



ROSS GRANT
GOLD HUNTER
JOHN GARLAND



AROUND THE BOULDER CAME THE FIRST HORSE

ROSS GRANT GOLD HUNTER

BY

JOHN GARLAND

Author of

ROSS GRANT TENDERFOOT

Illustrated by R. L. BOYER



THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY PHILADELPHIA
1916

**COPYRIGHT
1916 BY
THE PENN
PUBLISHING
COMPANY**



LOAN STACK

Ross Grant, Gold Hunter

PS 3513
Ga 75 R64

To

Mr. and Mrs. Charles L. Tewksbury

*whose life in the Wyoming Mountains
has made "Ross Grant, Gold Hunter,"
possible, I cordially dedicate this book*

Introduction

I TAKE it for granted that you are not sorry that "Ross Grant, Tenderfoot," after his adventures over in Meadow Creek Valley and in Wood River Cañon, was not allowed to leave the mountains immediately, but was drawn into a mysterious entanglement in the Valley of the Pass, which led him to become "Ross Grant, Gold Hunter." I know, furthermore, that, before you have reached the "Monkey's" last Indian chant, you will be glad—in another way—that Sandy McKenzie pushed himself into this same entanglement also, the same Sandy who learned to his discomfort that Ross was not so much of a tenderfoot as he looked to be. As for Lucky, patient old Lucky, and the acrobatic and gay "Monkey," you haven't seen the last of them yet.

Some one, who never climbed a hill more than a thousand feet high in his life, informed me that too much is said in this story about eating. I told him—and now I'll confess to you—that not half as much is said about food as I thought during the weeks spent among these lofty peaks. As I recall it, all the time I was not eating I was

INTRODUCTION

talking and thinking about it. The altitude and life in the open gives a fellow the appetite of a bear! I have eaten cold corn fritters in a miners' boarding-house and found them more appetizing than porterhouse steak in a Broadway hotel. You might, as the Toddler would put it, eat till you bust one hour and be just as hungry the next. And, furthermore, for two reasons, it's not the women who discuss recipes, but the men. The first reason is, there are not enough women there to do much discussing, and the second is as good—every man must be his own cook or starve. Therefore, look out in the next book for further extensive references to "rustling grub"!

JOHN GARLAND.

Contents

I.	AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS	11
II.	AN IMPORTANT LETTER	31
III.	NICHOLAS ARRIVES—AND OTHERS	55
IV.	A "WILD WEST" SCOUT	74
V.	A GLIMPSE OF THE LETTER	96
VI.	SCHEMES AND COUNTER SCHEMES	121
VII.	A PUZZLING SITUATION	144
VIII.	DISTURBING NEWS	165
IX.	A PLUNGE INTO THE WILDERNESS	190
X.	SURPRISES FOR BOY AND BEAR	206
XI.	A TRIUMPH FOR SANDY	223
XII.	THE "HA'NT" OF THE HORN	246
XIII.	THE MISSING TREASURE	266
XIV.	ON THE TRAIL OF THE MCKENZIES	287
XV.	THE LETTER	310
XVI.	"CAPTAIN HEAD-ON-YOU"	331
XVII.	A RACE TO THE GOAL	355
XVIII.	ROSS PLAYS AN UNEXPECTED PART	376

Illustrations

	PAGE
AROUND THE BOULDER CAME THE FIRST HORSE <i>Frontispiece</i>	
MAP OF THE VALLEY OF THE PASS	41
"I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE HERE"	69
THE MAN HELD THE LETTER	142
THERE WAS NO MISTAKE THIS TIME	202
HE SUDDENLY CLUTCHED AT THEM	231
HE NAILED IT TO THE BARK	272
MAP OF THE VALLEY OF THE FORKS	305
"ALL RIGHT; THAT'S FAIR"	371

Ross Grant, Gold Hunter



Ross Grant, Gold Hunter

CHAPTER I

AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS

ROSS GRANT, respectfully named "Doc Tenderfoot" in the mountains of western Wyoming, up-ended a large trunk and a smaller chest on a dry knoll beside the stage trail in Wood River Cañon. Mounting the large trunk, he sat banging his heels against the side, impatiently awaiting the coming of the stage to Meeteetse.

He wore a gray cap and a gray suit, much the worse, not for wear, but for an eight months' residence in the large trunk, where it had acquired a multitude of creases. The ends of the trouser legs were pushed into high mountain shoes. At Cody Ross intended to change for low shoes, but as eighty strenuous miles of bad roads lay between Miners' Camp and Cody, he preferred to travel them in the heavy, useful foot-gear he had worn in the mountains. His shirt, originally white, which had likewise been undisturbed for eight months, was yellow and mussed, while his stiff

ROSS GRANT

collar was decidedly uncomfortable after he had lived so long in a flannel shirt. But as he had turned his face toward Pennsylvania, he felt that he must put himself again into the garb of that remote region.

Presently the clatter of hoofs sounded far up the cañon. Ross checked his whistle to ascertain the number of hoofs represented, and was disappointed when the owner of only four appeared around a projecting rock and bore down on him at a gallop. Seated astride the saddleless pony on a blanket was a boy of fourteen or fifteen clamping the pony's sides with thin, live-wire legs. Thin, live-wire arms were waving above a shock of unclipped, tow-colored hair, while the bridle reins were knotted on the pony's neck. The rider was fantastically clad in a red shirt and soft lightweight leather trousers, or "chaps," tanned and ornamented with gayly colored beads by the Indians on the Shoshone reservation south of Miners' Camp. A pair of elaborately beaded red moccasins completed this highly colored outfit.

Catching sight of Ross, the newcomer gave vent to a Comanche yell of exceeding great volume, and, reaching out one moccasin-clad toe, touched his mount just in front of its foreleg. The animal bunched its hoofs together and came to a stop with such suddenness that an ordinary rider would have

GOLD HUNTER

been pitched over its head. This extraordinary rider, however, gave a leap and a scramble and stood triumphantly on the animal's flank, bowing low to the older boy on the trunk.

"Hello, Monkey!" greeted Ross with a grin. Every one grinned when the "Monkey," otherwise Nicholas Page, appeared.

"Hello, yourself!" returned the Monkey, dropping back to the blanket as light as a feather. Here he sat, bunched up, his knees touching his chin and his arms hugging his legs as comfortable as though his seat were not the heaving back of a spotted pony.

Ross glanced at a lean gunny sack strapped across the pony behind him, and remarked, "Thought you were to stay on up the cañon with the men who are working Dad's claim."

Nicholas shook his head until his long hair bobbed about madly in the wind. "Take another think! Dad merely told me I had better stay up here!"

"Minding, aren't you?" offered Ross.

"Yep. He didn't tell me right out to stay. Merely said I'd better. Some difference, you see. Now, all I do is to add a 'not' to that and down I go to see that you make Cody right side up!"

The word "down" referred in general to the extensive valley of the Big Horn, but it suggested

ROSS GRANT

to the boy a new accomplishment which he at once exhibited. Sitting astride the pony, he clamped the strapped blanket loosely and whirled over until he hung head downward beside the pony, his hair almost touching the ground. A moment later he was again seated on the pony's back, his knees bunched beneath his chin.

"What d'ye think of that?" he demanded.

Ross stared in amazed approval. "It's great, Nick. I can't see for the life of me how you do so many stunts. I couldn't if I worked until Doomsday."

He looked down half apologetically at his heavy frame and large limbs. Ross was as slow in motion as the other was quick. He suggested strength and solidity in every line, while Nicholas had earned his nickname by his speed, dexterity of movement, and lightness of poise.

"Well, I have to work to do 'em!" affirmed Monkey candidly. "Work like the dickens! What I did just now is no cinch, but I'm goin' to go that one better. I'm going to get so I can fire under Spot while I'm hangin' there head down, and hit a dime at ten paces away with every shot. Buffalo Bill says he'll take me into the Wild West Show when I can do that. I saw him the last time he was in Cody. I rode for him and shot for him and he shook hands on takin' me some time—

GOLD HUNTER

when Dad's willing," the last was added with a thoughtfulness unusual to Nicholas.

"What does your father say to your training for the show?" asked Ross. He regarded Nicholas with little less than awe in view of the attention given his acrobatic performances by Colonel Cody, known outside his native state of Wyoming as Buffalo Bill.

Nicholas grimaced. "He doesn't say one word against my *training*! Thinks that's good for me. But he won't say that I can ever join the show. And he won't say I can't. Dad's queer in some ways. He could make a dandy living if his wages depended on his sayin' nothing. He can keep still the longest of any man I know. He lets me do most of the talkin'!"

The boys grinned at each other, and Nicholas, dropping his feet beside the pony, threw one leg over the other, his hands clasping the knee while he rocked back and forth in leisurely fashion.

"But I notice," he continued frankly, "that when it comes to acting, Dad's all there and then some! When September comes and he tells me to pack my trunk and trot down to school in Omaha, I notice that little Nicholas Scott Page packs and trots! And if he had told me to come up to camp and *stay* here until he got back, I'd not be escorting you down. See?" The boy spoke with unbounded pride in Dad's powers to command.

ROSS GRANT

"Shouldn't wonder, though, if it would be quite a spell before he gets back. When he finishes roundin' up the cattle thieves, I shouldn't be surprised if he'd go scoutin' on Fred Holzworth's lost trail."

"Who's Fred Holzworth?"

Nicholas swung his feet violently. "He's the last maverick that stung Dad," was his succinct reply. "Dad grub-staked him or lent him money or something, and he up and died a month ago while Dad was in Omaha. So Dad has lost his grub-stake, I suppose, as I've never heard of Fred's being worth a plunk! It's a good thing, maybe," philosophically, "for if Fred had staked any more claims for Dad to pay for developing, I guess it would be 'over the hills to the poorhouse' for yours truly! Now right up here in Miners'"—the boy pointed up the cañon—"he has two men developing two claims. They get two plunks per day and grub, and the ore they're getting shows only a trace of gold. Doc," abruptly, "are you quartz crazy?"

"No, I'm not," declared Ross emphatically. "I think I should be plain crazy though if I were obliged to spend my life in these mountains hunting for gold. I'd rather doctor folks."

"Well, it's queer you haven't caught the mining disease. Bet you'll find the microbe has got you

GOLD HUNTER

when you go back East!" triumphantly. "Now, there's Dad. You know he owns a ranch, the Lazy Y, down in the valley?"

Ross nodded.

"Well, Dad is as quartz crazy as the rest of 'em around Wyoming. Seems as if you can't stay in Wyoming and not be. But Dad, he knows better than to give up his time to prospecting himself. He's sharp enough to hold down his job of ranching and being deputy sheriff, jobs that bring in the plunks. Then, with the money, he grub-stakes fellows like Fred Holzworth, that you couldn't keep away from the mountains unless you put dynamite under 'em. These chaps go nosing around and stake out claims, and then Dad plunks down more dollars and has the claims developed, as he's doing up here. He hires one man and puts him to work against the work of the fellow who has staked the claims. See?"

"And what does it all amount to?" asked Ross skeptically. "There's gold and silver all through these mountains, and yet the ore isn't rich enough to pay for transportation to a smelter; and because it isn't rich enough no one builds a smelter here, and the Burlington Railroad keeps talking about running the road on up here from Cody and yet doesn't begin the actual building—waiting—everything is waiting for something to be turned up,

ROSS GRANT

and here are hundreds of men wasting their lives trying to turn up something big."

"But who knows," interrupted Nicholas, "that the next shot some one puts in his development work may not unearth a pocket of free gold? If some prospector could strike a vein of free gold—that would be big enough to start things going—either a smelter or the branch road."

"Well," returned Ross in a discouraged tone, "I hear there have been mighty few free gold pockets unearthed in these mountains, and yet the digging goes on everywhere here in the Shoshones, and over on the Big Horn Range."

"Yes, Dad talks as low spiritedly as you do," laughed the Monkey, "and yet he can't keep from grub-staking fellows and taking his chances. The love of gold hunting seeps into the blood, Doc. It'll get you yet!"

Ross shrugged superior shoulders. "I guess not. It hasn't got me yet, and I've started back home—no more of these cold old mountains for me. I've started for a state where June 20th brings summer instead of early spring, and where green peas are growing in the garden now instead of in tin cans! It's old 'Pennsy' for me hereafter."

He looked about, as he spoke, at the curious mixture of summer and winter, due to a conflict between the lofty altitude and the hot sunshine.

GOLD HUNTER

The peaks were yet deep with snow. There were snow banks on the sides of Gale's Ridge under the shoulder of the spruce trees, with wild flowers blooming a few feet away. Wood River, a narrow stream, foamed and rushed through the cañon with a velocity and depth of an eastern spring freshet, fed by the melting snow. The sun shone hotly in Ross's face while a sharp, snow-cooled wind chilled his back.

Nicholas hunched up his knees again and hugged them, rocking back and forth on his pony's back. "Wyoming is good enough for me," he declared. "Dad says that what he wants is a horse and a gun and plenty of room, and so do I. A horse and a gun and plenty of room," the boy chanted.

With one of his quick movements he lay along the pony's back, his arms about its neck and his softly shod feet caressing its flank.

"Wish I could get rid of school and Omaha," he mumbled, "but Dad says he's an ignorant maverick, and I shan't be. He won't let me talk as he does. He says I've got to use good English and be wise to Latin even. Oh, shucks! What do I want with 'Amo, Amas, Amat'? I can say it all to old Spot in plain United States better, can't I, Spot?" slapping the pony's neck. "Dad doesn't seem to think that digging out Latin is harder work than digging out gold!"

ROSS GRANT

Ross had never seen "Dad," as every one called him, but for two weeks Nicholas had haunted his vicinity, lost in an admiration of Ross's skill with the contents of the medicine chest and with his knowledge of the human joints and hinges which the Monkey could manipulate so handily. Ross, on the other hand, regarded the younger boy's physical accomplishments with no less a degree of admiration.

For a moment there was silence save for the sough of the wind through the pines and spruces that hid the wagon trail and filled the cañon and covered the mountainsides up to "timber line." Then Nicholas, who disliked both silence and inaction, shot out his feet, crossed them on the neck of the pony and lay back, his head on the lean gunny sack containing the few necessities in the toilet line which he was bearing with him into that vast region referred to as "below."

At this moment there was a clatter of wheels and hoofs and the jingle of trace chains, succeeded by Bill Travers' raucous voice:

"Hike out o' this, kittens! Air yer heels! Git!"

Nicholas turned his pony out of the track as Bill's four bronchos and the big-wheeled stage bore down on him with Bill whirling a long "black-snake" from a seat high over the tails of the "wheelers." Three times a week Bill made the

GOLD HUNTER

forty mile run with the mail from Meeteetse to Miners' Camp, and "run" it really was for the four "kittens" with their nimble heels.

"Stage's late!" yelled Bill, drawing in his bronchos beside the trunks. "Hi, there, Monkey, get down and make yerself useful."

With one bound the boy was on the ground and with another he lit on top of the large trunk just as Bill and Ross were lifting it. His weight, lightly poised, scarcely added to the burden.

"Gee whittikers!" shouted Bill as Nicholas left the trunk midway in its progress to the stage, turned a somersault in the air, landed on his feet on the ground one moment and was standing on the flank of his pony the next. "Bless my boots and pistols! I never seed anything like you, Monkey, in all my born days! I knew you was as thin as a crutch, but I didn't know before you was no heftier 'n air. If ye ain't a hull circus I loses!"

In a few moments the entire outfit was under headway. Bill Travers, with one foot on the brake, gave his bronchos his undivided attention, despite his overwhelming desire to talk. The Monkey followed on the spotted pony. Ross sat beside Bill staring down the cañon, his face turned literally and figuratively toward Pennsylvania.

Rapidly the stage swung down the winding,

ROSS GRANT

narrow cañon—always down now, for Miners' Camp was two miles above sea level. Sometimes the "kittens" ploughed through snow-drifts; again they galloped across bridges of slender, yielding saplings spanning the deep, ice-choked stream; at times the peaks on either hand left so narrow a sky cañon between that the trail at mid-day was deep in gloom. But gradually the mountains were left behind. The cañon widened. The air grew warmer and less rare. Flowers appeared more profusely beside the track, yellow asters, bluebells, daisies. The snow disappeared and the travelers were among the black, barren foot-hills below the Shoshones.

Not until they were approaching the first ford in Wood River did Bill Travers divorce his attention from the bronchos and bestow it on his passenger. Carefully he surveyed this boy with his wind-reddened, earnest face, honest eyes, and slow, rather awkward movements.

"Doc, how deep has Wyomin' branded ye these eight months? Sorry ye're hittin' the hike back East, ain't ye?"

Ross grinned cheerfully. "Wyoming is all right, Bill, but I guess Pennsylvania branded me pretty deep before you folks got hold of me."

"Goin' back int' school now, I hear," Bill continued genially, "to larn more about folks' insides,

GOLD HUNTER

and how t' cut 'em up and help 'em pass in their checks easy like, eh?"

The embryo physician nodded, his eyes lighting as they always did whenever reference was made to his chosen career. "But a doctor's ambition is to keep them from passing in their checks! That's what I'm going to try to learn to do."

Bill winked, spat skilfully past the flank of the nigh wheeler, and gave the lagging ponies his unwelcome attention again. "Yep, s'pose 'tis; and you've made a fair beginnin' at it hereabouts even if you hain't got no paper framed yet and hung on the wall, and sich. Guess ye've airned the right to the 'Doc' part."

The boy made no immediate reply, but glanced back of the seat at the strong, old-fashioned, hair-covered chest in which were numerous medical "first aids" designed for his use in case of accident or sickness, and which he had had occasion to use, not for himself, but for others. Hence, his title gratefully bestowed.

"I guess you know," he said finally, perceiving that Bill expected information, "that I've lived for years with an uncle who's a country doctor among the Pennsylvania coal mines. I've always been tremendously interested in all that sort of thing," indicating the chest; "and I've helped him a lot with accidents and gone with him to

ROSS GRANT

visit poor patients and kept track of his cases with him. And then I've read medical books ever since I was old enough to understand 'em."

Bill's interest at this point was distracted from the subject of medicine by the untoward antics of his four-in-hand. They were sliding down the steep bank of the river and registering their objections to the process with teeth and hoofs. Whirling his "blacksnake" above the flanks of his unambitious leaders, Bill urged the bronchos across the ford. The swift cold water swirled and eddied about the stage, causing the passenger to draw up his feet apprehensively as the current struck the body of the vehicle.

"Hi, ye mavericks!" shouted Bill. "What d'ye mean moseyin' round this way? Take what's comin' to ye, and hit th' high trail!"

The four, dripping, struggled up the opposite bank, and swung the heavy, creaking stage along a devious track which skirted the fertile valley of Wood River on one hand and on the other the foot-hills pierced with gopher holes and overgrown with sage-brush.

Bill's blacksnake was whirling again to the accompaniment of a wild clanking of trace chains and clatter of hoofs on the stones of the rough track, when far behind sounded a loud shout, "B-i-l-l Travers! B-i-l-l! Ho-ye-ho!"

GOLD HUNTER

The stage driver drew in his bronchos, and, standing up, faced the back trail. His passenger did likewise. Nicholas, close behind, drew in the spotted pony, and, leaping nimbly upright on its flank, shaded his eyes with both hands and let out so weird a shriek that the stage horses were startled. Following them in the clear distance came a man on horseback. Standing in his stirrups, he waved his hand until the Monkey's answering call reached him. Then, dropping into his saddle, he bent his shoulders forward, and was lost to view behind a hill.

"Who is it?" asked Ross. During his brief residence in Wyoming he had learned that one hundred miles of mountain and valley do not separate men so widely as five miles of Pennsylvania soil.

Bill shaded his eyes with his hands. "Looks like—yes, 'tis!" in a tone of conviction as the horseman rounded the hill at a gallop. "It's Lucky Frace—and—what's he leadin' the Toddler's hoss fer now, I wonder. And fer what is he a-holdin' of us up in this way?"

The rider was a tall man of powerful frame and bearded face. He wore leather chaps, a sombrero, and a corduroy coat. At the end of a leading rope attached to his pommel was a saddled horse.

"How d'ye?" was his brief greeting as he rode

ROSS GRANT

alongside the stage. He spoke to Bill, but his eyes ranged over the Monkey, whom he regarded with a smile, and came to rest seriously on Ross. They were kind eyes, deep-set and gray.

“What are ye mussin’ up the landscape fer, Lucky?” asked Bill affably.

The stranger spoke abruptly. “There’s trouble up to th’ Pass. A man rode up yesterday all in. He fell off’n his hoss in front of Trigger’s shack, and smashed his spectacles, and laid his cheek open across here,” indicating his cheek-bone. “Then he up and had a fever, and turned sort o’ lunny. We can’t do no better’n bind a handkerchief over his face. He needs t’ be looked out fer; so I hiked it over t’ Miners’ this morning after”—here he paused, his deep-set eyes again searching Ross’s face—“after a—Doc Tenderfoot. Heard about ’im in Meeteetse before I went up on South Fork this spring. Heard he knew as much as some hull bunches of regular doctors.”

“He’s it!” announced Bill succinctly, jerking a thumb in Ross’s direction.

Ross rested one knee on the seat, and leaned against his trunk up-ended in the back of the stage. “I’m Ross Grant,” he stammered diffidently. “They call me ‘Doc’ up in camp, but —”

The man interrupted. “They told me up there,”

GOLD HUNTER

he said slowly, "that you was hittin' the trail with bag and baggage for back East. But still I come along—and brought Tod's horse ——"

His mouth, which was large, closed on the subject unexpectedly, and seemingly with finality. His tongue asked nothing more, but his kind eyes put a question as they met Ross's squarely.

The boy understood, and the understanding brought only dismay. His gaze wavered and fell before the stranger's. He looked back at the mountains, huge and black and frowning as they topped the foot-hills and soared far up into the vivid blue of the June sky. He had been sent among those peaks by his father to do the work on some mining property, work that had been finished in a most amazing way. His father and uncle, business man and physician, had come on to Miners' Camp to look him up after months of necessary silence on his part. They had returned East after lingering but a few days in Camp, expecting him to follow in a couple of weeks. The fortnight had been spent at the lower mine in Miners' Camp, the Gale's Ridge, and when Ross had dragged his trunk down the precipitous side of the Ridge that morning he supposed he was saying good-bye to the Shoshone Mountains. He had expected to divide the ensuing three months between the home of Dr. Grant near Wilkesbarre

ROSS GRANT

and of his father and stepmother in New York. Then in September he intended to enter the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania.

And now — He opened his lips to refuse the request in the stranger's eyes, and then closed them on the refusal. He recalled his uncle, worn and bent in the service of others, battling against storms, dragging through mud, ploughing through snow-drifts, and all done cheerfully to relieve suffering. He recalled the other's oft-repeated warning :

“ Ross, if ever you allow the idea of personal ease or preference to come between you and duty, you're not fit to become a doctor. Better choose a less responsible profession.”

Ross stood up. “ I'll go with you,” he said in a low tone, “ and do what I can.”

The man's face lighted. “ I thought ye would,” was all the reply he made ; but Ross's heart warmed at the quiet confidence in the tone.

Instantly the Monkey pricked up a pair of small, well-formed ears. “ Hey ! ” he called gayly whirling his pony about like a top. “ I'm goin' too. Where Doc goes I go. Dad's deserted, and I might as well be at the Valley of the Pass as anywhere else ! ”

Lucky Frace smoothed his horse's mane and

GOLD HUNTER

looked at the thin, whirling Dervish with perplexed eyes. "Where's Dad?" he asked absently.

"If I could tell I would," chanted the whirling Dervish, "but what I don't know I can't tell. He hiked out and took both guns with 'im! He won't let me carry a gun yet unless he's around. Says he wants to be handy to pick up the pieces when I shoot myself! But I'd like to see him shoot as fast and straight as I can, and from the hip, too—but until I'm eighteen, he says he won't trust me with a gun of my own. And ——"

"Fer the sake of the nation, Monkey, rope that tongue of yourn and throw it a minute," interrupted Bill Travers, wiping the perspiration from his face. "I've had a question hangin' onto my tongue fer half an hour more 'r less!" He turned to Lucky. "Say! Who is it that's ailin' up t' th' Pass?"

Lucky brushed a little foam from his horse's shoulder. "He's a young man and new to these parts. Hain't none of us seen 'im before, and he hain't spoke his name."

"Huh!" exclaimed Bill. "Must be a soci'ble party! Ye must like his com'ny."

Lucky made no reply. His forehead was deeply lined in thought. He backed his horse out of the way, while the stage driver assisted Ross in making sundry transfers from the trunk to the chest. Then as Bill was mounting the high front seat

ROSS GRANT

again, leaving Ross and the chest on the trail, Lucky spoke again. He bent forward smoothing his horse's mane and endeavoring to make his voice as careless as his actions. But through the simple question that he asked ran a deep vein of anxiety!

"What's become of Sandy McKenzie?"

"He and his brother left Miners' Camp about five weeks ago," volunteered Ross.

"Heard they was in Cody outfitting for the Big Horn. Goin' prospectin'," Bill gave information.

Lucky threw his bridle reins over his pony's neck and leaned from his saddle to receive the medicine chest. He made no comment. Balancing the chest across the pommel of his saddle he gathered up the reins, while Bill released the brake on the stage.

"Hi!" chanted Nicholas Page, whirling the spotted pony about beside Lucky. "It's me for the Valley of the Pass! Where Doc goes I go! Where Doc goes I go!"

Lucky turned quickly in the saddle and looked at the Monkey. For a moment he was silent. Then he spoke slowly and decisively:

"We hain't got either quarters nor grub fer ye, Nick, up t' the Pass, with the sick feller and Doc there—say! Ye jest keep on headin' along to the Lazy Y."

CHAPTER II

AN IMPORTANT LETTER

To shut off further argument from the disappointed Monkey, Lucky, balancing the chest before him, rode slowly back, leaving Ross hastily writing a postal card which he had taken from his trunk.

"Folks home are expecting me right away," he explained, "and this is to tell 'em to stop expecting for a few days."

The postal finished and in Bill's hands, Ross gathered in the leading rope dangling from the neck of "Tod's" horse, knotted it to the pommel, and swung himself clumsily into the saddle.

"Mail that card and dump my trunk into the freight room at Cody, will you, Bill?" he asked, "and tell the agent I'll be along in a few days."

Nicholas, standing on his horse's flank, waved a derisive hand after the retreating Lucky. "Ha, ha!" laughed the boy. "Thinks he can keep me away from the Valley of the Pass, does he? No grub to spare, no bunk to spare; but there's plenty of outdoors up there, and at the Lazy Y there's both grub and a sleeping-bag to pack with me!"

ROSS GRANT

With this ambiguous remark the boy dropped to his blanket, hit the pony's sides with both heels and shot down the trail, calling back to Ross, "See ye later, but not much later!"

"If he ain't a monkey," exclaimed the stage driver as his four started, "then there never was one and there never was a circus ner a Wild West Show!"

Ten minutes later Ross overtook Lucky on the bank of the river and followed him across the ford. As the horses were shaking themselves on the other side, he looked attentively at the boy:

"I take it in good part, Doc, yer goin' with me. Fred Holzworth done me more'n one good turn afore he died, and I wouldn't leave his brother t' suffer without gittin' help!"

"Fred Holzworth! Brother!" echoed Ross in astonishment. "Then you know who he is? I thought you said back at the ford you didn't——"

Lucky interrupted firmly. "I never said I didn't know who he is. Ye think back t' what I did say. We don't savvy his lingo just as I said, not one word of it, but he's got Fred's face and Fred's actions, and I know Fred had a brother that he was expectin' here and so of course I know this is him."

Ross looked curiously at the other. What object had he in concealing the injured man's iden-

GOLD HUNTER

tity—and where had he, Ross, heard the name of Fred Holzworth before?

Lucky partially answered these unasked questions. He spoke abruptly: "I didn't tell all I knew back there because I see that, somehow, Hans had got from Cody up t' the Pass without Bill Travers findin' out about 'im. And as the Monkey said, what a body don't know he can't tell!"

"But why shouldn't it be told?" asked Ross bluntly.

Lucky made no reply to this. He spoke as though he had not heard. "As I told ye, Fred done me more'n one good turn before he died, and I'm goin' to see Hans through with this——" he checked himself, and then reiterated: "I take it well ye're comin' with me, fer doctors in Wyomin' is as scarce as railroads—and free gold!"

The nearest physician was, like the nearest railroad, at Cody, Buffalo Bill's native town, eighty miles away.

Ross mumbled an assent and followed thoughtfully. "Free gold!" How often he had heard the term. In front of him rode, probably, another "quartz crazy" prospector who was giving the best years of his life to this endless search for gold among the cold, desolate, barren peaks of the Rockies.

ROSS GRANT

"How long have you been in these mountains?" the boy asked at length.

Lucky straightened in the saddle and half turned, one hand on his horse's flank. "This makes my fifth summer up t' the Pass," he said slowly. "But if you mean t' be askin' how long I've been prospectin', why, as man and boy, I've been at it twenty-five year, here and over in the Big Horn, and down in Colorado and up in Montana and over in Californy."

"Have you"—here Ross hesitated knowing that personal questions are not popular in the mountains—"have you ever—found anything?"

Lucky rubbed the horse's flank. "Off and on," he admitted slowly, "but mostly off!" with a rueful laugh. "I panned some rich dirt up in Butte first off. That begun it. I was on a ranch afore that, doin' well as to wages—hoss wrangler, I was. Then I got the gold fever and went to Butte. Since then—wall, I'm here now," succinctly, "and I'm free t' say that the Pass ain't a payin' proposition unless the Burlington gits its road up t' Miners' before long, or else that Chicago company builds a smelter there. But the smelter ain't comin' ner the road unless some of us run onto a rich find,—free gold, maybe."

"Free gold," as Ross knew, was applied to quartz containing flakes and specks and nuggets

GOLD HUNTER

of the yellow metal visible to the naked eye. There had been pockets of such ore uncovered among the Shoshones where the gold could be flaked off the quartz with a pocket knife. But such finds were rare, and the "pockets" extremely limited. It paid richly to transport such ore down to Cody on packhorses or freighters' wagons and send it to Butte or Omaha where the metal could be separated from the ore by machinery.

Presently Lucky turned his horse's head away from Wood River, and followed a turbulent little tributary which raced and tumbled about among the hills that were gradually closing in, steep, rocky, and barren. He rode bent forward over the medicine chest, his head sunken in thought. Between his heavy brows his forehead was contracted in an anxious furrow. He was evidently troubled, and Ross, after a fruitless attempt to engage him in further conversation, fell into silence also.

The sun had begun to sink toward the west when the horsemen entered a cañon through which the South Fork foamed downward, dropping over boulders with a roar, or gurgling through a narrow channel far below the trail. This cañon was very like Wood River Cañon, except that the South Fork was smaller than the stream that received it and the gorge it had worn for itself between the ranges was not wide enough to admit of a wagon trail.

ROSS GRANT

Finally Lucky, who was still riding ahead, turned in his saddle and looked over his shoulder. "Doc," he began, "I'm sorry I didn't pack no grub along. You'll be hollow clean t' your toes before we strike Elk Pass."

"It won't be the first time," responded Ross cheerfully. "That's my natural state up here in the mountains!"

The older man and the younger grinned at each other a moment understandingly. Then Lucky faced about slowly, hesitated and turned back again.

"Doc," he asked haltingly, "d'ye happen t' know where Dad Page is?"

"No. The Monkey told me that his father, as deputy sheriff, was out rounding up some cattle thieves." Here Ross halted abruptly and then burst out, "Now I know where I've heard of Fred Holzworth before. Nick said—this man owed Dad Page, didn't he? Dad grub-staked him last summer, Nick said."

Lucky hesitated oddly. Then he answered cautiously, "So I've heard."

Again they mounted the trail in silence. January once more mingled with June; and the horses, which an hour before had been crushing wild flowers under their hoofs, were now slipping and stumbling over snow banks, while the stream

GOLD HUNTER

swirled past, hurrying cakes of ice into the warm valley far below. Presently the trail ahead seemed entirely closed by a singular rock tower with perpendicular sides. The trail zigzagged to its foot and then seemed to disappear.

"Hello!" exclaimed Ross. "Do we go through that little old rock or climb over it or dig under it?"

Lucky looked back with a pleasant smile. "The Hoof of the Elk that is," said he, "and we go 'round it. We've reached th' Valley of the Pass—Elk's Pass, ye know."

"Without any elk?" added Ross interrogatively.

"Without any elk," affirmed Lucky. "When I first come here there was mebbly a hundred head hereabouts, but they don't like the sound of dynamite or the smell of men. They've gone further back now, over nearer Yallerstone Park."

"Who is in the Valley?" asked Ross, anxious to know in advance whom he was to meet.

"Wall, first off there was the Toddler, and Trigger and me. We're at work there provin' up our claims. Then along come the—stranger—Hans Holzworth. Now you come." Here Lucky stopped a moment and then added in a mutter, "And I hope that's all that will come."

As the travelers approached the Hoof, Ross

ROSS GRANT

saw that the trail veered to the right of the rock and passed through a narrow defile. On the other side the mountains, that towered thousands of feet above their heads, turning the sunny afternoon into shadowy evening, retreated, forming a little valley. And through the Pass, a deep, narrow gorge opening toward the west in the direction of Miners' Camp, poured the glorious hot June sunshine, dissolving the last vestige of snow in its track and rejuvenating an abundant growth of coarse, nutritious grass. On the bank of the creek stood a hobbled broncho drinking. At the mouth of the Pass was a log shack, and in the center of the valley two more built within a rod of each other. Against the logs of the larger leaned two men silently watching.

"Which is which?" asked Ross.

"Short one's Tod Brunel; thin one's Trigger West."

The Toddler, short, fat, good-natured, waddled as he walked. Trigger was lean, restless, and nervous in his movements. At present, however, he industriously supported the side logs with the Toddler, his hands rammed deep into his pockets.

Lucky introduced Ross by jerking his head in the boy's direction and announcing: "Doc's all in. Better rustle 'im some grub."

"Snaked 'im along, didn't ye?" exclaimed

GOLD HUNTER

Trigger, removing his hands from his pockets and awakening to action. He grinned hospitably at Ross. "Wall, Lucky, I never met up with your equal on doin' what ye set out t' do."

The Toddler also grinned genially at Ross, but addressed his companion. "Say, Lucky, if you haven't had anything to eat since you left here at midnight, the front of your stomach must be smashin' against your back-bone!"

"Doc's is," assented Lucky. Then he nodded toward the door of the other shack. "How is he?"

"So-so," responded Tod easily. "Luny off and on, face swelled big as two, drinkin' the crick dry right along, and squinting at a letter from his best girl on the sly."

Lucky, about to dismount, jerked himself upright in the saddle. "Letter?" he repeated quickly.

Trigger jumped into the conversational arena, his hands in action. "He does this way with it, and this, and then this," going through the motions of bringing the letter close to his eyes and then holding it off at arm's length. "But he can't seem to see nothin', along of one eye bein' tied up and the other not bein' in workin' order."

"Must be from some girl, or he wouldn't be so

ROSS GRANT

blamed anxious to look at it again," affirmed Tod, "nor to hide it when we're around."

Lucky offered no comments, but proceeded to dismount, whereupon the two spectators retired to the interior of the shack, where a clatter of tinware indicated that they were "rustling grub."

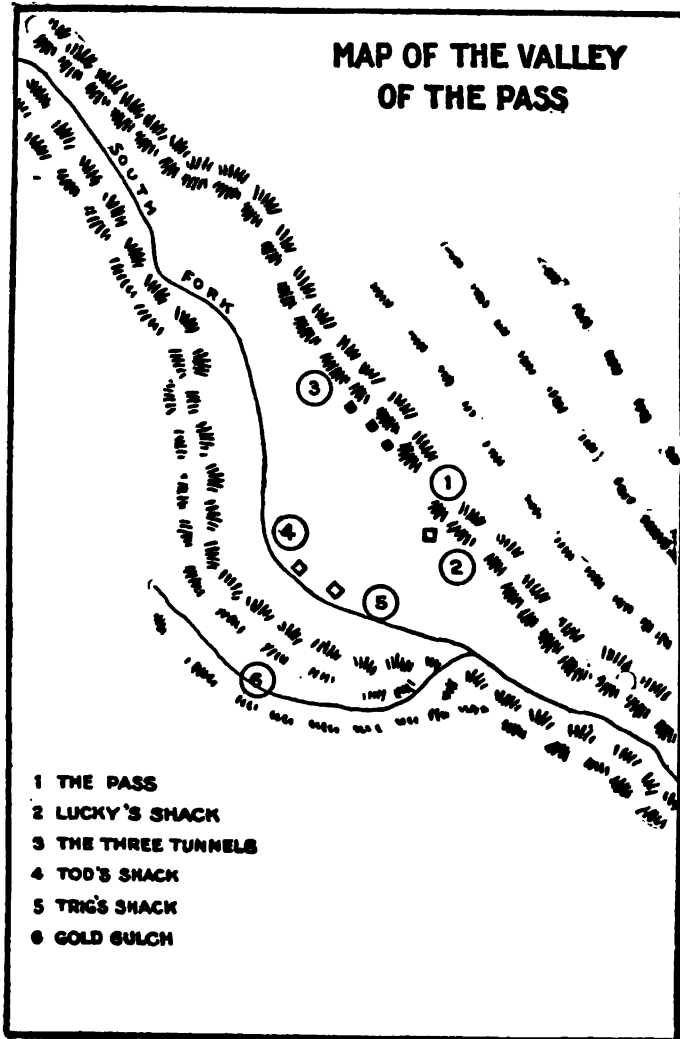
"This shack's Tod's," explained Lucky. "Here's where we eat. That one's Trig's. *He's* there. Mine is yon beside the Pass. Before *he* come we was each livin' in our own. Now we've had to double up and change 'round. One of us stays all the time with him. Want yer box in where he is?"

Ross nodded, and Lucky, lifting the small but heavy chest lightly, bore it into the shack, followed by the boy.

Trigger's shack, that housed the sick man, like the others, consisted of one room, the log walls and ceiling chinked with dried mud. The hard dirt floor was uneven, the small sheet-iron stove rusty, and the pine board table minus a leg. There were boxes for chairs, and, nailed against the side logs, one on either side of the small, dirty window, were bunks filled with mountain-grass and covered with soiled blankets.

In one of these bunks lay Hans Holzworth, a young German. A red kerchief was bound over one eye; the other was bloodshot. His face was

GOLD HUNTER



ROSS GRANT

badly swollen and rough with a neglected beard. At present he was coughing and shaking in a chill. As the two entered the shack, he hastily slipped a fat envelope under a folded blanket which served as a pillow.

"Doc's come," announced Lucky, depositing the chest on the floor.

The one eye stared uncomprehendingly from man to boy. Then Hans arose shakily on one elbow, pointed to his swollen face, and poured out a flow of German, to which Ross shook his head hopelessly. But when, by way of introducing himself, he grasped the sick man's wrist and placed a finger on the pulse, an expression of grateful comprehension illuminated the eye; and Hans, falling back in the bunk, intrusted himself to the care of the embryo physician. Then Ross, throwing off his top coat and unlocking the chest, fell to work. He dragged the crude table to the side of the bunk, and laid thereon thermometer, bandages, antiseptics, absorbent cotton, and half a dozen other appliances with which his uncle, Dr. Grant, had furnished him. His manner underwent a change. From a diffident, overgrown boy of slow and rather uncertain movements he became alert, sure of motion, and possessed of a species of self-confidence which breeds confidence in others. Ross, so his uncle affirmed, was born a physician.

GOLD HUNTER

Lucky felt the change, and drew nearer hopefully. His deep-set eyes lighted and warmed until Ross, glancing up at the strong face with its square jaws and big, rugged features, met the warmth, and knew that it had melted his last regret that he was at Elk's Pass instead of speeding toward Pennsylvania.

"What's he got," asked Lucky finally, "besides this here bad gash on the cheek?"

"I guess it's sort of a grippe," answered the embryo physician. "That's easier to deal with than the cheek. The air up here would take care of any grippe. The cut and bruise are dangerously near the eye. If I could have attended to it twenty-four hours ago ——" he hesitated. "It's in bad shape now. I wish a regular physician could take charge of him."

Lucky squared his great stooped shoulders. "I guess ye're good fer it, Doc," he returned with quiet confidence; "and there's no one else t' git."

In an hour the cabin had taken on the appearance and order of a hospital, with Ross commanding surgeon and Lucky a willing but exceedingly clumsy assistant. The cheek was dressed, and the patient's visible eye was taking on a restful, sleepy expression when Tod came over from the twin cabin in his rolling, easy gait and planted himself curiously in the doorway. Behind him came

ROSS GRANT

Trigger with quick, nervous steps. He also looked in curiously over the shorter man's shoulders.

"H'm'm," sniffed Tod, wrinkling his fat nose. "Smells like the time I had two teeth out, one man holding me and a couple more pullin'. That was in Omaha. Didn't know there was a smell like it in the mountains. H'm! Can't say it is exactly as fetching as rose perfume, but it may be a plaguy sight more useful."

Ross laughed. "It's the disinfectant on his cheek. That's a bad cut."

"I wisht," ventured Trigger in a hushed and awed tone, "that I could seen ye fix it up."

"You can to-morrow."

"But before to-morrow," interposed Tod, "there's a feedin' or three of bacon and flapjacks and a few other things. One feed is ready right now, and I surmise you're both ready for it. The flapjacks will be cold if you don't hurry. Now, if Trig here had baked 'em," he explained leading the way to the other cabin, "they'd be full better taken cold and far apart; but mine can be snaked down by the dozen pipin' hot."

"Doc," defended Trigger as they sat down to flapjacks and coffee, "if ye stay here long enough, ye'll find that the only quick thing about this man Tod is his tongue. It don't seem t' tire him none t' wag it from mornin' till night!"

GOLD HUNTER

"I was born tired," Tod returned, "and haven't had time yet to outgrow the feelin'."

"Huh!" retorted Trigger. "The more ye grow the less you outgrow that feelin'. If ye'd move around more ——"

"You do enough movin' around for both," interrupted the Toddler with great good nature. "Trig, if you were as full of learnin' as I am you'd know there was such a thing as conservation of energy, and that's *exactly* what I am."

Ross chuckled and looked with an access of interest at Tod. He appeared to have had a wider acquaintance than the other two with the world beyond the mountains.

"I don't know a thing about no conservation of energy by that name," returned Trig, "but if it does mean you I know what I'd call it!"

At this thrust the Toddler sent out such an amused shout that Ross hushed him. "That man Hans what's-his-name ought to be asleep by this time," he expostulated.

Tod subsided sheepishly. "Ain't used to having sick folks about, Doc. Anyway, it's all Trig's fault! You'll have to rope and tie him half the time to keep him quiet. He's a fizzling, sizzling Fourth of July fireworks display all the year around."

"With you to tech off the fuses!" mentioned

ROSS GRANT

Lucky, at which the Toddler shook like a bowl of jelly.

Tod sat in the door of the cabin as Lucky and Ross ate, but Trigger was ever on the move. It did not take Ross long to learn the leading characteristics of the two men which had given them their nicknames. By nature, the Trigger was restless and excitable. He was imaginative, and saw future success and failure largely according to his mood. One day his mining-claims were bound to yield him a fortune; the Burlington Railroad was bound to build a branch up among the mountains within a year; and a smelter would soon be located at Miners' Camp. The next day his future would be filled with gloom, the claims a failure, and the Burlington road an unreliable factor in the development of the mining-interests of the Shoshones.

To Tod, with his round, red cheeks and sleepy eyes, the work of the day was sufficient, and the day's hopes and fears. "I wouldn't build that smelter to-night," he would advise the irritated Trigger, "nor lay the ties for the branch road. Wait till some day when you lay off from work up in the tunnel."

Between the two stood Lucky. Lucky worked as hard as Trigger, but possessed a stability and common sense which Trigger lacked. He was as

GOLD HUNTER

calm as Tod, but possessed the ambition and activity which Tod lacked. Instinctively Ross turned to Lucky. So did the other two.

The boy was glad, when night came, to hear Lucky announce his intention of staying in Trigger's cabin, where the sick man lay. He brought his blankets from the cabin at the entrance of the Pass and made up a bed on the floor. Ross was to occupy the second bunk in the cabin as long as he remained in the valley. Hans was restless and feverish, and Ross's confidence in his own medical skill was not so great as to preclude uneasiness as to the outcome of his patient's illness. He felt the same sense of security in Lucky's presence that Lucky evidently felt in his.

About nine o'clock Hans fell asleep, and Lucky insisted on Ross's turning in. "Ye've had a hard day of it, Doc, and ye might as well rest when ye can. I'll set by fer a spell and give 'im water when he wakes up."

Therefore, Ross rolled himself up in a blanket, the night being cold, and tumbling into the bunk, fell asleep immediately; but it was not a sound sleep. The care of Hans oppressed him, and, at the least movement from the other bunk, he would open his eyes. Whenever Hans' temperature arose ever so little, he became slightly delirious; and, presently, he began to push and work at the side

ROSS GRANT

logs, muttering something about "das Gold." The mutter aroused Ross, but he did not at once move. He merely opened his eyes and looked across the intervening space at the mutterer. Between the bunks in front of the window stood the little rough table, and on it was a miner's candlestick, the candle burning low.

Ross wondered if Lucky were asleep and was about to raise his arm from its position across his face when Hans, throwing off his blanket impatiently, drew an envelope from beneath the folded blanket which served as a pillow. He continued to mutter about "das Gold" while turning the envelope aimlessly over and over. Simultaneously there was a light step in front of Ross's bunk and Lucky, in his bare feet, approached the sick man swiftly and bent over him, scanning the directions on the envelope. It was at once thrust hastily under the pillow, while Hans stared upward straining his exposed eye in a delirious effort to place the intruder.

Lucky, making no effort to touch the letter, drew back, and filling a cup with cold water from a pail, raised the sick man's head gently and held the cup to his lips. Then, with a glance at Ross, lying with his arm across his face, he lay down between the blankets he had spread on the hard floor and went to sleep.

GOLD HUNTER

In the morning, Tod "slung grub" for the little community, after which he and Trigger repaired to their tunnels on the side of Elk Mountain, but Lucky lingered with Ross, although the latter had learned that he was behind in his assessment work.

"You don't need to stay here all day," Ross declared. "I can take care of Hans—but see here!" he pointed at the side of the shack; "if I need you what's the matter with hanging a towel on those nails outside here? Can't you see it from your tunnel?"

Lucky absently stared at the spot on the logs indicated, and nodded. Then his gaze went back to the trail that led from Wood River Valley over the intervening mountains and through the Pass. He was standing between the two shacks while Ross occupied the doorway of Trigger's cabin. There seemed to be something on his mind about which he could not bring himself to speak at once.

"Which tunnel is yours?" asked Ross finally, scanning the side of Elk.

"Middle one. Trig's is on the left and Tod's the right."

Elk Mountain was the highest peak in the mountains encircling the valley. It rose precipitously, facing Ross as he looked out from the doorway. Its side was bare of all vegetation in

ROSS GRANT

long avalanche-swept slopes, that alternated with timber-packed stretches protected from the loads of snow and ice above by huge up-standing boulders or sudden outcropping ridges above timber line. A well-worn trail led from the shacks across the valley to the Pass, zigzagged up the mountain from the foot of this cut, and then, turning, led still up across the face of the mighty granite pile to where three rectangular openings, dark and timber-framed, opened into the heart of the mountain. In the tunnels to which these doorways led the three residents of the valley were doing the "development work"—in this case digging—required by law before they could "patent the claims," or, in other words, receive from the state of Wyoming the full rights to that bit of public land to which each had laid claim, ownership rights that carried with them a right not only to the worthless surface, but to all metals and minerals that might be found anywhere within the twenty acres that constitute one legal "claim."

Ross, watching, saw Trigger presently trundle a small hand-car full of ore out of his tunnel across the trail and dump it down the mountainside. From that distance the worker looked like a miniature man, but his outlines were perfectly distinct in the rare, clear air that deceives the stranger in the mountains and causes him to think that an

GOLD HUNTER

object fifteen miles away is lying within a mile of his door.

Suddenly Lucky asked without looking up: "Doc, when Hans speaks Dutch, you don't savvy what he means, do you?"

Ross shook his head. "Only a few words. I can read a little—just sort of primer sentences. I took French at prep school, but I've studied German a little by myself. I have to have it in college. Got a dictionary in my box."

Lucky's head sank forward until his chin rested on his chest. For a moment he dug his toe into the loam. Then, suddenly, whirling on his heel, he planted himself in front of the astonished boy.

"Doc," he said quietly, "there's somethin' I must tell ye before I go t' work—and ask ye t' do. That letter in there"—he nodded toward Hans' bunk,—“ye must have seen 'im have it in his hand?” Lucky paused for confirmation.

Ross nodded.

"Wall, it ain't from no girl, that letter ain't. Tod and Trigger, they don't know. It's from——" He checked himself and then began again. "I want ye t' take it and lock it up in yer chest there, and say nothin' to nobody about it. Keep it tight against his gettin' well."

Ross started back with a negative movement of his hand. "Oh, no——" he was beginning

ROSS GRANT

when Lucky cut him short. In his earnestness he grasped the boy's arm in a hand the unconscious tension of which made him wince.

"Doc, yesterday when I found Bill didn't know Hans was here I sort of rested easy on nobody's knowin', but I've made up my mind that it ain't safe t' do no restin'. Even if Bill don't know there's them that may. Now, Doc, I'll tell ye somethin' about it, and then you'll see what I mean. Tell me first, though—what d'ye know about Fred Holzworth?"

Ross hesitated. "I never heard of him until Nick Page told me—and he didn't tell much, just that Dad had grub-staked this Fred last summer ——"

"Was it a grub-stake or a loan?" asked Lucky sharply.

Ross hesitated. "What did Nick say about that—he spoke of both—I can't remember which he said it was."

"They's some different," Lucky muttered.

With the difference Ross was well acquainted, a grub-stake entitling the staker to half of the discoveries of the man whom he had outfitted for prospecting.

"Well, anyway," Ross continued, "I got the idea from Nick that Holzworth was just an unsuccessful, quartz-crazy prospector."

GOLD HUNTER

Lucky released the boy's arm and again faced Elk Mountain. He drew a long breath. "Not s' unsuccessful as folks thinks," he began. "No, before he died Fred struck it rich somewhere; he never told me where. But he was a sick man when he made his find wherever it was. He had t' hike out. He got as fer as Meeteetse, and no further."

Again Lucky drew a long breath. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That letter in there I directed myself, 'n' I packed it t' the post-office. I never seen the inside of it, but I have reasons fer sayin'."—here a long arm shot out impressively—"reasons, mind ye, fer sayin' that the way to what Fred found is put down in it; and, Doc, *nobody but Fred's brother must find the way.*"

For a moment Lucky and Ross stared at each other in silence. Then Lucky's face lighted as he added quietly: "Doc, ye can see now why nobody must see the inside of that letter. If Trig and Tod believe it's from some girl, let 'em—but, Doc, I asks ye—will ye find some way t' get hold of that letter? Mebby he'll trust ye with it, because you're helpin' him."

"If I can make him understand," assented Ross finally, "I will." Then he broke off abruptly, and glanced up at the side of Elk Mountain.

ROSS GRANT

“But if they don’t know anything about its importance, why do you worry——”

Lucky interrupted. “I wa’n’t thinkin’ of them, either of ’em, but of some one that I knows suspects about what’s in the letter. And he has it in ’im t’ make this here Hans Holzworth a powerful sight of trouble!”

CHAPTER III

NICHOLAS ARRIVES—AND OTHERS

As abruptly as he had begun the conversation Lucky ended it. He left Ross puzzling over the man under suspicion. Naturally he thought at once of Dad Page because of what Nicholas had told him, but Dad did not answer to Lucky's description of some one "who has it in him to make Hans a powerful sight of trouble."

"Dad's reputation in these parts is all right," Ross told himself as he reëntered the cabin. "And as long as Lucky told me part I wish he had made a clean breast of the whole thing."

