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CHAPTER XVII

We had a good deal of trouble finding the exact spot where we had left him, for we could get no answer to our calls. He was down in a heap, covered with blood and quite dead.

"God!" cried Babsy, deeply moved. "I'll put a ball through the next one of those devils I meet!"

We returned slowly to the fire, carrying the body, which we laid reverently one side and covered with a blanket. In all our hearts burned a fierce, bitter anger.

The latter were the father and five sons of a backwoods family from the northwest, Pine by name. They were all tall, heavily built men, slow moving, slow speaking, with clear, steady eyes, a drawing away of talking and the appearance always of keeping a mental reservation as to those with whom they conversed.

Just now they stood tall and grim behind us as we ate, and the gray dawn and the rose dawn grew into day. Nobody said anything until we had finished, then Yank rose to his full height and faced the attentive men.

"I want vengeance," he announced in an even voice, stretching forth his long, lean arm. "Those devils have harried our stock and killed our partner, and I'm not going to set quiet and let them do it."

"Yes, dad," said he. "I know you're with me. But I'm going to get our friends yere to go with us. Old man,"

he said to Pine, "you and yore sons help us with this job and we'll locate you on the purtiest diggings in these hills."

"You bet!" agreed McNally. "You don't need to make my boys no offer," replied Pine slowly. "Those devils yere after our hosses too, and they'd have got them if you hadn't come along. We'd been told by a man we believe that there wan't no Injuns in this country or you wouldn't have seen us sleeping es close to our fire. What do you all reckon to come up with them?"

Our old trapper interposed. "Their ranches is down the valley somewhars," said Babsy, "and we'll have to scout for it. We must go back to camp first and get a ready."

McNally and I returned against this check to immediate action, but saw the point after a moment. The Pines packed their slender outfit. We bound the body of our poor friend across his horse and mournfully retraced our steps.

We arrived in camp about 10 o'clock, to find Johnny and Don Gaspar anxiously on the alert. When we had imparted our news their faces, too, darkened with anger. Of us all Vasquez had been the only man who never lost his temper, who had always a flash of a smile for the hardest days. Hastily we threw together provisions for several days and arranged our affairs as well as we could. We all wanted to go, and Don Gaspar, in spite of the remains of his malarial fever, fairly insisted on accompanying the expedition.

"Senores," he said, with dignity, "this was my own man from my own people."

"Nevertheless somebody had to stay in camp, although at first some of us were inclined to slur over that necessity."

"There's no chance that Injuns will drift by and take all our supplies," Babsy pointed out.

"Chances are slim in only a day or so. You must admit that," argued Johnny. "Let's risk it. We can scratch along if they do take our stuff."

"And the gold?"

"That nonplused us for a moment. 'Why not bury it?' I suggested. Babsy and I snorted. 'Any Injun would find it in a minute,' said Pine.

"And they know gold's worth something, too," put in Yank. "This is a scout, not a house moving expedition," said Babsy decidedly, "and somebody's got to keep camp."

"I'll stay for one," offered old man Pine, his eyes twinkling from beneath his fierce brows. "I've fit enough Injuns in my time."

After some further wrangling we came to drawing lots. A number of small white pellets and one darker were shaken up in a hat. I drew in the fourth turn and got the black!

"Hard luck, son," murmured old man Pine. "The rest were eager to be off. They leaped upon their horses, brandishing their long rifles, and rode off down the meadow. Old man Pine leaned on the muzzle of his gun, his eyes gleaming, uttering commands and admonitions to his five sons.

"You, Old," he warned his rounest, "you mind and behave and don't come back yere without a you bring a skeep!"

About 3 o'clock of the second day Pine remarked quietly: "That they come!"

I was instantly by his side, and we strained our eyesight in an attempt to count the shifting figures. Pine's vision was better and more practiced than mine.

"They are all thar," said he, "and they're driving extry hosses." Ten minutes later the cavalcade stopped, and the men dismounted wearily. They were, as the old man had said, driving before them a half dozen ponies, which Governor Boggs herded into the corral. Nobody said a word. One or two stretched themselves. Johnny seized a cup and took a long drink. Yank leaned his rifle against the wall. Old man Pine's keen, fierce eye had been roving over every detail, though he, too, had kept silent.

