

## KIRK SHELDON'S MINE

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and the miners held a whispered conversation as to the course they should pursue. It was then about midnight, and it was decided that all except the boys should form a circle around the villains by stealing out beyond them on the plain.

They could remain under partial cover by lying flat on the ground, and when it should be sufficiently light, Kirk was to discharge one barrel of his gun. This would, of course, attract the attention of the robbers for a moment, during which time those in hiding could draw bead on the outlaws, who would thus be forced to make complete surrender.

As silently as they had come, the men, twelve in number, took their departure, half going one way and half another, Bart waiting behind to whisper to the boys:

"You stay inside here, no matter what happens. You couldn't do any good, and, if you should come out before everything was over, you might do a great deal of harm."

"But, Bart," said Kirk, holding him by the arm to detain him, "the men can't be out there, for, if they were, they'd be on the lookout to keep up from getting away. If they'd been watching, you couldn't have got in so easily."

"Don't you fear but that they're there. As a matter of fact, they would be mighty glad if you did get out of here, for then they could easily track you down, whereas, so long as you stay here you're out of their reach. Then, again, they know that you wouldn't start off in the night across the plain. We shall find them easy enough, for they're all there, waiting until you have to come out for water."

Then Bart was gone, and the two boys were alone once more, but with a sense of security in their hearts that took all fear from them.

While the miners had been laying their plans, it was decided that no one should return to the ledge after he had left it; therefore, the boys must continue their watch, and fire upon the first one they heard approaching.

After talking of the probable success of the miners in making the road-agents prisoners, Dory lay down and went to sleep again, and Kirk did not waken him, even when it was time for him to stand his watch.

As the hour drew near for the attempt at capture to be made, Kirk had no desire to sleep, and he remained on duty until, by the gray light of morning, he could see everything distinctly.

"Get up!" he said to Dory. "I'm going to give the signal now."

As soon as Dory was on his feet, Kirk discharged the weapon. In an instant the three road-agents sprang up, and almost at the same time twelve forms, ranged in a half-circle, appeared behind them.

"Up with your hands!" shouted a dozen voices, and, with a low cry of rage, the men obeyed, as they turned to see in whose power they were.

It would have been worse than foolish for them to have made any resistance, with the odds so much against them, and they realized it fully.

They stood like statues, with their hands held above their heads, while two of the party advanced, and fastening their elbows from behind, lashed all three together.

"We'll get right along to Silver Cliff," said the leader of the miners, "and if the folks up there think it will be any trouble to keep these fellows, we'll give the boys a little hanging party."

"We'll follow you," said Bart, as the miners marched past the cave, two guarding the fettered prisoners, while the boys from the top of the ledge saw their enemies, so triumphant a few hours before, again disheartened.

Tom was not among those who had been captured. He had probably been left behind when the others started, owing to the fact that he was stiff and lame from having been bound so long in the canyon.

The chances were that he would attempt to rejoin his companions during the day, believing that he should find them at the ledge; but the miners were not disposed to wait for him. They had captured three, and the fourth would be harmless alone.

When the boys turned the burros loose the night before, they had no expectation of ever seeing them again; but the little animals were still reveling among the cactus, and before the miners and their prisoners were out of sight, Bart's party were ready to start, none the worse for the series of adventures that had befallen them since leaving Canon City.

"Come on," said Bart, cheerily, as, with his rifle over his shoulder, he led the way down over the boulders. "We ought to be in Silver Cliff this afternoon, and then Kirk can get rid of the load he's carrying in front of his saddle."

## CHAPTER XI.

## AT SILVER CLIFF

THE journey from the ledge to Silver Cliff was made in a most leisurely fashion. There was no care on the mind of any member of the party, and the absence of it made traveling, even through the hot sand, very pleasurable.

The burros were allowed to choose their own gait, and even to nibble at the sage brush

now and then, which must have been quite a surprise to them after having been urged on so fast.

It was about three o'clock when they entered the mining camp at Silver Cliff, a place that looked as if each one in it had been trying to wheel it away in barrows, for the greater portion of the work done there is, or was, surface mining. It was a camp that had sprung up as suddenly and in quite as singular a manner as many others—a place in which prospectors had looked in vain for iron, and which, by the accidental blow of a pick several years after, was found to be literally a silver cliff.