With his thoughts divided, he turned his attention to ways and means of getting hold of the letter. Presently he determined on his action. Getting out his German dictionary, he sat down on his chest, and, turning his back on the doorway, bent to his task of framing crude sentences in German. As he worked, the brilliant sunshine, streaming through the Pass, touched with glory the white heads of the peaks opposite Elk; it streamed in at the open door of the cabin. It

ROSS GRANT

melted a film of ice across South Fork, and sent it tinkling merrily on its way to Wood River Valley.

Ross could scarcely keep his eyes on his work. The glorious morning called him. He was forgetting the long shut-in, snow-bound months that had gone before. He was beginning to feel more friendly to the mountains, more at home among them. The life out-of-doors and heavy manual labor had lifted his shoulders, accustomed to drooping too long at a time over a medical book, and had given a steel-like timbre to his muscles, while the invigorating, pure air had expanded his chest. And now the life, hardy, free, healthful, was beginning to appeal to him. Devoted as he was to his chosen profession he realized that he preferred to be with Lucky up on the side of Elk, wielding a pickaxe, than sitting inert beside a sick man. From one of the tunnels came a series of blasts, echoing among the mountains and disturbing Ross's distasteful literary labors. Inside the cabin quiet reigned as his pencil traveled laboriously across the paper. Occasionally he looked over his shoulder at Hans, who alternately slept and fumbled at the logs against which his bunk was nailed and talked of "das Gold" to the puzzled listener.

Suddenly, without warning, there was a sound just outside the shack, a human sound. Ross had

GOLD HUNTER

heard no one approach, but now a sibilant "Sh" sounded near the door. Startled, he sprang to his feet, dictionary, pencil and paper sliding from his knees. Striding across the dirt floor he came face to face with the Monkey, peering around the door jamb curiously at the sick man.

"I'm here," announced the boy. "What did I tell you? All here! Grub, sleeping bag and all. I ask no favors of the grouchy Lucky. He doesn't own quite all of the Valley of the Pass. I salute it!"

With this the visitor dropped lightly on his hands, elevated his legs and standing upright on the top of his tow head waved his feet in salutation east, west, north and south, while Ross sat on his feet in the doorway and laughed. Having finished this ceremony, the younger boy threw himself over backward in a somersault, and landed on his feet, bounding in the air a couple of times as though he were made of rubber and could no more stop than a ball set in motion.

"How do you do it?" asked Ross. He had asked this question of Nicholas many times with the helplessness born of the consciousness of his own heavy, awkward movements.

Nicholas looked down critically at his spidery figure. "First, I was born that way, and then I grew that way, and lastly I practised that way. What d'ye think Dad wants me to practise on?"

ROSS GRANT

The piano!" The boy gave a derisive yell. "The piano! Think of that! Gee, how I'd look playing the piano." He suddenly plumped himself down on a rock, and going through with the motions of spreading a pair of imaginary coat tails, smoothing his hair back and holding his elbows close to his sides, he bent his wiry little wrists downward, rolled his blue eyes upward, and proceeded to give an imaginary piano a thorough drubbing.

"There, is that as becoming to me?" he asked. "And what use," he added, "would Buffalo Bill have for a piano player? I spent all the time I could get in the gymnasium at Omaha. Like gym work?"

Ross shook his head reluctantly. "I didn't when I was obliged to exercise in one, but I think now I'd like it better—if it could make me half as supple as you are," he added.

Nicholas looked doubtful. "You're not built for suppleness. Besides, you'll have more use for your head than your feet."

This mention of Ross's head reminded Nicholas of the patient. Advancing his own head cautiously inside the doorway, he again surveyed Hans and asked softly, "Have ye found who he is?"

Ross hesitated. He remembered Lucky's rejection of Nicholas' society at the Pass and the flimsy excuses he had given—inhospitable ex-

GOLD HUNTER

cuses unusual for a man of the mountains. Recalling all this the boy replied evasively, "We call him Hans."

"And why 'Hands'?" asked Nicholas with a grin, having misunderstood the name. He pointed to a pair of generous shoes underneath the bunk. "Why not 'Feet' if the name is to fit the biggest part of him? But come on over and help me with the packhorse. *Feet* is asleep now. At least his eye is shut."

Ross followed slowly, wondering what sort of a reception the Monkey would meet at the hands of Lucky. "I'll let some one else tell him who Hans is," he decided, "although he's got to know. It's likely Lucky doesn't want him here, but here he is and here I hope he'll stay—makes things livelier, at any rate!"

At the entrance to the valley, on the banks of the South Fork, stood the spotted pony, and a packhorse on the wooden saddle of which were the boy's supplies and sleeping bag. Ross, with a backward, careful glance at his patient, and a careless glance at the dictionary, open on the floor, crossed the tiny valley with the Monkey. His acquaintance with pack outfits was not so intimate yet that their structure and contents had ceased to interest him. It was rather exact work to pack a horse heavily and well for a long jour-

ROSS GRANT

ney, but the Monkey had brought along only a few days' supplies. First, a blanket was laid across the pack animal and on it a big wooden saddle was cinched securely. Across this saddle the load was balanced and roped. There was a bag of meal and one of flour. There was a gunny sack containing salt, sugar, coffee, bacon and ham. On top of these supplies another gunny bag held a collection of the indispensable "canned goods," while dangling at the animal's sides or stuck beneath the taut ropes were pans, skillets and a coffee-pot.

"See here," cried the Monkey, delving among the canned goods. "See what I got!"

He brought various tin cans to the surface, peas, tomatoes, sauce of different kinds, sweet corn, and lastly asparagus. This, with a small jar of butter, he exhibited with great glee.

"See here what I brought up to stand treat on. I want you all to fill up on these, especially the old Grouch that gave me such a cordial invite to come! Bet they haven't seen butter in this valley, and mebbly none of 'em ever saw asparagus. I brought a lot of cans of that up from Omaha this spring. Dad doesn't like it—says it tastes like dish-water. Hope it tastes like that to these men, and then you and I can put it all away!"

He grinned cheerfully as he drew two hobbles

GOLD HUNTER

from the sack and throwing one to Ross, bent in front of the packhorse. About its fore legs just above the knees he buckled on the hobble, the two encircling leg straps being connected by another so that the animal could take steps of but a few inches long. This enabled it to graze freely, but prevented it from wandering far away or climbing the mountains. When both horses were hobbled, the Monkey selected a hillock which the horses could not climb. Here he laid out his sleeping bag, at which Ross looked curiously.

"Brought that from Omaha this spring too," Nicholas informed him. "Here, get in it and see what it's like."

Ross obeyed. He wriggled himself between the warm blankets fitted into a long waterproof bag closed at its lower end, the under side of the bag extending at the upper end into a flap which the owner of the bag folded over Ross's head.

"There you are, in case it rains, as snug as a bug in a rug!" he cried dancing about. "Here! I put the horse blankets for pillows under the flap and lay it back over 'em open pleasant nights. See? Now you can be warm and easy and dry and defy consumption of one kind and another!"

"Except consumption of food," added Ross, crawling out of the bag. "I'm hungry as a hound this minute. Come on over to the cabin and let's

ROSS GRANT

get dinner ourselves. We can have it all ready for the men when they come down. It's Trigger's turn to get it, and he hates to cook."

"It takes me to sling good grub," boasted Nicholas. "Here, lend a hand to get the stuff over there and then go 'long! This dinner is all on me. I've brought up a dozen potatoes that I found in the cellar down at the ranch and we'll have them and some other vegetables, for fear the asparagus tastes like dish-water to 'em, ye know," with a chuckle. "Now I'll earn me a welcome, see if I don't."

While Ross busied himself with the sick man, the Monkey "slung grub" with painstaking care and reckless prodigality, determined to earn a welcome from the strangely inhospitable Lucky. When Trigger came from Elk bent on doing his duty in the culinary department, he began to sniff inquiringly as he approached the twin cabins. Ross, glancing out of the doorway on his way to the water pail, saw him give one glance into the other cabin and then shout:

"If here ain't the Monkey! The great horn spoon! And if he ain't slinging grub! This is one time I ain't wishin' that company was a thousand miles away. I'm not at all dislikin' the kind that takes a-holt like this!"

Unceremoniously Trigger stepped to the stove

GOLD HUNTER

and accompanied his comments by the uncovering of various pans and kettles while the cook stood by laughing.

"Spuds!" was Trigger's first discovery as he looked at the boiling potatoes. "Them didn't grow in the Valley of the Pass! I hain't glued my lookers on a spud in so long I forgot they belong t' the vegetable kingdom. Huh!" pointing to a skillet of bacon, "that's no stranger. I've et bacon three times a day since these mountings was young! Wall, what in tarnation is this?" He bent low and surveyed the bubbling contents of a pan. "Eggs! Say, Monkey, why didn't ye rope a couple of the cattle that lays these things and bring 'em along? I reco'lect that hen is tasty, but I can't reco'lect how it tastes. As fer eggs, I hain't seen one in s' long that I'd forgot they're round! And, Monkey, what under the blue canopy is this here?" Trigger was looking at the asparagus, standing upright in the can, from which the cook had removed the top. "Do we eat it or does the hosses? Is it a newfangled picket fence, or do they use it as a hedge down in Omaha?"

Before the boy had time to answer, Lucky and the Toddler appeared, the latter as openly delighted at the sight of the newcomer as Trigger. Lucky, following Tod, stopped on the threshold

ROSS GRANT

frowning. Nicholas at once addressed the frown, squinting his eyes together impishly.

"You don't have to give me bunk nor board. I furnished both myself and some board for you, and here it is all cooked and ready."

The frown faded from Lucky's face, although his eyes held an expression of perplexity. He glanced about. "Wall, the 'some fer us' don't look so bad! Do we eat now?"

The Monkey dexterously emptied the asparagus into a basin and set it on the stove. "In just a York second. Get Doc, will you?"

Lucky crossed the space between the twin cabins slowly and stood in the doorway of Trigger's. Ross had just finished feeding Hans and was adjusting the bandage over the injured cheek. The neglected dictionary and paper lay on the chest.

"Come t' grub," invited Lucky. Then he stepped inside and lowered his voice, "What luck, Doc, with the letter?"

Ross glanced uneasily at the dictionary. "I had begun to get some German sentences together when the Monkey came. You didn't want Nick here, did you?"

"I don't want any one here," said Lucky slowly, "who'll go back and spread the news in Wood River Valley that Hans is here. That's the only reason I didn't want Nick."

GOLD HUNTER

"I see," said Ross slowly. "Well, I'll go at that letter business again after dinner."

"Of course, Doc," said Lucky haltingly, "ye didn't explain nothin'—to nobody?"

Ross shook his head. "The Monkey doesn't even know Hans' name, to say nothing about the letter."

He was learning it, however, at that moment, and when Ross reached the eating shack he was greeted by the demand :

"Hey, there, Doc! What d'ye mean by telling me that 'Feet's' name was 'Hands'? He's Fred Holzworth's brother. Don't you know I told you over in Miners' that Fred died owing Dad?"

Ross drew up the end of a bench and sat down at the loaded table. "Oh, yes! That's so, you did tell me," he mumbled.

"Wonder if Dad knows about this Hans, and that he's here?" speculated Nicholas, while Lucky looked at him curiously. "Wonder if he has come out here as quartz crazy as Fred was. If he is, I hope he keeps away from Dad. Dad can't help grub-stakin' men any more than I can help—well, he'd say—talking," frankly. "But what's a tongue made for except to talk?"

"To eat!" responded Tod, "when you're around to dish up the grub. Say! Monkey, you're the very maverick that Trig would like to corral here

ROSS GRANT

to preside over our eatin' department permanent!"

"You bet!" cried Trigger, his mouth full. "What would ye take, Monk, to sling grub fer us stiddy—and furnish it? Schoolin' generally makes a feller worthless, but it hain't you—so fur, that is," encouragingly.

"Nobody has given the asparagus any notice yet," complained the cook. "What does it taste like, picket fence or hedge?"

Tod reached unceremoniously across the table and secured another portion. "It tastes to me like Massachusetts and York State rolled into one. First I've seen or smelled or tasted since I struck the wild and woolly."

"We were in hopes," observed Ross, "that no one would like it!"

"Here," said Trigger generously, "take all that's comin' to me. A little of it goes a long ways with this cow-puncher! And give me that last spud if there ain't a kick comin' from nobody," with a pointed look at Tod.

"I want it myself," returned that individual promptly, "but I'll give it up to you. I'm not like some that I know—who make it a rule never to give away anything they want themselves! Charity, I used to hear back East, begins at home!"

GOLD HUNTER

"And as I used to hear," retorted Trigger, "with most folks it generally stays there!"

After dinner Lucky, who had recovered his usual good-nature, genially invited Nicholas to go up to the tunnels with him, and Ross understood that the invitation was given to allow him time for the German sentences.

"Go on, Nick," he urged when the boy hesitated and looked at him. "I'm going to be busy for a while here and don't want you around to bother. I could work just as well looking at a three-ring circus!"

Thus pulled and pushed, the Monkey departed with the men, leaving Ross watching them longingly. As usual, Tod and Trigger were badgering each other, both men being aided in turn by Nicholas whose high-pitched laugh rang back through the valley. Lucky walked slowly in advance, looking back occasionally at the figure in the doorway. Lucky was not given to speech, especially humorous speech. Ross watched them climbing the side of Elk, appearing and disappearing among the trees and sage-brush until they looked like toy men wending their way on a thread stretched across the face of the mighty mountain.

Before entering Lucky's tunnel, the Monkey waved his handkerchief and Ross, responding,

ROSS GRANT

turned reluctantly again to his dictionary. The tiny valley was silent, the horses having wandered into the willows beside the South Fork. Hans was asleep, and there was nothing to prevent Ross from continuing his task of attempting to get possession of the letter. It was not, he considered, a very necessary task. Why go to all this trouble to get possession of something the importance of which no one at the Pass realized save Lucky and himself?

"I believe Lucky's worry is all useless," Ross concluded. "I don't see any harm in Hans' keeping his letter. Don't believe I can make him understand my intentions, anyway."

Still, he had promised Lucky, and, therefore, he sat down again on his chest, his back to the enticing open doorway, his face toward the sick man, and began to wrestle with German sentences. An hour passed and he had become so interested that he did not notice that Hans had awakened and had slyly drawn the letter from beneath his pillow.

Unfolding the sheet, the sick man held it at arm's length from the unfettered eye, striving in vain to separate one word from another, that eye being unable to distinguish fine characters without the aid of the broken lens.

Suddenly he gave vent to a startled "Hein!"



“ I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE HERE ”

GOLD HUNTER

followed by a fit of coughing. Ross looked up in time to see him hastily fold up the sheet and restore it to its envelope and the envelope to its place beneath the pillow. Then a voice pleasant and drawling caused the boy to spring to his feet and face the doorway. For the second time that day the Valley of the Pass had suffered a noiseless invasion.

"Hello, Doc! Nose flattened ag'in' a book, as usual, ain't it? Mystery t' me how it ever got to grow to such a pretty length."

In the doorway, his hands clasped around his knees, his sombrero pushed back on his reddish hair, sat Sandy McKenzie, a man concerning whom Ross knew little good and a great deal of harm, and whom he had personally little cause for liking.

The paper on which he had been writing fluttered to the floor. In confusion he stooped to recover it, saying haltingly, "Why—hello, McKenzie. I didn't know you were here!"

Sandy arose and stretched up his arms in a vocal yawn. The third finger of his right hand was gone. Ross had good reason to remember the occasion on which it had been shot away. At present, however, no one would have suspected that Sandy had any save the most cordial feelings toward the boy.

ROSS GRANT

"I didn't know I was here, neither, Doc, till a minute or two ago," he explained. "Mart and I hiked 'er up along the South Fork prospectin'."

"I heard only yesterday morning," exclaimed Ross quickly, "that you were going over to the Big Horn."

Sandy leaned against the door jamb, his hands in the pockets of his corduroy trousers. "Ye're gittin' deaf, Doc, sure as preachin', if ye think ye heard that. No, we've been outfittin' fer these parts. Mebby," with a wide grin, "they's a fortune kickin' around here fer yours truly."

Suddenly a light began to dawn on Ross. He recalled Lucky's question of the day before concerning the whereabouts of Sandy. A comparison of the reputations of Sandy and Dad Page flashed over him, leaving him rapidly tying up Lucky's anxiety, thread by thread, to Sandy. As he thought, he moved aimlessly about the shack, putting things to rights. He replied mumblingly to Sandy's pleasantries. The sick man began impatiently to insist on something, only one word of which Ross understood, but at present did not care to heed.

Sandy threw his hat on the bench, and, adjusting the red silk tie beneath the turnover collar of his gray flannel shirt, walked coolly over to the bunk, and surveyed the occupant, the table, and

GOLD HUNTER

the blanket pillow. Ross trod closely on his heels. He realized now why Lucky was so anxious to get that letter under lock and key.

"So Fred's brother is here," mused Sandy. "Poor Fred! Friend of mine."

"Was he?" Ross asked himself.

Sandy pushed one hand into his pocket. With the other he absently pulled at a lock of hair which fell between his eyes. Without noticing Ross's silence he continued, "Bill Travers told me that you'd started East hot-footed, but Lucky got ye t' turn back. Wall, don't suppose it'll be long before Hans'll be up again. Eh?"

Ross rearranged the contents of the table. "He'll get over the grippe in no time up here in this air, but that face—well, I'm not so sure about his cheek."

Resting one knee easily on the bunk, Sandy thrust both hands into his pockets and asked solicitously about the wound, occasionally tossing the hanging lock out of his eyes. Sandy had a frank and pleasing manner and jovial ways well calculated to snare the confidence of the unwary. His blue eyes met Ross's gaze fully for an instant, then slid away, only to return and slide away again.

"Wasser," demanded the sick man reproachfully.

"What's that he's wantin'?" asked Sandy curiously.

ROSS GRANT

Ross hesitated, glanced at the empty pail on a bench beside the door, and replied, "Water."

Sandy followed his eyes, settled himself more firmly against the bunk, and, without offering to go after the water, began to relate volubly the incidents connected with outfitting himself and his brother Waymart for a protracted stay in the mountains. Sandy was more talkative than the majority of mountain men.

As Hans' thirst became more clamorous, the newcomer removed his knee from the bunk, stretched out his legs, and shrugged his shoulders. "I'll hang around here with him, Doc," he offered cordially, "while ye hike after some 'wasser.' I'd do the hikin' myself if I wasn't so leg-weary from the saddle."

He spoke carelessly; but Ross, glancing up, caught a momentary gleam in his eyes as they ranged over the bunk. The boy picked up the tiny thermometer, sat doggedly down on the side of the bunk, and inserted the instrument into Hans' mouth, saying:

"He'll have to go thirsty for a while."

Ross was doing some rapid thinking. He was determined not to leave Sandy with that letter; yet Hans ought to have the water. At least two hours would elapse before the men returned from the side of Elk. Before that time, also, he would

GOLD HUNTER

be obliged to go into Tod's shack to prepare some jerked-elk broth for the sick man. What could he do?

Glancing about the cabin, his eyes rested on the tin basin half full of water. "Why, I had forgotten——" he began aloud, and checked himself hastily.

"Forgotten what?" asked Sandy.

"Stuff for him to take," responded Ross promptly.

He picked up a bottle, and then, as though another thought had but then assailed him, laid it aside, and took a towel from the table, and, dipping it in the basin, bathed Hans' face. Tossing the wet towel across the table, he asked good-naturedly: "If you're not too leg-weary, McKenzie, I wish you'd take that towel and hang it up beside the door. You'll see two nails about a foot apart. Spread it out well so it will dry more quickly."

CHAPTER IV

A "WILD WEST" SCOUT

AFTER hanging the towel outside the cabin, Sandy at once returned to his post of observation beside Hans, who was still begging for "Wasser."

"Better stop his mouth with a drink," he urged. "I'll stay."

"By and by," assented Ross, and began to rearrange the bandages over Hans' face, at the same time glancing out of the doorway to the side of Elk.

Before the bandaging was completed, in response to the white sign he saw a figure hurrying along the high trail. It disappeared among the trees and reappeared presently at the foot of the mountain. Ross arose slowly, and picked up the water pail. An eager light flashed again into Sandy's eyes. Ross stopped to wipe out the pail. Sandy moved restlessly about the cabin, and followed the boy to the door. There he made a sudden sound in his throat as Ross stopped, exclaiming innocently :

"If there ain't Lucky ! I'll get him to go."

He stood in the doorway with a silent Sandy,

GOLD HUNTER

and watched Lucky's approach. Down beside the creek stood three packhorses and two saddle horses. Waymart McKenzie, a man slightly larger than Sandy and darker, was unloading the stuff. Sandy was the brains of the McKenzie outfit, and Waymart the hands.

"Going to camp here?" asked Ross carelessly.

Sandy nodded, abruptly pointing to the top of the knoll occupied by the Monkey's possessions.

"Whose outfit is that?"

"Nicholas Page's."

"Oh—just the Monkey's!" echoed Sandy and there was a trace of relief in his tone. Then as Lucky came striding toward them, he raised his voice at Waymart.

"Want me?" he asked, and, in answer to an affirmative reply, he waved his hand at the approaching man, grinned affably at Ross, and walking slowly across the narrow valley, aided his brother in pitching a small tent between two spruce trees almost at the water's edge.

Lucky said nothing until he stood beside Ross. He was breathing heavily, and scowling darkly at the group beside the creek. "Wall—this is what I was afraid of," he said finally. "Sandy's been on the lookout probably for Hans, and knew when he come, and has follered him—jest as I was afraid of. Has he seen that letter?"

ROSS GRANT

"No," answered Ross. Then he related the circumstances which had led to his hanging out the white signal. "I feel sure from his manner that Sandy was prepared to get a sight of the letter right now," he added.

"I hain't a doubt of it," Lucky spoke with conviction. "If he could 'a' seen it, he and Waymart would 'a' made their get-away without stoppin' fer so much as a 'Howdy' to us. As ye see they're fixin' fer a camp. Now we got t' keep our eyes open 'n' our tongues still."

Inside came a call for "Wasser" and Ross, leaving Lucky studying the ground intently, obeyed the call. He tapped cheerfully on the empty pail as he bore it out-of-doors and Hans responded with a one-sided smile. The way to the water hole led past the site selected by the McKenzies for their tent and through a thicket of quaking asp bushes just beyond.

"Hello, Waymart!" called Ross.

Waymart, as silent as Sandy was loquacious, glanced up with a sullen "Howd'ye." Waymart, left to himself, would have chosen a more restful life than the one planned by his brother.

When Ross returned with the water, he found Lucky ready to talk.

"Doc, I want t' tell ye the hull thing," he said slowly, "because it's best ye should understand."

GOLD HUNTER

The two retired to a log near Tod's cabin, and sat down facing the tent-stretching process beside the creek.

"I didn't tell ye the hull thing this mornin'," Lucky began, "because I only suspicioned what Sandy would do; and, when ye don't have nothin' but suspicion to tie to, ye better tie to it alone, and not rope some one else in. But I said t' myself, 'If Sandy follers Hans, that will mean that what I suspicioned is true.' So now I can tell ye."

Lucky clasped his hands about his knees, and stared across the valley at Sandy a moment before he began. "Ye see they ain't much t' tell that's sartin; so I'll jest go over the thing as it was. Last October Fred Holzworth showed up down in Thermopolis. Ye know where that is—over on the Big Horn River. He didn't say where he was headed fer, but hired hosses, packed 'em up, and hiked out in the night—nobody knew where to. A couple of weeks after, the hosses, his saddle hoss and the others, come a-stragglin' back t' the ranch where he got 'em. That didn't set no one t' guessin'. Everybody knew that Fred had laid by his winter store, and was som'ers around in a thousand square mile of mount'in workin'. About seven weeks ago, when I was down t' Meeteetse, the Miners' Camp stage brought 'im in, and dumped 'im at the Weller House. He was a long

ROSS GRANT

ways toward passin' in his time, and I took care of 'im." Here Lucky bent, and examined the buckle on his high mountain shoe.

"I'd been prospectin' with Fred off 'n' on ten years ago back in Colorado. We've been pards in many a deal, and so I took care of 'im. He didn't say where he'd been, and I didn't ask 'im, of course; but he give me to understand that he'd struck it rich up here in the Shoshones som'ers. There was no way of findin' out where, even if I'd wanted t' mind what was none of my business. The stage had picked 'im up on the lower ford, and so he might 'a' come down Wood River or Bear Crick or Owl Crick or South Fork or Middle Fork. And he was on snow-shoes, and was packin' along blankets and grub, a back-load, so he might 'a' come a matter of one hundred and fifty mile beyond the lower ford. I jest took what he told me, and asked nothin'."

Another pause ensued. Sandy and Waymart pulled the tent ropes taut, and made them fast to the trees. The horses, with hobbles on their fore legs, but relieved from the galling wooden pack-saddles, joined the other animals feeding in the sunshine.

"He told me about Hans," Lucky went on, "and told me that *all that he'd found* was t' go t' Hans. He said his brother was a-comin' here t'

GOLD HUNTER

be with 'im. He had an address. It was in New York. His brother was t' come there from th' old country. He said he was writin' t' him all about it. And he said, 'Lucky, when he comes, you take care of 'im, for he's naught but a boy.' Them was his words, 'Lucky, you take care of 'im.'" The man paused, and looked at Trigger's shack. "He'd set up in bed, and write a lot. Then he'd make marks like this."

Lucky stooped, and drew a stick along on the ground. The end made a line with many angles and turns and curves. Finally he straightened himself and continued :

"At last he got whatever he was doin' t' suit 'im, and then his hand was too weak t' do more ; so I got an envelope, and writ down the direction, and licked the flap myself, and hiked over t' the post-office. And here's where Sandy gits in. Sandy's generally where he hadn't no business t' be."

A scowl settled again on Lucky's face which had softened at the memory of Fred Holzworth.

"Sandy had pushed int' Fred's room some when I couldn't nowise keep 'im out, and I suspect he heard things said. Ye know Sandy. Ye know how he can make folks laugh. Ye know ye almost like 'im when all the time ye feel he'd ought t' be under lock and key."

ROSS GRANT

Ross nodded. "That's Sandy clear down to the ground."

"Wall, Fred felt that way about 'im; but he pushed in, and the day I come back from the office I found 'im standin' beside Fred, talkin' as chipper as ye please, but a-eyin' a paper that was on the bed—this paper."

Lucky turned away from the two beside the creek, and, drawing a paper from his breast pocket, unfolded it. There was a line drawn full of turns and angles, with dots and names on either side. At one end of the line was Cody. Following this were "Meeteetse," "M-bar Ranch," "Upper Ford," "South Fork," and then—here Ross gave an excited exclamation—"Elk Pass."

"Is Fred's find right here?" he cried.

Lucky shook his head decidedly. "No. Do you see? He made a mistake here with his map, and threw it away. He put th' Pass on th' wrong side of the line. Ye see he was a-fixin' a sure trail fer Hans to foller, and he couldn't let no mistake stand. So he laid this by, and made another." Lucky nodded toward the sick man's shack. "That's the one in that there letter. The envelope has my writin' on it."

"Then," asked Ross, "all that Sandy saw was this paper?"

"That's all, but that's enough. He must suspect

GOLD HUNTER

what's inside that letter after what I think he overheard ; and, Doc, don't ye fergit that he's here to make sure he's right and act on what he finds out."

"How could he act on it?" asked Ross. "What could he do?"

"It's likely," returned Lucky slowly, "that Fred in his diggin' run on a pocket of good gold-bearin' ore. And it's more'n likely that after he found it he was too weak to go on with the work. So, if Sandy could beat Hans to it, he could jump the claim, because Fred had t' come away before he got a year's work done on it, accordin' to law, ye see. He told me that much. Oh, there's more'n one way that Sandy has found to beat th' law and claim-stakers! Sandy never does things ag'in' the law. He always keeps out of its clutches," bitterly. "Sandy, he's smart. No matter what ye think about 'im, he's smart."

Ross assented grimly. "Smart! I've found that out by experience. I've seen too much of his smartness myself. Of course you heard about it—what he did to me last winter?"

Lucky lowered his gaze from the top of Elk. "Yes, I heerd," he admitted, adding, "I heerd, too, what ye did t' him, Doc. Ye ain't s' slow as ye'd have folks believe. I'm dependin' on ye in this matter." Then he drew a long breath and

ROSS GRANT

squared his shoulders. "Doc, we mustn't let 'im git his hands on that letter."

At that moment a shout sounded from the entrance to the Pass. Trigger and the Toddler were coming from their work followed by Nicholas. They had discovered the McKenzies, and the welcoming shout came from Trigger, who knew them but slightly. And a slight acquaintance with the good-natured, witty Sandy was apt to cause a hearty welcome.

"We never look fer any one t' come to the Pass, but ye always git what ye're not lookin' fer in this world, I notice!" Trigger shouted.

"And sometimes what ye find is better'n what ye look fer, and sometimes it's worse," yelled Sandy.

Lucky thrust his hands into his pockets with a sudden exclamation. "Mostly worse where *you* are concerned," he said under his breath.

The Toddler waddled forward in his own time. Nothing could hurry Tod. "What don't you see when you haven't your gun along and feel like shootin'?" he observed non-committally with a broad grin.

Sandy waved his cap gayly as he made answer. "The very biggest kind of game.—But say, Tod, where did ye drop all of yer weight? Seems like I never seen such a fairy figger as you've got on ye right now!"

GOLD HUNTER

"Dropped it in the same place where you lost your gift for gab!" returned the fat, good-natured Toddler unconcernedly, while even Waymart, sitting on his heels smoking, grinned.

Trigger threw his cap into the air delightedly. Instantly the Monkey darted forward, and even as Trigger's hands were raised to receive the cap, the boy leaped and caught it, inverted himself, and amid a confusion of laughter, held his prize on one foot toward the owner.

With the cap perched on the back of his head Trigger, raising his voice in order to be heard, shouted: "Say there, McKenzie! I'm glad Tod's got another whetstun 'sides me t' sharpen his tongue ag'in'. I'm all wore down smooth now."

"Smooth!" scoffed Tod. "You're about as smooth as a cactus. An old fellow over in Scotland, Trig, said something on purpose for you. He said it a few years back—forgot just when, but it hits you broadsides, head on!"

"Shucks!" exclaimed Trigger incredulously, yet curiously. "Spit it out."

Tod removed his cap and scratched his head thoughtfully. "It ran like this in plain United States: 'O would some power the gift but give us, to see ourselves as others see us ——'"

"That old saw!" yelled Trigger interrupting.

ROSS GRANT

"A Scotchman said it, did he? Wall, he never! A little schoolma'am back in Missouri used to git that off every day. I went to her when I was only knee-high to a grasshopper. Scotchman—I guess! And she didn't say it about me, neither. She told me to pack it around with me till I met up with a feller called Tod and turn it loose on 'im, but I'd clean forgot it!"

After this series of personal drives, made possible by Tod's unfailing good nature, Trigger asked suddenly:

"What's struck you fellers to come along up here?" He looked from Waymart to Sandy as he spoke.

Waymart, according to his custom, made no reply. Sandy replied flippantly: "Nothin's struck us. We've come t' do the strikin' ourselves!" Then he turned at once to the Monkey, asking: "What new tricks have ye got up yer sleeve beside the one we jest seen?"

Without troubling to reply verbally, Nicholas again cast himself on his head and walked toward them rapidly on his hands, his feet in the air curved over his head. As the shout of approval for this performance died away, his head and feet unexpectedly changed places momentarily and he still advanced by a series of handsprings.

"There!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "You

GOLD HUNTER

fellows can strike gold in one way, but I can in another—as soon as Dad's willing!"

As Tod and Trigger followed the acrobat into the little tent, Lucky arose and entered Tod's shack. It was his turn to "rustle grub for the outfit." Since Hans had come among them the three men had combined their housekeeping forces.

Ross retired to the side of Hans' bunk, where for a half hour he labored with the sick man and his defective German sentences. From the half-hour's labor he entered Tod's shack discouraged, and found Lucky wrestling with the supper.

"It's no use," Ross told him in a low discouraged tone, "I can't get hold of the letter. I made him understand that he must not try to use his eye, and that I'd lock the letter up if he valued it, and so forth. But I saw it made no impression on him. He won't give it up, and of course I can't take it by force. I've no right to. And another thing: if I should try to get it against his will it would excite him and up his temperature would go. That wouldn't do. Besides, it would lead him to distrust me, and that would make him worse in itself. I've been trying to think," Ross added, "how queer it must feel to be a stranger among a strange people, sick, and not able to understand us."

"Jest so," assented Lucky, "and I've been

ROSS GRANT

thinkin' all along what a fool thing fer 'im to hike out alone. But I s'pose he didn't trust the folks down in the valley that speak his lingo any more than he does us. Where gold is concerned"—Lucky paused and shook his head—"seems like folks is scurse that can be trusted." Then he turned earnestly on Ross: "Doc, I can use my hands better'n my head. Can't ye think of a way out?"

"I can't now," Ross returned, "but I'll keep on thinking—and watching. And say! Strikes me that it's a pretty good thing to have the Monkey here. I'll keep him with me so you can go on with your work same as usual."

Lucky hesitated. "But, Doc, the fewer that know ——"

"He needn't know a thing," interrupted Ross. "I'll remember that. But he's quick as a cat—or Sandy—and handy to have around to go after water and help hold the fort generally. You couldn't half work if you had to watch out continually for that towel. And you're not up in your work, Tod says."

"No, I ain't." Lucky looked uneasily toward the tent. "You know, of course, that the law gives a claim-staker five years to do the development work in, and my fifth year is up this summer and I ain't done nigh all the work."

GOLD HUNTER

"That's a bad outlook," muttered Ross, his glance following Lucky's to the tent. "A bad outlook with a professional claim jumper at your door!"

"He's after bigger game," shrugged Lucky. "My claim ain't pannin' out any good dirt—the assay shows only a trace of gold now, and it hain't done any better in weeks."

The term "trace of gold," as Ross knew, was applied to ore that yielded so little gold to the ton as not to be worth handling.

"No," Lucky continued, "when Sandy lays out to jump a claim it's a claim that's got somethin' worth while corralled in it!"

"And I understand that he always jumps the claim so the law can't jump on him," added Ross.

"You bet!" exclaimed Lucky forcefully. "Sandy has studied the law of Wyomin' ever since we took t' livin' under a law here instid of behind a gun. It's more comfortable livin', by and large now, but a gun 'ud do better work where he's concerned—but Sandy sure knows the law when it comes to minin' in this state, and he never runs agin the law. He jest dodges in and out among it and takes what he wants, and gets shet of juries!"

Ross laughed. "He didn't take what he wanted

ROSS GRANT

last winter! That was one time Sandy was fooled and, Lucky, let's make this another time!"

Lucky impulsively extended his hand. "I'm more than willin', Doc—I'm almighty anxious!"

The evening was uneventful so far as Sandy was concerned. He and Waymart completed their household arrangements by setting up a tiny sheet-iron stove beside a scrub hemlock and wiring the stovepipe to the trunk. On this diminutive cooker Sandy gayly baked flapjacks and fried ham, Waymart resting from his more arduous labors.

"What do you suppose has struck the McKenzies?" Tod asked Lucky facetiously as Trigger and Nicholas, drawn by the cook's gayety, had departed after supper to the tent. "Whose claims has he got an eye glued to now, yours or mine?"

Lucky shook his head. "Ye can't tell till he's jumped 'em."

Tod laughed, and shrugged his fat shoulders. "No jumpin' mine. Not even Sandy could find a flaw in the amount of work done. Maybe he means to turn genuine worker himself."

"Mebby!" drawled Lucky unbelievably.

That night he again stayed with Ross and Hans in Trigger's cabin.

The following morning Sandy and Waymart made a brave showing as prospectors. Each was armed with the usual outfit of the professional

GOLD HUNTER

prospector, hammer, pick, microscope and blow-pipe with some charcoal for doing rough assaying on the spot of the find. Sandy had, in addition, a large new field-glass strapped over his shoulder. Thus accoutered, the two tramped away through the Pass and up the cañon on the other side of the range into regions which had long since been picked over and found wanting in ore of any value. After they had disappeared, Lucky followed Trigger and the Toddler up the side of Elk, leaving Nicholas with Ross.

“Don’t fergit t’ hang out th’ towel in case Sandy comes back,” Lucky cautioned Ross. “If it wa’n’t fer the fact that I ain’t any too fer along with my work, I’d bide right here with ye.”

“I’m sure there’s no use of that,” returned Ross confidently, “as long as Nick and I are both here.”

“I hope,” ventured Lucky suggestively, “that ye won’t fergit t’ think up a way out.”

But Ross forgot the letter, so much engrossed did he become in the younger boy’s scout practise. After giving Hans all necessary attention, he came out in front of the cabin and seated himself on one of the rocks that sowed the mountainside thickly and had rolled down into the valley beside the cabins. From this post of observation he could both keep an eye on Hans and watch the curious manœuvres of the Monkey. Nicholas

ROSS GRANT

was industriously traveling from the South Fork to various points in the little valley with his eyes blindfolded. He accompanied these journeys with various manœuvres. He would stand and listen intently. Then, whirling rapidly about, he would start off walking, finding his direction again by the wind, or the heat from the sun or the sounds about him, or running, stopping occasionally to whirl again, and listen. He went straight to his packhorse as it grazed a few feet from Ross. Then he made a circuit of the cabins and clambered among the rocks piled up behind Trigger's. Next he groped for the water pail, found his way through the tangle of quaking asp bushes to the water hole and back again with a full pail. At last he unbandaged his eyes and dropped down beside Ross panting.

"Now," said the latter, "tell me what you were up to?"

"Training my senses so I can scout better," returned Nicholas promptly. He stretched out his thin, leather-clad legs and opened his gaudy red shirt comfortably. "You know, Doc," he continued wisely, "we use our eyes instead of our ears and nose and touch until what we don't see we don't know. Colonel Cody was talking with Dad about that last time I saw 'im. He said the old Indian scouts used to use all their senses like a

GOLD HUNTER

dog, only better. Even the dogs," in a tone of disgust, "are civilized now out of their senses, Dad says! Why, old Still Foot—ever see Still Foot?"

Ross shook his head.

"Well, he's an old Injun from the Shoshone Reservation. He can smell elk a mile away if the wind is right. And he'll be lying with his blanket wrapped around 'im beside a trail and suddenly he'll say, 'White man comes.' And there'll be a man comin' sure enough, a mile away. And Still Foot knows, and knows it ain't an Injun by the way he rides! He hears through the ground. So I'm practisin' to get back the use of my senses."

"Say, Nick," Ross exclaimed in admiration, "I wish I had your perseverance."

The boy pushed his shock of hair out of his eyes and looked up with a shrewd smile. "I guess you've got as much perseverance with bones as I have with senses." Here he scrambled to his feet with a shiver. "D'ye know we're in the shade here. Come around to the other side of Tod's cabin in the sun so I can dry off."

Ross glanced through the doorway behind him and saw that Hans, although awake, was quiet. Then he followed Nicholas across the open space between the two cabins and around Tod's to a rock exposed to the hot rays of the sun and sheltered from the wind that blew over the ice fields

ROSS GRANT

far above them. The Monkey threw himself down on the warm ground, while Ross sat on the rock and leaned against the cabin wall. Before him was Elk Mountain. At his left the South Fork murmured past. From all about came the contented munching of the hobbled horses. A few birds chirped near them, tiny, brown-coated songless sparrows, flitting saucily from sage-bush to sage-bush. They were the only birds hardy enough to brave the altitude and temperature of the higher mountains.

Ross, resting easily against the logs, kept a sharp outlook on the Pass, determined that Sandy should not return unnoticed. Nicholas pillowed his head on his clasped hands and talked of Dad and Colonel Cody and the old days in Wyoming when those men were young and wore six shooters dangling at their hips.

"I wish I had lived then," said the boy lingeringly. "You ought to hear Buffalo Bill and Dad talk. Of course Dad's much younger, but he can remember when buffaloes ranged over Big Horn Valley and wolves and bears were as plenty around the valley as cattle are now. In those days nobody bothered much about these mountains—didn't know there was ore up here or anything. You see there wasn't a sign of a railroad in northern Wyoming twenty years ago, and Cody was

GOLD HUNTER

just a cowboy town—and Meeteetse a group of saloons. Wouldn't you have liked it here then, Doc?"

Ross shook his head reflectively. "Honestly, Nick, no. I guess I'm not much of a sport. I'd hate to see a buffalo loose, and when I heard the wolves on the top of the shack last winter"—he stopped and smoothed his hair down thoughtfully—"well, I thought the roots of my hair were all turned the wrong way for keeps!"

The younger boy chuckled. He rolled over on his side and supported his head on his hand, his elbow bent. "I met a bear all right one day when I was going over beyond Wood River Cañon toward the Yellowstone, that is, I would have met it if Spot had let me."

"What did you do?" asked Ross eagerly.

"Do?" cried Nick ruefully. "I didn't have time nor a chance to do a thing but hang on Spot for dear life. Spot did every blamed thing that was done! He smelled the bear before I saw 'im and the way he turned tail and tore down the trail made my hair stand on end too; the wind attended to that. I never had so much trouble stickin' to a blanket before or since. You know a horse hates the smell of a bear."

"But you weren't afraid!" exclaimed Ross admiringly.

ROSS GRANT

"Afraid? I didn't have any chance to find out whether I was or not. I guess the bear ran as fast up the cañon as Spot did down it from the looks of a quaking asp thicket that grew above where he was sunning himself."

"I should be too scared to stick on a saddle even," said Ross frankly, "unless I was tied on!"

"Well, that was one time I did wish a saddle was under me. Of course I don't use one, because you can't do stunts from a saddle. None of the fellows in the Wild West Show use 'em in fancy riding, and that's what I'm practising."

Suddenly the Monkey paused and lay flat, with one ear pressed to the earth. Then with a finger upraised at Ross he talked on at random. Finally he projected the information into his remarks that a "white man comes," at the same time getting noiselessly on his feet and motioning toward the cabin at Ross's back. With a finger on his lips he stole soundlessly around the corner of the shack, followed by Ross, whose alarm was instantly stirred. Past Tod's cabin and across into the space between the two, Nicholas stole softly around behind Trigger's shack. Ross, abandoning caution, sprang in alarm for the doorway and looked anxiously within. At the same time the Monkey's triumphant voice reached him from behind the cabin:

GOLD HUNTER

“Hey, there, McKenzie! I told Doc that a ‘white man comes,’ and sure enough! My hearing hasn’t turned up missin’. Now this is what I get by training my senses!”

CHAPTER V

A GLIMPSE OF THE LETTER

Ross lost Sandy's reply in his efforts to quiet the alarmed invalid. Hans had just drawn the envelope from under his shirt as Ross appeared, and now he thrust it hurriedly back with a startled "Hein!" at the unexpected change from silence to confusion. When, at last, the embryo physician had time to take observations from the cabin door, he saw Sandy walking rapidly across the valley toward his tent, while Nicholas was returning, having accompanied him half-way, explaining eagerly his scouting methods.

"Say, Doc," said the boy meditatively when he stood before Ross, "what d'ye suppose Sandy was up to?"

Ross moved uneasily and muttered, "Oh, 'most anything! He's always up to something he ought not to be!"

"That's so," affirmed Nicholas with conviction. He turned and looked at the tent, throwing his hair back with a light gesture. "He certainly was taken by surprise that time," with a chuckle. "I never saw him taken off his guard before."

GOLD HUNTER

"What was he doing?" asked Ross anxiously.

"Huh! He was just stretching up to take a look into that window. The sash is out, I notice, this morning. He'd evidently noticed it too."

"Yes, I took it out to give Hans more air."

"Well, Sandy saw in it a peep-hole. But, Doc, what was to hinder him from walking in and looking at Hans aboveboard?"

Again Ross moved uneasily, and looked behind him at the sashless window. "That's Sandy. He's a sneak."

Nicholas assented. "But he always has an object in his sneaking, and I know by the way he acted—awfully taken aback he was—that he has an object now. Of course, he pulled himself together quick and said offhand that Hans looked funny enough with that bandage over his eye, and that he, Sandy, happened to be passing on his way to the tent after more charcoal for the blow-pipe—but you can't fool me! Say, Doc," here Nicholas turned and looked at the other in his shrewd way, his small face screwed up into a knot, "I'll bet that Hans has something that Sandy wants—hey?"

Ross's eyes fell, and his face turned red.

"Ha, ha!" accused Nicholas pointing a triumphant finger. "You know, and your face gives you away."

ROSS GRANT

"It usually does," Ross blurted out, becoming still redder.

"What is the something?" demanded Nicholas.

"I—I can't tell, Nick; but now keep still with that guess before everybody, and help me keep Sandy and Waymart away from him," nodding toward the bunk. "We can't keep 'em far away, but we can prevent 'em from being left alone with him, or from looking through the window or anything like that."

The Monkey's bright blue eyes sparkled. He turned a double somersault and stood on his head. "It's me for some real scouting then!" he exclaimed delightedly. "I'll get under Sandy's skin. I did just now. Hooray! I'll do more than tell 'im how it pays to cultivate the senses!"

Ross went back to Hans with a guilty feeling of neglect and failure. "The Monkey saved the day!" he told himself ruefully as he observed that the window was only a couple of feet from the head of the sick man's bunk. "Stupidity is an awfully hard disease to cure," he said bitterly as he replaced the sash in the window and nailed it in.

"If it hadn't been for the Monkey," he confessed frankly to Lucky that night, "Sandy would have had the letter. Hans had it out and all Sandy had to do was to reach in and grab it and make off

GOLD HUNTER

while I sat on the other side of Tod's cabin watching the Pass!" disgustedly. "I wish I could grab it myself and lock it up, but I'm afraid of the result. It would probably play the mischief with his fever. I don't dare go that far."

Lucky was in Trigger's cabin aiding in the bandaging of Hans' face when Ross told him this. He pressed his bearded lips together for a moment in a perplexed silence and then said hesitatingly, "Doc, there's no way to git ahead of Sandy—and be sure ye're ahead—only by gittin' that letter under lock and key and then watchin' the lock."

"If only I could make Hans understand!" groaned Ross. "But all I have done so far is to excite him and make him hang to that envelope tighter than ever. But with Nick here, and interested," hopefully, "we'll baffle Sandy yet!"

Lucky sighed, and that sigh said that Lucky had more confidence in Sandy's ability than in both boys', although he left the cabin without further remonstrance. But he left Ross full of the renewed determination to get hold of that letter. "I shall *make* Hans understand!" he told himself emphatically.

That night, however, the sick man was alarmingly worse because of the fright he had experienced in the morning, and Ross, with dismay, pointed out to Lucky the result of agitating him.

ROSS GRANT

The boy was up with his patient the greater part of the night, but when day broke, both nurse and patient slept.

Late in the morning Ross awoke. Hans still slept. The valley was quiet. Lucky sat motionless in the doorway. There was a slight stir in the other shack. Ross crept out of his bunk and rubbed his eyes open. Silently, Lucky, observing him, departed for the water hole with the pails. Ross stole across the floor and over to Tod's cabin. There Nicholas was stuffing wood into the stove and baking bread. He gave a sigh of relief when he saw Ross.

"See here, Doc! I'm glad you're awake. How's Hans? If I have to keep still much longer I'll bust!"

Ross sat down on a bench, still yawning. "Don't bust till you get a good breakfast for me, and keep still a while longer! Hans may sleep an hour yet. I hope so. Say! We mustn't let Sandy come nosing about to-day and upset him so, or I'll lose my job."

In a few moments the youthful physician sat down to a hot breakfast, while Lucky, having filled the water pails, prepared to start for his tunnel, first giving a long look around the landscape which, somewhere, held Sandy and Waymart.

GOLD HUNTER

"Where did the McKenzies go?" asked Ross.

"They hiked out early on horseback down the South Fork trail. They packed along some grub for dinner, but that don't mean you won't see 'em again in an hour," Lucky said warningly.

"I'll be ready and waiting for 'em this time," Ross assured him.

The Monkey added to that assurance. "I can hear Sandy a quarter of a mile away," he boasted. "And I'll not trust to hearing either—I'll see him."

In less than an hour the boys did see him. He did not come slyly nor under cover. Instead, he rode up from the South Fork with a flourish, followed by Waymart, and stopped outside Trigger's cabin with a shout.

"'Lo, there, Monkey, you've got a call!"

Both boys appeared in the doorway of the cabin. Ross had just finished giving Hans his breakfast.

"What kind of a call?" asked Nicholas.

"I can tell you what kind of a call," answered Sandy with a jolly laugh, "but I can't tell you the kind of caller. We met 'im on the trail away back there this mornin'," nodding toward the South Fork. "A feller that can't manage our lingo very well—sort of short and dark and wheezes in his throat when he talks."

ROSS GRANT

"Oh,—that 'Daisy' Breitmann!" exclaimed Nick. "It's the new man at the ranch next ours, the U. I haven't seen him but once, but I've not forgot the wheeze. Short and dark—that's Daisy. He understands English all right if she is spoken a word at a time, but he's more at home with German. He came from that German settlement beyond Cody. Where did you see him?"

"'Long back there. He asked if I had heard of ye and when I said ye was here, he said t' tell ye yer Dad was at the Lazy Y tryin' t' locate ye."

"Now, listen to that!" exclaimed Nicholas, in a disappointed tone. "Dad has a way once in a while of turnin' up just when I get ready to settle down. I don't want to go now."

Sandy shrugged his shoulders and rode on, shaking a long forelock from his eyes. "All right. Suit yerself. I was asked t' git shet of that word t' ye. So long. Me and Mart are goin' to hike over t' near Miners' now."

Sandy and his brother galloped on. The Monkey turned a solemn face on Ross.

"Say, Doc, it's me for the Lazy Y all right, all right, if Dad has called! What possessed that stupid Daisy to run into Sandy and what possessed him to think that Sandy knew where I am? Well, you'll have to trail Sandy alone a while.

GOLD HUNTER

Maybe Dad will let me come back again right away. I'll see."

At noon, when Lucky came down from the side of Elk, he found Ross getting dinner.

"Where's the Monkey?" he asked, Nicholas having told him that morning not to worry about "grub slinging."

"Gone," replied Ross. "My scout was sent for. I'm now nurse, doctor, scout, chief cook and bottle washer."

After he had told Lucky the circumstances under which his scout had departed, his listener frowned.

"See here, Doc, it never got int' the heads of either of ye that Sandy made that up out of hull cloth, did it?"

A basin slipped out of Ross's hands and fell to the floor with a clatter. He stared at Lucky speechless.

"Of course," the latter continued, "it sounds as good as they make 'em, and maybe Dad really is on the outlook fer 'im, but I doubt it. Didn't Nick tell ye that Dad expected him to bide up in Miners' while he was gone?"

"Sure enough he did," admitted Ross. "You see it did sound so plausible we never stopped to question. If Dad is down at the Lazy Y, all he'd think he would have to do to get Nick is to send

ROSS GRANT

up t' Miners' by Bill Travers. Of course, after yesterday's work, Sandy wanted to get rid of the Monkey."

"And he has," commented Lucky briefly.

"But Nick said he was coming back," responded Ross hopefully.

After dinner, when Lucky went up to his tunnel, he left Ross sitting in the doorway of Trigger's cabin laboring again with his German dictionary, pencil and paper. His sentences now contained the information, imperfectly conveyed, that Sandy McKenzie was bent on getting the letter. But to Hans the name of Sandy meant nothing, while it was a terribly clear and suspicious circumstance that Ross, who was left with him constantly, seemed itching for possession of that same epistle. A flood of excited and unintelligible language was one of the results immediately following this new attempt on Ross's part. Another result Lucky found when he came from his work at six o'clock.

Ross explained in a discouraged tone: "Hans has been delirious now for two hours hanging onto that letter and talking as fast as he can talk. I don't see any way to get it—or to keep it away from him rather. Easy enough to take it while he's asleep. That's what Sandy is laying for, probably."

