

The Young Engineers in Nevada

H. Irving Hancock

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THE YOUNG ENGINEERS IN NEVADA

or, Seeking Fortune on the Turn of a Pick

By

H. IRVING HANCOCK

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS

- I. Alf and His "Makings of Manhood"
- II. Trouble Brews on the Trail
- III. Jim's Army Appears
- IV. Sold Out for a Toy Bale!
- V. No Need to Work for Pennies
- VI. Tom Catches the "Nevada Fever"
- VII. Ready to Handle the Pick

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- VIII. Jim Ferrers, Partner
- IX. Harry Does Some Pitching
- X. Tom's Fighting Blood Surges
- XI. Planning a New Move
- XII. New Owners File a Claim
- XIII. Jim Tries the New Way
- XIV. The Cook Learns a Lesson
- XV. Why Reade Wanted Gold
- XVI. The Man Who Made Good
- XVII. The Miners Who "Stuck"
- XVIII. The Goddess of Fortune Smiles Wistfully
- XIX. Harry's Signal of Distress
- XX. Tom Turns Doctor
- XXI. The Wolves on the Snow Crust
- XXII. Dolph Gage Fires His Shot
- XXIII. Tom Begins to Doubt His Eyes
- XXIV. Conclusion

CHAPTER I

ALF AND HIS "MAKINGS OF MANHOOD"

"Say, got the makings?"

"Eh?" inquired Tom Reade, glancing up in mild astonishment.

"Got the makings?" persisted the thin dough-faced lad of fourteen who had come into the tent.

"I believe we have the makings for supper, if you mean that you're hungry," Tom rejoined. "But you've just had your dinner."

"I know I have," replied the youngster. "That's why I want my smoke."

"Your wha-a-at?" insisted Tom. By this time light had begun to dawn upon the bronzed, athletic young engineer, but he preferred to pretend ignorance a little while longer.

"Say, don't you carry the makings?" demanded the boy.

"You'll have to be more explicit," Tom retorted. "Just what are you up to? What do you want anyway?"

"I want the makings for a cigarette," replied the boy, shifting uneasily to the other foot. "You said you'd pay me five dollars a month and find me in everything, didn't you?"

"Yes; everything that is necessary to living," Reade assented.

"Well, cigarettes are necessary to me," continued the boy.

"They are?" asked Tom, opening his eyes wider. "Why, how does that happen?"

"Just because I am a smoker," returned the boy, with a sickly grin.

"You are?" gasped Tom. "At your age? Why, you little wretch!"

"That's all right, but please don't go on stringing me," pleaded the younger American. "Just pass over the papers and the tobacco pouch, and I'll get busy. I'm suffering for a smoke."

"Then you have my heartfelt sympathy," Tom assured him. "I hate to see any boy with that low-down habit, and I'm glad that I'm not in position to be able to encourage you in it. How long have you been smoking, Drew?"

Alf Drew shifted once more on his feet.

"'Bouter year," he answered.

"You began poisoning yourself at the age of thirteen, and you've lived a whole year? No; I won't say 'lived,' but you've kept pretty nearly alive. There isn't much real life in you, Drew, I'll be bound. Come here."

"Do I get the makings?" whined the boy.

"Come here!"

Drew advanced, rather timidly, into the tent.

"Don't shrink so," ordered Tom. "I'm not going to spank you, though some one ought to. Give me your wrist."

Reade took the thin little wrist between his thumb and finger, feeling for the pulse.

"Are you a doctor?" sneered Drew.

"No; but generally I've intelligence enough to know whether a pulse is slow or fast, full or weak."

"But-----"

"Keep quiet," Tom commanded, as he drew out his watch. His face expressed nothing in particular as he kept the tip of his forefinger against the radial artery at the boy's wrist.

"Fine," commented the young engineer, a few moments later, as he let go the captive wrist.

"Good pulse, eh?" questioned Alf Drew.

"Great!" quoth Tom. "Fine and wiry, and almost skips some beats. I'm not much of an authority on such subjects, but I believe a boy of your age ought to have a normal pulse. Where do you expect to wind up with your 'makings' and your cigarettes?"

"They don't hurt me," whined Alf.

"They don't, eh?" demanded Reade, rising and drawing himself up

to his full height of five-feet-eleven. "Drew, do you think you look as healthy as I do?"

As he stood there, erect as a soldier, with his fine athletic figure revealed, and the bronze on his face seemingly inches deep, Tom Reade looked what he was---every inch a man though still a boy in years.

"Do you think you look as healthy as I do?" Tom repeated.

"No-o-o-o," admitted Alf. "But you're older'n me."

"Not so much, as years go," Tom rejoined. "For that matter, if you go on with your cigarettes you'll be an old man before I get through with being a young man. Fill up your chest, Alf; expand it---like this."

As he expanded his chest Reade looked a good deal more like some Greek god of old than a twentieth century civil engineer.

Alf puffed and squirmed in his efforts to show "some chest."

"That isn't the right way," Tom informed him. "Breathe deeply and steadily. Draw in your stomach and expand your chest. Fill up the upper part of your lungs with air. Watch! Right here at the top of the chest."

Alf watched. For that matter he seemed unable to remove his gaze from the splendid chest development that young Reade displayed so easily. Then the boy tried to fill the upper portions of his own lungs in the same manner. The attempt ended in a spasm of coughing.

"Fine, isn't it?" queried Tom Reade, scornfully. "The upper parts of your lungs are affected already, and you'll carry the work of destruction on rapidly. Alf, if you ever live to be twenty you'll be a wreck at best. Don't you know that?"

"I---I have heard folks say so," nodded the boy.

"And you didn't believe them?"

"I---I don't know."

"Why did you ever take up smoking?"

"All men smoke," argued Alf Drew.

"Lie number one. All men don't smoke," Tom corrected him. "But I think I catch the drift of your idea. If you smoke you think men will look upon you as being more manly. That's it, it?"

"It must be manly, if men do it," Alf argued.

"You funny little shaver," laughed Tom, good-humoredly. "So you think that, when men see you smoking cigarettes, they immediately imagine you to be one of them? Cigarette-smoking, for a boy of fourteen, is the short cut to manhood, I suppose."

Tom laughed long, heartily, and with intense enjoyment. At last he paused, to remark, soberly:

"Answering your first question, Drew, I haven't the 'makings.' I never did carry them and never expect to."

"What do you smoke then?" queried Alf, in some wonder. "A pipe?"

"No; I never had that vice, either. I don't use tobacco. For your own sake I'm sorry that you do."

"But a lot of men do smoke," argued Alf. "Jim Ferrers, for instance."

"Ferrers is a grown man, and it would show a lot more respect on your part if a 'kid' like you would call him 'Mr. Ferrers.' But I'll wager that Mr. Ferrers didn't smoke cigarettes at your age."

"I'll bet he did."

"We'll see."

Tom stepped to the doorway of the tent, Alf making way for him, and called lustily:

"Ferrers! Oh, Mr. Ferrers!"

"Here, sir!" answered the voice of a man who was invisible off under the trees. "Want me?"

"If you please," Tom called back.

Ferrers soon appeared, puffing at a blackened corn-cob pipe. He was a somewhat stooped, much bronzed, rather thin man of middle age. Ferrers had always worked hard, and his body looked slightly the worse for wear, though he a man of known endurance in rough life.

"Ferrers, do you know what ails this boy?" demanded Tom.

"Laziness," Jim answered, rather curtly. "You hired him for a chore-boy, to help me. He hasn't done a tap yet. He's no good."

"Don't be too hard on him, Ferrers," pleaded Tom solemnly. "I've just heard the youngster's sad story. Do you know what really ails him? Cigarettes!"

"Him? Cigarettes!" observed Ferrers disgustedly. "The miserable little rascal!"

"You see," smiled Tom, turning to the boy, "just what men think of a lad who tries to look manly by smoking cigarettes."

"Cigarettes? Manly?" exploded Jim Ferrers, with a guffaw. "_Men_ don't smoke cigarettes. That's left for weak-minded boys."

"Say, how many years you been smoking, Jim Ferrers?" demanded Alf, rather defiantly.

"Answer him, please," requested Tom, when he saw their guide and

cook frown.

"Lemme see," replied the Nevada man, doing some mental arithmetic on his fingers. "I reckon I've been smoking twenty-three years, because I began when I was twenty-four years old. Hang the stuff, I wish I had never begun, either. But I didn't smoke at your age, papoose. If I had done so, the men in the camps would have kicked me out. Don't let me catch you smoking around any of the work you're helping me on! Is that all, Mr. Reade? 'Cause I've got a power of work to do."

"That's all, thank you," Tom assured him. "But, Ferrers, we'll have to take young Drew in hand and try to win him back to the path of brains and health."

"Say, I don't believe I'm going to like this job," muttered Alf Drew. "I reckon I'll be pulling my freight outer this camp."

"Don't go until tomorrow, anyway," urged Tom. "You'll have to go some distance to find other human beings, and grub doesn't grow on trees in Nevada."

With a sniff of scorn Ferrers tramped away.

"I guess, perhaps, what you need, Drew is a friend," remarked Tom, resting a hand on the boy's nearer shoulder. "Make up your mind that you can't have a cigarette this afternoon, take a walk with me, in this fresh air and the good old sunshine. Let's drop all talk of cigarettes, and give a little thought to brains and a strong body. They don't flourish where you find boys smoking cigarettes. Come along! I'm going to show you how to step out right, and just how to breathe like a human being. Let's try it."

Tom had almost to drag the boy, to make him start. But Reade had no intention of hectoring the, dough-faced little fellow.

It was rough ground along this mountain trail in the Indian Smoke Range of mountains, in Nevada. Soon the pulses of both began to beat more heavily. Tom took in great breaths of the life-giving air, but Alf was soon panting.

"Let's stop, now," proposed Tom, in a kindly voice. "After you've rested a couple of minutes I'm going to show you how to breathe right and fill your lungs with air."

Soon they were trying this most sensible "stunt." Alf, however, didn't succeed very well. Whenever he tried hard it set him to coughing.

"You see, it's mostly due to the cigarettes," said Tom gravely. "Alf, you've simply got to turn over a new leaf. You're headed just right to have consumption."

"Cigarettes don't give a fellow consumption!" retorted the younger boy sullenly.

"I don't believe they do," Tom admitted, thoughtfully. "Consumption is caused by germs, I've heard. But germs take hold best in a weakened part of the body, and your lungs, Alf, are weak enough

for any germ to find a good place to lodge. What you've got to do is to make your lungs so strong that they'll resist germs."

"You talk like a doctor!"

"No; I'm trying to talk like an athlete. I used to be a half-way amateur athlete, Drew, and I'm still taking care of my body. That's why I've never allowed any white-papered little 'coffin-nails' to fool around me. Bad as your lungs are, Alf, they're not one whit worse than your nerves. You'll go to pieces if you find yourself under the least strain. You'll get to shivering and crying, if you don't stop smoking cigarettes."

"Don't you believe it," muttered the boy, sullenly.

"Alf," smiled Tom, laying a hand gently on the boy's shoulder, "you don't know me yet. You haven't any idea how I can hang to a thing until I win. I'm going to keep hammering at you until I make you throw your cigarettes away."

"I'm never going to stop smoking 'em," retorted Drew. "There wouldn't be any comfort in life if I stopped."

"Is it as bad as that?" queried Tom, with ready sympathy. "Then all the more reason for stopping. Come; let's finish our walk."

"Say, I don't want to go down and through that thick brush," objected Alf Drew, slowing his steps.

"Why not?"

"Snakes!"

"Are you afraid of snakes, Alf?"

"Some kinds."

"What kinds?"

"Well, rattlers, fr instance."

"There are none of that kind on this part of the Indian Smoke Range," Reade rejoined. "Come along with me."

There was something mildly though surely compelling in Tom's manner. Alf Drew went along, though he didn't wish to. The two were just at the fringe of the thick underbrush when there came a warning sound just ahead of them.

Click! cl-cl-click!

"Whee! Me for outer this!" gasped Alf, going whiter than ever as he turned. But Tom caught him by the shoulder.

"What's the matter?" demanded Reade.

Click cl-cl-click!

"There it is again," cried Alf, in fear.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Tom demanded.

Once more the dread sound smote the air.

"Rattlers!" wailed Drew, perspiring from fear. "Lemme get away from this."

"Nonsense!" retorted Reade, retaining a strong clutch on the boy's shoulder, though once more the sound reached their ears.

"It's all your nerves, Alf," Tom insisted. "You just imagine such things. That's what cigarettes do to your nerves."

"But don't you hear the rattlesnake?"

"I don't," Tom gravely informed him, though once more the nerve-disturbing sound rose clearly on the air. "See here, Alf, rattlers, whatever their habits, certainly don't climb trees. I'll put you up on that limb."

Tom's strong young arms lifted Alf easily until he could clutch at the lowest limb of a tree.

"Climb up there and sit down," Reade ordered. Drew sat on the limb, shaking with terror.

"Now, I'll show you that there isn't a snake anywhere in that clump of brush," Tom proposed, and forthwith stepped into the thicket, beating about lustily with his heavy boots.

"L-I-I-look out!" shivered Drew. "You'll be bitten!"

"Nonsense, I tell you. There isn't a rattler anywhere on this part of the Range. It's your nerves, Alf. Cigarettes are destroying 'em. There! I've beaten up every bit of this brush and you see that I've not been bitten. Now I'll help you down to the ground, and you want to get a good, steady grip on your nerves."

Alf Drew permitted himself to be helped to the ground. No sooner, however, had his feet touched the earth than there came that ominous rattling sound.

"There, you big idiot!" howled Alf. "There it is again!"

"Just your bad nerves, Alf," Tom smiled. "They're so bad that I'll overlook your lack of respect calling me an idiot!"

"Don't you s'pose I know rattlers when I hear 'em?" asked Drew, sullenly. "I was almost bitten by one once, and that's why I'm so afraid of 'em."

"I was bitten once," Tom replied. "Yet you see that I'm not very nervous about them, especially in a part of the country where none are ever found. It's your nerves, Alf--and cigarettes!"

"I wish I had one now," sighed the younger boy.

"A rattlesnake?" Tom inquired innocently.

"No---of course not! A cigarette."

"But you're going to forget those soul-destroying little coffin-nails," Reade suggested. "You're going to become a man and act like one. You're going to learn how much more fun it is to have your lungs filled with pure air instead of stifling cigarette smoke."

"Maybe I am!" muttered the boy.

"Oh, yes; I'm sure of it," said Reade cheerfully.

Cl-cl-cl-click!

"O-o-o-ow!" shrilled Alf, jumping at least two feet.

"Now, what's the matter with you?" inquired Tom in feigned astonishment.

"Don't tell me you didn't hear the rattler just now," cried young Drew fiercely.

"No; I didn't," Tom assured him. "And how could we find a rattler--_here_? We're crossing open ground now. There is no place within three hundred feet of us for a rattlesnake to move without our seeing him."

Cl-cl-cl-click!

Alf Drew held back, trembling.

"I'm not going forward another step," he insisted. "This ground is full of rattlers."

"Let's go back to camp, then, if your nerves are so unstrung," Reade proposed.

They turned, starting backward. Again the warning rattle sounded, seemingly just in front of Alf, though there was no place for a snake to conceal itself nearby.

Alf, however, turned paler still, halted and started off at right angles to his former course. Again the rattle sounded.

"Hear that snake?" demanded young Drew.

"No; and there isn't one," Tom assured him. "Why will you be so foolish---so nervous? In other words, why do you destroy your five senses with cigarettes in this fashion?"

Cl-cl-click!

Alf Drew halted, trembling so that he could hardly stand.

"I'm going to quit camp---going to get out of this place," he shivered. "The ground is full of rattlers. O-o-o-oh! There's another tuning up."

Tom laughed covertly. The disturbing sound came again.

"I never saw a place like this part of the range," Alf all but sobbed, his breath catching. "Oh, won't I be glad to see a city again!"

"Just so you can find a store where you can buy cigarettes?" Tom Reade queried.

"I wish I had one, now," moaned the young victim. "It would steady me."

"The last ones that you smoked didn't appear to steady you," the young engineer retorted. "Just see how unstrung you are. Every step you take you imagine you hear rattlers sounding their warning."

"Do you tell me, on your sacred honor," proposed Alf, "that you haven't heard a single rattler this afternoon?"

"I give you my most solemn word that I haven't," Tom answered. "Come, come, Alf! What you want to do is to shake off the trembles. Let me take your arm. Now, walk briskly with me. Inflate your chest with all the air you can get in as we go along. Just wait and see if that isn't the way to shake off these horrid cigarette dreams."

Something in Reade's vigorous way of speaking made Alf Drew obey. Tom put him over the ground at as good a gait as he judged the cigarette victim would be able to keep up.

Readers of the preceding volumes of this series, and of other, earlier series, need not the slightest introduction to Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton. Our readers of the "Grammar School Series" know Tom and Harry as two of the members of that famous sextette of schoolboy athletes who, under the leadership of Dick Prescott, were known as Dick & Co.

In the "High School Boys Series," too, our readers have followed the fortunes of Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, through all their triumphs on football fields, on baseball diamonds and in all the school sports.

Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes succeeded in winning appointments to the United States military Academy, and their adventures are fully set forth in the "West Point Series."

Dave Darrin and Dan Dalzell "made" the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, and what befell them there has been fully set forth in the "Annapolis Series."

Reade and Harry Hazelton elected to go through life as civil engineers. In "The Young Engineers in Colorado" has been fully set forth the extraordinary work of these young men at railroad building through the mountains wilds. In "The Young Engineers in Arizona" we have followed Tom and Harry through even more startling adventures, and have seen how they handled even greater problems in engineering.

Up to date the careers of these two bright young men had not been humdrum ones. The surroundings in which their professional lives had been passed had been such as to supply them with far more

startling adventures than either young man had ever looked for.

And now they were in Nevada, the state famous for its gold and silver mines. Yet they had come here solely in search of a few weeks of rest. Rest? There was anything but rest immediately ahead of the young engineers, but the curtain had not been lifted.

Immediately after the completion of their great work in Arizona, Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton had gone back east to the good old home town of Gridley. While there they had encountered Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes, their old school chums, at that time cadets at the United States Military Academy. The doings of the four old chums at that time in Gridley are set forth fully in "Dick Prescott's Third Year At West Point."

During the weeks spent East, Tom and Harry had taken almost their first steps in the study of metallurgy. They had succeed in mastering the comparatively simple art of assaying gold and silver.

So now, with the summer past, we find our young engineers out in Nevada, taking a little more rest just because no new engineering task of sufficient importance had presented itself.

"If we're going to be engineers out West, though, Harry, we simply must know a good deal about assaying precious metals," Tom had declared.

So, though the chums were "taking a rest," as they phrased it, they had brought with them a small furnace and the rest of the outfit for assaying minerals in small quantities.

Today, however, was altogether too fine for thoughts of work. Just after breakfast Harry Hazelton had borrowed the only horse in camp, belonging to Jim Ferrers, their cook and guide, and had ridden away for the day.

Barely had Hazelton departed when Alf Drew, hungry, lonely and wistful, had happened along. He asked for "a job." There really wasn't one for him, but good-natured Reade created one, offering five dollars a month and board.

"No telling, young man, how long the job will last," Tom warned him. "We may at any hour break camp and get away."

But Alf had taken the job and gratefully. Not until after the noon meal had the little fellow revealed his unfortunate vice for cigarette smoking.

"You've simply got to give up that habit, Alf" Tom urged, as they walked along.

"You can't make me," retorted young Drew. "You've no right to."

"No, I haven't," Tom admitted soberly. "If I had any real rights over you I'm afraid I'd turn you over my knee and spank you, three times a day, until you gave up the beastly habit."

"You're not going to bounce me, are you?" asked Alf.

"No; I'll keep you here as long as we can use a boy. But, mark me, Alf, somehow, and before very long, I'm going to break you from your cigarettes. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to do it just the same!"

Alf Drew looked uncommonly solemn, but he said nothing.

For five minutes more they walked on, then came suddenly out from under a line of trees and stood at the edge of a low cliff, gazing down in astonishment at the gully below them.

"What on earth-----" began Tom Reade, in amazement.

"Let's scoot!" begged Alf tremulously. "There's going to be some killing right down there!"

It certainly looked that way.

In the gully three automobiles, showing the effects of long travel over hard roads, stood close together. More than a dozen people, all but two of whom were dressed in "eastern" clothes, stood by the machines. Two of the party were women, and one a girl of twelve.

The two men who belonged to the party, but did not appear to be "eastern," had drawn revolvers, and now stood facing four sullen-looking men who stood with the butts of their rifles resting on the ground.

"Gracious! We can't have any shooting with women and children standing around to get hit!" gasped Tom Reade.

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE BREWS ON THE TRAIL

So silent had been the approach of Tom and his waif companion that those below had not perceived them.

Moreover, judging from the expressions on the faces of the people almost at Reade's feet, they were all too deeply absorbed in their own business to have any eyes or ears for outside matters.

Through the scene below was one of armed truce that might, at any moment, break into hostilities, with human lives at stake, Tom glanced coolly downward for a few seconds after his first startled, unheard remark.

"I'm going, to duck out of this," whispered Alf Drew, whose slim little figure was shaking in a way suggestive of chills.

"Don't be in a hurry," Tom murmured. "We may be of some use to some of these people."

"Tote those guns away, friends," spoke one of the revolver-armed men with the automobile party, "and march yourselves under the

guns. Remember, we have women here."

"They can get away," returned one of the sullen-faced men with rifles. "We won't hinder 'em. We'll give 'em two full minutes to get where it's safe. Then we're going to turn our talking machines loose."

From the top of the low cliff came Tom Meade's drawing voice:

"Oh, I say, friends!"

Startled, all below glanced quickly upward.

"There seems to be trouble down there," Tom suggested.

"There sure is," nodded one of the armed men with the automobile party.

"Now, it's too glorious a day to spoil it with fighting," Reade went on. "Can't we arbitrate?"

"The first move for you, young man," warned one of the four men, raising his rifle, "is to face about and git outer here."

"Not while there are women and children present who might get hurt," Tom dissented, with a shake of his head.

"Git, I tell you!" shouted the man, now aiming his rifle full at Tom's chest. Git---before I count five."

"Save your cartridge," proposed Tom. "I'm too poor game, and I'm not armed, either. Surely you wouldn't shoot a harmless orphan like me." Saying which the young engineer, having found a path down the cliff nearby, started slowly to descend.

"Get back there! Another step, and I'll put a ball through you!" roared the man who had Reade covered with his rifle.

"That wouldn't prove anything but your marksmanship," Suggested Tom, and coolly continued to descend.

"Going to get back?" howled the man behind the gun.

Without further answer Reade quickened his pace somewhat, reaching the flat bottom of the gully on a run.

Though he felt that the chances were eight out of ten that he would be shot at any second, Tom didn't betray any outward fear. The truth was that even if he wanted to stop, he would have found it somewhat difficult on that steep incline.

Where he landed, on his feet, Tom stood between the hostile parties. Had hostilities opened at that moment he would have been in a bad position between the two fires.

"Great Scott!" gasped the frightened Alf, peering down.

That youngster had thrown himself flat on his stomach his head behind a bush. He was trying to make himself as small as possible. "Whew! But Reade has the real grit!"

First of all Tom gazed curiously at the four men, who glared back at him with looks full of hate.

"Who are you, anyway?" demanded the spokesman of the sullen four.

"I might be the sheriff," Tom replied placidly.

"Huh!" retorted the spokesman.

"But I'm not," Tom went on, rather genially. "I'm just an inquisitive tourist."

"Heard o' Bald Knob?" demanded the leader of the four.

"No," admitted Reade, opening his eyes with interest. "Who is he, and how did he become bald?"

"Bald Knob is a place," came the information. "It's the place where inquisitive tourists are buried in these parts."

"I'll look it up some day," Tom promised, good-humoredly.

"You'll look it up before dark if we have time to pack you there," growled the leader of the men. "Now, are you going to stand aside?"

Tom shook his head.

"Let's shake hands all around and then sit down for a nice little talk," the young engineer suggested.

"There's been too much talk already," snarled Tom's antagonist.

The men of the automobile party were silent. They had scented in Tom an ally who would help their cause materially.

"Then you won't be sociable?" Reade demanded, as if half offended.

"Git out and go about your business," ordered the leader of the four men.

"It's always my business when women and children appear to be in danger," returned Tom. He turned on his heel, presenting his broad back as a target to the rifles as he stepped over to automobile party.

Oddly the four men, though they had the look of being desperate, did not offer to shoot.

Tom's audacity had almost cowed them for the moment.

"I hope I can be of some use to you," suggested Tom, raising his hat out of respect to the women.

"I reckon you can, if you're a good hand with a gun," replied the older of the two armed men with the motor party. "Got any shooting irons about you?"

"Nothing in that line," Tom admitted.

"Then reach under the cushion, left-hand front seat of that car," returned the same speaker. "You'll find an automatic revolver there."

Reade, however, chose to ignore the advice. He had small taste for the use of firearms.

Seeing, the young engineer's reluctance the younger of the two armed men went himself to the car, taking out the revolver and offering it to this cool young stranger.

"Thank you," was Tom's smiling reply. "But that tool is not for me. I'm the two-hundred-and-thirteenth vice president of the Peace Society."

"You'd better fight, or hike," advised the older of the two men. "This isn't going to be a safe place for just nothing but chin. And, ladies, I ask you to get behind one of the cars, since you won't leave here. Throw yourselves flat on your faces. We don't want any good women hit by any such mean rascals as that crowd over there."

The men with the rifles scowled dangerously.

"Now, listen to me---all hands," begged Tom, raising his right hand. "It's none of my business, as I very well know, but may I inquire what all this trouble is about?"

A rather portly, well dressed and well-groomed man of sixty, who had been leaning against the side of one of the cars, now spoke up promptly enough:

"I am head of the company that has legally staked out a claim here, young man. Ours is a mining company. The men yonder say that they own the claim---that they found it first, and that it is theirs. However, they never staked it off---never filed their claim."

"It's our claim, just the same," spoke up the at the four men. "And we won't have it jumped by any gang of tenderfeet on earth. So get out of here, all of you, or the music will start at once. We don't want to hit any woman or children, but we're going to hold our own property. If the women and the child won't get out of here, then they'll have to take their chances."

"That's the case, and the line of action!" growled another of the men.

"But let me ask you men," continued Tom, facing the quartette, "do you claim that you ever made legal entry of your asserted title here?"

"Maybe we didn't," grunted the spokesman. "But we've known of this place for 'most a year Today we came to settle here, stake off our claims, file our entry and begin living here. But we found these benzine trotters on the ground.

"But these people state that they have made legal claim here," Tom urged.

"We have," insisted the portly man in black.

"If there is any dispute over the facts, my friends," Tom continued, turning once more to the four men, "then it looks like a case for the courts to settle. But if these people, who appear to be from the East, have acquired legal title here then they'll be able to hold it, and you four men are only intruders here. Why, the matter begins to look rather clear---even for a Nevada dispute."

"These folks are going to move, or we'll topple 'em over and move 'em ourselves," insisted the leader.

"Men," rejoined Reade, "I'm afraid you're not cool enough to settle this case fairly. We'll call in a few of the neighbors and try to get the facts of the case. We'll-----"

"Neighbors?" jeered the leader of the quartette. "Where are you going to find any?"

"Right near at hand," Tom proposed. "Much nearer than you think. Drew!"

Alf still lay behind the bush near the edge of the cliff. He was still present mainly because he had not courage enough to run away.

"Drew!" Tom repeated, this time speaking sharply, for he guessed that the cigarette fiend was shaking in his boots.

"Yes, sir," piped the faltering voice of Alf.

"Drew, run to camp as fast as you can. Tell Ferrers to bring the whole crowd over at once."

Alf was astounded by this staggering command, which sounded like an order to rush an army to the spot. Yet he managed to gasp:

"Yes, sir."

"Now, go! Make fast time. Don't let any of this outfit catch you and hinder you."

"No, sir!"

This time Alf Drew's voice sounded faintly, over his shoulder from a considerable distance, for the boy was running fast, fear lending speed his feet.

"You see," Tom went on coolly, standing so that he could face both factions in this quarrel, "I don't know much about the merits of the case, and I'm a stranger here. I don't want to be accused of being too fresh, so I've sent for some of the natives. They'll know, better than just what to advise here. It won't take 'em long to get here."

Tom wound up this last statement with a cheerful smile.

"So Jim Ferrers is over in your camp, is he?" demanded the leader

of the four men.

"Yes," Tom assented affably. "Do you know him?"

"Maybe."

"Jim is a fine fellow," Reade went on warmly. "He knows all about Nevada, too, and he's a man of good judgment. He'll be a lot of use to us in getting at the rights of this case."