The boys had already seen enough of mining camps to know what scenes of confusion they present; but they were by no means prepared for such a turmoil as the one rough street of Silver Cliff presented. It was thronged with miners and speculators, and every one appeared to be in a state of pleasurable excitement.

When Bart and the boys came in sight, fully half the inhabitants of the town shouted themselves hoarse, as if in welcome, a proceeding that greatly puzzled Kirk and Dory, until Bart explained it by saying:

"The capture of the road-agents was a good thing for those who live here, and they want us to know that they appreciate the part we've taken in the matter."

It was as Bart had said. The miners were determined to show them all the honor possible, and they marched the party, burros and all, to the one log tavern of the town, where they made the boys understand that anything they wanted was theirs.

"Show them the plunder," whispered Bart, who seemed to be as eager to bring the boys into prominence as he was to keep himself in the background—"show them the plunder, and let them understand that you want those who can identify their property to come forward."

After giving this advice, Bart had slipped among the crowd, thus preventing the boys from insisting on his acting as master of ceremonies, and there was nothing for Kirk to do but to carry out the suggestion.

In the rush, the donkeys had been forced into the "hotel" with their masters, and Kirk had nothing to do save to unfasten the heavy package that had caused them so much trouble from the pommel of his saddle.

"Here is some property that the road-agents have stolen," Bart, Dory and myself got it out of their cabin, down at the lower end of the range, and we want to leave it with some one who will see that those who own the different articles will be sure to get them."

As he spoke, Kirk placed the heavy bundle on the rode bar, and unrolled it, while the miners crowded around, shouting and cheering with delight at the thought that not only had the road-agents been captured, but that at least a portion of the spoils had been recovered.

"Hold on, boys! Let's do this thing on the square. It ain't likely that any of us would try to make out that a thing was his'n when it wasn't; but, for fear that some gentleman that hasn't been robbed should try to strike pay-gravel in this 'ere blanket, I propose that Jerry takes the whole lot. Them as has lost anything comes up, an' describes it. If it's here, he gets it, an' if it isn't, he jist waits till two more boys comes along, an' does a job sech as we men couldn't do."

"Take it, Jerry! Take it, Jerry!" shouted a dozen voices, and the red-nosed proprietor of the "Cliff Hotel" came from the other end of the room, in obedience to the call.

Lifting the precious load by the ends of the blanket, Jerry deposited it on the ledge behind the counter, while a dozen of the blue and red-shirted miners raised Kirk and Dory up on to the bar, forcing them to sit there.

"Let the boys see fair play, an' what they says goes. Some one unload them burros, an' turn 'em out, so's they can eat."

The donkeys were unloaded, the goods being piled up in one corner of the room, and while this was being done the work of claiming the stolen property was going on.

"I had twenty ounces of dust when I come here from Central, and that same gang lifted it. Do you see it in there, Jerry?"

"What was it in?" asked the proprietor.

"A buckshot pouch, with 'P. L.' marked on it."

"Here it is, then."

And Jerry handed a heavy bag to Kirk, who passed it to its rightful owner.

"Here, son, take this." And the miner poured a handful of the glittering dust into a tin cup that stood on the bar. "Take it, for it's jist like finding a pocket of nuggets to get this after the road-agents once had it in their clutches."

"Look for a gold watch with 'W. G.' on the case, Jerry," shouted another man, who, one of the miners told the boys, was the owner of a rich vein that had just been located.

Jerry calmly passed the identified property to Kirk, as the miners shouted themselves hoarse again at this piece of good fortune.

The owner of the new mine tossed a bag of silver bullion on the bar between Kirk and Dory, saying as he did so:

"It's only fair you should have the tailings, boys, for, as Pete says, it's jist like finding dust to get these things back."

One after another described articles that had been lost, and but few were disappointed. The news spread that the road-agents' booty was at the Cliff Hotel, and the crazy old tavern was the centre of attraction until all the property that could be identified had been delivered. Several had been robbed of money; but where it had no wrappings about it, of course it could not be claimed.

Every article had been taken from the blanket (some of the party describing property which absent friends had lost, and which was handed over to them in trust), and quite a large sum of money in bills remained.