GOLD HUNTER

After supper Hans' temperature dropped and he fell asleep. Then Lucky, lighting his pipe, sat down in the doorway of the shack and commanded Ross to "stretch his legs." Ross availed himself gladly of the command, as he had taken no exercise that day. He walked briskly through the Pass, and faced a range of mountains as high and black and forbidding as the range of which Elk was a part. He knew that, should he climb this range, another yet would bar his progress, and yet another before he could listen to the familiar roar of Wood River as it foamed past Miners' Camp. He drew a long breath. He felt the oppression which comes to a stranger among the peaks, a sense of suffocation despite the bracing air, a conviction that escape from the embrace of the mountains is an impossibility. Turning abruptly, he came back to a sight of the cabins and the lazy upcurling smoke from the projecting stovepipe chimneys. Turning to the trail up Elk, he climbed the worn path until he came to Trigger's tunnel. As he approached, he heard Trigger's voice excitedly relating the possibilities of wealth penned up in those mountains, the certainty of the coming of the Burlington road, and the probability of the building of a smelter. It was one of Trigger's optimistic days, and his tones soared with his optimism.

As Ross approached, an inquiry from Sandy cut

ROSS GRANT

across this stream of talk. "Ye hain't told me yet about Hans. Does Doc take care of 'im nights?"

Ross stopped, and listened for the reply.

"Doc's there, but we take turns stayin' with 'im, too, Todd and Lucky and I. Doc's got to sleep nights s' long as he looks out fer 'im days. It's my turn to-night."

Ross listened alertly, but could hear nothing more. He then hurried back to Lucky and recounted the incident. "I see how Sandy is going to work it for the letter," he added confidently. "He's going to insist on taking his turn here to-night, and that I, as head nurse, can prevent. He can't work that game—not much!"

Lucky's hands, clasped between his knees, opened and shut slowly. "That looks likely, Doc, likely. We'll wait and see."

Then he sat, his pipe smokeless, and stared at his hands, his thoughts racing ahead of his words. "We'll see, Doc," he added at last. "But ye never can be sure of Sandy's game till it's played—and won."

Presently Sandy and Trigger came back and joined Waymart and Toddler in the latter's shack. Ross, leaving Lucky smoking, crossed from Trigger's cabin and sat in the doorway in order to be on hand in case Sandy should volunteer his services as nurse, but nursing seemed to be far from the

GOLD HUNTER

thoughts of everybody. Sandy was "picking on" the Toddler, whose wits were working nimbly for the entertainment of the company. Not only did Tod never lose his temper, but he had the art of indulging in pointed repartee in a likeable, humorous way that robbed the truth of its sting and generally amused even its victims. It was always a temptation in a company to stir him into speech to see what he would say and how near the truth he dared to drive. He seldom resented personal gibes directed against himself, claiming merely the privilege of returning them—with interest.

He sat on a box near the stove, his back planted comfortably against the side logs, his head tipped back and his eyes resting lazily on the log, dirt-chinked roof. Sandy faced him on another box. Waymart sat on the table, swinging his legs. Trigger, restlessly moving about, never stayed many moments in the same position.

"I jest dropped in, Tod," Sandy was saying, "t' git yer receipt fer leanness. D'ye sell the receipt 'r give it away?"

The Toddler removed his pipe from his mouth and squinted along its stem.

"I generally sell it, Sandy," he replied readily, "but I'll give it to you because you're so young and innocent. I keep lean by paying strict atten-

ROSS GRANT

tion to my own business—and givin' as good as is sent me!"

Waymart especially enjoyed this home thrust at his brother, whom he feared more than he loved. Sandy, having drawn the thrust on himself, could not resent it, but failed to enjoy the laugh at his expense. He reddened and tried to reply carelessly, "All right, Tod, you're following a receipt I was brought up on."

"Tod wa'n't brought up," interposed Trigger; "he come up hisself. Says he's self-made."

The Toddler nodded. "I brought myself up—square."

"Round, I sh' say!" retorted Sandy.

"Round, you might say," assented Tod imperturbably, "except on a deal. There I'm square!"

At this Ross applauded vigorously, his own experience with Sandy's deals proving them anything but square. Again Sandy's face reddened.

But the Toddler, perceiving that Sandy's temper was failing him, arose and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. There was no hint of displeasure on his fat face. Banging on the stovepipe with a tin cup he announced loudly:

"Vamose, one and all. It's me for my own bunk to-night, and Trigger for Doc's handy helper. I'm goin' to turn in."

GOLD HUNTER

Sandy and Waymart at once arose. "Sun's shinin' yet," remarked Sandy looking up at the peaks in the east. "Come on over t' the tent, rest of you fellers, and let the Toddler snooze."

Trigger and Waymart responded to the invitation. The three went slowly across the valley laughing and talking, and settled down around the little sheet-iron stove, which they filled with wood as the night was cold.

Ross joined Lucky, who still sat in the opposite doorway, his cold pipe clenched between his teeth. The boy was disappointed. "I fully expected Sandy to offer to take Trigger's place," he whispered, "but he said nothing about it."

"Time enough yet," said Lucky.

Ross sat down on an adjacent stone. Tod, intent on "turning in," was moving about his shack whistling. The sick man was quiet. Slowly the sunshine faded from the white peaks and twilight fell. The figures of the three beside the stove became blurred, but Sandy's voice still rose and fell to the accompaniment of Trigger's laugh. Soon a snore apprised the watchers of Tod's restfulness. Then a diversion occurred from the direction of the Pass. The dim shape of a horse appeared bearing a rider, the first horse followed by another, on the back of which was a pack.

"Dad Page!" Lucky exclaimed in a low but

ROSS GRANT

forceful voice. Then in a lower tone, "What's comin' now, I wonder!"

He did not arise to greet the newcomer until Dad had advanced to the corner of Tod's cabin and halted. Then he arose, and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, put it into his pocket and went forward.

"Hello, Dad!"

"Hello, Lucky!"

Ross arose, his hands in his pockets, and looked eagerly at Nicholas Page's father. He did not in the least resemble his son. He was a large man with a large face and heavy features. In the place of the Monkey's mass of fine, light hair, Dad's head had a scant covering of dark hair. His eyes were also dark, and his movements slow.

"Doc Tenderfoot," introduced Lucky, jerking his thumb over his shoulder without turning.

"Howdy," said Dad. "The name I've heard before. I've just hiked over from Miners'."

"Camp all there?" from Lucky.

"All there," responded Dad.

"Wall, the Pass ain't near s' excitin' as Miners', but we can put ye up as well. They's an empty bunk over there in my shack that's waitin' fer ye."

"Thank-ee, Lucky, I'll turn in."

"Hain't et lately, have ye? If ye hain't——"

Dad cut him short. "I stopped over yon," nod-

GOLD HUNTER

ding toward the Pass, "and rustled me some grub."

There was a brief pause filled by Tod's snores and Sandy's distant voice. Then Dad arrived at the real object of this interview.

"Lucky, they told me down t' Meeteetse that you was with Fred Holzworth when he was sick."

Another pause. "They told ye right."

Dad cleared his throat. "They said you was the only one he'd have around 'im."

"Guess that's right—the only one he wanted around 'im."

"Where was he workin' in the winter and spring?"

"Don't know, Dad. He never said."

Dad looked keenly at Lucky. "That's queer—and you with 'im at the end."

"Fred was pretty bad off when I got to 'im," volunteered Lucky. "He didn't waste much strength talkin' about things that was past."

Dad removed an old worn sombrero with a lopsided brim. He rubbed the thin hair on the top of his head and ran his fingers through it.

"Fred owed me a—well, a trifle or so, Lucky. I loaned it t' him last summer. He was outfittin' then fer a long hike. Said he expected t' be gone a year up in the Wood River country near its rise. I ain't acquainted up there myself—but when Bill

ROSS GRANT

Travers picked Fred up it wa'n't on any trail from Wood River ——”

“ Might 'a' been,” Lucky broke in. “ Bill found 'im at the lower ford.”

“ He never sent me no word about the money he owed,” Dad went on, paying no attention to Lucky's interruption. “ Leastways I got none. Never knew he had come out of the mount'ins till I heard he was passin' in his checks at the Weller House. I was in Omaha at the time, ye know.”

Lucky nodded, and there ensued a longer pause. Lucky selected a stick and began to whittle it with painstaking care, while Dad frowned and twisted uncomfortably in the saddle. Ross listened eagerly, expecting some reference to Nicholas and Hans.

Finally Dad continued, “ I wanted t' see ye right after I got back, but I had to hike out after them cattle thieves. Now I ain't really bound on my own business yet, but I come by here on the way to Sheep's Horn. I got t' subpcena old man Clark over there ——” The speaker stopped abruptly and asked, “ Lucky, will ye answer me this? How was Fred off fer property ?”

Lucky threw the stick away, closed his knife slowly and slipped it into his pocket. Then he spoke :

“ Dad, before Fred cashed in he said to me, see

GOLD HUNTER

he, 'Lucky, I've fixed things up square with every one now. When I leave, nobody can say he has anything ag'in' Fred Holzworth!'"

Dad's hand fell heavily on the pommel of his saddle. He controlled his voice with an effort. "Lucky, I'm loath to say anything about a man that's dead and gone, but when Fred said what he did he must have gone short in his memory. It won't break me t' lose what I loaned 'im, but no man likes to be dealt with unfair, and what I want to know is—and what I've got a right t' know is, has he any property to square with?" Again Dad put the question sharply, and again Lucky avoided a direct reply.

"Dad, it's mighty little I know about any property of Fred's. But in here is some one," pointing at Trigger's shack, "that ye can talk to when he gets fit t' talk. If Fred left any property, ye can find out by his brother Hans. Hans Holzworth is here now ——"

"Hans Holzworth!" ejaculated Dad. "Fred's brother here! Lemme see 'im."

The rider threw himself from his horse, but both Lucky and Ross stepped forward with a warning exclamation.

"See here, Dad," Lucky explained hastily, "Hans can't talk United States, ner understand it, and he's too sick to be bothered."

ROSS GRANT

Dad stopped, a hand gripping the pommel of his saddle. "Then he's the man they told me Doc had come up to look after? A stranger was all anybody knew over to Miners'."

"Didn't Nick tell you who he was?" Ross broke in eagerly.

Dad turned slowly to the boy. "Nick? No, I haven't seen Nick."

"Didn't you send for him? He has been up here with us."

"Send fer 'im? No, I thought he was up on the claims above Miners'. I didn't come by way of the ranch, and I didn't stop in Miners' long enough to hike up to the claims. Where'd he go?"

"Down to the Lazy Y," answered Lucky, and Dad at once transferred his attention to the sick man.

"Well, this here Hans—what's he here fer? Didn't he know Fred was gone?"

"Ye see, Dad," parried Lucky, "he can't tell what he's here fer even if he could speak English. He's too sick. Doc here can tell ye about him that way. When he gits well, if you bring some one along that can talk his lingo and ours, I suppose ye can ask him all the questions ye want answered. Anyway, he's the only one that can answer ye—I can't."

GOLD HUNTER

Ross looked in admiration at Lucky. He had been both truthful to Dad and yet loyal to the trust Fred Holzworth had reposed in him.

At this point the two beside the McKenzie tent, attracted by the stir of Dad's arrival, reached the twin shacks. Tod also awakened and stumbling to the window, put a tousled head outside.

"What's this racket about?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"More com'ny," declared Trigger. "This here valley's gittin' t' be the most popular summer resort this side Thermopolis Hot Springs."

"Well, why not?" drawled Tod. "We've got springs and lots of other attractions so long as Sandy stays. Who's come?"

"Dad Page," replied Trigger.

"Deputy sheriff," mumbled Tod. "Who's he after? Arrest yerself, Dad, for stealing my sleep!"

"Stay t' breakfast, Dad, and steal his grub," invited Trigger. "That's what he'd really like t' see vamosin'. If there's one thing that Tod hates t' do it's t' eat!"

"Under some circumstances," affirmed Tod warmly, "when you're the cook!"

Dad responded but absently to these pleasantries. He was looking with frowning eyes into the dark interior of Trigger's cabin from which, at that moment, came Hans' weak voice calling, as usual,

ROSS GRANT

for "Wasser." Ross reluctantly repaired to the bunk of the sick man, lighted a candle and went after fresh water, leaving the men relieving the packhorse of its load and hobbling both horses.

When he returned with the pail of water, only Lucky and Dad stood beside Trigger's cabin. Tod had gone to bed, while Trigger with the McKenzies had returned to the latter's camp. Lucky was directing Dad to a bunk in his shack near the Pass.

"I'll turn in, then, right off," Dad was saying. "I want t' get an early start for Sheep's Horn. If I find old man Clark beyond there I can ——" he turned abruptly to Ross. "Doc, how soon can yer patient talk business?"

"I don't know," began Ross dubiously. "Of course, it will be exciting business, rather, won't it?"

"Mebby," grimly.

"Well, you better wait until I get him down to Cody and have a real doctor look him over. It will be days yet before he can be moved—have no idea how long myself."

Dad considered a moment. "There's a new man, Breitmann, down on the U ranch. He talks both English and German. I can talk through him."

After Dad had disappeared in the direction of

GOLD HUNTER

the Pass, Lucky turned to Ross: "Doc, I'll turn in with Tod here so to be on hand in case ye want me."

An hour later when Trigger tiptoed into his own cabin, he found Hans quiet, and Ross in his bunk making an effort to keep awake until he saw whether Sandy came in Trigger's stead.

"What's the night's layout, Doc?" whispered Trigger.

"Hans is asleep," returned Ross in a low tone. "I don't think he'll keep us up to-night as he did Tod and me last night. Guess you can prepare to sleep."

Trigger tiptoed to the table and looked over its contents wonderingly. "How ye ever handle them things, Doc, is beyant me. I can rope a steer, but I couldn't never lance a man's cheek."

Ross laughed. "And I couldn't rope a steer to save my life, but if it's to save Hans' life I shall lance his cheek. I've never done any lancing, but I've watched my uncle do it until I know I could. But I'm hoping Hans will escape lancing."

Trigger looked thoughtfully at the man in the bunk. Hans, the side of his face bulging with cotton and bandages, lay with his hand under the pillow. He moved restlessly and muttered in his sleep.

ROSS GRANT

"Say, Doc," asked Trigger, "have ye noticed he's always havin' nightmares about 'golt'?"

"No," Ross's voice was sleepy. "I'll look up that word when I think of it. It sounds like 'gold.' Maybe he means that."

Trigger's eyes shone. He walked restlessly around the table. "Doc, will doin' that make yer everlastin' fortune?" He pointed at the table's contents.

Ross opened his eyes. "Well, no," he replied warmly. "Who ever heard of a rich doctor?" He laughed, thinking of his uncle.

Trigger stopped in front of his bunk. "What d'ye do it fer then, Doc? Don't ye want to be rich?"

Ross rolled over yawning. "Yes, of course. Everybody does, but I notice that very few are—but, Trig," here the boy sat up suddenly, "I'd be a doctor if I knew I could barely earn a living. You see I—well, I've got to be one. I'd rather do things like that," nodding at Hans, "than—than to eat. Providin'," here he laughed up into Trigger's incredulous face and dropped his earnest manner, "providin' I'm not too hungry!"

In another moment he was asleep, and presently the cabin was quiet, with Trigger lying on the floor near the medicine chest.

In the cold gray of the morning Ross awakened.

GOLD HUNTER

On the table the candle burned low in its socket of wood. Hans lay asleep with his shoulders and arms uncovered. Ross arose, and, going softly to the bunk, was pulling up the blankets, when his attention was arrested by a paper lying beside the sick man. Hans must have awakened some time before, and, beguiled by the quiet of the night and the slumbers of his nurses, had taken the letter from its envelope and fallen asleep in the vain attempt to examine it by the light of the candle.

For an instant Ross stood idly looking down at the paper. Had Hans not been in so critical a condition he would have locked the letter up in his chest then, and risked the effect produced on the invalid, but such a proceeding was out of the question.

“ Might prove fatal to him,” thought the boy. “ He gets so awfully excited over that letter. If he didn’t find it he would ——”

Ross uttered a low exclamation. His own words had suggested a way out of the dilemma. A wave of excitement surged over him. He looked about for the means to put his plan into immediate effect, but it would require paper, pencil and a little time. The pencil and paper were locked up in his medicine chest, and that stood near Trigger’s head. To get them meant to awaken him. Besides, the idea was so simple and could be so easily worked

ROSS GRANT

out that the following day was time enough to act on it.

Quietly Ross picked up the sheet and folded it. It was large and many times doubled. Across its surface with numerous twists and turns ran a line sprinkled with dots and names on either side, and much marginal writing. As Ross restored it to the envelope, one name only stood out clearly. It was written in large letters, and was located at the end of the line furthest from Cody. It was a name a single glance at which would have repaid the McKenzies for their extensive outfitting in Cody and their journey to Elk Pass. The name was Sheep's Horn.

CHAPTER VI

SCHEMES AND COUNTER SCHEMES

"WHY, that's the place where Dad is going," was Ross's first thought when his eyes fell on the name of Sheep's Horn. Then as he pushed the letter beneath the pillow and went again to his own bunk, another and more important consideration occurred to him. "Suppose, in spite of me, Sandy should get hold of that one name," he told himself uneasily, "but then, he won't have an opportunity after I carry out my plans, and that will be to-morrow the first time Hans sleeps."

He slept late himself the following morning, and did not appear in the other cabin until the three there had finished breakfast and Dad had been long on his way toward the Wind River district beyond Sheep's Horn. Trigger was moping over the dish-pan, and dreading bread making, it being his turn in the culinary department, a department he loathed.

"I wisht," he was saying as Ross entered, "that we could find a patent dish-washer and baker t' pack up inter the mountings. If there's one thing I ——"

ROSS GRANT

Here Lucky arose good-naturedly, and elbowed him out of the way with one powerful sweep of his arm. "Let be, Trig! Git t' yer work. I guess I'm patent enough t' hoe off the dishes and sling some sinkers good enough to fill ye up. I was makin' sinkers before ye dreamed of the mount'ins."

Trigger yielded place, pleased yet shamefaced. It was not the first time that Lucky had come to his rescue in various ways. He turned and faced Ross.

"Hello, Doc!" he shouted. "Awake yit? Ye don't look it. How's Hans?"

As Ross was sitting down at the table, Sandy and Waymart appeared at the door, the former echoing Trigger's question.

Ross reached for the can of condensed milk. "Hans is decidedly better this morning. Must have slept since midnight—that is," he corrected himself, thinking of the letter, "most of the time; and his face is less inflamed."

Tod, rummaging around in a tool chest, glanced up with a grin. "Doc, seen anything of that letter that he is so all-fired careful of? I'd like to git a squint at *her* picture. Wonder if she'll be hikin' out here some time t' marry him. Think of a woman around these diggings!"

Lucky turned, and tossed a hot flapjack on Ross's

GOLD HUNTER

tin plate, managing to upset a kettle of hot water that stood on the back of the stove. The water ran briskly under Tod, causing him to move in more lively style than was his wont, and the subject of the letter was forgotten in the laughter and confusion which followed.

"I see Dad's gone," remarked Sandy when quiet was restored.

"Yep," Tod replied. "He hiked out early enough to get shet of Trig's breakfast. If I'd thought I'd told 'im it was my turn to sling grub this A. M."

"He thought it was, reason he fell over hisself t' hit the hike!" came back from Trigger with a grin.

"Where's he gone t'?" asked Sandy, leaning against the door jamb, his hands in his pockets, a long lock of red hair reaching down to his eyebrows.

"Over beyant Sheep's Horn," Lucky answered. "Got a subpoena to serve on old man Clark."

"What's old man Clark doin' over Sheep's Horn way?" asked Sandy in an uninterested tone.

Ross, at the sound of the name, jumped involuntarily and felt his face change color.

"Prospectin'," laconically from Lucky. "He was the first to go through here after I come the last of May. Could hardly git over the trails. I

ROSS GRANT

surmised he'd have more trouble further up, but he must have got along all right. We didn't have so much snow this year as most years, or he couldn't 'a' made it. Hain't heard of s' many slides over on the Divide as usual."

"Say," volunteered Waymart, "I know old man Clark. He might ha' went t' Sheep's Horn, but he wouldn't stay there—not in the shack under the Horn, at any rate!"

Ross and Trigger were the only ones who seemed to need an explanation. "Why?" asked the former. Any information that he could now glean concerning the Horn was of interest.

Waymart, who sat in front of the stove on a box, did not trouble to withdraw his pipe from his mouth. He spoke indistinctly around it. "That there ha'nt," he explained briefly.

"What ha'nt?" asked Trigger, his tone showing that behind his question lay a fear that Ross did not feel as he too echoed, "Yes, what ha'nt?"

Waymart smoked on as stolidly as though no one had spoken. Sandy flipped the stray lock from his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "Jest a fool sound that's in that cabin, and never stops. Pah!"

Waymart looked up quickly. "There was a time onct, Sandy, that, when we got there, instid of sayin' 'Pah!' ye said 'Come on. Let's vamous.'"

GOLD HUNTER

It was seldom that Waymart threw any obstructing remarks in his brother's path.

He was rewarded now by a black look as Sandy retorted, "That was out of respect, Mart, t' yer sentiments. If I remember right, ye wa'n't sleepin' well then o' nights, and that little sound sort of wore on yer nerves. Ye had a little indigestion at the time, I rec'lect, and so we got out to sort o' soothe ye down and tone ye up." Sandy's tone was insultingly sarcastic.

Waymart made no response, but drew furiously at his pipe.

"Wall, now that ye've got us so far," insisted Trigger, "tell us what in tarnation this ha'nt is? What is it that never stops?"

"It's a sound, Trigger," explained Lucky, "jest a sound what can't be explained ner found out about, jest a little tap, tap, tap. That's what I call it. Every one that hears it hears it different, and not every one wants to stop t' listen long."

"Ye bet they don't," said Waymart, coolly. He removed his pipe from his mouth. "They're like Sandy here. They git out fast, and then lay their gittin' onto some one's else shoulders."

Tod laughed. "Guess I'll have to go over some day and look into that little ghost. I'd like to meet up with a ghost that can come it over Sandy."

ROSS GRANT

Sandy scowled and exclaiming brusquely, "Come on to work, Mart," left the shack.

"Sore spot," grinned Tod.

Waymart arose. "He's jest as scared of ha'nts as any one else, only he don't like t' own it up. Sandy always took ownin' up hard, anyway. He ruther see the other feller doin' that!"

"Not much love lost between them brothers, is there?" asked Trigger when Waymart had left.

Tod looked shrewdly at Trigger. "You've lived so long among the cow-punchers of Montana, Trig, that you're tender and innocent yet to the ways of Wyoming," he explained affably, "and among 'em Sandy and Waymart. When ye get seasoned here you'll find they don't have occasion to love each other, only Waymart has occasion t' mind what his dear little brother says to him or else get strung for it. There's discipline in that family, and Sandy always is the one with the whip!"

As soon as the rest had left the shack, Ross told Lucky what had occurred during the night, and what he had seen.

"Sheep's Horn?" exclaimed Lucky excitedly. "So the trail ends at Sheep's Horn. Are ye plumb sure, Doc, that Sheep's Horn's the name?"

"Absolutely sure," returned Ross, "because I noticed right away that it was the same place where Dad said he was going."

GOLD HUNTER

"And I thought old man Clark—the one he's after—was daffy to go near there prospectin'. The Sheep's Horn—ha!"

"Of course," continued Ross, "that name means nothing to me. I never heard it before last night. But it means a lot to you and to any one who knows these mountains—like Sandy. Now if he should get one glance at that name ——"

He paused, and Lucky finished gravely: "That one look would be all that Sandy's waitin' fer."

"Just what I thought. That day he got to the window and Nick caught him, and Hans had just taken out the letter—whew! One glance would be enough, for the name is in big letters."

"Couldn't be he seen it, or he wouldn't be here now," commented Lucky. "He'd be at the Horn by now."

Ross laid a forefinger impressively on his other palm. "No—and he isn't going to see it, for, Lucky, I've got a plan, a jim-dandy plan too! It's so simple I was a lunkhead not to think of it before."

Lucky looked intently at the boy. "What's that, Doc? What are ye aimin' t' do?"

"Get ahead of Sandy!"

"How?"

"At last," Ross announced triumphantly, "I've thought of a way out with that letter, and a good

ROSS GRANT

sure way, too. I'll take a piece of paper the size of the letter, and draw a crooked line on it, and make dots, and put in a lot of names—any old names, and then, when he's asleep, substitute it in the envelope for the letter, and lock that up. You see he'll think then that he has the real letter because he can't see anything but outlines without his glasses, and he can't get glasses until he's well enough to go to Cody; and then he'll be out of Sandy's reach, and can take care of his letter in safety."

Lucky arose. His eyes shone. "I cotton t' that idee, Doc. That's a great way out! That idee shows a good head on ye!"

"You see," cried Ross, "if I had thought of this before, I could have made the exchange last night. But I'll fix the paper now and, when Hans is asleep this morning, I'll change the letters."

A few moments later Ross was left alone in the valley with Hans. During the morning he made out a paper such as he had described, and laid it aside to await his opportunity to make the exchange. But the opportunity did not come.

"Hans slept so lightly this morning," he told Lucky when the latter came from his work at noon, "that the least movement around him awakened him. But I think I can make the change

GOLD HUNTER

before night. I have the other paper, the one I fixed up, in my German dictionary."

Lucky's face fell, but he showed his disappointment in no other way. Quietly he set about getting dinner, while Ross stood in the doorway watching him.

"I'm thinking about Dad and his debt," said the boy finally. "Strikes me that Hans will have to pry himself loose from some of his inheritance as soon as he gets it. Wonder how much he'll have to pay?"

Lucky frowned thoughtfully and applied a knife to a can of baked beans. "Dad didn't say." Then he added thoughtfully, "Doc, Fred was a square dealer and in that letter I believe that he has told Hans all about the debt ——"

"But you never told Dad that ——" Ross began.

Lucky looked up in surprise. "Rec'lect, Doc, that Dad don't know of no letter!"

"Of course not," assented Ross. "But, for a moment, I had forgotten."

Lucky poured the beans into a pan and set it over the fire, saying slowly, "Doc, as I see things, it's my duty to help Hans t' that find and then leave him t' settle with Dad. I'll deal fair with 'im and expect him t' deal fair with Dad."

After dinner Lucky lingered under pretense of helping Ross, when the others started for their

ROSS GRANT

work. He brought a pail of water for Hans and then stood out at the corner of Tod's cabin and turned his eyes abstractedly toward the Pass, through which Sandy and Waymart were walking briskly.

Suddenly Sandy turned back and, looking up, caught sight of Trigger. Dropping his hammer he made a funnel of his hands and yelled :

"Trig—'lo, Trig! Come along back and see some ore we've found over on t'other side."

Trigger responded with alacrity. He came striding down the trail, and joining the two, disappeared through the Pass. For an instant Lucky stood staring after them, his big kind face overcast, and his brows drawn together in perplexity. Then he dropped on a rock beside the cabin, and with his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hands and became motionless.

Here Ross found him a little later and remonstrated with him. "I'm right on the job this afternoon. You can go back to work. I'm glued tight to this old shack."

Before Lucky could reply, the stillness of the valley was disturbed by the hoof beats of a horse, and a man's hoarse voice called, "Who's t' home here?"

Ross ran around the shack followed by Lucky. Confronting them was a man of middle age and

GOLD HUNTER

grizzled beard, mounted on a shaggy little broncho and leading another on which was cinched a wooden pack-saddle.

"How d'ye do?" greeted Lucky.

"Howdy, both on ye," returned the stranger. "I'm jest over the range there," jerking his thumb behind him, "in Gold Gulch. I'm out o' sticks¹ just as I'm nearin' the end of this year's work. Don't want t' go t' Meeteetse for 'em, ner even Miners'. I hain't got time. Can I snake any over from here?"

Lucky nodded. "Guess I can accommodate ye."

"To how much?"

Lucky thrust his hands into his pockets, and poked his toe into the dirt. Then he raised his head and squared his shoulders. A sudden gleam illuminated his strong features. "Would a couple of cases help ye out?" His voice was eager out of all proportion to the subject under consideration.

"You bet!" assented the stranger emphatically. "It would finish the work."

"Doc," said Lucky, "ye're always wantin' t' stretch yer legs. I'll stay here, and you go up with him after the sticks if ye want to. Ye'll find two cases in the box out on the dump."

"Right ho!" exclaimed Ross, glad to "stretch

¹Sticks of dynamite.

ROSS GRANT

his legs" through the warm sunlight. "In twenty minutes give Hans two of the yellow tablets. Dissolve 'em in a—oh, a couple of swallows of water, quarter of a cup, maybe."

While he was preparing the sick man to be left in Lucky's care, the two men exchanged such news as was to be had among the solitude of the peaks. To the stranger the activities of Elk Pass seemed extraordinary. He was developing his claims with only one other man within twenty miles.

"Don't the mountains and the loneliness get on your nerves?" Ross asked as he walked by the other's stirrup.

The man laughed. "No, young man, and 'no' fer two reasons. First, I ain't lonesome, and, second, I hain't got nerves except when I'm corralled in Chicago fer a spell. Got a darter out there married, and onct a year I have to visit 'er. Wall, wall! Talk about nerves and lonesomeness in all that jostle and bustle and joggle. No-sir-ee! It's me fer the mountings. I'd die of lonesomeness in Chicago."

Involuntarily he stretched up, and looked the peaks in the face, the wooded, silent, snow-crowned peaks that meant to him companionship and work and hope.

Ross dropped behind as they began the ascent of the Elk trail, and, in silence, the two mounted to

GOLD HUNTER

Lucky's tunnel. Beside the mouth of the tunnel was a box containing the cases of dynamite. Ross opened the box, and looked inside.

"There are only two cases here," he exclaimed in surprise. "He's letting you have all he has except a few sticks here in another case."

The stranger looked in. "Two," he said; "but it does shave 'im clost, don't it?"

Ross hesitated. "We'll take 'em both; and, if he doesn't know how few it leaves him ——"

"I can drop a case with 'im," interrupted the stranger. "All right."

Lucky, sitting at the door of Trigger's shack, waved his hand at the packhorse when Ross told him of the dearth of dynamite remaining in the box. "Pack it along, stranger. Ye're welcome to it. It wouldn't last me long, anyway. I've got t' go to Miners' Camp after a load, and a matter of a few sticks more or less don't matter."

As soon as the stranger was out of ear-shot, Ross turned in astonishment on Lucky. "Are you thinking of going to Miners' Camp *now*?"

Lucky looked up intently at the side of Elk. "Got to go soon. Don't take long."

"How long?" Ross felt a sudden sinking of the heart at the thought of being left without Lucky in the midst of the present situation.

Lucky considered. "I generally leave here

ROSS GRANT

about midnight if there's a moon,—and there's one this week,—and git back some time same day—nearer night than noon.”

Ross breathed more easily. “Oh, that's not a long trip!” he exclaimed. “When will you go?”

Lucky scanned the side of Elk again. “I can't jest say now.” He arose. “Probably ye'll git that letter cached this afternoon and then mebbe to-night ——” he broke off. “I'll go up now and put in a shot. There's enough sticks left for another blast—and we'll see.”

Lucky left Ross thoroughly puzzled and disappointed by this unexpected move. It seemed strange that after guarding Hans so carefully for days, Lucky should plan an absence of twenty-four hours with the situation unchanged. There occurred to Ross, however, an agreeable explanation.

“I guess Lucky trusts me to handle the situation,” he decided, “with this plan about the letter. Of course, with a false letter under Hans' pillow, Sandy may peek and pry all he wants to, and Lucky feels free to go after dynamite. I can fix the letter business the first time Hans sleeps.”

But Hans persisted in remaining awake hour after hour, with the precious envelope clutched in his hand, and Ross was obliged to confess further failure to Lucky at night as the two stood in front of the open doorway of Trigger's cabin bathed in

GOLD HUNTER

the warm multi-colored glow of the setting sun. From the little stovepipe lashed against the tree down by the creek a cloud of smoke was rolling. Sandy stood over a skillet tossing flapjacks into the air and catching them in the pan on their reverse side as they fell. Waymart lay on the grass. Beside the stove sat Trigger, watching the familiar manipulation of flapjacks. In his shack Tod, whistling lustily, was taking his turn "rustling grub."

"Of course," Ross told Lucky, "I can make the transfer to-night without any trouble."

Lucky nodded and looked behind him at the sick man, who lay staring at them with his free eye, his hand still beneath the pillow.

"It's your turn in here to-night, isn't it?" added Ross.

"Yes—it's my turn," answered Lucky in a curiously uncertain tone.

"Or are you going to Miners'?" asked Ross quickly.

Lucky hesitated. "I'll see later on."

Here Tod came to the door of his shack and let out a stentorian yell: "A Waldorf-Astoria dinner with all fixin's now being served in the cabin at the rear. First call, and there won't be a second!" Tod was only a matter of five years distant from York State.

ROSS GRANT

Ross turned back to his patient a moment and then joined Lucky and Tod in the other shack. A moment later Waymart McKenzie entered and took Trigger's place at the bare pine table.

"Trig says he's taken his knittin' and gone visitin'," Waymart explained with an infrequent grin, "and he sent me t' take his place. Sandy's spinnin' a yarn that'll take till midnight."

"Fall on the flapjacks," invited Tod hospitably.

Lucky said nothing, but his shoulders twitched involuntarily, and he glanced again and again during the meal at the two figures eating beside the little sheet-iron stove.

After supper Tod washed the dishes, Waymart bearing him company. Lucky took Ross's water pail and started for the creek. Sandy and Trigger were not visible.

Ross stood outside and watched Lucky until the growth of quaking asp bushes just beyond the McKenzie camp hid him from view. A few moments after he disappeared in the bushes, Sandy and Trigger strolled past and entered the tent together, where they were joined by Waymart.

For a longer time than usual Ross waited while Hans demanded water petulantly. Finally the watcher discovered Lucky coming from the direction of his cabin bearing the dripping pail.

"Did ye think I was never comin'?" he asked,

GOLD HUNTER

adding immediately, "Better go stretch yer legs while I stay with Hans."

Willingly Ross obeyed, and strode off, taking his way past the tent and down the trail which he and Lucky had traveled a week ago. It seemed ages to the boy since he had started with Bill Travers from Miners' Camp, so many events had been crowded into the days and so much anxiety. He whistled buoyantly as he walked, confident that his plan with the letter would do away that very night with one source of anxiety.

"This is the time I'll put it all over Sandy!" he exulted. "I'll cheat him out of a chance to cheat. Wish he would have to fall to and do a little honest work. I'd like to see his hands hardened up some." Here Ross spread his out and grinned at them quizzically. "I'd like to see them look like mine right now, for instance. Uncle will tell me mine don't look much like a surgeon's hands, but they'll have time to limber up and soften before I get to be a surgeon, I think!"

He left the trail half a mile below the valley and climbed the mountain at the left until he was able to overlook the Valley of the Pass. Climbing aimlessly among the boulders with which the mountainside was strewn, he ran into a weather-beaten stake driven into the thin soil near a deep

ROSS GRANT

hole blasted out of the rock. He stopped to examine it.

"Another graveyard of somebody's hopes," he muttered aloud, twitching away from the stake a rag of paper still flopping in the wind.

The paper had contained writing which the storms of years had obliterated. Only a date remained that showed the claim had been staked in the late nineties. Originally it must have contained the name of the prospector who had staked the claim. Ross had been in the Shoshones long enough to picture accurately what had occurred on that spot. Some prospector had explored those peaks with his pack outfit, his blow-pipe and his microscope. In his wanderings he had happened on some outcropping of the strata that made up the range, and had found, or thought he had found, a "lead" within its enclosing "wall rocks" at this place. Here he had stopped. In the lead there might be a vein of metal-bearing ore.

"And that's what they're all hunting—metal-bearing ore," said Ross aloud.

Planting his back against the stake he looked across the valley at the side of Elk with the three dark holes that marked three more attempts to reach metal-bearing ore.

"The thing that's hard to understand," he thought, "is that when they've failed a hundred

GOLD HUNTER

times they're just as keen on the next scent. Maybe now this fellow," he looked again into the "discovery hole" behind him, "had blasted and hammered all over these mountains and screwed his microscope into his eye over a thousand bits of valueless ore."

Aimlessly the boy, starting from the discovery hole, paced off three hundred feet at the right, pretending he was staking a claim according to law. He was merely following the procedure of the real prospector in the late nineties. Three hundred feet the law gave him, surveyed at right angles to the general trend of the "lead." Then he was entitled to fifteen hundred feet along the lead, making twenty acres in all. No more could he possess in a single claim, but much less if he desired. A stake set at each corner of this crudely surveyed claim held it against all comers, so long as the prospector did his "development work" according to law. In this case the staker had deserted his claim and gone elsewhere. There was but little good ore in the vicinity of Elk Pass. Elk Mountain contained the best veins in that neighborhood.

"And I hope that Lucky's tunnel is following the best vein here," muttered Ross as he slipped and slid down to the Pass. "I'd like to see him strike something good."

ROSS GRANT

Turning toward the twin shacks, he paused at Lucky's cabin, behind which he heard a sound. He turned aside and circled the place, discovering, in the fast falling darkness, Lucky's packhorse and his saddle-horse tethered to a tree.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ross blankly. "This means that Lucky goes to-night. Why didn't he tell me?"

Slowly the boy made his way back to the twin cabins. Here was the reason, then, that Lucky had been gone so long after water; he was rounding up his horses. "Queer he didn't tell me," muttered Ross again.

When he reached the cabin, Lucky stood in the doorway of Trigger's cabin, while Tod occupied the doorway opposite.

"I found my packhoss back there among the bushes," Lucky was saying, "and took 'im up and tethered 'im alongside my cabin."

"Goin' to Miners' after the sticks to-night, then?" remarked Tod.

Lucky nodded. "Guess so, providin' you'll take my place in here. Will ye?" jerking his head toward the sick man's bunk.

"Nothin' surer!" responded Tod.

"Then I'll turn in over t' my shack and ketch a wink 'r two before startin'." Lucky turned to Ross as he spoke, adding, "Guess I better make it over t' Camp to-night. It's as good a time as any."

GOLD HUNTER

The light from the candle within the shack fell on Lucky's face as he turned. On it lay an expression that Ross could not fathom—an excitement hardly suppressed. The boy was vaguely startled by it.

Presently, however, tired by his long tramp and broken sleep of the few previous nights, the boy lay down in his bunk fully intending to remain awake until Hans slept and then make the transfer of the sheets of paper and lock the real letter up in his chest, but scarcely had his head touched the blankets before he was asleep.

He was aroused by the noisy entrance of Trigger, and started up with a confused sense of something that must be done at once. Trigger bore his blankets in his arms. Ross sat on the side of his bunk and regarded him confusedly.

"I thought Tod was to stay," he remarked finally.

Trigger knelt with his back to Ross and spread out his blankets on the floor.

"Tod was here last night. I told 'im t' roll in his own bunk, and I'd snore my head off over here. That would even things up more."

Ross looked toward the other bunk. Hans was staring sleeplessly at the newcomer with his blood-shot eye.

"I'll lie down again," thought Ross, "but I

ROSS GRANT

will not sleep until I've attended to the letter." He spoke sternly to himself, but sternness did not suffice to keep him awake.

The next thing that he realized he was lying on his back, one arm thrown across his face, and his eyes fixed confusedly on Trigger standing beside the other bunk.

Above the candle the man held the letter—the sick man's letter—in hands which shook like quaking asp leaves, and on his face was an expression of eager amazement.

Before Ross was thoroughly aroused, Trigger had left the shack with the letter in his hand. The boy threw off his blankets, and sat up. The door of the cabin stood open. Outside he heard the sibilant hiss of whispers, and the sound of matches struck into a flame. A hundred thoughts flashed through his mind. This, then, was the way Sandy had been working—through the impulsive Trigger. Ross's first excited determination was to face the two and demand the instant return of the letter. Then came the steadying reflection that it was impossible for him to take away the knowledge that a scrutiny of the mapped trail had already given them, and equally impossible for him to prevent their acting on that knowledge. But Lucky—had Lucky already started? He held his watch up to the light of the candle. It



THE MAN HELD THE LETTER



GOLD HUNTER

was three o'clock. The moon had long since arisen, and Lucky was on his way to Miners' Camp.

With a feeling of profound helplessness Ross lay down, drew up the blankets, and resumed his former position with his arm across his face. Scarcely was his arm in place when Trigger came back, tiptoed to the bunk of the sick man, and slipped the letter under his pillow. Then with a sharp look at Ross he caught up his cap and slicker, and left the shack again; and there fell on the listener's ears the tramp of two pairs of feet growing fainter and fainter in their progress toward the Pass.

CHAPTER VII

A PUZZLING SITUATION

As the sound of the steps died away, Ross came out of his bunk with a bound. Stepping into his shoes, he threw his coat across his shoulders, and ran out-of-doors. In the shadow of the snoring Tod's shack he stopped, and looked toward the Pass.

Behind the head of Elk hung a great full moon swimming in a sea of its own brilliant light, which turned the blue of the sky into a velvety black, and trailed long shadows after two figures moving rapidly across the valley. With Trigger, Ross had no difficulty in recognizing Sandy. At the edge of the deep shadow cast by Elk Mountain the horses were grazing. As Sandy and Trigger approached the horses, a third figure came out of the shadow and joined them.

"Waymart!" muttered Ross.

The three stood a long time together. Then the shadows swallowed up two figures, while the third moved about, led out a horse into the light, and went through a variety of motions the result of which Ross could not see. Half an hour passed.

GOLD HUNTER

To Ross, shivering beside Tod's cabin, it seemed hours. When the other two men finally emerged from the darkness of Elk's shadows, all three cut their horses from the bunch, saddled up, and rode off. They were evidently prepared for an immediate journey from that spot. As they crossed the path of light which marked the entrance to the Pass, Ross saw that Waymart was leading a loaded packhorse. He had been cinching its wooden saddle and putting finishing touches to its loading during the absence of Sandy and Trigger. The four animals crossed the path of light, and entered the Pass at a gallop.

Not until the last horse had disappeared did Ross, chagrined and heavy-hearted, return to his bunk, but not to sleep. What an account he must render to Lucky! Lucky had been so anxious to have the letter locked up, and he had slept through his opportunity of securing it. But he had had no reason to suspect Trigger. Had Lucky suspected him? It was a question that Ross could not answer, but a new significance attached to the fact that Lucky had asked Tod to take his place that night rather than Trigger, although Tod had been up the night before. In the light of this new development, certain phases of Lucky's manner during the last two days took on a new significance. Ross believed now that Lucky had come to sus-

ROSS GRANT

pect the result of Sandy's sudden intimacy with Trigger.

"Everything is plain now that it's too late to thwart Sandy," Ross told himself, with a feeling of resentment against Lucky. If only Lucky had put him on his guard against Trigger!

It was like Sandy to work through Trigger, in whose shack the sick man lay. Ross could have kept Sandy out, but could not have kept out the owner of the shack. Perhaps, after all, he could not have prevented what had occurred.

At last dawn came, and the Toddler began to rattle the pans and skillets, yawn at the top of his lungs with many vocal flourishes to the process, at the same time slamming the door of the stove and banging down the covers. Whatever Tod did, he did noisily and cheerfully. Sound seemed necessary to his comfort.

"Where in the nation's name is that good-for-nothin' Trig?" he asked when Ross presented himself, heavy eyed, for breakfast.

It was a question which Ross had anticipated, and answered readily, as he pushed a wooden box up to the table and bestrode it. "I don't know; but, if you do, I wish you'd tell me. I saw him and Sandy and Waymart ride through the Pass this morning at three o'clock, and they took a loaded packhorse with 'em."

GOLD HUNTER

Tod dropped his knife, shoved his tin cup of thick coffee from him, and stared at Ross in amazement. Then he leaned back, slapped his leg, and guffawed loudly. "Say, Doc, ever see things at night before you come to Wyoming?"

Ross flushed angrily, and then swallowed his resentment with a flapjack. "If I could, I'd lay a lot of things to dreams," he declared. "Find out for yourself. Trig isn't in sight, is he? And where are Sandy and Waymart?"

Tod stared again, and then, arising, went to the door. Looking in the direction of the tent, he uttered a low exclamation, and started toward it at a lumbering run. Ross followed. Tod ran past the cold stove, and, stooping, looked into the tent.

"Doc, you're right!" he cried. "There ain't hide ner hair of supplies here. Flour sack's gone, skillet's gone, pans, bacon, blankets—where?" He faced Ross with an excitement so genuine that the latter was convinced that he had neither part nor parcel in the scheme.

"But I'll let Lucky tell whatever he wants told when he comes home," he said to himself. "It's his business, and I'll leave him to manage it."

To the astonished Toddler he reiterated the tale he had already told, adding: "I heard them moving about, and got up in time to see the three saddle up and ride off. They must have had sad-

ROSS GRANT

dles and everything else all bunched together over there." He pointed to a huge boulder at the foot of Elk near Lucky's cabin.

Over and over Tod threshed the matter out. "That was one for Trig to play on me," he scowled finally, "deserting this way without a word and with Hans down. But, Doc, I'll tell you how the land lays, probably. Trigger is gold mad. He's a cow-puncher by trade, you know—or maybe you don't; and last year his horse bucked on him and almost killed 'im. Then Trig lost his nerve, and took to prospectin'; and he's gone plumb quartz crazy. And as for Sandy"—Tod hunched his shoulders—"well, Sandy is as full of schemes as a dog is of fleas, and I'll gamble that he's caught Trig in one. I'm sorry he's got hold of old Trig. He don't know Sandy very well, Trig don't, and nobody has informed him extensively. Trig come out of Montana. He hain't lived long in the same county that holds Sandy."

Ross filled the rusty stove with green pine limbs, and, greasing the skillet, poured in some batter.

"What time," he asked abruptly, "do you expect Lucky back?"

Tod planted his left elbow more firmly on the table, while he steered his loaded knife toward his mouth. "When he comes, and not much before!" he made answer. "If he comes at sun-

GOLD HUNTER

down, he'll be doing his duty by his country—or by his tunnel, rather. He can't afford to do much dillydallyin' this summer."

"Because he's behindhand with his work," supplemented Ross with an upward slide on the remark.

The Toddler nodded. "Yes, this is his fifth year." Here the speaker broke off to ask, "Are you wise to Wyoming mining laws?"

"Know something about 'em," Ross responded. "Enough to be sure that when a fellow doesn't get his claim patented at the end of the fifth year from the time he stakes it, Sandy McKenzie or any one else may jump the claim."

"Huh, uh." Tod opened his lips over another large mouthful. "That's the size of it, and the trouble now with Wyoming, she's enforcin' the laws. We don't have a law officer within forty miles of us except Dad Page, and he ain't on the Lazy Y half the time, and yet someway, in these new and degenerate days, gun rule has sort of gone out of fashion. Of course you see chaps wandering around yet with six shooters hanging to their belts like Sandy, but they ain't so plenty by a long run as they used to be when I come in here and I've been here only a matter of five years—in Wyoming, I mean. The law and order craze has got hold of Wyoming strong."

ROSS GRANT

"I'm glad it got a good hold before I came," commented Ross grimly, "because I can shoot about as straight as I can ride, and you know what sort of a figure I cut in the saddle."

"You're right enough, Doc, in the saddle or out," said Tod easily. He leaned back, one elbow on the table, and proceeded, systematically, to clean out the dishes, one by one. "If you stay here long enough and ride enough you'll pass. All you need is practice."

"And I'm not likely to get that," exclaimed Ross decidedly. "In ten days or two weeks it's me for old Pennsy, where we have automobiles and street cars and steam cars on every corner."

Tod stretched his legs out beside the table and rested his head on his hand. "Queer, Doc, but you remind me of myself five years ago. I come out here to look around one summer between schools. I was teaching school back in York State at the time, and had signed a contract for another year's work in the same place. I come out here with a cousin who was some afflicted with the gold bug. He'd been here a couple of years. Well, I came up to Miners' with him, and we worked on his claims. He had offered me a two spot a day and board and I came along more to see the country than to earn the dough. Well, at first I felt

GOLD HUNTER

as you do, or think you do"—here Tod gave the boy a shrewd look. "The mountains got on my nerve. The food out of tin cans distressed me until I found I was hungry enough to eat cans and all! The hardships all made me pine for the East—or think I did! Well, the summer went away, but I didn't! I found in the fall that I had, somehow, thrown up my school and was facing a winter in Miners'. I haven't been East since. I found I liked the open and the mountains and—yes," with a little chuckle as he reached for another biscuit, "even the canned grub has got me. Watch out, Doc, or the whole business will get you before you know it!"

Ross shook his head. "You see, I've wanted to do one thing and be one thing since I went to live with my doctor uncle, when I was twelve." The boy leaned forward, speaking earnestly. "I've always had it in mind since then and worked toward it—I've wanted to be a surgeon. I've been a—well—we call 'em 'grinds' in Pennsylvania"—he flushed a little—"but I've had to be. I am not quick with books, and you have to have a lot of book work before you begin the practice in medicine. So I've neglected the 'open,' as you call it, and read and studied. I hated even to work in the gym at Wyoming Seminary, where I graduated last year. I've lived with one idea in my mind for

ROSS GRANT

years, and now I don't believe the wild and woolly can turn me away."

"Probably not, Doc, if you're as set as that, and you looked pretty set to me all along. Guess if you begin a thing you go through with it—looks that way to me. But Wyoming got me, all right. I didn't like teaching and was marking time at it till I could study the law. But I guess the law missed a poor devotee and the mountains found a good one."

The Toddler arose and stretched up his arms. "I'm forgettin' the language you speak even," he said with a short, rueful laugh. "What with punchin' cows winters and prospectin' summers, I've dropped my 'g's' mostly. Some time I'll probably speak in the vernacular as strongly as—well, as Lucky here—good old boy!"

After Tod went up to his tunnel, Ross made Hans comfortable, and then sat dozing and thinking in the sunshine. A dozen times an hour he pulled out his watch to measure off the time before Lucky could return. A dozen times he wandered over to the deserted tent, and looked within. How far toward the Sheep's Horn had the three ridden now? he asked himself periodically. What would they find when they reached there? What would they do?

The warm sun had not the power to dispel the

GOLD HUNTER

loneliness which brooded over the little valley, and at noon he prepared dinner and eagerly awaited Tod's coming. Over the "sour-dough" bread of the latter's manufacture, and jerked-elk stew, and canned tomatoes, Ross began to ask questions. How far across ranges was Miners' Camp? What mountains lay south and east of the Pass? How far away were the Great Divide and Yellowstone Park? And then, at last, none of these questions having elicited the desired answer :

"Where's that Sheep's Horn Mountain, Tod, the home of the 'ha'nt'?"

The Toddler dipped a spoon into the can of condensed milk, and stirred his coffee. Then he jerked his spoon over his shoulder. "Toward the Great Divide, pretty near the Park over west of here."

"How do you get there?"

"Oh, most any old way," responded Tod carelessly. "You can go up the South Fork and over the South Range, or you can go through the Pass and up Elk Crick, or go over t' Miners' Camp, and follow Wood River up to the Divide, and then go an easy way across lots southwest; but that's a long way."

"How long does it take to go?" asked Ross.

Tod shook his head, speech being momentarily denied him. When a laborious swallow removed all

ROSS GRANT

obstacles to speech, he said carelessly: "Depends on way you take. I went up the South Fork. That's the shortest way and makes less 'n a two-day hike from here."

When Tod arose from the table, he checked a yawn to say: "Don't forget, Doc, that I'm on the outlook to-day. If you need help with Hans, hang out your towel, and I'll be on deck."

"Don't think there's any chance of my needing you," Ross responded. "Hans is getting along finely. He doesn't bother much. Neither Trig nor I was up last night—that is," in some confusion, "until Trig went away."

Tod chuckled. Already his resentment against Trigger had faded. Tod could not hold resentment long. "I hope I'm around when you tell Lucky. I want to see how he takes Trig's hikin' out this way without warnin'. Lucky's helped Trig a lot this year, same as he has me. We're newer to this business than he, Trig and I are. Lucky is an old stager."

The next three hours passed slowly for Ross. He washed the dishes, cleaned up both shacks, and waited on Hans, glancing every few moments at the Pass in the vain hope that he might see Lucky riding through. He talked with his patient. That is, he spoke slowly and distinctly in English, and Hans seemed to understand a little. Then he

GOLD HUNTER

responded rapidly, although weakly, in German; and Ross understood nothing. But one word arrested his attention, "golt," a word that Hans had reiterated so often in feverish sleep as he pushed at the logs beside his bunk.