"Well, Old," he remarked, "I see you obeyed orders like a good sojer." The boy grinned. "Yes, dad," said he. "And then I saw what I had not noticed before—that at the belt of each of the tall, silent young backwoodsmen

hung one or more wet, heavy, red and black soggy strips. The scalping had been no mere figure of speech. Thank heaven, none of our own people was similarly decorated!

So horrified and revolted was I at this discovery that I hardly roused myself to greet the men. I looked with aversion and yet with a certain fascination on the serene, clear features of these scalp takers. Yet, since in the days following this aversion could not but wear away in face of the simplicity and straightforwardness of the frontiersmen, I had to acknowledge that the atrocious deed was more a product of custom than of natural barbarity.

Though these Indian troubles had nothing to do with it, nevertheless they marked the beginning of our change of luck. We suffered no definite misfortunes, but these things did not go well. The slight malarial attack of Don Gaspar was the first of an annoying series. I suppose we had all been inoculated on the marshes of the Sacramento, and the disease had remained latent in our systems. The hard work in the open air had kept us healthy, but the fever only awaited the favorable moment of depression or of overwork. The combination of ice-cold water around our legs and burning sun on our heads was not the best in the world. Fortunately Yank, who came from an arid country, had had foresight enough to bring a supply of quinine. For two months one or the other of us was ailing, and once for a few days five of us were down!

Then, too, I think the zest of the game was palling on us a little, strange as it may seem. We could dig gold from the soil almost at will. It would seem that this single fact would keep normally acquisitive men keyed to a high pitch of endeavor all the time.

but it was not so. I suppose we needed a vacation. We began to discuss what we would do when we should see the city again. No one for a moment dreamed that we should quit these rich diggings. We were here to make our fortunes, and the fortunes seemed to be ready for the making. Only, the novelty having passed, it had become hard work, just like the making of any other kind of a fortune.

The Pine family camped below us, used our corral at our invitation, and set placidly to work. They were typical frontiersmen and settled down in the well built cabin which they quickly man up as though they meant to make of it a permanent home. For two months, which brought us up to the end of July, they lived a regular and leisurely life. Then one morning, without any warning at all, they rode over to our cabin, leading their horses, fully packed. Old man Pine explained, while his five tall, steady eyed sons sat their horses quite immobile in the background, that they had dug enough gold for their necessities, and that they were now going down to the lower country to pick out some good land. These men were the very first I happened to meet who had come into the country with a definite idea of settling.

After the departure of this strong force, began our discussions as to the safeguarding of our gold. It had now reached a very considerable sum—somewhere near \$35,000, as I remember it. Babsy was very uneasy at its presence in camp.

Buck Barry brought up strongly the advisability of sending our treasure out to a safe place. His argument was given point by the arrival in camp one evening of three evil looking Mexicans, shabbily clothed, but well armed, and mounted on beautiful horses. We fed them well, but saw to the caps of our revolvers and the security of our corral before turning in for the night. In the morning they departed before we were stirring, without so much as a word of thanks. These mysterious visitors had given us no faintest inkling of their business or destination. Don Gaspar stated flatly that they had come to spy us out, having heard of our presence in the valley from the Indians.

"And I told them," said he triumphantly, "that esson we would be sent out for the food."

He went on to argue that thus he had prepared their minds for the fact that the pack horses would soon be going out. By distributing the gold its presence would be unsuspected.

I suggested a strong guard, but both Babsy and Don Gaspar opposed me. "There's enough of these yere robbers to git us anyhow, even if we all went," said Babsy, "and that's why I want to send the stuff out now. The place they'll tackle will be right yere, if they tackle anything at all."

I will not weary you with the pros and cons. At the time I thought, and still think, the whole arrangement most ill advised; but against me was the united opinion of nearly the whole camp, including the most level headed members of my own party. It was finally agreed that Yank, Buck Barry and Don Gaspar should take out the gold.

They started very early in the morning, carrying the treasure in saddle bags and across the horns of the saddle. I argued that Yank rode much the lightest and had the strongest horse, and managed to get the others to concede to him a full half of the mules. At the last moment we had modified the original plan to suit everybody. The horsemen encumbered by pack animals were to push on as rapidly as possible in order to reach by nightfall the settlement where dwelt the Italian friend. Once there they could feel themselves reasonably safe. Johnny, Missouri Jones and I would ride with them until noon as a sort of escort for the uninhabited portion of the journey. By that hour we figured we should have reached the outskirts of the regular diggings, where, our experience told us, our companions would be safe.

Accordingly we pushed our mounts hard. Untampered by pack animals, and aided by knowledge of the route, we made great progress. By noon we had passed the meadow of our night's camp. After a hasty lunch we accompanied our men a few miles farther, and said farewell and godspeed and hurried back in order to reach home before sunset.

(Continued Next Saturday.)

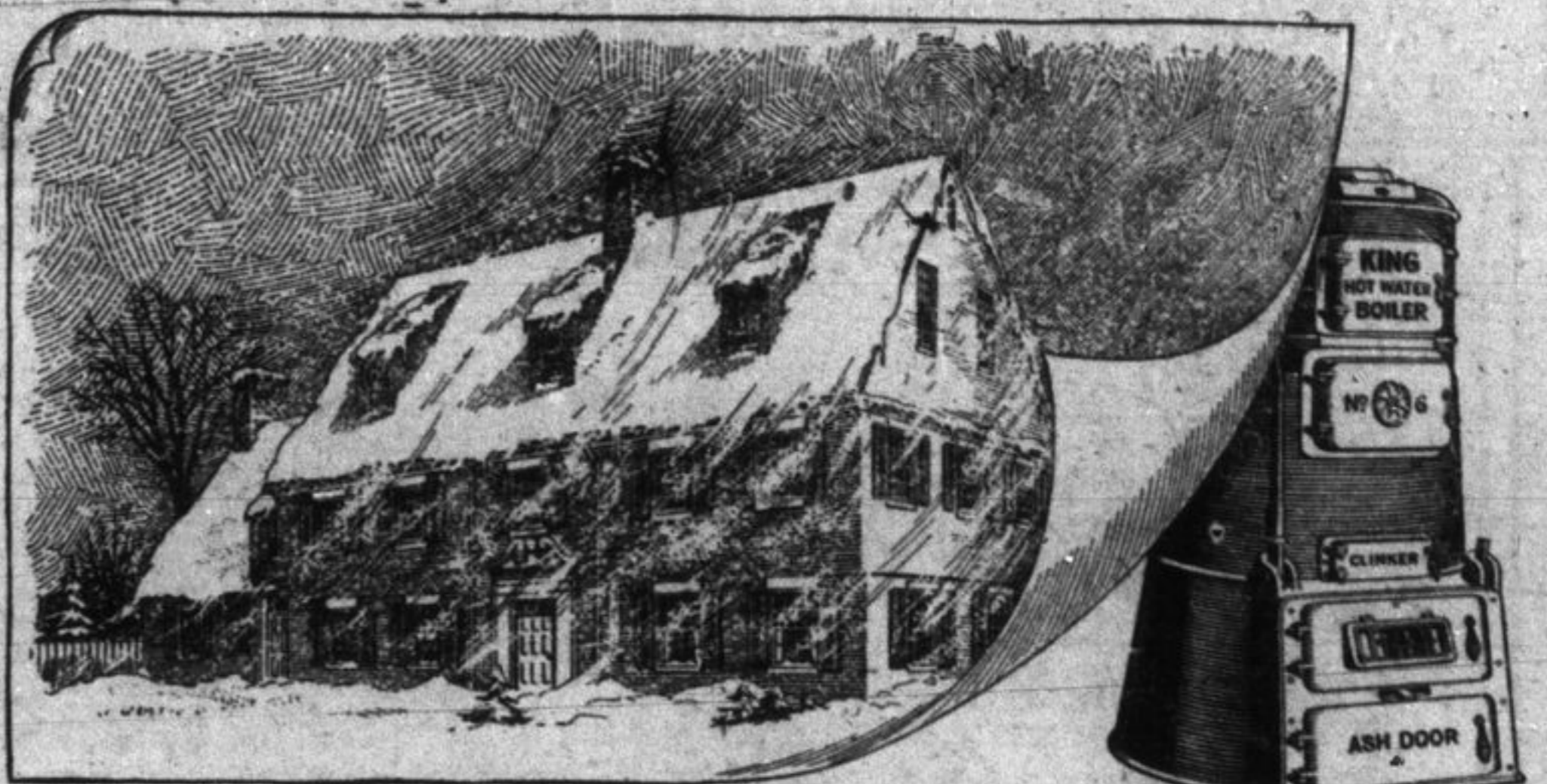
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