"There's only one right side," insisted the leader of the quartette.

"So my friend here has informed me," answered Reade, nodding in the direction of the stout man in black. "Yet there seems to be a good deal of difference in opinion as to which is really the right side. But just wait until Jim and his friends get here. They'll be able to set us all straight and there won't be any need for doing any rough work like shooting."

"Dolph, we'd better shoot up the whole crowd, including the cheeky young one, before Jim Ferrers and his crowd gits here," propose one of the quartette.

"Jim Ferrers will be awfully displeased, you do," drawled Tom. "Do you know Jim? He has a reputation, I believe, for being rather sore on folks who shoot up his friends."

"I'll do it for you, anyway, kid!" growled one of the four, leveling his rifle.

But their leader struck the weapon up angrily just before the shot barked out.

"Who's having Fourth of July around here?" called a laughing voice from some distance down the rising path at the rear of the quartette. The four men turned quickly, but Tom had recognized joyfully the tones of Harry Hazelton's voice.

"You keep out of here, stranger!" ordered one of the quartette gruffly.

"Don't you do anything of the sort, Harry!" roared Reade's voice. "You keep right on an join us."

"Did you hear my advice?" insisted the leader of the four, holding his rifle as though would throw the butt to his shoulder.

"Yes," said Hazelton, calmly, "but I also heard my senior partner's order. He and I stick together. Gangway, please."

Harry was cool enough as he rode his horse at a walk past the men. Hazelton will never understand how near death he was at that moment. But there had been a few whispered words between the men, and they had allowed him to ride by.

"What's the game here, Tom?" Harry called cheerily. "Any real excitement going on?"

"No." Tom shook his head. "Just a little misunderstanding over

a question of fact."

"Then I see that the lie hasn't been passed," grinned Hazelton. "The ground isn't littered at all."

He rode up to his chum, displaying no curiosity.

That the automobile party had been much cheered by the arrival of the young engineers was wholly apparent. For the same reason the four men appeared to be a good deal less certain of themselves.

"I guess there isn't going to be any real trouble," spoke Reade carelessly. "But there's a question at issue that I feel it would be impertinent in me to try to settle, so I've sent for Jim Ferrers to bring over the whole crowd."

Though Harry couldn't imagine where Ferrers's "crowd" was, he wisely held his tongue.

At the same time an earnest conference was going on among the four men. They spoke in low whispers.

"Jim Ferrers, alone, we could handle," declared the leader. "But if Jim has a crowd back of him things won't go our way when it come to the shooting."

"Let's start it before Ferrers's party gets here," growled another of the sullen ones.

"We would be tracked down and shot at by Ferrers and a crowd," argued the leader. "Things are too warm for us here, just now. In a case like this remember that a fellow lasts longer when he does his shooting from ambush and at his own time. We won't let this Dunlop crowd fool us out of our rights, but we'll have to choose a better time---and fight from ambush at that."

It was soon plain that this view prevailed among the quartette. As they turned to move away, the leader remarked:

"We'll leave you for a while, Dunlop, but don't image you've won. Don't get any notion that you'll ever win. You'll hear from us again."

"And you'll hear a plenty as long as your hearing remains good," snarled another of the men.

The four disturbers, turning their backs, started down the sloping trail.

"Oh, but I'm glad we've seen the last of them!" shuddered one of the women of the Dunlop party.

"Don't be deceived into thinking that the last has been seen of that crew, madam," spoke Tom Reade gently. "Those fellows will be heard from again, and at no very distant hour, either. Mr. Dunlop---I believe that is your name, sir?"

The stout man bowed.

"Mr. Dunlop," Reade went on, earnestly, "I urge you to get these women and the child away from here as soon as you can. Also any of the men who may happen to have no taste for fighting. I don't believe you'll see those four men in the open any more, but there'll be more than one shot fired from ambush. You surely won't expose these women and the child any further!"

"But, Father," broke in one of the women, tremulously, "if we leave, it will take one of your two fighting men to run the car. Think how weak that will leave your defense."

"You forget, my dear," spoke Mr. Dunlop, gently, "that our newly-found young friends have just sent for other men."

Tom smiled grimly as he thought of Jim Ferrers's "crowd"---consisting of poor, frighten little Alf with the cigarette-stained fingers.

"At any cost or risk, sir," Tom went on, after a moment, "you must get the women and the child away from here. But---why, where is the child?"

There was an instant of dismay. The little girl had vanished.

"Gladys!" spoke Dr. Dunlop's daughter in alarm.

From under one of the cars a muffled voice answered, "Here I am." Then Gladys, sobbing and shaking, emerged into view.

"I was so frightened!" cried the child. "I just had to hide."

"The men have gone away, dear," explained her mother soothingly. "And now we're going too. We'll be safe after this."

At that instant three shots, fired in rapid succession, rang out.

CHAPTER III

JIM'S "ARMY" APPEARS

"Down on your faces!" called the older of the armed men with the motor party.

"Not necessary," spoke Tom, dryly. "The shots were fired by Jim Ferrers's army."

"And I missed the pesky critter, too!" spoke Jim's voice, resentfully, as he showed his head over the edge of the cliff, where three puffs of smoke slowly ascended.

"Don't show yourself, Jim! Careful!" Reade warned their guide.

"It's all right," declared Ferrers indifferently, as he rose to his full height, then discovered the path by which Tom had descended. "The critters took to cover as soon as they heard me making a noise."

With that explanation Ferrers slid rather than walked down into the gully.

"Where are the rest of your men?" questioned Mr. Dunlop, eagerly.

"I'm all there are," explained Jim, "except one pesky little puffer of cigarettes. He's hiding his stained fingers somewhere in the brush half a mile from here."

"There are no more men to your crowd?" spoke Dr. Dunlop anxiously.

"None," Tom broke in. "My order to the boy, Drew, was intended by way of conversation to interest your four callers."

"Then, indeed, we must look out for an ambush," said one of Mr. Dunlop's companions, a man of thirty.

"And you will be in real danger every minute of the time," said Dunlop's daughter, fearfully. "Father, why can't you come out of this wild country? Is the money that you may make out here worth all the risk?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Dunlop, with a firmness that seemed intended to settle the matter.

"Why did you fire on those men without provocation?" Tom asked, aside, of Jim Ferrers, who stood stroking his rifle barrel with one hand.

"I had provocation," Ferrers answered.

"Oh," said Reade, who was none the wiser.

"I'll 'get' Dolph Gage yet, if I ever have a fair chance without running my neck into the noose of the law," added Ferrers, with silent fury in his tone.

"Is there a story behind it all, eh" queried Tom mildly.

"Yes, Mr. Reade. Too long a story to tell in a minute."

"I didn't mean to pry into your affairs, Ferrers," Tom made haste to say.

"Well, for one thing, Dolph Gage shot the only brother I ever had---and got cleared of the charge in the court!" muttered Ferrers.

"Was your brother killed?" Tom inquired.

"Didn't I state that Dolph Gage shot him?" demanded Jim in a semi-injured tone. "Men don't often waste ammunition out in this county, even if I did send in three wild shots just now. But that was because I was excited, and couldn't see straight. I'll try to do better next time."

Mr. Dunlop was now engaged in making his daughter, her child and the other woman comfortable in one of the touring cars.

Several of the men in the party, also, had decided that they did not

care to remain if they were to be exposed to shooting at all hours of the day.

In the end Mr. Dunlop had but three of the men in his party left with him.

The younger of the two armed men was sent to drive the car containing the women. One of the guests of the Dunlop party drove a second car. In this order they started for Dugout City, thirty miles away. As the roads hardly deserved the name the motor cars would not be likely to reach Dugout before dark.

"Look out for ambushes," exclaimed Mr. Dunlop, to the armed driver of the women's car.

"Yes, sir; but there isn't much danger of our being fired on. Gage's gang will be only too glad to see the women folks leaving here. We won't be troubled."

Mr. Dunlop stood anxiously gazing after the two touring cars as long as they could be seen. Then he stepped briskly back, holding out his hand to Tom Reade.

"Permit me, now, to thank you for your timely aid," said the stout man. "You know my name. Will you kindly introduce your friends?"

This Tom did at once, after which Mr. Dunlop presented his three companions. One was his nephew, Dave Hill, the second, George Parkinson, Mr. Dunlop's secretary, and the third a man named John Ransome, an investor in Mr. Dunlop's mining enterprise. The elder of the armed men who remained behind was Joe Timmins, both guide and chauffeur. The young man who had gone with one of the cars was Timmins's son.

"You have a mining claim hereabouts, Mr. Dunlop?" Tom inquired.

"Yes; but not exactly at this point," added the older man, with a smile as he noted Reade staring about him with a quizzical smile. "The claim stands over there on that slope"--- pointing to the westward.

"Has it been prospected, sir?" asked Hazelton.

"Yes: it's a valuable property, all right. I brought my party out here to show it to them. The friends who have returned to Dugout, and Mr. Ransome here, have the money ready to put up the needed capital as soon as they are satisfied."

"I'm satisfied now," spoke up Ransome, "and I'm sure that the others are, after what Mr. Dunlop showed us this morning."

"How soon do you begin operations?" Tom asked with interest.

"As soon as my men have talked it over and have concluded to put up the money, replied Mr. Dunlop.

"We're ready, now---all of us," Ransome broke in.

"Then," said Mr. Dunlop, "the next step will be to get in touch

with a satisfactory engineer. You see, Mr. Reade, it's either a tunneling or a boring claim. We must either sink a shaft or drive a tunnel---whichever operation can be done at the least cost. Either way will be expensive, and we must find out for a certainty which will be the cheaper. There's a lot of refractory rock in the slope yonder. In the morning our party will get all the ore we can from the surface croppings, then start for Dugout, going from there to Carson City. At Carson we hope to find an honest engineer and a capable metallurgist."

"Then you haven't engaged any engineer?" Reade asked, almost eagerly.

"Not yet. There was no need, until we had satisfied the investors."

"Perhaps Hazelton and I can make some deal with you, Mr. Dunlop," Reade proposed.

"In what line?" inquired Dunlop. "Are you miners---or machinists?"

"When we want to be really kind to ourselves," smiled Tom, "we call ourselves engineers."

"Mining engineers?" demanded Mr. Dunlop, gazing at the two youths in astonishment.

"No, sir. Neither Hazelton nor myself ever handled a mine yet," Tom answered. "But we have done a lot of railroad work."

"Railroad work isn't mine digging," objected Mr. Dunlop.

"I'm aware of that, sir," Tom agreed. "Yet boring is largely excavation work; so is tunneling. We've had charge of considerable excavating in our services to railroads."

"Very likely," nodded Dunlop, reflectively. "But how about the assays for gold and silver? Sometimes, when searching for drifts and runs of the metal we may need a dozen assays in a single week."

"We have the furnace with us, sir; the assay balance and all the tools and chemicals that are used in an ordinary assay."

"You have?" asked Mr. Dunlop. "Then you must have come prepared to go into this line of work."

"We thought it more than likely that we'd amuse ourselves along that line of work for a while," Tom explained truthfully. "Yet mining attracts us. We'd stay here and go into the thing in earnest if we could make good enough terms with you."

"Would seventy-five dollars a month for each of you be satisfactory?" asked Mr. Dunlop keenly.

"No, sir," replied Reade with emphasis. "Nor would we take a hundred and seventy-five dollars, either. When I said that we would consider a good proposition I meant just that, sir."

"Hm-m-m-m!" murmured Mr. Dunlop. "I shall have to give this matter thought, and question you a good deal more on your qualifications. I suppose you would be willing to let this matter remain open for

a few days?"

"Certainly, sir; we are in no hurry. However, until we are definitely engaged we do not bind ourselves to be ready for your work."

"Where is your camp?" said Mr. Dunlop.

Jim Ferrers explained the easiest way of reaching the camp in a motor car.

"And I'd advise you to come to our camp, too," Tom added. "You'll be safer there than here."

"But we would; expose you to danger, too," Mr. Dunlop objected.

"We're rather used to danger," smiled Tom placidly. "In fact, just a little of danger makes us feel that we're getting more enjoyment out of life."

"Do you think it a good plan to take up the invitation of these gentlemen, Timmins?" inquired Mr. Dunlop.

"It's the safest thing you can do, sir," answered Joe Timmins.

"We'll start back, now," proposed Tom. "If you don't drive too fast you'll give us a chance to reach our camp in time to welcome you."

"You start now, and we'll start within ten minutes," proposed Mr. Dunlop.

This being agreed to, Tom, Harry and Ferrers began the task of climbing the cliff path. At last they reached the top, then started at long strides toward camp, Ferrers's horse having been surrendered by Harry to Dave Hill.

"Who knows," laughed Tom, "we may become mining engineers here in Nevada"

"Small chance of it," Harry rejoined. "In opinion Mr. Dunlop is a good enough fellow, but he's accustomed to making all the money himself. He'd want us at about a hundred dollars a month apiece."

"He can want, then," Tom retorted. "Yet, somehow, I've an idea That Mr. Dunlop will turn to be generous if he decides that we're the engineers for him."

For some minutes the trio tramped on silently, in Indian file, Ferrers leading.

"Hello, Alf!" bellowed Tom through the woods, as they neared their camp site. No answer came.

"Where did you leave the little fellow, Jim?" inquired Reade.

"I didn't notice which way he went, sir," returned the guide. "He looked plumb scared, and I reckon he ducked into cover somewhere. Maybe he headed for Dugout City and hasn't stopped running yet."

Then a turn of the path under the trees brought them in sight of their camp.

Rather, where the camp had been. Jim Ferrers rubbed his eyes for an instant, for the tents had been spirited away as though by magic. Nor were the cots to be seen. Blankets lay strewn about on the ground. A quarter the camp's food supplies was still left, and that was all.

"Is it magic, Jim?" gasped puzzled Tom Reade.

"No, sir; just plain stealing," Ferrers responded grimly.

"Then who-----"

"Dolph Gage's crew, I'll be bound, sir. They don't want you two hanging around in this country, and they want me a heap sight less. But maybe we'll show 'em! The trail can't be hard to find. We'll have to start at once."

"After we've seen and spoken to Mr. Dunlop," Tom amended. "We can't run off without explanation to the guests that we have invited to share the camp that we thought had."

Barely a hundred yards away four men lay on their stomachs, heads concealed behind a low fringe of brush under which the muzzles of their rifles peeped.

"Remember," whispered Dolph Gage faintly, "all of you fire your first shot into Jim Ferrers. After that we'll take charge of the youngsters! Get a close bead on Jim. Ready!"

CHAPTER IV

SOLD OUT FOR A TOY BALE!

Jim Ferrers had stated a plain truth when he remarked that Nevada men did not often waste ammunition.

With four rifles aimed at him, at that short, point-blank range, it would seem that Jim's last moment had come.

Yet at that instant the sound of an approaching motor car was heard.

Then the car, moving at twelve miles an hour mounted the crest at a point less than seventy yards from where the four ambushed men lay.

Joe Timmins caught sight of them.

"Take the wheel!" muttered Timmins, forcing Parkinson's nearer hand to the wheel.

In an instant Joe was upon his feet, drawing his revolver. He fired at the men in ambush, but a lurch of the car on the rough ground destroyed his aim.

"Dolph Gage and his rascals at the ridge," bellowed Joe, in a fog-horn voice, pointing.

Jim Ferrers dropped to the ground, hugging it flat. Harry followed suit. Tom Reade hesitated an instant, then away he flew at a dead run.

Close to a tree Tom stopped, thrusting right hand in among the bushes. Up and down his hand moved.

"Shoot and duck!" snarled Dolph, in a passion because of their having been discovered.

Boom!

Over by the ridge where Gage and his fellow rascals lay it looked as though a volcano had started in operation on a small scale.

Fragments of rock, clouds of dirt, splinters and bits of brush shot up in the air.

Following the report came a volley of terrific yells from Dolph and his fellows.

They had been on the instant of firing when the big explosion came. Jim Ferrers, too, was taking careful aim at the moment.

It is a law of Nature that whatever goes up debris, mixed with larger pieces of rock and clots of earth, descended on the scene of the explosion. Yet little of this flying stuff reached Dolph Gage and his companions, for they were up and running despite the mark that they thus presented to Ferrers.

Nor did the rascals stop running until they had reached distant cover.

"Stop it, Jim---don't shoot!" gasped Tom Reade, choking with laughter, as Ferrers leaped to his feet, taking aim after the fugitives.

"I want Dolph Gage, while I've got a good, legal excuse," growled Ferrers, glancing along rifle barrel at the forward sight.

"Don't think of shooting," panted Tom, darting forward and laying a hand on the rifle barrel to spoil the guide's aim. "Jim, it isn't sportsmanlike to shoot a fleeing enemy in the back! Fight fair and square, Jim---if you must fight."

There was much in this to appeal to the guide's sense of honor and fair play. Though scowled, he lowered the rifle.

"Tom, you everlasting joker, what happened?" demanded Harry Hazelton.

"You saw for yourself, didn't you?" retorted Reade.

"Yes; but----"

"Are you so little of an engineer that you don't know a mine when you see one, Harry?"

"But how did that mine come to be there?"

"I planted it."

"When?"

"Today, when you started on your ride."

"Oh!"

"You see, Harry, I was pondering away over mining problems this morning. As you had the only horse, that was all that there was left for me to do. Now, you must have noticed that most of the outcropping rock around here is of a very refractory kind?"

"Yes," nodded Hazelton.

"Then, of course, you realize that for at least a hundred feet down in the mine the rock that would be found would be the same."

"Undoubtedly."

"So, Harry, I was figuring on a way to blast ore rock out whenever we should find refractory stuff down a shaft or in the galleries or tunnels of a mine."

"Fine, isn't it?" retorted Hazelton. "A great scheme! You blast out the rock and the force of the explosion shoots all the fine particle of gold into the walls of the mine---just the way you'd pepper a tree with birdshot!"

Mr. Dunlop had drawn close and now stood smiling broadly.

"That appears to be one on you, Reade," suggested the mine promoter.

"That's what I want to find out," returned Tom soberly; "whether I'm a discoverer, or just a plain fool."

"What do you think about it?"

"Let's go and look at the ledge, and then I can tell you, sir," Reade answered, striding forward.

"Look out!" cautioned Joe Timmins. "Those hyenas will shoot. They'll be sore over the trick you played on them, and they'll be hiding waiting for a chance for a shot."

"Oh, bother the hyenas," Tom retorted, impatiently. "I'm out for business today. Coming, Mr. Dunlop?" The mine operator showed signs of hanging back.

Harry promptly joined his chum at what was left of the little ledge. After a few moments Mr. Dunlop, seeing that no shots were fired, stepped over there also, followed by his nephew. Jim Ferrers climbed a tree, holding his rifle and keeping his eyes open for a shot, while Timmins threw himself behind a rock, watching in the direction that the four men had taken.

"This looks even better than I had expected," Tom explained, his

eyes glowing as he held up fragments of rock. "You see, the dynamite charge was a low-power one. It just splintered the rock. There wasn't so very much driving force to the explosion. Another time I could make the force even lower."

"Here's gold in this bit of rock!" cried Harry, turning, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes; but not enough to look promising," replied Mr. Dunlop, after examining the specimen. "But we'll look through the rest of the stuff that's loose."

The two men who had hung back soon joined them.

"I wouldn't care about filing a claim to it," Mr. Dunlop, shaking his head after some further exploration. "This rock wouldn't yield enough to the ton to make the work profitable."

"Just a little, outcropping streak, possibly from the claim that I have below," was Mr. Dunlop's conclusion "By the way, Reade, how did you explode the mine?"

"With a magneto," Tom explained, then ran and took the battery from behind the tree from which he had fired it. "I buried the wire, of course, so that no one would trip over it," he added. "Just after I got it attended to Alf Drew happened along, looked forlorn, and wanted a job. So I had almost forgotten the mine, until I realized that the thing was planted right in front of where Dolph Gage's crew were hidden. By the way, Jim, where is Alf?"

"All the information I've got wouldn't send you two feet in the right direction," the guide reported gruffly.

"And where are our tents and the other stuff?" Harry demanded. "Gage's crew couldn't get far with them in the time they've had. Shall we hustle after our property?"

"Yes," nodded Tom.

"At the momentary risk of being shot to pieces," added Mr. Dunlop, dryly.

"Those little chances go with being involved in a Nevada mining dispute, don't they?" queried Reade.

"Where can we begin to look?" Harry pressed. "Let's scurry about a bit. Surely men can't get away with tents without leaving some trail."

Within two minutes they had the trail. Marks were discovered that plainly had been made by dragging canvas and guy-ropes along over the ground.

"We'll find our stuff soon," predicted Tom, striding along over a rough trail. "The scoundrels didn't have a team, and they wouldn't take the stuff far without other transportation than their own backs. Hello! What's in there?"

Tom had detected some motions in a clump of brush.

"Look out!" warned Jim Ferrers, bringing his rifle to "ready."

But Tom darted straight into the brush.

"Then this is where you are?" demanded Tom dryly. He glanced down at the cowering form of Alf Drew.

"So you've got the 'makings,' have you?" Reade demanded, seizing Alf by the collar and yanking him up to his feet.

Paper and tobacco fell from young Drew's nerveless grasp to the ground.

"You made me drop the makings of a good one," whined Alf resentfully.

"You didn't have that stuff two hours ago. Where did you get it?" Reade demanded.

"Found it," half whimpered Drew.

"Do you expect me to believe any such fairy tales as that?" insisted Tom Reade.

"If you have tobacco and cigarette papers," Tom continued, "then some one gave the stuff to you. It was Dolph Gage, or one of his rascals, wasn't it?"

"Don't know him," replied the boy, with a shake of his head.

"Now, don't try to fool me, Drew," warned Tom, with a mild shake administered to the youngster's shoulders. "How much tobacco have you?"

"A whole package," admitted Alf reluctantly, feeling that it would be of no use to try to deceive his employer.

"And plenty of papers to go with it?"

"Ye-es."

"You got it from four men?"

"No; I didn't."

"Well, from one of four men, then? Tell me the truth."

"Ye-es."

"What did you do to please the four men?"

Alf Drew shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, and then back again.

"Come! Speak up!" Reade insisted sternly.

"You're wasting our time. What did you do for the four men?"

"I didn't do anything," Alf evaded.

"What did you tell them, then?" Reade wanted to know.

"They asked me a few questions."

"Of course; and you answered the questions."

"Well, I-----"

"What did the men want to know about?" pressed Tom, the look in his eyes growing sterner still.

"They wanted to know how many men Jim Ferrers had," admitted the Drew boy.

"Oh, I see," pondered Tom aloud, a half smile creeping into his face. "They were guessing the size of Ferrers's army, were they?"

"I---I guess so," Alf replied.

"And you told them-----?"

"I told 'em the camp was made up of you and Mr. Hazelton, Jim Ferrers and myself."

"And then they gave you the tobacco for cigarettes, did they?"

"I made 'em gimme that first," Alf retorted, a look of cunning in his eyes.

"So, my bright little hero, you sold us out for a toy bale of cigarettes, did you?" demanded Tom Reade, staring coldly down at the shame-faced youngster.

CHAPTER V

NO NEED TO WORK FOR PENNIES

"I---I didn't see how it could do any harm," sniveled young Drew.

"Perhaps it didn't," Tom admitted. "So far, it has resulted only in our being ambushed and all but murdered. Now, where did they take our tents and the other stuff?"

"I don't know," declared Alf. "Are the tents gone?" He answered so promptly that Reade believed him.

"Very much so," replied Reade, releasing his grip on Drew's shoulder. "Come on, friends, we'll hunt further."

"Say, what was that big explosion?" asked Alf, running after the party when he found himself being left alone.

"No time to talk until we find our camp stuff," Tom called back

over his shoulder.

"I'll help you," proposed Alf eagerly.

"You're full of helpfulness," Reade jibed.

But Alf evidently preferred to stick to them. He ran along at the heels of the last rapidly striding man. Joe Timmins was the only one absent, he having remained at the camp site to keep a watchful eye over the automobile.

Jim Ferrers was in the lead, his trained eyes searching the ground for the trail of the tents.

Within five minutes the party came upon the tents and the food supplies, all of which had been dumped into a thicket in confused piles.

"We'll sort this out and get it back to camp," Tom proposed. "Alf, little hero, redeem yourself by buckling down to a good load. Come here; let me load you down."

Alf meekly submitted, cherishing a half hope that he would not be discharged from his new position after all.

At the end of an hour the stuff had all been taken back and the camp looked a good deal as it had looked that morning.

"Now, Alf," directed Tom in a milder, kinder tone, "you hustle over and break your back helping Mr. Ferrers to get supper ready. We're a famished lot. Understand?"

Alf was only too glad to be able to understand that his part in the dismantling of the camp had been overlooked. While Tom and Harry led their guests into one of the tents, young Drew hastened over to where Jim Ferrers was starting a fire in the camp stove.

"Now, put that stuff back in your pockets, or I'll throw it in the fire!" sounded the angry voice of Ferrers. "You can't use any of that stuff when you're working around me."

"The poor little cigarette pest must have been trying to use his newly acquired 'makings,'" grinned Tom.

While Ferrers was thus busied with preparation of the meal, Joe Timmins had taken the guide's rifle and was keeping a watchful eye over the approaches to the neighborhood.

"So you young men think you could serve me satisfactorily as engineers," questioned Mr. Dunlop.

"I think we could," Tom answered.

"But I am afraid you young men have a rather large notion as to the pay you're worth," continued the mine promoter.

"That's right, sir," Reade nodded. "We have a good-sized idea on the pay question. Now, when you go to Dugout City next you might wire the president of the S.B. & L. railroad, at Denver,

or the president of the A.G. & N.M., at Tucson, Arizona, and ask those gentlemen whether we are in the habit of making good on large pay."

"How much will you young men want?"

"For work of this character," replied Tom, after a few moments of thought, during which Harry Hazelton was silent, "we shall want six hundred dollars a month, each, with two hundred dollars apiece added for the fighting risk."

"The fighting risk?" questioned Mr. Dunlop.

"Well, we shall have Dolph Gage and his crowd to guard against, won't we?" Reads counter-questioned.

"But such pay is absurd!" he protested.

"From your view-point, very likely, sir. From our view-point it will be very ordinary compensation, and nothing but our desire to learn more about mining will tempt us to go into it at the figure we have named."

"Your price puts your services out of the question for my company," replied Mr. Dunlop, with a shake of his head.

"Very good, sir," Tom rejoined pleasantly. "No harm done, and we need not talk it over any more. We wish you good luck in finding proper engineers for your work. You will probably motor back to Dugout tomorrow morning, won't you?"

"We'll have to," Mr. Dunlop answered. "We're not safe here until we hire a few good men to come out here to keep Gage and his fellows at a distance."

"That's true, sir," Tom nodded. "As you'll need a good many men here by the time you start work on your mine you'll do well to bring at least a score of them down at once. Twenty good, rough men, used to this life and not afraid of bullets, ought to make you feel wholly safe and secure on your own property."

There was more talk, but neither Tom nor Harry again referred to their serving the new company as engineers.

In due course of time Jim Ferrers, with such help as Alf was able to give, had supper ready to serve. It was a rough meal, of hard tack, pilot bread, potatoes, canned meats and vegetables, but outdoor life had given all a good appetite and the meal did not long remain on the camp table.

For guard duty that night it was arranged that Jim Ferrers and Joe Timmins should relieve each other. Tom also offered to stay up with Ferrers, Harry taking the watch trick with Timmins, though neither of the young engineers was armed or cared to be.

Harry and Timmins were to take the first watch. The others retired early. Tom Reade was about to begin undressing when Hazelton came in for a moment.

While the chums were chatting, Alf Drew's forlorn figure showed at the doorway of the tent.

"Say, boss," complained Alf, "I haven't any place to sleep."

"What?" Reade demanded in pretended surprise, "with nearly all the ground in Nevada at your disposal?"

"But that isn't a bed," contended Alf.

"Right you are there, lad" agreed Tom.

"Now, see here, boss, only one of you two is going to sleep at a time tonight. I'm tired---I ache. Why can't I sleep on the other cot in this tent?"

"Come here," ordered Tom.

Alf wonderingly advanced.

Whiff! whiff! moved the young engineer's nostrils.

"Just as I thought," sighed Reade. "You've been smoking cigarettes without any let-up ever since supper."

"Well, I have ter," argued Drew.

"And now you smell as fragrant as a gas-house, Alf. Mr. Hazelton is rather particular about the little matter of cleanliness. If you were to sleep on his cot the smell of cigarettes would be so strong that I don't believe Mr. Hazelton could stay on his cot when it came his time to turn in."

"But say! If you knew how dead, dog-tired I am!" moaned Alf.