"I'll look that word up," muttered Ross presently. He opened his chest, which he did not keep locked, it being nearly empty, and took up his German dictionary. "Hans says golt, but he no doubt means gold. Yes, here it is. He's been digging for it already, poor fellow, among the logs," Ross said aloud.

He sat down on his chest, and with the dictionary still in his hands planted an elbow on his knees, and watched Hans, who had fallen asleep. "By this time," he thought, "his claims may be jumped, and Waymart making camp on 'em. I wonder if Lucky will follow up the jumpers."

He had raised the lid of his chest to return the book, when a sudden recollection caused him to straighten up. Taking the dictionary by the covers, he turned it upside down and shook it. Nothing fell out.

"I left that paper in here," he declared aloud.

With his foot on the chest and the book on his knee, he searched from cover to cover. No paper appeared. Opening the chest, with puckered lips, he looked through its contents hastily. Still no

ROSS GRANT

paper. Then, dropping on his knees, he made a thorough investigation. He unfolded every article of clothing, and went through the two or three medical books which the chest contained. Then he arose to his feet, and stared down in perplexity. The paper which he had intended to substitute for the letter was gone. He could not understand it.

He passed his hand across his face in confusion. There was something which he ought to remember in this connection, and could not. He went to the door, and looked up at Elk. Again he saw in his mind's eye the three men crossing the path of bright moonlight and entering the dark shadows of the Pass, and the recollection brought him the thing he was struggling to grasp. It was the expression on Trigger's face when Ross opened his eyes on Trigger standing over the candle with the letter—the expression of astonishment. Whirling on his heel, he went to the bunk of the sleeping Hans, drew out the letter boldly, though cautiously, and opened it.

The original sheet was gone, and in its place was the paper he had left in his dictionary! Trigger's amazement was explained.

The sheet contained a long line with many turns and angles. Along its length were meaningless names. There were "Smith" and "Jones" and "Lucky" and "Trigger" and "Toddler," and the

GOLD HUNTER

names of men he had known in Miners' Camp, written along the margin of the paper so that to the dim vision of the sick man it would resemble the chart his brother had made.

Hastily replacing the sheet, Ross tiptoed out-of-doors. He believed he saw it all now, and there was but one way of expressing his joy at the result as long as he could not indulge in yells. With a broad grin he turned a series of clumsy hand-springs. Bringing up at the door of Tod's shack, he sat down to gloat over that expression on Trigger's face. Lucky had prudently taken the real letter with him. He must have made the transfer when Ross had gone for a tramp. It was odd that he did not wait to tell what he had done, but that was an item over which the boy did not linger now. Lucky had the letter; Sandy and Trigger were fooled. That was enough.

Pulling out his watch, Ross whistled as he looked at it. It was five o'clock and nearly time for Lucky to appear in the Pass.

Six o'clock came and went. Ross got supper, and was making jerked-elk broth for the sick man when Tod appeared with a tale of woe.

"I smashed my pick handle, and am out a pick," he grumbled. "Trig's taken his to parts unknown, and Lucky's ain't worth a plunk, not the one up in the tunnel. If mine had only given

ROSS GRANT

out yesterday, I could have sent over to Camp for one. As it is, I'll have to borrow Lucky's new one. I'm sure he's got one in his shack."

Tod seated his bulky form on a box beside the table, and fell to with a will on the food of Ross's preparation.

It was eight o'clock before the reds and yellows of the sunset faded from the tops of the snow-capped mountains, and twilight fell on Elk's Pass. Ross sat in the doorway of Tod's shack, straining his eyes toward the narrow cut in the huge mountain through which Lucky must come. Tod was lighting a fire inside the shack, for the nights were always cold.

"Tod," asked Ross finally, "is it possible that Lucky won't get here to-night?"

Tod came to the door, and looked out. "Looks that way. He won't come across Spar in the darkness with dynamite aboard, and the moon won't get up till one to-night. Nope. Guess it's little me and you alone here to-night. There's nothin' doin' but coyotes, though," he added encouragingly, with a smile at the boy. "Shouldn't be a bit surprised to find us all alive and kickin' in the mornin'."

Ross smiled faintly. "I wasn't thinking about—us." He hesitated, resisting an impulse to tell Tod the whole thing; for a new fear had assailed

GOLD HUNTER

him, and the alarming idea that Lucky would not reach the Pass that night intensified it. Why, when the McKenzies and Trigger failed to find out what they wanted to know from the letter, had they gone away with a pack outfit? Why had they gone at all? Did they suspect that Lucky had taken the letter with him, and had they gone to meet him, three against one? Ross arose, and moved about restlessly.

Tod arranged the draughts, put on his coat, and, humming cheerfully, went out and sat down on the rock at the corner of his cabin, where Ross presently joined him, undecided what to do.

"Well, Doc," yawned Tod, "guess I'll hike over to Lucky's cabin, and lend myself his pick. There's nothin' like bein' friendly with every one around you, especially if every one ain't near enough to object."

Ross started up eagerly. "Let me go. I've not been out to-day. You stay with Hans."

Tod sank back to the rock. "All right, Doc. My legs need a rest as bad as yours need to move. Go on, and you needn't be in any hurry about gettin' back. Just shoulder the pick, and do a stroke or two of work up in my tunnel if you're dyin' for a little exercise."

Ross went slowly across the valley, his head bent and his hands in his pockets. The sunless

ROSS GRANT

air struck sharply against his face with icy fingers. He shivered, and quickened his pace. By the time he had reached Lucky's cabin he had decided to take Tod into his confidence on his return.

The shack stood under the shadow of the boulders of Elk Mountain. Ross had been there before, and knew where everything stood, the bunk, the stove, the tools, Lucky's entire outfit, in short. The door was open, and through the doorway and the open window enough light streamed to enable Ross to see the interior distinctly as he entered. The tools, he knew, stood at the foot of the bunk; and he was half-way across the dirt floor, absorbed in his own thoughts, before he noticed anything strange in the shack. Then he stopped, and looked about him in amazement.

The tools were not at the foot of the bunk. The bunk itself was empty of blankets. Only the coarse hay remained. One of the two sacks of flour which had stood beside the stove was gone. Gone were skillets and stew-pan, ham and side of bacon, and supply of jerked-elk meat. Ross went over to the table, and looked into a large wooden box of canned stuff. Half the cans were missing.

With his hands hanging beside him and his forehead contracted into a deep furrow of perplexity he stood for a long time in front of that

GOLD HUNTER

box, staring at the contents. Finally he brought a clinched fist down on the table, and exclaimed aloud :

“It can't be. I know Lucky wouldn't do such a thing!”

He returned on slow, reluctant feet to Tod. He was trying to reason out what he had seen on other than reasonable grounds. He assured himself that the McKenzies had made off with Lucky's supplies, even while his common sense told him that they had more supplies of their own than one packhorse could carry and they had taken but one with them.

Tod's voice came out of the darkness beside the door of the shack. “Well, where's the pick? Or did you forget what you'd gone for before you went?”

“Neither.” Ross hesitated, and then burst out, “Tod, Lucky took all his tools and supplies with him.”

Tod arose. “Now, see here, Doc. I'm ready to believe anything that's reasonable, but there's some things that nobody can stuff down my throat.”

Ross entered the shack. “Go and see for yourself,” he said quietly.

Tod went. He abandoned his usual slow gait, and strode breathlessly across the valley. In a

ROSS GRANT

few moments he was back again. He came into the shack, and sat down on the bench beside the stove. For a minute no one spoke. Tod clasped his hands about his knee, and leaned forward, examining the stove intently. Finally he straightened up, and looked sharply at Ross.

"Doc, is this place bewitched? What's goin' on? Have you any idea?"

Ross finished dressing Hans' face before answering. "I'll tell you all I know to-morrow noon if Lucky doesn't come before. If he does come—why, it's his business to explain as much as he wants to."

A moment longer Tod looked narrowly at the boy, and then nodded. Nor did he refer to the subject again.

The following morning the two ate breakfast in silence, and in silence Tod left the shack for the tunnel, prepared to make a new handle for his pick. Left alone, Ross busied himself all the morning, going restlessly from one thing to another and from one shack to the other. And every time he passed a door or went into the open he looked longingly at the Pass.

Noon brought Tod, but not Lucky. Ross had prepared dinner again, and left Tod to eat alone while he got Hans' dinner. He lingered at this, dreading the task he had promised Tod he would

GOLD HUNTER

perform at noon, knowing that his tale would incriminate Lucky. Finally, having no further excuse for lingering with Hans, he crossed to the other shack, and sat down to a cold dinner. Tod had finished, and was sitting on his box, his hands clasping one foot thrown over the other knee, stoically awaiting Ross's story.

He heard it through without stirring or taking his eyes from a point where Elk sends up a giant arm from the summit of its mass, and rends the sky. When Ross had finished, he still said nothing, but, arising laboriously, poked the fire, and, pulling the skillet forward, proceeded with maddening deliberation to bake some hot flapjacks.

Ross, unhungry, watched him impatiently, as he poured in the batter and slowly baked it on one side, and, tossing the pancake in the air, caught it again on the skillet and returned it to the fire.

"Eat, Doc," urged Tod laconically, setting the cakes in front of the boy.

"I can't!" Ross burst out. "Why don't you say what you think?"

Tod settled himself on his box again. "Can't," he returned nonchalantly. "There ain't time enough to spare, nor words enough in the dictionary. But, Doc, I'll say just this much: No matter what Lucky seems to have done or not done, there ain't a mean

ROSS GRANT

hair in his head. I've lived near him off and on for five years, and I know."

Impulsively Ross sprang to his feet. Grasping Tod's hand, he wrung it gratefully.

"If you feel that way about him," grinned Tod, returning the grip with interest, "we'll set down and talk things over."

Just then his glance was arrested by something seen through the open door. He uttered an exclamation, and pointed.

"Look here, Doc. See what's hikin' through the Pass!"

CHAPTER VIII

DISTURBING NEWS

Ross reached Tod's side with one step, and, seeing a solitary horseman riding beneath the ledge at the further end of the gorge, cried excitedly: "Lucky! It's Lucky!"

"No, it ain't, more's the pity," responded Tod. "It's Trig."

He turned his back on the Pass, and looked sidewise at the boy. "Maybe it'll help Trig to rest nights if he don't know what we know, and it won't spoil our rest either way."

Ross, watching the slow advance of the horseman, glanced up with a quick nod. "I understand," he said. "I'll follow your lead."

"And," added Tod meditatively, "I'll begin educatin' 'im on the subject of Sandy. It won't be many days before he'll be wise."

Trigger rode across the valley with an elaborate carelessness which was so foreign to his usual impetuosity that it was ludicrous. He threw one knee over the pommel, and began to whistle "The Girl I Left Behind Me." As he approached the

ROSS GRANT

shack, he let out a stentorian voice: "Hello, in there! Ye gittin' deaf, everybody?"

"Deef?" yelled Tod. "Deef nothing! We're fairly stunned, Trig, with the discovery we have a full fledged prima donna in our midst—a regular Mr. Jennie Lind! What you been up to all these years, hidin' your talent under a bushel basket?"

"I'm whistlin' to encourage my bread basket not t' collapse yet a while!" shouted Trigger. "Ye'll find that it's a bushel basket when ye've cooked enough t' fill it! Rustle a few dozen flap-jacks for a starvin' man, will ye?"

Tod appeared in the doorway, his fat face wearing a broad grin. "Ever since I was born, Trig, I've heard that the starvin' man should be given a bite at a time, with bites a long way apart. That's how we'll treat you, hey?"

"Not s' long as I'm able t' sling ye out of the shack with one hand roped behind me!" retorted Trigger. "This here brand of starvation calls for a bite every second for an hour stiddy."

Tod stuffed his hands into his pockets. "You old jackanapes, you," he asked easily, "where have you been? And where is Sandy? And where's Waymart? And where's all their supplies?"

The rider dismounted and began to unsaddle.

GOLD HUNTER

There was a certain shamefacedness about him which his assumed carelessness did not conceal. He lingered long at the saddle and bridle, multiplying difficulties with cinch and bit.

"Wall, as t' Sandy and Waymart, they're over t' Miners'. Part of their grub is there, too, the part," facetiously, "that ain't inside of us."

"What's up over at the Camp?" was Tod's next question, instead of the ones Ross would have liked to have him ask. But Ross understood now that the mountains were a world inside of a world, and the mountaineers followed a rule of conduct, unwritten, but closely observed, a rule that excluded the asking of many personal questions.

"Wall," answered Trigger from the further side of his horse, "there ain't enough news t' run a daily paper, as I noticed. Still, there's some doin's."

"Always are." Tod still stood in the doorway watching the other. "You can always pick up a few head-lines over there. What are they?"

"Grasshopper Jim got caught with his freight outfit below Gale's Ridge t'other day; I guess that's the most. Leastwise Bill Travers thinks it is. Bill had t' git all hands out of the stage and build an addition onto the trail where it bulges over the river jest above the first bridge. Of course neither

ROSS GRANT

Grasshopper ner Bill could pass ner back up ner turn 'round."

"How's that?" asked Ross. "I don't understand."

"Trail's too narrow above the Meadows for any meetin' that isn't on horseback," Tod explained. "Grasshopper should have waited on the Meadows for the stage."

"That's the idee," affirmed Trigger. "He knew it was stage time, and he should have waited. But he come right along and all hands had to turn to and build the trail out the width of the stage for a rod, and then hold the stage right side up, while Grasshopper got the freight wagon past. Grasshopper had a big load and eight bronses pullin'."

"I should think one of the mining companies over there would widen out that trail for a few miles up near camp," said Tod meditatively. "They could put it into their development work and have it count in patenting the claims."

He retired into the cabin and began to mix batter as unconcernedly as though Trigger was coming in from a day's work on the side of Elk. Presently the room was filled again with an appetizing odor. Trigger entered, washed in a basin beside the water pail and straddled a box beside the table. He recounted other "head-lines" of

GOLD HUNTER

Miners' Camp rapidly and with some incoherence, his eyes sliding away from Ross's steady gaze uncomfortably. Tod baked flapjacks without evincing any further inclination to watch the newcomer, who, Ross observed, did not seem to notice the absence of Lucky, nor make inquiries concerning Hans.

Finally, with steaming coffee, boiled beans, and a pile of flapjacks before him, Trigger found a convenient resting place for his eyes and became more at ease. "Don't know when Sandy and Waymart are comin' after their tent and t'other hosses," he volunteered. "They said they was goin' t' hike down t' Meeteetse to-morrer."

"They don't like the climate up at the Pass, then," commented Tod sarcastically. "The climate of most places don't agree with their healths long, especially Sandy's!"

Trigger looked up quickly; but Tod was filling the stove with wood, and did not see the look. Slamming the cover down noisily, he asked, as though the idea had but that moment arrived: "Say, Trig! Which of you dumped Lucky over the Spar trail?"

Trigger upset a spoonful of sugar on the way to his cup. His voice was painfully constrained. "Lucky? Where's Lucky? Ain't he here?"

"Where, for instance? Doc, uncover that box

ROSS GRANT

of beans, and see if he has cached himself in there."

Trigger conveyed another spoonful of sugar to his cup. "I hain't seen hide ner hair of Lucky."

Ross leaned forward and spoke sharply, "Trigger, is that straight goods?"

"That's straight goods, Doc," returned Trigger solemnly, as he bent over his cup.

"Didn't you run on his trail in any way?" persisted Ross, while Tod gazed curiously at the newcomer.

Trigger looked steadily at the questioner. "No, Doc, we didn't run onto his trail, and what's more, we didn't see no one that had run onto it." So earnest was his denial that the two listeners believed him.

Nothing more was said that day about the affair; no more questions were asked; no more information was volunteered; but at noon the following day, when Trigger had gone for a pail of water, Ross reopened the absorbing topic of Lucky's flight with a question, one of the many which he was unable to answer.

"Doc," Tod answered, "the lay of the land is about this, as I figure it out. They rushed away that night to trail Lucky, and Lucky was foxy enough to cover his trail. Strikes me that Lucky knew more 'n you think he did, and what he

GOLD HUNTER

didn't know he figured out pretty close. Now, of course, the McKenzies may be in Miners', or on the hunt for Lucky's trail, or headin' back here, or down to Cody. No one ever counted rightly on the McKenzies. And see here, Doc, don't be too hard on old Trig. Trig acts like a dog that's been killing sheep. You can see by his actions that he isn't burstin' with pride in himself. And you can likewise see that he isn't an old hand at claim-jumpin'. And Doc"—here Tod leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on the mouths of the tunnels visible on the side of Elk,—"when a fellow is huntin' gold, and a chance comes along to stretch out his hand and take it, and there's some one eggin' him on—say, Doc, don't be too hard on Trig. How d'ye know I wouldn't have done the same in his shoes?"

For a moment Ross looked at him in silence. Then, "Because it isn't in you!" he burst out.

"I don't believe," Tod continued philosophically, drawing at his pipe, "that any of us can tell exactly what we'd do if we was set down in the other fellow's shoes. We can always *say* what we'd do—and what he ought t' do—but doin' it is another thing, and Trig is plumb crazy to get rich quick."

"His claim up on Elk doesn't promise much in the way of riches, does it?" Ross asked after a moment.

ROSS GRANT

"Nope, not for Trig—nor any of us. Some day we'll get a livin' out of our claims *if* the Burlington runs the Cody road up to Miners' within reach of us or if—well, Doc, we've gone over that trail so often I reckon you've got it by heart."

"I have," responded Ross. "'*If* the Burlington builds its road or *if* one of the mining companies over at Miners' puts in a smelter'—yes, I've fairly eaten those 'ifs' ever since I came to the mountains."

Tod smoked in silence a moment. He gazed slowly around the valley. "These mountains are full of 'ifs,'" he said slowly, finally, "but they've got me—that you've heard before, too!"

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it into his pocket. "No," he began again. "We can't seem to be sure what anybody would do when he can stretch out an arm and rake in some gold." He looked sharply at Ross and added abruptly, "Now, there's Lucky! What about Lucky?"

Ross arose without replying and went into Trigger's cabin. There was Lucky! And after the first hours of excitement and of rejoicing that the McKenzies and Trigger had been foiled, the boy's thoughts had turned to the other side of the case, where, evidently, Tod's were turning. There was Lucky! And Lucky had succeeded in doing exactly what the three had attempted to do. When,

GOLD HUNTER

in their circling, Ross's thoughts came to this end, he clenched his hands involuntarily as though he were assailing an enemy. It could not be that Lucky with his kind eyes and roughly gentle touch, his direct manner and strong, likeable personality had stolen the letter and gone away to Sheep's Horn to appropriate the find he had been trying to protect from Sandy.

"It can't be!" Ross insisted aloud to the uncomprehending Hans, as he raised the latter to a sitting posture in the bunk. "And yet—facts are facts!"

Life at once resumed its dead routine and monotony at Elk Pass. Ross watched the gorge hourly for new arrivals, the McKenzies or perhaps Lucky. He watched all the afternoon until the night shadows hid the Pass from view. Then he listened, but no one came. The following morning he volunteered to do the housework in Trigger's stead.

"Hans isn't making many demands on me now. I'd like to do something, even dish-washing," he exclaimed.

"No more'n I'd like t' have ye," assented Trigger cordially. "Sh' I come down at noon t' sling grub?" he added ingratiatingly.

"I'll have dinner ready at twelve sharp," returned Ross, "and then there'll be a good piece of the morning that will drag."

ROSS GRANT

But in spite of the "piece that dragged," filled in with fruitless thinking and watching and listening, noon and dinner came at last, bringing Tod and Trigger from their work. For the first time Hans sat propped up in his bunk and fed himself. The little table was drawn to the side of his bunk and supplied with such portions of food as his increasing appetite called for. The half of his face visible was pale and shrunken, but his motions were more sure and held the promise of returning strength. Ross left him straining his near-sighted eye hungrily down at some hot broth made from condensed milk and elk steak that had been air-cured or "jerked" the previous November.

"If I foller the mount'ins fer all time," declared Trigger with his face in the wash basin, "I'm goin' t' rope a cook and fasten 'im to my outfit. This here grub gettin' wears on my nerves."

"It don't wear on your nerves, Trig, half as much as it does on the folks that have to eat your cookin'," responded Tod amiably as he swung one leg over a bench beside the table and, sitting down astride, leaned up lazily against the side logs facing the door. "But cooks are expensive, especially the bunch they call chefs that slings you a twenty-five-cent mess and ropes a dollar out of ye for it. But I've thought of something exactly your size in the cook line."

GOLD HUNTER

Trigger ignored Tod's idea. He rubbed his head vigorously on the party towel that had been a party to too many rubbings already. Then he stepped rapidly across the floor and sat down at the table facing Tod. Grasping a steel knife and fork tightly, he fell on a plateful of food ravenously, at the same time tossing a doubtful compliment across the table at the cook.

"Say, Doc, ye wouldn't make a bad grub slinger yerself if ye kept at it long enough."

Tod, spearing his food deliberately and consuming it slowly, chuckled. "Doc, that compliment is worth about two bits. Got 'em handy?"

Ross, plunging his hand into his pocket, drew out a silver quarter, exhibited it and returned it to its resting-place. "It'll be needed worse somewhere else, I'm thinking, than paying for compliments."

"Right ye are, Doc!" exclaimed Trigger. "Take care of the bits and the plunks'll look out fer themselves!"

Tod turned the tin can of condensed milk upside down over his cup and regarded it contemplatively. "But, Trig, this before-mentioned idea of mine would save you all the plunks you'd pay a cook, and here I'm offerin' it to you free gratis for nothin', and you pass it up!"

ROSS GRANT

"Hand it out and let's have a look at it," said Trigger cautiously.

"It's not much to look at," began Tod. "It's a condensed idea. Last time I was in Chicago I run across it. You can carry your grub now in your vest pocket. It's exactly what you need, Trig. Condensed food. They have it all done down in tablets. You wouldn't even have to take along a packhorse. Just load up a case of tablets behind your saddle and start out happy. Take along a parcel of cups, and when noon comes fill the cups with water and stick your hand in among the tablets. Out comes some condensed corn, likely, 'n' potatoes, 'n' meat, 'n' soup, etc. All you do is to drop the tablets into the water and let 'em dissolve, and there you have a sustainin' meal. I ain't sayin' a square meal, understand, but one that'll keep the wolf from ——"

Here Tod leaned forward suddenly and gazed out of the door. "H-m," he interrupted himself. "If there don't come that knee-high-to-a-grass-hopper Monkey!"

With a bound Ross was on his feet and out of the door. Through the Pass rode Nicholas on the spotted pony, the packhorse following at the end of a rope. As soon as the rider saw that he was the center of observation, he leaped to the flank of the pony gayly, heralding his arrival by an In-

GOLD HUNTER

dian war-whoop that made the echoes ring. Ross marveled that one thin throat could pass such a volume of sound.

"Hi, Nick!" he yelled in return, waving his arms wildly. "Right this way. What's the latest?"

The Monkey rode up with many flourishes, and still standing on the flank of the pony, saluted. Then he dropped nimbly to the ground. "The latest with me is that I'm here to see you," he returned. "And what's the latest with you?"

"That we're here bein' seen!" shouted Tod, who still sat inside, with his back against the logs, slowly spearing food.

"Leave the hosses and come to grub while it's hot," urged Trigger, who had run out of the shack with his knife and fork still in his hands.

Ross, untying the pack pony's leading rope, added his invitation. "I cooked the dinner, Nick, and it's worth eating. Come on in."

"If you let Trigger get five minutes more the start of you," called Tod, "you'll regret it. Trig's jaws work like a stamp mill on metals."

"And Tod's jaws work like a stamp mill on fool ideas," retorted Trigger testily. "He can always tell other folks what t' do, but he never tries to break any new trail fer himself."

Nicholas laughed amusedly at this sharp shoot-

ROSS GRANT

ing. He left his ponies standing with low-hanging heads and came to the door. There he stopped, with a quick glance about the interior of the shack.

"Ain't Dad here?" he asked.

"Nope," Tod answered. "The population of the Valley of the Pass has thinned out considerable since you left. Not," he added, "that the population that are here is gettin' any thinner—I hurried up to say that, Trig, for your benefit, because I saw you tryin' to swallow a flapjack whole in order t' say it first. Now bite that mouthful in two and never accuse me of not havin' saved your life!"

Nicholas grinned, and, accepting the box that Ross pushed forward, sat down beside Tod, who, without moving, reached into a cupboard beside him and produced an agate ironware pie plate, a knife, fork and spoon and a cup. Thus outfitted, the newcomer-attacked the food with a will.

"Has Dad been here?" he asked.

"Been and come and gone again," volunteered Tod. "That's ancient history. Must have happened four days ago. He come from Miners'. You did too, didn't you?"

Nicholas nodded. "I didn't know the trail from Miners' was so long," he complained. "I never went over it before." Then he glanced at Trigger. "Every one seems to have been to

GOLD HUNTER

Miners' just before I was there," he remarked, "looking up Lucky Frace. The fellows said you and Sandy and Waymart were there hunting for him hot footed."

Trigger flushed and bent over his plate. "Yes, quite a bunch of us was there," he mumbled.

"Where is he?" asked Nicholas with painful directness.

There was a pause. Ross pulled the skillet forward on the stove noisily. Trigger attempted to swallow another flapjack whole. It was up to the Toddler to reply.

"When Lucky pulled out of the valley," said he calmly, "he told the post-office authorities to send all his mail to Miners' until further notice—and now he's forgot to forward that 'further notice,' and so his mail is pilin' up here something fierce with every express that pulls in!"

"And you don't know where he's gone, then?" cried Nicholas. "Is Dad with him?"

"I take it he ain't, son," returned Tod. "Your ancestor pulled out of the valley hours before Lucky saddled up—and in the opposite direction."

"You see," Nicholas explained, "I found I had gone down to the Lazy Y on a fool's errand. Sandy never saw Daisy. There wasn't any word sent to me to come ——"

ROSS GRANT

"Hem!" interrupted Tod, looking steadfastly into his plate. "Folks that go according to Sandy McKenzie's word generally do find themselves on a fool's errand."

Trigger's face turned red, but Nicholas, not understanding, did not notice. He answered Tod in good faith.

"That's so. Guess they do. But it never once entered my head that Sandy was ly—well, hadn't seen Daisy. He was so sort of—er—careless about giving the message, and didn't act as though it concerned him a bit ——" Here the boy paused and glanced uncertainly at Ross. He remembered that the reason that had led Sandy to get rid of him was not to be told to the others. Therefore, he continued an account of his wanderings.

"When I found that Dad hadn't been heard from at the ranch I went on to Meeteetse and then to Basin to get wind of him. At Basin I found I'd missed 'im. He had brought in the thieves there and turned 'em over to the court and had left for Meeteetse. So I've been trailin' him ever since. Got up to Miners' yesterday and found the last any one knew of him he had come over here. Now, where did he go from here? Back to the Lazy Y?"

Tod answered. "Nope. He left here headin' up the South Fork after old man Clark."

GOLD HUNTER

"Old man Clark!" Nicholas echoed. "What has Dad got on him?"

"A little piece of paper, son, that he wants to put on 'im," Tod instructed. "It's a subpoena, but in what case I can't tell you. Dad didn't tell us all his business!"

"But maybe you can tell me the place where this man Clark is to be found?"

"That I can. He's over in the Wind River country."

"What part of it?"

"Sheep's Horn region."

"Where's that?" asked Nicholas. "If you can direct me I'll hike out in the morning. Trailing is great fun. Dad'll find he can't escape me. Do you know the way?"

"I can set you on the right trail," Tod assured him.

Suddenly Trigger aroused himself. "Sheep's Horn. That's where the ha'nt puts up, ain't it?"

"Right there," responded Tod affably. "It's been layin' in wait for you, Trig, for years. I listened to it all one night and heard it say *Trig, Trig, Trig*, as plain as day! And, Trig, that was years before I ever saw you!"

"Yer ears are failin'," Trig retorted. "It was sayin' *Tod, Tod, Tod*, instid!"

ROSS GRANT

"What haunt?" asked Nicholas, and Tod explained.

After supper Nicholas found an opportunity to ask Ross privately: "Did Sandy do any more window peeking before he left?"

"No, he didn't get a chance, although he got rid of you. I held down the job of watching after you left."

"Then he hasn't got what he was after—from Hans?"

Ross shook his head. "No, for once Sandy got fooled—and so he got out. Did the men down in Miners' say where he and Waymart have gone?"

"Nope, didn't hear any one say." Then raising his voice until it reached the men outside the cabin, he challenged Ross to a race. "Come on," he shouted, turning handsprings out of the shack. "Let's run across to the South Fork. I'll give you five yards start and then beat you to Sandy's tent."

Ross paused to look into Trigger's shack. Hans lay quietly with the letter in his hands, the false letter of Ross's creation. But the holder did not know the difference, no matter how near he brought the paper to his eye. Only a blur of words and a familiar crooked line were revealed to him by his defective eyesight.

Of course, Nicholas won the race even with five yards handicap. The boy seemed possessed by the

GOLD HUNTER

spirit of activity. He was not content to reach the tent first, but spun rapidly around and around in the entrance until the larger boy was dizzy merely watching, and the two men sat outside the twin shacks and applauded.

"Now," exclaimed Nick, somewhat breathless as he stopped in front of Ross, "I'm going to give you lessons in coming down a tree. How do you come down?"

"Why," said Ross puzzled, "the way every one comes—when I find myself up a tree. That isn't often."

"Feet first or head first?" demanded Nicholas.

"Why, feet first, of course."

"Watch me!"

The younger boy selected a tall, straight pine near the tent, and in a moment was at the very top, while Tod and Trigger drew near.

"Now," shouted the showman, "here's your new and original way of getting down a tree. Watch me."

He came down so rapidly that Ross could scarcely see how he came—except that he was head downward half the time. Clamping a limb with his legs twisted together he swung down from the topmost limb strong enough to bear him, seized a limb below, untwined his legs, and dropped, his feet feeling for a foothold below. This found, he

ROSS GRANT

dropped to that foothold and repeated the process until he swung lightly to the ground and was bowing to his delighted audience.

"Nick," cried Tod, "I used to hear that we was all descended from the apes, and I do declare I'm nearer to believin' it than I was five minutes ago."

"Up, Doc!" cried Nicholas with sparkling eyes. "Go try that yourself! I'll run up with you and show you. You're always saying you'd like to do those stunts——"

"Go on up, Doc, and try it," urged Trigger excitedly. "I'd like to see if you could."

Tod shrugged his fat shoulders. "Go easy, Doc," he advised. "There's enough of us here to pick up your remains, but no one's skilful enough to put 'em together except yourself, and you won't likely be in the mood!"

"Oh, come along, Doc," cried Nick impatiently. "Be a sport for once! Come on up," and like a squirrel, the speaker climbed and continued his urging from the tree top.

Tod lay back, pillowing his head in his clasped hands. "You're a queer teacher," he yelled at the tree top, "to expect your scholar t' skip his a, b, c's and read the whole book at once. Just take Doc up on the first limb and teach 'im to turn turtle there without breaking his neck."

Nicholas reluctantly descended to the lowest

GOLD HUNTER

limb, where Ross joined him, little dreaming that his lesson would ever be of practical value to him. He shinned awkwardly up the trunk and bestrode the limb with little taste for the sport. Amid the good-natured gibes of the others he followed the instructions of Nicholas, who made none too patient a teacher.

“Here—do this way, Doc. Bend your right leg—so. Now twist your foot around your left—no, further up, near the knee, so that when you swing down your right knee will hook over the limb and your left leg will hold that knee fast—like that. Now, swing down — Oh, be a sport! Hook and hang! I’ll clutch your legs this time so they can’t loosen. Swing!”

Ross “hooked” firmly, but to “hang” was a different matter. He swung down head first, but his right hand refused to loosen its hold on the limb until Nicholas jerked it loose. Then, finding his legs held, he swung a moment until the blood drummed in his ears and his eyeballs seemed full to bursting. Then he lifted his head and shoulders, grasped the limb and righted himself heavily and slowly. Sitting dizzily astride the limb, his back to the trunk, he watched the agile Monkey perform. The boy would twine his legs together and cast himself down with a violence which whirled him around and up and over

ROSS GRANT

again, his long flaxen hair and moccasined feet changing places with startling rapidity.

When Ross had recuperated, his teacher again took him in hand, insisting on his persevering until he was able to swing down fearlessly, both hands free.

“Good, Doc!” cried Trigger. “I didn’t think you could do it.”

“You’d better believe I’d never do it just to pass the time away,” declared Ross frankly, dropping to the ground. “I’d rather have my head about six feet higher than my feet, if you please! It’s more comfortable.”

“Say!” exclaimed Nicholas, trying in vain to squeeze the disgust out of his tone. “I thought there wa’n’t a boy alive who couldn’t do that much! I’m glad I wa’n’t brought up in the East!”

“See here!” ordered the long-suffering Ross, “don’t put it over the whole East just because I can’t do such things. While other fellows were climbing trees I was helping uncle patch up the miners from the coal mines, that got blown up or crushed under a load of coal or suffocated with gas or kicked by the mules——”

Nicholas, looking from the embryo doctor to the tree, interrupted: “Doc, I’ll take back what I said about the East. Only—I don’t believe you’ll

GOLD HUNTER

ever be sorry you know how to swing off from a branch!"

Tod arose laboriously. "So long as Doc has stayed whole through his lesson there ain't enough excitement here now to keep me awake. I'm goin' to turn in!"

The departure of Nicholas the following morning left Ross with another heavy day on his hands,—three, in fact, as his patient absorbed less and less of his time, and yet could not be left alone yet. He was up and dressed the second day, but could walk only a few steps at a time. The grippe had left him weak. The inflammation on his cheek was gradually being reduced, and the gash was at last healing nicely. With the aid of the German dictionary Ross spent hours making himself understood by his patient. In this he was more successful than in understanding.

But during these three days Ross was carrying on an undercurrent of thought that was bearing him toward a resolution. The evening of the third day he determined to lay his resolution before Tod. In order to see him alone, he waited until Trigger had come down early from his tunnel and was getting supper. Then Ross left Hans sitting on his blankets in the doorway, his precious envelope in his inner breast pocket,

ROSS GRANT

his eye closed to shut out the blinding light from the setting sun.

On the trail across the face of Elk, between Tod's tunnel and Lucky's, Ross met the former who stopped short with a grin. "Come to clear out your mind, haven't you, Doc? Well, sittin's as cheap as standin'."

He stepped across the fallen tree, and seated himself on the trunk facing the tiny valley. Opposite rose a massive pile, rock-bound, tree-ornamented, snow-crowned, its feet washed by the South Fork. Beside the creek the horses grazed and drank. About the water hole the thick growth of quaking asp bushes kept the animals away. The shacks looked like doll houses, and the smoke pouring from Tod's cabin resembled the smoke from a clay pipe.

"Tod," Ross began, seating himself beside the other, "in ten days Hans will be ready for the saddle, and I for Pennsylvania. But I shall have to take him to Cody with me to an oculist, and the first thing he'll try his new glasses on will be that letter."

Tod opened his knife, and began to cut notches in the tree trunk. "Nice little surprise he'll meet up with!" was all he said.

"And a nice figure I'll cut in the matter," Ross continued resentfully. "It will look pretty much

GOLD HUNTER

as though I were a party to the theft." The word came out with an effort. Tod gouged the knife deeper in the wood, and said nothing.

"Tod," exclaimed Ross finally, "the long and the short of it is, I've made up my mind to go after Lucky!"

CHAPTER IX

A PLUNGE INTO THE WILDERNESS

"I MUST have that letter before we go to Cody," Ross continued, "and besides—I've got to find Lucky. I can't leave Wyoming until I know about ——" here an unexpected catch in the boy's voice arrested speech. He cleared his throat impatiently, and continued brusquely, "The long and the short of it is, I've got to know whether he—you understand ——" Ross stopped abruptly.

Tod nodded, whittling with care. "You may have the loan of my horse," he mentioned briefly.

Ross swallowed. "Thank you. But—can I get to Sheep's Horn alone? If only I'd gone with Nick, but at the time he went I never thought of it. He probably went as straight as a bird flies, but could I?"

"Nothing easier," assented Tod carelessly. "I can map you the trail and start you on your way. You can leave here before noon, pack along three or four days' grub in case you shouldn't strike Lucky, and reach Sheep's Horn at sundown the next day."

GOLD HUNTER

"That will mean one night in the open!" exclaimed Ross.

Tod looked up in surprise. "Surely. Take along a blanket, and keep up a good fire. The bears from Yellowstone Park are apt to rampage around in that part a good deal this time of year."

"Bears!" ejaculated Ross, drawing back.

"Bears? Bless you, yes!" Tod continued easily. "Government won't let any be shot, you know, and they trot around, and eat out of the tourists' hands, or would if the tourist didn't shin up a tree too quick." Here Tod grinned at the expression on Ross's face.

"Aren't they dangerous?" the boy asked.

"About as dangerous as a cow!"

"But cows have been known to fight ——"

"Yes, and tame bears to hug," laughed Tod. "Don't work yourself into a fever about those bears. In the first place, you're not likely to see one. In the second place a good fire'll scare 'em off. In the third place, you can pack along Trig's gun. Mine's out of commission."

"I'm not worth a cent with a gun," Ross began.

"I should hope not," interposed Tod, "for in that case, you might kill a friendly, innocent animal, when all you need to do is to raise a racket to make it show its heels. And Trig's gun

ROSS GRANT

can make about as much racket as its owner. I never see such a gun. A charge of dynamite ain't in it with that gun! Let that off in a bear's face and he ain't going to trot along after you any longer, no matter how much he's longin' for sweet chocolate. The women tourists over in the Park feed 'em on milk chocolate until the guides say they can't live without it—gets to be a habit!"

Ross smiled uneasily at the pictures Tod was painting with a humorous exaggeration. He did not relish the idea of a night alone under the stars, but he was not easily turned from his purpose.

"I can outfit you," said Tod presently, "so that you can hike out to-morrow."

"What about Trigger?" asked Ross hesitatingly.

Tod shut his knife with a click. "You leave Trig to me. As long as he didn't go around shoutin' news of his little hike, you needn't either; but honest, Doc, I don't believe Trig would do again what he did that night. You needn't be afraid of his followin' you. Trig's education about Sandy is a'most finished. He'll graduate by and by with honors."

Until the sun went down the two sat, Ross with paper and pencil making notes, and listening eagerly, while Tod, grinning broadly at the paper,

GOLD HUNTER

described the way to Sheep's Horn. Note-taking on trails was a new business to him.

"I never heard of making literature out of a trail!" he chuckled.

"Of course not. Nick, for instance, didn't have to. He is used to trails and finding them, and I am not." Ross spoke with dogged honesty. "But I know my head wouldn't hold all this, and I'd get so turned around that I'd be doubling on my tracks. A little literature on the subject won't hurt me!"

As the two made their way down the steep trail beside the Pass, Tod continued the subject of the boy's journey. "In the morning I'll get Trig off to his work, and then we'll pack up my horse and start you off. I'll lend you Trig's gun and make it right with him afterward. And I'm hoping you find Lucky—safe and ——" Tod did not finish his sentence.

The following morning Ross was astir early, preparing rather dismally for the journey. He made Hans understand that he was going to be absent for a few days, at the end of which time they would both go to Cody and an oculist. The injured eye was still inflamed, requiring a bandage; but the cheek no longer needed dressing.

"Here you, Trig," said the Toddler after breakfast, "I'll hoe off the dishes. You vamoso."

ROSS GRANT

Trigger turned from the stove with a delighted grin. "I don't need no second tellin', but what's struck you? Been attendin' a missionary meetin'?"

"Yep, home missions!" retorted Tod. "I've eaten three times with the same bean stuck on the side of my plate; and I aim to get shet of that bean."

"Bean!" cried Trigger scornfully. "What's the matter with a nice clean bean? And it gittin' cleaner every time the plate is washed!"

As soon as Trigger started for the Elk Mountain, Tod and Ross fell to work outfitting the latter for his journey. It was a glorious morning. As Ross started toward the creek in search of Tod's horse, he stopped to sniff the sharp air.

"The last of June here," he exclaimed, "smells like an April thaw in northern Pennsylvania."

"That's right, Doc," stated Tod, "but you can't find any day here in the three hundred and sixty-five that smells like a Fourth of July back East, with every man swelterin' in his shirt sleeves, and wishin' that even shirts had never been invented."

At nine o'clock everything was in readiness. Beside the cabin stood Tod's horse, saddled and bridled. Leaning against the shack was Trigger's rifle and a sharp hatchet, indispensable aid to a camp-fire.

"Here, Doc," Tod directed, "fill your pockets

GOLD HUNTER

with first aids. Here's string in plenty. And matches—never run low on matches. Let's see your jack-knife. Ha! A mere toy. Here's mine. Some weight and strength to this blade. When you've been rampagin' around the mountains for five years you'll learn to load up with other things beside clean towels and neckties!"

Ross reddened. "I have got a towel," he returned defensively, "but not a single tie!"

Tod chuckled and began to arrange the pack outfit on the horse's back, the boy watching and assisting, knowing that the next time the packing was done he must do it alone. From the pommel Tod suspended a skillet and coffee-pot, while behind the saddle he strapped a bag containing a supply of "sinkers," or man-made biscuits, boxes of crackers, coffee, bacon, and tin cans bearing a variety of labels.

"Always pack along just double the grub you think you'll want," he advised, stooping to wrestle with a buckle. "It's a mighty good rule to follow."

As his head came above the horse's back again, he started back with an exclamation, and half dodged, passing his hand across his eyes. "How'd you do that stunt, Doc?" he asked.

Ross looked across the saddle at him in astonishment. "Do what? What do you mean?" The

ROSS GRANT

boy's hands were busy with the agate-ware coffee-pot.

Tod glanced about him a moment, at Hans sitting drearily in the doorway, cut off from companionship by a difference in language, at his own shack, and then back at Ross. "I guess," he explained with another grin, "that speakin' of an eastern Fourth just naturally made me see lightning. The thunder may come later when the snow decides it will slide down the further side of old Elk. There you are! Now, vamoso, and—Doc—luck to you."

Ross felt the significance of the last words. He waved a farewell at Hans, and rode out of the valley, feeling that all his own doubts and fears concerning Lucky were Tod's.

The horseman's way that day was clear. No notes were wasted on the trail to the head waters of South Fork. "Follow your nose," Tod had directed, "and camp when there's danger of getting your nose twisted by lettin' it lead any longer."

The trail was rough, but not dangerous. Again and again the horse patiently forded the stream in order to get a foothold in the narrow cañon, which burrowed its snake-like way through the mountains with only a few hours' daily exposure to the sun.

At one o'clock Ross dined on "sinkers," while

GOLD HUNTER

the horse cropped a scanty supply of grass beside the creek. He did not want to stop long enough to build a fire and get a hot dinner. He was obsessed with the idea of reaching Lucky.

Until six o'clock he "followed his nose" up, up, up, until he reached Indian Ledge, a huge granite pile which barred his progress and threatened to "twist his nose." Here he rested his horse and consulted his map and notes. At the foot of the Ledge, on the other side of the mountain, he was to make his camp for the night. He had stopped in a thicket of sage-brush, stunted pine, hemlock and quaking asp. The boughs met so thickly overhead that the world of peaks was cut off from his view. The trail wound back and forth, but always up. His horse picked its way carefully, sometimes pushing aside the meeting branches, sometimes stumbling over stones, sometimes treading on soft pine needles and often emerging at dizzy heights on a narrow snow-filled path with huge boulders on one side and sheer descents on the other.

At the end of an hour Ross again drew the pony in and let it rest. He had now reached the bleak, snow-shrouded, wind-swept summit of the Ledge. From his lofty position he counted twenty peaks, the most of them snow-capped, all of them cold and barren and rocky. He caught

ROSS GRANT

his breath and, for a moment, swayed faint and dizzy in his saddle. The rare air, the intense cold, the utter lifeless loneliness of the mountains robbed him of breath and oppressed him with a numbness both mental and physical. Even the sun, still visible above the western ranges, was forbidding in its cold brilliancy.

"I wonder which is Elk Mountain?" he said aloud recovering with an effort from his faintness. "It's back there somewhere—and Tod and Trigger and Hans——"

His voice stopped, and he wondered how, for mere gold, men would allow themselves to be swallowed up in this gulf of silence and lifelessness.

"Not all the gold of Ophir could tempt me," the boy cried vehemently aloud, hitting his pony on the neck with the reins.

Slowly and wearily the animal crunched over the ice and snow, picking its way to the left, and then began a slow and perilous descent. The trail was man-made, Ross soon saw. Originally there had not been a foothold for a horse on the sharp slope. But the tireless prospector had come and gone and left in his wake the thread of a trail.

"Somewhere about here a claim is staked," Ross told himself.

In a few moments he reached the dark mouth of

GOLD HUNTER

a tunnel, and stopped a moment where the dump broadened and leveled the trail. Overhead, the mountain loomed almost perpendicularly. Below, it fell away, straight down hundreds of feet into a cañon. Then he looked at the tunnel. It was a shallow affair, yet on the timbered entrance was nailed a yellowed and shriveled paper announcing the fact that one Jonathan Castle had patented that claim under the laws of Wyoming three years before.

"I don't see how he could swear to five hundred dollars' worth of development work done in that tunnel," thought Ross, and then exclaimed aloud, "Oh, yes, the trail!"

According to Wyoming law, in order to perfect ownership to a claim of public land, the claim-staker is obliged to have five hundred dollars' worth of development work done by the end of the fifth year. Thus Jonathan Castle instead of putting the required five hundred dollars' worth of work into his tunnel, had blasted and dug and built out a way across the face of the mountain, by which his claim could be reached, a work which the law allows in the place of development or digging on the claim itself.

A quarter of a mile beyond the trail twisted around the mountain and entered a dense hemlock forest at the upper edge of the timber belt. Dodg-

ROSS GRANT

ing and crouching to avoid the low branches, Ross left the finding of the path to his horse, glancing here and there half fearfully through the heavy gloom. Down, down, the trail led until finally it emerged into a tiny valley with Indian Ledge towering three thousand feet above. Here spring time reigned again, and the sunlight, lingering a few moments longer, greeted the horseman with a warmth unfelt on the peaks.

Ross drew a long, unlabored breath again, and slipping, stiff and saddle worn, from his pony, proceeded to survey his surroundings with a view to selecting a suitable camp. The tiny valley was sparsely wooded. With its coarse, nutritious grass, its huge rocks and its clear cold spring, it proved more friendly than the heights, and his spirits rose. He even whistled as he selected a large flat rock near a spring as a flank defense for his camp. A tall pine tree stood beside the rock, its tangled boughs growing low on its stout trunk.

He unloaded and unsaddled his pony, hobbled it and turned it loose to graze. It rejected the grass on that side of the basin and made its way slowly across the valley, where it found feed to its liking opposite Indian Ledge. Ross followed until satisfied that it would not wander far. Then he returned and devoted himself to camp making. It was the first night he had ever spent in the

GOLD HUNTER

open under the velvet, star-studded, moon-pierced sky that seemed to lay so near the wind-swept peaks.

First, he built a fire of dry sage-brush beside the rock, heaping the coals between two stones which served as a support for his coffee-pot and skillet of bacon. When the bacon was fried, he pried open a can of soup with Tod's jack-knife, and heated the contents in the skillet. Afterward he feasted, sitting at ease on his blankets, his back against that part of the rock warmed by the fire. As he ate, the coals between the stones gradually dulled. The sun crept down behind the western peaks and threw its farewell signals on the eastern mountain tops across the sky in long streamers of gorgeous colors. Gloomy shadows fell on the rim of the valley basin beneath the trees and overhanging ledges, but the center of the valley was yet bathed in the soft, long-lived twilight. The wind, ever active along the heights, began to creep down the steep slopes. The first chilly blast sought Ross out and aroused him to the necessity of preparing for the night.

"The first thing," he exclaimed aloud, "is a supply of fire-wood."

Seizing the hatchet, he repaired to a fallen pine tree a few yards away and began hacking strongly at the branches. He worked with his

ROSS GRANT

back to the rock, piling the dry branches beside him.

“Whew!” he muttered. “If this won’t make a fire and a half! It seems sort of extravagant to use up so much pine kindling——”

A strange, low sound arrested his attention. He paused. It was repeated. He looked toward the left, straightening slowly. Above was the towering Ledge. The flat rock stood near the forest that stopped at the foot of the mountain. Between the woods and the rock was an undergrowth of quaking asp bushes, then an open space of several rods. This space was empty. The origin of the vague sound was not there.

“Woof! G-r-r-r!” came from behind him. There was no mistake this time as to either origin or direction.

The hatchet slipped suddenly from a nerveless hand as the boy turned petrified and faced an enormous bear in shaggy brown coat. The animal was on the other side of the rock, the side where lay the supplies. He had reared himself on his strong hind legs, and, his forepaws on the rock, stood blinking at Ross. Ross did not blink back again. His eyes felt as large as saucers and were strained wide open. Both Bruin and the boy were surprised, but astonishment affected them differently. The bear had seen many more people than

10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100



THERE WAS NO MISTAKE THIS TIME

GOLD HUNTER

Ross had seen bears. To Bruin a human being meant merely a litter of good food such as he smelled now but could not find, therefore he stared crossly at Ross for a moment, and then dropped down behind the rock out of sight—but not out of hearing.

Ross stood petrified beside the fallen tree. The memory of Tod's laughing comments on bears failed to stiffen his spine in the actual presence of this enormous marauder. It might be as harmless as a tame cow, but it certainly did not look so—nor act so! He heard his coffee-pot rattle, heard the tin cans thrown about, heard the discontented sniffs of the hungry bear. He knew that the fire, which would have kept Bruin at a respectful distance, had died away to the last coal. Trigger's rifle, which would also have frightened the animal, lay under its feet.

Ross strained his eyes across the rock incapable of thought or action, but Bruin, it seems, was capable of an unlimited amount of action. He licked the coffee-pot and then knocked it aside. He ate up the supply of cold biscuits and finished off half a box of crackers Ross had left open. Then he nosed about among the closed cans and decided they did not contain eatables. With a disgusted snort he scattered them with a powerful paw, and, still hungry, turned his attention to Ross. With

ROSS GRANT

his huge paws again planted on the rock, and his huge head between, he stared at the boy out of small malevolent eyes.

"G-r-r-r," was his greeting.

Ross, rooted beside the fallen tree, felt his hair rise. His teeth were chattering.

"G-r-r-r!" came again from Bruin. He grew taller, his neck and then his great shoulders appearing above the rock. He advanced his paws and, gripping the crevices of the rock with his powerful nails, began to draw his huge hind parts upward.

Then it was that Ross was galvanized into action. He cleared the distance between the fallen tree and the standing tree in a couple of bounds and climbed as he had never climbed before, while the bear *Wo-oped* behind him and clawed the rock for a foothold. With elbows and fingers, knees and heels Ross dug into the rough bark as he shinned up the trunk frantically. Boughs, living and dead, encircled the trunk thickly fifteen feet above the rock, while a dense thicket of smaller boughs and needles sprang from the parent branches close to the tree trunk. Up through this stiff tangle of foliage Ross, with set teeth, pushed his way desperately. His hands were bleeding and his clothing torn. His cap lay at the foot of the tree. The sharp needles and dead branches caught his head and

GOLD HUNTER

scratched his face, but he was unconscious of pain.

Half-way up the tree climbing became easier. The branches thinned out until there were boughless stretches of the trunk six feet and more apart. As boldly, but not as agilely as Nicholas Page, Ross reached for the upper branches and swung his feet up, clambering, sprawling, clutching, panting. All the way up he heard the bear's teeth snapping at his heels and the animal's growl just behind him. He did not stop climbing until he had reached the top of the tree, where the branches bent and swayed beneath his weight. There he was forced to stop. Clinging breathless and shaking to the tapering tree trunk he looked down fearfully, expecting to see the great shaggy head and clinging paws just below his feet.

CHAPTER X

SURPRISES FOR BOY AND BEAR

ALL that Ross could see as he looked below him was the fragrant thicket through which he had forced his way. He listened intently. There was no stir among the boughs. Bruin evidently was not climbing. It was only his imagination quickened by fear that had pictured the bear at his heels. He sat on a swaying, bending branch, clung to the tree trunk and shuddered with fear. It seemed to him that the end of all things was at hand. It was one thing to listen to Tod's humorous reference to the bears from the Yellowstone, and quite another to be treed by one. The situation held no humorous aspects.

Suddenly it occurred to him that this was the very evening when he had expected to arrive at the home of his uncle in far-away Pennsylvania. A wave of homesick longing mingled with his fear. He could see Dr. Grant moving about his office, lighting the lamps while Aunt Anne, in the kitchen, cooked the dinner. But more than anything else, the memory of the home sounds ap-

GOLD HUNTER

pealed to him ; the rattle of the stove covers, the patter of Aunt Anne's slippers, the closing of doors, the neigh of the gray horse in the stable, the low murmur of the near-by brook, the voices of the passers-by—if only he could hear a human sound now !

But no sound of any kind disturbed the stillness of the place. It was a stillness that betokened an utter lack of life, but the boy, marooned in the tree top, knew that, despite the silence, there was present one life too many.

He looked up at the peaks helplessly and found them bathed in the red of the dying sun. Some moisture trickled into his eyes and he wiped it away. His hand showed the red of the sunset. It was blood. Then, for the first time, he noticed blood on the front of his coat and discovered it trickling down from his face. The sharp dead twigs had scratched his forehead and cheeks, but he had felt no pain. With his handkerchief he wiped his face, and then, folding the linen, bound it about his forehead where the deepest scratch was located. This familiar action seemed to restore again his power of coherent thinking.

He sat down on the branch and tried to consider a way out of his dilemma, but no way occurred to him. The best he could expect was to remain in the tree top all night. This was in case Bruin

ROSS GRANT

chose to remain below instead of coming up. Suppose, however, he should take to climbing? Ross looked up. He was very near the top. The boughs above would not support him, and yet the trunk would support the bear. If he went to the end of the bough on which he sat, it would be likely to snap off and precipitate him below, especially with the additional weight of the bear.

But where was the bear? Ross bent down and turned and twisted in every direction to find an opening through which he could see the rock, but in vain. Finally, unable to endure the suspense longer, he kicked the tree trunk vigorously and shouted. The noise had the desired effect of locating his captor. There was a movement below, loud sniffs and an impatient growl.

"Great Scott!" muttered Ross weakly. "This will do for a feeler. Now I'll keep quiet."

But silence on his part did not mean silence on the part of the bear. There came a persistent "*scratch, scratch*" from below. At first Ross thought the animal was upward bound, but he quickly decided that Bruin was carefully sharpening his claws on the tree trunk, not a pleasant nor a reassuring sound.

On the further side of the grassy valley the horse was grazing undisturbed. The wind was fortunately in the direction of the bear. Fainter

GOLD HUNTER

and fainter on the peaks grew the red of the sunset, and lower and blacker grew the shadows below.

Presently Ross's shivers of fear merged into shivers from the fall in temperature. He could see the edge of the rock furthest from the tree, where his blanket lay. The sight was a tantalizing one. It lay beside the gun which Tod had added to his outfit against such an occasion as this. If only he had it he might be able to frighten the animal, if not hit him. On the other side of his airy perch was another irritating sight; the pile of dry pine boughs.

"Why on earth didn't I set fire to that pile instead of shinning up this tree?" he asked himself in exasperation.

He dove into his pockets one after another, but the only defense against his adversary was a strong jack-knife, matches and the string which Tod had insisted on his bringing. The scratches on his face and hands were beginning to smart. He peered at the scattered supplies on the further side of the rock and wondered if his scant supply of "first aids" was uninjured.

Cold and cramped, he stood up finally, clinging to the tree trunk. The boughs swayed and scraped against each other. Instantly there was a response from further down the tree. Evidently

ROSS GRANT

Bruin had waited as long as he intended for Ross to come down and feed him. Therefore, he started up.

Ross's hair seemed to rise as he heard the tearing of the great claws in the bark and the grunts and labored breathing of the bear. Desperately he looked up and then along the limb on which he stood, but along neither way lay the path to safety. The animal was in no hurry, and it seemed to Ross that during the next two or three minutes he lived a dozen years and thought of everything that he knew, but especially vivid was the impression of Nicholas Page. What wouldn't he give to hear Nick's familiar war-whoop, and see the spotted pony wheeling into the valley. But, without a gun, what could the Monkey do? At once the answer flashed into Ross's mind and brought with it an idea that arrested all others and beat them into a retreat.

Woof—grunt—scratch—the sounds came nearer accompanied by a snapping and crashing of the branches as Bruin forced his way through the tangle.

Ross heard, but his attention and all his energy were now focussed on his idea, and when an idea obsessed the boy, he acted on it calmly, every move counting. Quickly he lowered himself to the bough adjacent to a dead limb. Whipping

GOLD HUNTER

out his knife he cut a bunch of dry twigs and bound them together with a string, winding it around and around the bunch and tying it in many places so that when one knot was destroyed the bunch would be still held together. As he tied the last knot, a brown shaggy head was forced up through the boughs into view, and a huge paw came slipping up the trunk, felt of the rough surface and then was securely clamped in its position by great sharp claws.

Ross leaned over and paused. The bear looked up and paused. The boy's hair completed its rising process, but his teeth were firmly clinched, and his hand did not falter as he dove into his pocket, depositing the knife and securing a couple of matches, while Bruin blinked and pushed aside the smaller branches with powerful thrusts of his head.

With a greater assurance than he had shown when he was learning the lesson, Ross put the Monkey's teaching to a practical use. It was his only way of carrying out his plan quietly and effectively. The fagots at the end of a pole would have done better work, but Ross had neither time nor opportunity to secure the pole, therefore he hooked his knee over the limb on which he sat, twisted his ankle about the other leg and steadily applied his lighted match to the end of his bundle

ROSS GRANT

of fagots. As soon as one twig blazed he coolly dropped the match in the bear's face.

The experiment proved satisfactory. Bruin gave an angry growl and shook off the stinging, tiny blaze. But he looked with new respect on its wielder, and hesitated. The fagots in Ross's hand blazed brightly, and instantly he swung head downward and at arm's length thrust the blaze into the face of the astonished bear.

The effect was instantaneous. The bear, his hair singed and his eyes blinded and filled with smoke, backed downward, precipitately growling. Ross, the blood rushing to his head, unable to maintain his position, in a moment dropped the blazing bundle on the bear's head and grasping the limb below let go with his feet and swung, faint and dizzy, a moment before he could find another foothold. But the bear, burned and terror stricken, lost his foothold and fell, crashing through the limbs, clawing frantically with his forepaws at his burning hair. He struck the rock in a rage of pain, and started for the underbrush between the rock and the foot of Indian Ledge, filling the valley with the echoes of his wrath.

Ross lost no time in leaving his uncomfortable perch. He swung himself stiffly and painfully from limb to limb, until he dropped to the rock.

GOLD HUNTER

On this he sat down hastily and unexpectedly, his legs doubling beneath him, half paralyzed with fear and cold and the unusual strain put upon them. For a moment he sat listening to the bear thrashing about in the bushes whimpering and growling. Then, on hands and knees he crawled to his pile of fire-wood and touched a match to it. Sitting before the blaze he stretched out his legs, rubbing and slapping them until they would once more bear his weight. Then, securing his gun, he crossed the valley in search of his horse. If the bear intended to remain near him all night it behooved him to look out for his mount. He unhobbled the pony and tethered it near the fire. Then, with the gun within reach of his hand, he proceeded to gather up his scattered supplies and carry them also near the fire. Not until he had these secured did he attend to the skin wounds his face and hands had suffered.

As he sat on his blanket warming his back beside the blaze and applying adhesive plaster where it was needed, he continued to hear the bear growl. Evidently the beast was not stationary, but was making a half-circle of the valley, returning repeatedly to the spot where the forest most nearly approached the rock.

"He may be a Yellowstone tourists' pet to begin with," said Ross aloud, "but he is certainly too

ROSS GRANT

mad now to be a pet of any kind! I don't want him to catch me napping to-night."

So saying, he reached for the hatchet and began once more to hack off the dry branches from the fallen tree, pushing the fire under the trunk, making of it a huge back-log that would blaze merrily all night spurred on by the smaller pieces of pine fuel. It was nearly dark now, and the stars were beginning to appear in a sky so deeply blue that it seemed black. As the darkness deepened the bear's growls indicated a nearer approach, and Ross uneasily hugged the fire, gun in hand. The brute evidently had crept to the edge of the thicket, not a dozen rods away. The underbrush cracked and rustled with his threshings. The horse, scenting him, moved uneasily to the end of his tethering rope and stood snorting. Twice the boy raised the gun to fire into the brush, but hesitated. The animal was already injured and enraged. If a stray bullet should chance to graze him his rage might outweigh his fear of both fire and gun. Of man, it was evident, he had no fear.

He lowered his gun the second time and leaned on the butt irresolutely. The mountains had burst into sound. Under cover of the darkness, the coyotes were beginning their nightly concert. It came in long-drawn cries and short, sharp barks, coyote answering coyote from the forests on every

GOLD HUNTER

side—a familiar concert to Ross, punctuated by the unfamiliar growls of the bear.

Suddenly, without the warning of sound or movement, a shot awakened the echoes of the valley and startled the boy. Instantly its echoes silenced the coyotes. Ross rushed to the end of the rock and stood peering into the blackness that enveloped the thicket. There was an interval of quiet, followed by two more shots, the gun being discharged fairly in Ross's ears, it seemed to him.

As the last echo died away he shouted, but received no answer to his call. He listened. The silence was broken only by the rustle of the wind among the branches over his head. There was no movement of either man or beast in the underbrush.

Cupping his hands about his mouth he sent out a strong and sonorous, "Hello! Hello, there!"

The valley continued silent. For a long time he stood irresolute, hallowing at intervals. There was no answer to his calls, and no further human sound reached his ears. Presently the coyote concert began again and he retreated to the fire, where he sat down, his back against the rock, his knees bunched up to his chin, and stared blankly into the velvety darkness. Despite the cessation of the bear's growls, he was far from easy. He had supposed himself to be twenty miles from a living

ROSS GRANT

soul. Whose hand had drawn the trigger of that gun, and why did the gunman not make himself known? He must have crept into the thicket and fired at close range on account of the darkness. Was he there now beside his game? He might be an outlaw lurking in the mountains. Ross had heard of such men, and did not desire to make their acquaintance.

Finally, his fatigue overcame his fear, and piling fresh branches on his fire, he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down under the edge of the rock. In a moment he was asleep.

When he awakened, the sun shone in his face, and the fire was a mass of glowing embers. The valley lay placid and still before him. Not a coyote could be heard. He threw his blanket off and arose stiffly. His horse was grazing at the end of its tether. His outfit lay undisturbed beside him. Over the edge of the rock he looked toward the thicket. It was trampled and broken, and in the midst, on his side, his great paws extended, his huge head thrown back, lay the bear.

Ross made his way to the animal with difficulty. The effects of the previous day's ride and nerve-strain had not yet disappeared, and the boy was obliged to rub his legs briskly before they would obey his call to action. He found, as he

GOLD HUNTER

had expected, that the bear had met death from bullets fired at such close range that the powder had scorched the animal's fur. But the hunter had not followed up his conquest by securing the beast's hide. The bear had done considerable tramping in every direction, so that the boy failed to find any distinctively human tracks.

"I suppose the Monkey might find them," he thought as he hunted.

Finally, with his mind reverting to the main object of his journey, he returned to his fire, and, over the coals, prepared breakfast, and then, packing up the remainder of his supplies, saddled up and was off. A feeling of relief assailed him when he rounded the top of the mountain opposite Indian Ledge and lost sight of the scene of his adventure of the previous night.

"No more bears for me," he muttered, "if I am consulted and have any choice. One is enough to last a lifetime!"

Before starting he had consulted his notes: "Follow the seam to the right, opposite Indian Ledge," they ran, "and then follow the spur that hitches on to the bottom of the seam. On the far side of this you face three peaks. Take the center one, and scramble for it." The wording was Tod's. "At the foot of the middle mountain on other side follow a creek the way your shadow falls until you

ROSS GRANT

come to the Valley of the Willows. A basin. Water. Dinner here."

At this point Ross put the notes into his pocket. He had memorized the way thus far. "At dinner time I'll go over the rest," he decided.

All went according to his schedule until noon. He traveled with the gun across the pommel of his saddle and his eyes and ears open, not only for bears but for the killer of his late adversary, but the morning passed without a discovery of either. After a "scramble" up the side of a low wooded mountain, he came on a creek, and followed his shadow until noon brought him to the Valley of the Willows. Hunger compelled a hot dinner, and weariness a longer rest than he had taken at noon the previous day. Spreading out his blanket, he lay on his back among the willows, and without intending to fall asleep, his hat shading his face.

It was three o'clock before he tossed his hat aside and struggled dizzily to his feet with a loud exclamation of impatience with himself. Hastily throwing his blanket across the pommel, he mounted and hurried the horse out of the Valley of the Willows along the trail, across a nameless granite pile which marked the first of three ranges separating him from Sheep's Horn. The pile had been described by Tod as "sort of a hunchback of

GOLD HUNTER

rock above where the willows grow the thickest. It's the highest in its range as far as you can see."

On the other side Ross, following directions, pushed on rapidly up a creek which led him deeper and deeper into a cañon with towering sides and gloomy depths. With his notes in his hand he looked doubtfully at the imprisoning walls. Tod had not mentioned a cañon.

"But this is the creek he described," Ross muttered. "It was on the other side of the range after leaving the Valley of the Willows, and I was to follow it for two hours. I must be right."

On and on he rode deeper into the gloom. A feeling of uncertainty assailed him. He drew in his horse and went over the notes again. He recalled what Tod had said. Not a word about a cañon, but, by the description, this must be Wind Creek, a tributary of Wind River. He put up his notes, and rode on and on resolutely. Two hours passed, and still the cañon showed no signs of yielding to a valley.

"There's a difference in horses' speeds," Ross told himself. "An experienced rider would urge an animal faster than I, and so reach the valley within two hours."

Another hour he rode, and then to his relief the mountains on either hand seemed to crumble

ROSS GRANT

away. Lower and lower they bent their heads, at last giving way to a plateau covered with an abundant growth of grass which caused his tired horse to step faster. Ross dismounted and looked about. He drew out the notes once more. There was no plateau set down on his paper. According to Tod he should have arrived an hour ago at a tiny bowl-shaped valley swept about by a great bow-shaped mountain, with a pass on the east. That was the opening through which man and horse could travel and in another hour face Sheep's Horn.

Ross had lost the trail!

He looked at his watch, swallowing hard. It was nearly seven. The sun was dipping down toward the western range of mountains a mile away. Close against him on the east was a range of low barren hills covered with huge boulders and sagebrush. On the top of one a coyote sat and cried like a child in agony. Ross drew in his breath sharply, and leaned against the saddle, allowing the horse to crop grass.

"If I could find where I had made the mistake," he muttered, "I could go back and pick up my trail. But I have come according to Tod."

He raised his face to the hills, and then started back with a muffled cry, and stared at the summit of one hill taller than the others, a quarter of a

GOLD HUNTER

mile away. A sudden gleam had flashed from this point across his eyes, causing him to dodge. Instantly he thought of Tod the previous morning with his Fourth-of-July lightning flash. A paralyzing suspicion occurred to him. He leaned again on the saddle, facing the eastern hills. Again there came a flash, which might have been a signal, but he felt sure it was not. He located it now beneath a pile of rocks near the summit of the hill on which the sun cast strong, level rays.

As his suspicion grew, the boy's lips formed a pale but determined line. Forgotten was the lost trail and Sheep's Horn. He sauntered forward as carelessly as he was able, reconnoitered for a camping-place, selected a spot at the foot of the first hill, unpacked his horse, and, hobbling him, sent him out into the valley in sight of the third hill. Then without delay he made a *détour* around the first hill, and, coming in back of the third, began to climb it slowly and cautiously, pausing every few steps to look and listen. The sun had dropped below the opposite peaks, and the east side of the hill already lay in a deep shadow which screened him.

Emerging on top, he turned toward that part from which the flash had come, and crept along from bush to bush and rock to rock until he came to the pile on the summit, from which he looked down on the plateau and his grazing horse. Here

ROSS GRANT

he paused, uncertain of his next step, until a voice beneath his feet caused him to start.

"D'ye see 'im, Sandy?" Waymart McKenzie asked the question, and Sandy answered it.

"Nope. He's makin' camp up there near the spring. We might as well turn in."

Ross dropped on his face, and, dragging himself to the edge of the rock on which he stood, looked down on the heads of Sandy and Waymart. Sandy was scanning the valley through his long telescope whose highly polished brass mountings glittered and flashed in the face of the setting sun.

CHAPTER XI

A TRIUMPH FOR SANDY

Ross made his way back as cautiously as he had come, although he was trembling, not from fear, but excitement and dismay. He had played straight into the hands of Sandy McKenzie. Sandy was, in truth, a "deep one." It was evident that, having got rid of Trigger, whom he could no longer use, he had been watching the Valley of the Pass for two days from the top of Elk. Tod had evidently caught a flash from Elk that he thought was lightning. Then, the previous morning, the long vigil had been rewarded by the sight of Ross starting out with a packhorse. The McKenzies had followed, confident that his trail would lead them to Lucky and Holzworth's gold discovery. They had not been far away the previous night and, of course, Bruin had met his death at their hands.

Here Ross drew a long breath. It was white of them to help him get a good night's sleep even at the risk of having him suspect who the gunman was. "Still," he thought, "Sandy was probably afraid that if I didn't get in a little sleep, I'd not be worth much on the trail to-day!"

ROSS GRANT

At the foot of the hill Ross saw, in the dimming light, three horses tethered on the other side of a little valley formed by the three hills.

"They didn't trust to hobbling," he decided, "for fear their horses would come over with mine."

The McKenzies, in their superior knowledge of the mountains, must have come by a shorter route than he took. They had made their camp and then climbed to their outlook to watch him arrive. In the morning, he thought, they would, from the same post, observe his departure, and then follow, perhaps, by another way.

Suddenly he stopped short. Follow? Where to? The trail was lost. Where was he going in the morning? Not until these questions assailed him did he realize that he still held the situation in his own hands. Had he made no mistake in the trail, he would now have been with Lucky, and the McKenzies would have been in their vicinity and they unconscious of the presence of the intruders. As it was, the claim jumpers were fooled again.

He felt as relieved as when he discovered that Lucky had changed the letters. Getting lost had, after all, its compensation, and he grinned cheerfully as he hurried through the sage-brush to his camp.

GOLD HUNTER

"I'll simply go back in the morning the way I came," he chuckled, "and lead 'em back to old Elk. Then, maybe, Tod can find a way for me to fool 'em. Or perhaps Lucky is back already at the Pass now."

The disappointment at the failure of his quest and the bewilderment over the loss of his way were swallowed up in delight at thwarting the McKenzies, and he whistled jubilantly as he went about supper. Taking his coffee-pot, he found the source of the little creek beside which he had journeyed up the cañon. It was a spring bubbling out of the side of the second hill, clear and cold. Filling his pot, he looked after his horse grazing a short distance away, and returned to his camp with many furtive glances toward the darkening side of the third hill.

But when darkness fell, and, wrapped in his blanket, he lay beside his fire listening to the coyotes and the munching of the horse, he thought with relief of the two men the other side of the hills. They were near enough to help out in case another bear should prove too attentive!

The following morning he was astir early, and soon after sunrise rode down into the cañon headed toward Elk Pass. For an hour he rode gayly enough thinking of the dismay of the

ROSS GRANT

McKenzies. He scanned the peaks towering on either side and wondered on which side they were journeying and if they had a smooth trail to travel.

"They must take a parallel course," he reasoned, "and keep me in sight from the 'roof of the world.'"

After journeying a couple of hours he began to look for the trail by way of which he had come into the cañon, the trail over the "hunchbacked mountain, the tallest in sight." No such formation appeared, and Ross's whistle died in his throat as he realized that a mountain does not appear the same on both sides. He recollected, however, that he had emerged from the trail between a huge boulder and an overshadowing pine tree close beside the creek, and when he reached the bases of two mountains so marked, he turned his horse's head that way, and began mounting the one on the left, fighting back the suspicion, which was gaining ground every moment, that he had never before set eyes on his surroundings. There must have been other pine trees and other boulders similarly situated in the cañon. There was no well defined trail here and he zigzagged along the side of the mountain, groping his way among a dense forest of pine and hemlock.

"I'll go on a way," he decided, "and see if I

GOLD HUNTER

can't find the trail, and if I can't, I'll go back to the cañon and find another rock and tree."

For an hour he rode, his bewilderment growing momentarily. He had never noticed before what an awful similarity there is in the mountains that rise one after the other, range after range, cañon after cañon, pass after pass. And with every advance step he looked to see the forest give way to the Valley of the Willows where he had camped the night before.

"If I don't go back," he said aloud finally, confusedly, "I'll lose the cañon." But even as he spoke he knew he had lost it already.

He turned back, or thought he turned back, and traveled another hour. He came to a cañon, but it was not the cañon he had left. His confusion grew momentarily. The direction in which the sun was traveling came to mean nothing to him. It was going wrong. The bend of the trees under the incessant northwest wind meant nothing to him. The entire world was turned topsyturvy and with it his head. It did not occur to him, when he first turned, to retrace his steps by means of the impression his horse's hoofs left on the rotten snow beneath the trees. The one fact which was beating insistently on his brain was that in the midst of thousands of square miles of wilderness he was lost. He stopped finally in

ROSS GRANT

an open, grassy space, and ate a little, allowing his horse to eat. Then he took his head between his hands and tried to calm himself and think coherently.

Somewhere, presumably, the McKenzies were on his trail. Perhaps, when they saw that he was lost, they would make their presence known. On a sudden impulse he cupped his hands around his lips and sent out a loud "Hello!" His voice died away among the trees and was lost. There was no response.

Fighting down the rising terror in his heart, the boy, keeping his horse in sight, climbed the mountain to the topmost rock and looked about. On this side and that other peaks soared above him into the blue of the noon sky, and forming a bright hem to their skirts, ran little creeks, silver threads here and there, but there was no cañon to be seen on one side nor the Valley of the Willows on the other. He had passed from one mountain to another through the forest.

From his vantage point the boy again sent out a call, but it brought no answer. Presently he returned to his horse and, mounting, set off resolutely down the first stream he came to. He had enough reasoning power left to persuade himself that by following the down course of any stream he would, providing he did not starve first, come

GOLD HUNTER

to the inhabited valley of Wood River or of Wind River. He did not know which stream these creeks fed.

Blindly he rode on until his watch told him it was three o'clock. He was traveling a gorge between two ranges which came gradually closer and closer together until to his dismay, when he rounded the shoulder of a spur, he found his way altogether barred. The creek became a waterfall. It leaped a barrier of rock at the spot where the ranges closed in so nearly together that only a wedge-like opening remained through which the water raged and foamed and swept onward, leading where neither man nor horse could follow.

Ross stopped with a groan of dismay. All Nature seemed to be opposing him. Yielding to his faintness—hunger he did not feel—he unsaddled and hobbled his horse, turned it out to graze, and building a fire, ate heartily for the first time since morning. Refreshed and stimulated, he arose, and with an access of resolution and calmness looked about him. He was at the foot of a high mountain shaped like a huge chocolate drop covered with sage-brush at its base and hemlock trees at its summit. Its middle sides were too rock bound to support trees or brush. Above the dense group of hemlocks on top loomed a great rock. Ross imagined that, from the top of that rock, he could

ROSS GRANT

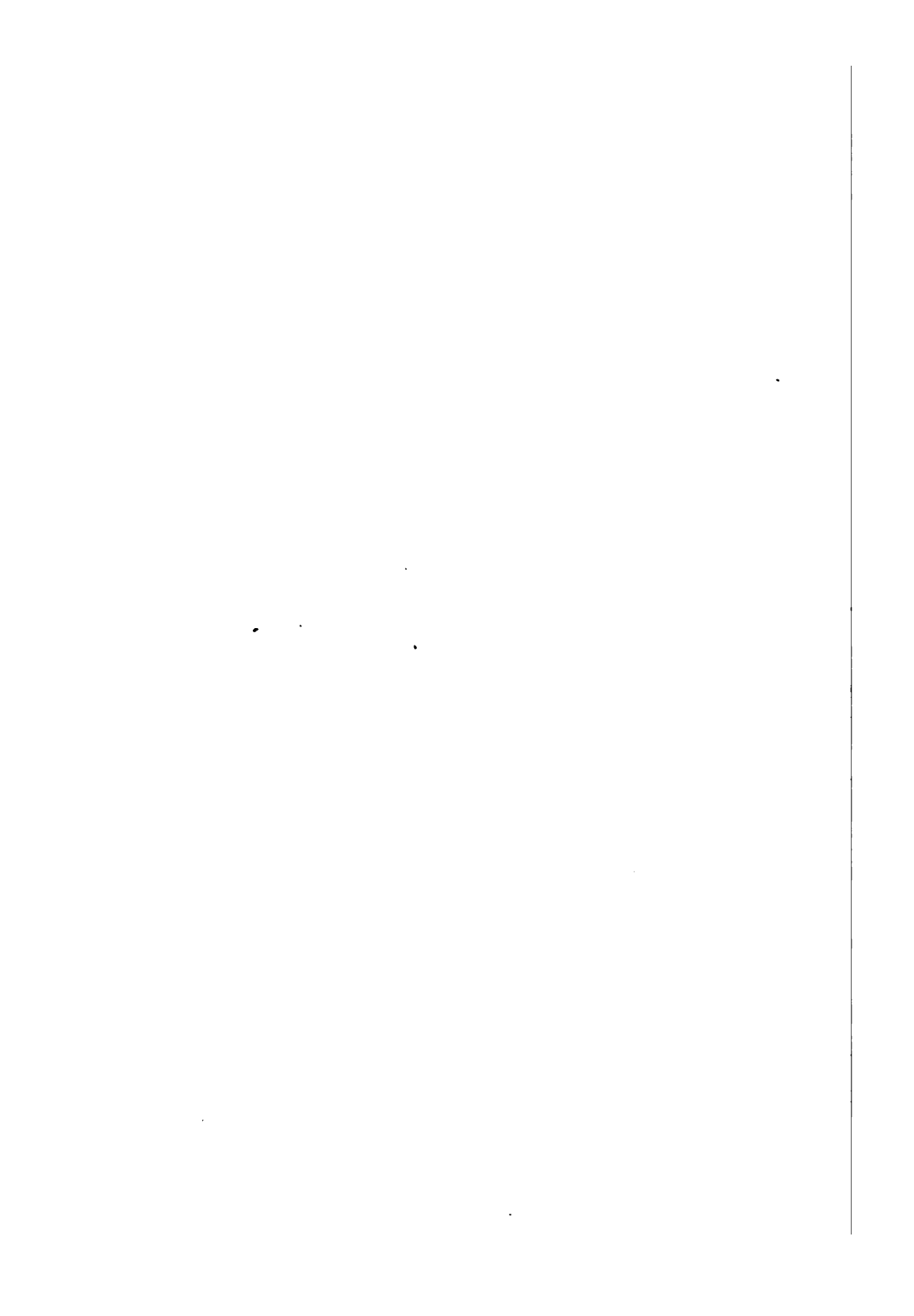
survey the lesser peaks for miles around and the better lay his course.

Doggedly he climbed, clinging to rocks and pulling himself up, flattened against the almost perpendicular face of the peak to avoid falling over backward. Occasionally, as he stopped to breathe, he thought he detected signs of recent life—a displaced stone, a gouge into the dirt, a rock freshly chipped by a hammer.

This sign inspired him to greater exertions that, at length, brought him to the edge of the belt of trees. Here the rise was not so abrupt, but the obstacles to travel were, however, greater. He found himself at the edge of a tangle of scrub hemlock and fallen trees overgrown with sagebrush. He paused. It seemed impossible to push his way into this tangle, but above it towered the rock which was his destination. He backed out of the tangle and found a path leading around it, a path that seemed to have no legitimate beginning. It suddenly sprang into being outside the thickest part of the tangle and wound in and out among the outermost trees around the top of the chocolate-drop mountain. Ross followed it in a half-circle, and without looking to see where it led, he scanned the great rock from that side. Here it was perpendicular and unscalable. There was evidently no access to the top unless through



HE SUDDENLY CLUTCHED AT THEM



GOLD HUNTER

the jungle on the other side, and, perhaps, once he had broken through that jungle he would find the rock unapproachable from that side also.

He returned to the trail. He could look out through the trees and catch glimpses that persuaded him he might, as he had suspected, get an uninterrupted view of the surrounding country from the clear top of that rock. He went back to the spot where the trail began, or at least began to be visible. A fallen spruce lay across the spot and sent up a labyrinth of tangled branches. In its fall it had carried with it scrub pines and then had buried itself in thick bushes.

Knife in hand, he crept and pushed and cut his way into the tangle beneath the fallen tree. He bruised and cut his hands and knees on the upturned edges of rocks. All the rocks among this growth, he noticed, were turned up on edge. It was the end of a vein of rock, a sudden outcropping of stone that might have been holding its way deep down under the ranges for hundreds of miles. Beyond the trunk of the tree he stood upright again and threw his weight against the opposing thicket, thus forcing his way forward a few feet. This brought him to underbrush less dense, and pushing aside the low hanging boughs of a growing tree, he suddenly clutched at them frantically to avoid falling into a pit some seven feet deep, and

ROSS GRANT

fifteen across. He drew back with an exclamation of surprise. Above loomed his goal, the still inaccessible summit of the outcropping ledge. Beneath it the ledge had been blasted away and the débris thrown out of the pit on the right side. Then trees had been felled among the undergrowth of evergreens, their prostrated foliage a complete screen to the pit and the refuse heap. The tops had fallen outward and looked like the work of the mighty winds which, in winter, sweep the peaks. The floor of the pit was covered with ice and snow shielded by the trees from any touch of the sun's rays.

"Somebody's been here," muttered Ross, "and that not so long ago. I wish he were here now."

Giving another longing look at the rock above, he pushed his way out. As he was leaving the jungle, a bit of quartz at his feet attracted his attention. He picked it up, glanced at it, slipped it into his pocket and forgot it. In that cursory glance he had recognized the fact that it was different from any quartz he had heretofore seen. There was a streak of dull yellow along the surface, but Ross had been in the mountains long enough to realize the truth of the old adage, "All that glitters is not gold." Therefore, the streak made only a passing impression. Instead of going down to his horse at once, he determined to go around to

GOLD HUNTER

the other side of the mountain again and investigate.

"It *feels* as though somebody had been here lately, as well as looks that way," he muttered aloud.

Following the trail back to the opposite side of the summit, he found it turned at once for the descent and became a slide rather than a trail. He stopped and examined it wonderingly. Wherever the rocks gave way to soil, the path looked as though something had been dragged down the slope, the slide being about two feet wide. In one place there appeared footprints, and when Ross saw those he whistled and began to look about him sharply. Finally a bend in the trail brought him out of the forest into the open, overlooking a valley perhaps a quarter of a mile wide. On the opposite side was a range of low mountains, rising easily from the valley, lightly wooded and free from snow. Indeed, the whole scene had a pleasing appearance of summer unusual to that section in June. The hot sun had access to this treeless valley, and had chased away the last remnant of winter.

Ross had just decided that he would find a way to bring his horse over to this side of the mountain and make his night's camp in the valley, when the dirt underneath his feet gave way. He sat

ROSS GRANT

down unexpectedly and was carried rapidly down the slope a short distance on top of a miniature landslide which left him looking down at an object that caused him to burst into a prolonged and almost unconscious shout. Below him, clinging to the mountainside, was a tiny cabin in front of a great flat rock. Ross could barely see the roof with its dirt-chinked logs. A small stovepipe projected from this roof and out of it rolled a lazy cloud of smoke.

Hastily Ross scrambled to his feet and was about to hurry down, when, from behind a rock a little distance to his right, a man arose, his great frame straightening itself quickly from a bent posture, his broad shoulders slowly squaring themselves, his shaggy head, cap-crowned, raised alertly.

"Lucky!" yelled Ross. "Lucky Frace!"

Lucky hastily laid a hammer and microscope on the rock. "Talk about yer surprise parties!" he cried. "This is sure one!"

"One surprise party!" yelled Ross. He fairly hurled himself on the rock in his joy. "One surprise party? Well, I'm one myself, and if you're another there's two! Honor bright, I never was so glad to see anybody in my life! What under the sun are you doing away off here?"

"Me?" Lucky's face twisted into an odd smile. He looked across the rock in some embarrassment.

GOLD HUNTER

"I've been hammerin' rocks around these parts quite extensive the last few days."

"Oh—yes!" Ross drew back as though he had met with a dash of ice water. He looked at the great ledge towering above them, at the hills on the other side of the smiling valley and then back to Lucky. "Where am I, anyway?" he demanded.

Lucky pulled his cap from his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "Wall, Doc, you're where I am, it seems, and I'm at Sheep's Horn. Where did ye s'pose you was at?"

Ross drew a long breath. Unconsciously to himself his manner had changed. In the midst of his adventures he had lost sight of the possible object of Lucky's journey, and what Sheep's Horn stood for.

"Why, I—didn't know where I was," he muttered. "I'm—lost—or was."

"Where was ye bound fer?" asked Lucky. He drew his cap down until the brim almost concealed his eyes.

"Why—for you—at first," Ross stammered, "and then, when I lost my way, I set out to find a man—any man that could set me right again."

Lucky's deep-set eyes, from under the cap brim, studied the boy. Ross's glance shifted uneasily as

ROSS GRANT

though he were the one under suspicion of unfair play. The man spoke first in his usual direct way :

"Doc, ye started out t' come and see fer yerself what I went away from the Pass for, didn't ye?"

Ross looked up at the Horn and down at the cabin, and then blurted out, "Yes, I did! That's exactly what I came for. I couldn't leave Wyoming and—leave things—well, all tangled up as they seem to be!"

Lucky nodded without any show of resentment. "Ye thought I done dirt to Hans." He spoke in the mountain slang. "Didn't ye?"

"I came," responded Ross doggedly, "to prove that you didn't!"

A slow smile lighted the other's strong face. "Thank ye, Doc." He picked up his hammer and began chipping the rock. "Mebby it can't never be proved, but I hadn't no intention of doin' 'im dirt. I know how it looks. I knew how 'twould seem to ye when I left, but—wall, I left jest the same."

He stopped, threw the hammer down and stood straight. "Doc, I've run onto a blind lead, I guess. I expected t' prove up my claim t' bein' a decent friend t' Hans afore this, but I hain't proved nothin'. But—Doc—someway I'd power-

GOLD HUNTER

ful like t' have ye take my word fer things and not jedge by the looks of 'em !”

There was a wistfulness in Lucky's voice that touched the boy. He came close beside the rock and looked into the man's honest, earnest face. Then he held out a hearty hand. “Lucky, whatever you say goes with me !”

Lucky met the hand with a grip that made Ross wince. He began his explanations haltingly, as though he were feeling his way along a new trail in the dark.

“Doc, I wish I could satisfy ye, but I don't believe I can. Guess ye'll have t' do as ye agreed and take my word fer it that when I got that letter and hiked 'er over here t' Sheep's Horn t' try t' find Fred's claims and look out fer 'em, I done what I thought was best.”

“But why didn't you tell me what you were up to ?” demanded Ross hotly. “I couldn't bear to think you meant to cheat Hans, but after everything that went between us, to have you go off without saying ——”

Lucky raised his hand. “Hold on, Doc. I reckoned it this way: I wa'n't doin' ye any real harm by leavin' ye figurin' on it in the dark, but if I told ye what I believed I might 'a' had to do some one else real harm—suspicions is mostly harmful, I've found.”

ROSS GRANT

Ross leaned over the rock eagerly. "Then you did suspect Trigger!" he cried. "Tod figured it out that way too!"

"Trigger—what about Trigger?" asked Lucky, with a wariness that did not deceive Ross.

"Yes, you did suspect him," he accused triumphantly, "and you were right!"

Rapidly he related the circumstances of the night when Trigger had looked at the letter. When he finished Lucky stood staring down at the little cabin.

"Now, Doc, so long as that's sure, I'll go back and tell ye the hull thing. I begun t' suspect the day after Sandy come how things was goin'. I seen Trig was gettin' warped Sandy's way, and I misdoubted how fur it would go. I got t' suspectin' 'im, but Trig's a pard of mine. We've et together and worked together, and I couldn't let no one else in on what I only suspicioned. That wouldn't be straight. Fer, Doc, rec'lect, I didn't know nothin' positive till ye told me now. At first I couldn't see no way out. Ye couldn't git the letter, and if ye didn't git it and my suspicions was right, Trig would. Even if it was locked in yer chest, Sandy could frame up a way t' have Trig get a look at it, because Hans is in Trig's shack. No one could keep Trig out of his own shack. So I framed up this way out. It was on

GOLD HUNTER

my mind that Fred had told me t' look out fer his brother, and I seen from the start that Hans can't look out fer himself among such men as the McKenzies, especially without our lingo. So I fixed it t' have an excuse to go over t' Miners' as soon as ye told me the name at the end of the line was Sheep's Horn. I was afraid that Fred hadn't got his claims fixed accordin' t' Wyomin' law. He hain't worked long in Wyomin'. Colorado has been his stampin' ground. Then when ye fixed out that other sheet it come to me that the only safe place fer the real letter was with me, clean away from Sandy and Trigger."

Ross nodded assent.

"So when ye went out t' stretch yer legs and Hans fell asleep I got yer dictionary and took the paper ye marked on and put it under Hans' pillow and took the real letter and hiked out." Lucky paused and looked sidewise at the boy. "Doc, if I could 'a' told ye without goin' back on a pard I'd 'a' done it, but I couldn't. So I hiked out and covered my trail."

Ross extended his hand across the rock again and caught Lucky's, the hand of a man who was willing to let suspicion fall on himself rather than "go back on a pard."

"I tell you what!" the boy exclaimed, "I was so astonished myself at Trigger that I lay there in

ROSS GRANT

my bunk like a log of wood and saw him go out with that sheet of paper and come back with it. It was some time before I could do any thinking, and no use of thinking, anyway. The whole thing was over with, as I believed, and the outfit were on their way to Sheep's Horn. Of course I didn't know then that the real letter was gone."

"It was my idee," continued Lucky slowly, "that I'd have t' be gone only a matter of a couple of days. I sorta counted on hikin' back before anything in particular broke loose. I expected t' look up Fred's claim and see if he had done everything necessary to hold it, so I could be a witness to its bein' straight in case the McKenzies tried any dodge in the future, and then get back. But Trigger's always in a hurry. Whatever he does he does mighty quick."

"Trigger's' a good name for him," assented Ross.

"Doc, don't be too hard on Trig." Lucky pushed his cap back. "Gold is powerful temptin' to most men when it seems t' lay 'round easy like t' git hold of."

"Just what Tod said," returned Ross quickly. "I must say Trig acts as if he wished he hadn't been tempted. But how about the claim—Hans' claim? Is it all right? Does it hold according to law?"

GOLD HUNTER

Lucky sat down abruptly on the rock and swung a foot slowly. Slowly he continued to chip the rock and throw the chips down toward the cabin. Ross leaned forward resting both elbows on the rock, his chin in his palms.

Lucky turned and regarded him with an odd smile. "Doc, I've tramped over miles of the mount'ins hereabouts. I've hunted and looked and pried and peeked and I can't locate hide ner hair of Fred's claim. There's tunnels a-plenty and claims a-plenty staked, but Fred's name is nowhere ner any sign of a claim that ain't got a name on it. There ain't been a spadeful of dirt turned up in two years 'round here within a mile on every side of this cabin. Everybody has deserted his claim or else proved up on it and gone. Doc, I can't make it out. D'ye s'pose Fred could 'a' been lunny when he drewed that map? Ye rec'lect he was sick at the time."

Ross fell limply on the rock. "See here!" he cried. "Do you mean to tell me we've had all this fuss and feathers for nothing? Have I taken this trip and been treed by a bear and been made game of by the McKenzies all for nothing?"

Lucky scratched his head. So deep was his perplexity that he did not hear Ross's reference to the bear. "Wall, Doc, I've hunted and hunted and then hunted again. I've bust into these rocks

ROSS GRANT

all over here to make sure that there wa'n't any promise of good ore. I thought it queer when ye fust see the name 'Sheep's Horn,' because this mounting ain't even staked. Nobody has ever found any ore here."

Suddenly Ross started up with an exclamation, "But the letter! What does the letter say? Beside the map of the trail there is writing. I saw it all around the page—and on the other side."

Lucky's odd smile deepened. He unbuttoned his coat silently and drew from an inside pocket the letter. He had wrapped it carefully in a page of old newspaper. Still wordless, he handed it over to Ross, who seized it eagerly.

This way and that he turned the sheet, his face becoming momentarily blanker. Finally, hand and letter dropped to his knee as he lifted his perplexed eyes to Lucky.

"Lucky, that writing is German script, and I can't read a word of it!"

"German script," repeated Lucky. "I thought it was jest hen tracks, and proved that Fred was lunny."

Ross shook his head decidedly. "No, it's regular German writing. Their letters are not like ours, but just the glance I got didn't make me wise to that. I thought, of course, it was written in English—the names are."

GOLD HUNTER

For a moment neither spoke while Ross again studied the sheet of "hen tracks." "But the trail ends in Sheep's Horn," he said finally.

"That it does," assented Lucky. He pointed to the shack below them. "And there's where Fred lived. That I know."

"How do you know?"

"There's his supplies—all he didn't use up. He's got a little wood cut out beside the cabin and a log that ain't cut up. He must 'a' snaked the logs down the trail there behind ye."

"Oh!" Ross looked behind him. "That explains the trail. It looks as though something had been dragged over it."

"Fred must have snaked some logs before he turned his horses loose to go back to their home ranch. Why, even his extry blankets is down there in his bunk."

Ross looked about wonderingly. "If he lived here—right under the Horn, he surely would work around here, especially since he didn't keep a horse to ride."

"No, he couldn't have gone fur to work, and that makes things so queer. That's what made me think mebbly Fred got a notion in his head that he had really run on a find because he wanted to s' bad. Ye know sick folks take them notions."

ROSS GRANT

"One thing's sure," muttered Ross. "Even if Trigger had seen this letter he wouldn't have been any wiser than you are, nor ——"

Here the boy came to an abrupt stop. He sprang to his feet and turned excitedly on the astonished Lucky.

"I forgot them!" he explained incoherently. "I was so confused by getting lost and seeing you and all this other —— The McKenzies are probably around here somewhere looking at us!"

"What?" Lucky almost shouted. "What's that ye're sayin'?"

"The McKenzies," insisted Ross. "They may be within hearing," he lowered his voice and looked cautiously about. "They followed me, and it was the first thing I should have told you," and he rapidly outlined his journey.

When he had finished, Lucky leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Wall, Doc, they're welcome to all I've found here. Now, let's set about gittin' yer horse over on this side with mine and rustlin' some grub."

When Ross pointed out the way he had come, Lucky shook his head. "Ye took the hardest way acrost. Nobody has ever got t' the top of the old stone Horn as I knows of. But s' long as it led ye here I'm glad ye tried to find a way t' climb it."

GOLD HUNTER

He looked at Ross, and Ross, returning the look, felt his heart warm. He had "had it out" with Lucky, and the process had satisfied both.

By a wide *détour* and an easy trail the two made their way around the mountain and found Ross's horse and pack. All the way Lucky was examining the loam for signs of the McKenzies. They were crunching over snow and ice that lay unmelted on a trail through dense underbrush when Lucky, who was in advance, turned to Ross and motioned downward. There, on the telltale snow, were the shapes of iron shoes.

"Three horses," said Lucky in a low tone.

The marks were so fresh that Ross fairly felt the presence of his trailers.

CHAPTER XII

THE "HA'NT" OF THE HORN

TOWARD the end of the valley over which Sheep's Horn towered, Lucky hobbled the boy's horse and turned it out with the two he had brought, and then led the way to the cabin.

"I wonder," said Ross, "where the McKenzies will camp to-night?"

"Probably not in the open," responded Lucky. "There are shacks all about here in the mount'ins, especially to the southeast nearer Wind River."

"By the way," interrupted Ross, "have you seen the Monkey? Did he come this way?"

Lucky nodded. "He come along here hot-footed after Dad. Guess Tod hadn't made no mistake in his directions with Nick. Nick didn't have no trouble comin' that he mentioned. I hadn't seen Dad at all, but the very day the boy come I had been down t' the end of this valley and climbed t' the top of a mount'in there and I seen a smoke comin' out of a shack that stands in a cañon about five miles beyond where I

GOLD HUNTER

stopped. As 'twas the only sign of life I'd seen, I sent Nick there. He hain't come back, so I suspect that my surmise was right, and Dad's there."

"And here we are!" exclaimed Ross in relief as they reached Lucky's temporary home. "I'm hollow clear to my toes! I shall eat like a pig."

"Wall, there hangs a good part of a pig fer ye t' eat!" grinned Lucky, pointing to a ham which swung from the roof logs.

The shack which they entered, and which Fred Holzworth had so recently occupied, was larger than the cabins at Elk Pass. It stood on a shelf in the steep, rocky mountainside backed up against a huge rectangular rock which appeared to be driven into the mountain to immeasurable depths. The flat top of the boulder loomed above the dirt-covered roof of the shack.

Ross had followed Lucky through a low doorway on the side opposite the rock. In one corner of the cabin, propped up on sections of pine logs surmounted by flat stones, stood an ancient, rusty, legless, sheet-iron stove. Its pipe was rusted into holes over which pieces of tin had been wired. Beside the stove, in boxes and bags, was a good supply of "grub," not only of Lucky's furnishing, but of Holzworth's. A table and some empty boxes completed the housekeeping outfit, an outfit

ROSS GRANT

that had become familiar to Ross. But facing the door and nailed to the logs against the boulder were two bunks, one of which excited his curiosity.

"Queer looking shake-down, ain't it?" grinned Lucky pointing. "I'm in the other and guess I'll stay there, Doc, as you're taller 'n me 'n' younger. Ye ought t' do better at climbin'."

The bunk occupied by Lucky was old and weather-beaten. It had evidently been built into a corner of the cabin when the latter was first erected. It was made of small pine boughs nailed to crosspieces in the shape of a box. The crosspieces were nailed to the rear logs, while the front of the box bunk was supported on sections of timber about two feet high. The box was filled with pine needles and long mountain grass that made a comfortable mattress over which Lucky's blankets were spread.

The second bunk was, however, a strange and awkward affair, and seemed totally unnecessary in view of the fact that Fred Holzworth had lived there alone. It stood fully four feet high and filled the space between the old bunk and the corner of the cabin. It was built out of pine boughs and the stout boards of half a dozen boxes which had originally contained dynamite. The bunk itself was fashioned from these boards. The

GOLD HUNTER

supports at the four corners were also boards. Holzworth had not trusted to nails at the back of the bed to hold it in place against the rear walls, but, in addition, had dropped a board leg at each corner.

"How tall was Fred?" asked Ross, surveying the awkward bed with amusement.

Lucky cast his cap into his own bunk and scratched his head. "That's the funny part. Fred didn't come much above my shoulder. He might as well 'a' built a roost and be done with it!"

"Well, I should say so!" Ross threw his own blanket over the grass and pine needles that also filled the new bunk, gave a leap and tumbling into the bunk, stretched out his legs with a satisfied grunt. "See here! There's a good foot of space between my feet and the bottom of this bunk. Holzworth must have had a giant in mind when he framed this."

"Looks like he begun t' build it at t'other end and then kept right on buildin' till he reached the end logs. Ye see, it's nailed t' the end logs as well as t' the back ones."

Ross clasped his hands beneath his head. "At any rate, it makes an easy bed. After my long hike I'm glad he felt moved to put up a second one."

ROSS GRANT

Lucky hung his coat on a peg beside the doorway and lifted down the ham. "Queer notion not t' use th' old un, but, then, we're all queer in spots. Now, Doc, you jest keep stretched out there while I rustle the grub."

"That meets my ideas exactly," Ross assented.

As Lucky cut the ham and selected a couple of tin cans from a heap in the corner behind the stove, he explained the shack and the mountains of the region.

"This 'ere cabin is the oldest 'round here, and built the best. Nobody knows who done it, but it's stood ever since I first come through here, and that's twenty year back."

"These logs," Ross interrupted, "could tell a lot of interesting stories if they could talk."

"That's likely. Men by the dozen have dropped int' this shack, unrolled their beds, stayed a while 'til they seen these mount'ins didn't yield as good ore as the Wind River region and then they'd move on. Always they'd move on if they was huntin' gold. I've been here myself and went on. As I said t' ye before, one reason that made me think Fred was lunny when he sent Hans here is that this valley and gold ain't acquainted very clost. There's iron here a plenty, and coal, but the gold bearin' quartz don't pan out well enough t' promise much even if there should come a way

GOLD HUNTER

t' handle the ore, like a branch of the Burlington or a smelter near here. Most of these claims," he indicated the encircling mountains, "are proved up fer coal and iron and not gold. But Sheep's Horn ain't staked. It don't show good coal, even."

"It's queer about Holzworth!" muttered Ross drowsily.

He was half asleep, lulled by the welcome, familiar sounds that he had sorely missed for the last two days. The pine knots which Lucky was feeding to the stove blazed and crackled. The coffee-pot simmered gently, and the vegetable soup in its can on the back of the stove mingled its appetizing odor with the frying ham, while Lucky's big spoon beat the flapjack batter with a soothing, rhythmical sound. It was not until supper was ready, the fire had died down, and Lucky had removed the bubbling dishes from the stove, that another sound made itself heard.

It was a slight sound, a mere breath of a sound that forced itself on Ross's attention, not by its volume but by its persistency. He raised his head and listened. At the same time Lucky stood still, a dish poised in his hands while he watched Ross with eyes shot with amusement.

"Hearin' things, Doc?" he inquired at length.

"What is it?" asked Ross, raising himself on his elbow.

ROSS GRANT

"What's what?"

"That queer little noise." He sat up and bent toward the door. "It's a—what? Where is it? Don't you hear it?"

Lucky smiled. "Yes, and I've been waitin' for you to. Ye ain't superstitious, are ye, Doc?"

"Not a bit," returned Ross indignantly.

Lucky still stood motionless, and the sound persisted, minute, regular, baffling as to its origin.

"I thought you wa'n't superstitious," said Lucky at length setting the dish on the table. "Then that sound won't hurt ye. It's always there. It never stops. Nobody knows where it comes from, ner how, but it keeps a heap of men outside this shack who've wanted t' stay here. They come in and make ready t' stay. Get a meal, mebbe, and don't take any notice of the sound while they're on the move. Then they turn in, and everything gits still—powerful still, Doc, when ye're the only man within forty miles ——"

"Guess I can testify to that!" muttered Ross with a shiver.

"Then," Lucky continued, "that sound begins and don't stop. It gits sorta on their nerves."

Ross slid out of the high bunk and began investigating. He went slowly around the room, Lucky's amused gaze following. The sound seemed the stronger at the bunk side of the shack

GOLD HUNTER

and on the side directly opposite than on the other two sides. But it was most audible opposite the bunks. Here Ross placed his ear close to the logs, and, half bent, moved slowly along the wall past the doorway to one spot, just beyond which he stopped.

"Here it is," he shouted, "right here!" He laid his hand on the central log in the wall.

Lucky smiled, shook his head and pushed a box up to the table. "How can it come from there, Doc? There's nothin' there but a plain pine log. Better come t' grub while it smokes."

But Ross was not yet ready to eat. He laid his ear to the log and the mysterious sound became a muffled throb or beat. He went to the door and looked out. There was nothing on that side of the cabin except an almost sheer drop into the valley from the edge of the rock shelf. He went slowly along the outer wall applying his ear to the logs. He could hear nothing. He returned and listened again at the inner wall. Instantly the beat became regular.