One of the miners proposed that it should be given to Kirk and Dory, who already had more bullion and dust than they could comfortably care for, when the former shouted, as he stood up on the bar:

"I propose that all those who have been robbed of bank-bills put down on a piece of paper the amount they lost. Then this money can be divided between them proportionately."

"That's a fair shake," replied one.

And in a very few moments each of the road-agents' victims had a portion of the amount that had been taken from him.

As a matter of course, every one of these insisted on rewarding the boys, and there flowed in bank-bills as profusely as gold and silver had before, until Kirk and Dory had money literally piled up around them.

"Now let's string up the thieves!" proposed some of the more hot-headed.

And hardly had the words been spoken, when the entire company, with the exception of the proprietor of the house, Bart and the two boys, left the place.

"Where have they gone?" asked Kirk, who had not fully understood the cry.

"They've started out to lynch the men you brought in. You see they've got to wind the day up with some kind of fun," explained the landlord, in the most matter-of-fact tone.

"Let's try to stop them, Bart!" cried Kirk, excitedly. "We must stop them! It would be horrible to think that we had done even the little we have toward bringing those men here to be hanged!"

"You needn't be worried about that," said Bart, calmly, as he put their outfit into its most compact form. There were two government agents here from Canon City, and, knowing what the miners would probably do if they have ironed the robbers and sneaked off with them. They're half-way to Canon by this time."

Neither Kirk nor Dory had any reason to feel any especial good-will for the road-agents, and yet it would have been most distressing to them if lynch law had been meted out to the villains, for they felt that they were in a certain sense instrumental in having them brought there.

The landlord gave the boys two buckskin pouches for their gold and silver, and after this had been taken care of, came the question of where they were to pass the night.

Jerry offered them a room in which all three could sleep at reasonable prices—three dollars for each one—and Bart advised that they take it.

If, in the morning, they should decide to remain any longer in the town, the tent could be put up.

The boys concluded that the guide's plan was the best, and, before the crowd returned from their fruitless quest, the three were domiciled in about as cheerless and desolate a looking room as the boys had ever seen.

The floor was made of roughly-hewn planks, between which were wide cracks, and, being situated over the bar-room as it was, every noise made below could be heard distinctly in the chamber above.

"I should think it might be a fair place to come into out of the rain," said Kirk, as, seated on their luggage, he surveyed the room; "but, as a place to sleep in, I think it's a decided failure."

"We can put up the tent even now, if you think best," said Bart, suddenly realizing that these rough evidences of civilization were much worse than a camp in the woods.

"I think we'd better stay, now that we're here, and that we start out bright and early in the morning," said Dory. "We've got to get across the range again, and the sooner we're there the better."

"That's what we'll do," said Kirk, decidedly. "We can see all we want to of this place between now and dark, and if we've come out to hunt for gold, it's time we begun. I wonder where the burros are."

"We can find them easily enough in the morning," replied Bart, carelessly. "No one would want to steal them, and they'll be sure to stay where they can find something to eat."

The first thing you want to do is to get a money belt, for you can't carry that bullion around with you in those pouches—that is, unless you want to deposit it here."

"We will do that. I'd send it back to father; but I'd rather surprise him by bringing it home myself. Is there a bank here?"

"Most likely there's some place that answers the same purpose. I'll ask the landlord."

Bart disappeared down the stairs, and the boys could hear his questions and Jerry's replies with the greatest ease, thus showing that the conversation could have been carried on from above quite as well.

There was a bank—branch of a Denver house, where they could deposit all their valuables, and the three started for the place at once, being escorted by the unsuccessful lynchers, who returned to the hotel just as they were about to leave it.

After this business had been transacted—and nearly every one of their escort insisted upon seeing that it was done "on the square," they having assumed a sort of guardianship over the boys—the entire party started toward the mine.

The arrest of the road-agents had served as an excuse for nearly every one to stop working; therefore, Kirk and Dory had a little opportunity of seeing the carbonates of silver, the finding of which in this particular locality had greatly puzzled the geologists.

From that time until the guests of the Cliff Hotel had quieted down so that the occupants of the room over the bar could go to sleep, the boys wandered around the queer little settlement, or viewed the different shanties, and when they retired to gain the needed

rest before starting on their long tramp the next morning.