"Oh, let him sleep on my cot," interposed Harry, good-heartedly. "If I can't stand the cot when I come to use it, then it won't be the first night that I've slept on hard ground and rested well."

"All right, Alf, climb in," nodded Tom. "But see here. Cigarettes make you as nervous as a lunatic. If you have any bad dreams tonight, and begin yelling, then I'll rise and throw you outdoors. Do you understand?"

"Yes," mumbled the boy. "But I won't dream. I'm not nervous now. It's only when I can't get enough cigs that I'm nervous."

"You should have seen him this afternoon," Tom continued, turning to his chum. "The lad and I took a walk. At every other step he kept imagining that he heard rattlesnakes rattling."

"And I did, too," contended Alf stoutly. "You know I did. You heard 'em yourself, Mr. Reade."

"I didn't hear a single rattler," Tom replied soberly.

"Let the tired little fellow go to bed in peace," urged Harry.

"All right," Tom agreed.

Alf went to the head of the cot, to turn the blanket down from the head.

Click-ick-ick-ick! came the warning sound.

With a yell of terror Alf Drew bounded back.

"There's another rattler," he screamed. "It's under that blanket."

"It's all your nerves," Tom retorted. "There isn't a rattler within miles of here."

"Didn't you hear a rattle, Mr. Reade?" wailed the cigarette fiend.

"No; I didn't."

"Didn't you, Mr. Hazelton?"

Harry was on the point of answering "yes," but Tom caught his eyes, and Harry, knowing that something was up, shook his head.

"You must both be deaf, then," argued Drew.

"Why, see here, you nervous little wreck of a cigarette," said Tom, grinning good-humoredly, "I'll show you that there is no snake in that bed. Watch me."

With utmost unconcern, Tom took hold of the blanket, stripping it from the cot. Then he ran his hands over the under blanket.

"Not a thing in this bed but what belongs here," Tom explained. "Alf, do you see how cigarettes are taking the hinges off your nerves."

Shame-faced, and believing that Tom was right, Alf advanced toward the cot. As he reached the side of it-----

Click-ick-ick! sounded close to him.

"You can't make me stay in this tent. It's the most dangerous spot in Nevada," cried Drew, turning and fleeing into flee open. The two chums could hear his feet as he sped to another part of the camp.

"Some trick about that rattling?" queried Harry in a whisper.

"Of course," Tom admitted with a wink.

"It's a shame to tease the youngster so."

"It would be," Tom assented rather gravely, "but I'm using that means to make the lad afraid to smoke cigarettes. If young Drew goes on smoking the miserable little things he'll become come a physical wreck inside of a year."

"How do you do the trick, anyway?" asked Harry curiously.

"Does it really sound like the click of a rattler?" asked Tom.

"Does it? I was 'stung' almost as badly as poor Alf was. How do you do the trick?"

"I'll show you, some time," nodded Tom Reade.

With that promise Harry had to be content, and so must the reader, for the present.

Hazelton went out to stand first watch with Joe Timmins. Alf Drew, finding that the Dunlop party had no room for him under the shelter they had rigged from the rear of the automobile, curled himself on the ground under a tree and fitfully wooed sleep. By daylight the little fellow was fretfully awake, his "nerves" refusing him further rest until he had rolled and smoked two cigarettes. By the time the smoke was over Jim Ferrers called to him to help start the breakfast.

Nothing had been seen of the four intruders through the night.

"I think we shall try to get safely through to Dugout City this morning," suggested Mr. Dunlop.

"You'll make it all right, if you have gasoline enough," remarked Ferrers, who hovered close at hand with a frying pan filled with crisp bacon.

"You don't believe Gage will try to attack us on the way?"

"He has no call to," replied Ferrers. "You're obeying him by leaving the claim, aren't you?"

"Then probably Gage and his companions will settle down on the claim after we leave," suggested Mr. Dunlop.

"If Gage tries to jump the claim in your absence," proposed Ferrers, "your course is easy. If you have the legal right to the claim you'll have to bring back force enough to drive those hyenas off."

"Will you people try to keep an eye over the claim while I'm gone?" asked Mr. Dunlop.

"That would be a little out of our line," Tom made reply. "Besides, Mr. Dunlop, I'm not at all sure that we shall be here until you return."

"But we haven't settled, Reade, whether you and your partner are to be our engineers at the Bright Hope Mine."

"Quite true, sir," nodded Tom. "On the other hand, you haven't engaged us, either"

"Won't you keep the matter open until our return?"

"That would be hardly good business, Mr. Dunlop."

"Yet suppose I had engaged you,"

"Then we'd be going back to Dugout City with you."

"Why, Reade?"

"So that we might get in touch with the world and find out whether you are financially responsible. We wouldn't take an engagement without being reasonably sure of our money."

"You're a sharp one," laughed Mr. Dunlop.

Yet he made no further reference to engaging the two young engineers, a fact that Reade was keen enough to note.

Within an hour after breakfast the Dunlop ear pulled out, leaving Tom Reade with only his own party.

"What our friend wants," smiled Harry, "is a pair of mining engineers at the salary of one mere surveyor."

"He won't pay any more than he has to," rejoined Reade.

"Do you really want to work for Dunlop?"

"I really don't care a straw whether I do or not," was Tom's answer. "Harry, we're in the very heart of the gold country and we don't need to work for copper pennies."

"If you'll allow me to say so, friends," put in Jim Ferrers, "I believe you two are the original pair with long heads and I'm going to stick to you as long as you'll let me."

"Me, too," piped up Alf Drew ungrammatically.

The young cigarette fiend was at that instant engaged in rolling one of his paper abominations.

Click-ick-ick-ick!

"Rattlers again!" shivered Alf.

Paper and tobacco fell from his fingers and he fled in terror.

CHAPTER VI

TOM CATCHES THE "NEVADA FEVER"

Two nights passed without adventure. On each of these nights the three campers---for Alf didn't "count" divided the hours of darkness into three watches, each standing guard in his turn. On the third morning after the departure of the Bright Hope group the campers were seated at breakfast around the packing case that served as table.

"I feel as though we ought to be at work," suggested Hazelton.

"Good!" mocked Tom. "You've been riding every day lately, and

I have remained in camp, testing samples of ore that I've picked up on my strolls."

"You take the horse today," proposed Harry, "and I'll stay in camp and work."

"Suppose both of us stay in and work," proposed Reade.

"That'll be all right, too," nodded Harry, pleasantly. "May I ask, Tom, what you're up to, anyway?"

"Yes," Reade smiled. "If the Bright Hope is a real mine there must be other good property in this region. I've been looking about, and making an assay every now and then. Jim, you've prospected a bit, haven't you?"

"Yes," nodded the guide. "And, gentlemen, in my day I've been sole owner of three claims, each one of which panned out a fortune."

"Great!" glowed Harry. "But how did you lose your money, Jim!"

"I never got a cent out of any of the mines," rejoined the guide grimly.

"How did that happen?"

"Did you ever hear of 'square gamblers'?" inquired Ferrers.

"Some," Tom admitted with a grimace. "We ran up against one of that brood in Arizona, eh, Harry?"

"You didn't play against him, I hope, hinted Jim soberly.

"Yes, we did," admitted Tom. "Not with his own marked cards, though, nor with any kind of cards. We met him with men's weapons, and it is necessary to add that our 'square gambler' lost."

"The 'square gamblers' that I met didn't lose," sighed Jim Ferrers. "They won, and that's why all three of my mines passed out of my hands before they began to pay."

"You must know something about ore and croppings, and the like, Jim?", Tom continued.

"In a prospector's way, yes," Ferrers admitted.

"Then we'll take a walk, now. Alf can wash up the dishes."

"It's all the little wretch is fit for," muttered Ferrers contemptuously.

Jim looked carefully into the magazine of his repeating rifle, then saw to it that his ammunition belt was filled.

"Ready when you gentlemen are," he announced.

"Say, won't you take me with you?" pleaded Alf.

"You wouldn't be of any use to us," Reade answered.

"But I---I am afraid to stay here alone."

"Do you believe yourself to be so valuable that any one will want to steal you?" Tom laughed.

Alf made a wry face and watched the others depart. Then, filled with needless alarm, he crawled out into a thicket and hid himself. He didn't mean to be trapped by prowlers!

Tom led the way for nearly a mile. At last the trio climbed a slight ascent, halting at the top of the ridge.

"You see, Jim," Tom explained, "this ridge runs southwesterly from here."

"I see it does?" nodded the guide.

"Now, to the northeastward I don't believe there are any croppings that look good enough. But just keep along to the southeast, picking up a specimen here and there. Some of the rock looks good to me."

Jim Ferrers didn't answer in words, though his eyes gleamed with the old fever that he had known before.

"Here's a pretty piece of stone," called the guide in a low tone. He stood holding a fragment about as big as his two fists.

"It's streaked" pretty well with yellow, you see, gentlemen," he remarked;

"It is," Tom agreed, taking the specimen.

"Does the vein run with the top of the ridge?" demanded Harry eagerly.

"It runs a little more to eastward, from this point, I think," Tom made answer. "But let us walk along, in three parallel lines, and see who finds the best indications."

By noon all three were fairly tired out by the steep climbing over the rocky ground. Each had as many specimens as he could carry. The result of the exploration had tended to confirm Tom's notion as to where the vein lay.

"Now, let's see about where we'd stake the claim," Tom proposed. "Of course, we want to get the best rock obtainable. We don't want to leave the best part of this slope for some one else to stake out. It seems to me that the claim ought to start up by that blasted tree. What do you say, Jim?"

"Well, I don't like to make mistakes where you young gentleman are concerned," Ferrers answered, taking off his felt hat and scratching his head. "You see, it isn't my claim."

"The dickens it isn't!" Reade retorted.

"Why, you---you gentlemen didn't plan to take me in, did you,"

asked Ferrers, opening his eyes very wide in his amazement over the idea. "You see I---I can't contribute my share of the brains, along with a pair like you," continued the guide. "Look at you two---engineers already! Then look at me---more'n twice as old as either of you, and yet I'm only a cook."

"You're an honest man, aren't you, Jim?" demanded Reade.

"Why, there's some folks who say I am," Ferrers slowly admitted.

"And we're among those who believe that way," Tom continued. "Now, Jim, you're with us, and you've every right to be a partner if we find anything worth taking up in the mine line."

"But there ain't no sense in it," protested the guide, his voice shaking with emotion. "You don't need me."

"We need a man of your kind, Jim," Tom rejoined, resting a very friendly hand on the guide's shoulder. "Listen to me. Hazelton and I are engineers first of all. We'd sooner be engineers than kings. Now, the lure of gold is all well enough, and we're human enough to like money. Yet a really big engineering chance would take us away from a gold mine almost any day in the year. Eh, Harry!"

"I'm afraid it would," confirmed Hazelton.

"If we left a paying mine, Jim, what would we want?" Tom continued. "We'd want an honest partner, wouldn't we---one whom we could leave for six months or a year and still be able to depend on getting our share of the profits of the mine. You've gambled in the past, Jim, but you stopped that years ago. Now you're honest and safe. Do you begin to see, Jim Ferrers, where you come in? Another point. How old do you take us to be?"

"Well, you're more than twenty-one, each of you," replied Ferrers.

"Not quite, as yet," Tom answered. "So, you see, in order to take out a claim we'd need a guardian, and one whom we could depend upon not to rob us. Jim, if we're to take up a mine we must have a third man in with us. Do you know a man anywhere who'd use us more honestly than you would?"

"I don't," exclaimed Jim Ferrers. "At the same time, gentlemen, I know your kind well enough. Both of you talk of fighting as though you dreaded it, but I'll tell you, gentlemen, that I wouldn't dare to try any nasty tricks on either of you."

"We understand each other, then," Tom nodded. "Now, then, let us try to make up our minds just where we would want to stake off this claim if the gold assays as well as it looks."

At the beginning Tom and Harry built a little pile of stones. Then, by mere pacing they laid off what they judged to be the fifteen hundred feet of length which the government allows to a single mining claim.

"We can attend to the proper width later," suggested Tom. "Now, what do you say if we make for camp at once. I'm not hungry;

still, I think I could eat my half of a baked ox."

The instant that the trio reached camp, Jim Ferrers, with an unwonted mist in his eyes, began to juggle the cooking utensils. Tom busied himself with building the best fire that he could under the chamber of the assaying furnace, while Harry Hazelton, rolling up his sleeves, began to demonstrate his muscle by pulverizing little piles of ore in a hand-mill.

"Be careful not to mix the lots, Harry," advised Tom, glancing over from his station by the furnace.

"Thanks for the caution," smiled Hazelton. "But I have just enough intelligence left to understand the value of knowing from what section of the slope each particular lot of rock comes."

Dinner was eaten in silence. For one thing the campers were ravenously hungry. In the second place, though each kept as quiet as possible, he was deep in the thrall of the fever to dig up hidden gold.

The meal was nearly over when Alf Drew came into camp.

"Are you leaving anything to eat?" he asked.

"Maybe," said Jim Ferrers grimly, "but you were left to wash the breakfast dishes, and you haven't done it yet. Now, you'll wash the breakfast things, and then the dinner things, before you get even a cold bite to eat."

Alf didn't protest. Now that he was back safe in camp he felt much ashamed of himself for having run away and left the camp unwatched.

As soon as he had eaten his dinner Tom Reade went back to the assay furnace to improve the fire.

"Now, Harry, we'll get the powdered stuff ready to roast," Reade remarked. "We've a lot of it to rush through this afternoon."

"And we want to be sure to finish it at least two hours before dark, too," Larry nodded. "If we decide to file a claim Jim ought to be riding for Dugout City by dark, ready to file the papers the first thing in the morning."

"And Jim can bring back half a dozen men to help us sink the first shaft," proposed Tom.

"That's where I feel like a fool," muttered Ferrers. "I haven't a blessed dollar to put in as capital."

"We'll take your honesty for a good deal in the way of capital, Jim," Tom hinted cheerfully.

"Harry, you might get out the transit, the tape, markers and other things. If we stake out a claim we'll do it so accurately that there can be no fight, afterward, as to the real boundaries of our claim."

"What shall we call the claim?" inquired Hazelton, as he came

back with the surveying outfit.

"Suppose we wait until the assay is done, and find out whether the claim is worth anything better than a bad name," laughed Tom.

The crucibles were in the furnace now, and a hot flame going. Jim Ferrers sat by, puffing reflectively at his pipe as he squatted on the ground nearby. Alf Drew was smoking, too, somewhere, but he had taken his offensive cigarettes to some place of concealment.

Harry anxiously watched the course of the sun, while Tom kept his gaze, most of the time, near the furnace.

"Come on, Harry!" called Tom at last. "We'd rake out the crucibles. My, but I hope the buttons are going to be worth weighing."

A withering blast of hot air reached the young engineers as the oven door of the portable assay furnace was thrown open. The crucibles were raked out and set in the air to cool.

"Would fanning the crucibles with my hat do any good?" asked Hazelton eagerly.

"Some," yawned Tom, "if you're impatient."

Reade strolled off under the trees, whistling softly to himself. Jim Ferrers smoked a little faster, the only sign he gave of the anxiety that was consuming him. Harry frequently sprang to his feet, walked up and down rapidly, then sat down again. Two or three times Hazelton burned his fingers, testing to see whether the crucibles were cool enough to handle. At last Tom strolled back, his gaze on the dial of his watch.

"Cool enough for a look, now, I think," Reade announced.

Harry bounded eagerly toward the crucibles, feeling them with his hands.

"Plenty cool enough," he reported. "But how did you guess, Tom?"

"I didn't guess," Reade laughed. "I've timed the crucibles before this, and I know to a minute how long it ought to take."

"What a chump I am!" growled Harry, in contempt for self. "I never think of such things as that."

Tom now carefully emptied the crucibles. In the bottom of each was found a tiny bead of half-lustrous metal, which miners and assayers term the "button."

"The real stuff!" glowed Hazelton.

"Ye-es," said Tom slowly. "But the next question is whether the buttons will weigh enough to hint at good-paying ore. Even at that, these buttons are only from surface ore."

"But the ore underneath is always better than the surface ore," contended Hazelton.

"Usually is," Tom corrected. "If we get good enough results from this assay it will at least be worth while to stake a claim and work it for a while."

Harry waited with feverish impatience. Tom Reade, on the other hand, was almost provokingly slow and cool as he carefully adjusted the sensitive assaying balance and finally weighed the buttons. Then he did some slow, painstaking calculating. At last he looked up.

"Well, sir?" asked Jim Ferrers.

"From this surface ore," replied Tom calmly, "twenty-eight dollars in gold to the ton; silver, six dollars."

"That's good enough for me!" cried Ferrers, his eyes brightening.

"Wow! Whoop! Oh---whee!" vented Harry, then ran and snatched up the surveying transit.

"Yes; I guess we'd better go along and do our staking," assented Tom.

"And I'll be ready at daylight to file the claim at Dugout City," promised Jim. "I won't sleep until I've seen our papers filed."

"You'll file the claim in your own name, Jim," Tom suddenly suggested.

"No; I won't," retorted Ferrers. "I'll play squarely."

"That will be doing squarely by us, Jim," Tom continued. "We don't want to use up our claim privileges on one stretch of Nevada dirt."

If we can find claims enough we'll stake out three, and then pool them all together in a gentlemen's agreement."

"That's a good deal of trust you're showing in me, gentlemen," said Jim huskily.

"Never mind, Jim," returned Reade quietly. "You can show us, you know, that we didn't waste our confidence."

While they were still talking the three came in sight of the ridge.

"Look there!" gasped Harry suddenly.

"Dolph Gage and his tin-horn crowd!" flared Jim Ferrers, in anger. "Hang the fellow! This time I'll-----"

"Stop fingering your rifle, Jim," ordered Reade. "Remember, nothing like fighting! If they haven't filed notice in due form on the claim, we're safe yet. If they have-----"

"Look!" hissed Ferrers.

At that moment Dolph Gage could be seen nailing a sheet of white paper to a board driven into the soil.

"We've staked what you want, I reckon!" bellowed Gage laconically. "Staked it in due form, too, if you want to know."

"I guess we've lost that claim," said Tom slowly.

"Have we?" hissed Jim Ferrers.

CHAPTER VII

READY TO HANDLE THE PICK

"Keep off this ground!" yelled Dolph Gage, snatching up his rifle.

"Stop that nonsense," Tom bellowed back in his own lusty voice.

"You've no right on this ground."

"Yes, we have, if you want to know," Tom continued. "You haven't filed your papers at Dugout yet."

"How do you know we haven't?"

"I'll take a chance on it," smiled Tom amiably, as he and his companions continued to walk nearer.

Jim Ferrers held his rifle so that it would take him but an instant to swing it into action if the need came.

"If you've filed your papers for this claim" Tom continued, lowering his voice somewhat as they drew nearer to the four rascals. "Have you any such paper to show us?"

"Perhaps not," growled Dolph Gage, his evil eyes seeming to shoot flame. "But we've got our notice of claim nailed up here. We got it here first, and now you can't file any mining entry at Dugout City for this bit o' ground."

"Not if your notice is written in the prescribed language," Tom admitted.

"Well, it is. Now, keep off this ground, or we'll shoot you so full of holes that you'll all three pass for tolerable lead mines!"

"If you don't shoot and make a good job of it," Reade insisted, "I'm going to look over your notice of claim and see whether it's worded in a way that will hold in law."

"Drop 'em, boys! Don't let 'em near!" roared Dolph Gage, swinging his rifle as though to bring it to his shoulder.

But Jim Ferrers had forestalled him. The guide was gazing at his enemy through his rifle sights.

"Drop your weapon, Dolph Gage, and do it blazing quick, or I'll shoot you where you stand!" sounded Jim's voice, low and businesslike. "If any of you other galoots tries to raise his weapon I'll turn and drop him."

As Jim Ferrers had a reputation in Nevada as a rifle shot the others hesitated, then let their rifles drop to the ground.

"Hold them to their present good intentions, Jim," said Tom, with a smile, as he continued to move forward. "Now, Mr. Gage---I believe that's your name let me see what kind of notice you know how to draw up."

"There 'tis," muttered Dolph sullenly, pointing to the board.

Tom read the notice through under his breath, word by word.

"You've done this sort of thing before, I guess, Gage," said Reade quietly.

"You bet I have. Find it all reg'lar, too, don't you?"

"As nearly as I can tell, it is," agreed Tom.

"And the claim is ours."

"It's yours if you file the formal papers soon enough."

"They'll be filed first thing tomorrow morning," grunted Dolph Gage. "Now, try a two-step off the dirt that goes with this claim."

"Not until I've seen the borders that you claim," Tom rejoined.

"Why!" demanded Gage cunningly. "Going to start your claim right at the corners of ours."

"If you'll pardon me," Reade smiled, "I don't believe I'll tell you anything about my intentions."

"Maybe you think this claim is a pretty valuable one," Gage insinuated.

"I didn't say so."

"But you would have staked if we hadn't done it first."

"That's what you've got to guess," smiled Reade.

"Say, now you've lost this claim, tell us some thing straight, won't youth begged Dolph.

"Tell you something straight?" repeated Tom. "Certainly. I'll tell you something just as straight as I know how,"

"Well," he said, at last, "you said you'd tell us something straight."

"And so I will," laughed Tom. "It's just this: Go to blazes!"

"Come, now, don't get fresh, kid!" warned Dolph angrily. "If we're going to be on neighboring claims you may find it a heap to your advantage to use us about half-way decent and polite."

Tom didn't answer at once. He was rapidly covering the statement of location from the paper nailed to the board.

"You fellows picked up a lot of ore stuff around here," continued Dolph Gage.

"Yes?" Tom inquired. "Did you see us?"

"Yes, and we also saw you making an assay."

"You did."

"Of course we did. Say, friend, how did that assay come out?"

"It came out of the furnace," Tom answered still writing.

"Course it did. But say, how did that assay read?"

"Read?" repeated Tom. "Why, bless me, I never knew that an assay could read."

"You know what I meant, younker. How did it figger?"

"To the best of my belief," said Tom, "an assay is as much unable to figure as it is to read."

"Don't waste any more time on the kid, Dolph," growled another of the group. "He won't tell you anything that you want to know."

"If he doesn't" rejoined Gage, "maybe he'll miss something. See here---Reade's your name, isn't it?"

"You've got that much of your information straight," assented Tom, looking up with a smile.

"Well, Reade, maybe you'd better be a bit more polite and sociable. You've missed staking this claim, but I think we can fix it to give you a job here as engineer."

"That would be very kind of you, I'm sure," nodded Tom. "But I can't undertake any work for you."

"Then you'll lose some money."

"I'm used to losing money," smiled Tom. "As for my partner, he's a real wonder in the way of losing money. He lost ten cents yesterday."

"We've got a fine claim," asserted Dolph Gage. "It's right under our feet, and there isn't another such claim in Nevada. Now, if you two want to make any real money you'd better begin to be decent with us right now. Otherwise, you won't get the job. Now, what do you say?"

"I vote for 'otherwise,'" laughed Reade, turning on his heel.

"Oh, you run along and be independent, then," called Dolph Gage after him. "If you're going to stick the winter through on this Range you'll be hungry once or twice between now and spring, if you don't take the trouble to get in right with us."

"Why?" questioned Reade, halting and looking squarely back. "Do

you steal food, too?"

Once More Tom turned on his heel. Harry walked along with him. Jim Ferrers all but walked backward, holding his rifle ready and keeping a keen eye over the claim stealers.

"Come along, Jim," called Tom at last. "Those fellows won't do any shooting. Their minds are now set on their new claim. They expect to dig out gold enough to enable them to buy two or three banks. They won't shoot unless they're driven to it."

Jim Ferrers turned and walked with the boys.

Fifteen seconds later a rifle cracked out behind them, the bullet striking the dirt well to the left of Tom's party.

"It's a bluff, Jim, and-----" began Reade.

Crack! spoke Ferrers's ride.

"I knocked Gage's hat off," said the guide dryly. "Now, if he fires again, it'll show that he's looking for trouble."

"The fellow who goes looking for trouble is always a fool," Tom remarked.

"Because trouble is the most worthless thing in the world, yet a fellow who goes looking for it is always sure to find twice as much as he thought he wanted."

By the time the young engineers had reached their own camp, Harry, whose face had been growing gradually "longer" on the walk, sank to the ground in an attitude of dejection.

"Just our luck!" he growled. "Gage is right when he says that claim is the best in this part of Nevada. And, just because we were too slow, we lost it. Fortune, you know, Tom, knocks but once at any man's door."

"I don't believe that," said Tom stoutly. "Harry, now that we've made a start and lost, my mind is made up as to our course now. I hope you'll agree with me."

"What is it?" Hazelton asked.

"Harry, old fellow, we'll turn mining engineers in earnest for the present. We'll engineer our own mines, with Jim for a partner. Harry, we'll get up our muscle with pickaxes. We'll stake our fortunes on the turn of a pick!"

CHAPTER VIII

JIM FERRERS, PARTNER

"You mean it, do you?" asked Hazelton, after a pause of a few moments.

"I never meant anything more in my life!"

"Then, of course, I'll agree to it, Tom. If I go astray, it'll be the first time that I ever went wrong through following your advice."

"And you're with us, Ferrers?" inquired Tom, looking around.

"Gentlemen," spoke the guide feelingly, "after the way you've used me, and the way you've talked to me, I'm with you in anything, and I can wait a month, any time, to find out what that 'anything' means. Just give me your orders."

"Orders are not given to partners," Tom told him.

"Orders go with this partner," Jim asserted gravely. "And, gentlemen, if we make any money, just hand me what you call my share and I'll never ask any questions."

"Jim, we're going in for mining," Tom continued. "I can speak for Mr. Hazelton now, for he has authorized me to do so. Mining it is, Jim, but we three are young and tender, and not expert with pickaxes. We'd better have some experts. Can you pick up at least six real miners at Dugout City?"

"A feller usually can," Ferrers replied.

"Then if you'll put in a good part of tonight riding, tomorrow you can do your best to pick up the men. Get the kind, Jim, who don't balk at bullets when they have to face 'em, for we've a hornets' nest over yonder. Get sober, level-headed fellows who know how to fight--men of good judgment and nerve. Pay 'em what's right. You know the state of wages around here. While you're at Dugout, Jim, pick out a two-mule team and a good, dependable wagon for carting supplies. Put all the chuck aboard that you think we'll need for the next two or three weeks. I'll give you, also, a list of digging tools and some of the explosives that we'll need in shaft sinking. While you're in Dugout, Jim, pick up two good ponies, with saddles and bridles. I guess I'd better write down some of these instructions, hadn't I?"

"And write down the street corner where I'm to pick up the money, Mr. Reade," begged Ferrers dryly. "You can't do much in the credit line in Nevada."

"The street corner where you're to find the money, eh, Jim?" smiled Tom. "Yes; I believe I can do that, too. You know the map of Dugout, don't you?"

"Course."

"You know where to find the corner of Palace Avenue and Mission Street?"

"Sure."

"On one of those four corners," Tom continued, "you'll find the Dugout City Bank."

"I've seen the place," nodded Ferrers, "but I never had any money in it."

"You will have, one of these days," smiled Tom, taking out a fountain pen and shaking it. Next he drew a small, oblong book from an inside pocket, and commenced writing on one of the pages. This page he tore out and handed Ferrers.

"What's this?" queried the guide.

"That's an order on the Dugout City Bank to hand you one thousand dollars."

Ferrers stared at the piece of paper incredulously.

"What'll the feller pay me in?" he demanded. "Lead at twelve cents a pound? And say, will he hand me the lead out of an automatic gun?"

"If the paying teller serves you that way," rejoined Reade, "you'll have a right to feel peevisish about it. But he won't. Hazelton and I have the money in bank to stand behind that check."

"You have?" inquired Ferrers, opening his eyes wide. "Fellers at your age have that much money in banks"

"And more, too," Tom nodded. "Did you think, Jim, that we had never earned any money?"

"Well, I didn't know that you probably made more'n eighteen or twenty dollars a week," Ferrers declared.

"We've made slightly more than that, with two good railroad jobs behind us," Tom laughed. "And here's our firm pass-book at the bank, Jim. You'll see by it that we have a good deal more than a thousand dollars there. Now, you draw the thousand that the check calls for. When you're through you may have some money left. If you do, turn the money in at the bank, have it entered on the pass-book and then bring the book to me."

"I'll have to think this over," muttered Ferrers, "and you'd better set down most of it in writing so that I won't forget."

The smoke from the cook fire brought Alf Drew in from hiding, his finger-tips stained brown as usual.

"Now, see here, young man," said Tom gravely, "there is no objection to your taking some of your time off with your 'makings,' but Ferrers is going away, and you must stay around more for the next two or three days. Otherwise, there won't be any meals or any payday coming to you."