Lucky sat at the table watching the young man curiously. "Wall, Doc, how does yer spine feel? Here's about the p'int where half the fellers who strike this trail pack their outfit and move on. I've known 'em not t' stop goin' till they reached Wind River. Depends on how easy their con-

ROSS GRANT

sciences is and how they've been brung up. I never had much bringin' up, and that noise is sure a queer thing, but I sleep all the better nights fer it. It's not s' lonesome here. The first time I come that sound was waitin' fer me and it's here now. It ain't any feebler than it was twenty year ago."

"There is some explanation for it, of course," declared Ross, deeply puzzled.

"Find it if ye can," Lucky challenged.

"Don't eat up all those batter cakes," Ross called over his shoulder. "I'll be back in a moment."

That moment he spent in further survey of the exterior of the shack, but he discovered nothing that threw any light on the subject. There was only the steep mountainside with the cabin clinging to it backed up firmly against the huge rock, as sheltered as a wren's nest. And nowhere out-of-doors was that insistent throb repeated.

"Nothing doing!" he announced to Lucky as he upended a box beside the old table and sitting precariously astride it, fell on the food. "I haven't found the explanation yet, but it can certainly be explained. Say!" as a sudden idea struck him. "D'ye know what I wish? I wish that the Monkey was here. He's got hearers as sharp as both of ours put together, and then some. He has trained all

GOLD HUNTER

his senses so well—wish he could hear that noise. Did he stop when he went through?”

Lucky shook his head. “Nope. He was too busy trailin’ Dad. He didn’t even get off that spotted bronc of hisn. I was eatin’ dinner, but he had had his, and when I told ’im that the smoke from that shack was only a matter of ten mile or so away ye’d have had t’ rope ’im t’ keep ’im. But hold on, Doc, I rec’lect ye spoke of a bear. Have ye been meetin’ up with one?”

Ross laughed ruefully. “Meeting up with one? Well, I should say so!” He rubbed his head tenderly. “Say, Lucky, does my hair lie down from the roots out? It’s been standing straight up with a nerve from every root attached somewhere to my back-bone and every nerve jumping, while not a nerve in my legs would work! Honest, Lucky, I was the most frightened fellow in Big Horn County two nights ago.”

When Ross had finished his story Lucky’s smile was faint. “It’s a good thing ye got yer wits about ye, Doc. That bear was hungry, probably, fer candy and sweet chocolate and other things that it wipes up after tourists over t’ the Park, and when ye didn’t cough some up it might ’a’ clumb up there and bothered ye some.”

“Bothered me!” Ross burst out. “That’s a mild way to put it.”

ROSS GRANT

"Wall," said Lucky, with a grin, "it might 'a' come up and gone through yer pockets fer the sweet things and ——"

"And you would have come along in a few days," interrupted Ross grimly, "and picked up all that was left of me—and my pockets!"

Lucky chuckled. "Wall, Doc, it proved ye got a head on ye. 'T' think," admiringly, "of yer backin' the old feller down in the way ye did!"

"It was thinking of the Monkey, Lucky, that gave me that idea," Ross confessed. "It was only a couple of days before that he had taught me to swing on the limb of the tree in front of the McKenzies' tent, and the thought of that seemed to inspire me to try it out with a few variations on the bear."

Lucky stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "Speakin' of the Monkey gives me an idee, too," he observed. "I don't see nothin' nigh t' hender our goin' over first thing in the mornin' and seein' if Dad and Nick is there," jerking his thumb in the general direction of Wind River. Then he added with a chuckle, "It'll keep the McKenzies busy follerin' us—give 'em somethin' t' pass away the time with."

"What is our program, anyway?" Ross asked, pouring soup into a basin from the hot tin can.

Lucky sagged forward against the table and

GOLD HUNTER

shook his head. "I'd laid out t' fool 'round here another day and then hike back t' the Pass. Now I dunno what we better do."

Ross moved uneasily and added what was in Lucky's mind, "My bringing the McKenzies here changes things."

"We'll think it over, Doc," returned Lucky evasively. "I don't aim t' give Sandy any advantage."

"Is it possible," began Ross after a pause, "that Holzworth located a lead and didn't stake it—that would have called attention to it—but described its location in the letter?"

Lucky brought his open hand down on the table with a bang. "Doc, that's exactly the trail I begun t' foller to-day. That's the reason I've been 'round the Horn prospectin' t' see if I could find such a lead—but I hain't struck it!"

"If only I could read the letter!" mourned Ross. "But then, Sandy isn't nearly as wise as we are. That's one comfort!"

Lucky chuckled. "Course he hain't. He can't be sartin what we're doin' when we go huntin' 'round aimless like. See? He don't know that we can't read the letter, and if he thinks I made off with it and yet hain't turned nothin' up that's plain to his sharp eyes—Sandy's goin' t' be puzzled about what we're up to."

ROSS GRANT

Ross grinned delightedly. "We've still got the whip hand, haven't we?"

All this conversation had been carried on in a mere mutter as the heads of the two almost met over the narrow table. They knew that Sandy's ears were sharp and Sandy's sense of honor was bounded only by his knowledge of the law. He might be listening at any crack between the logs, but if he had been, no word of the murmured conversation could have reached him. And when Lucky straightened his shoulders and spoke in a natural tone it was of affairs in the Valley of the Pass.

As Ross was sweetening his second cup of coffee, he heard a sound from below the shack, then a medley of sounds out of which emerged a stout bass voice:

"Ho, Lucky! Ye up there yet?"

"It's Dad!" cried Ross joyfully.

With a bound he was out of the doorway peering over the edge of the stone shelf. Below, looking up, were Dad and Nicholas.

"We've come calling," the latter cried. "But if you had not been at home we couldn't have left cards. Because why? Because we—— Oh, stars and stripes! If that ain't Doc Tenderfoot!"

"Of course it is!" shouted Ross. "Get yourself up here!"

GOLD HUNTER

The two horsemen picketed their mounts on the grassy slope below and then followed a devious trail that wound around and up to the stone shelf. The boy climbed agilely, the man slowly and heavily.

"Found 'im, didn't ye?" was Lucky's greeting as he glanced past the boy to Dad when the former's head appeared above the shelf.

"He was all there and at dinner when I reached him," responded the boy. "Guess he was sorry I came, because I ate up everything in sight."

Dad pushed the cap back and smiled, a pleasant smile, slow in making its full appearance. He resembled Lucky in some ways, Ross thought. He gave the same impression of trustworthiness and solidity. He looked at Nicholas now wordlessly but with unmistakable affection.

"Holler now, ain't ye, Nick?" asked Lucky.

"It wouldn't be polite to say I am, and it wouldn't be truthful to say I ain't!"

Lucky at once led the way into the shack and got under headway among his supplies, Ross assisting, and, in the end, the call was turned into a feast of canned goods.

"Ye didn't find old man Clark, I take it?" asked Lucky over the sizzling bacon.

Dad threw his cap into a bunk and rubbed his thin, dark hair. "Nope, I didn't find him, but I

ROSS GRANT

have run into all his belongin's up there." Dad sat down heavily on a box and sagged forward, his elbows on his knees. "There was an envelope on the floor directed to 'im, so I knew I was in the right place, and there's all his supplies and blankets. Ye'd think, just to drop in the shack, he was out workin' on his claims between meals, if 'twa'n't for the horses. There's been horses around, but they're gone, and so I take it Clark has gone away for a few days. His claims are near there. New staked claims they are, and there ain't but a handful of dynamite left, so I take it he's gone for some sticks, mebbe t' Meeteetse."

"And you're waitin' for him?"

Dad nodded and then turned uneasily toward the wall. "Same old sound's here, ain't it, Lucky?"

At this Nicholas, who had been standing in front of the window, turned. Ross saw that he was listening. "That thumping sound is the haunt you told me about, isn't it?" he asked.

"Listen!" said Lucky, lifting the noisy bacon from the stove.

There was yet too much stir in the shack for Ross to catch the mysterious sound, but the younger boy's sharp ears did, and he began the same investigation that Ross had indulged in an hour earlier. When he left the shack intent on tracing the cause, Ross went with him.

GOLD HUNTER

"You see," said Ross after they had gone around the cabin and had climbed to the top of the rock, "there's no place outside where you can hear that 'haunt.'"

The younger boy, having satisfied himself as to the truth of this, sat down beside Ross on the edge of the rock and dangling his feet over the roof of the shack swapped experiences of the days since they had parted in the Valley of the Pass, Nicholas listening with envy to the story of the bear.

"And I've never had such an exciting set-to as that, and I have lived at the foot of these mountains all my life," he mourned. "I've seen wolves in winter, lots of 'em, but I've never met one."

"Gracious! Do you *want* to?" cried Ross.

"I rather meet a bear the way you did—without having Spot under me—than to meet the King of England," affirmed Nicholas solemnly and honestly, but he added at once, "Of course, I'd want a gun handy."

"So should I," added Ross grimly, "and a tree at my elbow that would hold me but not the bear!"

"Ho, boys!" came Lucky's voice from below. "Where have you critters gone to?"

"Here!" shouted Nicholas, obeying the call with alacrity.

ROSS GRANT

As the boys entered the shack, Dad was saying :
“ No, Lucky, I didn't grub-stake Fred this time ; I jest lent 'im the cash. Ye see I'd grub-staked 'im twice before, and he hadn't turned up anything worth follerin'. So last summer when he hiked down t' the ranch, he asked t' borrow a thousand. Of course I was a fool to lend it, but Fred told a hard luck story, and I—wall, I give in. Ye know,” apologetically, “ how them things go. I had it in the bank, and Fred said he hadn't a plunk that he could lay his hands on then, but that he sure would have before long, and so I handed it over t' 'im, and that's the last I seen or heard from 'im. I have his note, but what's that good fer when a man hasn't nothin' that ye can collect from ? But if Fred has somethin', if he did make a stake ——” Dad stopped and gazed out of the door, his forehead puckered into a frown.

“ A thousand dollars,” repeated Lucky. He scratched his head slowly. “ A thousand dollars loan and not a grub-stake. Wall, if Fred was in his right mind when he passed in his checks—and before—mebbe that ain't so bad a debt as ye think fer. I can't git shet of the idee that Fred fixed things right in this letter if he could think straight. Anyway, with a note, ye have yer claim on any stake that he made.”

Here Lucky turned to Ross. “ Ye see, Doc,

GOLD HUNTER

I've been makin' a clean breast of the thing t' Dad, here. There ain't no reason now why I shouldn't, I'm thinkin', with the McKenzies on the spot. He might as well know how things stand."

Dad, his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hands. "I'll stick around here as long as ye stay," he decided, "if old man Clark comes back in a day or two so I can serve 'im with that subpoena. If he don't come I've got to get after 'im."

Here Dad raised his head abruptly. "Lucky, let's have a look at that letter."

The letter was produced, and each looked it over in turn, but it threw no light on the subject.

"If Hans is as honest as Fred and knew of the debt, but ——" here Dad drew a long breath. "I never lent money like that before, but I believed in Fred."

At this point Ross made a discovery. He had opened the large sheet and was going over it carefully. He had found before that, although the letter was written in German script, the names of the places mapped on the trail were in English. With his finger he now began tracing each line of the script, with the result of finding that wherever the writer had occasion to use any of the names with which he had been familiar in Wyoming, he

ROSS GRANT

had written them in letters which Ross could read. Slowly the boy made his way down the page of closely written characters on the side of the sheet opposite the mapped trail. At the very end he reached a paragraph which caused him to give an excited exclamation.

"Here you are, Mr. Page," he yelled. "Here you are! Your name is all I can make out, of course, but Holzworth didn't forget you!"

Eagerly four heads bent above the paragraph in the midst of which Dad's name appeared three times, but not another word was recognizable.

"But there it is!" cried Lucky the optimist. "There's that debt of yours set down. Fred was honest. He's squared himself with ye. Wait and see if I ain't right!" Lucky spoke with his broad blunt forefinger pressed on the last paragraph.

Dad nodded dubiously and turned his attention to the supper, while Lucky restored the letter to the pocket of his coat that hung on a peg against the side logs.

From that time the talk around the table escaped Ross who nodded beside the stove too sleepy to keep his eyes open. As soon as Dad and Nicholas had departed promising to return the following morning, he stumbled yawning to his feet.

"Lucky, guess I'll turn in," he exclaimed, drawing off his coat.

GOLD HUNTER

It slipped out of his hands as he turned sleepily toward the peg, and fell to the floor.

As he raised it a piece of quartz rolled out of a pocket. Instantly Lucky's glance lighted on it and in another instant Lucky's hand was on it, and Lucky's voice, high pitched with excitement, demanded :

"Doc, where'd ye come by this? It's free gold, and that ain't seen often in these mount'ins!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE MISSING TREASURE

IN an instant Ross was wide awake. "Gold, did you say?" he cried excitedly. "Free gold?"

"Free gold," assented Lucky solemnly. The hand that held the quartz shook. "Didn't ye know that, Doc?"

"I should say I didn't! I thought it was a pretty good specimen of 'fool's gold,' best I'd ever seen."

"Ye thought it looked too good t' be true."

"Exactly. I had forgotten all about it. Just slipped it into my pocket when I was trying to find a way to get out of this place. I simply gave it enough attention to see that it looked—different——"

Lucky reached the doorway in a long stride, and, drawing a small microscope from his pocket, examined the quartz, his hands unsteady from excitement. "Different!" he exploded. "Wall, I sh' say so! It's a fine specimen, Doc. It carries a mighty good value in gold."

Ross looked it over with keen interest. It was his first glimpse of a species of quartz, the rare

GOLD HUNTER

sight of which in these elevations had helped make many a man "quartz crazy." The transparency of the ore was interrupted by bands and streaks and particles of dull yellow. Lucky took out his knife, and chipped off one of the yellow bands that lay on the surface. It fell on Ross's outstretched palm—the lure of the Rockies. Over it the eyes of the two met solemnly.

"Doc, where'd ye find this? If 'twas on an unclaimed bit of mount'in and there's a good pocket of the same kind where this was broke off—why, Doc, ye've met up with a good thing."

Ross's eyes shone exultantly. He stepped outside the shack, and pointed at the ledge barely visible far above the cabin. "I found it up there under that ledge."

Lucky stared at him incredulously. "D'ye mean the Horn? Under th' Horn?"

"Yes, on the other side."

Lucky passed a hand over his eyes as though to clear away the mental cobwebs. "Was—was it jest layin' 'round loose?"

"Yes," replied Ross, "it lay on the ground. I—let's see—I was crawling out from under a fallen tree and ——" Here the boy suddenly paused and then burst out, "Lucky, have you never found that hole—why, it must be a discovery hole!"

ROSS GRANT

"A discovery hole?" echoed Lucky.

"Just at the foot of the ledge on the other side. I was inside a tangle of branches and fallen trees and found a pit. It's covered up with tops of spruce and underbrush. I nearly fell into it pushing through to reach the ledge. I just chanced to notice and pick up this piece of ore on my way out."

"A discovery hole and this," Lucky looked down at his hand, "under the Horn—and the Horn's at the end of Fred's trail. Then——" His low voice, vibrant with agitation, ceased abruptly. He stood staring at Ross.

The boy recognized the idea which had stopped the speech. "Of course," he said quietly, "I have no claim on it. It must be a part of Holzworth's find."

Lucky turned from him with relief written on every feature of his big bearded face. But all the response he made as he scanned the ledge above was the rapid question, "Was there any more such lookin' ore laying loose?"

"None that I noticed. But, you see, I was looking for other things beside gold or mining-claims then. I was looking for a way out for myself, not for Hans."

"Inside that mess of brush and trees, ye say the hole is?" asked Lucky.

GOLD HUNTER

"Yes. The only way I could get in was to crawl under a fallen tree."

"And was there any sign of a claim?" asked Lucky eagerly. "No stake ner paper sign up ner nothin'?"

"Not that I saw."

Lucky drew a quick breath. "An' there I've hiked past that tangle a dozen times!" he muttered. "I've hammered stones jest outside of it and went 'round it—but I never pushed inside."

"It was the chance of finding a way to the outlook on top that led me inside," said Ross, but Lucky was not listening.

"Doc," he said hurriedly, "ye're all in, with yer long hike; but there's a good hour of light yet, and I'm goin' up t' the ledge, hopin' the McKenzies ain't there before me. You stay here and rest."

"Not much!" cried Ross. He hastened into the shack and swinging an axe to his shoulder, stood ready for action.

But Lucky, kicking a box up beside the table, motioned to it. "Here, Doc, ye're handier with a pencil than me. Set down here and write three 'r four declarations of discovery and possession. Only one's necessary, but we ain't aimin' t' stop at what's jest necessary. I want th' McKenzies t' read 'em all 'round the claim."

Rapidly Ross did as he was bidden. Lucky

ROSS GRANT

stood over him, dictating, the suppressed excitement in his voice and manner causing the boy's pencil to wobble and his hand to shake.

"Now," he exclaimed, springing up and shoving the papers into Lucky's hand, "are we ready?"

He seized the axe again, and hurried out of the shack without giving his coat a thought. Lucky was also in his shirt sleeves. Neither thought of the chill which followed the sundown in those high altitudes, so anxious were they to reach the ledge in advance of the McKenzies, provided the brothers had not yet become interested in the surroundings of the huge rock.

"You see there are trees all around the hole," Ross explained breathlessly. "From half-way down the side they could not have seen me in the thicket."

"They could trail ye," responded Lucky briefly.

His brown flannel shirt, pulled up loosely at the belt, flopped in the rising breeze. His face was set and stern at the thought of possible marauders. He led silently and rapidly, going straight up the almost perpendicular side of Sheep's Horn until they reached the foot of the ledge. Then, still silent, they circled its foot, until they arrived at the tops of the fallen trees.

"This screens the hole," whispered Ross.

Lucky surveyed the mass, gloomy under the

GOLD HUNTER

overhanging trees. "I don't wonder that I never suspicioned what this place held."

Ross led the way to the beginning of the trail and the felled tree. "Here's where I broke through."

"Wait," breathed Lucky. They spoke beneath their breath, not knowing where the McKenzies might be.

Lucky stooped, and examined the trail. Other footprints besides Ross's appeared. He traced them to the edge of the thicket, and found that here they veered to the left and followed Ross's as his led around the rock.

"They didn't go in," whispered Lucky. "Lookee here. They knew you was lost, and jest aimed t' keep ye in sight without trailin' yer every step. That's fortunate."

When Lucky was well into the tangle of hemlock, following Ross on hands and knees, he stopped with an exclamation. "Ha! The rock here is all turned up on aidge, ain't it, Doc?"

"That's the only thing I noticed about it in here," whispered Ross. "I had to climb over too much of it not to notice that."

Lucky brought his eyes close to the stone, the shadow of the thicket making seeing difficult. "This is queer, Doc, queer enough. These strata poke up here like a finger through this mount'in."

ROSS GRANT

"Pointing the way to Holzworth's find," breathed Ross, pushing forward.

"Not jest pointin' the way but bringin' it," insisted Lucky, "fer this is different rock. There ain't no more like this 'round the Horn."

"Here," announced Ross, "is the hole."

He allowed the excited Lucky to drop into the pit first. He followed, but could only stand in silence and watch the other eagerly examining the place, its rough floor, its sides and, finally, the dump of refuse at one side. On Lucky's face Ross read the signs of disappointment. He found no more free gold, nor did the refuse yield more rich ore. But the fact that this refuse-dump was small out of all proportion to the hole escaped Ross's attention. It did not escape Lucky's. Around and about among the felled trees he poked and pushed and looked. At last with a sigh he came back to the trail, followed by the boy.

"It ain't here," he muttered aloud.

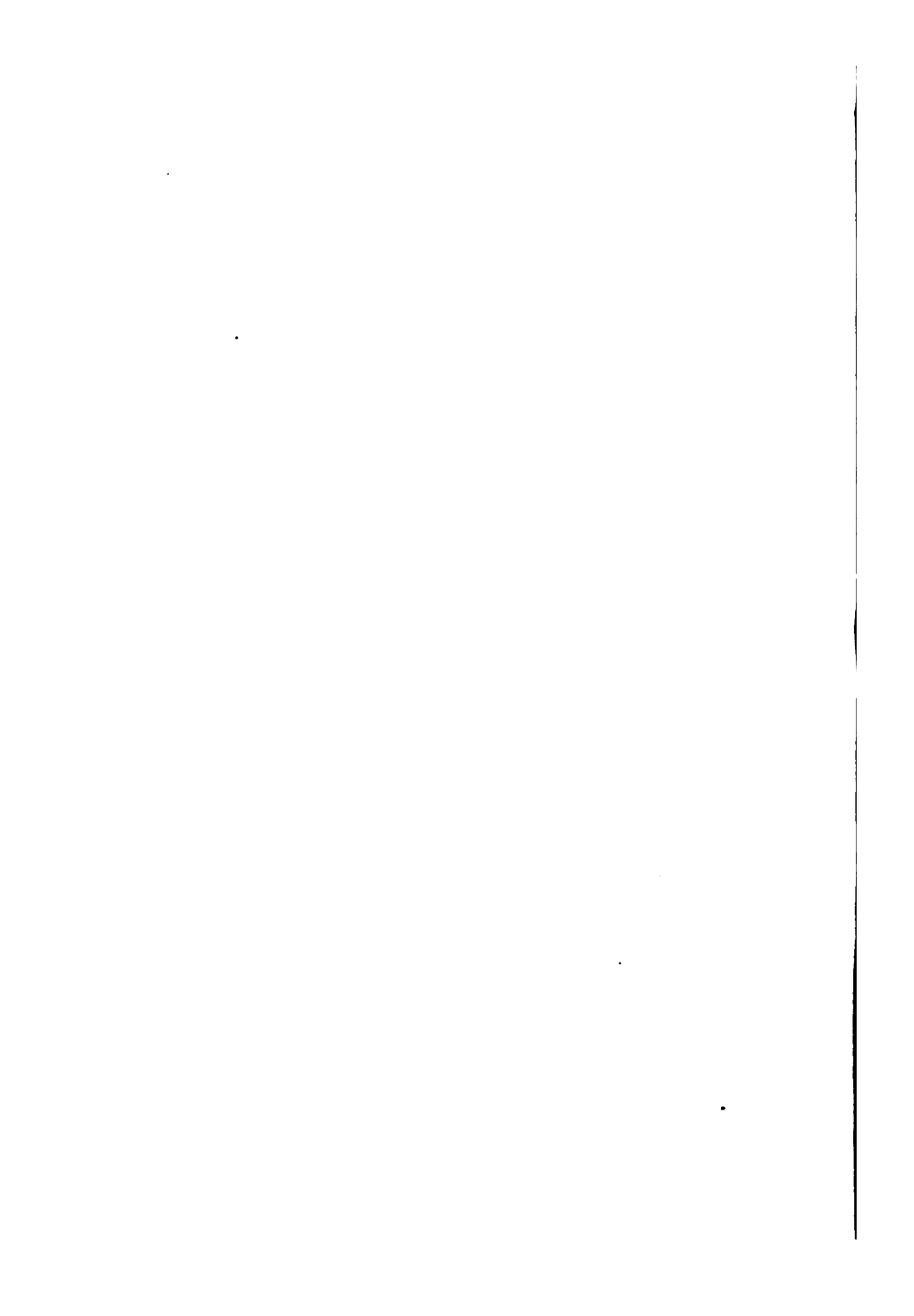
"What?" asked Ross.

His companion did not hear. He was standing by a smooth, straight tree beside the trail at the edge of the thicket. Producing the declaration of possession and discovery, he nailed it to the bark. Then, going to the edge of the woods, he studied the side of the mountain.

"I guess," he whispered, "that the rock inside



HE NAILED IT TO THE BARK



GOLD HUNTER

there," jerking his thumb back toward the discovery hole, "runs slantwise off here northwest, but it runs deep."

"The strata seem to me to go straight down to China," exclaimed Ross, "but what I don't know about geology would fill books!"

"Same here," said Lucky absently, "but I do aim t' know a few things about gold minin' and the lay of the quartz that holds the metal. I don't know nothin' about books."

Ross smiled. "Strikes me that knowing things comes before putting 'em in books," he muttered, "and you do seem to know a few things worth while!"

"Only a few," said Lucky decidedly. Then he changed the subject abruptly.

"Doc, we'll take possession of this side and go only about a hundred feet over on t'other side. That'll give Hans as much of a bite as he can swallow, and I guess a bit more."

"Holzworth did exactly as you suspected he would about not visibly claiming his discovery, didn't he?"

Lucky nodded. "Guess his head was level after all. Ye see, if he had staked it off and laid claim t' it, and then left without doin' all of the first year's work on it, and not knowin' when his brother could come, why, any one, naturally

ROSS GRANT

curious, and most prospectors is—that's their business—wall, as I was goin' t' say, any prospector could hike along and jump the claim.

“ Now,” Lucky continued, “ ye better take these papers and the hammer, and pace off three hundred feet straight out here t' the right. Then go down the mount'in fourteen hundred paces and put another paper at that corner. Then up the cañon six hundred feet, and another paper there. Then, when we go back, we'll attend t' the hundred feet on t'other side. We'll see if the McKenzies will hold Hans' claim or if we will! We'll jest pretend at present that we're Hans' grub-staked pards. In the mornin' I'll come up and begin t' sink that hole a little deeper.”

With hammer and papers Ross set off jubilantly down the mountainside through the fast falling darkness, while above him Lucky swung his axe, making an opening through the tops of the felled trees. The sound of the blows echoed loudly against the mountainside opposite.

“ Whew!” muttered Ross. “ If the McKenzies are not deaf, they can hear that, no matter where they have camped.”

At the foot of the mountain he stopped, and, notching a pine, nailed Hans' name above the notch. Then he started up the narrow gorge down which he had so recently ridden. Here

GOLD HUNTER

the trees turned the twilight again to darkness, and he advanced slowly, counting his paces. A hundred feet or so from the marked tree he paused, realizing that he had lost count. Listening to the blows from the axe, he retraced his steps until, within a few feet of the tree, he came to a sudden stop, halted by low voices.

He crouched behind a rock, and listened. He heard the sound of a match on the tree trunk and then Sandy's voice reading in a mumble the notice which Wyoming law requires to be affixed to a stake or other permanent post near the vein of ore that the prospector wishes to take possession of to the extent of one or more claims.

“‘Discovered _____ of June _____ by Ross Grant _____ possession of _____ in name of and for Hans Holzworth.’”

“Who signs it?” asked Waymart in an excited tone.

“Lucky, of course,” growled Sandy, “with Doc as witness. Now, what does he find here on old Sheep's Horn? And what did Fred find? It's a mistake. There ain't nothin' here to strike rich. Men that knowed a heap more about ore than Fred Holzworth have been comin' and goin' these twenty-five years, and all of 'em have passed by the Sheep's Horn.”

“But Lucky's staked it,” insisted Waymart;

ROSS GRANT

“and ye git up early and stay awake late t’ git ahead of Lucky Frace. If he’s staked out this mount’in, there’s good ore here som’ers.”

“Aw, go ’long!” scoffed Sandy. “Lucky’s doin’ this jest to fool Doc. Didn’t do it here till Doc got here, ye notice. Ye jest wait, Mart, till I git my hands on ——”

The rest of the sentence was lost on Ross. He remained in his retreat until the brothers had passed him, grinning jubilantly at the slur cast by Sandy. Lucky doing this to fool him, indeed! Then Sandy did actually believe that Lucky was trying to steal the gold. Impulsively, without stopping to weigh the matter, but feeling that his exultation over finding the Holzworth claim must find some outlet, he arose and called:

“Hello, there, McKenzies!”

Two dim figures halted. One hesitated, and came back to the rock. It was Sandy. “Wall, Doc!” cried Sandy with the hearty friendliness that he could so easily assume. “What’s ye doin’ here, moonin’ all by yerself?”

Ross sat down jauntily on the rock. “I’m not by myself,” he returned. “Lucky Frace is up at the ledge.”

“That so?” imperturbably. “Wall, now, don’t Lucky find hours enough in daylight t’ chop wood in?”

GOLD HUNTER

Ross laughed, and answered impulsively with boyish bravado, "Well, this particular kind of wood is worth chopping at any hour of the day or night that you run across it."

"Ah!" Sandy's tone evinced great interest, also enlightenment. "What kind of wood?"

Waymart turned his head alertly.

Ross bit his lips in vexation, repenting his impulsiveness too late. "'There's no fool like a *young* fool,'" he told himself angrily.

Sandy repeated his question.

"Oh, the only kind there is around here," the boy said lamely, and hastened to add, "Where are you camping?"

To his relief Sandy did not follow the subject of Lucky's chopping. He merely answered the question, and joined Waymart, and both men crunched along the gravelly soil, passing out of sight and hearing in a few moments.

Then Ross hastened to count his paces and nail the possession-claim to another tree at the corner. "If only I'd kept my mouth shut in the first place!" he kept repeating, vaguely uneasy. "I know that Sandy's suspicions are aroused. I wonder what Lucky will say?"

He turned and looked at the side of the opposite mountain for the McKenzies' camp. He could see nothing from his position among the trees. Walk-

ROSS GRANT

ing forward briskly for a few moments, he came to an open space in the cañon ; and there, securely picketed, were the three horses. On the first slope beyond was a dying fire, but the campers were not in sight. Half an hour later he had joined Lucky and confessed to his interview with the trailers.

Lucky leaned on his axe, and peered into the opening it had made in the jungle of tree tops. He made no comment on Ross's course.

"I think," Ross burst out finally, "that you wish I'd kept still and stayed behind my rock, don't you?"

Lucky picked up some boughs and tossed them aside. "Wall, Doc," he returned slowly, "if they didn't know that we knew they was here, they wouldn't have s' much t' cover up, and we might not have s' much t' find out."

Ross looked puzzled. "But what is there now to find out or cover up?" he asked. "We have found Fred Holzworth's claim and taken possession in Hans' name, and you will begin to-morrow to make good the possession. What's left?"

Lucky lowered his voice cautiously. "There's everything left, Doc, that the McKenzies want."

"I don't understand ——" began the boy.

For answer Lucky led the way into the hole again. Ross stumbled after. Lighting a match, Lucky held it up to the refuse-heap at the right of

GOLD HUNTER

the hole. "Doc, ye can see—can't ye?—that most of the ore taken out of this hole has been snaked away and cached?"

"Oh!" cried Ross, "now I understand." Words failed him. He plunged his hands into his pockets, and whistled again. "Holzworth pulled out all the ore with the free gold in it, and hid it somewhere," he whispered.

Lucky nodded solemnly. "That's it. He run on a pocket of the yeller. That pocket has pinched out right here. We've staked the mount'inside for Hans, but mebbe he'll never git a plunk's worth more of gold out of it. But som'ers around Fred has the gold cached."

"Then we must find it before the McKenzies do!" muttered Ross excitedly.

Lucky led the way out. He did not comment on the assertion at once. "We'll go home now," he said, shivering as a piercing wind struck him. "Have ye got one of them papers left?"

Ross produced it, and they groped their way down the other side of the mountain, stuck the notice temporarily on the branch of a sage-brush, and then sought the dark, cold shack. The sky was clear and pierced by stars increasing in brilliancy as the early darkness deepened. Among the peaks the wind was rising to a gale, the skirts of which hit their faces. It did not visit the

ROSS GRANT

cañon in full force at once. It made brief sorties at first, retreating back to the peaks, leaving every branch a-quiver with the memory of its departure and anticipation of its early return. But with its descent began a measureless, mournful roar which swept the wooded sides of the mountains and died away in little puffs among the gently waving hemlocks above the cabin.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ross as he entered the shack, "I've just found out that I'm cold as an iceberg! A cup of hot coffee wouldn't be scorned now."

Lucky lighted a candle. In a few moments a pine chunk fire was roaring in the stove, and a fresh pot of coffee simmering.

Ross placed the hingeless door in place, and propped it against the sudden gusts of wind. Then, taking one of the blankets from his bunk, he hung it over the glassless window.

"There!" he ejaculated with satisfaction. "I believe in fresh air; but there can be too much of it, I've found out here."

He sat down beside the table, and took up the piece of ore again. The flickering rays from the candle cast only a dull light on the yellow metal. Beside the stove two coats swayed, sucked in and out against the unchinked logs, their lengths throwing grotesque shadows across the hard dirt

GOLD HUNTER

floor as the draught threw them outward. The fire roared and crackled, and the yawning seams in the stove emitted a dancing brilliancy.

Ross rested both elbows on the table, leaning against it in a lazy, warm content, and watched Lucky until the coffee boiled. Then he arose with alacrity, and filled the cups. But not until the two sat opposite each other over the steaming cups was the subject of the hiding place of the free gold reopened. They sat a long time or, rather, Lucky talked almost in a whisper at intervals, and Ross listened.

"I've combed these here mount'ins with a fine-tooth comb fer four days," he mused, "and ain't come on hide ner hair of a cache. But," with a shrug of his powerful shoulders, "neither did I run on that discovery hole. Wall, if Fred was as foxy with his cache as with that hole, I guess it can wait safe till Hans gits a glass over his eye and can read that letter." Lucky jerked his thumb behind him at his coat. "That'll tell, of course."

"If Fred was weak," said Ross thoughtfully, "and sick, he couldn't carry quartz very far, could he? You said, I believe, that he had no horse here."

Lucky nodded gravely. A puzzled expression overcast his face. "Doc, ye're right. Fred was

ROSS GRANT

weak at the best when he found that pocket, and he couldn't 'a' took the ore fur. Now, I wonder ——" Lucky's voice trailed away into silence, and the wind went shrieking past the shack, making the candle flare, causing the pine knots in the stove to roar, and swinging the coats out after their wavering shadows.

Finally he arose, and wandered aimlessly around the room. "Ye know, the law is," he began again, "that ye can hold a claim for thirty days without doin' work on it; and I guess I best put in a few of that thirty first a-lookin' Sheep's Horn over again sharp for that ore."

"Isn't there another tangle deep enough to hide it?" asked Ross.

"I hain't come on any such," answered Lucky.

"What about a hole big enough and covered?"

"There'd be a pile of the stuff took out of the hole to give it away. Besides, I don't believe Fred was strong enough t' dig such a hole after all the work he done under the Horn."

"It's got to be somewhere hereabouts," insisted Ross again, "because he couldn't have carried it far."

Lucky returned no answer, but sitting down beside the stove scratched his head, always a sign of perplexity with him.

GOLD HUNTER

"How do you believe the pocket of ore panned out?" asked Ross.

"I've been askin' myself that very thing," returned Lucky. "By what Fred said I sh' think not much as we measure thousands in plunks. He said it would be a starter fer Hans—and then there's Dad t' share it."

Lucky reached for the ore on the table and looked at it carefully. "Doc, if I was guessin' I should guess this: that the pocket Fred run ont' was small, but the ore carried a mighty high assay. This piece is rich. A ton of such quartz would run up int'—wall, from five t' seven thousand, som'ers."

"From five to seven thousand dollars," muttered Ross.

He sat with his elbows on the table and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He felt a strange stir within, an awakening of the spirit of the mountains, the spirit of discovery and conquest and possession. Then he arose, shaking his head in a denial of that awakening, but he spoke reluctantly:

"And I suppose that it's up to me to take that letter and get back to the Pass, and take Hans down to Cody. And then," he spoke still more reluctantly, "I suppose I must make tracks for Pennsylvania." The boy felt just then that it

ROSS GRANT

would be far more interesting to stay with Lucky "a-lookin' sharp!" His view-point had temporarily changed since Lucky had overtaken the Meeteetse stage only a few days before. "Now, are you sure," he demanded, "that you can send me back so I won't lose my way?"

Lucky assented. "The mistake that Tod made was at the cañon that ye struck after comin' over from the Valley of the Willows. Tod clean forgot that crick. He jest skipped over that, and laid the trail along the next one. Of course ye took the one nighest and so got mixed up."

"It was fortunate for me," declared Ross with conviction, "that I got still further mixed up to-day, and crossed and recrossed trails and creeks until I fell against Sheep's Horn!"

"Ye bet it was!" responded Lucky warmly.

It was late that night before they turned in. The fire had burned out before Lucky was snoring in his bunk. Ross lay awake, wondering how he could explain to Hans what had been done to safeguard his interests. Finally a solution to his difficulties presented itself.

"Nothing easier," he muttered aloud, sitting up in his bunk. Near Cody there was a collection of German "nesters" or small farmers, along the banks of the "Stinking Water." They could speak English as well as their native tongue. He would

GOLD HUNTER

take Hans to them on the way to the oculist and have all he wished to say interpreted. With this thought in mind he fell asleep.

Between three and four, in the cold gray dawn of the morning, he awakened. The wind had fallen. Not a bird chirped. The vast mountains engulfed the shack in silence, but it was a silence broken within the cabin by a small, persistent sound. Ross arose on his elbow and listened. The "ha'nt" of the place was busy, always busy. With the fire roaring and the wind blowing, the tiny, persistent sound had escaped his notice. Now it encroached, as steady and irritating as the nibbling of a mouse. Ross rolled over restlessly, unable to shut it out or forget it. Finally he arose impatiently, and, groping his way to the other side of the shack, listened again at the logs beside the door.

"It's as though the logs were hollow here," he thought, "and a loud nickel clock were ticking; yet it doesn't sound exactly like a clock. It's a muffled, mixed-up beat."

Leaning over too far in his investigation, he lost his balance, and pitched forward, taking with him the coats and the peg on which they were hung. Behind him, Lucky's snores ceased a moment while the sleeper moved uneasily. Then he began to sleep more loudly than before, while Ross gath-

ROSS GRANT

ered himself up shivering. He picked up his coat, and laid it across a box that stood in his way. As he stooped for Lucky's a sudden thought caused him to run his hands over it until they reached the inside pocket. Dropping the garment hastily on the floor, he stepped over it, struck a match, and glanced about the floor.

"I'm sure," he thought, "that Lucky——" The match fell blazing to the floor. "Jerusalem!" he exclaimed aloud, "I remember now. We did leave it—and I never thought—Lucky, Lucky, wake up."

The man turned, and opened his eyes just as Ross struck another match and lighted the candle. He sat up. "What is it, Doc?"

"The letter," gasped Ross; "where did you leave the letter when we went up to the Horn?"

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MCKENZIES

"WHAT letter?" asked Lucky in a dazed voice.

He raised on one elbow and blinked sleepily at the flame of the candle that Ross had set on the table.

"The letter!" repeated Ross in a loud tone. "Your letter—Hans' letter. Did you leave it in your coat pocket?"

Lucky sat up still bewildered. "In my coat pocket," he repeated aimlessly, "beside the stove there. Can't ye find it? Who wants it?"

"See here, Lucky," cried Ross impatiently, "you wake up! I guess the McKenzies want it—and I believe they've got it, too!"

Lucky, thoroughly awake at last, came out of his bunk with a bound. "Doc, what's that ye're sayin' about that letter? I've been dreamin'——"

Ross held up the coat. "Did you leave Hans' letter in your pocket—the pocket of your coat?"

Lucky, catching up his shoes from force of habit, stood with them clutched in one hand. With the other he mechanically combed his roughened hair.

ROSS GRANT

"The letter—of course it's in my coat—there in the breast pocket, the inside pocket."

Ross tossed the coat to its owner. "Find it—if you can. I can't. I got up to hunt out that haunt and run on this coat. Pulled it off the peg and then happened to think ——"

He paused, watching Lucky. The latter had dropped his shoes as he caught the coat and, sitting on the edge of his bunk, was hastily going through the pockets, his teeth clinched and his lips drawn back in his absorption.

"It ain't here, Doc," he said in a hushed voice, finally. The coat fell from nerveless fingers to the floor. He passed both hands through his hair.

"The McKenzies have one on us, all right!" said Ross.

Lucky assented gloomily. "There can't be no two ways about that. While we was up there lookin' out fer Hans' claim, the McKenzies got Hans' letter, and, Doc, they fur better 'a' got the claim. How could I be s' headless as t' go off and leave my coat behind. Jest simple headless!" he reiterated in bitter self-condemnation.

"We were both too excited to think straight!" exclaimed Ross despondently. He sat down on the bench and, clasping his knees with his arms, looked inquiringly at Lucky. "But—ranting at ourselves won't bring that letter back," he added.

GOLD HUNTER

Lucky's lips straightened and tightened. He reached again for his shoes. "Nope—but travelin' will, 'r I'll never answer t' the name of 'Lucky' agin!"

"Traveling?"

"That's the word." Lucky laced his high mountain shoes hurriedly. There was an expression on his face which Ross had not seen there before, an expression of savage determination that boded no good for the McKenzies. "I'm goin' t' hike out right now and begin t' locate that letter!"

His rifle lay across two pegs driven between the logs above his bunk. He arose, and taking it down, stood it against the bunk.

Ross commenced to lace his own shoes. "I saw their camp-fire ——" he began.

"So did I," interrupted Lucky, "but don't ye keep on thinkin' that they're where that fire was. They've left there, bag 'n' baggage, since then. We'll go over and take a look at that camp, though, first thing. Sometimes an old camp tells a long yarn."

Ross, uneasily intent on the other's expression, bungled with his shoe lacings. "Sandy is no wiser with that letter than we are," he exclaimed suddenly. "Of course he can't read German script!"

Lucky paused and looked up. The ferocity

ROSS GRANT

died out of his face. He half smiled in relief. "Headless agin, Doc. I hadn't got 'round t' think of that! But I'm mighty glad there's two of us here and t'other one has brains."

Ross grinned. "I'm not guilty of many, but the few I have tells me that Sandy is going to feel like sixty when he finds he can't make head nor tail out of that letter!"

Lucky's expression of determination deepened. He spoke resolutely. "But we'll hike right along jest the same. I'll feel a heap sight better t' have the letter in my pocket than Sandy's. I never want t' take no chances on Sandy."

As they were leaving the shack, Ross thought of the Monkey.

"How about our engagement with the Pages?" he asked, pausing. "They were to come down here this morning——"

"Other engagements ain't of no account beside the pressin' one we've got with Sandy," retorted Lucky.

"But the Pages will wonder," insisted Ross, hanging back. "Suppose I leave a note."

Lucky unwillingly paused. "If ye can write it in one jerk of a mule's tail, all right," he consented.

With a pencil Ross scrawled on the margin of an old yellowed newspaper that lay among the

GOLD HUNTER

wood behind the stove, "The McKenzies are gone and we are trailing them—don't know where, nor when we'll be back."

This he nailed to the door jamb and then joined Lucky.

When the two set out, the sky over the eastern peaks was just giving promise of the dawn. The valley lay gray and unreal between huge black mountains. Out of the blue blackness of the heavens the stars were being blotted out one by one. The wind was still, but a chill more penetrating had succeeded it. The water on the trail had frozen. Man and boy passed like specters through this cold gray dim valley, the former stalking in advance on swift sure feet, the latter following unsteadily, stumbling in the uncertain light. Silently they followed the windings of the valley until Lucky halted abruptly and swerved to the right.

"No use goin' any further up here, Doc," he said, jerking his head to the left. "They hain't took our hosses ner unhobbled 'em. That's right good in Sandy!" His low voice was ironical.

Ross peered up the valley and saw three shapes among the sage-brush. One moved toward them, giving a low whinny.

From the valley Lucky struck the bridle trail

ROSS GRANT

which led to the cañon on the other side of Sheep's Horn. He walked slowly, his head bowed, scanning the trail sharply. As they mounted, objects became more clearly defined. The eastern sky brightened and the last star disappeared. At the summit, Lucky stopped and looked sharply over the valley.

"Doc, they didn't come over on this side," was his conclusion. "There ain't no traces of 'em on this trail, and if they got over here with their hosses they'd have t' come this way 'r else go up the cañon some five mile."

The other side of the mountain was wooded. Lucky moved cautiously among the trees, Ross following with equal care. The McKenzies might be within hearing, and it was Lucky's desire to "meet up" with them unexpectedly. At the foot of the mountain, instead of emerging into the narrow treeless cañon, he followed its upward windings under cover of the forest. Wordlessly the two advanced until they came to a broad open space where the grass had been tramped by horses' feet and the tops cropped. Here Lucky took to the open. Still speechless, however, he examined the grazing ground and then, crossing the cañon, began the ascent of a narrow trail which led to the cold embers of a camp-fire that Ross had seen the previous evening.

GOLD HUNTER

The refuse from the McKenzies' supper strewed the ground. There was a little pile of flour where the sack had stood. Two heaps of hemlock boughs marked the spot where they had intended to spend the night. On these signs of their recent presence Lucky spent not a moment. Rather, he made an immediate study of the soft loam on the slope below the embers. Ross watched alertly, but to him the marred earth told nothing further than that a horse had stood there not many hours before. To Lucky it told more.

"I guess," he said in a perplexed and muffled voice, "that our birds have got a longer wing than I'd reckoned on."

"Where have they gone?" asked Ross eagerly.

Lucky straightened himself and pointed downward. "Jedgin' from the signs here they've started on a long hike. Their hoss has braced itself hard against the cinch and pack rope, and if they was jest goin' t' change camps, they'd not be loadin' fer the trail. That's what I come up here t' see. I seen down there," waving a hand toward the cañon, "that three hosses had gone on up the cañon from the feedin' ground. This tells me what I aimed t' know." He turned and regarded Ross soberly. "I'm afraid, Doc, ye won't git started fer Elk's Pass with that letter to-day. They've got too many hours the start of us."

ROSS GRANT

"Are we going to follow?" asked Ross anxiously.

Lucky's response was prompt. "We're goin' t' foller, always pervidin' we can't git ahead!"

"Where do you think they've started for?" asked Ross wonderingly. "Why are they going away from Sheep's Horn and the claim?"

"I figure it out this way," answered Lucky as they started down the trail. "Sandy is smart. When he got holt of that letter and found he couldn't read it, he didn't think, as I did," ruefully, "that it was a mess of hen tracks. He must 'a' sized it up as a furrin lingo and hiked out t' find some one who could read it."

"You've hit the nail on the head," cried Ross excitedly. "I know you have. Who'll he go to?"

Lucky shook his head. "We'll saddle up and find out if we can," he answered significantly.

The sun was not yet up when, breakfast eaten and the packhorse loaded, the two rode over the mountain from the valley to the cañon and took up the trail of the McKenzies. In answer to Ross's excited urging that they start at once instead of returning to the shack and eating, Lucky had explained:

"Doc, we've got a long hard day's ride ahead of us. A hot snack and a hot drink won't come amiss

GOLD HUNTER

to start off on. We can keep our heads better that way, and, it seems," with a frown, "as if I needed somethin' t' help mine along—mebbe it's a new head that I'm needin'."

As they rode off, Lucky ahead, the packhorse next and Ross following, the latter regarded his leader wonderingly. There had not been one word from Lucky concerning his own delayed work, or the fact that he was trying to benefit an entire stranger, sick and helpless in the clutches of a strange land and a strange language. The only explanation for his conduct lay in the man's kind face and in the grateful statement he had made to Ross the first day of their meeting concerning the elder Holzworth: "Fred done me many a good turn afore he died."

Hour after hour the three bronchos followed slowly and patiently on the trail of the other three which had gone six or eight hours before. The McKenzies had evidently gone to the head of the cañon in the darkness and had camped there until dawn. About the time their trailers had started from the cabin, they had commenced the difficult ascent of a mountain to the southwest of the cañon.

On their camping ground Lucky called a halt, curbing Ross's impatience to follow at once. "We'll feed man and beast here," said Lucky

ROSS GRANT

firmly. "Both will then be more fitten to the task. We've gained on 'em, as it is. We've made two hours since we started."

He spoke cheerfully, but Ross saw that he was puzzled. He let the bacon burn, standing over it with his gaze glued to the skillet; and, when the mid-morning meal was ready, he ate but little.

"Lucky," said Ross finally with quiet insistence, "you may as well tell me what it is."

Lucky put down the tin cup out of which he had been drinking. He met the boy's eyes honestly. "Doc, I'd tell ye in a minit if I knew what t' tell."

"You're puzzled, then, as to where the McKenzies are heading for?"

"As puzzled as I ever was in my life. They're takin' us t' nowhere and int' No Man's Land. By sundown we'll be in the Teton Forest Reserve. D'ye see that here the mount'ins ain't staked? We're outside the gold lands here, and, s' far as I know, no one's workin' hereabouts."

Ross finished the scorched bacon with a hunger that suspense could not blunt. "Are you guessing about it?" he asked.

Lucky shook his head. "I guessed hard up to here. Now I've stopped. I knew if they started up the cañon they'd have t' come this fur. Here I expected 'em t' go northeast, a-headin' fer some

GOLD HUNTER

place that holds men. But t' keep on toward the Reserve ——" Lucky arose abruptly. "There's only one thing t' do—foller."

He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the boy. A smile lighted his face. "But I'll tell ye now, Doc, there's one hope ahead."

"What's that?" asked Ross eagerly. "Where's that hope?"

"Wait," parried Lucky, "till we come t' the partin' of the trails in the Valley of the Forks, and that'll tell which 'ill come out ahead, them or us."

Ross waited impatiently.

Half an hour later they crossed a creek with sandy banks, and, stopping, watered their horses and drank themselves. As Lucky was mounting again, his glance fell on the soft dirt the other side of the creek. "Huh!" he ejaculated, crossing over.

"What's up?" asked Ross, following.

Lucky pointed to an impression in the sand. "Nothin's up, but a hoss has been down."

"Looks as if it had taken a roll after it drank."

"Jest so," answered Lucky. He made no immediate explanation, but continued to study the sand. "Looks t' me," he said finally, "like they have a sick hoss on their hands. That's the only way I can explain it, fer there's no camp here."

ROSS GRANT

"Sorry for the horse," Ross responded, "but that would mean we may overhaul them soon. Perhaps that's the reason we've gained on 'em so fast," hopefully.

"Likely," assented Lucky, mounting.

They pushed on faster, but did not overhaul the McKenzies, nor did they see any further signs of a sick horse. At last, as they came to the foot of a wooded mountain, Lucky drew rein and breathed the horses a while.

"Doc," he said quietly, "on the other side is the Valley of the Forks."

That was all, but Ross felt his suppressed agitation, a rising anticipation that the end of their journey was in sight. But he said nothing further, and Ross forebore to ask questions. Presently they rode on, climbing the narrow trail over the mountain up into the very face of the sun that shone so hotly now that the boy took off his coat and laid it across the pommel.

At the summit of the mountain Lucky halted on a rocky platform which formed a lofty outlook over the valley beyond. The man motioned with his hand, his glance darting hastily here and there.

"The Valley of the Forks," he said briefly.

They were facing a valley bordered by two parallel ranges of mountains. A quarter of a

GOLD HUNTER

mile from the foot of their outlook the valley was cut in two by a row of hills which arose rapidly into mountains, constituting a middle range on either side of which the divided valley forked out into two gorges.

"Will ye stay here with the hosses, Doc, while I foot it down and spy out the land? I don't want hoof of any horse but theirs t' show down there yet."

Ross assented, and Lucky disappeared among the trees which covered that side of the mountain. "If I wave my hat at ye," was his parting direction, "it means, 'Come on.' If I don't, it means I'm comin' back." Then he halted, and threw over his shoulder the additional information: "If they've gone up the left fork, it'll mean that Sandy hain't heard from that trail since last winter, and I have!"

Soon Ross, watching from the rocks, saw Lucky below, a mere miniature man making his way across the valley. Skirting the hill on the right, he was soon hidden by a bend in the valley. Beyond the bend a hemlock forest crept down from the towering mountains, spread out across the fork of the valley, and climbed the hills.

It was half an hour before Lucky came into sight again. Ross leaned forward with tense muscles, watching for the "Come-on" signal;

ROSS GRANT

but the other did not give it. He crossed the open valley, and disappeared among the trees at the foot of the lookout. Long afterward Ross heard him coming back.

"Well?" questioned Ross the moment his head appeared above the rocks.

But Lucky's face answered the query before his voice did. His face glowed triumphantly, and his deep-set eyes twinkled.

"They took the left hand trail," he announced jocularly, "which is the wrong one fer 'em on this hike!" Taking off his sombrero, he ran his fingers through his thick hair. His tone rang triumphantly as he added, "Doc, we've got 'em in a trap."

After a moment's rest he explained: "Ye see, these hills don't stay hills very long. They stretch up to mount'ins without any trail acrost 'em, and they crowd the valley on each side till all that's left is two cañons jest wide enough to squeeze through. That is, the right one is wide enough; but the left one pinches out. It comes to an end with a mount'in like Sheep's Horn acrost it. The McKenzies are aimin' t' git over that moun-t'in as they've done before, but they can't. Last winter there come a snowslide and a landslide, and there ain't never a sign of a trail left. They couldn't 'a' heard about it, and so took the left

GOLD HUNTER

fork because that used t' be the easiest way. Now the only thing fer 'em to do is t' come back and go up the right fork."

"Then," cried Ross eagerly, "all we've got to do is to go down into the valley and wait for them."

Lucky shook his head. "That would do all right if we knew where they'd cross over from the left cañon t' the right. But we don't know. They won't have t' come 'way back here. They can git acrost most anywheres among the hills fer three miles up. And if they should happen t' come in behind our tracks—why, we'd never see hide ner hair of 'em. They'd hike back rather than risk overhaulin' us. Sandy never takes no risks on his precious self," with a shrug of the shoulders. "No, we've got t' lead the hosses over the right range here, and travel a hard trail runnin' neck and neck with the right fork, and then foot it over the range, and head 'em off sudden like."

Lucky pointed to the range of peaks bordering the right fork of the valley, where they immediately made their way. On the other side they traveled a difficult and winding trail. Before they had journeyed half an hour Ross was confused. "I don't know which side of the range we're on, nor where to look for the McKenzies," he explained ruefully as they sat down to eat supper beside a

ROSS GRANT

little stream which ran among the hemlocks. "We've doubled and twisted until my head is turned."

Lucky smiled and pointed. "Over there's the range that's between us and them. We're takin' a short cut to where we can cross over. In an hour we'll be on the other side a-waitin' fer 'em."

Ross began to eat hurriedly. "They may be passing that point now, and we're not there to head them off!"

Lucky helped himself leisurely to the crackers and canned dried beef that they had brought along. "Doc, don't go and choke yerself. They can't be there yet. We won't miss 'em. Go easy on this beef. Wish we could fire up," gazing longingly at the coffee-pot lying useless beside their meager supplies.

"Would they be apt to see the smoke?" asked Ross.

"Might," assented Lucky. "Don't never take no chances with a fire if ye don't want t' be seen," he advised. "Ye see the air up here in the mount'ins is so powerful clear that a smoke might give ye away for a matter of ten miles off. Ye never can tell. After dark it's safe enough per-vidin' the flame can't be seen. After dark to-night—and mebbe before, we'll fill up on coffee and have some ham and soup!"

GOLD HUNTER

"That sounds good," exclaimed Ross. "I almost wish it were dark now! Wouldn't Aunt Anne laugh if she could see me eat here—and see what I eat," with a chuckle. "Aunt Anne is my uncle's wife," he explained, "the one I've lived with since I was twelve. She's a crackerjack of a cook!" enthusiastically. "Why, Lucky, if we should sit down to a meal of her cooking up here in the mountains, we—why, we'd eat till we about burst!"

"Don't doubt it. But I've found, Doc, that the best appetite don't always travel the same trail with the richest vittles or the best cook. I was up in the Big Horn once with a Sissy from Massachusetts. He was ailin' and his pa had spent a fortin 'r two on his stomick—tryin' t' git it t' hike along on schedule time, which it wouldn't never do, and finally Sissy got dumped off on me one summer. I was in jest such a camp 'n' shack as we live in down t' the Pass now. Wall, first day Sissy knew he'd die of a stomick spell when I set good honest flapjacks and bacon and coffee before 'im. Said it had been years sense he'd eat any part of a hog, and as fer 'pancakes,' as he called 'em, they wa'n't never fitten fer a hog t' eat! And the coffee was more like stiff mud, he said, and the tin can goods was all filled with tomato poisonin' or somethin' that sounded like that! My! Didn't he throw

ROSS GRANT

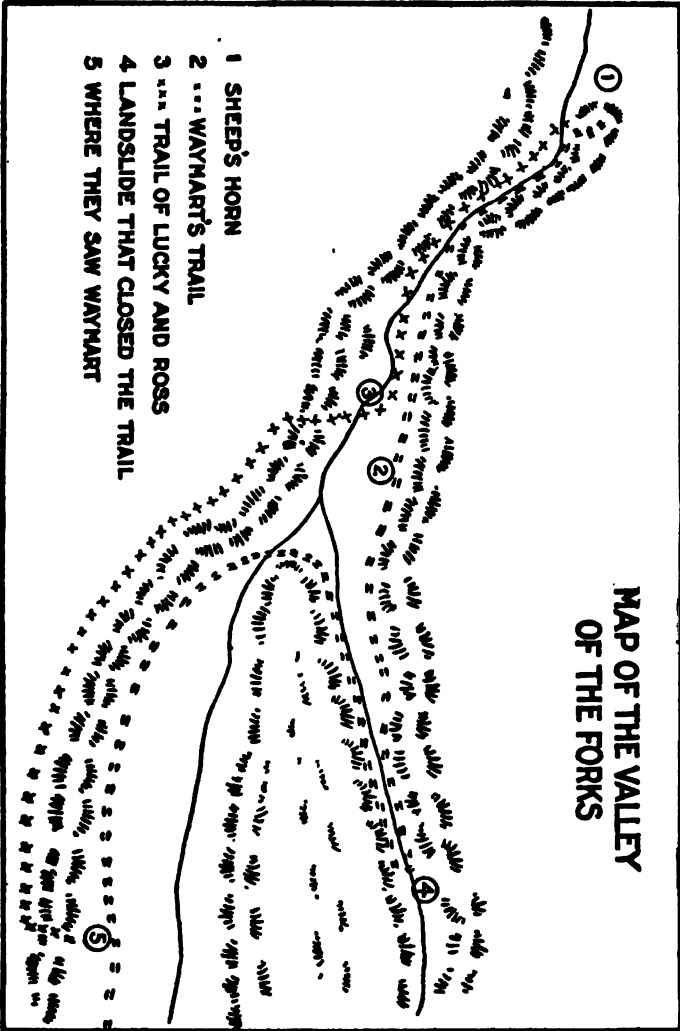
fits—and give some t' me! But there he was by orders of his doctor, and no baby food pervided either. That doctor had sound hoss sense, and the second day, Sissy, he braced up and tasted things, and was surprised t' find he didn't die—jest got doubled up with a cramp 'r two that he got over. Wall, the third day the poor chap was that hungry that his mouth watered at the smell of bacon and flapjacks, and he begun t' eat. Nation! How that feller did eat! He made up fer years of starvation in about two weeks, and I run out o' grub and had t' send him down t' Cody ——”

Here Lucky interrupted his story. “It's no time now, Doc, t' hit Sissy's trail. That's a long story. Hand over the rest of that beef, will ye? Here, fill yer pockets with these crackers and let's be goin'.”

Half an hour later Lucky drew rein at the foot of the range, and dismounted. “Here's where we'll picket the hosses and foot it across,” he explained with a preoccupied air.

The sun had left the valleys, and was gilding the peaks and painting the sky in glorious reds and yellows. The clear, sharp air went far toward robbing Ross of the weariness which succeeds a day in the saddle; and excitement finished the task the air began. He mounted with Lucky shoulder to shoulder. He hoped that from the summit he

GOLD HUNTER



ROSS GRANT

could command a view of the cañon and the approaching McKenzies; but both sides of the peak were wooded, affording no outlook save glimpses of a looming peak on the other side of the cañon, and so near that it seemed to Ross the branches of the trees on the steep, sloping sides must interlock.

The cañon, like dozens of its neighbors among the Shoshones, was a winding gorge just wide enough for the passage of a stream and a trail that crossed and recrossed the creek in order to gain a slender foothold against the faces of the mountains.

"They hain't passed," Lucky announced after a brief scrutiny of the trail. "We'll wait fer 'em here. They'll likely try t' make camp about five mile above here, where there's an old shack."

They selected a rock hard by the trail, and sat down behind it to wait. Through a cluster of sage-brush they could see the trail a few rods each way. A huge boulder pushed it almost into the creek on the side from which the McKenzies must come. Another boulder hung above their heads, projecting far over the path. They were mere pygmies in the midst of a mighty upheaval of old Mother Earth.

Leaning back against a flat stone, and stretching out his feet with a dawning realization that he was tired, Ross began straining his ears and eyes

GOLD HUNTER

for signs of the oncoming travelers. But, seeing Lucky lie back restfully, his hat beside him, his hands pillowing his head, his long legs extended, with the rifle beside him, the boy drew a long breath, and relaxed his taut muscles.

"They likely won't be along yet fer an hour," Lucky volunteered; but he spoke in a muffled undertone. "Best not depend on their bein' a great ways off, though," he added.

Ross, his hat drawn over his eyes, lay looking up at the sunset glow in the deep blue sky arched over the narrow cañon. The summits of the peaks were clad in snow, splashed now with brilliant colors. With the sunshine still touching the peaks, the shadows of night began to fall in the narrow cañon. "Maybe they went back instead of coming over to the right fork," Ross suggested.

"No, they'd expect t' meet up with us. They must know they left a mighty plain trail. Ye see they probably reasoned that they had s' many hours the start they didn't need t' use any caution, and so never covered their trail. No," decidedly; "they're bound t' come this way."

A squirrel ran down the tree trunk in front of Ross, and leaped to the rock fearlessly. It was probably the first time the little creature had seen a man, and it felt no fear. Ross watched it a moment in silence. Then :

ROSS GRANT

"Lucky, I've been thinking how helpless we are, in the eyes of the law, without that letter."

Lucky, who had arisen on his elbow, facing the down trail, did not turn his head. "You've been a-thinkin' about right," he responded dryly.

"Suppose," pursued Ross, following his own thoughts, "Sandy should find that cache. We couldn't swear that it was the same free gold that Holzworth hid, because we have never read the letter. Hans has read it; but, if he couldn't produce it and had no witnesses, what would his word be worth?"

"Nothin'," whispered Lucky. He turned slowly, and looked earnestly at Ross. "But, Doc, what I done I done fer the best, and s' far as my head went it seemed a good thing; but my head—sh!"

Ross had not heard a sound; but Lucky noiselessly came to his feet, gun in hand, and, crouching behind the sage-brush, obscure in its shadows, watched the boulder around which the trail wound. Ross, his heart beating to the point of suffocation, but his head clear, got on his knees and waited, knowing that his part in this justifiable hold-up would be to get the letter while Lucky covered the riders with his gun.

And now he too heard sounds, the steady approaching hoof beats, the clatter of stones, the noise of oncoming horses. Louder and louder

GOLD HUNTER

grew the noise, echoing back from the walls of the cañon. Lucky crouched lower, but Ross, even in his excitement, noticed that the man's right arm was motionless and his hand perfectly steady. Around the boulder came the first horse. It was ridden by Waymart, half dozing, his chin resting on his chest. The tail of his horse was knotted to a leading-rope; and, as the second animal came in sight, they saw it was the packhorse, with the rope about its neck.

Then Ross saw Lucky give a convulsive start, saw his arm relax and the gun fall to his side. For attached to the packhorse's tail was another leading-rope; and at its end was Sandy's horse, saddleless and riderless, swinging easily along, snatching at rare bits of grass beside the trail or pulling back on his rope, unaccustomed to being led.

Sandy, the brains of the McKenzie outfit, was not with his brother, nor had he been since the latter started from Sheep's Horn!

CHAPTER XV

THE LETTER

Ross, kneeling, watched Lucky. Lucky, after the first convulsive start, made no motion. He still crouched, his gaze fastened on the nodding rider, his gun clutched at his side. The three horses, taking their own gait, guided only by the turns in the trail, filed past the screening rock, clattered up the cañon, and passed out of sight. Not until the last beat of their hoofs gave place to silence did man or boy alter his position. Then Lucky arose stiffly. Ross arose also, looking expectantly at the other.

"Wall, Doc," said Lucky finally, "Sandy's ahead. He has beat us and got twenty-four hours start, and will have forty-eight before we git back. If I had a head like Sandy ——"

"You wouldn't be putting it to the use Sandy does," interrupted Ross forcefully.

Lucky paid no attention to the praise implied. He leaned against the rock staring up the trail. "Doc," he reiterated, "I done the best fer Hans I knew how when I got that letter. I hadn't reckoned on no such thing as this."

GOLD HUNTER

"No," returned Ross, hot with self-condemnation, "and you wouldn't have to reckon with it now if I hadn't been such a fool as to follow you to Sheep's Horn. I have myself to blame for all this business. The McKenzies might have been sitting on Elk Mountain now watching and cooling their heels if I had minded my own business."

Lucky met the boy's eyes with a glance in which were blended affection and admiration. "Doc, when ye come ye was doin' what ye thought was best, wa'n't ye?"

"Yes, I was," gratefully.

"Wall, ye couldn't 'a' done better, then. And now, as I make it, the only way is t' keep on doin' what we think is best. I don't know no other way t' do."

"And that is—what?" asked Ross.

"Let's eat on that question," evaded Lucky, "and think on it."

There was no question in the mind of either as to which brother had the letter. Sandy had planned the ruse skilfully, although its success was costing him a long and unaccustomed foot journey. He knew that Lucky would look for the trail of three horses, and it would not do to leave the trail of two only, therefore he had sent Waymart with the three in the direction where the trail would be most apparent.

ROSS GRANT

"Sick hoss!" Lucky broke out disgustedly as the two climbed the mountain on the way to their own horses. "That last leadin' rope was long enough t' let Sandy's roll all over the bank of the crick. I couldn't see int' it—a hoss rollin' on the trail before the riders made camp." Then again dejectedly, "If I had the head that's on Sandy——"

"I'm mighty glad you haven't his heart!" Ross broke in quickly. Privately, he considered Lucky's head as good as Sandy's where the odds were the same. At present Lucky was working under difficulties into which he, Ross, had plunged him.

"And I wish," thought the boy, "that I could find the way out."

In silence they found their horses and began the return journey, Ross riding behind Lucky. The boy was forcibly reminded of the ride up the cañon of the South Fork when Lucky had ridden as now, with head bent forward in deep perplexity.

"Back home I never imagined so many things happening in six months as have come tumbling into the last few days," thought Ross, "and everything hasn't happened yet!"

"Lucky," he called finally, "where do you think Sandy will go to have that letter read?"

"Wall," answered Lucky slowly, "there's Dutch Weimer over t' Medder Creek."

GOLD HUNTER

"But he's too snow-blind to read," objected Ross.

"That's so," Lucky assented. "Well, there's Daisy Breitmann down on the U Ranch. I don't know nothin' about 'im, only that he's a Dutchman, and mebbe could read the letter."

A couple of hours later Lucky drew rein, and, finding a sheltered spot, built a fire. "We're two ranges away from Mart," he explained. "Guess our smoke won't give us away, and mebbe it wouldn't do no harm now if it should," he added rather despondently.

Presently they were eating in a sheltered nook under the edge of a boulder at the foot of a mountain. Before them was a bed of live coals on which stood the coffee-pot and a skillet. A few rods away their horses were picketed in the midst of a plot of tall grass. At the left, with a gentle tinkle and murmur, a tiny waterfall slid down into the valley.

Pouring a generous offering of coffee into a tin cup, Lucky handed it to Ross, asking, "Wall, Doc, have ye roped an idee yet?"

"Just one," returned Ross promptly. "It's the one I tried to work at first and it wouldn't work then because Hans was so sick, but now it may be I could work it. I'll try again, if you can't think of anything better."

ROSS GRANT

"My head's as empty as a drum. What ye got on yer mind?"

Ross drank his coffee slowly, and spoke more to himself than to Lucky. "He hasn't any temperature now, and so I could keep at it until I made him understand. Besides, I practiced some talking with him after you left."

"Who—Hans?" asked Lucky.

"Yes, Hans. And now I have something definite to tell him. I can use the indicative mood and let the subjunctive go to grass—where it naturally does go when I try to handle it in German!"

Lucky scratched his head. "Doc, don't talk t' me about no moods, but tell me what ye aim t' do."

Ross drained his tin cup of the muddy coffee and shook the last drops out on the grass. "Well, why not send me back to Hans as fast as I can go, while you go back and stay on the job at the Horn—and get Dad and Nick on it too? I'll hurry as fast as I can and sit down in front of Hans and tell him a few things that I couldn't tell him before—that is, your guesswork is history now, and I can put the thing boldly. I can tell him positively now that Sandy is a rascal and has possession of his precious letter—stole it. I can tell him positively that you are searching for the

GOLD HUNTER

cache and intend to hold it down for him—Hans. I can tell him that it's up to him to tell you, or me rather, where the cache is so that you can get ahead of Sandy. No guesswork about those statements, and so I won't be obliged to hedge and get in such deep water in the German language that I can't get out again. Then, too, I stand a better chance of making him understand now because I can keep at it. He's well enough now to stand a little excitement without going off his head and getting feverish. I'll *make* him understand. Then I'll do my best to beat Sandy back here. What do you think?"

Lucky pondered. "S' long as Sandy is afoot, there's a chance that ye could. Yes, it seems the best way—because I can't think of no better. But strikes me there'll be a few breakers ahead ready t' bust on ye. Don't Hans think the real letter is in his hands? Didn't ye say he kept it out tryin' t' see it most of the time? How'll ye make 'im understand that that ain't——"

"I've got to take a chance on the whole thing, Lucky," interrupted Ross. "But it's the best chance I can think of."

"Try it, Doc, try it!" Lucky urged. "It may help out." His tone did not, however, have the hopeful ring Ross was counting on. "Let's see, we can start back at daylight, but it'll take till noon

ROSS GRANT

t' set ye on the way t' the Pass. Ye can't make it before the next noon and Sandy has had sence dark last night—still, he's afoot. But I want ye t' try it, Doc. I'll git ye started off right at the head of the cañon above the Horn, and then I'll hike back t' the Horn and watch out."

After a moment's silence Lucky spoke again. "There's one thing, Doc, that might be in our favor. Ye see, Sandy don't have no need t' hurry. If it hadn't 'a' been fer the blockade on the left fork, we would 'a' follered Waymart fer—wall, I ain't reckonin' on how long."

At twelve o'clock the day following the trails of the two parted, Lucky following the sinuous windings of the cañon which led to Sheep's Horn, and Ross, with a fresh assortment of notes descriptive of the way, turned to the left en route for the Valley of the Willows, where he intended to camp for the night. He went forward confidently, for Lucky, mindful of Tod's blunder, had laid out the way carefully, and Ross's faith in Lucky was strong.

His faith, however, was no stronger than his liking, and there was one side in the many-sided affair which had just begun to impress him as he rode alone through the rustling forests of pine and hemlock. It was the effect on Lucky's reputation. How would the matter look to the men of Big

GOLD HUNTER

Horn County when told baldly, fact for fact, with the fine shading of Lucky's generous motives left out or ignored? It was one thing for him to be able to vindicate his motives by turning the cache of free gold safely and triumphantly over to Hans, and it was another thing to say that he had intended to turn it over. As things stood now, Lucky would show up as a traitor toward Hans. He would appear to have attempted to rob the man for whose benefit he was in reality robbing himself of time and strength. One phase of the matter, however, comforted Ross, and that was the fact that Lucky had taken Dad and Nicholas into his confidence. They had seen the letter and they believed in Lucky's good intentions, but Dad and Nicholas were only two out of the many whose opinion Lucky would be obliged to face.

Ross groaned aloud. "I'd give a good deal," he muttered as he approached the mountain on whose further side lay the willows, "to be able to get him out of this fix. He's white not to say that I got him into it, but I did, just the same!"

At the summit of the trail he paused to breathe his horse and look about him. Profiting by his recent experience, he had been keenly observant of his surroundings and direction since parting from Lucky, having in mind the necessity for a speedy and sure return. Leaving his horse with

ROSS GRANT

the bridle reins trailing, he climbed to a point on the summit from which the valley could be seen through a wide lane among the trees cut by the yearly snowslides.

"This begins to look familiar," he said with satisfaction as his gaze swept the willow filled valley. "I won't need any notes on the way back."

It was late. The sun had set and the twilight was fast falling on the valley. In half an hour darkness would follow, and he needed that half hour for the trail down the side of the mountain. Drawing his watch from his pocket he whistled with surprise at the story it told. It was nearly nine o'clock.

"We're so near the sun up here in this altitude," he thought whimsically, "that the light stays longer—but not the heat," he added as he slipped on the ice that a slight depression in the loam held.

He had turned to hurry back to his horse when a faint odor reached his nostrils, an odor that startled him.

"Smoke," he muttered aloud, sniffing. It drifted to him from the left at the edge of the valley out of sight. He turned his face toward the rising breeze. The odor became pronounced.

"Forest fire!" he exclaimed. "It mustn't catch me up here."

GOLD HUNTER

Hurrying back to his horse he mounted and urged the animal down the darkening trail, keeping his face turned to the left. Occasionally only, however, did the smoke reach him, and in a lessening volume. Nor did he see any flame. The trail debouched into the valley at the right and as Ross emerged from the timber his horse became suddenly galvanized into life. It raised its head with a snort and its rider felt a ripple pass over the muscles beneath his legs. At once the boy jumped to the conclusion that his mount had scented a bear. Raising Trigger's gun he leaned forward and peered over the horse's head, but a moment's ride through the willows toward the stream brought him on a sight more astonishing than a bear. Heaped carelessly together beside the stream was a pile of wooden pack saddles and pack ropes, but no packs. At that moment his horse shied and nearly ran over the saddles in its efforts to avoid a dark heap of objects on the other side of the trail under the willows.

Ross dismounted and, stooping, picked an object from the heap and held it up in the fading light. It was a stout new gunny bag. He stirred the heap with his foot. It consisted only of empty bags. Going to the other side of the trail he counted the saddles. There were ten of wood and two of leather. As he finished counting a crash

ROSS GRANT

through the underbrush startled him. A rough coated broncho appeared, its fore legs bound by the hobble strap. Another horse followed, and another.

For a long moment Ross stood motionless. Then, in a flash, the presence of the horses and empty pack saddles and the bags took on a new significance.

"It can't be!" he muttered, startled. "Not this quickly. He hasn't had time to get anywhere and back again."

But, despite this self-assurance, his heart beat suffocatingly as he watered his own horse and then led it back to the cover of the trees. Here he tied it, and going a little higher on the mountainside, crept along stealthily in the direction of the smoke. As he approached the left side of the valley the smoke began to drift into his face, and he could see a cheerful flame curling among a pile of sage-brush. Coming nearer he walked more cautiously, stopping occasionally to listen. When he came within sound of voices he edged further down among the willows, dodging from one cluster to another until he had made his way to a clump within a few yards of the fire. There he halted and awaited a chance to see the speakers. But before seeing them he heard them, and it was Sandy's voice unmistakably that said:

GOLD HUNTER

"If ever I was ready to turn in, it's right this minute. I don't believe I could foot it another mile with a gun p'inted at my head."

This speech was greeted by a laugh, a short wheezy laugh and answered by a deep wheezy voice in an unmistakable German accent. "I tink you never valked so far, maybe. You vest-erners are on the back of a horse alvay."

"Ye bet we be!" Sandy returned.

He threw his blanket over his shoulders and sat down beside the blaze. Ross pushed forward a step and saw him plunge his hand into a pocket and bring out the sheet of paper, unfold it and hold it so that the light shone on it brightly. The boy leaned forward so far that he nearly lost his balance. He caught hastily at the stout stem of a quaking asp bush. The twigs rustled and swayed, and the German turned sharply toward the disturbance.

"Vat's dot?" he asked.

Sandy looked keenly over his shoulder. Ross stood motionless, holding his breath. At that moment the underbrush on the further side of the fire was rudely parted and a hobbled horse made its way slowly toward the stream. The animal seemed to answer the stranger's question, for he sat down beside Sandy with no further comment, while the latter turned his attention to the letter. Ross

ROSS GRANT

took care to plant his feet more solidly and grasp the sapling firmly before leaning forward again.

"How ist it," asked the German curiously, "dot you haf dot letter?"

Sandy pushed his sombrero back comfortably on his head and answered quickly: "Oh, yes, I told ye I'd explain things when I got time, didn't I?"

"Ja," affirmed the German, throwing fresh fuel on the fire. "Dot you said."

"Wall, Breitmann, it's like this." Suddenly he hesitated and then asked cautiously, "But see there! Nick Page was down t' the Lazy Y the other day. Didn't he tell ye nothin'?"

"Ach! Dot monkey!" the other returned. "Nein, I see him nicht."

Sandy lay back restfully, his head pillowed on the crown of the sombrero. He had a clear field for his invention.

"Ye see, Breitmann, this man Fred Holzworth was a pard of mine. Savvy that?"

"Vat?" asked the other in a bewildered tone.

"Savvy," repeated Sandy. "D'ye ketch on—that — Oh, th' nation! D'ye know what I'm sayin'? Fred and me was—was pardners."

"The liar!" said Ross indignantly to himself.

"Ach, ja!" exclaimed Breitmann. "Fred vas like ein brudder? Ja."

"That's the stuff," approved Sandy. "Say!

GOLD HUNTER

Seein' ye're up and I'm down and jest about out—sail a few more sticks onto that blaze, will ye?"

His gestures eked out his meaning, and Breitmann mended the fire again.

"Wall," Sandy went on sleepily, cracking the paper he still held, "after this here Fred had cashed in—savvy? about t' pass in his checks, that means—Lucky Frace was with 'im and must have got a-holt of the idee that's in this letter. So when Hans struck the trail up t' the Pass and got hurt there what does this Lucky up and do but take the letter and hike out t' find Fred's cache and steal it. And then what does me and Mart do but trail 'im over t' the Horn and rope in this letter and leave 'im in the dark about it."

The German moved uneasily, staring attentively at Sandy, his face bearing a bewildered expression.

"It's about as clear 's mud t' ye, ain't it?" the latter asked.

Breitmann shook his head in perplexity. "Dere is one Lucky Frace a tief?"

"Right. Draw again."

"Vat?"

"Oh, shucks!" sighed Sandy. "When be ye goin' t' git hold of a little good English? Ye make my throat ache tryin' t' suit my lingo t' ye. I mean—well, never mind what I mean. I'm goin' t' dodge Lucky Frace and keep 'im from

ROSS GRANT

runnin' off with Hans' gold, that's what I'm goin' t' do, Breitmann."

"How you do dot?"

Ross stretched his neck and listened until his ears rang.

Sandy hummed a little tune. "Oh, I'm goin' t' pack that ore t' a new cache where it won't git mixed up with Lucky Frace agin. Then, when Hans is all t' the good I'm goin' t' turn that cache over t' 'im, of course, neck and heels!"

"Yes," thought Ross sarcastically, "of course you will!"

"'Neck and heels,'" repeated Breitmann wonderingly.

Sandy sat up and fanned himself vigorously with the letter. "Oh, the nation! Ye brought yer head along, Breitmann, but ye left yer understandin' behind! Here—never mind. Freeze t' this letter and read it t' me agin."

Ross again nearly lost his balance in his excitement. Was it possible that such good fortune was to be his? Was he going to get hold of the location of the cache without going on to Hans? He would start back that night, he decided, and travel as long as his mount could pick out the trail. He would beat Sandy back to the Horn and the free gold. For once Sandy would be foiled and he, Ross, who had a heavy score to settle with Sandy,

GOLD HUNTER

would have settled it. He bent forward and listened with all his might.

The two before the fire sat with their backs toward him. He had been able to hear perfectly before this, because Sandy, under the impression that Breitmann could be made to understand if he were yelled at, had raised his voice while his companion had unconsciously matched his voice in pitch. But now Breitmann, leaning toward the fire, and reading slowly, hesitating as he translated the lines into such English as he could command, lowered his voice to its natural key, so that Ross, to his dismay, found himself catching only an occasional word or phrase.

"Dear Brudder," he heard, "die in short time—leave ein little mit you—map of path in oder side—dree, four tousand dollar—hide in—in—in—in——" here the reader hesitated.

Ross held his breath. "One word," he thought, "and I have it."

"In—in," Breitmann repeated. "Dot vord in English ——"

He hesitated and turned his head toward Sandy. Ross's heart pounded the blood through his ears until it fairly deafened him. He held his breath and stepped forward carefully into the open in his efforts to hear what Sandy would supply.

But Sandy remained silent. He sat up and

ROSS GRANT

clasped his hands around his knees and stared into the fire until aroused by his companion's repetition of "Dot vord in English?" Then he shook himself impatiently. "Yes, yes, I know where it is. Go on!"

But before Breitmann could continue, Sandy exclaimed abstractedly, "Whatever possessed the man to cache it there?"

The other lowered the letter. "Vy not?"

Sandy drew the blanket around his shoulders, and repeated, "Why not? Why because——" He stopped and added vaguely, "Oh—because—you'll find out to-morrow—nothing. Go on with the letter."

Ross's heart sank and he caught his breath gaspingly. The point was passed over and he had lost it! Breitmann went on reading, but the boy did not catch a word until the last paragraph was reached, and then he understood only the one word that he already had seen there and recognized—the name of Dad Page.

"Huh!" commented Sandy. "Owes Dad a thousand, does he? Wall, they's such a thing as keepin' on owin'!" with a chuckle. "I hain't hikin' over the country handin' out plunks to——"

"Plunks," repeated the other wonderingly. "Vas ist?"

GOLD HUNTER

Sandy groaned. "Man, can't you take in a darned thing that's said in plain English? What should plunks be but jest—wall, *plunks!* Mebbe you've heard 'em called dollars. If so, well and good. Call 'em what ye like, but let me git a snooze ready fer th' day's liftin' to-morrer. I'm afraid, though, after my long foot-hike, that come mornin' ye'll have t' go after a derrick and hist me t' the hoss's back."

Sandy tossed his hat one side and rolled himself up in his blanket with his feet to the fire. "Chuck on more wood, Breitmann, and turn in."

After the German had fed the fire and rolled himself up in his blanket, Sandy raised his head and regarded his companion with a grin. "I say, Breitmann, don't let my generosity with this here Hans keep ye awake o' nights. I'm s' full of what some fool feller called the 'milk o' kindness' that it jest naturally oozes out o' my pores. Ask any one in Big Horn County, Breitmann, and they'll tell ye the same yarn!"

With another chuckle, Sandy rolled over adding comfortably, "Now rope yer snores and be up by daylight."

"By all that," thought Ross, "it's evident that this Breitmann is a stranger here, or he'd know all about Sandy's 'milk of human kindness' to begin with—and call it by its right name—vinegar!"

ROSS GRANT

Quietly the boy waited until the two figures beside the fire lay motionless, and the silence of the camp was broken only by the snapping of the flames and the restless movements of the horses the other side of the valley. Then he slowly made his way back to his own horse, his thoughts in a turmoil. It was clear that Sandy had made a forced journey to the valley, gathered up those packhorses, and with Breitmann to help with the work, come back hotfooted to carry away the ore, believing that Lucky and Ross were still trailing Waymart, as they would have been doing but for the fortunate incident of the landslide.

"There's no mistaking the object of all those bags and packhorses," muttered Ross when he reached his own horse again.

Here he stood irresolute. What should he do? Where should he spend the night? Should he go back to Lucky or go on? If he went on Sandy and Breitmann would reach the Horn far in advance. If he went back still ignorant of the cache, of what service could he be? He would tell Lucky what he had overheard and—here Ross shook his head as he recalled Lucky's expression in the cabin before they set out after the McKenzies, and Lucky had taken down his gun. Ross did not like to think of the possible results of telling Lucky what he had overheard. Besides, Sandy had outwitted

GOLD HUNTER

them before—why not again, despite either force or vigilance, since they were ignorant of what he knew, namely, the location of the ore.

No, he decided, it would be best for him to push on to the Pass and leave Sandy and Breitmann to journey first to the Horn. Dad and Nicholas would be with Lucky, who would be looking for Sandy's return, although not so soon as the morrow.

"But twelve horses and two men can't be pounding around in the neighborhood of Sheep's Horn and Nick not hear 'em," was Ross's conclusion.

A sound suddenly interrupted the boy's thoughts. It came from the trail high up the mountainside, and was so faint that only the stillness of the early night betrayed it. The coyotes had not begun their concert yet, and the wind had died away. Ross, imitative of the Monkey, lay down and pressed his ear to the ground. At once the sound resolved itself into the hoof beats of an advancing horse. Instantly he was on his feet again. Leading his own pony back further among the bushes he tied it to a tree, and then hurried up the trail to meet the horseman, under the strong impression that he was on his way to meet Lucky. It was not until the outlines of the approaching horse showed dimly through the deep twilight that he thought of Waymart. This valley might be the place appointed by Sandy for a meeting. The

ROSS GRANT

thought caused Ross to jump hastily aside and seek the shelter of a dense sage-brush close beside the trail. Crouching low, he parted the branches and peered out in a vain attempt to see the rider before the horse came abreast of the bush. The animal came on slowly, sliding down the steep trail or picking its way carefully among the stones.

Not until its head was almost against the sage-brush did Ross recognize the rider. He leaped out instantly, saying in a low but joyful tone :

“Sh, Nick, don't speak loud! Tell you what, I'm about as glad to see you as I ever was to see any one!”

CHAPTER XVI

“CAPTAIN HEAD-ON-YOU”

THE spotted pony, bunching its feet together to overcome its downward momentum, came to an abrupt stop. Nicholas, his moccasined feet deftly clamped against the horse's withers, exclaimed in an excited whisper :

“Doc, is it bears, or outlaws, or what?”

Ross went close to the side of the pony. “It's worse than bears or outlaws. It's Sandy McKenzie with packhorses. He's after the free gold and knows where it is. He has the letter and has had it read. But you don't know about the letter——”

The Monkey dismounted and turned his pony across the trail where the animal could stand easily.

“Yes, I do know about the loss of the letter and your hike, yours and Lucky's.”

“Then you've seen Lucky?”

“Yes, I went over to the Horn to stay, while Dad struck out for Meeteetse by way of Wind River and——”

Ross interrupted in a dismayed tone. “And there I was counting on Dad's being at the Horn

ROSS GRANT

with Lucky to meet Sandy! And Lucky counted on him, too."

"Wish he was there," whispered Nicholas sympathetically. "But as long as there was no sign of old man Clark coming home, Dad felt he must light out after him before the subpoena got to be such an old story that Clark had heard all about it and could get away from it. So I came on over to be with you at the Horn, and you weren't there. I read your note and hung around overnight and then struck out for the Pass. I run onto Lucky after you got a couple of hours the start of me, but after Lucky told me what was in the wind, I came on fast, thinking that Sandy might know about the new man at the U Ranch. He's a German, and ——"

"He's the man—wheezes when he talks."

"You bet!" returned Nicholas. "Is he with Sandy?"

Hastily Ross related what he had heard beside the camp-fire.

"The rascal!" exclaimed Nicholas indignantly when the story was told. "Sandy ought to be run out of Wyoming." Then, after a pause, he added in a curiously altered voice, "Say, Doc, ain't it sorta queer—his story is about the same as Lucky told us—Dad and me—you remember? when we went over to the Horn ——"

GOLD HUNTER

"But you believe Lucky, and you don't believe Sandy!" Ross cut in angrily, touched by the subtle doubt expressed in the other's voice. "Lucky is an all-right fellow, and Sandy is—well, I've reason myself to know that he's a rascal, and not an ordinary one either!"

"Oh, of course!" assented the Monkey hastily. "Don't tear me into shreds, Doc, right here! But at first it seemed queer—both were with Fred Holzworth in Meeteetse, both claim to be friends—both stole the letter——"

"I don't like to hear it put that way," interrupted Ross sharply, but in his heart he knew that any unprejudiced person would put the matter exactly that way, and consider Lucky as guilty as Sandy—if the former were not able to locate the hiding place of the gold and turn it over to its rightful owner.

This, after a moment of constrained silence, he admitted, adding, "Nick, we've got to prove Lucky in the right and Sandy in the wrong. Now, what's to be done? I'd about decided I'd best push on to the Pass. What do you think?"

Nicholas made no immediate response to this. He stood looking down and moving a small stone about with his toe while he thought. Finally he changed the subject abruptly. "See here, Doc! I haven't tasted grub since noon. You're a regular

ROSS GRANT

hustler on the trail, for a tenderfoot, and I've had to hurry to catch up. Where's your camp?"

Ross gave a rueful laugh. "Haven't made any. I can't build a fire, or it would betray me just as Sandy's did him. My horse is tied down here beside the trail out of sight. But while you're talking—I'm hungry, too!"

"Let's eat first," suggested Nicholas, "and think afterward. That's Dad's one rule for the trail."

"Guess that's Lucky's, too," added Ross. "I've heard him say that once or twice."

Leaving his horse, Nicholas, taking the lead, searched out a level spot in the lee of a large rock, and after reconnoitering along the mountainside until he found the exact location of the other campfire, persuaded the doubting Ross that they could build a smart fire under the projection of the rock near the spotted pony and cook a supper in safety—and in safety talk in natural tones.

"The wind is in our direction, so they won't get our smoke," Nicholas argued. "And a pine wood fire big enough to boil some coffee and fry some bacon wouldn't be seen because the forest around here is thick—and what's more, they are probably sound asleep."

Thus persuaded, Ross brought up his own supplies, and leaving his horse securely tied, helped with the fire and food, doing his full share also

GOLD HUNTER

later when the two sat eating beside the blaze, the Monkey cross-legged and doubled up in a supple way that was Ross's envy. His larger bones and stiffer joints would not permit of such a position as that.

Finally Ross drained his cup and set it down beside the coffee-pot.

"Would it do any good for you to get at this Breitmann and tell him what sort of an errand he's on?" asked Ross slowly as he drank his coffee.

"Not a bit of good," scoffed Nicholas. "You see, Breitmann is just one of the horse wranglers at the U Ranch, and it's his business to take out the freight broncs and go to any place where they're called for. Guess you ain't acquainted with the business of the freighting here, are you?"

Ross shook his head. "Haven't had a chance to be. My business all winter has been to cool my heels and kill time some distance away from any business—thanks to Sandy McKenzie!"

"Well," exclaimed Nicholas, "the U Ranch keeps a bunch of bronchos and rents 'em for freighting purposes. They're rented either to pack outfits or wagon service. Lucky's packhorse came from the U Ranch, and I noticed a U brand on both Trig's and Tod's packhorses. Now, of course, I'd be talking to the wind to tell Breitmann to go below

ROSS GRANT

and mind his own business, because he is minding it. He's been sent out with the horses, and it's none of his business on what errand Sandy is bent, provided the horses are paid for. As for the owner of the U, I don't suppose he even asked Sandy's object. Why should he? It's all in a day's work. Sandy explained to Breitmann, because Breitmann had read the letter and was curious."

"Yes, you're right," returned Ross slowly. "It would be time and words wasted to speak to him. Well—what then?"

"Sure enough," echoed Nicholas, "'what then,' unless we do as you intended—go back to the Pass and tackle Hans."

Ross arose stiffly and stretched himself. He pushed his cap to the back of his head and stuffing his hands into his pockets, frowned down at the dying fire. The Monkey, still doubled up like a knife, looked up at him hopefully. Out of the darkness in front of him a red and cream colored head emerged and quivering nostrils investigated the odors of the supper. The spotted pony was hungry.

"Get your head to work, Doc," Nicholas urged, "and think up something for my legs to do! You got rid of the bear—get rid of Sandy."

"But it was your training that taught me how to get rid of the bear," retorted Ross. "If I could

GOLD HUNTER

get rid of Sandy as easily I'd be tempted to stick a whole pine tree, ablaze, in his face. As it is ——"

Ross came to a full stop. He stared a moment at the other and then burst into an exclamation so shrill and penetrating that it startled him into silence again. Then he sank on his knees close beside the younger boy and in two minutes had transferred to him all his agitation and excitement. Nicholas gave one bound in which he uncoiled himself and stood on his feet. Being unable to give his favorite Indian yell of triumph, he relieved himself by standing on his head and waving his feet in the air, ending by bringing them down on the inquiring nose of the spotted pony, which backed precipitately to the end of its tether.

During this performance Ross, still on his knees, thought rapidly, for once paying no attention to the gymnastics that he so much admired in the other. When Nicholas alighted on his feet again and stood at mock attention, his heels together, his hand saluting, his face radiant in anticipation of desired action, Ross arose, and, scattering the embers of the fire, tramped on the last spark.

"Captain Head-on-You, what's the first move?" asked Nicholas.

"Well, first thing, I'd like to make sure that the other camp is just as I left it, and the two asleep."

ROSS GRANT

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Nicholas joyfully. "Thy henchman goeth!"

He was off before Ross knew he was gone, melting silently into the shadows that marked the border-land of darkness. The stars were beginning to appear, but the peaks were still faintly visible, and the trail could still be dimly seen in outline. Ross led the spotted pony down farther and had tied it near his mount and stepped out on the trail again when Nicholas returned as silently as he had left, his softly shod feet supporting so slender and supple a frame that, through practice, he could move with scarcely a crackling of the twigs.

"It's Breitmann all right, with a U outfit," he announced. "I know the broncs, and the best leader is with 'em, old Shier. I ran on her first thing. Where she goes the rest will follow. We'll get hold of her first."

"What about Sandy? Is he asleep?"

"Asleep? Well, I should say so! He's so much asleep I wonder he doesn't cause a stampede among the bunch. Snores like a volcano!"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Ross. Having made the plan he turned to the more agile and experienced Nicholas to execute it.

"Leave our horses where they are," commanded Nicholas promptly, "and you come down to the

GOLD HUNTER

pile of saddles and camp out there. I'll know where to find you then. Leave it to me!"

Ross did as he was told, and, sitting down on a wooden saddle, awaited developments. The younger boy again faded into the night, and, for a few moments, Ross listened in vain for any sound which should reveal his whereabouts. From mountainside to mountainside echoed the long mournful cry of the coyotes, or their short, sharp yelping. Close beside him the wind soughed through the pines. Mingled with the faint tinkle of the stream at his back was the soft "munch, munch" of the invisible horses. Then, suddenly, into these sounds came another that caused the listener to arise hastily. It was the regular thud of unhobbled hoofs approaching. In another moment Nicholas appeared, leading by its mane the pack leader.

Ross noticed that he had not taken time to remove the hobble, but had merely unbuckled one encircling leg strap which dangled to the other leg. As the connecting strap was not long enough to trip the animal, Ross luckily said nothing about it, and after a hurried consultation led by Nicholas, who understood the ways of packhorses better than Ross, the latter led the unhobbled animal carefully along the trail heading to the Valley of the Pass and from thence to its home ranch.

ROSS GRANT

“Lead it up where there isn’t a spear of grass—where the side is so steep that it can’t leave the trail,” directed Nicholas, “and then let it go. Get a stick and give it a smart rap on the flank when you send it on. Then we’ll get the rest, one by one, and send ’em after. We can’t round ’em up in a bunch because of the noise they’d make. And we must be awfully careful not to get them nervous.”

Ross led the leader slowly across the narrow valley and up the trail as Nicholas had directed. There was still light enough lingering to enable him to walk briskly until he reached the point in the ascent of the mountain where the slope fell away steeply below and rose sharply above. Here he loosened his hold on the shaggy mane, stepped back and gave the horse a blow on its flank which brought a pair of protesting hoofs into the air perilously near the boy’s head. He dodged hastily and then retraced his steps while the horse climbed upward.

In the darkened valley he prowled about near the stream in search of another horse, leaving the Monkey to bring up those nearest Sandy’s camp, Ross’s faith in the stealthiness of his own movements being small. Presently, as he was unhobbling an animal near the trail, he heard Nicholas approaching hastily, leading another.

GOLD HUNTER

"Sh, Doc," whispered the Monkey. "I had to tramp fairly on Sandy's heels to get this beast, and I woke 'im up. Here—hold it until I go back and scout a little, will you?"

Ross, with a hand in the manes of two horses, allowed them to crop the grass to keep them from being restless. In a few moments the Monkey was back with a satisfactory report.

"Guess he wasn't alarmed any. He's turned over and drawn the blanket over his head, but I don't believe he's asleep yet. Let's wait a few minutes."

The darkness deepened. The horses became merely blacker spots against a black background. The stars appeared brilliantly in a black sky. The peaks became indistinguishable. The cries of the coyotes grew louder and more numerous.

Suddenly the Monkey, without warning, threw himself on the ground and pressed his ear to the earth. "Doc," he whispered excitedly, "Shier is coming back on the run—down the trail——" He bounded to his feet. "Don't let those horses loose. I must head her back again or she'll play the mischief. She's a bundle of nerves."

During the next half hour Ross felt like a bundle of nerves himself. He stood with the two animals while Nicholas ran beyond the foot of the opposite mountain. It was too late. In a mo-

ROSS GRANT

ment Ross heard the thud of galloping hoofs, and a loud snort that caused the horses beside him to start and cease grazing. He felt the ripple of excitement that passed through their muscles as the snort was repeated, and a low neigh. Then the sound of the flying hoofs was deflected toward the right, and Ross could not suppress an exclamation of dismay. "It's going straight toward camp!" he muttered, "and Sandy not asleep! There goes my nice little plan."

In a moment all was confusion in the direction of the camp. Voices rang out across the valley, and the thud of hoofs sounded louder. Shier had whirled and was coming toward Ross followed, evidently, by the voices.

"The nation!" he heard Sandy say in an irritated tone. "What's broken loose? Didn't ye hobble all them mavericks when ye turned 'em out?"

Suddenly Ross backed the horses he was holding almost into the stream, and, stepping out to the trail, caught the mane of the leader as she broke through the bushes. Holding her firmly he rubbed her neck soothingly and patted her forehead gently, listening to the approaching men.

"Ja!" answered Daisy's disgusting voice. "Dot I did. It's dot old leader ——"

Here Ross hastily stepped back and took refuge

GOLD HUNTER

behind a sage-brush and held his breath. The leader, soothed by his caresses, started forward at a walk which allowed Breitmann to lay his hand at once on her neck as he and Sandy reached the trail. The ranchman hastily ran his hand down the horse's fore legs and gave an exclamation of relief.

"Vat I tell you?" he said triumphantly. "Dis hobble ist on. It ist broke. Dot makes all dis noise."

A match flared out in the darkness and Sandy stooped to look, while Ross clung dizzily to the bush and tried not to breathe, so near was Sandy.

"Broke!" reiterated Sandy. "Broke? Wall, it ain't! Ye never buckled that side at all!"

He flung the match from him and turned back. "Fix it t' stay put this time. I don't want t' be got up agin 'til it's time t' strike th' trail. That'll come soon enough fer my bones. Every one on 'em aches worse'n its neighbor now!"

With unutterable relief Ross heard the two depart, and their voices became fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. Then, with an introductory "Sh!" Nicholas touched Ross's arm.

"A close call that, Doc, eh? I reached the foot of the mountain too late to catch Shier, but just in time to turn 'er in the wrong direction. Now we've got to wait a while."

ROSS GRANT

They waited until Sandy and Daisy were again asleep and then, once more, Ross led old Shier over the trail, but with orders to "stand by" when he let her go and prevent her from returning, and also to receive each horse as Nicholas brought it up and send it after the leader. This plan he carried out, and when Nicholas finally led up the last horse, both boys sighed in relief.

"Now," said Ross, "there's our own horses to get. Then we'll follow."

"Don't you stir!" Nicholas ordered. "Stay right on your job here and I'll bring up our ponies."

"All right, Nick. My heart won't steady down to doing natural work until we are mounted and off. It has done nothing but jump and fall over itself for two hours!"

"Same here, only more so," confessed Nicholas. "Mine has been balancing itself on a tight rope!"

It was midnight before the two were mounted and had started after the pack animals that could be heard—but not seen—rattling the stones on the trail ahead.

"Don't try to guide your horse, Doc," advised Nicholas. "Give him his head and he'll take care of his heels."

Ross, straining his eyes in vain to see the trail, loosened the bridle reins and shuddered as he thought of the long steep slope only a few inches

GOLD HUNTER

away—unseen inches. His horse felt its way slowly, carefully, often putting out a foot twice before planting it, and moving with painful slowness, they reached the top of the mountain.

“Nick, how long have we got to keep this up?” asked Ross finally through clinched teeth.

“The horses are all headed toward home,” Nicholas told him grimly, “and they’ll keep on going until they think it’s time to stop; and just so long we better stick to the saddle.”

The animals considered it time to stop in the valley at the foot of Indian Ledge, where they found grass and water. Ross, remembering the perils of that mountain, drew a long breath of relief, and dismounted. Taking his blankets from behind his saddle, he lay down. Striking a match, he examined his watch.

“One o’clock,” he muttered. “It gets light at three.”

“Yep,” returned Nicholas briskly. The younger boy, accustomed to the saddle and the mountains, was far from exhausted. “Say! This is the place where you met up with the bear.”

“Huh-uh,” assented Ross sleepily. “He’s over there yet, I expect. Well, bears are welcome to walk all over me to-night!” And he was asleep in a moment, not caring whether or not Nicholas built a protecting fire.

ROSS GRANT

Despite his weariness, three o'clock and the dawn of day found him awake and looking for the horses. They had all disappeared except his mount and Nick's, which were hobbled. In alarm he awakened Nicholas and ran back on the trail. It was marked liberally with hoof prints, but all were headed for the valley.

"What're you up to?" shouted Nicholas, sitting up, his blanket still about him.

"The horses are all gone—can it be they've gone back to Sandy?"

"Never!" returned Nicholas, casting off his blanket. "Not because he isn't fit company, but because home is in the other direction. Shier went back last night because she found the other horses weren't at her heels as they ought to be. Now let's get a mouthful of grub, and I'll prove I'm right."

He was right. The animals had evidently gone on at the first break of day and at eight o'clock when the boys reached the Valley of the Pass their ponies' hoof prints were lost in a multitude of other tracks that showed distinctly in the sandy deposit beside the stream.

"Here you see 'em!" yelled the Monkey over his shoulder as he pointed downward. "The whole bunch has gone through here."

"Right, too!" shouted Ross. "Now for Hans and the cache!"

GOLD HUNTER

As his horse pushed through the willows at the entrance to the Valley of the Pass, Ross felt that he was coming home. He snatched off his hat and waved it at the twin shacks in the center of the valley. Out of Tod's issued a black smoke which told of the presence of some one within.

"Hi there!" he yelled, his hat sweeping in frantic circles above his head.

His call met with an instant response.

"Hi yourself!" shouted Tod.

He stood at the open door, waving the bread pan. Over his shoulder appeared Hans, still pale, but with both far-sighted eyes visible and only a strip of adhesive plaster on his cheek. Tod, holding up the tin pan and thumping on the bottom, came forward with a heavy, awkward skip, grinning from ear to ear. Hans, also grinning, a one-sided grin on account of the plaster, stood in the doorway and waited.

"I say, Doc," yelled Tod, "are you boys responsible for that round-up of bronchos that dilly-dallied past here this mornin' and woke us up?"

"Guess we are, and I'm glad to hear that they did go past."

Tod ceased to drum on his pan. "They hiked 'er past with their hobble straps hangin' to one leg! Say, boys, you've got me guessin'. That same outfit of beasts, plus pack-saddles, and escorted by

ROSS GRANT

Sandy McKenzie and one called Daisy Breitmann, on account of his fairy form, went up the trail yesterday. I saw 'em when I come out on my dump up at the tunnel. Sandy pushed through as if he had a special delivery stamp on 'im. Didn't stop to say so much as 'Howdy' here. I wondered what devilry he was up to."

"We can tell you soon enough," said Ross.

He slid out of his saddle with difficulty, lame and stiff from his journey, but the Monkey, as much at home on horseback as on foot, leaped nimbly from the spotted pony.

Both boys, as they unsaddled, eagerly but briefly related the events that had crowded closely together since he left the Pass, Tod keeping up a running fire of comment.

"Sunshine on a field-glass!—I did forget that cañon, and that's sure enough!—Good old Lucky!—A landslide forever—hurray!—Only Mart? That's a McKenzie trick. They're deep ones!"

But, when Ross arrived at the episode of the packhorses, Tod's joy was unbounded. He banged the pan on the stones, and howled. He jumped up, and kicked his heels together. He gave Ross a blow between the shoulders that nearly knocked him down. He seized the lighter boy and swung him squirming off his feet.

Above this confusion Ross raised his voice with

GOLD HUNTER

difficulty. "Now," he explained, "the first thing I'm going to try to do is to explain things to Hans and get him to tell me where the free gold is hidden."

"Good!" commented Tod. "And, while you're talking, I've found Hans right social. We talk in signs and motions. We act out questions and answers. It's as exciting as an Omaha stock company performance."

"Go ahead with Hans," encouraged Nicholas, "and we'll keep still—or try to."

"Still!" shouted Tod. "Nonsense! Doc, you get into Trig's cabin there for your literary duties and the Monkey and I'll keep close in mine—and not keep still. I expect you'd like a little grub rustled, a sort of late breakfast, early dinner meal, betwixt and between."

When Ross had settled down beside Hans in Trigger's cabin he was embarrassed by the sight of gratitude that filled Hans' face. "I wonder," the boy thought, "if he will feel that way when I've told him about the letter."

The telling was a laborious task, but one at which Ross went immediately while Tod "rustled" breakfast for the travelers. So intent was Ross on his task that he did not notice the absence of Trigger. Getting out his German dictionary, with paper and pencil, he sat down with Hans to tell

ROSS GRANT

him the story of the letter. It was of necessity an unsatisfactory narrative. Ross strung the German words together with scant regard to gender or mood, but when Tod summoned him to eat he obeyed the call, satisfied that the German understood his narrative—although perhaps imperfectly, as far as he had progressed.

As the newcomers were eating, watched by Hans and waited on by Tod, the Monkey voiced a question which had come and gone amid a multitude of thoughts and plans and doubts that had run riot in Ross's head since he had stolen a march on Sandy's camp in the Valley of the Willows.

"Tod," Nicholas asked, "how under the canopy could Sandy have made his get-away with a bunch of ore? You can steal a wad of money or a round-up of jewelry, but what earthly good would it do to try to steal a lot of ore? How could he hope to keep it and not get caught?"

Tod indolently supported the side wall, his hands deep in his pockets: "Well, sonny, the answer to that is strictly up to Sandy. But if I was in the stealing business myself and wanted to get away with a nice little bunch of ore under the circumstances that Sandy had put himself into, I should know first of a little hiding place somewhere around the tens of thousands of square miles more or less in these parts that hasn't a human boot put

GOLD HUNTER

on 'em once a year! Then I should load up the packhorses that you've relieved Sandy of"—with a quiet chuckle—"and just tell that stupid Breitmann to hold the fort at the Horn till I come back. Then I should lose myself in the aforementioned square miles of wilderness, cover my trail, cache the ore, take the horses back to Breitmann and clear out." Here Tod threw out his hands helplessly, adding, "In case he did do this what could Lucky do?"

Ross nodded comprehensively. "Might as well try to locate a needle in a haystack as try to find such a cache."

"Just so," Tod went on. "Sandy could fade away, and Hans here, and maybe Lucky, and maybe you and the Monkey would waste a good deal of time hunting for his cache and finding nothing. Then Hans would drift away penniless and everybody would forget everything. Then Sandy appears up to Butte, we'll say, with a few bags of ore. Might give any old place as the place where he got it, and who'd be the wiser? He'd get the gold extracted and disappear. Next thing you'd know—only you wouldn't know it—he'd turn up down to Omaha with a few more sacks and take it to one of the stamp mills there, and who'd ever know he'd stole it?"

"I see," exclaimed Nicholas decidedly. "Get

ROSS GRANT

back to Hans, Doc, and find out where that gold is cached. Hurry up!"

Ross promptly "got back" to his task once more. Hans' alarm when he finally understood that the real letter was not in his possession was pathetic. But pulling himself together again, he strove as earnestly to understand as Ross was striving to explain.

Tod, sitting by now, with the Monkey at his elbow, both anxious as to the outcome, suddenly wiped his face on his sleeve, exclaiming: "Doc, here I am sweating like a race-horse just looking at you work. This is worse than stayin' in the tunnel all day. Ain't you most through?"

Ross leaned back wearily, and looked at his watch. It was nearly noon.

"I'm going to ask him now to tell me where the cache is. If he does this, part of the work's done."

"Well, he will," said Tod with conviction. "I've gathered from the remarks that he don't make, and that I wouldn't understand if he did, that he thinks you helped get the earth into shape and set it goin'!"

"But can he make me understand?" worried Ross.

"He must," said Todd decidedly.

A few moments later Hans understood, and sig-

GOLD HUNTER

nified his willingness to answer the question. If Ross wanted to know where the gold was, Hans had faith to believe that the knowledge would not be betrayed. At first the latter broke out into German, but checked himself at the blank look on Ross's face. He shook his head, took it between his hands, and thought. Then, arising, he motioned to Ross to follow, and, going to a near-by rock, indicated the ground beneath it.

Ross shook his head. To Tod he said: "Guess he means it's under a rock, but that doesn't simplify matters. There's a thousand rocks there."

But Hans was not done. He beckoned, and went into his cabin. Dropping onto his knees, he began to push and pull at the logs under his bunk. Then he sat back, and asked earnestly, "Verstanden Sie nicht?"

Tod and Ross and Nicholas looked at each other blankly.

"That's what he was always doing when he was delirious—pushing at the logs," Ross muttered.

"Why can't he take a turn at the dictionary?" demanded Tod.

"Because he can't see the words without glasses," replied Ross.

He raised the book, and looked at it. The sight seemed to be an inspiration to Hans. He laid a

ROSS GRANT

trembling hand on the book, and said slowly and distinctly, "Hohle, die Hohle."

"Die Hohle," repeated Ross stupidly.

"Ja, ja," cried Hans. He took hold of the dictionary, and pushed it against Ross, impatiently reiterating: "Die Hohle! Keller."

"Oh, yes!" shouted Ross, suddenly enlightened. "He wants me to look up the word. 'Keller' I can spell. That other word I can't get hold of."

He dropped to the bench, and hastily turned the pages. The instant the English equivalent of "Keller" met his eyes, he sprang to his feet, waving the book under Tod's nose, and shouting:

"I have it! I have it! 'Keller' means 'cellar' or 'cave'! There's a cave under the rock against which the shack is built, and it is reached by taking away the logs under one of the bunks—that high one that Fred built—of course!"

CHAPTER XVII

A RACE TO THE GOAL

NICHOLAS was so astonished that, for once, he remained motionless. "Under Holzworth's bunk!" he repeated. "Then that explains its ridiculous height."

"And its length," added Ross, "and its back supports."

"Bunks!" exclaimed Tod. "Is there more than one? There's been one there ever since Columbus discovered America—but only one."

"Two now," interrupted the Monkey. "A new one. Holzworth must have put it in to cover the opening he made into the cave—he must have made an entrance. Who knew there was a cave under that rock before? Dad doesn't."

"Nobody did," affirmed Tod. "Never heard of such a thing. If there's one there Fred ferreted it out. I supposed that rock went clear down to China."

"Looks that way," assented Ross, "but see here! There's some one else knows now that it doesn't, and that's Sandy."

Tod sat down on the bench, took one knee

ROSS GRANT

between his hands and rocked back and forth grinning. "Sandy!" he cried triumphantly. "You clipped his wings when you took all his horses away. He's helpless—more helpless than Holzworth here."

Hans, his far-sighted eyes boring sharply into Ross's face, burst into a torrent of speech at the sound of his name. By the upward slides of his voice Ross knew he was asking questions, but the drift of them he could not catch. Besides, there was no time now for laborious translation.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Tod. "The mess that Sandy's in does me good! It gets better the more I think of it! No horses, and Lucky settin' tight right in front of the hole that Sandy aims to get into. Ha! Ha!"

"See here, Tod," remonstrated Ross finally, "I'm not so sure about Sandy's helplessness. If you had had as much to do with Sandy as I've had, you'd be uneasy up to the moment you had your own hands on that free gold and saw to it that Sandy's hands were a long way off now. And remember, Lucky is alone there, and Waymart is coming back. No-sir-ee. It's me for a fresh horse and back again as fast ——"

Tod shrugged his fat shoulders. "Doc, the truth is, there ain't any horses, fresh or otherwise, in the valley."

GOLD HUNTER

"Why not?" Ross demanded excitedly.

Tod ruffled his hair. "Don't look at me in that tone of voice, Doc! I hain't swallowed the outfit. Miners' Camp has. We got short on sticks, and so Trig, not takin' kindly to house-keepin', as you know, rounded up the horses and went over to Miners' after the dynamite, leavin' me to be chief cook and bottle washer to Hans here. He ought to be back now. May come any minute, but we can't calculate on 'im."

Ross's hands fell helplessly to his sides. He glanced at his tired mount grazing near by. Tod's glance followed his. He shook his head slowly but said earnestly:

"That horse is sure all in, Doc, but I guess you're right about gettin' back right along. Lucky ought to be put wise to all this."

"Sandy isn't going to make time to-day traveling," remarked the Monkey meditatively; "he's too leg-weary."

Tod nodded. He arose slowly, followed by the boys' anxious eyes. Thrusting his hands into his pockets he stood staring toward the rushing, tinkling South Fork. "When a man don't stir abroad except on horseback," he mentioned slowly, "his feet don't serve 'im well on the trail. There's a chance you'll reach the Horn now ahead of him."

"But free gold at the other end of the trail is

ROSS GRANT

apt to heal a man's feet and make him forget he's tired," Nicholas broke in pessimistically. "I'm afraid they'll beat us there, for Doc here certainly has ridden his horse about out."

"And see here!" cried Ross, "if we beat him to the Horn we must pass him. There's only one trail from the Valley of the Willows. Isn't that right?"

"The nation!" groaned Tod. "I hadn't thought of that!" He scratched his head. "My skull is so full to busting now that that idea can't get in yet. Here's where I stake you to some grub and boil down some of my ideas at the same time!"

Presently, as the boys saddled up while Tod supplied the rations for the return journey, he opened the subject again, his ideas having evidently boiled down into a digestible state. "Now, boys, first, as to your passing Sandy. I'll put you wise to a cross-lots trail from the foot of old Axle to the Horn. It's an old Shoshone Indian foot trail. No horse can travel it. You couldn't make it on horseback without its costin' ye a neck apiece——"

The Monkey immediately felt of his throat and wagged his head to and fro. "Thanks, then. I'll keep mine! I never expect to have another neck as good as the one I'm wearing right now!"

Tod grinned. "But see here, Monkey, listen.

GOLD HUNTER

You watch out for Sandy's trail. You won't overtake 'im nohow this side of the Axle. Now when you get pretty near through the cañon at the foot of Axle, you'll reach a rock as high again as Doc here. The rock will be pushing the trail out fair into the creek on one side and separatin' it from a matter of a dozen quaking asp set in thick together on the other side. There you stop and find out whether Sandy's shoes went on over Axle on the main trail, or turned in this side of the rock on the Indian trail. Then you act according. If Sandy knows of the Indian trail, he'll take it for sure, being afoot. In that case, you stick to the horses and the main trail. But if he has kept on past Axle in the bridle trail, you leave the horses and shin it over the Indian trail. If this last happens, you'll beat him to the Horn by six hours. But if he takes the Indian trail himself and you the other, it will be neck and neck which will come in ahead, you on tired horses or Sandy on tired feet."

The Monkey beat on the saddle with the coffee-pot, while Hans looked and listened eagerly trying in vain to learn the drift of the conversation. "We'll beat him!" yelled the Monkey.

"Now listen again," commanded Tod, "for, Monkey, you've got to learn that trail by heart. It's almost covered over and lost across some of the peaks, and you'll have to look alive to follow it.

ROSS GRANT

Put these directions away inside your skull and I'll try not to leave any points out," with a grimace at Ross.

Ten minutes later he asked: "Got it, have you?"

The Monkey nodded. "I can just see old Axle and that cross-lot trail."

Then Tod spoke abruptly of Lucky. "Here he is hikin' out on Hans' business and neglectin' his own. He's behind in his work, and first thing he knows his five-year strangle hold on his claims will be up, and the legal amount of work not done. Then he stands to lose 'em and all the work he has put on 'em."

"Just when are the five years up?" asked Ross quickly.

"Don't know the exact date. In a few weeks now, though, and there's a two-man job of work yet to do in his tunnel. Trig and I'd fall to and lend a hand if either of us had an extry one that wa'n't full of our own work. Poor old Lucky! Guess this trip his luck is failin' him all the way around. He's too everlastin' ready to take up the case of the under dog until he finds he's that dog himself!"

Ross looked up at the steep side of Elk and drew a long breath. "The under dog! He may not be under in the end. Not if I——" His voice trailed into a mutter as he mounted.

GOLD HUNTER

“One thing more, boys,” warned Tod as they started. “Don’t you try to get on the Indian trail one inch this side of that rock, or you’ll fall into trouble.”

What that trouble was Ross left Nicholas to learn while he rode on. When Nicholas joined him, the two pushed on until they reached the valley on the further side of Indian Ledge. Here they met a weary and perplexed Breitmann trudging back to the U Ranch on foot.

“Hello, Daisy!” shouted the Monkey. “How’s the walking to-day?”

Daisy removed his cap and scratched his head. Instead of answering, he asked another question. “Did you poys meet mit horses from de U Ranch?”

“They are safe and sound and at home by this time, Daisy,” Nick assured him. “They went through the Valley of the Pass with all their hobbles hanging. How’d they get loose?”

Breitmann smoothed his cap and frowned. “Dot was a rascal trick by somepody.”

The boys, anxious to push ahead, refrained from asking questions, and left Daisy looking after them, his longing for further conversation written all over his stupid, anxious face.

“Now we have only one man to get ahead of instead of two,” exclaimed Ross when they were out

ROSS GRANT

of Daisy's hearing. "Let's hurry and put one more over Sandy!"

The boys' eagerness to put one more "over Sandy" led to their pushing forward faster than Ross's mount could endure. The spotted pony led, and the other pony, ambitious not to be distanced, followed so closely that they entered the Valley of the Willows while twilight lingered on the peaks.

The Monkey rode forward to the pile of wooden saddles and drew rein. "Here they are, Doc. Someway I half expected to find 'em gone. But"—in surprise—"where have the pack ropes gone?"

"And where are the bags?" exclaimed Ross. He threw himself from his horse and rushed forward. "Nick, the bags are all gone, as well as the ropes."

The younger boy bounded from the back of the spotted pony. "Are you sure, Doc?"

"They lay here," Ross declared, pointing, "opposite the saddles. That I know."

Leaving his horse, he plunged through the willows here and there, searching; but, although he hurried over the length and breadth of the little valley, no gunny bags appeared.

"Well," said Nicholas with a little sigh of satisfaction, "Sandy's made traveling all the

GOLD HUNTER

harder by packing along a load. And there's their grub, too."

"But, Nick, it shows that Sandy has hatched some new plan. Let's hurry along."

"Not now," declared Nicholas firmly; "we're due to make camp here. Not another step can these horses go to-night."

Reluctantly Ross agreed, and the boys made camp in the Valley of the Willows. They built their fire on the ashes of Sandy's, hobbled their horses, cooked themselves a hot supper, finally lying down to sleep, their blankets around them and a pile of brush and branches beside the fire.

"It doesn't seem to me," murmured the Monkey as he drew his blanket up to his chin, "as though I should wake up if a bear sat on my head!"

But Ross, having on his mind the idea that daybreak must find him awake, arose at intervals and threw fuel on the flames. Three o'clock, and the first peep of daylight found him folding up his blanket and stretching his stiff legs wearily, but he did not arouse the younger boy until he had built a fire, prepared breakfast, and caught and saddled the horses. The little brown sparrows were chirping about them sleepily, and the eastern peaks were silhouetted against a faint pink sky when at last Nicholas dragged himself yawning to his feet.

ROSS GRANT

"Ugh!" he shivered. "What d'ye call the season this time in the morning, summer or winter? Gee whiz! Half-past three! Say, Doc, we'll be hollow again before nine."

Ross nodded and lifted the steaming coffee-pot from the coals. "Then we'll eat again. There's plenty. Tod always looks out for plenty of grub."

"Good!" cried Nicholas, turning a few somersaults to limber up his muscles. "I'm glad he judges other people by himself!"

Before four o'clock the two were on the trail again, with the supplies all packed on the spotted pony in order to make traveling as easy as possible for Ross's mount, which was too jaded to care whether the Monkey's pony got ahead of it or not. It lagged slowly up the mountains and slid stumbingly down them until Ross clung fearfully to the saddle and eyed the dizzy depths below the narrow paths with increasing apprehension.

The Monkey had no saddle. He rode, as usual, only on a blanket, his softly shod feet clamping his horse's withers to prevent his sliding over its head going down the mountainsides, while his knees, gripping its sides, prevented him from falling over its tail as it climbed the almost perpendicular stretches of trail. Occasionally he dis-

GOLD HUNTER

mounted and searched the ground for shoe prints, reporting their presence to Ross. He made these searches in a few spots on the path where the soil had opportunity to lodge and furnish a foundation soft enough to reveal the passing of the traveler.

As the two approached the lofty, snow-topped summit of old Axle, Nicholas drew rein and looked back. "Hey! Pulling leather, are you? That's a tenderfoot trick for certain!" He spoke half derisively and half anxiously, his eyes on the other's horse.

Ross flushed and let go of the high pommel of the saddle, but called back defensively, "Guess you'd 'pull leather' if your horse stumbled every other step, as mine does."

The only reply Nicholas made was the uneasy glance he cast over his shoulder at the tired horse as he rode on. The sun was throwing a flood of dazzling light over the snowy peak of old Axle when he entered the narrow winding, gloomy defile that skirted the foot of that mountain and wound in and out among a dense forest of low pines and hemlocks. On the left was a tiny tinkling stream, on the right, the rise of the mountainside. On all sides was the forest, and at every turn a rock shoulder of Axle.

As the Monkey rode out of sight, Ross's mount

ROSS GRANT

stumbled over a small stone and fell to its knees. Dismounting, the boy coaxed it to its feet again, and then led it along the trail for a few rods. But the weary beast had gone as far as it was able. Again it stumbled and coming to its knees, refused at first to rise. With difficulty Ross pulled the saddle off and the animal stretched out on its side. For a moment the boy thought it was dead, and had opened his lips to call Nicholas back when the horse rolled over and sat up like a dog looking lazily about until it discovered a tuft of grass. Stumbling weakly to its feet it began to feed.

"I'll not risk my neck on you any longer," muttered Ross. "You're likely to take a header any old moment and then I—yes—huh! Little use I'd be to Lucky—or myself!"

Pulling the saddle out of the trail, he hobbled the animal, and then followed Nicholas on foot, glad of a chance to stretch his legs, but keenly alive to the necessity of having a good horse at his command. In a few moments a sudden turn in the trail brought him on the spotted pony. Its bridle reins were dangling, its head hanging sleepily—but its rider was nowhere to be seen.

"He's scouting," thought Ross and stooping, began to examine the trail that here was covered with the soft loam made by centuries of leaf deposit from the sage-brush and quaking asps. It

GOLD HUNTER

took him only a moment to discover the fresh prints of a pair of shoes and a pair of moccasins.

"Here's where I get back and stay tight with Spot," he told himself as he retreated. "I'm about as much of a scout as an elephant. I'll let the Monkey attend to that."

Anxiously he waited and watched until a faint odor of smoke came drifting down on him. At the same time the Monkey appeared, moving as noiselessly as the smoke, his face screwed up and a warning finger raised. He came close to Ross and spoke in a low tone.

"He's eating right up here a quarter of a mile, maybe ——"

"Then let's hurry and take the Indian trail," Ross interrupted joyfully. "My horse has fallen. He's up again, but I won't trust myself on him again to-day. Gee whiz! Ain't I glad we're at his heels!"

"Yes, but Doc, we can't get on the Indian trail now."

"Well, why not?"

"Because Sandy's eating right above that rock where the trail begins. Of course I don't know whether he's going to take it or not, but one thing I do know, and that is we can't get on it while he is there. If he takes it we can follow him, but that's all. There's a gorge this side of the foot

ROSS GRANT

trail, Tod said, and I passed it, too. If we should try to slip down the bank here and make the trail further along, we'd find ourselves at the bottom of a perpendicular wall. No, Tod said not to try to get on that trail except from the side of that rock and we can't. We must wait Sandy's motion. Let's lead the horses back and hobble 'em and cache the saddle and the grub—all that we don't eat. We can make time right now by doing all that."

They ate first without building a fire, ate hastily of cold "sinkers" and crackers, opening a tin can of peaches and drinking beside the horses from the stream. They said little. Ross was thinking, while Nicholas, his senses alert, informed himself by the smoke of the progress of the lunch above the big rock.

Finally Ross turned abruptly. "Nick, see here. My horse is finished for the day. That leaves me on foot. Now I have an idea. If it works—and you'd have to turn the trick—it would give us the advantage in this race."

The Monkey paused in the act of unblanketing his horse. He looked over its flank expectantly. "Good old Doc! You're full of ideas."

When he heard this particular idea, he threw a handspring and stood on his head waving his feet derisively up the trail. Then he regained his feet

GOLD HUNTER

and exclaimed in a low tone: "Bet I can fetch it! Of course you can't appear to 'im for Sandy knows you're with Lucky following Mart! But me! Why, I'm Dad's little boy riding for the fun of it, and I've never heard of a cache of free gold! Oh, no!"

A moment later he was on Spot's back again and stopping only to give a little more information to Ross about the gorge between them and the Indian trail, he set off whistling and singing by turns. Ross followed eagerly, but so far behind that he lost sight of the horseman. He followed until the trail neared the end of the cañon and rifts began to appear in the forest. Then he was halted by the sound of voices, or a voice, rather, and that belonged to the Monkey. It was raised high, unnaturally high, and carried a long way on the back trail, as the boy intended it should.

"Hello, Sandy!" yelled the Monkey. "What you doing up here so far from everybody?"

The reply was inaudible, but was followed again by the boy's high-pitched voice.

"Alone?" shouted Nicholas. "Am I alone? Of course not! Can't you see the crowd trailing on after me! Don't you hear my brass band? D'ye think Dad would let his little Nicky go so far from home without some one holding his hand?"

ROSS GRANT

Despite his anxiety Ross grinned at the boy's quick-witted gibes, which told no untruth, and yet gave no clew to the nearness of Ross.

"Yep," the Monkey continued in answer to another unheard question, "Dad's over in these parts somewhere, and if I live long enough I expect to meet up with him. Now that I've met you I can have company on the trail."

Ross climbed the side of the mountain and crept along among the sage-bushes above the fire that Sandy had built near the trail. The Monkey sat sidewise on the spotted pony looking down on Sandy, who was squatted beside the fire frying bacon. Beside him lay the bags, made into a tight bundle and tied about by the pack ropes.

This Ross observed from the shelter of a sage-bush. He sat down on his heels, parted the branches, and watched. He was too far away still to hear aught except the Monkey's replies, and these continued to be given for his benefit in a voice whose size was out of all proportion to the distance between him and his listener.

"Packhorses?" he exclaimed at length. "The U pack outfit? Why, surely! I have just come from the Pass. Yes. Tod said that a bunch of 'em went past yesterday morning before sunup. Did I see 'em pass? Not on your life! I was too



“ALL RIGHT ; THAT’S FAIR ”

GOLD HUNTER

sound asleep about that time. But Tod was up, of course; must have been."

Had the Monkey seen the width of Ross's grin then he would have felt repaid for his skilful evasion, but in the real object for which the boy had come, neither evasion nor artifice seemed to be necessary, for already Sandy was eyeing Spot hungrily.

"Why, say!" cried Nicholas doubtfully presently, in answer to something Sandy had said. "Let you go on with Spot? Of course, I believe in bein' neighborly, but—— Oh, in an awful hurry, are you? No pack except those bags? Well, I guess I can do it," reluctantly. "Explain to Dad, if you run across him, that his little Nick is cooling his heels waiting for Spot—— Oh, yes, just turn him loose and tie the reins back tight to the rope, this one that cinches the blanket, so he can't stop to eat, and I guess he'll get back here before night. All right, that's fair. I'll eat your grub until old Spot makes it back here."

Ross grinned delightedly while Sandy hastily cinched his bundle of bags on the pony's back, and then, without waiting to finish his dinner, and taking no food along, he mounted ahead of his pack and rode away in the direction of Sheep's Horn, leaving the boy looking after him. Ross stood up and waved his arms until he caught the

ROSS GRANT

watcher's attention. Then he lost no time in making his way down to the trail.

"Doc," grinned Nicholas, "that was dead easy sport! He bit on Spot before I had a chance to offer him. He said he needed a horse, and would I loan him Spot, as long as I was out for pleasure and he for business!"

Ross grinned. "What explanations——"

"None. Don't you see? So long as I'm the innocent lad I don't need to be lied to. He just got on Spot and rode off, tickled to death that I gave him up so readily and without questions. I'm to sit tight here by his fire, like the dear little boy that I am, until he sends Spot back to me!"

Here Nicholas flung his cap into the air and leaped nimbly to meet it. Then he turned back.

"Come on, Doc. It's us for the hatchet and a sprint along the Indian trail. Tod said never to forget the hatchet. We won't load up with anything else."

A few moments later Ross, bearing the hatchet, followed Nicholas past a huge rock, and, turning into a narrow path, hurried along the brink of a precipice that ran at right angles to the cañon at the foot of Axle. This precipice formed one of the sides to a fissure or gorge that cut through the range at the left of old Axle and opened a perilous way to the Horn. Ross, avoiding looking down

GOLD HUNTER

into the yawning crevasse, followed silently, hugging the steep mountain wall on the right, until at last the fissure, becoming shallower and shallower and widening, was merged into another cañon similar to the one below old Axle.

Here the Monkey, drawing a long breath, paused. "Doc, now for beating Sandy by some hours, for Spot ain't going to serve him well. The pony's too tired to travel, but worse than that, Sandy ain't used to riding without a saddle and don't know how to hang on. He'll slip off both ways! He'll have to take to walking over the worst places, and he'll be finding them right off, too!"

After this the boys traveled almost in silence. Ross was soon bewildered by the sameness of the peaks and the density of the thickets of scrub pine and sage-brush and quaking asp, through which they made their way. Again and again as they crossed the summits of the ridges he lost the trail and looked with admiration at the Monkey, who pushed on, darting here and there, always successful finally in picking it up again. Occasionally they were obliged to cut a path through the scrub hemlock that had grown over the trail. Then it was that Ross wielded the hatchet under direction of the more experienced woodsman and mountain climber.

"Nick, I'll furnish the muscle for this hike," he

ROSS GRANT

groaned, "if you'll hang on to your head and keep Tod's directions in it. Sure you've got 'em right now?" anxiously.

"We're all right yet, Doc," responded the Monkey, nursing a bloody arm torn by a fall over a rock. "See here. Take your bearings. The sun is at our backs—we can just see it over our right shoulders, and the Horn is ahead of our nose. Don't you recall what Tod said?"

"Yes, I do, now that I hear you repeat it!"

Ross put himself in the other's position, and sure enough! Deceptively near, but almost lost among the peaks, appeared the outlines of the Sheep's Horn.

"Looks from here about a mile away," mourned Ross. "If I was on good old Pennsylvania's soil I'd swear it was no farther, but in this clear air everything is so deceptively near—and alas, so far in reality!"

The Monkey munched a piece of sweet chocolate he had found in his pocket. "Guess you'll think so by the time we've fallen off a few more peaks!"

They set off again resolutely, and although Ross felt that every muscle in his body had been pounded and stretched to the breaking point he did not falter, with the vision of Lucky and the cache of free gold growing more and more vivid as the two approached the Horn.

GOLD HUNTER

"One more pull and we're there," he muttered as they began the climb of the Horn itself.

Skirting the tall rock tip of the Horn wearily they made their way down on the other side toward the cabin. As they neared it they broke into a run and burst into the shack together, each eager to be the first to tell Lucky.

But Lucky was not there.

CHAPTER XVIII

BOSS PLAYS AN UNEXPECTED PART

Ross stopped in the doorway aghast. Unreasonable as it now appeared to him, he had never considered the possibility of Lucky's not meeting them at the door of the shack.

"Ha!" cried the Monkey. "Lucky's out calling, is he? Well, we're here! Hurray!"

On his way to the high bunk the boy paused to spin like a top on one foot, waving his arms in derision of Sandy.

"When the gentleman on Spot arrives won't he be amazed and astonished and overcome to find Daddy's little boy here with the Tenderfoot from Pennsylvania? Ha—hurray!"

Then the Monkey stood erect, dashed the hair out of his eyes, and grinned at Ross. "Did Lucky take his best engraved calling cards along?"

"He certainly did," replied Ross somberly, pointing to the pegs above Lucky's bunk. "Look there! His gun is gone. That strikes me as meaning that he has hiked out for the day."

"What of it?" asked Nicholas carelessly. "Hurry up and let's get into that cave." He

GOLD HUNTER

removed a cover from the stove and looked inside. The fireplace was half full of cold ashes. "No fire here since morning," he announced, and with a bound reached the bunk that Fred Holzworth had built.

Ross did not immediately follow. He looked sharply about the shack, silent and motionless.

The Monkey, making observations under the bunk, was also silent for a moment, and into the silence crept that faint, insistent beat, the small, ever present call of the "ha'nt." Involuntarily Ross glanced behind him at the spot from which it seemed to come. Then he gave it no further attention in his scrutiny of the shack. Evidently Lucky had occupied himself for the last two days to the exclusion of cutting fire-wood, because the last log which Holzworth had "snaked" down the mountainside remained intact outside the door, while every box inside had been cut into suitable lengths for the stove. The axe lay beside the débris.

"He spent the night here," said Ross aloud thoughtfully, "and intends to come back to-night, because his blankets and mine are all here."

The Monkey, on his knees under the higher bunk, his tow head almost lost to view, his hands active, responded in a muffled tone: "Come on here and help, Doc. What you worrying about

ROSS GRANT

Lucky for? What can Sandy do? He may not get here himself until night —— ”

“ Tod said, I remember,” interrupted Ross, “ that if he came on horseback and we on foot over the Indian trail, we might get here at the same time.”

“ But I’m reckoning on Spot and on Sandy’s not being able to ride well without a saddle,” muttered Nicholas. Then he burst out triumphantly, “ This is the combination! I’ve found it. Look here !”

He seized the axe and inserting its blade between the bunk and the wall pried with all his might. Ross rushed forward, Lucky temporarily thrust out of his mind, and the bunk, yielding to the combined efforts of the two, fell away from the logs.

They found that Holzworth had built it to stand alone, a long box on four legs, the back supports being of board about a foot wide. The reason for this width was revealed as quickly as the bunk was drawn away from the wall. The reason also for its awkward height appeared at once. It was built to conceal the outlines of an opening—a crude door into the cave.

How Holzworth had come to suspect the existence of the cave no one will ever know. As Lucky said, men had come and gone in that shack for years, and no one before had dreamed that the back of the shack was built over the dark, damp entrance to an underground chamber. Holzworth

GOLD HUNTER

had made an easy and secret access to the cave possible by cutting through the base log and several above it. These sections of logs had been fastened together on the cave side by means of crosspieces nailed to the logs, so that the sections made a hingeless door that could be shoved into the opening. The back of the bunk extended along the crack between the door and the log above, while the wide rear supports covered the vertical cuts.

Excitedly the boys pulled back the door, and a burst of damp air met them as they peered into the blackness of the cave. Ross snatched a candlestick from the table and lighted the half length of candle it held. Then, stooping, he followed Nicholas silently into the cavern, with its floor of slippery muck. They stood upright the other side of the log wall. The great rectangular rock was only a shell of a rock, it appeared, pushed out into view by some mighty subterranean upheaval which had made the rock's concave bottom the funnel-shaped entrance to a deep and lofty chamber. From the jagged and seamed roof the water dropped continually and softly into the ooze on the floor.

Still in silence the boys crept forward, sliding their shoes through the muck, fearful of seams in the rock underfoot as well as overhead, until Nicholas, still in advance, stumbled over an object in his path.

ROSS GRANT

"Here it is!" he shouted.

Both boys started nervously at the result of the shout. The words came back to them in sepulchral syllables overlaid with uncanny sounds, lisplings and whisperings that made the cave seem full of unearthly presences. The candle in Ross's hand shook for an instant, so unexpected was the echo and so great had been the nervous strain of the preceding days.

"It's the ha'nt!" he murmured with a nervous laugh, and then jumped involuntarily again to hear both declaration and laugh tossed about and distorted by the echoes, now magnified, now muffled, now prolonged.

"Whew!" whispered the Monkey. "It's a powerful lively haunt!"

The haunt proved its liveliness by filling the cave with whispers that mingled indistinctly with the muffled echoes of their shoes splashing and sucking in the ooze.

The object that had given rise to Nicholas' triumphant yell of "Here it is!" was a pile of quartz that rose knee-high in their path and whose extent was lost in the gloom that was scarcely relieved by the faint rays from the little candle Ross now held above his head. Having recovered from the start given them by the "ha'nt," they fell to examining the quartz pile in its length and breadth,

GOLD HUNTER

bringing bits under the candle rays and exclaiming over the gleam of gold on the surface. They exulted, also, in the amount of ore. Had Sandy with his gunny sacks reached the place ahead of them, he could have made but little impression on that pile while daylight lasted—and now they were here—and surely Lucky would come before night.

They delved into the heap of ore until they were thoroughly chilled and wet by the cold drippings from the roof seams of the rock. Their candle was also burning low, and Ross had seen no other in the shack.

“Let’s go around the cave a little while we’ve a candle to see by,” he whispered, and the Monkey, nodding assent, fell in behind the light.

Putting it in front of him and protecting it from the drippings by holding his cap over it, he advanced further and further from the patch of light that marked the entrance to the cave. Suddenly his foot splashed into water, slipped forward and nearly unbalanced him. Hastily he drew back and lowered the candle. Its rays struck a black surface which rippled beneath great drops of water that slowly collected in a seam overhead and splashed at regular intervals into this murky deep pool.

“Nick,” whispered Ross, “did you ever imagine one drop of water could make so much sound?”

ROSS GRANT

Nicholas came to his side, and both stood motionless. Although they did not then realize it, they were listening to the "ha'nt" which had, through the years, spoken to the superstitious prospectors in the silence of the shack. In the cavern the sound of the regular dropping was intensified in volume until it seemed as though each drop was a bullet plunging into the pool. Beyond the black pool shone a curving and black surface, the rocky end of the cave, and an excellent sounding board.

Hurriedly retracing their steps Ross, still in advance, was about to stoop to enable him to pass under the wall logs into the shack when the candle light fell on an object that both had overlooked as they entered the cave.

It was a large box, strengthened by cleats nailed up its sides and along its edges and across its base, but it had evidently seen hard service. It had originally been brought in filled with canned tomatoes on the back of a horse. Having served its original purpose, it was now serving another and very different one. In an instant both boys were hanging over it exclaiming excitedly over its contents. It was evident that Fred Holzworth had sorted the ore, filling this box with the pieces which contained the largest visible nuggets and flakes. He had even commenced to break up the other quartz, casting into a refuse heap the broken

GOLD HUNTER

pieces that revealed the least amount of metal and putting the rest into the box. The result was a maximum of value in a minimum of bulk.

"Nick," whispered Ross softly to still the weird echo, "if Sandy should get here with only one bag—and find a bunch of such ore as this ——"

"Tell you what we must do, and do it now!" was the agitated return whisper.

Doing away with further speech and, therefore, further echo, Nicholas stooped and attempted to lift one end of the box. Instantly Ross caught his idea, which was to carry the box out of the shack and hide it. He seized the other end, giving it a strong wrench. The result was disastrous. The box had evidently been previously wracked to the limit of its strength, for it was stout enough to hold the quartz, but not strong enough to withstand the extra strain brought to bear on it by the boys. It gave way and fell apart, the rich ore sliding down into the muck in all directions, and faintly stirring the echoes.

"Oh, for a bag—just one of the gunny bags on Spot!" cried Nicholas aloud.

Instantly the cavern was filled with confused echoes, while the boys stood looking down in dismay at the result of their misguided efforts.

"Push the stuff up together, Nick," Ross whis-

ROSS GRANT

pered, "and I'll go out and see what I can get to carry it in."

Leaving the candle with Nicholas he dove through the aperture into the welcome sunlight. The necessity was strong upon him of getting that rare bit of gold out of the cave and away from Sandy's immediate reach. He had but a vague idea of the value of that boxful, but he believed there were hundreds of dollars' worth of gold included in a bulk of ore which one horse might carry on its back. His glance ran over the shack. A couple of bags which Lucky had used for the transportation of food lay beside the stove. Ross sprang for them hastily, but was arrested half-way across the floor by a sharp sound from the wall opposite the opening into the cave. He stared in fascination at the blank wall a full minute before he realized that he was listening to the bullet-like fall of the drop of water into the cavern pool.

It was evident that not only were all the conditions fulfilled to cause a perfect echo of that drop, but that some additional acoustic condition caused the ventriloquistic effect of making the sound to seem to come only from the reflecting surface.

"But it's so much louder than when I heard it before ——" Ross cried aloud.

"What's that you're saying?" shouted Nicholas.

The effect of the words was startling. Only the

GOLD HUNTER

drop of water had because of its distance a perfect echo. The question filled the cabin with half echoes, with strange syllables and hisses, with an overwhelming confusion of sound that poured from the funnel-shaped mouth of the cave and seemed also to drop from the logs overhead, from the side walls, and rise from the very floor. Before this avalanche subsided, a very different sort of disturbance smote Ross's ear. "Hush, Nick!" he warned sharply. "Don't you move nor speak. Mind now!"

He hurried to the door and looked out, advancing his head with the utmost caution. What he had heard was a stone bounding down the slope. It had flashed past the doorway and disappeared. With a tightening of the muscles in his throat, Ross peered up toward the Horn and saw there the realization of his worst fears in the figures of Sandy and Waymart McKenzie leisurely descending the slope. Sandy was talking excitedly and they were coming confidently as though they had no expectation of meeting any one. This attitude was easily understandable to the boy in the doorway. Sandy believed that Lucky and he were far away, and that the Monkey, utterly ignorant of the letter, was camping at the entrance to the Indian trail. Waymart must have doubled on his trail in accordance with a plan

ROSS GRANT

conceived by Sandy before the two had parted, and this meant that, not far away, were his three horses, together with Spot, and all those gunny sacks. And in the cavern was that boxful of rich ore with two unarmed boys. The men coming down the slope always went armed.

Ross drew back, the blood receding from his face. He stood still trying to steady his senses, when on his ear there fell the echo of the ceaseless dropping of the water in the cave. Fell also into his memory in an illuminating flash Sandy's remarks on that sound and his uneasy and unexplained comment as he sat with Breitmann beside the camp-fire in the Valley of the Willows. In that comment Sandy had wondered why Holzworth should have cached the ore where he did.

The letter had revealed to Sandy the existence of the cave. But it had evidently not mentioned the fact that the ha'nt was only an echo, and this latter fact determined Ross's action. His figure blocked the opening, and his voice, hoarse with agitation, whispered :

"Nick, Sandy and Waymart are coming. Sh! Not a word. I can't stop to explain—get out quick, block up this hole and put the bunk back in its place and then drop out of the window and hide and don't leave anything behind you to show that any one is here. Move your fastest!"

GOLD HUNTER

The younger boy made no comment, but the next moment Ross found himself alone in the cave with the candle-end spluttering faintly. The section of logs moved forward and left no glimpse of light. There was a faint scraping sound that he judged to be the bunk pushed into place. Then silence.

He started to the edge of the pool. He must throw his voice out from the exact point of the dripping of that drop—the point of perfect echo. Hastily, lest the candle fail before he reached his destination, he waded boldly into the pool. Luckily it was not deep. A depression in the rock had caught the drippings. But when he reached the point of perfect echo, he was standing in icy water nearly to his knees. At first he was not conscious of discomfort; he was busy grasping the situation. He reasoned that any variation in the volume of sound might produce different results in the shack, and he wanted his voice to appear to come from the outer wall where the ha'nt had spoken since the cabin was built. It had previously occurred to him that the closing of the aperture caused the softening of the echo into the throbbing, tiny, insistent beat that Sandy had heard before.

A moment Ross waited, trying to gain control of his voice, which he felt to be as shaky as his

ROSS GRANT

knees. With a final splutter his candle went out, leaving him in a damp darkness that seemed uncannily alive, waiting alertly as it was to burst into reiterated speech. Drawing a long breath, he began to whisper, "Sandy," in a quick, short, sharp manner so that the entire word would be repeated in the cabin.

He was working in the dark literally and figuratively. He could not know when the McKenzies would reach the shack. He could not know whether or not they would reconnoiter outside or enter at once, but he judged that if they came in at once they would be there in time to catch his first whisper. But, worst of all, he could not be sure whether the echo was doing its duty in front of that closed section of logs, and causing his voice to seem to come from the wall opposite the cave. He swayed dizzily in the murkiness, so intently were his eyes strained on the point from which the Monkey had excluded the light. So long as that door remained closed the human "haunt" must continue to play his part, for, he reasoned, Nicholas would relieve him at the earliest opportunity if the "ha'nt" had the desired effect of driving the McKenzies away.

After a moment's whispered repetition of "Sandy," Ross spoke aloud gradually deepening his voice. "Go!" he commanded. "Go! Go!

GOLD HUNTER

Go!" Then he betook himself to the favorite occupation of so-called "haunts," groaning, and his efforts in this direction caused the chills that were besetting his damp knees to creep up his spine, so uncanny was the result in the cave.

"If Sandy can live through much of this I can't!" he told himself as he kept silent after an especially sepulchral effort.

"I think I could scare myself into fits. Horrors!" he whispered as the groans dropped back on him in horrible cadences the original could not muster. "This is on a par with meeting the bear!"

Still the door at the mouth of the cave did not open, and this encouraged the boy to do his best in the matter of moans and calls although he could not be sure that the result was not being wasted in the shack. Finally, unable longer to endure the ice water bath his feet were getting, and recalling the result of the Monkey's speech nearer the mouth of the cave, he crept out of the water, and, groaning as he went, advanced to the side of the broken box.

Hours later, to measure by his feelings, perhaps fifteen minutes measured by the watch in his pocket, the section of logs moved slowly. Daylight appeared, and a groan was suddenly choked in his throat. Was it the Monkey, or Sandy? Had

ROSS GRANT

Sandy's superstition proved more keen or less than his wits? And were it Sandy, what would he, Ross, do?

"For the love of Mike, Doc, stop that noise, or I'll go mad myself!" came Nicholas' welcome voice, and Ross fairly fell forward through the opening.

"Where are they? What has happened?" he asked breathlessly.

"I can imagine the tails of their horses are sticking straight out behind by this time," giggled the Monkey. "If Waymart's coat had a tail I know it would be whipped into shreds before he reached the horses!"

Nicholas dropped to the floor and hugging his knees, rocked back and forth in glee. "As for Sandy, if he hasn't a stroke of apoplexy or heart failure or something after skating up the side of the Horn the way he did I'll miss my guess."

Ross stood shivering and dripping in the middle of the shack. "Then you're sure they've gone?"

"Gone! All of Daisy's freighters couldn't drag 'em back here. I scouted along up after 'em aways to be sure they were scared stiff—or limber, rather, for I never saw men go so fast up-hill."

Here Nicholas, for the first time, saw the discomfort that Ross's foot bath was causing him. He scrambled hastily to his feet.

GOLD HUNTER

“ See here, Doc, you get those wet things off and wrap up in blankets. Here, get into Lucky’s bed. We can’t build up a fire yet. They might see the smoke and smell a rat. But I’ll rub you down. I can give one or two first aids myself, if I’m not going to be a doc ! ”

Presently as Ross’s shivers were subsiding, Nicholas told his story coherently.

“ If I hadn’t felt sure you had something worth while up your sleeve, Doc, I never could have got out of that hole and got the door put up, and the bunk shoved over it and made my get-away before they came. But I tell you I didn’t let a blade of grass grow under my feet. Little Nicky was spry, and don’t you forget it! I grabbed my coat—almost forgot that—I had taken it off before I went into the cave—and just plunged head foremost through that glassless window. Then in they came! I crawled along to the rock and lay with my ear to the crack between the first and second logs, and shook in my moccasins for fear they’d look out of the window and see me.”

“ Could you hear me ? ” asked Ross eagerly.

“ Nope, not at first, but guess they heard something the first whack when they got inside, for Waymart said, ‘ Hold on ! What’s that ? ’

“ ‘ Come on now,’ said Sandy, sort of disgusted. ‘ What did I tell ye ? That ha’nt hain’t

ROSS GRANT

got arms ner legs ner a gun, and we're after that box of gold.' ”

“ Huh ! ” exclaimed Ross, “ then the letter must have mentioned the box. ”

“ Guess so, by that. Well, I heard 'em make a move or two, and it come to me for the first time what your game was. I nearly bust with one or more feelin's. Thought I'd yell in spite of me, but Waymart did that for me. Didn't you hear him ? ”

“ Not I ! ” exclaimed Ross. “ I was so busy listening to a dozen or more of myself in there that I hadn't ears for anything in the shack. ”

“ Well, before I could hear a sound of the echo, ” continued the Monkey, “ Waymart gave a yell. ‘ Sandy, d'ye hear ? I don't need no second tellin', ’ and out he got in a hurry. I heard him go on the jump. Now, what did you say ? ”

Ross shook in his blankets, but not with a chill. “ I said, ‘ Go, go, go ! ’ ”

“ Well—he went all right, but Sandy stuck it out a minute or two longer. I heard him muttering either to himself, or the haunt. Then, Doc, the sounds that broke loose in there were awful. Golly ! I could have heard you groaning and taking on through a double door of iron. It scared me half to death, in spite of myself. ”

“ Scared me too, ” assented Ross, chuckling. “ My

GOLD HUNTER

hair was about as stiff as when I was treed by that bear. I've never heard such an echo."

"Neither had Sandy! I heard him leave. I think he crossed the floor in one jump, and I know he hasn't stopped going yet. He kicked enough stones loose on the trail so that they rolled back down the side of the mountain for about——"

Suddenly Ross raised up on his elbow. "See here, Nick! Can you guess yet what makes that trail all scraped smooth down from Holzworth's discovery hole?"

"No—that is—he must have snaked logs——"

"Logs nothing!" cried Ross. "He got logs down nearer this shack. I have it! That trail was worn off by dragging the ore down. He may have had sacks—no, they would be worn out too quickly. Nick, he dragged it down in that box itself—that's it."

"Right you must be!" responded Nicholas eagerly. "He cleated the box for that job—and wore it out, too. And the hole through the end—he tied one of the pack ropes there and snaked the ore down from the Horn in small loads."

Ross threw off the blankets and sat up excitedly. "Exactly. He must have left the box at the top of the slope and then back-packed the ore out of the hole in sacks. And that accounts for the trail

ROSS GRANT

not being scraped from the top of the slope around the brush on the level."

Presently Nicholas, leaving Ross wrapped in his blankets, ascended the Horn, bent on a scouting expedition.

"I'm going to make sure the McKenzies are far enough away so I can fire up and get something hot inside of us," he explained. "There's a round-up of shivers chasin' each other all over my back now. A little hot coffee would seem good and healthy to me!"

As soon as the younger boy had left, Ross fell asleep. He was awakened at the close of an hour by the sound of voices. Springing out of the bunk he dressed hastily, and, running out on the rock shelf, looked below on a sight which gladdened his eyes. On the valley trail under the shelf stood four horsemen. Lucky and Dad, the former with his rifle across the pommel of his saddle, were headed up the valley from the distant shack of old man Clark. Nicholas, gesticulating frantically, and talking loudly, stood and hopped about excitedly on the flank of an exceedingly leg-weary Spot. He had found the pony hobbled the other side of the Horn. The fourth member of the group, rolling about in his saddle in an ecstasy of enjoyment, was Tod. The Monkey was setting forth vividly the boys' late adventures.

GOLD HUNTER

"Hey!" yelled Ross. "Cut that out until you get up here!"

Four faces turned up to meet the voice. Then the Monkey agilely inverted himself and gave the first public exhibition of a trick which he had long and patiently practiced in secret: he stood on his head on Spot's flank, and, bending his knees, dropped his feet back until he could grasp his toes in both hands, maintaining his balance skilfully. Having thus celebrated the Victory of the Horn, he led a jubilant procession up the trail and into the cabin of the handy echo.

"Trig's horse put its nose in the Pass about as soon as you boys had left," Tod explained to Ross, "and I waited only long enough for it to eat and rest up a bit before hiking after you hotfooted. I wanted to see what was going on over here, and the Monkey tells me," with a broad grin, "that the fastest things going are the McKenzies escapin' the ha'nt! And say, Doc, Daisy Breitmann stopped to see Hans."

Here Tod's speech was lost as he followed the others into the cavern, where pandemonium presently reigned as six voices burst into speech beside the ore, and amid the echoes. The Toddler was the first to beat a retreat into the shack. He was pressing both hands over his ears. "I don't suppose I'll ever meet up with another pair of good

ROSS GRANT

ear drums," he cried, "and I ain't going to let that ha'nt bust these!"

The other explorers soon joined him, glad to escape from the darkness, dampness and confusion of the cave. Every one was talking, except the Monkey, who fell at once on the supplies with a purposeful air while Lucky built a fire.

Then it was that Ross recalled Tod's reference to Daisy's call, and asked for an explanation.

"Daisy?" laughed Tod. "Oh, yes, I saw Daisy. He's a guileless old boy and still thinks Sandy is an open-handed charitable institute! What d'ye think Sandy's last pious act was? Why, he sent that letter back by Breitmann and told him to give it to Hans, and tell 'im that Sandy McKenzie was the only friend he had in the mountains, and that he was going to rescue as much of the gold from Lucky here as he was able and put it into a new cache against the time when Hans should get able to attend to it! At that time, Sandy allowed, he'd come around Hans' way and lead him to the cache like Mary's little lamb!"

"Did Daisy read the letter to you?" asked Nick eagerly.

"Yep—and, Dad, by the way, the last of the letter said that Hans was to hand over to you the first thousand he got out of the ore."

Dad's face lighted. "I ain't so keen about the

GOLD HUNTER

plunks as I am about Fred's handin' me out a square deal," he rejoined quietly.

"And was anything said in the letter about the fine bit of ore in the box?" asked Lucky.

"Huh-uh, that was all explained, so you see Sandy knew what he was about when he hiked along on foot with them bags."

Lucky, giving the supplies over into the Monkey's competent hands, sat down in his bunk, and spoke to Dad meditatively :

"Wall, all said and done, Hans 'ull have a good stake left after payin' ye, Dad ; I'm glad of that. Three 'r four thousand 'ull help out, and, from what Fred said I take it Hans wants t' own a brass band 'r somethin' like that. Fred said he wants t' be a musical director, whatever that may be."

Tod shook his head gravely. "Maybe he can manage a brass band, but some one would have to stand by to manage the manager ! Think of that full-sized Dutch baby startin' out alone with one packhorse to manage a ton of ore a hundred miles from nowhere ! We've got to round things up for him ourselves, that's all !"

Lucky opened and closed his hands, regarding them abstractedly. "I'll hike down to the valley and fetch back Daisy and the packhosses," he said slowly, "and we'll get this stuff and Hans down as fur as Cody as soon as he is fitten to go. There

GOLD HUNTER

he can git some of his own folks t' look out for him."

"But, Lucky," Tod remonstrated, "there's your tunnel. It's up to you to peg away at your work from now on."

Here Ross stepped forward. He spoke haltingly, half ashamed to offer his services in the presence of so many witnesses.

"There's no reason why I should go back to Pennsylvania before September," he began. "I'll write to my people not to look for me, and then—I'll help you out in your tunnel—if you'll let me."

Lucky made no reply in words, but into his deep-set eyes flashed such an expression of affection and gratitude that Ross's face flushed, and the others looked silently away.

But the irrepressible Monkey relieved the situation by chanting as he beat the slapjack batter: "Where Doc goes to work I'll go to visit!"

The Stories in this Series are:
ROSS GRANT, TENDERFOOT
ROSS GRANT, GOLD HUNTER



RETURN CIRCULATIC
TO → 202 Main L

LOAN PERIOD 1 2

LIBRARY - U.C. BERKELEY

4

5



8000542327

LIBRA

This book is due before closing th

DUE AS STA

REC. CIR. MAR 2 2 1979

UNIVERS

FORM NO. DD6A, 7m, 3/78