco," the doctor said.

"I shan't do that, doctor. I have lost big sums before now in a night's play, I confess; but I knew I could set to work and earn more. Now I have got an object before me."

That afternoon English Bill went round the camp saying good-bye to his acquaintances, and although it was very seldom that he drank too much, the standing treat and being treated in turn was too much for his head, and it was with a very unsteady step indeed that he returned late in the evening to his tent. Sim Howlett, who had started with him, had succumbed hours before, and had been carried down from the saloon by a party who were scarcely able to keep on their own legs.

When Will Tunstall woke in the morning he had but a vague idea of the events of the latter part of the evening. He remembered hazily that there had been many quarrels and rows, but what they had been about he knew not, though he felt sure

that there had been no shooting. He had a dim recollection that he had gone into Symonds' room at the hotel, where he had some champagne, and a talk about his trip to England and about the people there.

"What the deuce could have set me talking about them?" he wondered in his mind. He was roused from these thoughts by the doctor.

"If you are going to catch this morning's coach, Bill, you must pull yourself together."

"All right!" he said, getting on to his feet. "I shall be myself when I have put my head in a bucket of water. I'm afraid I was very drunk last night."

"Well, you were drunk, Bill. I have never seen you drunk but once before since we were partners; but I suppose no one ever did get out of a mining camp where he had been working for some time, and had fairly good luck, without getting pretty well bowled over after going the rounds to say good-bye. Now, then, Sim, wake up! Bill will be off in a quarter of an hour. I have got breakfast ready."

Sim Howlett needed no second call. It was no very unusual thing for him to be drunk overnight and at work by daybreak the following morning. So after stretching himself and yawning, and following Will's example of having a wash, he was ready to sit down to breakfast with an excellent appetite. Will, however, did poor justice to the doctor's efforts, and ten minutes later the trio started off to meet the coach. There were many shouts of

"Good-bye, mate! good luck to yer!" from the men going down to the diggings, but they were soon beyond the camp. Few words were said as they went up the hill, for the three men were much attached to each other, and all felt the parting. Fortunately they had but two or three minutes to wait before the coach came in sight.

"Just you look out for me in about six months' time, mates; but I'll write directly I get home, and tell you all about things. I shall direct here, and you can get someone to ask for your letters and send them after you if you have moved to a new camp."

With a last grasp of the hand, Tunstall climbed up to the top of the coach, his bundle was thrown up to him, the coachman cracked his whip, the horses started again at a gallop, and Sim Howlett and his mate went down to Cedar Gulch without another word being spoken between them.

Three days later, as they were breakfasting in their tent, for they had not yet made up their minds what they should do, a miner entered.

"Hello, Dick! Back from your spree? How did you get on at Frisco?"

"Yes, I have just got off the coach. I have got some bad news to tell you, mates."

"Bad news! Why, what is that, Dick?" Sim Howlett asked.

"Well, I know it will hit you pretty hard, mates, for I know you thought a heap of him. Well, lads, it is no use making a long story of it, but your mate, English Bill, has been murdered."

The two men started to their feet – Sim Howlett with a terrible imprecation, the doctor with a cry like the scream of a woman.

"It is true, mates, for I saw the body. I should have been up yesterday, but I had to wait for the inquest to say who he was. I was going to the coach in the morning when I saw half a dozen men gathered round a body on the footway of a small street. There was nothing unusual in that at Sacramento. I don't know what made me turn off to have a look at the body. Directly I saw it I knew who it was. It was English Bill, so I put off coming, and stopped to the inquest. He hadn't been killed fair, he had been shot down from behind with a bullet in the back of his head. No one had heard the shot particular. No one thinks anything of a shot in Sacramento. No one seemed to know anything about him, and the inquest didn't take five minutes. Of course they found a verdict of wilful murder against some person unknown."

Sim Howlett listened to the narration with his hands clenched as if grasping a weapon, his eyes blazing with fury, and muttering ejaculations of rage and horror. The doctor hardly seemed to hear what was said. He was moving about the tent in a seemingly aimless way, blinded with tears. Presently he came upon his revolver, which he thrust into his belt, then he dropped his bag of gold-dust inside his shirt, and he then picked up his hat.

"Come along, Sim," he said in hurried tones, touching his companion on the arm.

"Come along!" Sim repeated. "Where are you going?"

"To Sacramento, of course. We will hunt him down, whoever

did it. I will find him and kill him if it takes years to do it."

"I am with you," Sim said; "but there is no coach until to-night."

"There is a coach that passes through Alta at twelve o'clock. It is fifteen miles to walk, but we shall be there in time, and it will take us into Sacramento by midnight."

Sim Howlett snatched up his revolver, secured his bag of gold-dust, and said to the man who had brought the news, "Fasten up the tent, Dick, and keep an eye on it and the traps. The best thing will be for you to fix yourself here until we come back."

"That will suit me, Sim. I got rid of all my swag before I left. You will find it all right when you return."

They had but four hours to do the distance across a very broken and hilly country, but they were at Alta a quarter of an hour before the coach was due. It taxed Sim Howlett's powers to the utmost, and even in his rage and grief he could not help looking with astonishment at his companion, who seemed to keep up with him without difficulty. They ran down the steep hills and toiled up the formidable ascents. The doctor's breath came quick and short, but he seemed almost unconscious of the exertions he was making. His eyes were fixed in front of him, his face was deadly pale, his white hair damp with perspiration. Not a word had been spoken since the start, except that, towards the end of the journey, Howlett had glanced at his watch and said they were in good time and could take it easy. His companion paid no attention, but kept on at the top of his speed.

When the coach arrived it was full, but the doctor cried out, "It is a matter of life and death; we must go! We will give five ounces apiece to any one who will give us up their places and go on by the next coach."

Two men gladly availed themselves of the offer, and at midnight the two companions arrived at Sacramento. The doctor's strength had given way when the necessity for exertion was over, and he had collapsed.

"Perhaps someone has got a flask with him?" Sim Howlett suggested. "My mate and I have just heard of the murder of an old chum of ours at Sacramento, and we are on our way down to find out who did it and to wipe him out. We have had a hard push for it, and, as you see, it has been too much for my mate, who is not over strong."

Half a dozen bottles were instantly produced, and some whiskey poured down the doctor's throat. It was not long before he opened his eyes, but remained for some time leaning upon Sim Howlett's shoulder.

"Take it easy, doctor, take it easy," the latter said as he felt the doctor straightening himself up. "You have got to save yourself. You know we may have a long job before us."

There was nothing to do when they entered the town but to find a lodging for the night. In the morning they commenced their search. It was easy to find the under-sheriff who had conducted the inquest. He had but little to tell. The body had been found as they had already heard. There were no signs of a struggle.

The pockets were all turned inside out. The sheriff supposed that the man had probably been in a gambling-house, had won money there, and had been followed and murdered. Their first care was to find where Will Tunstall was buried, and then to order a stone to be erected at his head. Then they spent a week visiting every gambling-den in Sacramento, but nowhere could they find that anyone at all answering to their mate's description had been gambling there on the night before he was killed.

They then found the hotel where he had put up on the arrival of the coach. He had gone out after breakfast and had returned alone to dinner, and had then gone out again. He had not returned; it was supposed that he had gone away suddenly, and as the value of the clothes he had left behind was sufficient to cover his bill, no inquiries had been made. At the bank they learned that in the course of the afternoon he had drawn his portion of the joint fund on the order signed by them all. At another hotel they learned that a man certainly answering to his description had come in one evening a week or so before with a gentleman staying at the house. They did not know who the gentleman was; he was a stranger, but he was well dressed, and they thought he must have come from Frisco. He had left the next day. They had not noticed him particularly, but he was tall and dark, and so was the man who came in with him. The latter was in regular miner's dress. They had not sat in the saloon, but had gone up to the stranger's bed-room, and a bottle of spirits had been taken up there. They did not notice what time the miner left, or whether

the other went out with him. The house was full, and they did not bother themselves as to who went in or out. It was from a German waiter they learned all this, after having made inquiries in vain two or three times previously at this hotel.

As soon as they left the place the doctor seized Sim's arm. "We have got a clew at last, Sim."

"Not much of a clue, doctor; still there is something to go upon. We have got to hunt out this man."

"Do you mind going back to the camp to-night, Sim?"

"No, I don't mind; but what for, doctor?"

"You go and see whether Symonds is still there, and if not, find out what day and hour he left."

"Good heavens! you don't suspect him?"

"I feel sure, Sim, just as sure as if I had seen it. The description fits him exactly. Who else could Bill have known dressed like a gentleman that he would have gone up to drink with when he had £250 about him. You know he had got rather thick with that villain before he left the camp, and likely enough the fellow may have got out of him that he was going to draw his money from the bank, and thought that it was a good bit more than it was. At any rate go and see."

Two days later Sim Howlett returned with the news that Symonds had left two or three hours after Tunstall had done so. He had said that he had a letter that rendered it necessary that he should go to Frisco, and had hired a vehicle, driven to Alta, and caught the coach there. He had not returned to the camp.

"That settles it, Sim. When I find Symonds the gambler, I find the murderer of Bill Tunstall. I have been thinking it over. It may be months before I catch him. He may have gone east into Colorado or south into Mexico, but I am going to find him and kill him. I don't think it is any use for us both to hunt; it may take months and years."

"Perhaps he thinks he is safe, and hasn't gone far. He may think that poor Bill will be picked up and buried, and that no one will be any the wiser. We would have thought that he had gone off to England; and so it would have been if Dick hadn't happened to come along and turn off to look at the body. Like enough he will turn up at Cedar Gulch again."

"He may," the doctor said thoughtfully, "and that is the more reason why you should stop about here. You would hear of his coming back to any of the mining camps on the slopes. But I don't think he will. He will feel safe, and yet he won't feel quite safe. Besides, you know, I dreamt that I should kill him. However, if he does come back anywhere here I leave him to you, Sim. Shoot him at sight as if he were a mad dog. You don't want any fair play with a fellow like that. When you tell the boys the story they will all say you did right. I will write to you from time to time to let you know where I am. If you have killed him let me know. I shall come back to you as soon as I have found him."

And so it was settled; for, eager as Sim Howlett was for vengeance, he did not care for the thought of years spent in a vain search, and believed that his chance of meeting Symonds again

was as good among the mining camps as elsewhere.

CHAPTER III.
THE WANDERER'S RETURN

HAD the circumstances of William Tunstall's leaving his home been more recent, or had the son of Edgar Tunstall been older, the news that William Tunstall had returned and had taken up his residence at Byrneside as master of the portion of the estate left him by his brother, and as guardian to the young heir to the remainder, would have caused a good deal of interest and excitement in the county. The twenty years, however, that had elapsed since Will Tunstall had left home, and the fact that when he went away he was but a lad quite unknown personally to his father's acquaintances, deprived the matter of any personal interest. It had generally been thought that it was hard that he should have been entirely cut out of his father's will, and the clause forbidding his brother to make any division of the property was considered particularly so, especially as it was known that Edgar was attached to his brother, and would have gladly shared the property with him.

But William had been away twenty years, and no one had a personal interest in him. Ten years had elapsed since he had been finally disinherited by his father's will. Beyond a feeling of satisfaction that justice had been done, and that there would not be a long minority at Byrneside, the news that the eldest son had

returned created no excitement.

Messrs. Randolph & Son of Carlisle, who were business agents for half the estates in the county, reported well of the newcomer. They had never seen him as a boy, but they expressed themselves as agreeably surprised that the long period he had passed knocking about among rough people in the States had in no way affected him unfavourably. His manners were particularly good, his appearance was altogether in his favour, he was a true Cumberland man, tall and powerful like his father and brother, though somewhat slighter in build.

He was accompanied by his wife. Yes, they had seen her. They had both dined with them. They had not been previously aware that Mr. Tunstall was married. Their client, Mr. Edgar Tunstall, had not mentioned the fact to them. They were not prepared to give any decided opinion as to Mrs. Tunstall. She had spoken but little, and struck them as being nervous; probably the position was a novel one for her. There were, they understood, no children.

Messrs. Randolph, father and son, old-fashioned practitioners, had from the first considered the scruples of their agents in San Francisco to be absurd. Mr. Tunstall had presented himself as soon as they had advertised. He had produced the letters of his brother as proof of his identity, and had offered to bring forward witnesses who had known him for years as William Tunstall. What on earth would they have had more than that? Mr. Tunstall had had reason already for resentment, and it was not surprising

that he had refused to set out at once for England when he found his identity so absurdly questioned. So they had immediately sent off the abstract of the will and a copy of Edgar Tunstall's letter, and were much gratified when in due time Mr. Tunstall had presented himself at their office, and had personally announced his arrival.

It was indeed a relief to them; for, had he not arrived, various difficulties would have arisen as to his moiety of the estate, there being no provision in the will as to what was to be done should he refuse to accept it. Moreover, application must have been made to the court for the appointment of fresh guardians for the boy. Altogether they were glad that a business that might have been troublesome was satisfactorily settled. Mr. Tunstall, after introducing himself, had produced the letters he had received from his brother, with the abstract of the will and copy of the letter they had sent him.

He had said smilingly, "I don't know whether this is sufficient, gentlemen, for I am not up in English law. If it is necessary I can, of course, get a dozen witnesses from the States to prove that I have been always known as William Tunstall; though I generally passed, as is the custom there, under a variety of nicknames, such as English Bill, Stiff Bill, and a whole lot of others. It will naturally take some little time and great expense to get witnesses over, especially as men are earning pretty high wages in California at present; but, of course, it can be managed if necessary."

"I do not see that there is any necessity for it," Mr. Randolph said. "Besides, no doubt we shall find plenty of people here to identify you."

"I don't know that, Mr. Randolph. You see I was little more than a boy when I went away. I had been at Rugby for years, and often did not come home for the holidays. Twenty years have completely changed me in appearance, and I own that I have but a very faint recollection of Byrneside. Of course I remember the house itself, and the stables and grounds; but as to the neighbours, I don't recollect any of them. Neither my brother nor myself dined in the parlour when my father had dinner parties; but it seems to me that, after all, the best proof of my identity is my correspondence with my brother. Certainly, he would not have been deceived by any stranger, and the fact that we exchanged letters occasionally for some years seems to me definite proof that he recognized me as his brother."

"Undoubtedly so," Mr. Randolph said. "That in itself is the strongest proof that can be brought. We mentioned that in our letter to Mr. Campbell in San Francisco. His doubts appeared to us, I may say, to be absurd."

"Not altogether absurd, Mr. Randolph. California has been turned pretty well topsy-turvy during the last four or five years, and he was not to be blamed for being suspicious. May I ask you if you have come across my letters to my brother among his papers?"

"No, we have not done so. In fact, your brother told us that

he had not preserved them, for as you were wandering about constantly the addresses you gave were no benefit, and that beyond the fact that you were in California he had no idea where you could be found. That is why it became necessary to advertise for you."

"It is unfortunate that he did not keep them, Mr. Randolph, for in that case, of course, I could have told you most of their contents, and that would have been an additional proof of my identity."

"There is not the least occasion for it, Mr. Tunstall. We are perfectly and entirely satisfied. Mr. Edgar's recognition of you as his brother, your possession of his letters, the fact that you answered at once to the advertisement in California, your knowledge of your early life at Rugby, and so on, all tend to one plain conclusion; in fact, no shadow of doubt was entertained by my son or myself from the first. I congratulate you very heartily on your return, because to some extent the very hard treatment which was dealt to you by your father, Mr. Philip Tunstall, has now been atoned for. Of course you only received a short abstract of your brother's will; the various properties which fall to you are detailed in full in it. Byrneside itself goes to his son; but against that may be set off a sum invested in good securities, and equal to the value of the house and home park, so that you can either build or purchase a mansion as good as Byrneside. We may tell you also that the estates were added to in your father's time, and that other properties have been bought by your brother, who, owing

to the death of his wife and the state of his health, has for some years led a very secluded life, investing the greater part of his savings in land. So that, in fact, your moiety of the estates will be quite as large as the elder son's portion you might have expected to receive in the ordinary course of events."

"What sort of boy is my nephew, Mr. Randolph?"

"I have seen him two or three times when I have been over at Byrneside. Of course I did not notice him particularly, but he is a bright lad, and promises to grow into a very fine young man. I fancy from something his father let drop that his disposition resembles yours. He is very fond of outdoor exercises, knows every foot of the hills round Byrneside, and though but eleven or twelve years old he is perfectly at home on horseback, and he is a good shot. He has, in fact, run a little wild. His father spoke of him as being warmhearted and of excellent impulses, but lamented that, like you, he was somewhat quick-tempered and headstrong."

"Edgar ought not to have selected me for his guardian, Mr. Randolph."

"I said almost as much, Mr. Tunstall, when I drew out the will; but Mr. Edgar remarked that you had doubtless got over all that long ago, and would be able to make more allowance for him and to manage him far better than anyone else could do."

"I shall try and merit Edgar's confidence, Mr. Randolph. I have suffered enough from my headstrong temper, and have certainly learnt to control it. I shall not be hard upon him, never

fear."

"Are you going over to Byrneside at once, Mr. Tunstall?"

"No; I shall go up to London to-morrow morning. I want a regular outfit before I present myself there for inspection. Besides, I would rather that you should give notice to them at Byrneside that I have returned. It is unpleasant to arrive at a place unannounced, and to have to explain who you are."

"Perhaps you would like to see the will, and go through the schedule?"

"Not at all, Mr. Randolph. There will be plenty of time for that after my return."

"You will excuse my asking if you want any money for present use, Mr. Tunstall?"

"No, thank you; I am amply provided. I was doing very well at the diggings when your letters called me away, and I have plenty of cash for present purposes."

"You will, I hope, dine with us to-day, Mr. Tunstall."

"I thank you. I should have been very happy, but I have my wife with me. I have left her at the 'Bull.'"

"Oh, indeed! I was not aware – "

"That I was married? Yes, I have been married for some years. I did not think it necessary to mention it to Edgar, as he would only have used it as an additional argument why I should accept his generous offers."

"We shall be very glad, Mrs. Randolph and myself, if you will bring Mrs. Tunstall with you."

And so Mrs. Tunstall came. She was a dark woman, and, as Mr. Randolph and his wife agreed, was probably of Mexican or Spanish blood, and spoke English with a strange accent. She had evidently at one time been strikingly pretty, though now faded. She had rather a worn, hard expression on her face, and impressed Mr. Randolph, his wife, son, and daughter-in-law less favourably than the lawyer had thought it right to say to those who made inquiries about her; but she had, as they said, spoken but little, and had seemed somewhat nervous and ill at ease.

Mr. Tunstall did not appear for some time at Byrneside. He went down to Rugby to see his nephew, who had, in accordance with his father's wish, been placed there a month or two after his death. The holidays were to begin a week later, and Hugh was delighted when his uncle told him that he and his aunt were thinking of going to the Continent for a few months before settling down at Byrneside, and would take him with them.

Hugh was very much pleased with his new relative. "He is a splendid fellow," he told his school-boy friends. "Awful jolly to talk to, and has been doing all sorts of things – fighting Indians, and hunting buffalo, and working in the gold diggings. Of course he didn't tell me much about them; there wasn't time for that. He tipped me a couple of sovs. I am sure we shall get on first-rate together." And so during the summer holidays Hugh travelled with his uncle and aunt in Switzerland and Italy. He did not very much like his aunt. She seemed to try to be kind to him, and yet he thought she did not like him. His uncle had taken him about

everywhere, and had told him lots of splendid yarns.

At Christmas they would be all together at Byrneside. His uncle had been very much interested in the place, and was never tired of his talk about his rambles there. He remembered the pool where his father had told him they both used to fish as boys, and about Harry Gowan the fisherman who used to go out in his boat, and who was with them when that storm suddenly broke when the boat was wrecked on the island and they were all nearly drowned. He was very glad to hear that Gowan was still alive; and that James Wilson, who was then under stableman and used to look after their ponies, was now coachman; and that Sam, the gardener's boy who used to show them where the birds' nests were, was now head-gardener; and that Mr. Holbeach the vicar was still alive, and so was his sister Miss Elizabeth; and that, in fact, he remembered quite well all the people who had been there when he was a boy. Altogether it had been a glorious holiday.

His uncle and aunt returned with him when it was over, the former saying he had had enough of travelling for the present, and instead of being away, as he had intended, for another couple of months he should go down home at once. They went with him as far as Rugby, dropped him there, and then journeyed north. On their arrival at Byrneside, where they had not been expected, Mr. Tunstall soon made himself extremely popular. Scarcely had they entered the house when he sent out for James the coachman, and greeted him with the greatest heartiness.

"I should not have known you, James," he said, "and I don't

suppose you would have known me?"

"No, sir; I cannot say as I should. You were only a slip of a lad then, though you didn't think yourself so. No, I should not have known you a bit."

"Twenty years makes a lot of difference, Jim. Ah, we had good fun in those days! Don't you remember that day's ratting we had when the big stack was pulled down, and how one of them bit you in the ear, and how you holloaed?"

"I remember that, sir. Mr. Edgar has often laughed with me about it."

"And you remember how my poor brother and I dressed up in sheets once, and nearly scared you out of your life, Jim?"

"Ay, ay; I mind that too, sir. That wasn't a fair joke, that wasn't."

"No, that wasn't fair, Jim. Ah! well, I am past such pranks now. Well, I am very glad to see you again after all these years, and to find you well. I hear that Sam is still about the old place, and is now head-gardener. You may as well come out and help me find him while Mrs. Tunstall is taking off her things."

Sam was soon found, and was as delighted as James at Mr. Tunstall's recollection of some of their bird-nesting exploits. After a long chat with him, Mr. Tunstall returned to the house, where a meal was already prepared.

"You need not wait," he said, after the butler had handed the dishes. "I have not been accustomed to have a man-servant behind my chair for the last twenty years, and can do without it

now."

He laid down his knife and fork with an air of relief as the door closed behind the servant.

"Well, Lola," he said in Spanish, "everything has gone off well."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it has," in the same language. "It is all very oppressive. I wish we were back in California again."

"You used to be always grumbling there," he said savagely. "I was always away from you, and altogether you were the most ill-used woman in the world. Now you have got everything a woman could want. A grand house, and carriages, and horses; the garden and park. What can you want more?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I shall get accustomed to it in time," she said, "but so far I do not like it. It is all stiff and cold. I would rather have a little hacienda down on the Del Norte, with a hammock to swing in, and a cigarette between my lips, and a horse to take a scamper on if I am disposed, and you with me, than live in this dreary palace."

"Baby! you will get accustomed to it in time, and you can have a hammock here if you like, though it is not often that it is warm enough to use it. And you can smoke cigarettes all day. It would shock them if you were an Englishwoman, but in a Mexican they will think it right and proper enough. And you have got your guitar with you, so you can have most of your pleasures; and as for the heat, there is sure to be some big glass houses where they grow fruit and flowers, and you can have one of them fitted up

with Mexican plants, and hang your hammock there; and it won't need a very long stretch of imagination to fancy that you are at your hacienda on the Del Norte."

"If you can manage that it will be nice," the woman said.

"Anything can be managed in this country when we have got money to pay for it."

"At any rate it will be a comfort to know that there is no fear of your being shot here. Every time you went away from me, if it was only for a week or two, I knew I might never see you again, and that you might get shot by some of those drunken miners. Well, I shall be free of all that now, and I own that I was wrong to grumble. I shall be happy here with you, and I see that it was indeed fortunate that you found those papers on the body of the man you came across dead in the woods."

She looked closely at him as she spoke.

"Well, that is a subject that there is no use talking about, Lola. It was a slice of luck; but there is an English proverb, that walls have ears, and it is much better that you should try and forget the past. Remember only that I am William Tunstall, who has come back here after being away twenty years."

She nodded. "I shall not forget it. You know, you always said I was a splendid actress, and many a fool with more dollars than wit have I lured on, and got to play with you in the old days at Santa Fé."

"There, there, drop it, Lola," he said; "the less we have of old memories the better. Now we will have the servants in, or they

will begin to think we have gone to sleep over our meal." And he struck the bell which the butler, when he went out, had placed on the table beside him.

"Have you been over the house?" he asked when they were alone again.

"Not over it all. The old woman – she called herself the housekeeper – showed me a great room which she said was the drawing-room, and a pretty little room which had been her mistress's boudoir, and another room full of books, and a gallery with a lot of ugly pictures in it, and the bed-room that is to be ours, and a lot of others opening out of it."

"Well, I will go over them now with you, Lola. Of course I am supposed to know them all. Ah! this is the boudoir. Well, I am sure you can be comfortable here, Lola. Those chairs are as soft and easy as a hammock. This will be your sanctum, and you can lounge and smoke, and play your guitar to your heart's content. Yes, this is a fine drawing-room, but it is a deal too large for two of us; though in summer, with the windows all open, I daresay it is pleasant enough." Having made a tour of the rooms that had been shown Lola, they came down to the hall again.

"Now let us stroll out into the garden," he said. "You will like that." He lit a cigar, and Lola a cigarette. The latter was unfeignedly delighted with the masses of flowers and the beautifully kept lawns, and the views from the terrace, with a stretch of fair country, and the sea sparkling in the sunshine two miles away.

"Here comes the head-gardener, Lola, my old friend. This is Sam, Lola," he said, as the gardener came up and touched his hat. "You know you have heard me speak of him. My wife is delighted with the garden, Sam. She has never seen an English garden before."

"It is past its best now, sir. You should have seen it two months ago."

"I don't think it could be more beautiful," Lola said; "there is nothing like this in my country. We have gardens with many flowers, but not grass like this, so smooth and so level. Does it grow no higher?"

"Oh, it grows fast enough, and a good deal too fast to please us, and has to be cut twice a week."

"I see you are looking surprised at my wife smoking," William Tunstall said with a smile. "In her country all ladies smoke. Show her the green-houses; I think they will surprise her even more than the garden."

The long ranges of green-houses were visited, and Sam was gratified at his new mistress's delight at the flowers, many of which she recognized, and still more at the fruit – the grapes covering the roofs with black and yellow bunches; the peaches and nectarines nestling against the walls.

"The early sorts are all over," Sam said; "but I made a shift to keep these back, though I did not think there was much chance of any but the grapes being here when you got back, as we heard that you would not be home much before Christmas."

"We changed our mind, you see, Sam, and I am glad we did, for if we had come then, Mrs. Tunstall would have been frightened at the cold and bleakness. I'll tell you what I want done, Sam. I want this conservatory next the house filled as much as possible with Mexican and South American plants. Of course, you can put palms and other things that will stand heat along with them. I want the stages cleared away, and the place made to look as much like a room as possible. Mrs. Tunstall will use it as a sitting-room."

"I think we shall have to put another row of pipes in, Mr. William. Those plants will want more heat than we have got here."

"Then we must put them in. My wife will not care how hot it is, but of course we don't want tropical heat. I should put some rockery down the side here to hide the pipes, and in the centre we will have a fountain with water plants, a foot or two below the level of the floor, and a low bank of ferns round. That is the only change, as far as I can see, that we shall want in the house. I shall be going over to Carlisle in a day or two, and I'll arrange with somebody there to make the alterations."

"Very well, Mr. William, if you will get some masons to do the rockery and fountain, I can answer for the rest; but I think I shall need a good many fresh plants. We are not very strong in hot subjects. Mr. Edgar never cared for them much."

"If you will make out a list of what you want, and tell me who is the best man to send to, Sam, I will order them as soon as you

are ready to put them in."

And so, when Hugh returned at Christmas for the holidays, he was astonished at finding his aunt swinging in a hammock, smoking a cigarette, slung near a sparkling little fountain, and surrounded by semi-tropical plants. The smoking did not surprise him, for he had often seen her with a cigarette during their trip together; but the transformation of the conservatory astonished him.

"Well, Hugh, what do you think of it?" she asked, smiling at his surprise.

"It is beautiful!" he said; "it isn't like a green-house. It is just like a bit out of a foreign country."

"That is what we tried to make it, Hugh. You see, on the side next to the house where there is a wall, we have had a Mexican view painted with a blue sky, such as we have there, and mountains, and a village at the foot of the hills. As I lie here I can fancy myself back again, if I don't look up at the sashes overhead. Oh, how I wish one could do without them, and that it could be covered with one great sheet of glass!"

"It would be better," Hugh admitted, "but it is stunning as it is. Uncle told me, as he drove me over from Carlisle, that he had been altering the conservatory, and making it a sort of sitting-room for you, but I never thought that it would be like this. What are those plants growing on the rocks?"

"Those are American aloes, they are one of our most useful plants, Hugh. They have strong fibres which we use for string,

and they make a drink out of the juice fermented; it is called pulque, and is our national drink, though of late years people drink spirits too, which are bad for them, and make them quarrelsome."

During the holidays Hugh got over his former dislike for his aunt, and came to like her more than his uncle. She was always kind and pleasant with him, while he found that, although his uncle at times was very friendly, his temper was uncertain. The want of some regular occupation, and the absence of anything like excitement, told heavily upon a man accustomed to both. At first there was the interest in playing his part: of meeting people who had known him in his boyhood, of receiving and returning the visits of the few resident gentry within a circuit of ten miles, of avoiding mistakes and evading dangers; but all this was so easy that he soon tired of it. He had tried to make Lola contented, and yet her lazy contentment with her surroundings irritated him.

She had created a good impression upon the ladies who had called. The expression of her face had softened since her first visit to Carlisle, and the nervous expression that had struck Mr. Randolph then had disappeared. Her slight accent, and the foreign style of her dress, were interesting novelties to her visitors, and after the first dinner-party given in their honour, at which she appeared in a dress of dull gold with a profusion of rich black lace, she was pronounced charming. Her husband, too, was considered to be an acquisition to the county. Everyone had expected that he would have returned, after so long an

absence, rough and unpolished, whereas his manners were quiet and courteous.

He was perhaps less popular among the sturdy Cumberland squires than with their wives. He did not hunt; he did not shoot. "I should have thought," one of his neighbours said to him, "that everyone who had been living a rough life in the States would have been a good shot."

"A good many of us are good shots, perhaps most of us, but it is with the pistol and rifle. Shot-guns are not of much use when you have a party of Red-skins yelling and shooting round you, and it is not a handy weapon to go and fetch when a man draws a revolver on you. As to shooting little birds, it may be done by men who live on their farms and like an occasional change from the bacon and tinned meat that they live on from year's end to year's end. Out there a hunter is a man who shoots game – I mean deer and buffalo and bear and other animals – for the sake of their skins, although, of course, he does use the meat of such as are eatable. With us a good shot means a man who can put a ball into a Red-skin's body at five hundred yards certain, and who with a pistol can knock a pipe out of a man's mouth ten yards away, twenty times following; and it isn't only straightness of shooting, but quickness of handling, that is necessary. A man has to draw, and cock, and fire, in an instant. The twinkling of an eye makes the difference of life or death.

"Oh, yes! I am a good shot, but not in your way. I went away from here too young to get to care about tramping over

the country all day to shoot a dozen or two of birds, and I have never been in the way of learning to like it since. I wish I had, for it seems an important part of country life here, and I know I shall never be considered as a credit to the county unless I spend half my time in winter riding after foxes or tramping after birds; but I am afraid I am too old now ever to take to those sports. I heartily wish I could, for I find it dull having no pursuit. When a man has been earning his living by hunting, or gold digging, or prospecting for mines all his life, he finds it hard to get up in the morning and know that there is nothing for him to do but just to look round the garden or to go out for a drive merely for the sake of driving."

When summer came Mr. Tunstall found some amusements to his taste. If there was a wrestling match anywhere in the county or in Westmoreland he would be present, and he became a regular attendant at all the race-courses in the north of England. He did not bet. As he said to a sporting neighbour, who always had a ten-pound note on the principal races, "I like to bet when the chances are even, or when I can match my skill against another man's; but in this horse-racing you are risking your money against those who know more than you do. Unless you are up to all the tricks and dodges, you have no more chance of winning than a man has who gambles with a cheat who plays with marked cards. I like to go because it is an excitement; besides, at most of the large meetings there is a little gambling in the evening. In Mexico and California everyone gambles more or

less. It is one of the few ways of spending money, and I like a game occasionally." The result was that Mr. Tunstall was seldom at home during the summer.

When Hugh came home his aunt said: "I have been talking to your uncle about you, and he does not care about going away this year. He has taken to have an interest in horse-racing. Of course it is a dull life for him here after leading an active one for so many years, and I am very glad he has found something to interest him."

"I should think that it is very dull for you, aunt."

"I am accustomed to be alone, Hugh. In countries where every man has to earn his living, women cannot expect to have their husbands always with them. They may be away a month at a time up in the mountains, or at the mines, or hunting in the plains. I am quite accustomed to that. But I was going to talk about you. I should like a change, and you and I will go away where we like. Not, of course, to travel about as we did last year, but to any seaside place you would like to go to. We need not stop all the time at one, but can go to three or four of them. I have been getting some books about them lately, and I think it would be most pleasant to go down to Devonshire. There seem to be lots of pretty watering-places there, and the climate is warmer than in the towns on the east coast."

"I should like it very much, aunt; but I should like a fortnight here first, if you don't mind. My pony wants exercise terribly, Jim says. He has been out at grass for months now; besides, I

shall forget how to ride if I don't have some practice."

So for the next fortnight Hugh was out from morning until night either riding or sailing with Gowan, and then he went south with his aunt and spent the rest of his holidays in Devonshire and Cornwall. He had a delightful time of it, his aunt allowing him to do just as he liked in the way of sailing and going out excursions. She always took rooms overlooking the sea, and was well content to sit all day at the open window; seldom moving until towards evening, when she would go out for a stroll with Hugh. Occasionally she would take long drives with him in a pony-carriage; but she seldom proposed these expeditions. As Hugh several times met with schoolfellows, and always struck up an acquaintance a few hours after arriving at a place with some of the boatmen and fishermen, he never found it dull. At first he was disposed to pity his aunt and to urge her to go out with him; but she assured him that she was quite contented to be alone, and to enjoy the sight of the sea and to breathe the balmy air.

"I have not enjoyed myself so much, Hugh," she said when the holidays were drawing to a close, "since I was a girl."

"I am awfully glad of that, aunt. I have enjoyed myself tremendously; but it always seems to me that it must be dull for you."

"You English never seem to be happy unless you are exerting yourselves, Hugh; but that is not our idea of happiness. People in warm climates find their pleasure in sitting still, in going out after the heat of the day is over for a promenade, and in listening

to the music, just as we have been doing here. Besides it has been a pleasure to me to see that you have been happy."

When the summer holidays had passed away, Hugh returned to Rugby, and Lola went back to Cumberland.

CHAPTER IV.
AN EXPLOSION

AT Christmas Hugh found that things were not so pleasant at home. There was nothing now to take his uncle away from Byrneside, and the dullness of the place told upon him. His outbursts of ill-temper were therefore more frequent than they had been the last holidays Hugh had spent at home. He sat much longer in the dining-room over his wine, after his wife and Hugh had left him, than he did before, and was sometimes moody, sometimes bad-tempered when he joined them. Hugh's own temper occasionally broke out at this, and there were several quarrels between him and his uncle; but there was a savage fierceness in the latter's manner that cowed the boy, and whatever he felt he learned to hold his tongue; but he came more and more to dislike his uncle, especially as he saw that when angry he would turn upon his aunt and speak violently to her in her own language. Sometimes she would blaze out in return, but generally she continued to smoke her cigarette tranquilly as if utterly unconscious that she was spoken to.

So for the next two years matters went on. During the summer holidays Hugh seldom saw his uncle, who was more and more away from home, being now a constant attendant at all the principal race-courses in the country. Even in winter he was often

away in London, to Hugh's great satisfaction, for when he was at home there were frequent quarrels between them, and Hugh could see that his uncle habitually drank a great deal more wine than was good for him. Indeed it was always in the evening that these scenes occurred. At other times his uncle seemed to make an effort to be pleasant with him.

In summer Hugh went away with his aunt for a time, but he spent a part of his holidays at Byrneside, for of all exercises he best loved riding. His pony had been given up, but there were plenty of horses in the stables, for although William Tunstall did not care for hunting, he rode a good deal, and was an excellent horseman.

"What have you got in the stable, James?" Hugh asked one day on his return from the school.

"I have got a set of the worst-tempered devils in the country, Master Hugh. Except them two ponies that I drives your aunt out with, there isn't a horse in the stables fit for a Christian to ride. They are all good horses, first-rate horses, putting aside their tempers; but your uncle seems to delight in buying creatures that no one else will ride. Of course he gets them cheap. He doesn't care how wicked they are, and he seems to enjoy it when they begin their pranks with him. I thought at first he would get his brains dashed out to a certainty, but I never saw a man keep his seat as he does. He told me once, that when a man had been breaking bronchos – that is what he called them, which means, he said, wild horses that had never been backed – he could sit

anything, and that English horses were like sheep in comparison.

"Of course, it is no use saying no to you, Master Hugh; but if you want to go out, you must stick to that big meadow. You must mount there, and you must promise me not to go beyond it. I have been letting the hedges grow there on purpose for the last two years, and no horse will try to take them. The ground is pretty soft and you will fall light. You have been getting on with your riding the last three years, and have had some pretty rough mounts, but none as bad as what we have got in the stables now. I shall always go out with you myself with one of the men in case of accident, and I can put you up to some of their tricks before you mount."

Hugh was more than fifteen now, and was very tall and strong for his age. He had ridden a great deal when he had been at home during the summer, and in the winter when the weather was open, and had learned to sit on nasty-tempered animals, for these had gradually taken the place of his father's steady hunters; but this year he found that the coachman's opinion of those now under his charge was by no means exaggerated. In spite of doing his best to keep his seat, he had many heavy falls, being once or twice stunned; but he stuck to it, and by the end of the holidays flattered himself that he could ride the worst-tempered animal in the stable. He did not go away this year, begging his aunt to remain at home.

"It is a splendid chance of learning to ride well, aunt," he said. "If I stick at it right through these two months every day I shall

really have got a good seat, and you know it is a lot better my getting chucked off now than if I was older. You see boys' bones ain't set, and they hardly ever break them, and if they do they mend up in no time."

His aunt had at first very strongly opposed his riding any of the animals in the stable, and he had been obliged to bring in James to assure her that some of them were not much worse than those he had ridden before, and that a fall on the soft ground of the meadow was not likely to be very serious, but it was only on his giving her his solemn promise that he would not on any account go beyond the meadow that she finally consented. On his return at Christmas he found his uncle at home, and apparently in an unusually pleasant humour. A frost had set in that seemed likely to be a long one, and the ground was as hard as iron.

"I hear, Hugh," his uncle said the second morning at breakfast, "that you are becoming a first-rate rider. I am glad to hear it. Out in the Western States every man is a good rider. You may say that he lives on horseback, and it comes natural even to boys to be able to sit bare-backed on the first horse that comes to hand. Of course it is not so important here, still a man who is a really good rider has many advantages. In the first place, all gentlemen here hunt, and a man who can go across any country, and can keep his place in the front rank, has much honour among his neighbours; in the second place, he is enabled to get his horses cheap. A horse that will fetch two hundred if he is free from vice can be often picked up for twenty if he gets the reputation

of being bad-tempered. There is another accomplishment we all have in the west, and that is to be good pistol-shots. As we cannot ride, and there is nothing else to do, I will teach you, if you like."

Hugh accepted the offer with lively satisfaction, heedless of an exclamation of dissent from his aunt. When he had left the room William Tunstall turned savagely upon his wife.

"What did you want to interfere for? Just attend to your own business or it will be the worse for you."

"It is my own business," she said fearlessly. "I like that boy, and I am not going to see him hurt. Ever since you told me, soon after we first came here, that by his father's will the whole property came to you if Hugh died before he came of age, I have been anxious for him. I don't want to interfere with your way of going on. Lead your own life, squander your share of the property if you like, it is nothing to me; when it is spent I am ready to go back to our old life, but I won't have the boy hurt. I have always accepted your story as to how you became possessed of the papers without question. I know you have killed a score of men in what you call fair fight, but I did not know that you were a murderer in cold blood. Anyhow the boy sha'n't be hurt. I believe you bought those horses knowing that he would try them, and believing they would break his neck. They haven't, but no thanks to you. Now you have offered to teach him pistol-shooting. It is so easy for an accident to take place, isn't it? But I warn you that if anything happens to him, I will go straight to the nearest magistrate and tell him who you really are, and that I am certain

there was no accident, but a murder."

The man was white with fury, and advanced a step towards her.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked between his teeth. "By heavens! – "

"No, you won't," she interrupted. "Don't make the threat, because I might not forgive you if you did. Do you think I am afraid of you? You are not in California or Mexico now. People cannot be shot here without inquiry. I know what you are thinking of; an accident might happen to me too. I know that any love you ever had for me has died out long ago, but I hold to my life. I have placed in safe hands – never mind where I have placed it – a paper telling all the truth. It is to be opened if I die suddenly and without sending for it. In it I say that if my death is said to have been caused by an accident, it would be no accident, but murder; and that if I die suddenly, without visible cause, that I shall have been poisoned. Do you think I don't know you, and that knowing you I would trust my life altogether in your hands? There, that is enough, we need not threaten each other. I know you, and now you know me. We will both go our own way."

And she walked out of the room leaving her husband speechless with fury at this open and unexpected revolt. Half an hour later his dog-cart was at the door and he left for London. Hugh was astonished when, on his return from a walk down to Gowan's cottage, he found that his uncle had gone up to town.

"Why, I thought, aunt, he was going to be at home all the

holidays, and he said that he was going to teach me pistol-shooting."

"Your uncle often changes his mind suddenly. I will teach you pistol-shooting, Hugh. Most Mexican women can use a pistol in case of need. I cannot shoot as he does, but I can teach you to shoot fairly, and after that it is merely a matter of incessant practice. If you ever travel I daresay you will find it very useful to be able to use a pistol cleverly. There are two or three revolvers upstairs and plenty of ammunition, so if you like we will practise in the conservatory; it is too cold to go out. You had better go and ask James to give you some thick planks, five or six of them, to set up as targets. If he has got such a thing as an iron plate it will be better still. I don't want to spoil my picture. The place is forty feet long, which will be a long enough range to begin with."

Half an hour later the sharp cracks of a revolver rang out in the conservatory, and from that time to the end of the holidays Hugh practised for two or three hours a day, the carrier bringing over fresh supplies of ammunition twice a week. He found at first that the sharp recoil of the revolver rendered it very difficult for him to shoot straight, but in time he became accustomed to this, and at the end of a fortnight could put every shot in or close to the spot he had marked as a bull's-eye. After the first day his aunt laid aside her pistol, and betook herself to her favourite hammock, where, sometimes touching her guitar, sometimes glancing at a book, she watched his progress.

At the end of the fortnight she said: "You begin to shoot fairly

straight. Keep on, Hugh, and with constant practice, you will be able to hit a half-crown every time. In the West it is a common thing for a man to hold a copper coin between his finger and thumb for another to shoot at. I have seen it done scores of times, but it will take you some time to get to that. You must remember that there is very seldom time to take a steady deliberate aim as you do. When a man shoots he has got to shoot quickly. Now, practise standing with your face the other way, and then turn and fire the instant your eye catches the mark. After that you must practise firing from your hip. Sometimes there is no time to raise the arm. Out in the West a man has got to do one of two things, either not to carry a revolver at all, or else he must be able to shoot as quickly as a flash of lightning."

"I don't suppose I am ever going to the West, aunt; still I should like to be able to shoot like that, for if one does a thing at all one likes to do it well."

And so to the end of the holidays the revolver practice went on steadily every morning, Hugh generally firing seventy or eighty cartridges. He could not do this at first, for the wrench of the recoil strained his wrist, but this gained strength as he went on. Before he went back to school he himself thought that he was becoming a very fair shot, although his aunt assured him that he had hardly begun to shoot according to western notions.

Mrs. Tunstall had one day, a year before this, driven over to Carlisle, and, somewhat to the surprise of Mr. Randolph, had called upon him at his office.

"Mr. Randolph," she began, "I do not know anything about English law. I want to ask you a question."

"Certainly, my dear madam."

"If a married woman was to leave a sealed letter in the hands of a lawyer, could he retain possession of it for her, even if her husband called upon him to give it up?"

"It is a nice question, Mrs. Tunstall. If the lawyer was acting as the fiduciary agent of a lady he would at any rate see that her wishes were complied with; whether he could absolutely hold the paper against the husband's claim is a point upon which I am not prepared at present to give an answer. But anyhow there are ways of evading the law; for instance, he could pass it on to a third party, and then, unless the husband had been absolutely informed by his wife that she had handed over this document to him, the husband would be powerless, the lawyer would simply declare that he had no such document. Are you asking for your own sake, Mrs. Tunstall, or in the interest of a friend?"

"In my own interest, Mr. Randolph. I have a written paper here. I have not signed it yet, because I believe it is necessary to sign papers in the presence of witnesses."

"It depends upon the nature of the paper, Mrs. Tunstall; but in all cases it is a prudent step, for then no question as to the authenticity can arise."

"And it is not necessary for the witnesses of the signature to read the contents of the document?"

"By no means; they simply witness the signature."

"Well, Mr. Randolph, this is the document I want to leave in safe hands, so that it can be opened after my death, unless I previously request, not by letter, but by word of mouth, that it should be returned to me. I know of no one else to whom I could commit the paper, which is, in my opinion, a very important one; the only question is whether, as you are Mr. Tunstall's solicitor, you would like to take it."

"Frankly, without knowing the nature of the contents, Mrs. Tunstall, I should certainly prefer not to undertake such a charge. Should it remain in my hands, or rather in the hands of our firm – for we may sincerely trust that there would be no occasion for opening it until very many years after my death – it might be found to contain instructions which could hardly be carried out by a firm situated as we are with regard to Mr. Tunstall."

"I see that, Mr. Randolph."

There was a pause, and then the lawyer said: "Will you be going up to town shortly, Mrs. Tunstall?"

"Yes, in the course of a month or so I shall be passing through London with Hugh."

"Will the matter keep until then?"

"Certainly, there is no great hurry about it; but I wish the packet placed in safe hands, where it would be opened in the event of my death, unless I recall it before that."

"In that case, Mrs. Tunstall, I will give you the address of the firm who do my London business. They are an old established firm of the highest respectability, and the document will be

perfectly safe in their hands until you demand it back, or until they hear of your demise. I will give you a letter of introduction to them."

Accordingly when Mrs. Tunstall went up to town the next time with Hugh she called upon the firm of solicitors, whose place of business was in Essex Street, and upon reading Mr. Randolph's letter, which stated that she was the wife of one of his clients, a gentleman of means, she was courteously received, and they at once agreed to take charge of any document she might place in their hands, upon the understanding that if she did not write or call for it, it should be opened when they heard of her death, and its contents, whatever they might be, acted upon.

"You will stand in the position of our client, Mrs. Tunstall, and we will do all in our power to carry out your wishes as expressed in this document, whatever it may be. It is no unusual matter for a will to be left with us under precisely similar circumstances."

"If the packet should be opened under the conditions I name," Mrs. Tunstall said, "you will probably not regret having undertaken its charge, for I can assure you that it may put a considerable amount of business in your hands. But how will you know of my death?"

"Mr. Randolph or his successor would inform us. Of course we shall request him to do so."

"And as soon as he knows of the event," Mrs. Tunstall added, "it is of the utmost importance that the paper should be opened as soon as possible after my death."

"We will request Mr. Randolph to inform us by telegraph immediately he receives the news. But, pardon me, you look well and healthy, and are young to be making such careful provisions for an event that may be far distant."

"That may or may not be far distant," she said, "but for certain important reasons I wish to be prepared for it at all points. I will now sign it in your presence, Mr. Curtice. I have not yet put my signature to it."

"Very well, Mrs. Tunstall. Two of my clerks shall witness your signature. It may be many years before any question as to the authenticity of the signature may arise; so I shall be a witness also."

The document was a lengthy one, written on sixteen pages of foolscap. Two of the clerks were called in.

"Now if you will turn that last page down, Mrs. Tunstall, so that its contents cannot be seen, you can sign your name and we will witness it." This was done. "Now, Mrs. Tunstall, if you will put a sheet of brown paper over the other sheets, and place your initials on the margin at the bottom, we will put ours, so that no question can arise as to the whole of them forming part of the document signed by you. Now, madam, if you will fold it up and place it in this envelope I will attach my seal. I presume you do not carry a seal?"

"No, sir."

"I think it would be more satisfactory that you should affix a seal of some sort, no matter how common a thing it may be.

Mr. Carter, will you go up into the Strand with this lady, and take her to some shop where she can purchase a seal? It does not matter what it is, Mrs. Tunstall; any common thing, with a bird or a motto or anything else upon it. These things are not cut in duplicate, therefore if you seal the envelope in two or three places with it and take the seal away with you, it will be a guarantee to you, should you ever require it to be returned, that it has not been opened. In the meantime I will get a small strong-box similar to those you see round the room, and have your name painted on it. When it is completed I shall put the envelope in it, lock it up, and place it in our strong-room downstairs."

The seal was purchased and fixed, and Mrs. Tunstall took her departure, satisfied that she had left the document in safe hands. Mr. Curtice talked the matter over with his partner. The latter laughed.

"Women love a little mystery, Curtice. I suppose she has got a little property in her own right, and does not mean to leave it to her husband, and is afraid he may get hold of her will and find out how she has left it."

"I don't think it is that," Mr. Curtice said, "although, of course, it may be. I should say she was a foreigner – a Spaniard or Italian; she spoke with a slight accent. Besides, the thing extends over sixteen pages of foolscap."

"That is likely enough if she made the will herself, Curtice. She may have gone into a whole history as to why she has not left her money to her husband."

"Possibly, but I don't think so. You mark my words, Harris, if that packet ever comes to be opened there will be some rum disclosures in it. That woman was no fool, and there is no doubt about her being thoroughly in earnest. She said it was likely to give us some work when it was opened, and I believe her. I will write a letter to Randolph and ask him to give us a few particulars about this client he has introduced to us."

When he received Mr. Randolph's reply, stating briefly the history of Mr. William Tunstall, the husband of the lady he had introduced to them, Mr. Curtice was more convinced than before that the delivery of this packet into his charge was not a mere freak, and offered to bet his partner a new hat that the document was not merely a will, but that it would turn out something altogether unusual.

Mr. Randolph congratulated himself on his forethought, when, a year after Mrs. Tunstall's visit, Mr. Tunstall came into the office.

"I am just on my way up to town," he said. "I wish you would let me have a couple of hundred in advance on the next rents."

"Certainly, Mr. Tunstall. You have already had £200 on them, you know."

"Yes, I know; but I have been a little unlucky lately, and have got an account I want to settle. By the way," he said carelessly, as he placed the bank-notes in his pocket-book, "Mrs. Tunstall asked me to get from you the letter or packet she left in your charge."

"A letter, Mr. Tunstall? I think there must be some mistake. Mrs. Tunstall has certainly left nothing whatever in my charge."

"Oh! I suppose I misunderstood her. I only made up my mind to start a short time before I came off, and did not pay much attention to what she was saying; but it was something about a letter, and she mentioned your name; there were half a dozen commissions she wanted me to execute for her in London, and I suppose they all got mixed up together. I daresay it is of no consequence one way or the other. Well, thanks for the money – now I am off."

"I am very much afraid that William Tunstall is a liar," Mr. Randolph said to himself thoughtfully after his client had left. "He has found out that his wife has intrusted some document or other to someone, and he guessed naturally enough that she had most likely come to me with it, and he played a bold stroke to get it. I do not like the way he has fallen into of spending all his time going about the country to race-courses. I don't believe he has been at home two months this year. Besides, he sounded me last time he was here about raising a few thousands on a mortgage. He is not turning out well. I thought when he first came back that his wanderings had done him no harm. No doubt I had been prepossessed in his favour by his refusal to accept Edgar's offers to divide the rents with him, but I was too hasty. I am afraid there will be trouble at Byrneside. It is very fortunate Edgar put my name in as trustee for his son, so that his share of the property is safe whatever happens to the other; but I hate to see a man of

a good old family like the Tunstalls going wrong. I wonder what this mysterious document his wife wanted to leave with me is? It must be something of great importance, or he would never have come to me and lied in order to get it into his hands. It is a queer business."

Hugh did not see his uncle when he was at home for the summer holidays. His aunt seemed to take his absence as a matter of course.

"Don't you expect uncle home soon?" he asked her one day.

"I never expect him," she said quietly.

"I think it a shame he stays away so, leaving you all by yourself, aunt!" Hugh said indignantly.

"I am accustomed to it by this time, Hugh; and, upon the whole, I think perhaps he is better away than here while you are at home. You see you do not get on very well together."

"Well, aunt, I am sure I don't want any rows."

"I don't say you do, Hugh; but still there are rows. You see he is passionate, and you are passionate, and it is very much better you should be apart. As for me, I have always been accustomed to his being away from me a good deal ever since we married, and it does not trouble me at all. I would much rather have you all to myself. Your being here makes it a very pleasant time for me; we ride together, drive together, and practise shooting together. It is all a change to me, for except when you are here I seldom stir beyond the gardens."

Hugh had indeed no doubt that his aunt was more comfortable

when his uncle was away, for he heard from Wilson that when Mr. Tunstall was at home there were constant quarrels between him and his wife.

"He ain't like your father, Mr. Hugh. Ah! he was a gentleman of the right sort! Not that your uncle is a bad master. He is hasty if everything is not quite right, but in general he is pleasant spoken and easy to get on with. He is popular with the gentry, though of late they have held off a bit. I hear it said they don't hold to a gentleman spending all his life on the race-courses and leaving his wife by herself. Your aunt is well liked, and would be better liked if she would only go abroad and visit; but she never drives out unless when you are here, and people have given up calling. It is a bad job; but I hope when you come of age, Mr. Hugh, we shall have the old times back again, when the Tunstalls were one of the first families in the county, and took the lead of pretty nigh everything."

"Well, they have five years to wait for that, Wilson. I am just sixteen now, and I mean when I do come of age and am my own master to travel about for a bit before I settle down into a country squire."

"Well, I suppose that is natural enough, Mr. Hugh, though why people want to be running off to foreign parts is more than I can make out. Anyhow, sir, I hope you won't be bringing a foreign wife back with you."

"There is no fear of that" – Hugh laughed – "at least according to my present ideas. But I suppose that is a thing no one can settle

about until their time comes. At any rate aunt is a foreigner, and I am sure no one could be kinder or nicer than she is."

"That she is, Mr. Hugh. I am sure everyone says that. Still, you see, there is drawbacks. Her ways are different from the ways of the ladies about here, and that keeps her apart from them. She don't drive about, and call, and make herself sociable like, nor see to the charities down in the village. It ain't as she doesn't give money, because I know that whenever the rector says there is a case wants help she is ready enough with her purse; but she don't go among them or know anything about them herself. No, Mr. Hugh; your aunt is a wonderful nice lady, but you take my advice and bring home an English wife as mistress of the Hall."

When he came home for the Christmas holidays Hugh found his uncle again at home. For a time matters went on smoothly. Mr. Tunstall made an evident endeavour to be friendly with him, talked to him about his life at school, asked whether he wished to go to the university when he left; and when Hugh said that he didn't see any use in spending three years of his life there when he did not intend entering any of the professions, and that he would much rather travel and see something of foreign countries, he warmly encouraged the idea.

"Quite right, Hugh! There is nothing opens a man's mind like foreign travel. But don't stick in the great towns. Of course you will want a year to do Europe; after that strike out a line of your own. If I had my time over again I would go into Central Asia or Africa, or some place where there was credit to be gained and

some spice of adventure and danger."

"That is just what I should like, uncle," Hugh said eagerly; and looking at his aunt for confirmation, he was surprised to see her watching her husband intently beneath her half-closed eyelids. "Don't you think so, aunt?"

"I don't know, Hugh," she said quietly. "There is a good deal to be said both ways. But I don't think we need settle it now; you have another year and a half at school yet, you know."

Hugh went out skating that afternoon, for it was a sharp frost. As he was passing through the hall on his return he heard his uncle's voice raised in anger in the drawing-room. He paused for a moment. He could not catch the words, for they were spoken in Mexican. There was silence for a moment, and he imagined that his aunt was answering. Then he heard a loud exclamation in Mexican, then a slight cry and a heavy fall. He rushed into the room. His aunt lay upon the hearthrug, his uncle was standing over her with clenched hand.

"You coward, you brutal coward!" Hugh exclaimed, rushing forward, and, throwing himself upon his uncle, he tried to force him back from the hearth-rug. For a moment the fury of his assault forced his uncle back, but the latter's greatly superior strength then enabled him to shake off his grasp, and the moment he was free he struck the lad a savage blow across the face, that sent him reeling backwards. Mad with passion, Hugh rushed to the fender, and seizing a poker, sprang at his uncle. William Tunstall's hand went behind him, and as Hugh struck, he levelled

a pistol. But he was too late. The blow came down heavily, and the pistol exploded in the air; as the man fell back his head came with terrible force against the edge of a cabinet, and he lay immovable. Hugh's passion was stilled in an instant. He dropped the poker, and leaned over his uncle. The blood was flowing down his forehead from the blow he had given him, but it was the injury to the back of the head that most alarmed the lad. He lifted an arm, and it fell heavily again. He knelt down and listened, but could hear no sound of breathing. He rose to his feet, and looked down, white and trembling, at the body.

"I have killed him," he said. "Well, he brought it on himself, and I didn't mean it. It was the cabinet that did it. Perhaps he is only stunned. If he is, he will charge me with trying to murder him. Well, it is no use my staying here; they will be here in a moment," and he glanced at the door. But the servants at Byrneside were so accustomed to the sound of pistol shots that they paid no attention to it. Hugh picked up the weapon that had dropped from his uncle's hand and put it in his pocket; then glanced at his aunt and hesitated. "She will come round in time," he muttered, "and I can do nothing for her." Then he walked out of the room, turned the key in the door, and took it with him. He went out to the stable, and ordered his horse to be saddled, keeping in the stable while it was being done, so that his white face should not attract notice. As soon as the horse was brought out he leapt into the saddle and galloped off.

CHAPTER V.
ACROSS THE SEA

MR. Randolph was at dinner when the servant came in and said that young Mr. Tunstall wished to speak to him; he was in the library, and begged the lawyer to give him two minutes' conversation. Hugh was walking up and down the little room when he entered. The old lawyer saw at once that something was wrong.

"What is it, Hugh, what is the matter, lad?"

"A good deal is the matter, Mr. Randolph; but I don't want you to ask me. I am sure you will be glad afterwards that you didn't know. You were a friend of my father's, sir. You have been always very kind to me. Will you give me fifty pounds without asking why I want it?"

"Certainly I will, lad; but in heaven's name don't do anything rash."

"Anything that was to be done is done, Mr. Randolph; please let me have the money at once. You don't know how important it is. You will know soon enough."

Mr. Randolph unlocked his desk without a word, and handed him ten five-pound notes. Then he said: "By the way, I have gold, if you would rather have it. There were some rents paid in this afternoon."

"I would much rather have gold."

Mr. Randolph put the notes in the desk, and then unlocked the safe. "Would you rather have a hundred?"

"Yes, sir, if you will let me have them."

The lawyer handed him a small canvas bag.

"God bless you, sir!" the lad said; "remember, please, whatever you hear, it was done in self-defence."

Then without another word he opened the door and was gone.

"Why, what is the matter, my dear?" Mrs. Randolph exclaimed, as her husband returned to the dining-room. "Why, you are as pale as death."

"I don't know what is the matter exactly," he said. "Hugh has borrowed a hundred pounds of me, and has gone."

"Gone! Where has he gone to?"

"I don't know, my dear. I hope, I sincerely hope he is going out of the country, and can get away before they lay hands on him."

"Why, what has happened?"

"I don't know what has happened. I know things haven't been going on well for some time at Byrneside. I am afraid there has been a terrible quarrel. He begged me to ask him no questions, and I was glad not to do so. The less one knows, the better; but I am afraid there has been a scuffle. All he said was, just as he went out: 'Whatever you hear, remember I did it in self-defence.'"

"But, goodness gracious, Thomas, you don't mean to say that he has killed his uncle?"

"I don't mean anything," the lawyer said. "Those were his

words. I am afraid it won't be long before we hear what he meant. If they come to ask me questions, fortunately I know nothing. I shall say no word except before a magistrate, and then my story is simple enough. He came and asked me to let me have £100, and as I was his trustee, and have the rents of his estate for the past five years in my hands, I let him have it as a matter of course. I did not ask him why he wanted it. I saw that he was agitated, and from his manner, and from my knowledge that he and his uncle did not get on very well together, I judged there had been a quarrel, and that he intended to leave home for a while. It was only when he was leaving the room that I gathered there had been any personal fracas, and then from his words, 'It was done in self-defence,' I judged that his uncle had struck him, and that he had probably struck him in return. I hope that is all, my dear. I pray heaven that it may be all."

Hugh had dismounted just outside the town, opened a gate leading into a field, taken off his horse's bridle, and turned the horse in and closed the gate behind it. Then he had turned up the collar of his coat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and made his way to the lawyer's. He had cooled down now, but still felt no regret for what had passed. "He would have killed me," he said to himself, "and I had no thought of killing him when I knocked him down; anyhow, he brought it on himself. If he is dead, and I am pretty sure he is, I have no one to prove that it was done in self-defence; but if he is not dead, he will give his own version of it when he recovers. I know he is a liar, and in his quiet manner he

would be able to make everyone believe that I had attacked him without the least provocation. He might even say that I fired the pistol, that he knocked it out of my hand, and that then I sprang on him and struck him down with his head against that cabinet. Either way I shall get years of imprisonment if I am caught; but I don't mean to be caught if I can help it."

On leaving Mr. Randolph's he proceeded to the railway-station, consulted the time-tables, and then took a third-class ticket to Glasgow. He bought a Bradshaw, and sitting down on a bench under a light, turned to the advertisements of the sailing of steamers. By the time he had done that the train came in. It was a slow one, stopping at every station. He got out at the first station and paid the fare from Carlisle, then walked back to the town, and took a second-class ticket by the night mail for London. Arriving at Euston, he walked across to the docks, whence he had found that a steamer started for Hamburg at eight o'clock, and he would catch a trans-Atlantic steamer that started the next day. On his arrival at Hamburg he went to the steam-boat office and took a second-class ticket to New York. Having done this, he bought at a shop near the wharves a supply of clothes for the voyage, placed them in a cheap German trunk, and walked on board the steamer.

He was now, he thought, fairly safe from pursuit. The hour at which he would arrive at the station at Carlisle would be known, and as the northern train was nearly due, and someone answering to his description had taken a ticket to Glasgow, it would be at once suspected that he intended to sail by a steamer from that

port. No pursuit could be set on foot before the morning. Indeed, it was probable that before the police took the matter fairly in hand it would be late in the afternoon. It might then be another day before they picked up the clue that he had gone to Glasgow, and followed him there.

If a steamer had happened to start that morning or the day before, it would be supposed that he had gone by it, and they might telegraph across, and search the ship for him when it arrived at New York. If no steamer had started, and they could obtain no clue to him in Glasgow, they would think that he had gone back to Liverpool, and would make search there, watching all the steamers sailing. They would in any case hardly suspect that he could have gone up to London, across to Hamburg, and caught the steamer sailing from there. Indeed, it would not have been possible for him to do so had he first gone up to Glasgow as they would believe he had done.

As soon as the vessel was fairly under way Hugh looked round. On deck there was no distinction made between second-class emigrants and steerage, but it was easy to distinguish the two classes. The second-class kept somewhat together near the companion leading to their portion of the ship, while the steerage passengers were well forward. The number of the latter was not very large, for the emigrant traffic across the Atlantic was still carried principally in sailing ships. The second-class were composed chiefly of substantial-looking Germans, for the most part farmers going out with a small amount of capital to settle

in the West.

There were two or three other young Englishmen, and with one of these, named Luscombe, Hugh struck up an acquaintance before he had been many hours on board. He was a young man of about twenty, and Hugh soon learned from him that he was the son of a large landed proprietor in Norfolk. He had for a few months been in a crack regiment of Hussars, but had gone, as he expressed it, a fearful mucker. His father had paid the greater portion of his debts, but had refused to settle some that he considered debts of honour. Luscombe, therefore, sold out, and was now, as he expressed it, going over to knock about for a bit in the States, till his father took a "sensible view of things." "It was rough on him," he said, "for I had run him up a pretty heavy bill twice before. However, I think it is all for the best. I should never have got out of that line if I had stopped in the regiment. Two or three years knocking about, and hard work, won't do me any harm; and by that time the governor will be prepared to receive the prodigal son with open arms."

Hugh was slower in giving his confidence. But before the voyage was over he had told Luscombe why he had left England.

"Well, you did quite right, of course," Luscombe said, "in knocking that brute of a fellow down, and if you did split his skull and make your aunt a widow you have nothing to reproach yourself with. Still, I agree with you that it will be more pleasant for you if he gets round, as I daresay he will, or else it will be a long while before you can show up at home. Well, you will know

by the time we have been in New York a few days. If the papers the next mail brings out don't say anything about it you may be sure he has got over it. 'A gentleman killed by his nephew' would be a startling heading, and if it is not there, you may go about your work with a light heart."

The voyage was marked by no incident whatever. On arriving at New York Luscombe and Hugh put up at a good hotel for a few days before making a start west. They had agreed to keep together, at any rate for a time. Luscombe was several years older than Hugh, but he saw that the lad had plenty of good sense and a fund of resolution, and knew that he himself was more likely to stick to work in such companionship than he should be by himself. Luscombe's light-hearted carelessness amused Hugh, and though he did not think that his companion was likely to stick very long to anything he took up, he was very glad to have his companionship for a time. Hugh was thankful indeed when the next mail brought a batch of papers of a date a week later than that of his leaving Cumberland, and when a careful examination of the file disclosed no allusion whatever to the event at Byrneside.

"Well, I congratulate you, Hugh," Luscombe said when he told him. "I expected it would be all right. If he had been a good old man you would have killed him, no doubt, but bad men have always wonderfully thick skulls. Well, now you are ready, I suppose, to make our start to-morrow."

"Quite ready, Luscombe. We are only throwing away our

money here."

They had already made many inquiries, and had settled that they would in the first place go down to Texas, and would there take the first job of any kind that offered itself, keeping it until they had time to look round and see what would suit them best. Luscombe, however, said frankly that he thought it probable that sooner or later he should enlist in the cavalry out west.

"I know I shall never stick to hard work very long, Hugh. I have not got my fortune to make, and I only want to pass away the time for a year or two until the old lady and the girls get the governor into a charitable state of mind again. He is a first-rate fellow, and I am not surprised that he cut up rough at last. I expect a few months will bring him round, but I should not know what to do if I went back. I will give myself three years anyhow."

"I am very much in the same position, Luscombe. I sha'n't go back until I come of age. Then I can snap my fingers at my uncle. I have got a very good trustee, who will look after the estate. I will write to him to-night and let him know that I am all right and very glad to find that uncle has not been killed, and that he may expect me when I come of age, but not before."

On the following morning they took their places in the train, and travelled west, and proceeded to what was then the nearest terminus to their destination – Northern Texas. Travelling sometimes by stage-waggons, sometimes on foot, they arrived at M'Kinney, which they had been told was a young place, but growing fast.

"Well, here we are at last," Luscombe said as they alighted at a one-storied building, on which was a board roughly painted, "The Empire Hotel." "At any rate the scenery is better than it has been for the last two or three hundred miles. There are some good-sized hills. Some of those across the country ahead might almost claim to be mountains, and that is a relief to the eyes after those dreary flats. Well, let us go in and have a meal first, then we will look round. The place has certainly not an imposing aspect."

The meals here, as at the other places where they had stopped, consisted of fried steak, which, although tough, was eatable, and abundance of potatoes and cabbages, followed by stewed fruit. They had arrived just at the dinner-hour, and seven or eight men in their shirt-sleeves came in and sat down with them. The tea was somewhat better than that they had hitherto obtained, and there was, in addition, the luxury of milk. Scarcely a word was spoken during the meal. It was evidently considered a serious business, and the chief duty of each man was to eat as much as possible in the shortest possible time. After the meal was over, and the other diners had gone out, the landlord, who had taken his seat at the top of the table, opened the conversation.

"Are you thinking of making a stay here, gentlemen?"

"Yes, if we can get any work to suit us," Luscombe said.

"It is a rising place," the landlord said as he lit his pipe. "There are two stores and eight houses being built now. This town has a great future before it." Luscombe and Hugh had some difficulty in preserving their gravity.

"It is the chief town of the county," the landlord went on. "They are going to set about the court-house in a month or two. Our sheriff is a pretty spry man, and doesn't stand nonsense. We have an orderly population, sir. We had only two men shot here last week."

"That is satisfactory," Luscombe said dryly. "We are peaceable characters ourselves. And is two about your average?"

"Well, I can't say that," the landlord said; "that would be too much to expect. The week before last Buck Harris with three of his gang came in and set up the town."

"What do you mean by set up?" Luscombe asked. The landlord looked surprised at the question.

"Oh, to set up a town is to ride into it, and to clear out the saloons, and to shoot at anyone seen outside their doors, and to ride about and fire through the windows. They had done it three or four times before, and as four or five men had been killed the citizens became annoyed."

"I am not surprised at that," Hugh put in.

"The sheriff got a few men together, and the citizens began to shoot out of their windows. Buck Harris and two of his gang were killed and four of the citizens. Since then we have had quiet. And what sort of work do you want, gentlemen? Perhaps I could put you in the way of getting it."

"Well, we wanted to get work among horses," Luscombe said.

The landlord shook his head. "You want to go further south among the big ranches for that. This is not much of a horse

country. If you had been carpenters now there would have been no difficulty. A good workman can get his four dollars a-day. Then there is James Pawson's woodyard. I reckon you might get a job there. One of his hands got shot in that affair with Buck Harris, and another broke his leg last week. I should say there was room for you there. Madden, that's the man who was shot, used to board here."

"What is your charge for boarding, landlord?"

"Seventy-five cents a-day for three square meals; a dollar a-day if you lodge as well. But I could not lodge you at present. I must keep a couple of rooms for travellers, and the others are full. But you will have no difficulty in getting lodgings in the town. You can get a room for about a dollar a-week."

"Well, let us try the woodyard, Luscombe."

"All right!" Luscombe said. "There is a certain sense of novelty about a woodyard. Well, landlord, if we agree with this Mr. Pawson, we will arrange to board with you, at any rate for the present."

They went down the straggling street until they came to a lot on which was piled a quantity of sawn timber of various dimensions. The name Pawson was painted in large letters on the fence. A man and a boy were moving planks.

"Here goes!" Luscombe said, and entered the gate.

"Want a job?" the man asked, looking up as they approached him.

"Yes. We are on the look-out for a job, and heard there might

be a chance here."

"I am James Pawson," the man said, "and I want hands. What wages do you want?"

"As much as we can get," Luscombe replied.

Pawson looked them up and down. "Not much accustomed to hard work, I reckon?"

"Not much," Luscombe said. "But we are both pretty strong, and ready to do our best."

"Well, I tell you what," the man said. "I will give you a dollar and a half a-day for a week, and at the end of that time, if you get through your work well, I will raise it to two dollars."

Luscombe looked at Hugh, who nodded. "All right!" he said; "we will try."

Pawson gave a sigh of relief, for hands were scarce. "Take off your coats then," he said, "and set to work right here. There is a lot to be done."

Luscombe and Hugh took off their coats, and were soon hard at work moving and piling planks. Before they had been half an hour at it there was a shout, and a waggon heavily laden with planks entered the yard. James Pawson himself jumped up on to the wagon, and assisted the teamster to throw down the planks, while the other two carried them away and stacked them. Both of them had rolled up their sleeves to have a freer use of their arms. The sun blazed hotly down, and they were soon bathed in perspiration. They stuck to their work until six o'clock, but by that time their backs were so stiff with stooping that they could

scarcely stand upright, and their hands were blistered with the rough wood. Pawson was well satisfied with their work.

"Well," he said, "you move about pretty spry, you two do, and handle the wood quicker'n most. I see you will suit me if I shall suit you; so I will make it two dollars a-day at once. I ain't a man that stints half a dollar when I see hands work willing."

"Well, that is not a bad beginning, Luscombe," Hugh said as they went to put on their coats.

"We have earned a dollar, Hugh," Luscombe said, "and we have broken our backs and blistered our hands, to say nothing of losing three or four pounds of solid flesh."

"We did wrong to turn up our sleeves," Hugh said. "I had no idea that the sun was so strong. Why, my arms are a mass of blisters."

"So are mine," Luscombe said ruefully, "and they are beginning to smart furiously. They will be in a nice state to-morrow."

"Let us stay at the hotel tonight, Hugh. I feel so tired that I am sure I could never set out to look for lodgings after supper."

The next morning their arms were literally raw. Before starting to work they got some oil from the landlord and rubbed them. "It will be some time before I turn up my sleeves to work again," Luscombe said. "I have had my arms pretty bad sometimes after the first long day's row in summer, but I have never had them like this."

They worked until dinner-time, and then Luscombe went up

to Pawson and pulled up his sleeve. "I think," he said, "you must let us both knock off for the day. We are really not fit to work. We daren't turn up our sleeves, and yet the flannel rubbing on them makes them smart so that we can hardly work. Besides, as you said yesterday, we are not accustomed to work. We are so stiff that we are not doing justice either to ourselves or you. If you have any particular job you want done, of course we will come after dinner and do it, but if not we would rather be off altogether."

"Your arms are bad," Pawson said. "I thought yesterday when you were working that, being new-comers, you would feel it a bit. Certainly you can knock off. You ain't fit for it as you are. Take it easy, boys, for a few days till you get accustomed to it. We ain't slave-drivers out here, and I don't expect nothing beyond what is reasonable. I should get my arms well rubbed with oil at once; then to-night wash the oil off and give them a chance to harden, and in the morning powder them well with flour."

As soon as they had had their dinner they went out and found a room with two beds in it, and moved their small kits across there. Then they took a stroll round the town, of which they had seen little, and then lay down in the shade of a thick cactus hedge and dozed all the afternoon. The next morning they felt all the better for their rest. The inflammation of their arms had greatly abated, and they were able to work briskly.

"What do you want with that revolver of an evening, Hugh, when you do not wear it during the day?" Luscombe asked as he

saw Hugh put his revolver in his pocket when they went to their lodgings for a wash, after work was over for the day.

"I take off my coat during the day, Luscombe, and whatever may be the custom here I think it ridiculous to see a man at work in a woodyard with a revolver stuck into his pocket at the back of his trousers. At night it is different; the pistol is not noticed under the coat, and I don't suppose there is a man here without one."

"I think one is just as safe without a pistol," Luscombe said. "Even these rowdies would hardly shoot down an unarmed man."

"They might not if they were sober," Hugh agreed; "but most of this shooting is done when men are pretty nearly if not quite tipsy. I heard my uncle say once 'A man may not often want to have a revolver on him; when he does want a revolver he wants it pretty badly.'"

A few days later they heard at supper that three notorious ruffians had just ridden into the place. "I believe one of them is a mate of Buck Harris, who was shot here three weeks ago. I hear he has been in the bar swaggering about, and swearing that he means to wipe out every man in the place who had a hand in that business. The sheriff is away. He went out yesterday with two men to search for a fellow who murdered a man and his wife somewhere down south, and who has been seen down in the swamps of the East Fork. He may be away two or three days, worse luck. There is the under-sheriff, but he isn't much good by himself. He can fight, Gilbert can, but he never likes going into a row on his own account. He will back up the sheriff in anything

he does, but he has got no head to take a thing up by himself."

"But surely," Hugh said, "people are not going to let three men terrorize the whole place and shoot and carry on just as they like."

"Well, mate, I don't suppose we like these things more than anyone else; but I can tell you that when one of the three men is Dutch Sam, and another is Wild Harvey, and the third is Black Jake, it is not the sort of business as anyone takes to kindly, seeing that if there is one thing more tarnal sartin than another, it is that each of them is good to lay out five or six men before he goes under. When things are like that one puts up with a goodish lot before one kicks. They are three as ugly men as there are anywhere along this part of Texas. Any one of them is game to set up a town by himself, and when it comes to three of them together I tell you it would be a game in which I certainly should not like to take a hand. You are new to these parts, mate, or you wouldn't talk about it so lightly. When you have been out here for a few months you will see that it is small blame to men if they get out of the way when two or three fellows like this are on the war-path."

At this moment there was a sound of shouting and yelling with a clatter of horses' hoofs outside. Then came the rapid discharge of firearms, and the three upper panes of glass in the window were pierced almost simultaneously with small round holes in the very centres. Every one bent down over their plates. The next shot might come through the second line of window panes, in which case they would have taken effect among those sitting at

the table. Then there was a yell of laughter, and the horses were heard to gallop furiously away.

"That is only their fun at present," one of the men said. "It will be more serious later on when they have drunk enough to be savage."

"I don't see much fun in firing through the windows of a house," Luscombe said.

"Oh, that is nothing!" another put in. "I have seen a score of cow-boys come into a place, and half an hour afterwards there wasn't a window-pane that hadn't a round hole in its middle. They will shoot the hats off a score of men; that is one of their favourite amusements. In the first place it shows their skill with the pistol, and in the next it scares people pretty nigh to death, and I have seen the cow-boys laugh until they have nearly tumbled off their horses to see a fellow jump and make a straight line into a house. Nobody minds the cow-boys; they are a good sort. They are reckless enough when they are on a spree, but they don't really mean to do harm. They spend their money freely, and they hate ruffians like those three fellows outside. If it wasn't for cow-boys, the bad men, as we call them, would be pretty well masters of Texas. But the cow-boys hunt them down like vermin, and I have known them hang or shoot over a dozen murderers and gamblers in one afternoon. They fight among themselves sometimes pretty hard. Perhaps the men on two ranches will quarrel, and then if it happens that a party from one ranch meets a party from the other down in a town, there is sure to be trouble. I remember one battle

in which there were over twenty cow-boys killed, besides six or eight citizens who happened to get in the way of their bullets."

Just as they had finished the meal a man ran in. "Have you heard the news? Dutch Sam and his party have broken open the door of the under-sheriff's house, pulled him out, and put a dozen bullets into him."

There was an exclamation of indignation. "There," Hugh said, "if the under-sheriff had done his duty and called upon every one to help him to capture or shoot these fellows as soon as they came into the town he wouldn't have lost his life, and I suppose it will have to be done after all."

"The best thing we can do," one of the men said, "is to go round from house to house and agree that every man shall take his rifle and pistol, and take his stand at a window, then we will shoot them down as they ride past."

"But that wouldn't be giving them a fair show," another objected.

"A fair show!" the other repeated scornfully. "Did they give the under-sheriff a fair show? Do you think they give notice to a man before they shoot him, and ask him to draw and be fairly 'heeled' before they draw a trigger? Not a bit of it; and I say we ought to clear them out."

There was a general expression of approval, and after one of the party had opened the door and looked out cautiously to see if the coast was clear, and reported that none of the desperadoes were in sight, the party at once scattered. Luscombe and Hugh

stopped for half an hour chatting with the landlord. The latter did not believe that the people would attack the ruffians.

"If the sheriff had been here to take the lead," he said, "they might have acted; but as he is away, I don't think it likely that anyone will draw a bead upon them. You see, no one is sure of anyone else, and he knows that if he were to kill or wound one of them the others would both be upon him. If we had a regular street here with a row of houses running along each side, so that a volley could be poured into them, it would be a different thing; but you see the houses are separated, some stand back from the road, some stand forward; they are all scattered like, and I don't expect anyone will begin. They will be in here presently," he said, "and they will drink my bar pretty well dry, and I don't expect I shall get a dime for the liquor they drink; and that is not the worst of it, they are like enough to begin popping at the bottles, and smashing more than they drink."

"Well, it seems to me a disgraceful thing," Hugh said, "that a place with something like a hundred men in it should be kept down by three."

"It sounds bad if you put it that way," the landlord agreed; "but you must remember that each of these three men could hit every pip on a card twenty yards away; they each carry two revolvers, that is to say, they have got twelve men's lives in their belt, and they are so quick with their weapons that they could fire the twelve shots before an ordinary man could get out his revolver and cock it."

"Why not shut up your place for the night?" Luscombe asked. "Then they couldn't come in and drink your spirits and wreck your bar."

"They couldn't, eh? Why, they would blow the door open with their pistols, and if it was so barred they couldn't get in that way, they would like enough burn the house about my ears. I have known such things done many a time."

"Well, let us get home, Hugh," Luscombe said. "It seems to me the sooner we are quietly in bed the better. As our room is at the back of the house they may fire away as much as they like without a chance of our being hit."

Hugh put on his hat, and the two started down the street. They had gone but a short distance when the sound of a horse's hoofs was heard.

"Here is one of them!" a voice shouted from an upper window. "Run round to the back of the house, the door is open there. I have heard two or three pistol shots, and he will shoot you down to a certainty."

"Come on, Hugh," Luscombe said.

"You go round, Luscombe, you are unarmed. I am not going to run away from anyone," Hugh said doggedly. "Go on, man, it is no use your staying here, you have no pistol."

"I sha'n't leave you by yourself," Luscombe said quietly; "besides, here he comes."

Hugh's hand had already slipped round to his back, and he now had his pistol in his hand in the pocket of his coat. The

horseman threw up his arm as he came along, and Hugh saw the glitter of the moonlight on a pistol barrel. Another instant the pistol cracked; but Hugh, the moment he saw it bear on him, dropped on to one knee, and the ball struck the wall just above his head. He lifted his arm and fired, while two other shots rang out from the window. The man threw up his hands and fell back over the crupper of his horse to the ground, and the well-trained animal stopped instantaneously in his gallop, and turning stood still by his side.

"Come on, Luscombe," Hugh said; "the sooner we are out of this the better."

Before, however, they had gone twenty yards they heard the sound of two horses coming up behind them.

"Let us get round the corner of that house, Luscombe. I don't suppose they will pass those men at the windows; if they do, they will be thinking of their own safety as they gallop past and won't notice us."

They had scarcely got round the corner when there was a discharge of firearms, and the reports of the rifles were followed by the quick sharp cracks of revolvers. Then a man dashed past them at a gallop. One of his arms hung by his side, and the reins were loose on the horse's neck.

"I suppose they have killed the other," Hugh said, "and this fellow is evidently hit. Well, let us go on to bed."

Luscombe did not speak until they reached their room. Hugh struck a match and lighted a candle.

"Well, you are a nice lad, Hugh," Luscombe said. "I thought you were always against quarrels, and wanted nothing but to go on with your work peaceably, and here you are throwing yourself into this and standing the chance of being shot, as if you had been fighting ruffians all your life."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.