"Is Mr. Ferrers going to Dugout City?" asked Alf, with sudden interest.

"Yes."

"Say, I'll work mighty hard if you'll advance me fifty cents and let me get an errand done by Mr. Ferrers."

"Here's the money," smiled Tom, passing over the half dollar.

Alf was in such haste that he forgot to express his thanks. Racing over to Jim the little fellow said something in a very low voice.

"No; I won't!" roared Ferrers. "Nothing of the sort!"

"Does he want you to get the 'makings,' Jim!" called Tom.

"Yes; but I won't do it," the guide retorted.

"Please do," asked Tom.

"What? _You_ ask me to do it, sir? Then all right. I will."

"What do you want to do that for?" murmured Harry.

"Let the poor little runt have his 'makings,' if he wants," Tom proposed. "But I don't believe that Alf will smoke the little white pests very much longer."

"You're going to stop him?"

"I'm going to make him want to stop it himself," Tom rejoined, with a slight grin.

Alf came back, looking much pleased.

"Let me feel your pulse," requested Reade. "Now, let me see your tongue."

This much accomplished, Tom next turned down the under lid of one of young Drew's eyes and gazed at the lack of red there displayed.

"I see," remarked Reade gravely, "that your nerves are going all to pieces."

"I feel fine," asserted Alf stolidly.

"You must, with your nerves in the state I now find them," retorted the young engineer. "Next thing I know you'll be hearing things."

Click-ick-ick!

"Wow-ow-wow!" shrieked Alf Drew, bounding some ten feet away from the low bush near which he had been standing.

Click-ick-ick-ick!

"Get away from that bush, Mr. Reade!" howled the young cigarette fiend. "That rattler will bite you, if you don't."

"I didn't hear any rattler," said Tom gravely. "Did you, Harry?"

"Not a rattle," said Hazelton soberly.

Jim Ferrers looked on and grinned behind Alf's back. The youngster was trembling. As Tom came near him the "rattle" sounded again. Within five minutes two more warning "rattles" had been heard near

the boy.

"The camp must be full of 'em," wailed the terrified boy. "And I'm afraid of rattlers."

"So am I, Alf," Tom assured him, "but I haven't heard one of the reptiles. The trouble is with your nerves, Drew. And your nerves are in league with your brain. If you go on smoking cigarettes you won't have any brain. Or, if you do, it will be one that will have you howling with fear all the time. Why don't you drop the miserable things when you find they're driving you out of your heads"

"Perh-h-h-haps I will," muttered the boy.

After an early supper, Jim Ferrers rode away. He offered to leave his rifle in camp, but Tom protested.

"I'd feel responsible for the thing if you left it here, you know, Jim. And I don't want to have to keep toting it around all the time you're away."

"But suppose Dolph Gage and his crew come over here, and you're not armed?"

"Then I'll own up that we haven't anything to shoot with, and ask him to call again," Tom laughed. "But don't be afraid, Jim. Gage and his crew will be anxious, for the next few days, to see whether they can coax us into serving them. They need an engineer over at their stolen claim, and they know it."

So Ferrers rode away, carrying his rifle across his saddle.

Alf spent an evening of terror, for the ground around the camp appeared to be full of "rattlers".

CHAPTER IX

HARRY DOES SOME PITCHING

As Tom had surmised, Dolph Gage was anxious to become friends with the young engineers.

"They're only kids," Dolph explained to his comrades, "but I've heard that they know their business. If we can get their help for a month, then when they hand in their bill we can give them a wooden check on a cloud bank."

"Their bill would be a claim against our mine wouldn't it?" asked one of the other men.

"Maybe," Dolph assented. "But, if they try to press it, we can pay it with lead coin."

The morning after Jim had gone, one of Gage's companions stalked

into camp.

"The boss wants to see you," said this messenger.

"Whose boss?" Tom inquired.

"Well, maybe he's yours," scowled the messenger. "And maybe you'll be sorry if you fool with him."

"I? Fool with Gage?" inquired Reade, opening his eyes in pretended astonishment. "My dear fellow, I've no intention of doing anything of the sort."

"Then you'll come over to our camp, right away?"

"Nothing like it," Tom replied. "Kindly present my compliments to your boss, and tell him that I have another appointment for today."

"You'd better come over," warned the fellow.

"You heard what I said, didn't you?" Reade inquired.

"There'll sure be trouble," insisted the fellow, scowling darkly.

"There's always trouble for those who are looking for it," Tom rejoined smilingly. "Is Dolph Gage hunting it?"

"You'll find out, if you don't come over!"

"Really," argued Reade, "we've disposed of that subject, my dear fellow. Have you any other business here! If not, you'll excuse us. Mr. Hazelton and I are to be gone for the day."

"Going prospecting?"

"We're going minding," smiled Reade.

"Mining?" repeated the visitor. "Mining what?"

"We are going off to mind our own business," Tom drawled. "Good morning."

"Then you're not coming over to our place?"

"No!" shouted Harry Hazelton, losing patience. "What do you want?"

"As you will observe, friend," suggested Tom, smiling at the messenger, "my partner has well mastered the lesson that a soft answer is a soother."

"Are you going to leave our camp?" Harry demanded, as the visitor squatted on the ground.

"If you two are going away," scowled the other, "you'll need some one to stay and watch the camp. I'll stay for you."

"Come on, Harry!" Tom called, starting away under the trees. Alf Drew had already gone. Breakfast being over the young cigarette

fiend had no notion of staying in camp for a share in any trouble that might be brewing.

"Why on earth are you leaving the camp at that fellow's mercy?" quivered Harry indignantly, as he and Tom got just out of earshot of the visitor.

"Because I suspect," Reade returned, "that he and his crowd want to steal our assaying outfit."

"And you're leaving the coast clear for that purpose?" Hazelton gasped in high dudgeon.

"Now, Harry, is that all you know about me?" questioned his partner, reproachfully. "Listen. Around here you'll find plenty of stones of a throwing size. Just fill your pockets, your hands---your hat. Creep in close to camp and hide. If you see 'Mr. Sulky' poking his nose into anything in our camp---the furnace, for instance, or the assay balance, then just drop a stone so near to him that it will make him jump. Be careful that you don't drop a stone on that balance. You used to be a pretty fair pitcher, and I believe you can drop a stone where you want."

"And what will you be doing?" asked Harry curiously.

"Oh, I'll be keeping out of harm's way, I promise you," laughed Tom Reade.

"Humph! Yes, it would be like you to put me into danger and to leave yourself out of it, wouldn't it?" mocked Harry Hazelton, unbelievably.

"Well, I'll try to make good use of my time, Harry, old fellow. For one thing, if you haunt camp and keep Gage's crowd busy, then you'll keep them from following or watching me. Don't you see?"

"No; I don't see," grunted Hazelton. "But what I do suspect is that you have something up your sleeve that I may not find out for two or three days to come. Yet, whatever it is, it will be for our mutual good. I can depend upon you, Tom Reade! Go ahead; go as far as you like."

"Get the stones gathered up, then, and get back to camp," counseled Reade. "Don't lose too much time about it, for Gage's rascal may be able to do a lot of harm in the two or three minutes that you might be late in getting back."

Harry industriously picked up stones. Hardly had he started when Tom Reade silently vanished.

"Well, I'm glad, anyway, that Tom doesn't want us both away from camp while he's doing something," reflected Hazelton, as he began to move cautiously back. "There wouldn't be any camp by noon if we were both away."

Even before he secured his first glimpse of camp, Harry heard some one moving about there.

"The rascal must feel pretty sure that we're both fools enough to be away," quivered Hazelton indignantly. "What on earth is he doing, anyway?"

Then the young engineer crawled in close enough to get an excellent view of what was going on.

"Well, of all the impudence!" choked Harry, balancing a stone nicely in his right hand.

First of all the visitor had rounded up all the firewood into one heap. Now, to this combustible material the fellow was bringing a side of bacon and a small bag of flour. These he dropped on the firewood, then went back for more of the camp's food supply.

"Just wait," scowled Hazelton. "Oh, my fine fellow, I'll make your hands too hot for holding other people's property!"

Over the brush arched a stone. Hazelton had been a pitcher in his high school days, and no mistake. The descending stone fell smack across the back of the fellow's right hand.

"That's right! Howl!" cried Harry, exultantly. "Now, for a surprise."

The second stone flew with better speed, carrying away the fellow's hat without hitting his head.

"Hey, you, stop that!" roared the fellow.

From behind the bushes all was quiet. The camp prowler stood up straight, staring to see whence the next stone would come. After nearly two minutes he bent to pick up the case of biscuit that he had dropped.

Smack! Even as his nearer hand touched the box a sharp stone struck the back of that hand, cutting a gash and causing the blood to spurt.

"I'll have your scalp for that!" howled the enraged man. Making a pretty good guess at the direction from which the stone had come, the fellow started toward the brush on a run.

"Here's where you get all of yours!" chuckled Harry Hazelton. Still crouching he let three stones fly one after the other. The first struck the prowler in the mouth, the second on the end of the nose and the third over the pit of his stomach.

"You two-legged Gatling gun!" howled the fellow, shaking with rage and pain. He halted, shaking his fist in the direction from which the stones had come.

Another lot of stones flew toward him. The prowler waited no longer, but turned, making for Gage's camp as fast as he could go.

"That ought to hold those rascals for a little while," speculated Harry. "But, of course, there'll be a come-back. What'll they do to me now, I wonder?"

By way of precaution Hazelton cautiously shifted to another hiding

place. Within fifteen minutes he saw the same prowler stealing back into camp. When the fellow was near enough, Harry let fly a stone that dropped near the rascal's toes.

"Hey, you stop that, or I'll make you wish you had!" roared the fellow, shaking his fist.

Harry's answer was to drive two more stones in, sending them close to the fellow, yet without hitting him.

Again the man shouted at him, though he did not attempt to come any nearer to so expert a thrower of stones.

Then, suddenly, just behind him, Harry Hazelton heard a sound. In the next instant two men hurled themselves upon the young engineer, pinning him to the ground.

"I ought to have suspected this!" grunted Harry inwardly, as he fought back with all his strength. He might have succeeded in slipping away from the two men who sought to pin him down, but the third man, still aching from contact with Harry's missiles, now darted into the scrimmage, striking several hard blows. Harry was presently conquered and tied.

"Take the cub to his own camp!" sounded the exultant voice of Dolph Gage. "With one of the pair tied, it won't be hard to handle the other whenever he happens along."

CHAPTER X

TOM'S FIGHTING BLOOD SURGES

"Take another hitch of rope around that young steer," Dolph ordered, after he had flung Harry violently to the ground.

"He won't get away as he is," replied one of the other two men.

"Maybe not, but take an extra roping, as I told you," was Gage's tart retort.

So another length of line was passed around Hazelton, until he felt as though he had been done up in network.

"Now; we'll give your partner a chance to show up," muttered Gage, throwing himself on the ground. "You young fellers will have to learn the lesson that you're thirty miles from anywhere, and that we rule matters around here. We're going to keep on ruling, too, in this strip of Nevada."

"Are you?" grimaced Hazelton. "Then, my friend, allow me to tell you that you are making the mistake of trying to reckon without Tom Reade!"

"Is that your partner's name?" jeered Dolph Gage. "A likely enough boy, from what I've heard of him. But he isn't old enough to

understand Nevada ways."

"No, perhaps not," Harry admitted ironically. "So far Tom has gotten his training only in Colorado and in Arizona. I begin to realize that he isn't bright enough to have his own way among the bright men of Nevada. But Reade learns rapidly---don't forget that!"

"Huh!" growled Gage. "The young cub seems to think that he has come out here to take charge of the Range. According to his idea he has only to pick out what he wanted here; and take it. He never seems to understand that gold belongs to the first man who finds it. I was on this Range long before Reade was out of school."

"And he doesn't object to your staying here," remarked Hazelton calmly.

"That's good of him, I'm sure," snapped Gage. "I've no objection to his staying here, either. Fact is, I'm going to encourage both of you to stay here."

"Encourage us?" grinned Harry.

"Well, then, I'm going to make you stay here, if you like that word any better."

"That will be more difficult," suggested Hazelton.

"First of all, we're going to tote your assay outfit over to our camp. You won't be able to do much without that. Look around a bit, Eb," added Dolph, turning to one of his companions. "Perhaps you'd better get the furnace out first. Two of you can carry it. I wish we had our other man back from Dugout. We need hands here."

"Can't you use some of my muscle in helping you to loot our camp?" suggested Hazelton, ironically. "I'm fairly strong, you know."

"Yes; I know you are. That's why we've tied you up," growled Gage.

The man addressed as Eb had taken the other fellow aside, and they were now lifting the assay furnace in order to decide how heavy it was.

"It doesn't weigh much over a hundred and fifty pounds," called out Dolph Gage. "Two men like you can get it over to camp. And bring over our guns, too. It was a mistake to leave 'em over in camp."

Gage watched until the pair were out of sight among the trees.

"Hurry, you men!" Gage roared after them.

Then he started in to nose around the camp.

As he passed a clump of bushes there was a slight stir among them. Then Tom Reade leaped forth.

In a twinkling Dolph Gage had been caught up. He was in the grip of a strong, trained football player.

"Drop me!" ordered Gage, with a slight quiver in his voice.

"I'm going to," agreed Tom, hurling the fellow fully a dozen feet.

With an oath Gage leaped to his feet. Before he was fairly Tom Reade's fist caught him in the left eye, sending him to earth once more.

"Is that the way you fight, you young cub?" roared Gage hoarsely.

"I can fight harder if you want me to," Tom retorted, as the other again got to his feet. "Now, put your hands up, and I'll show you."

Tom went at it hammer and tongs. He was a splendidly built young athlete, and boxing was one of his strong points, though he rarely allowed himself to get into a fight. Indeed, his usually abounding good nature made all fighting disagreeable to him. Now, however, he drove in as though Dolph Gage were a punching-bag.

"Stand up, man, and fight as though you had some sand in you!" Tom ordered. "Get up steam, and defend yourself."

"I have had enough," Gage gasped. Indeed, his face looked as though he had.

"Are you a baby?" Reade demanded contemptuously. "Can't you fight with anything but your tongue!"

"You wait and I'll show you," snarled the badly battered man.

"What's the need of waiting?" Tom jeered, and swung in another blow that sent Gage to the ground.

"Eh! Josh!" bellowed Gage, with all the breath he had left. "Hustle o-o-o-over here!"

"Let 'em come!" vaunted Reade. "You'll be done for long before they can get here."

"I'll have you killed when they get here with the guns!" cried Gage hoarsely.

Tom continued to punish his opponent. Then Dolph, on regaining his feet, sought to run. Tom let him go a few steps, then bounded after him with the speed of the sprinter. Gage was caught by the shoulders, swung squarely around, and soundly pummelled.

"Let up! Let up!" begged Gage. "I'm beaten. I admit it."

"Beaten, perhaps, but not punished enough," retorted Tom. As Dolph would no longer stand up, Reade threw himself upon the fellow and pummelled him fearfully.

"This is no fair fight," protested Gage, now fairly sobbing in his pain and terror, for good-humored Reade seemed to him now to be the impersonation of destroying, fury.

"Fair fight?" echoed Reade. "Of course it isn't. This is a chastisement. You villain, you've done nothing but annoy us and shoot at us ever since we've met you. You've got to stop it after this; do you understand?"

"I'll stop it--I'll stop it. Please stop yourself," begged Gage, now thoroughly cowed.

"I'll wager you'll stop," gritted Tom. "I've never hammered a man before as I've hammered you, and I'm not half through with you. By the time I am through with you you'll slink into a corner every time you see me coming near. You scoundrel, you bully!"

Tom's fists continued to descend. Dolph's tone changed from one of entreaty to one of dire threats. He would spend the rest of his life, he declared, in dogging Reade's tracks until he succeeded in killing the boy.

"That doesn't worry me any. You'll experience a change of heart---see if you don't," Tom rejoined grimly, as he added to the pounding that the other was receiving.

Harry Hazelton had struggled to his feet, though he had been unable to free his hands from the cords that held them behind his back. "You're not talking quite the way you did a few minutes ago, Gage," Harry put in dryly.

"You'll see---both of you young pups!" moaned the battered wretch. "Ask any one, and they'll tell you that Dolph Gage never overlooks a pounding such as I've had."

"And you got it from the boy that you were going to teach something," jeered Hazelton, "Gage, you know a little more about Tom Reade, now, don't you?"

Then Harry straightened up, as he caught sight of moving objects in the distance.

"Get through with him, Tom" advised the other young engineer. "I see Eb and Josh coming on the run. They'll have the guns. We've got to look out for ourselves."

Tom flung the badly beaten man from him where he lay on the ground moaning over his hurts and vowing vengeance on Tom.

"Stand still, Harry, and I'll have you free in a jiffy," Tom proposed, hauling out his pocket knife.

"It won't do for us to stand still too long," urged Hazelton, as his chum began to slash at the cords. "The other scoundrels will kill us when they see what's been going on here."

"No, they won't," Tom promised calmly. "We'll take care of 'em both. You wait and see which one I take. Then you take the other. We'll handle 'em to the finish."

This seemed like foolhardy talk when it was considered that the other two men would return armed. But Harry had unlimited confidence

in his friend, and so followed Tom, crouching, until they had hidden behind bushes along the trail.

"Where be you, Dolph?" called the voice of Eb, as the pair drew near.

"He's over there," spoke Reade, springing out of the bushes. "You'll join him after a bit."

Neither Eb nor Josh was armed. Tom sailed into Eb, while Harry sprang at Josh. For a few minutes the trail was a scene of swift action, indeed. Shortly Eb and Josh tried to run away, as Gage had done, but each time the young engineers caught them and compelled them to renew the fight.

"My man's going to sleep, now, Harry!" Tom called, and drove in a knockout blow with his left.

Josh swiftly followed Eb to the ground.

"They'll keep quiet for a little while," declared Tom, after a look at each.

Dolph Gage had by this time painfully risen to his feet and came limping slowly down the trail.

"You might look after your friends, Gage," Tom called, pointing. "They need attention."

"How did they come to be here?" gasped Dolph.

"They'll give you full particulars when they have time," Tom laughed.

"You boys won't feel quite so smart when our turn comes," snarled Gage.

"Not a bit," Reade answered. "If you fellows have any sense you'll conclude that you've had about all the settlement that you can stand."

Gage didn't make any answer. Doubtless he concluded that it wouldn't be wise to talk back. So he began working over Eb and Josh, until they showed signs of reviving.

"Did ye---did ye kill 'em for us, Dolph?" gasped Josh, as he opened his eyes and beheld the face of his comrade.

"No," said Gage curtly.

"Why not?"

"Shut up!"

Not many minutes more had passed when Eb became conscious.

"You fellows can go over to your camp, any time you want," suggested Tom.

Slowly, painfully, the trio started.

"I feel almost ashamed of myself," Harry muttered.

"So do I," Tom agreed. "Yet what else was there for us to do! We've stood all the nonsense we can from that crowd. They'd have killed us if we hadn't done something to bring them to their senses. Now, I believe they'll let us alone."

"They'll ambush us," predicted Hazelton

"Well, they won't have any guns to do it with," Tom grinned.

"Why, what became of their guns"

"I'm the only fellow on earth who knows," Tom laughed.

"Then you were at their camp?"

"Of course. My telling you to stone any prowler who visited this place was only a trap. I thought that he'd run off and get the rest of the crew. Knowing you to be alone and unarmed, and believing me to be far away prospecting, they didn't imagine that they'd need their rifles. As soon as they left their camp I dropped in and borrowed the rifles and all their ammunition."

"Where is the stuff now?"

"Come on and I'll show you."

"Hold on a minute," begged Harry, as Tom leaped up. "Do you miss anything?"

"What?"

"Our assay furnace. Eb and Josh carted it away."

"Then we'll go after that, first," Tom smiled. "Our friends are so sore that it would be hardly fair to ask them to return the furnace."

That missing article was found about halfway between the two camps. Tom and Harry picked it up, carrying it back to where it had been taken from. "Going after the guns, now?" Hazelton inquired.

"First of all," Tom suggested, "I think we had better start a roaring good campfire."

"What do we want such a thing as that for?" Harry protested. "The day is warm enough."

"The fire will be just the thing," laughed Tom quietly. "Come on and gather the wood with me. Alf! Oh, you Alf Drew!"

But the cigarette fiend was not in evidence. If he heard, he did not answer.

"We might as well pay that imitation boy for his time and let him go," muttered Harry.

"Oh, I hardly think so," dissented Reade. "It's worth some time

and expense to see if we can't make something more nearly resembling a man out of him."

The fire was soon crackling merrily. Tom led the way to a thicket an eighth of a mile from camp. Here he produced from hiding three repeating rifles and several boxes of ammunition.

"We'll hold on to these," Hazelton said.

"For what reason?"

"They'll come in handy to steer off that other crowd."

"I wouldn't be bothered with keeping the rifles about camp," Tom retorted, as they started backward.

"But say! Gage's man that went to Dugout will soon be back. Do you forget that he carries a rifle?"

"Jim Ferrers will be back at about the same time," Tom rejoined. "They'll have rifles until the camp will look like an outdoor arsenal. We don't want these added rifles around camp. Besides, if we kept 'em we'd soon begin to feel like thieves with other folks' property."

"What are you going to do with these guns, then?"

"By tomorrow," Reade proposed, "I rather expect to put these guns out where Gage's crew can find them again."

"Well, you're full of faith in human nature, then!" gasped Harry.

"Wait and see what happens," begged Tom.

When they stepped back into camp Tom threw the magazine of one of the rifles open, extracting the cartridges. Then he stepped over and carefully deposited the rifle across the middle of the fire.

"I might have known!" cried Hazelton.

The other two rifles were soon disposed of in the same manner.

"Let the rifles cook in the fire for an hour," smiled Reade, "and the barrels will be too crooked for a bullet ever to get through one again."

"What are you going to do with the cartridges, though?"

"Fire a midnight salute with them," Tom answered briefly. "Wait and you'll hear some noise."

Alf Drew cautiously approached camp when he felt the pangs of hunger. The cigarette fiend must have been satisfied, for Tom and Harry had already gotten the meal. But Reade, without a word of rebuke to their supposed helper, allowed young Drew to help himself to all he wanted in the way of hot food and coffee.

Bringing midnight two hours nearer---that is to say, at ten o'clock,

Tom and Harry, aided this time by Alf, built a large fire-pile in a gully at a safe distance from camp. The wood was saturated with oil, a powder flash laid, then Tom laid a fuse-train. Lighting the fuse, the three speedily decamped.

Presently they saw the flames of the newly kindled fire shooting up through the trees. Then the volleying began, for Tom had carefully deposited through the fire-pile all the captured cartridges.

For fully five minutes the cartridges continued to explode, in ragged volleys.

"It's a regular Fourth of July," Harry laughed, back in camp. "Tom, who's going to take the first trick of watch tonight?"

"Neither one of us," Reade replied. "We'll both get a sound sleep."

But the enemy?"

"It would take four mules apiece to drag them over here tonight," laughed Reade, as he rolled himself up in his blanket. "Good night!"

CHAPTER XI

PLANNING A NEW MOVE

Barely were the young engineers astir the following morning when Alf Drew came racing back with news.

"There's a whole slew of men coming, on horseback and on foot!" Alf reported. "And a whole train of wagons!"

"Good enough!" nodded Tom. "I hope the new folks camp right close to here. We need good neighbors more than anything else."

"But they may belong to Gage's crowd," Alf insisted.

"Don't you believe it, lad. Dolph Gage hasn't money enough to finance a crowd like that."

"It may be Dunlop's crowd," suggested Hazelton.

"That's more likely," said Tom. "Well we'll be glad enough to see Dunlop back here with a outfit. This part of the woods will soon be a town, at that rate."

"Come out where you can get a look a new crowd," urged Alf.

"If it's any one who wants to be neighborly," Reade answered with a shake of his head, "he's bound to stop in and say 'howdy.' We're going to get breakfast now."

"Then I'll be back soon, and tell you anything I can find out about the new folks," cried Alf, darting away.

But Tom raced after the lad, collaring him.

"Alf, listen to me. We're not paying you to come in on time to get your meals. You get over there by Jim's cooking outfit and be ready to take orders."

"Humph!" grunted young Drew, but he went as directed, for there was nothing else to do.

Five minutes later Mr. Dunlop turned his horse's head and rode down into the camp.

"Howdy, boys!" called the mine promoter.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Dunlop," Tom nodded, while Harry smiled a welcome.

"I've sent my outfit around by the other trail," explained Mr. Dunlop. "I've brought back men enough to start work in earnest. There will be a mule train here by tomorrow with donkey engines and machinery enough to start the work of mine-digging in earnest. Here, boy, take my horse and tie him."

As Alf led the animal away, Mr. Dunlop turned to the young engineers with a smile of great amiability.

"Boys, I'm glad to say that I wired the two railroad presidents you mentioned to me. Both wired back, in effect, that my mine was bound to be a success if I turned the engineering problem over to you. So I'm going to accept your offers---hire you at your own figures. I want you to come over to the Bright Hope claim as soon as you've had breakfast."

Tom glanced at his chum, then answered, slowly:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dunlop, sorry indeed, if-----"

"What are you trying to say?" demanded the mine promoter sharply.

"When you left here, Mr. Dunlop, we told you that we couldn't agree to hold our offer open."

"Oh, that's all right. I've come right back and taken up your terms with you," replied the promoter easily.

"But I'm sorry to say, sir, that you are too late."

"Too late? What are you talking about, Reade? You haven't entered the employ of any one else not in this wilderness."

"We've formed a partnership with Ferrers, sir," Reade gravely informed Mr. Dunlop, "and we're going into the mining business on our own account."

"Nonsense! Where's your claim?"

"Somewhere, sir, in this part of Nevada."

"You haven't found the claim yet, then?" asked the promoter, with a tinge of relief in his voice.

"No, sir. We located a promising claim, but the Gage gang tricked us out of it. We'll find another, though."

"Then you'll prove yourselves very talented young men," scoffed Mr. Dunlop. "Lad, don't you know that I've been all over this country with old-time prospectors? There isn't any claim left that will pay you for the trouble of locating and working it."

"We're going to hope for better luck than your words promise us, sir," Harry hinted.

"You'll have your labor for your pains, then, and the satisfaction of finding yourselves fools," exclaimed Dunlop testily. "You'd better drop all that nonsense, and report to me after breakfast."

"It's not to be thought of, Mr. Dunlop," Tom replied gravely. "We are here in the land of gold. We think we see our chance to work for ourselves for a while, and we're going to make the most of our chance."

"Then you're a pair of idiots," quivered indignant Dunlop.

"We'll be our own fools, then," smiled Harry.

"I beg your pardon for getting out of patience," spoke Mr. Dunlop, more gently. "I'm disappointed in you. All the way here I have been planning to get you both at work early. The stockholders in the Bright Hope are all looking for early results."

"Couldn't you get hold of an engineer at Dugout?" Tom inquired.

"Not one."

"Then you'll have to go farther---Carson City," Reade suggested. "There must be plenty of mining engineers in Nevada, where their services are so much in demand."

"A lot of new claims are being filed these days," explained Mr. Dunlop. "The best I could learn in Dugout was that I'd have to wait until some other mine could spare its man."

"I'm sorry we can't help you, sir," Tom went on thoughtfully.

"I shall feel it a personal grievance, if you don't," snapped the mine promoter.

"We can't do anything for you, Mr. Dunlop," spoke Reade decisively. "Just as soon as Ferrers returns, so that our camp can be taken care of, we three partners are going to hustle out on the prospect. Will you have breakfast with us, sir?"

Mr. Dunlop assented, but his mind was plainly on his disappointment all through the meal.

Even when Harry Hazelton related how Dolph Gage and his crew had been served, the mine promoter displayed but little enthusiasm.

"By the way, sir," suggested Tom, "you are not going to use all of your men today?"

"I cannot use any of them for a day or two."

"Then you might do us a great favor by sending a few of your men over here. I expect that Gage's absent comrade will return at any time. He will have his rifle, and one gun in the hands of a marksman, might be enough to make considerable trouble around here."

"You ask me a favor, and yet you won't work for me," complained their guest.

"I think we did you a favor, once upon a time, by helping to chase off the Gage crowd at a critical time for you," said Tom bluntly. "However, if you don't wish-----"

"I'll send half a dozen men over here until Ferrers returns," interjected Mr. Dunlop hastily.

The men reported to Tom and Harry within half an hour. A few minutes after their arrival Harry espied Dolph Gage's absent man galloping over to the Gage claim.

"There would have been trouble, if we hadn't shown a few armed men here," muttered Hazelton.

"There's some excitement in that camp, as it is," exclaimed Tom, who had a pair of binoculars at his eyes. "Gage, Eb and Josh are crowding around the new arrival. Take the glasses, Harry. Note how excited they are about something."

"Gage is stamping about and looking wild," Harry reported. "He looks as though, for two cents, he'd tear his hair out. And Eb has thrown his hat on the ground and is stamping on it. I wonder what the trouble can be?"

Two hours later Jim Ferrers rode into camp at the head of his new outfit. He had the two-mule team and wagon, and seven men, all miners and armed. Two of the men rode the ponies that Reade had instructed Jim to buy.

"Jim," called Tom, as he ran toward their mining party, "have you any idea what's wrong with the Gage crowd?"

"I've a small notion," grinned the guide. "The man who was sent over couldn't file their claim to the ridge."

"Couldn't file it! Why not?"

"Because every man in that crowd has exhausted his mineral land privileges taking up claims elsewhere."

"Why, then, man alive!" gasped Tom, halting, a look of wonder on his face, and then a grin of realization, "if they can't file the claim to that strip, why can't we!"

"We can, if we're quick enough," Ferrers answered. "I tried to file the claim while I was over in Dugout, but the clerk at the mining claim office said he 'lowed that we'd have to have our declaration tacked up on the ridge first of all."

"That'll take us a blessed short time," muttered Reade. "Harry and I have all the particulars we need for writing out the notice of claim. Get some breakfast on the jump, Jim, and we'll hustle over there."

"I had my breakfast before I rode in here," errors answered, his eyes shining. "I'd a-missed my guess, Mr. Reade, if you hadn't been ready for prompt action."

"Then there's no reason, Jim, under mining customs, why we shouldn't ride over there and stake out that claim?"

"Not a reason on earth, Mr. Reade, except that Gage will probably put up a big fight."

"Let him!" added Tom, in a lower voice. "Take it from me, Jim Ferrers, that claim on the ridge yonder is worth all kinds of fight. Here, get the horses saddled again, while Harry and I write our notice in record-breaking time for legible penmanship."

Tom's eyes were gleaming in a way that they had not done in months. For, despite his former apparent indifference to the trick Gage had played on them, Tom Reade would have staked his professional reputation on the richness of the ridge claim.

"It's gold, Harry---gold!" he exclaimed, hoarsely, in his chum's ear. "It's gold enough to last us through life if we work it hard from the start."

"We'll have to kill a few men before we can get Gage off that ridge, though," Hazelton predicted.

"It's gold, I tell you, Harry. When the gold-craze gets into a fellow's blood nothing but gold can cure it. We won't kill any one, and we'll hope not to be killed ourselves. But that claim was our discovery, and now the way is clear for us to own that strip of Nevada dirt. Gold, Harry, old chum---gold!"

Then they fell to writing. Harry did the pen work while Reade dictated rapidly.

If Engineer Tom Reade had been briefly excited he did not betray the fact when he stepped outside the tent.

"Horses saddled, Mr. Reade," announced Ferrers. "I s'pose you're going to take some of the boys over with us, in case Gage tries to put up any shooting bluff?"

"Yes," nodded Tom. "But don't take with us any fellow who is hot-blooded enough to do any real shooting."

"It'll take real shooting to get Gage's crew off that ridge," Ferrers warned the young engineer. "All men get gold crazy when they find their feet on a claim. Dolph Gage will fight while

he has breath left. Don't try to go over there, sir, if you're not satisfied to have a little shooting done at need."

"We're going over," declared Tom, the lines about his mouth tightening, "and we're going to take the claim for our own, as long as we have the legal right to do so. But I hope there won't have to be any gun-powder burned. Killing belongs only to one line of business---war!"

CHAPTER XII

NEW OWNERS FILE A CLAIM

Dolph Gage, after his richly deserved battering of the day before, presented a sorry-looking sight as he stood near the notice of his claim location.

In his right hand he gripped the only rifle there now was in his outfit, the one brought back by the man who had been to Dugout.

Jim Ferrers, rifle resting across the front of his saddle, rode at the head of the Reade-Hazelton party as that outfit reached the edge of the claim.

On either side of the guide, just to the rear, rode Tom and Harry. Behind them tramped four men armed with rides, the other two men carrying a board, stakes and a hammer.

"The first man who sets foot on this claim dies!" shouted Dolph Gage hoarsely.

"Same thing for any man who raises a rifle against us," Ferrers called back. "Gage, I want only a good excuse for taking one honest shot at you!"

The moment was tense with danger. Heedless of the black looks of Dolph, Tom dug his heels into his pony's flanks, moving forward at a trot.

"Gage," called the young engineer, steadily, "I think you have been in wrong often enough. This time I am sure that you will want to keep on the right side."

"You keep on the right side by staying off the claim!" Gage ordered, but at that instant Reade rode over the boundary.

For an instant no man could guess who would fire the first shot. Gage was angry and desperate enough to fire and take great chances. Had he fired at that moment there was no doubt that he would have been killed at the next breath.

Something stuck in Gage's throat. He did not raise his rifle, but instead he growled:

"You're a fine lot, to bring a small army against one man!"

"We have as much right here, Gage, as you have, spoke Tom, steadily.

"What do you want here!"

"We have come to look this claim over."

"Get off, then. You have no right here."

"You know, quite well, Gage, that we have as much right here as you have," Tom rejoined easily. "We are quite well aware that your man failed to file the claim because all of you have exhausted your mineral rights under the law.

"So you think you can come here and take it from us, do you?" glared Gage, his face livid with passion.

"We have just the same right to this claim now that any man has who has any mineral rights left under the law," Reade made answer.

"But you haven't. I'm going to get this claim yet," Gage insisted. "I've sent for a friend who hasn't taken up any mineral rights yet. He will file the claim. See here!"

Gage moved aside, displaying a new board, on which a notice had been written.

"That's signed with the name of the man the claim belongs to now," declared Gage, triumphantly.

Tom handed his bridle to Harry, then dismounted, bending over to scan the new notice. It was a duplicate of the former one, except that the new signature was that of one, Joseph Pringle.

"Where is Pringle?" Tom demanded.

"None of your business."

"But you see," explained the young engineer dryly, "it happens to be my business."

From under his coat Reade drew forth a folding camera. Quickly opening and focussing he held the camera close, pressing the bulb.

"That photograph will enlarge to almost any size," Tom declared. "Now, then, Gage, do you claim that this strip has been claimed by one, Pringle?"

"I do," scowled Gage, "and Pringle is our partner. We're going to work this claim with him, and you're trespassing."

"Is that Pringle's own signature?" Tom insisted.

"None of your business!"

"You've given me that same kind of an answer before," Tom smiled. "As it happens, this is our business. Gage, the writing of that notice looks exactly like your writing, and Pringle's alleged signature is in the same hand-writing. If you've signed Pringle's

name---and I charge that you have---then that notice has no legal value whatever. Recollect, I have a photograph of the notice and signature, and that this notice in turn, so that you may remember that the writing throughout is the same that my photograph is going to reveal."

Jim Ferrers quickly came forward. Gage stepped squarely in front of the board holding the notice. But Tom took a swift step forward. Gage, shaking, drew back out of possible reach of Reade's fists.

Then, one after the other, the other members of Tom's party inspected the writing.

"Much good may it do you!" jeered Dolph Gage harshly. "You'll find that this claim is ours!"

"Look at what that cub is doing!" broke in Eb excitedly, pointing to Harry.

Unobserved at first by others, Hazelton had slipped back of the crowd. Now he was placing a board in position, and that board announced the fact that Jim Ferrers had staked out this strip for himself.

"Take that down!" raged Gage, as soon as he saw the new board and paper. "It won't do you any good."

"We'll take a chance on it, anyway, and watch it for a few days," Jim declared. "Are you through with me now, Mr. Reade?"

"Certainly," nodded Tom.

Mounting his horse, Jim Ferrers rode away at an easy gait.

"This is a mean trick to try to play on us, Reade," snarled Gage.

"If you hadn't played a mean trick on us, and staked this place off while you knew we were making the assay of ore taken from here," rejoined Tom, "then we might be inclined to waive the purely legal side of the case and give you a fair chance to get your friend Pringle here. But you must remember that you tricked us out of this claim in the first place, and now you have no right at all to complain. This claim now stands in Jim Ferrers's name, and so it will continue to stand."

"Go ahead," snarled Gage. "Try to take ore out of here. No man shall be a partner in this claim and live to spend any of the money he gets out of this mine! I've said it, and I'll pledge myself to back it up."

"And you've made that threat before witnesses, also, Gage. Remember that," Tom advised sternly.

"And all the time you're chinning, Dolph," broke in Josh, "Jim Ferrers is riding hard for Dugout City to file the new claim entry!"

"If he is, something may happen to him on the way!" raged Dolph, wheeling about like a flash. His saddle horse, ready for action, stood tied to a tree near by. Gage leaped into his saddle after

he had freed the horse.

"Boss, he's going after Ferrers, to do him harm on the road," hoarsely whispered one of Tom's new miners. "Are you going to let the scoundrel start?"

"Yes," nodded Tom coolly, "at Ferrers's special request. He didn't want Gage stopped from trying to overtake him."

Gage was now galloping away.

"You've seen the last of Ferrers," jeered Josh, after Gage had vanished in the distance.

"Perhaps we've seen the last of one of the men," replied Reade coldly.

CHAPTER XIII

JIM TRIES THE NEW WAY

"I've attended to the firm's business," exclaimed Jim Ferrers, wrathfully, on his return to camp. "I filed the papers at Dugout City, and the claim now stands in my name, though it belongs to the firm. And now, having attended to the firm's business, I'm going out to settle some of my own."

"What business is that!" Tom inquired over the supper table.

It was three days after the morning on which Ferrers had ridden away.

"That mongrel dog, Dolph Gage, took a shot at me this afternoon!" Ferrers exploded wrathfully. "I'd ought to have gotten him years ago. Now I'm going to drop all other business and find the fellow."

"What for?" Tom inquired innocently.

"What for?" echoed Jim, then added, ironically: "Why, I want to do the hyena a favor, of course."

"If you go out to look for him, you're not going armed, are you?" Reade pursued.

"Armed?" repeated Ferrers, with withering sarcasm. "Oh, no, of course not. I'm going to ride up to him with my hands high in the air and let him take a shot at me."

"Jim," drawled Tom, "I'm afraid there's blood in your eye---and not your own blood, either."

"Didn't that fellow kill my brother in a brawl?" demanded Ferrers. "Hasn't he pot-shotted at me? And didn't he do it again this afternoon?"

"Why didn't the law take up Gage's case when your brother was killed?" Tom inquired.

"Well, you see, Mr. Reade," Ferrers admitted, "my brother had a hasty temper, and he drew first---but Gage fired the killing shot."

"So that the law would say that Gage fired in self-defense, eh?"

"That's what a coroner's jury did say," Jim admitted angrily. "But my brother was a young fellow, and hot-headed. Gage knew he could provoke the boy into firing, and then, when the boy missed, Gage drilled him through the head."

"I don't want to say anything unkind, Jim," Reade went on, thoughtfully. "Please don't misunderstand me. But, as I understand the affair, if your brother hadn't been carrying a pistol he wouldn't have been killed?"

"Perhaps not," Ferrers grudgingly admitted.

"Then the killing came about through the bad practice of carrying a revolver?"

"Bad practice!" snorted Jim. "Well, if that's a bad practice more'n half the men in the state have the vice."

"Popular custom may not make a thing right," argued Reade.

"But what are you going to do when the men who have a grudge against you pack guns?" Jim queried, opening his eyes very wide.

"I've had a few enemies---bad ones, too, some of them," Tom answered slowly. "Yet I've always refused to carry an implement of murder, even when I've been among rough enemies. And yet I'm alive. If I had carried a pistol ever since I came West I'm almost certain that I'd be dead by this time."

"But if you won't carry a gun, and let folks suspect you of being a white-flagger, then you get the reputation of being a coward," argued Ferrers.

"Then I suppose I've been voted a coward long ago," Reade nodded.

"No, by the Great Nugget, you're not a coward," retorted Ferrers. "No man who has seen you in a tough place will ever set you down for a coward."

"Yet I must be, if I don't tote a gun in a wild country," smiled Reade.

"But to go back to the case of that good-for-nothing, Dolph Gage," Jim Ferrers resumed. "You advise me to forget that he shot at me?"

"Oh, no, I don't," Tom retorted quietly. "But you don't have to go out and take your own revenge. There are laws in this state, aren't there?"

"Of course."

"And officers to execute the laws"

"To be sure."

"Then why not go back to Dugout City, there to lay information against Gage. That done, the sheriff's officers will have to do the hunting. Having nothing personal against the officers, Gage will very likely hold up his hands when the officers find him, and then go back with them as peaceable as a lamb. Jim, you want to be even with Gage for shooting your brother and for trying to finish you. Won't it give you more satisfaction to feel that you've put Gage day for his bread and water? I know that is the way I'd want to punish a man that I had cause to hate. At least, I believe it's the way; I don't really know, for I can't recall any man that I hate hard enough to wish him worse than out of my sight."

"Say, it would be kinder funny to go up to the state 'pen' some day, and see Dolph Gage walking lock-step with a lot of rascally Chinamen, drunken Indians, Knife-sticking foreigners and sassy bill-collectors, wouldn't it?" grinned Jim Ferrers.

"I'm glad your sense of humor is improving," smiled Tom Reade. "Now, tomorrow, morning, Jim, you take two of the other men, and our ponies, and ride into Dugout. If you run across Gage don't try to pick up any trouble. Of course, I don't mean to say that you shouldn't shoot in self-defense if you're attacked, but try, if possible, to keep out of any trouble with Gage. Just save him for the sheriff. It's the law's business to handle such fellows. Let the law have its own way."

"I'll do it," promised Ferrers. "Putting it the way you've done, Mr. Reade, it doesn't seem like such a baby trick to use the sheriff instead of killing the hyena, myself. Yes; I'll sure leave it to the law. If Dolph Gage gets caught and sent to the 'pen' I'll sure go there on some visiting day and see how he looks in his striped suit!"

Instead of being offended, it was plain that Ferrers was in high good humor. He went about camp whistling that night, and with a cheery word for everyone.

Camp had been moved over to the ridge, and the young engineers were ready to begin blasting operations the following morning. Ferrers was no longer concerned with cooking, he having engaged a man to do that work. The new man kept a sharp eye on Alf Drew, making that youngster do a really honest day's work every day in the week.

"I hate to take two men from you, Mr. Reade right at the start of operations," complained Jim, the next morning at breakfast. "I don't need two men, either, to protect me."

"I don't need the two men here, either, Jim for a few days. As for you, you don't know how many men you are going to need. All three of Gage's partners have vanished, and I'm sure that they're together somewhere out on the Range. They undoubtedly have rifles again, at that, and if you meet them, three men won't be any too many to stand off those four rascals."

Tom watched the trio of horsemen out of sight in the morning.

"If Jim doesn't lose his head that trip will mean that we shall see the last of Dolph Gage," mused the young engineer.

For once Tom Reade was in grave error, as subsequent events proved.

"It's ten minutes of seven," Harry reminded him.

"Get ready, men," Tom shouted to their few laborers, who were enjoying a few minutes leisure after breakfast.

At seven o'clock the young engineers and their handful of toilers moved over to the point in the outcropping vein of ore that Reade had selected for their first blast.

A small portable engine had already been fired, and all was ready for turning on the steam drill.

Twenty minutes later a satisfactory boring had been made.

"Bring up the dynamite," called Tom.

"Are you going to pack the charge?" Harry inquired.

"Yes," nodded Tom, and received the stick of dynamite from the miner who brought it.

While this was being made ready, Hazelton superintended the laying of the wires to the magneto battery. All was soon in readiness.

"The red flag is up," Tom shouted.

The dynamite had been rather loosely tamped home, for young Reade wanted to begin with light rending force and work up, through successive blasts, to just the proper amount of force.

"Get back, everybody!" Reade called, and there was a flying of feet. Tom was last to leave the spot. He ran over to where Harry stood at a safe distance.

"Pump her up, Harry," nodded the young chief engineer.

"You watch me, and see just how I run this magneto," Hazelton said to one of their men who stood near by. "This will be your job after we've fired a few charges. I want you to get the hang of the trick."

Harry worked the handle of the magneto up and down.

Bang! Over where the drilling had been done a mass of dirt and rock was shot up into the air.

"What are you running so fast for, Harry?" laughed Tom, as he pursued his chum back to the scene of the blast.

"I want to see if we stirred up any real ore. I want to know if our claim is worth the grub it takes to feed the men," was Hazelton's

almost breathless response.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COOK LEARNS A LESSON

Arrived on the spot it took Tom only a moment to estimate that considerably less than a quarter of a ton of ore had been loosened from the rock bed by the blast.

"We'll drill six inches deeper next time, and put in fifty per cent. more dynamite," Reade decided.

The men brought up the drill and set it, after which the engineer was signaled.

Harry, in the meantime, was down on his hands and knees, curiously turning over the small, loose bits of rock.

"Stung, if this stuff proves anything," sighed Hazelton.

"You can't judge by one handful, Harry," Tom told him. "Besides, we may have to get down twenty, or even fifty feet below surface before we strike any pay-stuff. Don't look for dividends in the first hour. I've been told that gold-mining calls for more sporting blood than any other way in which wealth can be pursued."

"But I don't find a bit of color in this stuff," Harry muttered. "If we're on the top of a vein of gold it seems to me that we ought to find a small speck of yellow here and there."

A dozen blasts were made that morning. When the men knocked off at noon Harry Hazelton's face bore a very serious expression.

"Tom," he murmured to his partner, "I'm afraid we have a gold brick of a gold mine."

"It's an even chance," nodded Reade.

"And think of all the money---out of our savings---we've sunk in this thing."

"I hope you're not going to get scared as early as this," protested Tom. "Why, before we even get in sight of pay-rock we may have to sink every dollar of our savings."

"Then hadn't we better get out of it early, and go to work for some one who pays wages?" questioned Hazelton.

"Yes," Tom shot out, quickly, "if that's the way you feel about it."

"But do you feel differently, Tom?"

"I'm willing to risk something, for the sake of drawing what may possibly turn out to be the big prize in the mining lottery."

"But all our savings," cried Harry, aghast. "That seems like a foolish risk, doesn't it?"

"If you say so, I'll draw out now," Tom proposed.

"What do you think about it?"

"If all the money at stake were mine," Reade said slowly, "then I'd hang on as long as I had a penny left to invest."

"Tom Reade, I believe you're turning gambler at heart!"

"I intend to be a good, game business man, if that's what you mean by gambling. But see here, Harry, I don't want to pull your money into this scheme if you feel that you'd rather hold on to what you have."

"If you're going to stay in, Tom, then so am I. I'm not the kind of fellow to go back on a chum's investment."

"But if we lose all we've saved then you'll feel-----"

"Don't argue any more, Tom," begged Hazelton. "I'm going to be game. You've voted, old fellow, to stay by this claim as long as you can, and that's enough for me."

"But if we lose all our savings," Tom urged. He had now become the cautious one.

"If we lose them, we lose them," declared Hazelton. "And we're both of us young enough to be able to save more before we're seventy-five or eighty years old. Go ahead, Tom. I'm one of the investors here, but the whole game is in your hands. Go as far as you like and I'll stand back of you."

"But-----"

"Say no more. Tom, I shall try never again to be a quitter. Whoop! Let the money slip! We'll make the old mine a dividend payer before we are through with it."

That afternoon about a dozen and a half more blasts were laid and fired. Some five hundred feet of the surface of the vein had been lightly blasted, and several tons of ore thrown up.

"I wouldn't call it ore, though," muttered Harry to himself. "I don't believe this rook holds gold enough to put a yellow plating on a cent."

"It does look rather poor, doesn't it, Harry?" Tom asked, trying to speak blithely.

"Humph! We've got to go deeper than this before we can expect to loosen rock worth thirty dollars to the ton," Harry declared cheerily.

"Oh, we'll surely strike pay-rock in big lots after a while," predicted Reade, smiling happily and whistling merrily as he strode

away. "I'm glad Harry has his courage with him and his hopes high," Reade added to himself.

"I'm glad Tom is so cheerful and positive," thought Hazelton. "I'll do my best to help him keep in that frame of mind; though, for myself, I believe we would make more money if we stood on a cliff and tossed pennies into the ocean."

"I'm glad to see that all your high hopes have returned," declared Tom, at supper that evening.

"Oh, I've got the gold fever for fair," laughed Hazelton. "Tom, how are we going to spend the money when we get it?"

"A new house for the folks at home will take some of my money, when I get it," Tom declared, his eyes glowing.

"Any old thing that the folks take a fancy to will catch my share of the gold," Harry promised.

"But, of course, we'll wait until we get it."

"You haven't any doubts about getting the gold, have you?"

"Not a doubt. Have you?"

"I'm an optimist," Harry asserted.

"What's your idea of an optimist, anyway?" laughed Tom.

"An optimist is a fellow who believes that banknotes grow on potato vines," laughed Harry.

"Oh, we'll get our gold all right," Reade predicted.

"We will, and a lot more. Tom, you and I still have mineral rights that we can file, with Ferrers as trustee."

"We'll go prospecting for two more bully claims just as soon as we begin to see pay-rock coming out of this vein," Tom planned. "Alf, you lazy cigarette fiend, hurry up and bring me some more of the canned meat."

"Bring me another cup of coffee on the jump," called Harry. "While you're about it make it two cups of coffee."

As soon as he had brought the required things Alf tried slyly to slip away by himself, for he had already had his own supper.

"Here, you son of the shiftless one, get back here and drag the grub to this table," yelled one of the men at the miners' table.

After that Alf remained on duty until all hands had been fed. Then he tried to slip away again, only to be roped by a lariat in the hands of the new cook.

"Let me catch you trying to sneak away from work again, and I'll cowhide you with this rope," growled the cook. "Why are you trying to sneak away before your work is finished?"

"I'm almost dead for a smoke," said Alf.

"Smoke, is it? You stay here and wash the dishes. Don't try to get away again until I tell you you can go. If you do---but you won't," finished the cook grimly.

Alf worked away industriously. At last this outdoor kitchen work was finished.

"Now I can go, can't I?" spoke up Alf, hopefully. "Say, I'm perishing for want of a smoke."

"Stay and have a man's smoke with me," said the cook. "Here, hold this between your teeth."

Alf drew back, half-shuddering from the blackened clay pipe, filled with strong tobacco, which the cook passed him.

"You're always itching to be a man," mocked the cook. "And now's your chance. A pipe is a man's smoke. Them cigs are fit only for 'sheeters."

"I don't want smoke it," pleaded Alf, drawing back from the proffered pipe.

"You take matches, light that pipe and smoke it," insisted the cook, a man named Leon, in a tone that compelled obedience.

Poor Alf smoked wretchedly away. Finally, when he thought Leon wasn't looking, he tried to hide the pipe.

"Here, you keep that a-going!" ordered the cook wrathfully, wheeling upon the miserable youngster.

So Alf puffed up, feebly, and, when the pipe went out, he lighted the tobacco again.

"Here!" he protested, three minutes later, handing back the pipe.

"Smoke it!" gruffed Leon.

"I---I don't want."

"Smoke it!"

"I---I can't," pleaded Alf Drew, the ghastly pallor of his face bearing out his assertion.

"You smoke that pipe, or I'll-----"

"You can kill me, if you want," gasped, Alf, feeling far more ill than he had ever felt in his life before. "I don't care---but I won't smoke that pipe. There!"

He flung it violently to the ground, smashing the pipe.

"You little-----" began the cook, making a leap after the youngster.

But Alf, his sense of self-preservation still being strong, fled with more speed than might have been looked for in one so ill.

Tom Reade, passing a clump of bushes, and hearing low moans, stopped to investigate. He found the little cigarette fiend stretched out on the ground, his face drawn and pale.

"What on earth is the matter, mosquito?" inquired Reade, with more sympathy than his form of speech attested.

"Oh, dear!" wailed Alf.

"So I gathered," said Tom dryly. "But who got behind you and scared you in that fashion?"

"O-o-oh, dear!"

"You said that before; but what's up?"

"At first I was afraid I was going to die," Alf declared tremulously.

"Yes?"

"And now I'm afraid I won't die!"

Alf sat up shivering convulsively.

"Now, Alf," Tom pursued, "tell me just what happened."

By degrees the young engineer extracted the information that he was after. Bit by bit Alf told the tale, interspersing his story with dismal groans.

"I always told you, Alf, that smoking would do you up if you ever tackled it," Reade said gravely.

"But I have smoked for a year," Alf protested.

"Oh, no," Tom contradicted him. "The use of cigarettes isn't smoking. It's just mere freshness on the part of a small boy. But smoking---that's a different matter, as you've found out. Now, Alf, I hope you've learned a needed lesson, and that after this you'll let tobacco alone. While you're about it you might as well quit cigarettes, too. But I'm going to change your job. Don't go back to the cook. Instead, report to me in about an hour."

Then Tom strode forward. After he had left young Drew there was an ominous flash in the young engineer's eyes. He strode into camp and went straight to the cook's shack.

"Leon," Tom demanded, "what have you been doing to that poor little shrimp of a helper?"

The cook turned around, grinning.

"I've been teaching him something about smoking," the man admitted.

"So I've heard," said Tom. "That's why I've dropped in here---to

tell you what I think about it."

"If you're going to get cranky," warned the cook, angrily, "you needn't take the trouble."

"Punishing Alf isn't your work, Leon," Tom went on quietly. "I'm one of the heads here, and the management of this camp has been left more or less in my hands. I gave you a weak, deluded, almost worthless little piece of humanity as a helper. I'll admit that he isn't much good, but yet he's a boy aged fourteen, at any rate, and therefore there may be in that boy the makings of a man. Your way of tackling the job is no good. It's a fool way, and, besides, it's a brutal, unmanly way."

"I guess you'd better stop, right where you are, Mister Reade!" snapped Leon, an ugly scowl coming to his face. "I don't have to take any such talk as that from you, even if you are the boss. You may be the boss here, but I'm older and I've seen more of the world. So you may pass on your way, Mister Reade, and I'll mind my own business while you mind yours."

"Good!" smiled Tom amiably. "That's just the arrangement I've been trying to get you to pledge yourself to. Mind your own business, after this, just as you've promised. Don't play the brute with small boys."

"You needn't think you can boss me, Mister Reade," sneered Leon, a dangerous look again coming into his eyes. "I've told you that I won't take that kind of talk from you."

"You'll have to listen to it, just as long as you stay in camp," Reade answered. "I don't want to be disagreeable with any man, and never am when I can avoid it. But there are certain things I won't have done here. One of them is the bullying of small boys by big fellows like you. Do I make myself plain?"

"So plain," Leon answered, very quietly, as one hand traveled back to the butt of the revolver hanging over his right hip, "that I give you just ten seconds, Mister Reade, to get away and do your talking in another part of the camp."

Tom saw the motion of the hand toward the weapon, though no change in his calm face or steady eyes denoted the fact.

"I believe I've just one thing more to say to you, Leon. I've told young Drew that he needn't bother about coming back as your helper. He is to report to me, and I shall find him another job."

"Are you going to get away from here?" snarled the angry cook.

"Presently."

"I'll give you only until I count ten," Leon snapped, his hand still resting on the butt of his revolver.

"You're not threatening me with your pistol, are you?" Tom inquired in a mild tone.

"You'll find out, if you don't vamoose right along. One---two---"

"Stop it," Tom commanded, without raising his voice. "You may think you could get your pistol out in time to use it. Try it, and you'll learn how quickly I can jump on you and grab you. Try to draw your weapon, or even to shift your position ever so little, and I'll show you a trick that may possibly surprise you."

There was no trace of braggadocio in Tom Reade's quiet voice, but Leon knew, instantly, that the young engineer could and would be as good as his word.

"Take your hand away from the butt of your pistol," came Tom's next command.

Something in the look of the young engineer's eyes compelled the angry cook to obey.

"Now, unbuckle your belt and hand it to me, revolver and all."

"I'll-----" Leon flared up, but Tom interrupted him.

"Exactly, my friend. You'll be very wise if you do, and very sorry if you don't!"

White with rage Leon unbuckled his belt. Then he handed it out, slowly. He was prepared to leap upon the young engineer like a panther, but Tom was watching alertly. He received the belt with his left hand, holding his right hand clenched ready for "business."

"Thank you," said Tom quietly. "Now, you may return to your work. I'm ready to forget this, Leon, if you are."

Leon glared speechlessly at his conqueror. This cook had lived in some of the roughest of mining camps, and had the reputation of being dangerous when angry.

From outside came an appreciative chuckle. Then Jim Ferrers stepped into the shack.

"So you were hanging about, ready to back up the kid?" demanded the cook.

"I? Oh, no," chuckled Jim. "Leon, when you've known Mr. Reade as long and as well as I do you'll understand that he doesn't ask or need any backing. Mr. Reade wants only what's right---but he's going to have it if he has to move a township."

Tom departed, swinging the belt and revolver from his right hand.

"I'm through here," muttered Leon, snatching off his apron. "That is, just as soon as I've squared up accounts with that kid."

"Then you'd better put your apron on again," Jim drawled, humorously. "It takes longer than you've got left to live when any one goes after Tom Reade to get even."

"Jim Ferrers, you know me well enough," remarked Leon, reaching for his hat. "Most times I'm peaceable, but when I get started I'm a

bad man."

"Exactly," nodded Jim undisturbed. "That's why you can never hope to come out on top in a row with Mr. Reade. While you may be a bad man, he's a good man---and ALL MAN! You don't stand any show with that kind. Hang up your hat, Leon. Here's your apron. Put it on and stay with us. When you cool down you can stay right along here and take lessons in the art of being a real man!"

Jim Ferrers strolled out of the shack, leaving the vanquished cook in a towering rage. By degrees the expression on the fellow's face altered. Ten minutes later he was at work---at cook's duties.

CHAPTER XV

WHY READE WANTED GOLD

Four weeks moved on rapidly. All too rapidly, in some respects, to please Engineer Harry Hazelton.

Sheriff's officers had ridden into camp, and had scoured that part of the country, in an effort to locate Dolph Gage and that worthy's friends. Just where the four vagabonds were now no man knew, save themselves.

However, another spectre had settled down over the camp. The truth was that the young engineers were now using up the last thousand dollars of their combined savings.

By way of income, less than fifty dollars' worth of gold and silver had been mined. Every few days some promising-looking ore was turned out, but it never came in sufficient quantities. None of this ore had yet been moved toward Dugout City. There wasn't enough of it to insure good results. Brilliant in streaks, still the mine looked like a commercial fizzle.

"Hang it, the gold is down there!" grunted Tom, staring gloomily at the big cut that had been blasted and dug out along the top of the ridge.

"I'll be tremendously happy when you show me a little more of it," smiled Hazelton weakly.

"It's lower down," argued Tom. "We've got to dig deeper---and then a lot deeper."

"On the capital that we have left?" ventured Harry.

"Oh, we may strike enough, any day, to stake us for a few weeks longer," urged Tom.

"We'll soon have to be working in covered outs, where the frost won't put up trouble for us, you know," Hazelton hinted.

"Yes; I know that, of course. What we must begin to do, soon, is to sink the shaft deeper and then tunnel."

"That will cost a few thousand dollars, Tom."

"I know it. Come on, Harry. Get a shovel."

Tom himself snatched up a pick.

"What are you going to do, Tom?"

"Work. You and I are strong and enduring. We can save the wages of two workmen."

Both young engineers worked furiously that afternoon. Yet, when knocking-off time came, they had to admit that they had no better basis for hope.

"I wonder, Tom, if we'd better get out and hustle for Jobs?" Harry asked.

"You might, Harry. I'm going to stick."

Mr. Dunlop dropped in at camp, that evening, after dark.

"You young men are doing nothing," said the mine promoter. "I can use you a couple of months, if you'll stop this foolishness here and come over to me."

"Why, I suppose Hazelton could go over and work for you, Mr. Dunlop," Tom suggested.

"That would be of no use. I need you both, but you, Reade, most of all."

"I can't go to you now, Mr. Dunlop," Tom replied regretfully. "I'm committed to the development of this piece of property, which is only a third my property."

"Bosh! A decent farm would be worth more to you than this claim," argued Mr. Dunlop derisively.

"Perhaps. But neither of my partners has quit, Mr. Dunlop, and I'm not going to quit, either."

"This is the last chance I can give you, Reade. You'd better take it."

"No; though I beg you to accept my best thanks, Mr. Dunlop. However, Hazelton can go over and help you."

"Both, or neither," returned Mr. Dunlop firmly.

Harry looked half eagerly at Reade, but Tom shook his head.

"What do you say, Mr. Reade?" pressed the promoter. "Last call to the dining car. With your funds running low, and a hard winter coming on you'll soon know what it means to be hungry."

"I'm much obliged, sir but I'm going to stick here at my own work."

"What do you say, Hazelton?" coaxed the promoter.

"Nothing," Harry replied loyally. "You heard what my partner had to say. In business matters he talks for both of us."

"Good night, then," grunted Mr. Dunlop, rising. "If you should change your minds in the morning, after breakfast, come and tell me."

After Dunlop had gone Tom and Harry walked up and down the trail together under the stars.

"Sixteen hundred dollars a month Dunlop is offering the two of us," half sighed Hazelton. "Two months of that would mean thirty-two hundred dollars. How much money have we now, Tom?"

"Six hundred and forty-two dollars and nineteen cents," Reade answered dryly.

"That won't last us long, will it?"

"No; especially as we owe some of it on bills soon due at Dugout."

"Then---what?"

"I don't know," Tom answered almost fiercely. "Yes; I do know! As soon as our present few pennies are gone it means a future of fight and toil, on empty stomachs. But it's worth it, Harry---if we live through the ordeal."

"And for what are we fighting?" inquired Harry musingly.

"First of all, then, for gold."

"Tom, I never knew you to be so crazy about gold before. What are we going to do with it---if we get it?"

"There are the folks at home."

"Of course, Tom, and they would be our first thought---if we had the gold. But we can do all we want to for the home folks out of the pay that we are able to earn at steady jobs."

"True."

"Then why are we fooling around here? We are nearly broke, but we can honestly settle all the debts we owe. Then we could get back to work and have bank accounts again within a few months."

"Yes; but only pitiful bank accounts---a few hundreds of dollars, or a few thousands."

It would be steady and growing."

"Yes; but it would take years to pile up a fortune, Harry."

"What do we really want with fortunes?"

"We want them, Harry," Tom went on, almost passionately, "because

we have ambitions. Look out upon the great mountains of this Range. Think of the rugged bits of Nature in any part of the world, waiting for the conquering hand and the constructive brain of the engineer! Harry, don't you long to do some of the big things that are done by engineers? Don't you want to get into the real---the big performances of our profession?"

"Of course," nodded Hazelton. "For that reason, aren't we doubly wasting our time here?"

"That's just as it turns out," Reade went on, with a vehemence that astonished his chum. "Harry, what's our office address? Where are our assistant engineers---where our draftsmen? Where are our foremen that we could summon to great undertakings? Where is the costly equipment that we would need as a firm of really great engineers? You know that we must these things before we can climb to the top of our profession. The gold that's hidden somewhere under that ridge would give us the offices, the assistants, the draftsmen, the equipment and the bank account that we need before we can launch ourselves into first class engineering feats of the great civilization that rules the world today. Harry, I've firm faith in our claim, and I can go on working on a meal every third day."

"Then now, as always, you can count on me to stand by you without limit or complaint," said Harry generously.

"But, just the same, you haven't my faith in the mine, have you?" Tom queried half-disappointedly.

"Er---er---"

"Out with it, chum!"

"So far I have been disappointed in the claim. But I am well aware that I may be wrong. Listen, Tom, old fellow. This isn't a matter of faith in the mine; it's one of faith in you. Go as far as you like, and, whichever way it turns out, remember that I regard your judgment as being many times as good as my own."

"Yet you'd drop out if the decision rested solely with you, wouldn't you, Harry,"

"You'll never again get my opinion of this claim of ours," laughed Hazelton. "You'll have to be contented with my good opinion of you and your judgment."

"But see here, Harry, I wish you'd get out of here for a while. Go back into the world; take a position that will support you and provide the luxuries and savings as well. I'll work here faithfully and work for both of us at the same time."

"You must have a mighty small opinion of me, Tom Reade, to think I'd leave you in the lurch like that."

"But I ask it as a favor, Harry."

"If you ever ask that sort of a favor again, Tom Reade, you and I will be nearer to fighting than we've ever been yet in our lives!"

It was plain that Hazelton intended to stick to the mine, even to the starving point, if Reade did. After some further talk the two went back to their tent and lay down on their cots.

Five minutes later Harry's quiet, regular breathing betrayed the fact that he was asleep. With a stealthy movement, Tom Reade threw down the blankets, reached for his shoes, his coat and hat and stole out into the quiet and darkness.

From other tents and shacks nearby came snores that showed how soundly miners could sleep.

"I believe this is the first night that I ever failed to sleep on account of business worries," muttered Reade grimly, as he strode away. "This may be a fine start toward becoming a nervous wreck. In time I may become as shattered as poor little Alf Drew. I wonder if I shall ever fall so low as to smoke cigarettes!"

For some minutes Tom plodded on through the darkness. He did not go toward the claim, but in the opposite direction. He walked like one who felt the need of physical exhaustion. Presently coming to a steep trail winding along among boulders he took to the trail, striding on at barely diminished speed.

At last, out of breath from the rapid climb, Tom halted and gazed down over the rugged landscape. "The gold is there," he muttered. "I'm sure of it. Oh, if we could only find it!"

As Tom stood, deep in thought, the face of his patient friend rose before him.

"I don't mind going to smash for myself, in a good, hard fight," Reade went on audibly. "But it seems a crime to drag Harry down to poverty with me. If I could only get him to go away I'd give up my own life, if need be, to prove what's under our ridge of Nevada dirt."

"Ye'll give up your life for less'n that, I reckon!" sounded another voice, close at hand.

Around a boulder Dolph Gage stepped into view, followed by two of his men.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WHO MADE GOOD

"Good evening, Gage," Tom responded pleasantly, after a slight start of alarm. "What brings you in this section again?"

"Wanter know?" sneered Gage, while his companions scowled.

"That was my object in inquiring," Tom smiled.

"We're hiding---that's what we're doing here," Gage volunteered harshly, though he spoke in a low voice.

"Hiding here---with the officers looking for you?"

"Well, what could be a safer place than right where we're wanted?" demanded Dolph. "The officers are scouring other counties for us, and they have handbills up offering rewards for us. Right here, overlooking your claim, they'd never think of looking for men who have a price set on their capture."

"Well, you needn't be afraid of me," offered Reade, with mock generosity. "I'm short of money, but I'm not looking for blood money. You had better travel fast from here. I'll give you until daylight before I send word to the law's officers."

"Daylight? You'll never see daylight again," Gage retorted. "You will be lying here, looking up at the stars, but you won't see anything!"

"Your words have a mysterious ring to them," laughed Tom.

He wasn't in any doubt as to what the rascals meant to do with him. It was a rule with Tom Reade, however, that he wasn't dead until he had actually been killed. Even while he spoke so lightly, Tom, through his half-closed eyes, was taking in every detail of the situation.

None of the trio had yet drawn their weapons, though all wore them in plain sight. If they started to draw their pistols Tom decided that he would leap forward holding to Gage, kicking one of the latter's companions so as to render the fellow helpless, and---

"But the third man will get me with his pistol," Tom decided. "That is, unless they become flustered when I show fight. It's a slim chance for me---a mighty slim chance, but I'll do my best as soon as these wretches start something!"

"Lost your money in your claim, haven't you?" jeered Gage, who was plainly playing with his intended victim. "Serves you right, after jumping us out of the property just because the law said you could! But the gold's there, and we've got a man with mineral rights to nab the claim as soon as you give up."

"That will be a long while, I imagine," Tom smiled back at the rascal.

"Not as long as you may think," laughed Gage harshly. "We've got you now, and we'll get Hazelton and Jim Ferrers, next thing you know. Then our claim will be established through our friend, and we'll protect him from being jumped by any one else."

"If you live," Tom reminded the fellow.

"Oh, we'll live!" Gage retorted grimly. "We're hunted, now, and we'll kill every man that comes near enough."

"Begin with this cub!" spoke up Eb, gruffly. "Don't play with him until he tricks us and gets away."

"Perhaps you don't realize how close help is to me," Tom broke in quickly. It was a "bluff," but he hoped that it might have its effect.

"If there's help near you," quivered Gage, his anger rising, "we'll make sure that it doesn't get here in time to do you any good. Draw and finish him boys!"

Before Reade could tense his muscles for a spring, a shot rang out behind them. Eb fell, with a swift, smothered groan of pain.

"Duck!" panted Dolph Gage. "Out of this! To cover, and then we'll reckon with any one who tries to follow us!"

In the same instant Tom turned, bounding down the trail in the direction from which the shot had come.

"Good! Keep on going, boss!" whispered a calm voice. "Don't let 'em catch you again."

"Who are you?" Tom demanded, halting and trying to make out the man's face in the intense shadow under a ledge of rock.

"Duck!" commanded the same voice. "I'll follow close. I'm alone, and some of that crew may pluck up heart and follow us. Vamoose!"

"I'll go at your side, but I won't run ahead of you," Tom whispered back. "I know you, now. Thank you, Leon!"

In the darkness, in lieu of shaking hands Tom gripped one of the man's elbows in sign of thanks.

"We'd better get out of this," Tom went on, in a barely louder whisper. "But how did you come to be on hand, Leon?"

"Followed you," was the terse reply.

"From the camp?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Wanted to get even with you."

"You're talking in riddles," Reade protested, in a puzzled tone. "At the same time I'm greatly obliged to you."

"Thought you'd be," grunted Leon. "That's how I got even."

"What do you mean?" Tom wanted to know. "You got even by placing me under a great obligation?"

"Just that," nodded the cook, "we had trouble, once, and you came out on top, didn't you?"

"Yes; but that little affair needn't have prevented us from being friends."

"It did, until I had done something to make you needed me as a friend," the cook declared.

Tom laughed at this statement of the case. It accorded quite closely, however, with the cook's generally sulky disposition. Even a friendship Leon would offer or accept grudgingly.

"But why did you follow me?" Tom continued, as they neared the camp. "Did you think I was going to run into danger?"

Leon hesitated.

"Well," he admitted, finally, "when I saw you stealing off, soft like, I had a queer notion come over me that, maybe, you were discouraged, and that you were going off to put an end to yourself."

Tom started, stared in amazement, then spoke in a tone of pretended anger:

"Much obliged for your fine opinion of me, Leon," he declared. "Only cowards and lunatics commit suicide."

"That's all right," nodded the cook doggedly. "I've seen men lose their minds out here in these gold fields."

They were now in camp.

"Wait, and I'll call Ferrers and a few of the men, Leon," Tom proposed.

"What for? To stand guard?"

"No; we must send back a few of the men to find that man you wounded. It was Eb. He fell in a heap. If his own companions didn't carry him away he was left in a bad fix."

"You'll be going back to nurse rattlesnakes yet!" almost exploded the cook.

"That's all right, but we're going to find that wounded man if he's in need of help," Tom stoutly maintained.

He called Jim Ferrers, who roused five more men. Then the party returned to the place on the trail where Eb had been left. There were still blood spots on the ground, but Eb had vanished. The party spent some minutes in searching the vicinity, then concluded that Gage had rescued and carried away the wounded man.

It may be said, in passing, that Eb was subsequently found, by officers, lying in a shack not far from Dugout City. The fellow was nearly dead, when found, from careless handling of his wound. At Dugout the surgeons amputated his wounded leg, and Eb finally wound up in prison.

During all the excitement Hazelton had not been aroused. He knew nothing of what had happened until morning came.

Before Tom Reade turned in that night he shook hands with the

sullen cook.

"I think you and I are going to be good friends, after this, Leon," Tom smiled. "I hope so, anyway."

"And I'm glad you gave me back my gun," grunted Leon. "It gave me a chance to do something for you. Yes; I reckon we'll be good friends after this."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MINERS WHO "STUCK"

"Hey, Tom!" Harry called down, from the top of their shaft, now one hundred and thirty feet down into the ground.

"Yes!" Reade answered from below, making a trumpet of his hands.

"Doing anything?" Harry bawled.

"Not much. Why?"

"If you want to come up I'll show you something."

"What?"

"The first snow of winter is falling." Harry tried to speak jovially, but his tone was almost sepulchral.

"Yes, I'll come up, then," Tom Reade answered. "It's high time for us to see to building a shelter that will keep out of the shaft the big snows that are coming."

"The big snows are likely to be here, now, within a week," remarked one of the miners who had paused to rest from digging for a moment. "Men!" bawled Tom, stepping from the long into the short tunnel. "All hands knock off and go up to the surface."

There was a tub hand-hoist for carrying up ore, but the men always used the series of ladders that had been built in on the side of the shaft. Two minutes later these ladders swarmed with men going above.

As they stepped out into the world the first soft flakes of winter floated into their faces.

"Reade, we'll have to start building the cover to the shaft," spoke Jim Ferrers, who stood beside Hamilton.

"I know it," Tom nodded. "However, first of all, I want a few words with you and Harry."

The three partners stepped aside, waiting in silence while a whispered consultation went on around Tom.

At length Reade stepped back.

"Men" he began, and every eye was turned in his direction. "You are waiting for orders to start on shedding over the shaft, and the lumber is ready. However, we mean to be fair with you. You all know that this claim has been going badly. When my partners and I started we had some capital. Before we do any more work here it is only fair to tell you something. We now have money enough left so that we can pay you your wages up to Saturday. When we've paid that we shall have a few dollars left. If you men want to quit now we'll pay you up to Saturday, and you'll have time to be in Dugout before your time here is up."

"Do you want us to go, Mr. Reade?" asked Tim Walsh."

"Why, no, of course not," Tom smiled. "If we had the money we'd want to keep you here all winter. But we haven't, and so we've no right to ask you to stay."

Walsh glanced around him, as though to inquire whether the men were willing that he be their spokesman. Receiving their nods the big miner went on:

"Mr. Reade, sir, we've seen this coming, though, of course, we didn't know just how big your pile was. We've talked it over some, and I know what the fellows think. If you don't pay us our wages, but put the money into grub only, you can keep a-going here some weeks yet."

"Yes," Tom nodded. "But in that case, if the mine didn't pan out, we wouldn't have a cent left out of which to pay you off. At least, not until Reade and I had been at work for months, perhaps a year, on some salaried job. So you see that we can't fairly encourage you men to remain here."

"Mr. Reade," Walsh declared, this time without glancing at the other men, and there was a slight huskiness in the big miner's voice, "we wouldn't feel right if we went anywhere else to work. We've never worked under men as fair and square as you three men have been. You've treated all of us white. Now, what kind of fellows would we be if we cleared out and left you just because the snow had come and the money had gone. No, sir! By your leave, gentlemen, we'll stay here as long as you do, and the money can take care of itself until it shows up again. Mr. Reade, and gentlemen, we stick as long as you'll let us!"

Tom felt slightly staggered, as his face showed it.

"Men," he protested, "this is magnificent on your part. But it wouldn't be fair to let you do it. You are all of you working for your living."

"Well, aren't you three working for your living, too?" grinned Walsh.

"Yes; but we stand to make the big stake here, in case of victory at last."

"And I reckon we stand a show of having a little extra coming to us, if we do right by you at this minute," laughed Walsh.

"Yes, you do---if we strike the rich vein for which we're hunting. Yet have you men any idea a how little chance we may have of striking that vein? Men, the mine may---perhaps I would better say probably will---turn out a fizzle. I am afraid you men are voting for some weeks of wasted work and a hungry tramp back to Dugout City at the end. As much as we want to go on with the work, we hate to see you all stand to lose so much."

"You're no fool, Mr. Reade. Neither is Mr. Hazelton," returned Walsh bluntly. "You're both engineers, and not green ones, either. You've been studying mines and mining, and it isn't just guess-work with you when you say that you feel sure of striking rich ore."

"Only one of us is sure," smiled Tom Reade wistfully. "I'm the sure one. As for my partners, I'm certain that they're sticking to me just because they're too loyal to desert a partner. For myself, I wouldn't blame them if they left me any day. As for you men, I shall be glad to have you stay and stand by us, now that you know the state of affairs, but I won't blame you if you decide to take your money and the path back to Dugout City."

"It's no use, Mr. Reade," laughed Walsh, shaking his shaggy head. "You couldn't persuade one of us to leave you now."

"And I'd thrash any man who tried to," declared another miner.

"Men, I thank you," Tom declared, his eyes shining, "and I hope that we shall all win out together."

"Now, what do you want us to do?" asked Walsh.

"We have timbers and boards here," Tom replied. "If the big snows are likely to be upon us within a week, then we can't lose any time in getting our shaft protected. At the same time we must use other timber for putting up two or three more shacks. The tents will have to come down until spring."

Harry immediately took eight of the men and started the erection of three wooden shacks not far from the mine shaft. Ferrers took the rest of the men and speedily had timbers going up in place over the mouth of the shaft.

For three hours the snow continued to float lightly down. Then the skies cleared, but the wind came colder and more biting.

Jim Ferrers and one of the men started for Dugout City with a two-horse wagon, that the camp might be kept well-supplied with food.

By night of the day following all of the carpenter work had been finished, though not an hour too soon, for now the weather was becoming colder.

"Never put in a winter on the Indian Smoke Range, did you, Mr. Reade?" Walsh inquired.

"Never."

"Then you'll find out what cold weather is like. A winter on this Range isn't much worse, though, than what I've heard about cold weather in Alaska."

"It'll be a relief to see six feet of snow, after living on the hot desert of Arizona," Harry muttered.

By evening of the following day, when Jim and his companion returned with the wagon-load of provisions, another day's work had been done in the mine.

"Any color today?" was Ferrers's first question.

"No signs of gold," sighed Harry.

"I heard a new one over at Dugout City," Jim remarked carelessly.

"Heard a new one?" echoed Tom. "What was it?"

"A baby," Jim answered dryly.

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded. "What has a baby to do with a 'new one'?"

When the men began to laugh Harry suddenly discovered the joke.

"That's all right, Jim," growled Harry. "But I know something that would tickle you."

"A feather, or a straw," mocked Ferrers.

"No! A crowbar!" grunted Hazelton making a reach for a tool of that description.

Jim hastily jumped out of the way as Harry balanced the bar.

"Go and tell the men about the 'new one' you heard, Jim," laughed Tom. "By the time you get back Harry will have the joke pried loose with that bar of his."

"'Heard a new one!'" grunted Harry. But his look of disgust was because it had taken him so long to penetrate the "sell."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GODDESS OF FORTUNE SMILES WISTFULLY

"Haul away!" called Jim, from the bottom of the shaft.

Up came the tub, filled with chunks of ore, each about the size of a man's head.

At the top stood Harry Hazelton, on the crust of two feet of frozen snow.

Tom thrust his head out through the doorway of the nearby shack in which the partners lived.

"Is Jim sending up any bricks" he inquired.

"He's sending up ore, but I don't know whether it's any good," Harry answered.

"Why don't you look the stuff over?"

"I haven't had the heart to look at it."

Close to the shaft stood a wagon. The horses were resting in the stable shack, for by this time the weather averaged only a few degrees above zero and the horses were brought out only when they could be used.

"Take a good look at the stuff, Harry," called Tom, as soon as he saw two of the workmen dumping it.

Then Reade closed the door, and went back to the furnace that he had rigged up under the chimney at one end of the shack.

"Oh, what's the use?" sighed Hazelton, to himself, as he paused, irresolute. "In weeks and weeks we haven't brought up enough gold to pay for the keep of the horses."

Still, as Tom had asked him to do so, Hazelton presently walked over to the little pile that had just been dumped.

"You men up there work faster," sounded Jim's voice. "We want to send up a tub every five minutes."

"Want the team yet?" bawled the teamster, from another shack.

"No," Harry answered. "Not for a half an hour yet."

That question was enough to cause the young engineer to forget that he had intended to inspect the tub-load of ore. He strolled back to the head of the shaft. The wind was biting keenly today. Harry was dressed in the warmest clothing he had, yet his feet felt like lumps of lead in his shoes.

"Arizona may be hot, but I'd rather do my mining down there, anyway," thought the young engineer. "If I could move about more, this wouldn't be so bad."

Just off of the shaft was a rough shack several feet square which contained a small cylinder of a wood stove. There was a fire going in the stove, now, but Harry knew from experience that if he went in to the stove to get warm, he would only feel the cold more severely when he came out again.

"Say, I don't know why I couldn't run that furnace as well as Tom, and he likes this cold stuff better than I do," murmured Hazelton. "I am going to see if he won't swap jobs for a couple of hours."

"Getting anything out of those ore-tests of yesterday's dump?" Harry demanded, entering their shack.

"Not so much," Tom replied cheerily. "We're in a bad streak of stuff, Harry. But I thought you were watching the dump. What's the matter? Too cold out there?"

"Yes," nodded Harry. "I feel like a last year's cold storage egg. Don't you want to spell me a bit out there, Tom? I can run the furnace in here."

"Certainly," Reade agreed, leaping up. "There's nothing to do, now, but weigh the button when it cools."

"Did you really get a button?" Harry asked, casually, as he drew off his heavy overcoat.

"Yes; a small one."

"How much ore did you take it from?"

"About two tons, I should say."

"Then, if the button is worth sixty cents," mocked Harry, "it will show that our ore is running thirty cents to the ton."

"Oh, we'll have better ore, after a while," Tom laughed.

"We've got to have," grunted Hazelton, "or else we'll have to walk all the way to our next job."

"Just weigh the button, when it cools, and enter the weight on this page of the notebook," directed Reade, then went for his own outdoor clothing. "Have you been inspecting the dump as the stuff came up?"

"You'll think me a fool," cried Harry, "but I totally forgot it."

"No matter," Tom answered cheerily. "I've been doing bench work so long in here that I need exercise. I can run over all the stuff."

After Reade had pulled on his overcoat and buttoned it he fastened a belt around his waist. Through this he thrust a geologist's hammer.

"Don't go to sleep, Harry, old fellow, until you've cooled and weighed the button. Then you may just as well take a nap as not."

"There he goes," muttered Hazelton, as the door closed briskly. "Faith and enthusiasm are keeping Tom up. He could work twenty-four hours and never feel it. I wish I had some of his faith in this ridge. I could work better for it. Humph! I'm afraid the ridge will never yield anything better than clay for brick-making!"

Harry did succeed in keeping his eyes open long enough to attend to the button. That tiny object weighed, and the weight entered, Hazelton sat back in his chair. Within a minute his eyes had closed and he was asleep.

Tom Reade, out at the ore dump, looked anything but sleepy. With tireless energy he turned over the pieces of rock, pausing, now and then, to hold up one for inspection.

In reaching for a new piece his foot slipped. Glancing down, to see just where the object was on which he had slipped, Tom suddenly became so interested that he dropped down on his knees in the snow.

It was a piece of rock that had come up in the first tubful. At one point on the piece of rock there was a small, dull yellow glow.

Reade pawed the rock over in eager haste. Then he drew the hammer from his belt, striking the rock sharply. Piece after piece fell away until a solid yellow mass, streaked here and there faintly with quartz, lay in his hand.

"By the great Custer!" quivered Tom.

"What's the matter, boss?" called one of the workmen. "Got a sliver in your hand?"

"Have I?" retorted Tom joyously. "Come here and take a look."

"Haul away!" sounded Ferrers's hoarse voice from below.

"Tell Jim to stop sending and come up a minute," nodded Tom.

"Do you often see a finer lump than this?" Tom wanted to know as the two workmen came to him. He held up a nugget. Shaped somewhat like a horn-of-plenty, it weighed in the neighborhood of three ounces.

"Say, if there are many more like that down at the foot of the shaft this old hole-in-the-ridge will be a producer before another week is out!" answered one of the workmen. "How much is it worth, boss?"

"Allowing for the quartz that streaks this little gold-piece, it ought to be worth from forty to fifty dollars," Tom responded thoughtfully.

"Fifty dollars?" broke in Jim Ferrers, as he sprang from the top ladder to the ground. "Is there that much money on the Indian Smoke?"

"Not minted, of course," laughed Tom. "But here's something as good as money."

"Where did you get it?" Jim demanded, tersely, after one look at the nugget.

"In this ore-dump."

"Today's send-up, then?"

"Of course."

Without a word Ferrers fell at work on the pile of rocks, turning them over fast.

Tom helped him. The two men, released from hoisting duty, also aided.

"Nothing more like that sticking out of the rock," Jim grunted, turning to one of the men. "Bring me a sledge."

With that larger hammer, held in both hands, Jim placed ore pieces with his feet, swiftly bringing down sharp blows that reduced the rocks to nearly the size of pebbles.

"I don't see any more nuggets coming," mused! Tom. "But wait a minute. Look at the yellow streak through some of these fragments." "We're getting into the vein, I believe," spoke Jim solemnly. "Look at the stuff! But wait! I've a little more hammering to do."

Back of them stood the teamster, who had just come up with the horses.

"Am I to take that stuff and dump it down the ravine?" he asked slowly.

"If you do," retorted Ferrers heatedly, "I'll hammer in the top of your head, Andy! Reade, won't you pick out what you want for the site of the ore-dump. We've got some real ore at last!" One of the two hoist-men now ran to the shaft, shouting down the great news.

"Hold on there, Bill," Tom called dryly. "Don't get the boys excited over what may turn out to be nothing. Don't tell 'em any more than that we have-----"

"Tell 'em yourself, boss," retorted Bill. "Here they come!"

From the ladder a steady stream of men discharged itself until the last one was up.

"Where are you going, Tim?" called Tom, turning just in time to note big Walsh's movements.

"Going to call Mr. Hazelton, sir."

"Don't do it. Don't get him stirred up for nothing."

"For nothing, boss?"

"Don't bother Hazelton until we can tell him something more definite. Boys, with all my heart I hope that we have something as good as we appear to have. But every man of you knows that, once in a while, gold is found abundantly in a few hundred pounds of rock, and then, from that point on, no more yellow is found. We won't get excited until we get our first thousand dollars' worth out of the ground and have the smelter's check in hand. We'll hope---and pray---but we won't cheer just yet."

"Humph! If you don't want us to cheer, then what shall we do?" demanded big Walsh.

"We'll work!" Tom retorted energetically. "We'll work as we never did before. We'll keep things moving every minute of the time. Back with you into the shaft and out into the tunnel! You hoist-men stand by for a big performance with the tub. Jennison, you may stay up from below and tote specimens for me. I shall be at the furnace until midnight at the least."

"I'll tote for you till daylight, if the good streak only holds out," laughed Jennison, with glowing eyes.

"Come softly into the shack when you do come," Tom directed. "I'm going to put Mr. Hazelton to bed, and I don't want any one to wake him. When I play out tonight he'll have to be fresh enough to take my place at the assay bench and furnace."

Softly Tom entered their shack.

Harry lay fast asleep, breathing heavily.

"This won't do, old fellow," spoke Tom gently, shaking his chum's shoulder. "No; don't wake up. Just get into bed. I may want to turn in later, and, when I do, I may have some work left over that I'll want you to do."

"Anything up?" asked Harry drowsily.

"I'm going to be busy for a while, and then I want you to be," Tom answered.

He half pushed his chum toward the narrow bunk against the wall. Drowsy Hazelton needed no urging, but stretched himself out in his bunk.

Tom drew the blankets up over him, adding:

"Don't stir until I call you."

Hour after hour the men below in the mine sent up tub-lots of rock. Jim spent half of his time above ground, the rest below. Jennison was busy bringing the best samples in to Reade, but he walked so softly that Harry slept peacefully on.

Still the yellow rock came up. None of it looked like the richest sort of ore, but it was good gold-bearing stuff, none the less. Tom made many assays. It was seven in the evening ere the excited miners would agree to knock off work for the day.

Then Tom quit and had supper with them. There was excitement in the air, but Tom still counseled patience.

"We'll know more in a week than we do now," he urged.

"That's all right, Mr. Reade," laughed Tim Walsh. "As long as you were hopeful we didn't bring up enough yellow to pay for the dynamite we used in blasting. Now, boss, you're begging us not to be hopeful, and the luck is changing."

"I'm not kicking against hopefulness," Tom objected, smiling.

"All I ask of you men is not to spend the whole year's profits from the mine before we get even one load fit to haul to the smelter."

"We've got the ore dump started," retorted Jennison, "and we don't have to haul stuff to the smelter. Boss, you can raise money enough without hauling a single load before spring."

"How?" Tom wanted to know.

"The banks at Dugout will lend you a small fraction of the value of the dump as soon as they're satisfied that it has any value," Jim Ferrers explained.

"I didn't know that," Tom admitted.

"Now you can understand why the boys are excited tonight. They know you'll outfit the camp liberally enough if the yellow streak holds out."

"Outfit the camp liberally?" repeated Tom. "I'll go just as far in that line as my partners will stand for."

"We want a bang-up Christmas dinner, you see, boss," Tim Walsh explained. "We wouldn't have spoken of it if this streak hadn't panned today. Now, we know we're going to have doings on the ridge this winter."

"If the yellow rook holds out," Tom urged.

"Don't say anything more in that strain, just now, Reade," whispered Jim. "If you do, and things go badly, the boys will think you've been the camp's Jonah."

Tom went back to work in the partners' shack. Jim came in at ten and went to bed. It was midnight when Tom shook Harry by the shoulder.

"Time to get up, young man, and give me a rest," Tom announced.

Harry got drowsily out of his bunk.

"Why didn't you call me before, Tom?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I was too busy. But now you may have a few hours' work all by yourself, while I turn in," drawled Reade.

"Tom, old fellow, there's something up," discovered Hazelton, now studying his chum's face keenly. "Out with it."

Then Tom told of the day's luck, though he cautioned Harry against too soon growing elated.

"We'll just wait and hope," Reade finished. "Now I'll show you the work that's on the bench."

The gold news had waked up Hazelton. He examined eagerly the assay reports that Tom had filled out, then turned to the specimens that awaited his attention.

At six in the morning Reade was up again, nor did Harry turn in.

Both were present to inspect the first tub-lot of ore that came up the shaft. The yellow streak was continuing.

By the middle of the afternoon, however, the streak played out. Though the men worked an hour overtime they did not succeed in sending up any more ore.

"Just one pocket?" wondered Tom. "Or does our vein run in scattered pockets?"

"Oh, we'll find more pockets soon," predicted Harry cheerily. "Our luck has turned again. It's running in the old channels."

A feverish week passed. Towards its end the first big snow of the winter came, and the ridge was shut off from the rest of the world. It would have been all but impossible to get over even to the Bright Hope Mine.

The week of brisk work was using up the stock of dynamite, while the rock was too hard to work much with picks. Moreover, the money of the partners was gone. To seek credit at Dugout would be a dangerous proceeding, for those who granted the accommodation of credit would be sure to want a high price for it, even to a goodly share in the output of the mine. More than one mine has been taken over by creditors, and the original owners have gone out into the world again, poor men.

Saturday morning of this week Tom and Harry descended the shaft together. Jim was already there with the men.

"I thought we had two more boxes of dynamite, Reade," explained Ferrers. "I find that we have just six sticks left."

"Then may the Fates favor us with some lucky blasts!", muttered Tom.

"We can borrow money on our ore dump," suggested Harry.

"How about that?" asked Tom, looking intently at Ferrers.

"How much do you figure there is in the dump?" queried Jim.

"About two hundred dollars' worth of metal."

Ferrers shook his head.

"It would cost us forty dollars to cart the stuff to Dugout in the Spring. Then there'd be the smelter's charges. We couldn't borrow more than fifty dollars on such security. No bank is going to bother with such a small item."

Tom said nothing, but went forward to the heading of the tunnel. Here he made a careful examination ere he ordered the men to go ahead.

One after another five sticks of the dynamite were fired in small blasts, but the ore that came out did not suggest hope.

Then another drilling was made, and the sixth stick put in place, the magneto wires being connected with the charge.

Tom himself seized the magneto handle.

"Now, hold your breaths," he called, cheerily. "This blast means a lot, and then a bit more, to all of us. This blast may point the path to fortune!"

CHAPTER XIX

HARRY'S SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

Through the tunnel a dull boom sounded. Then, as if by a common impulse, all hands rushed back to the heading.

"Hard rock!" muttered Reade. "The blast didn't make much of a dent. Hand me a pick, one of you."

Then Tom swung it with all the force and skill of which he was possessed.

Some of the miners, who thought themselves strong men, looked on admiringly as Tom swung the pick again and again.

Clack! clack! clack!

"Some muscle there," proclaimed Tim Walsh. "I didn't think it was in a slim fellow like you."

"I haven't so much muscle," Tom informed him, "but I have a tremendous amount at stake here. One of you shovelmen come forward and get this stuff back."

Reade went tirelessly on with his pick. Some of the big fellows came forward with their tools and worked beside him. Tom still led.

For half an hour all hands worked blithely. Then Tom, halting, called them off.

"No use to go any further, boys, until we get some dynamite," he declared. "We're striking into harder and harder rock every minute. We are dulling our tools without making any headway."

"Dynamite?" asked Jim Ferrers, who had been looking over the shoveled back rock with Harry. "Where are we going to get any?"

"It's time for a council of war, I reckon," sighed Tom. "At any rate it's no use to work here any longer this morning. Let's go above."

As it was yet too early for dinner, the men congregated in one of the shacks, while the partners went to their own rough one-room abode.

"What's to be done?" asked Harry.

"I'd say quit," muttered Jim Ferrers. "Only, if we do, we lose

our title to our claim. Of course, I mean quit only for a while---say until spring---but even that would forfeit our title here."

"Then it's not to be thought of," rejoined Tom, with a vigorous shake of his head. "I haven't lost a bit of my faith that, one of these days, this ridge is going to pay big profits to some one."

"We either have to quit, and give up, or stay and starve," rejoined Ferrers.

"We've got to stick," Tom insisted. "In the first place, we owe our men a lot of money."

"They offered to take their chances," suggested Jim.

"True, but it's a debt, none the less. I shall see everyone of these men paid, even if I have to wait until I can save money enough at some other job to square the obligations in full. For myself, I don't intend to quit as long as I can swing a dull pick against a granite ledge."

"Then what did you come up for?" asked Harry dryly.

"Because there's nothing the men can do for the present, and I wanted all hands to have a chance to get over their disappointment. Jim, this snow-crust will bear the weight of a pony, won't it?"

"Why?"

"I must get to Dugout City."

"For what?"

"We haven't a big enough ore dump on which to borrow any money. but I've an idea I can sell this nugget for enough to get another good stock of dynamite."

"You don't want to try to get to Dugout today or tomorrow," replied Ferrers slowly.

"But I must," Tom insisted. "Every hour's delay is worse than wasted time. I must get to Dugout and back again as speedily as possible."

"Hotel living is expensive in Dugout," remarked Jim.

"But I don't intend to stop at a hotel for more than one meal."

"Have you looked at the sky?"

It was Reade's turn to ask:

"Why?"

"Just go to the door and take a look at the sky," suggested Ferrers.

Tom swung the door open and looked.

"Well?" he asked.

"What do you think of the sky?" Jim persisted.

"It looks as though we might have a little snow," Tom admitted.

"A little, and then a whole lot more," nodded Ferrers. "Notice how still the air is? We're going to have a howling blizzard, and I believe it will start in before night."

"Then we'd better turn the men out to fell and chop firewood," declared Harry, jumping up. "We haven't enough on hand to last through a few days of blizzard."

"Will you look after the wood, Harry?" asked Tom. "I want to keep my mind on getting to Dugout."

"We'll knock over a lot of trees between now and dinner-time," promised Hazelton, as he hurried away.

"Now, Reade, you'd better give up your idea of getting to Dugout for the present," resumed Jim Ferrers.

"But the work? We've got to keep the men busy, and we must keep the blasts a-going."

"You'll have to forget it for a week or so," insisted the Nevadan. "Your freezing to death in a gale of snow wouldn't help matters any."

"But I must get to Dugout," Tom pleaded.

"You won't try it unless you're crazy," Jim retorted. "If you make an attempt to stir from camp this afternoon, Reade, I'll call on the men to hold you down until I can tie you. Do you think I've waited, Reade, all these years to find a partner like you, and then allow him to go off in a blizzard that would sure finish him?"

"Then, if you're sure about this, Jim, I won't attempt to go until the weather moderates."

"When the time's right I'll go," proposed Ferrers. "A pony is no good on this white stuff. From some of the Swedes we've had working out in this country I've learned how to make a pair of skis. You can travel on skis where a pony would cut his legs in two against the snow crust."

"Then, if I'm not going to Dugout, I'll go out and swing an axe for a while," Tom suggested. "I want to be of some use, and I can't sit still anyway."

"Oh, sit down," urged Ferrers, almost impatiently, as he filled his pipe and lighted it. "I'll amuse you with some stories about blizzards on this Range in years past."

Outside they could hear axes ringing against the trees. Then the dinner-horn called the men in. Soon after the meal was over all the horses in camp were hitched and employed in bringing in the wood. Harry was out again to superintend the men.

By half-past two the first big flakes began to come down. There was still no wind to speak of.

Tom had lain down in a bunk, leaving Jim to brighten the fire.

Ferrers, too, nodded in his chair. It was the howling of the wind that awoke Tom.

"Where's Harry?" he asked, sitting up.

"Eh?" queried! Ferrers, opening his eyes.

"Where's Harry! Is he out in this storm?"

"I've been dozing," Jim confessed. "I don't know where he is."

"Hear the wind howl," cried Tom, leaping from his bunk and pulling on his shoes. Then he rapidly finished dressing, Jim, in the meantime, lighting the reflector lamp.

"Where on earth can Harry be?" Tom again demanded.

"Maybe in one of the other shacks, with some of the men."

Tom threw open the door. The snow-laden gale, sweeping in on him, nearly took away his breath. Then, after filling his lungs, he started resolutely for the nearest shack.

"Mr. Hazelton in here?" Tom called, swinging open the door.

"No, sir; thought he was with you."

Tom fought his way through the gale to the next shack. Here Tim Walsh had news.

"We came in, sir, when the blizzard got too bad," Walsh explained, "but we found we'd left one of the teams behind in the woods. Mr. Hazelton said he'd go back and get the team. Half an hour later one of the boys here noticed that the team was standing up against the door of the stable shack. So I went out and put up the team."

"Didn't it occur to you to wonder where Mr. Hazelton was?" Tom asked, rather sharply.

"Why, no, sir; we thought he had gone to your shack."

"Mr. Hazelton wouldn't leave horses out in a storm like this one," Tom rapped out briskly. "As a matter of fact he isn't in camp. You men get out lanterns and be ready to go into the woods. We've got to find Mr. Hazelton at the earliest possible moment!"

Twenty minutes later the beams of light from lanterns carried by the men revealed the form of Harry Hazelton, in the woods and nearly covered with snow.

"Pick him up," ordered Tom. "Make the fastest time you can to our shack."

In the shack the fire was allowed to burn low. Harry, still unconscious, was stripped and put to bed.

"Anything you want, let us know, sir," said Tim Walsh, as the men tramped out again.

Then Tom and Ferrers sat down to try to think out the best thing to do for Harry Hazelton.

He was still alive, his pulse going feebly. He had been briskly rubbed and warmly wrapped, and a quantity of hot, strong coffee forced gently down his throat.

After a while Hazelton came to, but his eyes had a glassy look in them.

"You're a great one, old fellow, to go out into the snow and get lost," Tom chided him gently.

"Did---I get---lost?" Harry asked drowsily.

"Yes. Here, drink some more of this coffee. Jim, make a fresh pot. You can stir the fire up a bit now."

"I---want to sleep," Harry protested, but Tom forced him to drink more coffee. Then Hazelton sank into a deep slumber, breathing more heavily.

"He's all right, now, or will be when he has slept," declared Jim Ferrers.

"Is he?" retorted Tom, who held one hand against Harry's flushed face, then ran the fingers down under his chum's shirt. "Jim, he's burning up with fever. That's all that ails him!"

Then Tom placed one ear over Hazelton's heart.

"None too strong," Reade announced, shifting his head. "And here's a wheezy sound in his right lung that I don't like at all."

"You don't suppose it's pneumonia?" asked Jim gravely.

It was congestion of the right lung that ailed Harry Hazelton. But Tom knew nothing of that. Jim Ferrers, who had never been ill in his life, knew even less about sickness.

As for Harry, he lay dangerously ill, with a doctor's help out of the question!

CHAPTER XX

TOM TURNS DOCTOR

The door opened almost noiselessly.

"Shut that door," cried Tom, angrily, without looking around.
"Whoever you are, do you know that we have a sick man here"

"Well, the men chased me out of one shack, and wouldn't let me in the other, and I don't want to go near the cook," complained a whining young voice.

It was Alf Drew who uttered the words.

"Shut the door," Tom repeated.

"May I stay here?" asked Alf, after obeying.

"I suppose so, though we have about enough trouble here already. Why did the men chase you out of their shack?"

"They said they couldn't stand the smell of cigarettes," Drew replied.

"I don't wonder at that," muttered Tom.

"They were all smoking. I don't see why I couldn't smoke, too," Alf whined.

"That's just the point," Tom returned. "The men were smoking. Now, as I've told you before, the use of cigarettes isn't smoking at all. You annoyed men who were minding their own business."

"They're a mean lot," complained young Drew. Being cold he went over to the fire to warm himself. Then he drew a cigarette from one of his pockets, and struck a match. Tom Reade, slipping up behind the youngster, deftly took the cigarette away from him, tossing it into the fire.

"You'll have to quit that," Tom ordered sternly. "If I catch you trying to light a cigarette then out you go. We have a man here sick with lung trouble and with a high fever, and we don't propose to have any cigarette smoke around here."

"What am I going to do, then?" asked Alf, after a minute or so spent in a kind of trance.

"Do anything you please, as long as you keep quiet and don't light any cigarettes," Tom suggested, rummaging in the cupboard for a medicine chest that he knew was there.

"But I'll go to pieces, if I can't smoke a cigarette or two," whined the boy.

Tom had the medicine chest in his lap by this time. His hand touched a bottle of pellets labeled "quassia."

"Here, chew on one of these, and you won't need your cigarette," Tom suggested, passing over a pellet.

Alf mutely took the pellet, crushing it with his teeth.

"Ugh!" he uttered disgustedly.

"Don't spit it out," urged Tom. "It's the best thing possible to take the place of a cigarette. Keep it in your mouth until it is all dissolved."

Alf made a wry face, but knew he must obey Tom. So he stuck to the pellet until the last of it had dissolved on his tongue. The pellet was gone, but the taste wasn't.

"Ugh!" grunted the youngster.

"You said that before," urged Tom. "Try to be original. Want another pellet?"

"No; I don't. I wouldn't touch one again!"

"Don't happen to want a cigarette, either, do you?"

"I don't want anything, now, but just to get that taste out of my mouth," Alf uttered.

"All right; go over in the corner and keep quiet. Jim, do you know anything about the use of the medicines in this chest?"

"Not a blessed thing," Ferrers replied regretfully. "I never took as much as a pinhead of medicine in my life."

"But Harry must have something," Tom insisted. "We can't let him lie there and die."

It was one of those ready-made medicine chests that are sold to campers and others who must live at a considerable distance from medical aid. Finding a small book of instructions in the chest, Tom moved over under the strong light and settled himself to read thoughtfully.

Harry tossed restlessly, unmindful of what was going on around him. His heavy, rapid breathing filled the place. Once in a while he moaned slightly, every sound of this kind going through Tom like a knife.

A particularly deep moan caused Tom to shiver and close the book. He went over and felt Harry's hot, drier skin.

"Jim," he directed, "I'm sure that, somehow, we should force the perspiration through his dry, parched skin. Take some of the blankets out of my bunk and spread them over Harry."

"It'll make his fever worse, won't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Tom admitted helplessly. "We'd better try it for a while, anyway."

Then Tom stood looking down at the flushed face of his chum, muttering below his breath:

"Harry, old fellow, I wish your mother were here. She'd know just what to do. And for your mother's sake, as well as my own, I've just got to blunder into something that will cure you."

Heaving a sigh, Tom went back under the lamp to read with blurred eyes.

At last he struck a paragraph that he thought bore on the case in hand. He read eagerly, praying for light.

"I've got it, at last," he announced, moving over to the bunk, beside which Ferrers stood.

"Got what?" asked Jim.

"I believe I'm on the track of the right stuff to give poor old Harry."

"What's the name of the stuff you're going to give Harry?"

"There are three medicines mentioned here," replied Reade, holding up the book. "They're all to be given."

"_Three_ medicines!" gasped Jim. "By the great Custer three are enough to kill a horse!"

"I'm going to try 'em," sighed Tom stolidly. "The poor fellow will die if nothing is done for him."

"Wouldn't it be better," suggested Ferrers, hopelessly, "to try one medicine on the lad and then wait ten minutes. Then, if that doesn't work, try one of the others on him! If that doesn't work then you know that the third kind of stuff is the right sort of bracer."

Despite his great anxiety, Reade could not suppress the smile that Jim's advice brought out. It was plain that Ferrers, good fellow as he was, would be of no use on the medical end of the fight that must be waged.

Tom searched the chest and found the medicines. Then he looked up the doses and started to administer the remedies as directed.

Even over the steadily increasing gale the notes of the supper horn reached them faintly.

"It's too tough weather to expect the cook to bring the stuff over here tonight," said Jim. "So, if you can spare me, I'll go and eat with the boys. Then I'll bring your chuck over to you."

Alf came out of his corner, pulling on the ragged overcoat that he had picked up in a trade with an undersized man down at the Bright Hope Mine.

Left alone, Tom drew a stool up beside the bunk, and sat studying his chum's face.

Twenty minutes later Hazelton opened his eyes.

"You're feeling better, now, aren't you?" asked Tom hopefully.

"I---I guess so," Harry muttered faintly.

"Where does it hurt you most, chum?"

"In---in my chest."

"Right lung!"

"Yes."

"Is the pain severe, Harry?"

"It's about all I can---can stand---old fellow."

"Poor chap. Don't try to talk, now. We're taking good care of you, and we'll keep on the job day and night. You've had some medicine, though you didn't know it. Now, try to sleep, if you can."

But Hazelton couldn't sleep. He tossed restlessly, his face aflame with fever.

Jim Ferrers came back with the supper, but Reade could eat very little of it. Alf Drew did not return. He had made his peace with the workmen.

Through the night Harry grew steadily worse. When daylight came in, with the blizzard still raging, the young engineer was delirious.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WOLVES ON THE SNOW CRUST

The blizzard lasted for two days. Toward the end the temperature rose, with the result that three feet of loose snow lay on top of the harder packed snow underneath.

Harry Hazelton had passed out of the delirium, but he was weak, and apparently sinking. He was conscious, though he spoke but little, nor did poor Tom seek to induce him to talk.

By this time Reade knew the little medicine book by heart. He also knew the label and dose of every drug in the case. But he had not been able to improve upon his first selection of treatment.

"Do you think he's going to die, Jim?" Tom frequently asked.

"What's the use of a strong young fellow like him dying?" demanded Ferrers.

"Then why doesn't he get better?"

"I don't know. But he'll come around all right. Don't worry about that. Strong men don't go under from a cold in the head, or from a bit of wheeze in the lungs."

"But the fever."

"That has to burn itself out, I reckon," replied the Nevadan. "Reade, you'll be sick yourself next. Lay out the medicines, and I'll give 'em, to the minute, while you get six hours' sleep."

"No, sir!" was Reade's quick retort.

"Then, before you do cave in, partner, suppose you pick out the medicines that you want me to give you when you can't do anything for yourself any longer."

Tom went back to his chair by the side of Harry's bunk.

Outdoors some of the men were clearing a path to the mine-shaft. Not that it was worth while to try to do any work underground. The rock at the tunnel heading was too stubborn to be moved by anything less than dynamite.

"I'd get some lumber together, and make a pair of skis," suggested Jim, the next day, "but what is the use? We'll have to have twenty-four hours of freezing weather before we'll have a crust. As soon as we can see snow that will bear a human being I'll start for Dugout City."

"But not for dynamite," declared Tom.

"No; for a doctor, I suppose."

"A physician's visit is the only thing I'm interested in now," Tom declared, glancing at the bunk. "I'd give up any mine on earth to be able to pull poor old Harry through."

On the fifth day, while the weather still remained too warm for the forming of a snow-crust, Harry began to show signs of improvement. He was gaunt and thin, but his skin felt less hot to the touch. His eyes had lost some of the fever brightness, and he spoke of the pain in his chest as being less severe than it had been.

"I've been an awful nuisance here," he whispered, weakly, as his chum bent over him.

"Stow all that kind of talk," Reade ordered. "Just get your strength back as fast as you can. Sleep all you can, too. Get a nap, now, and maybe when you wake up you'll be hungry enough to want a little something to eat."

"I don't want anything," Harry replied.

"He's a goner, sure!" gasped Tom Reade, inwardly, feeling a great chill of fear creep up and down his spine. "It's the first time in his life that I ever knew Harry to refuse to eat."

"The weather is coming on cold," Jim Ferrers reported that evening, when he came back from the coon shack with Tom's supper.

"Is it going to be cold enough to put a crust on the snow?" Reade eagerly demanded.

"If it keeps on growing cold we ought to have a good crust by

the day after tomorrow."

"I'll pray for it," said Tom fervently.

Next day the weather continued intensely cold. Jim Ferrers went to another shack to construct a pair of skis. These are long, wooden runners on which Norwegians travel with great speed over hard snow. Jim was positive that he could make the skis and that he could use them successfully.

Harry still remained weak and ill, caring nothing for food, though his refusals to eat drove Reads well-nigh frantic.

The morning after the skis were made, Jim Ferrers, who had relieved worn-out Tom at three in the morning, stepped to the young engineer's bunk and shook him lightly.

"All right," said Reade, sitting up in bed. "I'll get up."

He was out of the bunk almost instantly.

"I'm going to send Tim Walsh in to help you a bit," Jim whispered. "The crust is right this morning, and I'm off for Dugout. Before we forget it give me that nugget."

Tom passed it over, saying solemnly:

"Remember, Jim, you've got to bring a doctor back with you---if you have to do it at the point of a gun!"

"I'll bring one back with me, if there's one left in Dugout," Ferrers promised, fervently.

Fifteen minutes later Jim was on his way. Tim Walsh came in on tip-toe, and seemed afraid to stir lest he make some slight sound to disturb the sleeping sick lad.

"A day or two more will tell the tale, Tim," Tom whispered in the big miner's ear.

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that, sir; it can't be," protested the big fellow in a hoarse whisper. "I reckon Mr. Hazelton is going to get well all right."

"He won't eat anything," said Tom.

"He will when he's hungry, sir."

"Tim, have you ever had any practice in looking after sick people?"

"Quite a bit, sir. When I was a youngster I was private in the hospital corps in the Army."

"Why on earth didn't you tell me that before?" Tom gasped.

"Why, because, sir, I allowed that a brainy young man like you would know just what to do a heap better than I would."

"Tim, do you know anything about temperatures and drugs?"

"Maybe I'd remember a little bit," Walsh answered modestly. "It's twelve years since I was in the Army."

Tom brought the medicine case with trembling hands.

"To think that, all the time," he muttered, "I've been longing for a doctor's visit, and yet I've had a man in camp who's almost a doctor."

"No, sir; a long way from that," protested Tim Walsh. "And, besides, I've forgotten a whole lot that I used to know."

Tom rapidly explained how he had been treating Hazelton, according to the directions in the little medicine book. Tim listened gravely. "Was that all right, Tim?" Tom asked, breathlessly, when he had finished.

"I should say about all right, sir."

"Tim, what shall I do next?"

"Do you want me to tell you, sir?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Then I might as well do it, sir, as tell you," Tim drawled out. "Mr. Reade, you're worn to pieces. You get into your bunk and I'll take charge for an hour."

"I want to see you do the things you know how to do."

"Not a thing will I do, Mr. Reade, unless you get into your bunk for an hour," declared Walsh, sturdily.

"Will you call me in an hour, if I lie down?"

"I will."

"You'll call me in an hour?"

"On my honor, Mr. Reade."

Tim Walsh thereupon bundled the young engineer into another bunk, covered him up, and then watched until Tom Reade, utterly exhausted, fell into a deep sleep that was more like a trance.

"But I didn't say in which hour I'd call him," muttered Walsh under his breath, his eyes twinkling. Then he tip-toed over to look at Harry Hazelton, who, also, was asleep. Through the whole day Tom slept nor did the ex-Army nurse once quit the shack.

When dark came Tim Walsh had just finished lighting the lamp and shading it when he turned to find Tom Reade glaring angrily into his eyes.

"Tim, what does this treachery mean?" Reade questioned in a hoarse whisper.

"It means, sir, that you had tired yourself out so that you were no longer fit to nurse your partner. He was in bad hands, taking his medicines and his care from a man as dog-tired as you were, Mr. Reade. It also means, sir, that I've been looking after Mr. Hazelton all day, and he's a bit better this evening. Him and me had a short chat this afternoon, and you never heard us. Mr. Hazelton went to sleep only twenty minutes ago. When he wakes up you can feel his skin and take his pulse, and you'll find him doing better."

"Tim, I know you meant it for the best, and that I ought to be thankful to you," Tom murmured, "but, man, I've a good notion to skin you alive!"

"You'd better not try anything like that, sir," grinned Walsh. "Remember that I'm in charge here, now, and that you're only a visitor. If you interfere between me and my patient, Mr. Reade, I'll put you out of here and bar the door against you."

Tom, though angry at having been allowed to sleep for so long, had the quick good sense to see that the big miner was quite right.

"All right, Tim Walsh," he sighed. "If you can take better care of my chum than I can then you're the new boss here. I'll be good."

"First of all," ordered Walsh, "go over to the cook shack and get some supper. Don't dare to come back inside of an hour, so you'll have time to eat a real supper."

Tom departed obediently. Once out in the keen air he began to understand how much good his day's sleep had done him. He was alive and strong again. Taking in deep breaths, he tramped along the path over to the shaft ere he turned his steps toward the cook shack.

"Come right in, Mr. Reade, and eat something," urged Cook Leon. "This is the first time I've seen you in days. You must be hungry."

"There's a fellow ten times smarter than I who's looking after Hazelton," spoke Tom cheerily, "so I believe I am hungry. Yes; you may set me out a good supper."

"Who's the very smart man that's looking after your friend?" Leon asked.

"Tim Walsh."

"Why, he's nothing but a miner!"

"You're wrong there, Leon. Walsh has been a soldier, and a hospital corps man at that. He knows more about nursing in a minute than I do in a month. Oh, why didn't I hear about Walsh earlier?"

Leon soon had a steaming hot supper on the table. First of all, Reade swallowed a cupful of coffee. Then he began his supper.

"I wonder if Ferrers can get back tonight?" Tom mused, after the meal.

"He might, but a doctor couldn't get here tonight, unless he, too, could move fast on skis," Leon replied.

"Anyway, I'm not as worried as I was," sighed Reade.

The door opened, and Alf Drew entered. That youngster rarely came to the cook shack alone, but the lad learned that Tom Reade was present.

"Sit down and keep quiet, if you're going to stay here," ordered Cook Leon.

Alf went to the corner of the shack furthest from the other two. Tom, watching covertly, saw Alf furtively draw out cigarette and match.

Very softly Drew scratched a match. He was standing, his back turned to the others, over a wood-box.

Click-ick-ick! sounded a warning note.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow!" howled Alf, jumping back, dropping both match and cigarette.

"What's the matter, youngster?" demanded Tom placidly.

"There's a rattlesnake in there under the wood," wailed the boy, his face ashen.

"How do you know?"

"I heard him rattle!"

Leon, too, had heard the sound, and would have started after a poker, intent on killing the reptile, had he not seen Tom shake his head, a twinkle in his eye.

"There are no rattlesnakes about in the dead of winter on this Range," Tom declared positively.

"That one has been keeping hisself warm in the bottom of the wood-box," insisted Alf.

Click-ick-ick!

"There, didn't you hear it?" quivered the cigarette fiend.

"I heard no rattler," declared Tom, innocently. "Did you, Leon?"

The cook thought, to be sure that he had heard one, but he caught the cue from Reade and answered in the negative.

"Go and turn the wood-box out, Leon, to show the young man that there's no snake there," Tom requested.

Just then that task was hardly welcome to the cook, but he was a man of nerve, and, in addition, he reasoned that Reade must know what he was talking about. So Leon crossed the room with an air of unconcern.

"Here's your rattlesnake, I reckon," growled the cook, picking up Alf's dropped cigarette and tossing it toward the boy.

"That's the only rattlesnake on the Range," Tom pursued. "I've been trying to tell Alf that cigarettes are undermining his nerves and making him hear and see things."

Leon unconcernedly overturned the wood-box. Alf, with a yell, ran and jumped upon a stool, standing there, his eyes threatening to pop out from sheer terror.

Leon began to stir the firewood about with his foot.

Click-ick-ick!

Alf howled with terror, and seemed in danger of falling from the stool.

"You'll keep on hearing rattlers, I expect," grunted Reade, "when all the time it's nothing but the snapping of your nerves from smoking cigarettes. The next thing you know your brain will snap utterly."

Click-ick-ick! On his stool Alf danced a mild war-dance from sheer nervousness.

"Come, be like a man, and give up the pests," advised Tom.

"I---I---be-believe I will," half agreed the lad.

Click-ick-ick-ick!

"Didn't you hear that?" quavered the youngster.

"I hear your voice, but no rattlers," Reade went on. "Are you still hearing the snakes? Be a man, Alf! Come, empty your pockets of cigarettes and throw them in the fire."

Like one in a dream Alf Drew obeyed. Then he sat down, and presently he began to recover from the worst of his fright.

When his hour was up, Tom Reade went back to the other shack. Harry was awake, and feeling rather comfortable under big Walsh's ministrations.

Soon after nine that night, the camp lay wrapped in slumber, save in the partner's shack, where the shaded light burned. Tim Walsh was still on duty, while Tom sat half dozing in a chair.

For the first time in days the young chief engineer was fairly contented in mind. He now believed that his chum would surely recover.

Had Tom been outside, hidden and keeping alert watch over the surroundings, his content would have vanished into action.

In the deep darkness of the night, Dolph Gage glided about on the firm snow crust at the further side of the mine shaft. With

him, looking more like two evil shadows or spectres, were his two remaining companions.

Most of the time since they had been seen last, Gage and his confederates had been within a mile or so of Reade's camp. They had found a cave in which they had been passably comfortable. For food they had depended upon the fact that the commissary at the Bright Hope Mine was easily burglarized, and that no very strict account was kept of the miners' food. Thus the three scoundrels had managed not only to hide themselves from the law's officers, but to keep themselves comfortable as well.

"Now we can fix these youngsters, and slide back to our hiding place during the excitement," Gage whispered to his two friends. "This crowd is broke. If we fix the mine in earnest tonight they won't be able to open it again. With the dynamite we brought up from the Bright Hope on this sled we can fire a blast that will starve and drive Reade and Hazelton away from the Indian Smoke Range for good and all!"

CHAPTER XXII

DOLPH GAGE FIRES HIS SHOT

"Yes, if we don't blow ourselves to kingdom come in the effort," growled the man known as Josh.

"You're talking bosh!" grunted Dolph. "Why should we blow ourselves up? Is this the first time we've used dynamite!"

"But there's such a lot of the stuff," grunted Josh. "We must have a hundred and fifty sticks on the sled."

"All of that," nodded Gage.

"If the stuff goes oh accidentally, when we're near-----"

"Then our troubles will be over," said Gage grimly.

"I'm not so all-fired anxious to have my troubles over that way," grumbled Josh. The other man said nothing, but he looked extremely thoughtful.

"The best way to make the thing sure," Gage went on, "is to get to work before some one comes prowling this way."

"Who's going to prowl?" queried Josh. "The camp is asleep."

"Reade is up; we know that," Dolph insisted.

"Humph! We saw through the window that he's too drowsy to stir."

"Don't be too sure," warned Gage. "He may be only a boy, but he's a sure terror, the way he finds out things! He may be out at any time. Come, we'll hustle, and then get away from here."

"I'm ready," said the third man.

"Then get on to the top ladder," ordered Dolph. "When you're down about fifteen feet, then stop and light your lantern. We'll each do the same."

Dolph waited until the other two had reached the bottom of the shaft and he could see their lanterns. Then he, too, descended, lighting two more lanterns after he reached firm ground.

"Where are you going to set the stuff off?" Josh asked.

"In two places," Gage answered. "One big pile in the tunnel, half-way between the heading and the shaft, and the other at the bottom of the shaft. Get picks and a couple of shovels, and we'll soon lay mines and tamp 'em."

While the men were obeying, Gage reascended the ladders. Roping about a third of the dynamite sticks, and passing a loop over one shoulder, he succeeded in carrying the dynamite below. In two more trips he brought down the rest. The fourth trip he came down with a magneto and several coils of light firing wire.

On account of their industry the time slipped by rapidly. As a matter of fact their wicked task occupied them for nearly four hours. However, no sound of what went on underground reached the ears of those who slept in the shacks.

"We're ready for the wiring," announced Josh at last.

"I'll do that myself," said Gage. "I want it well done. Each of you hold a lantern here."

By the light thus provided Dolph attached the light wires so that the electric spark would be communicated to each stick in this "mine." This was done by looping a circuit wire around each separate stick, and connecting the wire with each detonating cap. The dynamite, frozen on the snow crust, had thawed again at this subterranean level.

"Now, for the last tamping," ordered Gage.

While the others worked, Dolph carefully superintended their operations.

At last the tamping was done, and the connecting wires were carried back to the bottom of the shaft.

Here the second mine was connected in the same manner, and the wires joined so that the circuit should be complete.

"One spark from the magneto, now," chuckled Dolph, "and both blasts will go on at once. Whew! This old ridge will rock for a few seconds!"

For a few moments he stood surveying his work with huge satisfaction.

"Now, get up with you," he ordered. "Remember, at the bottom of the last ladder, blow out your lanterns."

"The wires?" queried Josh.

"I'll carry 'em. All you have to do is to get out of here."

In quivering silence the three evil-doers ascended. The light of their lanterns extinguished, they stepped out of the shaft and once more on the hard snow crust.

"Now, take the magneto back about two hundred feet, leaving the wires stretched on the snow," whispered Dolph.

"Who's that coming?" Josh demanded, in sudden alarm, clutching his leader's sleeve.

For an instant all three men quailed. But they remained silent, peering.

"Don't get any more dreams, Josh," Dolph ordered sharply. "There's no one coming. It's all in your nerves."

"I was sure I heard some one coming." Josh insisted in a whisper.

"But you didn't"

"What if some one comes now?"

"No one is coming."

"But if some one should?"

"All the more reason for getting our work done with speed. Once we've connected the magneto and fired the blast our whole job will be done."

Josh, only half-convinced, drew a revolver and cocked the weapon.

"Now, be mighty careful!" snarled Dolph. "Don't get rattled and shoot at any shadows! A shot might spoil our plans tonight, for it would bring men tumbling out this way as soon as they could get out of their bunks and into some clothes. Give me that pistol!"

Josh, hesitating, obeyed, whereupon Dolph Gage let down the hammer noiselessly, next dropping the weapon into a pocket of his own badly-frayed overcoat.

"Now, get the magneto back, as I told you. I'll take care of the wires and see that they don't snap or get tangled."

This latter part of the work was quickly executed. Dolph deftly attached the wires to the magneto, then seized the handle, prepared to pump.

"All ready, now!" he whispered gleefully. "Two or three pumps, and damage will be done that it would cost at least fifteen thousand dollars' worth of material and labor to remedy. The kid engineers haven't the money and can't raise it. They'll have to give up---be driven out. Then we'll send our own man, who has his mineral rights, in here to take possession, and the mine will be ours once more---as

it always has been by rights."

"Let us get a little way to the rear before you fire the blasts," pleaded Josh.

"Go back a couple of hundred feet, if you want," assented Dolph. "But don't you run away! Remember that part of your job is to stand by me if we're followed and fired upon."

Josh and his companion carefully made their way back over the crust.

Dolph Gage waited until he saw them to be a sufficient distance away.

"Now, work away, my magneto beauty" muttered Gage, exultantly. "Do your work, straight and true. Drive these upstarts off of Indian Smoke Range and bring my mine back into my own hands! These fool engineers have found no gold in the ridge, but it's there---waiting for me. And---now!"

He pumped the handle of the magneto vigorously. In another instant the spark traveled.

From underground there came a sudden rocking, followed, after a breathless interval, by a loud, crashing boom.

Both blasts had exploded in the same instant, and the dynamite had done its work!

CHAPTER XXIII

TOM BEGINS TO DOUBT HIS EYES

When the shock came it shook the shacks so that nearly all of the sleeping miners became instantly alert.

Harry Hazelton, dozing lightly, sat up in bed, then felt dizzy and lay down again.

"You keep on your pillow, Mr. Hazelton," Tim Walsh ordered, gently. "It isn't your time to sit up yet, sir."

"What was the racket?" asked Harry, anxiously.

"A blast in the mine," Tom Reade answered, truthfully enough.

"I didn't know we had any dynamite left," persisted Harry.

"You haven't been in a condition to know all that has been going on for the last few days," Tom retorted, gently. "Now, don't ask me any more questions, for I've got to go out and see how the blast came along."

As he spoke Tom was hustling into his coat and pulling his cap down over his ears.

Then, full of the liveliest anxiety, the young chief engineer hastened out.

His instant conclusion had been that some treachery was afoot, but whence it came he had no idea. Just now Tom Reade wanted facts, not conjectures.

As he closed the door and hurried across the camp, Tom found the aroused miners flocking out. Several of them bore rifles, for they, too, had guessed treachery.

"Here's the boss!"

"What's happened, Mr. Reade?"

"Men," Tom called softly, "I don't know what's up. But don't talk loudly or excitedly, for Hazelton has been aroused by the noise and the shake, and I've tried to turn it off. Don't let him hear your voices."

"It was in the mine, sir, wasn't it?" asked one man, hurrying to Reade's side.

"It must have been, Hunter. Come along, all of you. We'll go over to the shaft and take a look."

Several of the men were carrying lighted lanterns. At the shaft one of the first evidences they discovered was the wires running back to the magneto.

"Trickery, here!" muttered one of the men. "Mr. Reade, shall we try to pick up a trail and follow it?"

"No," answered Tom, after a moment's thought. "It would be wasted time. Even if you pick up a trail on this frozen crust, which is hardly likely, you couldn't follow it except by lantern light. That would be slow work. Besides, it would show the rascals where you were and how fast you were moving. They could fire at you easily. No; let's have a look at the damage."

Looking down the shaft, with their rim light, from the top, all looked as usual about the shaft.

"Hand me one of the lanterns," called Tom. "Hunter, you take another and come with me."

"Careful, sir," warned another man. "The blasts may not be all over as yet."

Tom Reade smiled.

"The blasts were fired by magneto," he explained. "There can't be any more blasts, unless some enemy should sneak back and adjust the magneto to some other 'mine.' You won't let any one down the shaft for that purpose, I know."

There was a laugh, amid which Tom and Hunter descended. Near the bottom of the third ladder Reade found that the rest of the way down the shaft had been blocked by the smashing of the ladders.

"Go up, Hunter," the young engineer directed, "and start the men to knotting ropes and splicing 'em. We want at least a hundred feet of knotted rope."

Tom waited on the last solid rung while this order was being carried out. By and by Hunter reached him with one end of a long, knotted line.

"Don't pass down any more," Tom called, "until I have made this end fast."

This was soon done, and the rest of the rope was lowered.

"Hunter," Tom asked, "are you good for going down a hundred feet or so on a knotted rope?"

"I don't believe I am, sir."

"Then don't try it. Go up and send down two or three men who feel sure they can do it. But urge every man against taking the risk foolishly. For a man who can't handle himself on a knotted rope it's a fine and easy way to break his neck."

"Are you going down now, sir?"

"At once."

"Then I'll stay here and hold a lantern for you," replied Hunter, doggedly. "I won't stir until I know you're safe at the bottom of the shaft."

"Go ahead up," ordered Tom. "I'm tying a lantern to my coat."

This he was even then doing, in fact, making the knot with a handkerchief passed through one of the button-holes of the garment.

"Why don't you go up, with my message, Hunter?" Tom demanded.

"I'm afraid I can't stir, sir, until I know that you're safe at the bottom."

"Nonsense! What could you do to save me if I lost my hold and fell?" Tom questioned.

"Nothing at all, sir; but I'll feel a heap easier when I know you're safe at the bottom."

"All right, then," called Reade. "Watch me!"

He swung off into space with the skill and sureness of the practiced athlete. A little later Tom touched bottom, calling up:

"Now, get busy, Hunter. I'm all right."

"Are you at the bottom of the shaft, sir?"

"I'm on solid ground, but I'm not sure about being at the bottom of the shaft. I'm afraid the opening to the tunnel has been blocked."

Send down two or three men, and then some tools. The tools can come down in the tub, but forbid any men to try that way. The tub is too uncertain and likely to tip over."

"If the tub tips out a pick or two, they might fall on you, sir, and wind up your life," Hunter objected.

"That's a chance to which no good sport can object," laughed Tom. "Go ahead and see that my instructions are carried out."

One of the men came down the rope first. He landed safely, but looked at his hands in the dim light.

"That's a hard road to travel, Mr. Reade," he remarked. "I'll not be much pleased with the trip back."

"It's easy to any one who has had enough practice," Tom observed, mildly.

Then two other men came down in turn.

"We've enough men here," shouted Reade. "Now send tools."

Before long the young engineer had his little force busily engaged.

Of course, many of the timbers had been blown out of the walling of the shaft. There was danger of the dirt caving in on the few workers below.

"Now, you four can keep going, digging straight down and to the eastward," said Tom. "I'm going up to get some more men at work, putting in temporary walling. I don't want any of you men hurt by saving dirt from the sides of the shaft."

All four men stopped work at once.

"What's the matter!" asked Reade.

"Coming down's easy, sir; we're waiting to see you go up that rope."

"Then I'll endeavor not to keep you long away from your tasks," smiled the young engineer athlete.

Grasping the rope just above a knot over his head, Tom gave a slight heave, then went rapidly up, hand over hand. He was soon lost from the little circle of light thrown by the lanterns at the shaft's bottom.

"Not many men like him," remarked one of the miners named Tibbets, admiringly.

"I've been told that's what young fellers learn at college," said another miner, as he spat on his hands and raised his pick.

For two hours Reade attended to the mending of the walling, as the system of laying walls in shafts is termed. Ladders had to be rebuilt even in order to put temporary walling in place.

Then the young chief engineer deemed it time to run over to the partners' shack. He opened the door softly, peeping in. Feeling the draught Tim Walsh turned and came to the door.

"Mr. Hazelton is doing all right, sir."

"Has he asked for me?"

"No, sir."

"If he does, tell him that I'm putting in all night at the mine. If he gets worse run over and get me."

Then Tom went back to his labors.

Dolph Gage and his fellow rascals, owing to their haste, and also to the fact that they did not know as much as they thought they did about laying and tamping blasts, had not done as much harm as they had planned.

By the time that the miners had dug down some four feet, sending up the dirt in the hoist-tub, they came to the opening of the tunnel. Thus encouraged, they worked faster than ever, until a new shift was sent down the repaired ladders to relieve them.

By daylight the men, changing every two hours for fresher details, were well into the tunnel.

Here, for some yards, the tunnel was somewhat choked. After this semi-obstruction had been cleared away, Tom Reade was able to lead his men for some distance down the tunnel. Then they came upon the scene of the late big blast.

Here the rock had been hurled about in masses. A scene of apparent wreck met the eyes of the miners and their leader, though even here the damage was not as great as had been expected by Gage and his rascals.

To the north of the tunnel lay a great, gaping, jagged tear in the wall of rock. This tear, or hole, extended some ten feet to the north of the tunnel proper.

As Tom entered, a glint caught his eye. Something in the aspect of that dull illumination, reflected back to him, made his pulses leap.

He passed his left hand over his eyes, wondering if he were dreaming.

"I---I can't believe it!" he stammered. "Look, boys, and tell me what you see!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"It's the gleam of the real metal in the rock, sir---what's what it is," gasped one of the miners, as he held up a lantern to aid him in his quest.

It lay there, in streaks and rifts, a dull gleaming here and there. To be sure, it was nothing at all like a solid golden wall, but Tom Reade could be contented with less than Golconda.

In spots the precious metal showed in darkish streaks, instead of yellow. But these dark streaks showed admixtures of silver.

"Run and get me a hammer, one of you," cried Tom, breathing fast.

When the miner returned with the chisel-nosed hammer he found the young engineer eagerly exploring the whole length of the new wall thus laid bare.

"I knew that a real vein lay here," Tom went on, as he took the hammer. "The only trouble with us, men, was that we were working eight or ten feet south of where the true vein lay. Now, by the great Custer, we've hit it---thanks to the enemy!"

Eagerly Tom chipped off specimens of the rich gold and silver bearing rock. He loaded down two men and carried more himself. Every piece of rock was a specimen of rich ore.

Up the shaft they went, emerging into the sunlight.

"I'd like to know who the scamps were that fired the blasts in the mine," Tom muttered joyously. "I'd like to reward them."

"Party coming, sir," reported a miner, pointing to the southward.

Over the snow came a cutter, drawn by two horses, slipping fast over the snow. From one side of the cutter a pair of skis hung outward.

"That's Jim Ferrers and the doctor from Dugout," Tom breathed. "But who can the other lot of people be."

A pung, drawn also by a pair of horses, contained five men.

Jim was quickly on hand to explain matters.

"I've brought Dr. Scott. He'll have to see Hazelton quickly, and then get back to Dugout," Jim declared. "The doctor is afraid the crust may melt, and then he'll be stalled here with his outfit."

"Those men over there?" inquired Reade, as the pung stopped, and the five men got out "Two of them look familiar to me."

"I reckon," nodded Jim Ferrers. "They're officers---all of 'em. They've come over here to hunt the rocks to the south of here. Up at the jail the keepers worried out of Eb some information about a cave where Dolph Gage hangs out. It seems that Gage and his pals have been stealing supplies at the Bright Hope Mine."

Jim introduced Dr. Scott, who said:

"I must see my patient and be away in an hour. I don't want to get stalled here by a thaw."

So Tom led the way to the shack, and did not see the departure of the law's five officers.

Outside Reade carefully dropped the ore he had brought along and made a sign to his workmen to do the same. Then the partners and the physician went inside.

Tom watched closely while the physician placed a thermometer in Harry's mouth and felt his pulse. Respiration was also counted, after which Dr. Scott produced a stethoscope and listened at Harry's chest and back. A little more, and the examination was completed.

"Gentlemen," announced Dr. Scott, "you've brought me all this distance over the snow-crust to see a patient who is just about convalescent. This young man may have some nourishment today, and by day after tomorrow he will be calling loudly for the cook."

"What has been the trouble, doc?" Hazelton asked.

"Congestion of the right lung, my son, but the congestion has almost wholly disappeared."

A mist came before Tom Reade's eyes. Now that his chum was out of danger Reade realized how severe on him the whole ordeal had been.

As soon as Tom found a chance he asked Dr. Scott:

"Will a little excitement of the happiest kind hurt Hazelton any?"

"Just what kind of excitement?"

"We've had a disappointing mine that has turned over night into a bonanza. I've a lot of the finest specimens outside."

"Bring them in," directed the physician.

Tom came in with an armful.

"Harry," he called briskly, "we were right in thinking we had a rich vein. The only trouble was that we were working eight or ten feet south of the real vein. Look over these specimens."

Tom ranged half a dozen on the top blanket. When Harry's glistening eyes had looked them all over, Tom produced other specimens of ore. Dr. Scott examined them, too, with a critical eye.

"If you've got much of this stuff in your mine, Reade," said the medical man, "you won't need to work much longer."

"Won't need to work much longer?" gasped Tom Reade. "Man alive, we don't want to stop working. When a man stops working he may as well consult the undertaker, for he's practically dead anyway. What we want gold for is so that we can go on working on a bigger scale than ever! And now, Harry, the name for our mine has come to me."

"What are you going to call it?" Hazelton asked.

"With your consent, and Ferrers's, we'll name it the Ambition Mine. That's just what the mine stands for with us, you know."

"The best name in the world," Harry declared.

"And now, young man," said Dr. Scott, addressing Hazelton, "I want you to rest quietly while Tim Walsh sponges you off and the cook is busy making some thin gruel for you. Reade, in order to get you out of here I'll agree to go down in your mine with you."

Dr. Scott proved more than an interested spectator when he reached the tunnel. He possessed considerable knowledge of ores.

"Yes; you have your bonanza here, Reade," declared the physician. "Almost any ambition that money will gratify will soon be yours. From the very appearance of this newly-opened vein I don't believe it is one that will give out in a hurry."

"By the way, Doe," called Ferrers, joining them, "here's that nugget that you wouldn't take when I offered it to you in Dugout. You've made your visit, and now the nugget is yours."

"I don't want it," smiled Dr. Scott. "I want real money, in place of the nugget, and I'll be content to wait for it. The owners of this mine will be welcome to run up a very considerable bill with me."

"Then can you stay a few days?" queried Tom eagerly. "Until good old Harry is wholly out of danger."

"Yes; I'll stay a few days, if you wish it, Mr. Reade."

Finally Jim had the presence of mind to pilot the physician to the cook shack.

Quietly enough the officers from Dugout had reentered camp. With them they had borne one long, covered object--the remains of Dolph Gage, who had been shot and killed while resisting arrest. Gage's two remaining companions had been brought in, handcuffed. These expert sheriff's officers from Dugout had been able to find a trail, even on the hard-frozen snow crust, and had tracked the criminals directly to their cave.

Jim Ferrers went over to where the body of Gage lay on the snow. Gently he turned down the cloth that covered the dead man's face. For a few moments Ferrers gazed at the still face; then, awkwardly, after hesitating, he lifted his hat from his head.

"That man killed your brother, Jim," murmured Tom, stepping up to his Nevada partner. "You had other reasons for hating him. In the old days you would have run Dolph Gage down and killed him yourself. In these newer days you have left Gage to the hands of the law. It is a much better way, and you will never even have to wonder whether you have done any wrong."

"The law's way is always best, I reckon," returned Jim Ferrers,

slowly.

That same day, after the officers had gone with their men, Jim Ferrers, finding that the crust was holding, drove fresh horses to the doctor's cutter. The physician remained behind to take care of Harry Hazelton, but Jim went fast toward Dugout City. He was armed with letters from Dr. Scott that told certain dealers in Dugout what unlimited credit the partners ought to have on account of their mine.

Before Harry was sitting up vehicles had been employed to bring to Ambition Mine considerable supplies of dynamite, food and all else that was needed, including half a dozen of the latest books for the amusement of the invalid engineer.

Everything went on swiftly now. More miners, too, were brought over, while the hard crust lasted, and a score of carpenters. Lumber camp also. There was a constant procession of vehicles between Dugout and Ambition Mine. Tom did not hesitate to avail himself of his sudden credit, for every day's work showed that the vein was not giving out. An ore dump was piling up that meant big returns when the ore could be hauled to the smelter.

Ambition Mine proved a steady "payer." No; our young men did not become multi-millionaires. Mines that will do that for three partners are scarce, indeed. Ambition, however, did pay enough so that, by spring, Tom and Harry, after looking over their bank account, found that they could go ahead and furnish their engineer offices on a handsome scale. Some thousands, too, found their way to their families in the good old home town of Gridley.

The mine was turned into a stock company. Tom, Harry and Jim each retained one-fourth interest. The remaining fourth of the stock was divided evenly between Cook Leon and the twenty-four miners who had stood by so loyally, so that now each of the original miners, in addition to his day's pay, owned one per cent. of the gold and silver that went up in the new elevator that replaced the tub-hoist.

Alf Drew did not receive one of the small shares in the mine property. His cigarette smoking had made him lazy and worthless, and he had done nothing to promote the success of the once desperate mining venture.

However, there was hope for Alf. At the time when he threw his remaining "coffin nails" in the cook's fire he really did "swear off," and he afterwards was able to refrain from the use of tobacco in any form. He grew taller and stouter and developed his muscles. Tom and Harry employed him at the mine as a checking clerk, where he actually earned his money, and saved a goodly amount of it every month.

"Tom, you rascal, you promised some day to show me how you scared that boy stiff with your rattlesnake click," Harry reminded his partner.

"Nothing very difficult about it," laughed Tom. "Can you make a noise by grinding your molars together---your grinding teeth? Try it."

Harry did. The noise came forth from his mouth, though it didn't sound exactly like the rattle of a rattler.

"Keep on practicing, and you'll get that rattle down to perfection---that's all," nodded Tom.

Spring found the young engineers restless for new fields. They longed to tackle other big feats of engineering. Jim Ferrers understood, and said to them:

"You youngsters know, now, that you can trust me to run this mine."

"We always knew that we could trust you," Tom corrected him.

"Well, you know it now, anyway. You want to get back into the world. You are restless for new fields to conquer. Go ahead; only come back once in a while and shake hands with old Jim. While you're away I'll send you a monthly statement of your earnings and see that the money is placed to your credit."

On their ride to Dugout, Tom and Harry were favored with the company of Mr. Dunlop, promoter of the Bright Hope Mine.

"I suppose it's a lucky thing for you boys that you stuck to your own mine," said Dunlop. "you've come out a good deal better. I wish I had secured your services, though. We're making some money over at the Bright Hope, but we'd make a lot more with the right engineers in charge. I'm on my way to Dugout to use the telegraph wires in earnest. I've learned that the real way to make money out of a mine is to have a real engineer in charge."

Tom and Harry delayed but a couple of hours at Dugout. Then-----

However, their further adventures must be delayed in the narration until they appear between the covers of the next volume in this series. It will be published at once under the title, "_The Young Engineers In Mexico; Or, Fighting the Mine Swindlers_."

In this new volume will be described what Tom and Harry did in a land of mystery and romance; a land where the sharp contrasts of wealth and squalor have fostered the development of many noble characters and have created some of the vilest among men. The forthcoming story is one filled with the glamour and the fascination of that neighbor-country of hot-blooded men. In Mexico, Tom and Harry encountered their most startling adventures of all.

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