## CHAPTER XII.

## ON THE DIVIDE

THE guests at the Cliff Hotel were certainly early risers, for Jerry's morning customers began to arrive very shortly after the last one had left at night, and the occupants of the room over the bar were perfectly well aware of the fact.

"It's no use trying to sleep longer," said Kirk, as he got out of bed, which Dory suggested would be softer if it had an extra coat or two of paint. "It seems as if it was only ten minutes ago that they quieted down, and now it's as noisy as it was last night."

Neither Dory nor Bart cared to try to sleep in such a racket, and soon the old-hunters and their guide were making preparations to leave Silver Cliff. Three new lariats had been purchased the day previous, for they had either worn out, hauling rocks in the canyon, or left bound around Tom, their entire stock of rawhide. The remainder of their purchases had been a side of bacon, coffee and hard tack; for the road-agents, while they had been the self-invited guests of the boys, had reduced the contents of the larder wonderfully.

The burros had, as Bart said, "been prospecting for grass, and struck a rich lead near the hotel," where he found them without difficulty.

When the boys left the hotel that morning the greater portion of the miners were either at work or at breakfast; consequently, they avoided a public leave-taking, which they had feared would be embarrassing. The few whom they did see wished them all manner of good luck, and made them agree to come back that day, promising to show them some "good paying dirt" in case they failed to find any beyond the range.

Each one of the party was in the best of spirits at being once more on his proper journey, and even the burros seemed to start off more briskly, as if they knew that the danger that had threatened their masters had been dissipated.

"We'll camp on the divide tonight," said Bart, joyfully, when they had left the mining camp some distance behind, "and tomorrow night we shall be where we can do some prospecting."

The boys knew that the guide meant by this speech that they would camp in the pass that led over the mountains, the term "divide" being used to designate the middle or dividing line of the range. They would then be half-way across, and, as the labor of descending would be so much less than that of ascending, they would have plenty of time next day to find a suitable location for the camp, which would be their headquarters while they remained in San Luis Valley.

"There is no use talking. We did strike it rich at Silver Creek, and no mistake," said the guide, musingly. "How much did that broker allow you for the lot?"

"He gave eighteen dollars an ounce for the gold, and only ninety cents for the silver," replied Kirk. "The bank-bills, made three hundred and five dollars and fifty-five cents, or one hundred and one dollar and eighty-five cents apiece."

"But I've got nothing to do with that," said Bart, quickly. "All of it was given to you."

"You know as well as we do that if the money had been given to whom it belonged, you would have had the whole. Instead of that, Dory and I have taken each a portion, and there's no reason for you to make any talk about not sharing."

"But you see, Kirk, I'm getting regular wages from your father for guiding you, and, of course, I don't come in for anything you strike."

"We won't talk about it, Bart," said Kirk, laughingly. "You will take your share without fussing. So we'll let the matter drop. What I particularly want to know just now is, what kind of a pass this is we're going over?"

"Well, it isn't as good as it might be, but it's better than some I know of. We shall make it without a great deal of work. What idea have you about where you're going after we cross the divide?"

"None whatever. We simply want to prospect down the side of the range toward Alamoza," replied Kirk.

"I know of a gulch a little south of the pass we're going over, where we might find some placers, but how they'd pan out is another matter. It must be four years ago since I first found 'em, and I don't believe any one's been there meanwhile."

"Did you take any gold out?" asked Dory.

"No, I ain't stop just then."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, there were behind me a dozen Cheyenne Indians close behind me in less than half an hour after I found the placers, and I didn't think the place was very healthy. It won't do any harm to go down there, and wash out a few pans. If you don't strike pay-gravel, it won't be much time lost."

Beyond knowing the locality to which they wished to go, the boys had decided upon nothing definite, and were well pleased at thus having some particular destination. Placer-mining had been their intention, for they wanted to do something more than simply locate a claim during the trip, and they already began to consider the gulch Bart had told about as the spot where they were to get large quantities of gold.

The journey up the mountain-side, although the guide had spoken of it as not being remarkably difficult, was the most serious the boys had as yet undertaken, and, what was anything rather than pleasing, they knew that they should find no water until the next day. They would be forced to make that which they had brought from Silver Cliff serve them for forty-eight hours.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY