

Stratemeyer Edward

**Three Young Ranchmen: or,
Daring Adventures in the
Great West**



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PREFACE

"Three Young Ranchmen" relates the adventures of three brothers, Allen, Chetwood and Paul Winthrop, who are left to shift for themselves upon a lonely ranch home situated in the mountainous region of the beautiful State of Idaho, near one of the numerous branches of the Salmon River.

The lads, although sturdy and brave, have no easy time making a living, and among other troubles, they are visited by horse thieves, and also by a crafty prospector who wishes to take their claim away from them. In the meantime an uncle of the lads has gone off to visit the city, and he disappears entirely, adding to the complexity of the situation. What the boys did to straighten out the trouble is told in the chapters which follow.

In writing this story I have tried to give my boy readers a fair idea of life on a ranch of to-day, as well as of life in the wild mountains of Idaho, with some idea of the ranch hands and miners to be met with in these localities. The tale has been drawn as true to nature as possible, and I trust its reading will prove both entertaining and useful.

Captain Ralph Bonehill.

CHAPTER I.

An Unpleasant Discovery

"When do you think Allen will be back, Paul?"

"He ought to be back by two or three o'clock, Chet. His horse was fresh, and the roads are very good just now."

"I hope he brings good news, don't you? I am tired of waiting here."

"We will have to content ourselves on the ranch another year, I am afraid. Father left matters in a very unsettled condition, and what has become of Uncle Barnaby the world only knows."

"I don't care so much about the dullness – I like to hunt and fish and round up the cattle just as well as any one – but what I'm complaining of is the uncertainty of the way things are going to turn. For all we know, we may be cast adrift, as the saying goes, any day."

"That is true, although I imagine our title to the ranch is O. K. If those title papers hadn't been burned up when one end of the house took fire I wouldn't worry a bit."

"Neither would I. But we all know what Captain Grady is – the meanest man that ever drew the breath of life – and if he once learns that we haven't the papers he'll be down on us quicker than a grizzly bear in the spring."

"Well, we won't let him know that the papers have been burned up. We will continue to bluff him off."

"We can't bluff him forever. To my mind –"

The boy broke off short, and coming to a halt, pointed with his disengaged hand toward the barn.

"Did you leave that door unlocked?" he went on.

"Certainly I didn't. Who opened it? Perhaps Allen is back."

"And perhaps there are horse thieves around!" was the quick reply. "Come on."

Without a word more the two boys dropped their burdens and started for the structure in which the horse belonging to each had been stabled.

The boys were Chetwood and Paul Winthrop, two brothers, tall, well-built, and handsome. The face of each was browned by exposure, and showed the perfect health that only a life in the open can give.

Chet and Paul lived with their elder brother Allen at a typical ranch home in Idaho, on one of the numerous branches of the winding Salmon River. The home was a rude but comfortable affair, with several outbuildings close at hand, the whole surrounded by a rude but substantial stockade, a relic of the time when troubles with the Indians were numerous.

It was a warm, sunshiny day in August, and the two boys had been down to the river fishing at a favorite deep hole near the roots of a clump of cottonwood trees. Each had a nice mess of fish strung on a brush branch, showing that their quest of game had not been a vain one.

For three years the three Winthrop boys had lived alone at the ranch home. Their former history was a peculiar one, the particulars of which will be given later. Just now we will follow Chet and Paul to the barn, the door to which stood half open.

"Gone!"

The single word burst from the lips of both simultaneously. It was enough, for it told the whole story. Their two animals, Jasper and Rush, had vanished.

"Thieves, as sure as fate!" ejaculated Paul, gazing rapidly on all sides. "See how the lock has been broken open."

"And they have taken all the extra harness as well," added Chet, his black eyes snapping angrily. "I wonder how long ago this happened."

"There's no telling, Chet. Let's see – we went off about eight o'clock, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"Then the rascals have had nearly four hours in which to do their dirty work. By this time they are probably miles away. This is the worst luck of all."

"You are not going to sit down and suck your thumb, are you, Paul?" questioned the younger brother, quickly.

"Not if we can do anything. But we are tied fast here, – we can't follow on foot, – they knew that when they came to rob us."

"Have you any idea who the thieves can be?"

"Most likely a remnant of that old gang from Jordan Creek. I knew they would spring up again, even after Sol Davids was lynched. Let us take a look around, and see if we can't find some clew to their identity."

"If only Allen would come – "

"Fire off your gun. If he is in hearing that will hasten his movements."

Thus directed, Chet hastened outside, and running to the house, quickly brought forth his double-barreled shotgun. Two reports rent the air a second later, and then the youth returned with the still smoking firearm to the barn.

"Have you found anything?" he asked.

"Here is a strap that doesn't belong to our outfit," replied Paul. "But it's only a common affair that might belong to any one."

"And here is a silver cross!" cried Chet, as he sprang forward to pick up the object.

The article which Chet had found embedded in the dirt flooring of the barn was really of silver, but so unpolished that it did not shine. It was not over an inch in length and height, with a round hole directly in the center. At the four corners of the cross were the letters D A F G.

"What do you make of it?" asked Paul, impatiently, as he bent over to examine the object as it lay in his younger brother's palm.

"Nothing. It's a silver cross with letters on it; that's all. I never saw one like it before."

"Is there no name on the back?"

Quickly the cross was turned over. There, dug into the metal, as if with a jackknife, were the letters S. M.

"S. M.," said Chet, slowly. "Who can they stand for?"

"Sam somebody, I suppose," replied Paul. "I reckon there are a good many folks in Idaho with the initials S. M."

"That is true, too, but it's not likely many of them are mean enough to turn horse thieves."

Chet surveyed the cross for a few seconds longer. Then he rammed it into his pocket and went on with the search, and Paul followed suit.

But their further efforts remained unrewarded. Not another thing of value was brought to light.

They were on the point of giving up when a clatter of hoofs was heard outside on the rocks leading from the trail back to the willows and cottonwoods.

"There is Allen now!" cried Paul, joyfully. "Hi, Allen! This way, quick!" he added, elevating his voice.

"All right, Paul, my boy!" came in a cheery voice from the elder of the Winthrops, as he dashed up on his faithful mare. "What's wanted?"

"The horses have been stolen!"

"Phew!" It was a low and significant whistle that Allen Winthrop emitted, and the pleasant look on his fine features gave way to one of deep concern.

"Stolen!" he said at last. "When? By whom?"

"We don't know," replied Paul. "We just got back from the river a few minutes ago and found the barn door broken open and both horses gone."

"And no clew?"

"We found this."

Allen Winthrop caught up the silver cross quickly and gazed at it for the fraction of a minute. Then he muttered something under his breath.

"Did you ever see this cross before?" asked Paul.

"No, but I have heard father tell of it," was the answer. "It is the cross the old Sol Davids gang used to wear. Do you see those letters – D A F G? They stand for 'Dare All For Gold.' That was the gang's motto, and they never hesitated to carry it out."

"Then we were right in thinking that the horse thieves might be some left-overs from the old gang," observed Paul.

"Yes they are most likely of the same old crowd," said Allen. "The hanging of old Sol did not drive them out of this district."

"But what of the initials S. M.?" asked Chet. "I never heard of any horse thief that those would fit."

"We'll find out about that when we run the thieves down," said Allen. "You say you discovered the robbery but a short while since?"

"Less than a quarter of an hour ago."

"Have you been up to the house?"

"I went for my gun," began Chet. "I wonder if it were possible – " he commenced, and then meeting his older brother's eyes stopped short. Not one of the trio said more just then. All made a wild dash from the barn to the house. They burst into the living room of the latter like a cyclone.

"It looks all right," began Paul.

"But it isn't all right," burst out Chet. "See the side window has been forced open!"

Allen said nothing, having passed into one of the sleeping rooms. He began to rummage around the apartment, into the closet and the trunks.

"By gracious!" he burst out presently.

"What's up?" questioned his two brothers in a breath.

"It's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, every dollar is gone!" groaned Allen.

He referred to three bags which had contained silver and gold to the amount of seven hundred dollars – the Winthrop savings for several years.

Paul and Chet gave a groan. Something like a lump arose in the throat of the younger youth, but he cleared it away with a cough.

"The mean, contemptible scoundrels!" burst out Paul. "We must get after them somehow!"

"I'll go after them," replied Allen, with swift determination. "Give me my rifle. I already have my pistol."

"You are not going alone, are you?" demanded Paul.

"I'll have to. There is only my mare to be had."

"It's foolhardy, Allen," urged Chet. "What could one fellow do against two or more? They would knock you over at the first chance."

"I won't give them the first chance," grimly replied Allen, as he ran for his rifle. "As they used to say when father was young, I'll shoot first and talk afterward."

"Can't two of us ride on the mare?" asked Paul. "I am not so very heavy."

The older brother shook his head.

"It can't be done, Paul; not with her all tired out after her morning's jaunt. No, I'll go alone. Perhaps the trail will lead past some other ranch and then I'll call on the neighbors for help."

"Can you follow the trail?"

"I reckon I can; leastwise I can try. I won't lose it unless they take to the rocks and leave the river entirely, and it ain't likely they'll do that."

Chet and Paul shook their heads. To them it seemed dangerous, and so it was. But it was no use arguing with Allen when he had once made up his mind, so they let him have his own way.

Three minutes later Allen was off on the trail of the horse thieves.

CHAPTER II.

Allen on the Trail

Although Allen Winthrop was but a young man in years, yet the fact that he had had the care of the family on his shoulders since the death of his parents had tended to make him older in experience and give him the courage to face whatever arose before him in the path of duty.

He was four years older than Chet and two years the senior of Paul, and the others had always looked upon him as a guiding spirit in all undertakings.

Consequently but little was said by way of opposition when Allen determined to go after the thieves alone, but nevertheless the hearts of both the younger brothers were filled with anxiety when they saw Allen disappear on the back of his mare up the trail that led to the southwest.

"It's too bad that we can't accompany him," was the way Chet expressed himself. "I'd give all I possess for a good horse just now."

"All you possess isn't much, seeing we've all been cleaned out," replied Paul, with a trace of grim humor he did not really feel. "But I, too, wish I had a horse and could go along."

"Still, somebody ought to stay on the ranch," went on Chet, "we might have more unprofitable visitors."

"It's not likely that the gang will dare to show themselves in this vicinity again in a hurry. Like as not they'll steer for Deadwood, sell the horses, and then spend their ill-gotten gains around the gambling saloons. That is their usual style. They can't content themselves in the mountains or on the plains as long as they have the dust in their pockets."

After Allen had disappeared the two boys locked up the barn as well as was possible, using a wooden pin in lieu of the padlock that had been forced asunder, and then went back to the house. Chet brought in the string of fish and threw them in a big tin basin.

"I suppose I might as well fry a couple of these," he observed; "though, to tell the truth, I am not a bit hungry."

"I, too, have lost my appetite," replied Paul. "But we must eat, and dinner will help pass away the time. I reckon there is no telling when Allen will be back."

"No. I don't care much, if he only keeps from getting into serious trouble."

In the meantime Allen had passed down the trail until the buildings of the ranch were left far behind. He knew the way well, and had no difficulty in finding the tracks – new ones – made by the hoofs of four horses.

"As long as they remain as fresh as they are now it will be easy enough to follow them," was the mental conclusion which he reached, as he urged forward his tired mare in a way that showed his fondness for the animal and his disinclination to make her do more than could fairly be expected.

The belt of cottonwood was soon passed, and Allen emerged upon the bank of a small brook which flowed into the river at a point nearly half a mile further on.

He examined the wet bank of the brook minutely and came to the conclusion that here the horse thieves had stopped the animals for a drink.

"I imagine they came a long distance to get here," he thought, "and that means they will go a long way before they settle down for the night. Heigh-ho! I have a long and difficult search before me."

The brook had been forded, and Allen crossed over likewise, and five minutes later reached a bit of rolling land dotted here and there with sage and other brush.

Allen wondered if the trail would lead to Gold Fork, as the little mining town at the foot of the mountains was called.

"If they went that way I will have no trouble in getting help to run them down," he said to himself. "I can get Ike Watson and Mat Prigley, who will go willingly, and there is no better man to take hold of this sort of thing than Ike Watson."

Mile after mile was passed, and the trail remained as plain as before.

"It looks as if they didn't anticipate being followed," was the way Allen figured it, but he soon found out his mistake, when, on coming around a rocky spur of ground, the trail suddenly vanished.

The young ranchman came to a halt in some dismay, and a look of perplexity quickly stole over his face. He looked to the right and the left, and ahead, but all to no purpose. The trail was gone.

"Here's a state of things," he murmured as he continued to gaze around. "Where in the land of goodness has it gone to? They couldn't have taken wings and flown away."

Allen spent all of a quarter of an hour on the rocky spur. Then on a venture he moved forward over the bare rocks, feeling pretty certain that it was the only way they could have gone without leaving tracks behind them.

He calculated that he had traveled nearly ten miles. His mare showed signs of being tired, and he spoke to her more kindly than ever.

"It won't do, Lilly," he said, patting her soft neck affectionately. "We have got to get through somehow or other. You must brace up and when it is all over you can take the best kind of a long resting spell."

And the faithful animal laid back her ears and appeared to understand every word he said to her. She was a most knowing creature, and Allen would have gone wild had she been one of those stolen.

The barren, rocky way lasted for upward of half a mile, and came to an end in a slight decline covered with rich grass and more brush. Allen looked about him eagerly.

"Hurrah! there is the trail, true enough!" he cried, as the well understood marks in the growth beneath his feet met his gaze. "That was a lucky chance I took. On, Lilly, and we'll have Jasper and Rush back before nightfall, or know the reason why."

Away flew the mare once more over the plain that stretched before her for several miles. Beyond were the mountains, covered with a purplish haze.

The vicinity of the mountains was gained at last, and now, more than tired, the mare dropped into a walk as the first upward slope was struck.

Hardly had she done so than Allen saw something that made his heart jump. It was a man, and he was riding Chet's horse!

CHAPTER III. A Dangerous Situation

It was not possible for Allen Winthrop to make any mistake regarding the animal the man on the mountain trail was riding. Too often had he ridden on Rush's back, and too well did he know the sturdy little horse's characteristics.

But the man was a stranger to the young ranchman, and he could not even remember having seen the rascal's face before.

"Stop!" called out Allen, as he struck Lilly to urge her on. "Stop! Do you hear me?"

The man caught the words and wheeled about quickly. He was evidently much disturbed by the encounter. He had been looking ahead, and had known nothing of Allen's approach.

"Stop, do you hear?" repeated Allen.

"Wot do yer want?" was the surly response, but the speaker did not draw rein in the least.

"I want you to stop!" exclaimed Allen, growing excited. "That horse belongs to my brother!"

"Reckon you air mistaken, stranger," was the cool reply. "This air hoss is mine."

This unexpected reply staggered Allen. He had expected the man to either show fight or take to his heels. It was plainly evident that the fellow intended, if possible, to bluff him off.

"Your horse? Not much! Whoa, Rush, old boy!"

Commanded by that familiar tongue, the horse came to a halt that was so sudden it nearly pitched the rider out of his saddle. He muttered something under his breath, straightened up and gave the reins a vicious yank that made Rush rear up in resentment.

"See here, youngster, keep your parley to yourself!" howled the man, scowling at Allen.

"I will – after you get down and turn that nag over to me," rejoined Allen, as coolly as he could, although he was in an exceedingly high state of suppressed excitement.

"And whyfore should I turn him over to you, seein' as how he belongs to me?" growled the man, as brazenly as he could.

"You stole that horse from our barn not four hours ago," retorted Allen. "I will waste no more words with you. Get down or take the consequences."

As he concluded the youth unslung his rifle in a suggestive manner. He had lived out in those wilds long enough to know that to trifle in such a case as this would be sheer foolishness.

"You're a hot-headed youngster, tew say the least," was the reply, and as he spoke the man scowled more viciously than ever. The sight of the ready rifle in Allen's hands was not at all to his liking. He made a movement toward his pistols, but a second glance at the youth made him change his mind.

"I said I would waste no more words with you," repeated Allen. "Get down!"

"But see here, youngster – "

"Get down!" And up came the rifle in a motion that caused the man to start back in terror.

"There must be a mistake somewhar," he said, slowly, as soon as he could recover. "My pard turned this critter over to me, and I reckoned it war all right."

"There is where you reckoned wrong. Are you going to get down now or not?"

"Supposin' we talk it over with my pard first? Thar he is now."

The man pointed to the trail behind Allen. His manner was so natural that for the instant the young ranchman was deceived. He looked about.

With a dash and a clatter the horse thief urged Rush on, digging his spurs deep into the little horse's flesh. As he did so he dropped partly under the horse's neck, thus to shield himself from a chance shot, should it be taken.

But, although astonished and angered at being so easily duped, Allen did not fire. Rush was moving along over the rocks too rapidly for him to take the risk of killing his brother's favorite beast. Besides, only a small portion of the rider could be seen at one time.

"I'll follow him until I get a better chance," he thought, and he cried to Lilly to follow in pursuit.

Once again the gallant mare responded, although she was now thoroughly jaded. Up the rocks they went, and around numerous bends, the clatter ahead telling plainly that the race was about even for pursued and pursuer.

"I must be on my guard or that fellow may play me foul," thought Allen. "He looks like a most desperate character, and he knows well enough what capture by the law-abiding folks of this State means. They would lynch him in a minute."

Allen wondered what had become of the other thieves and the horse Jasper. Surely they could not be far away.

"Perhaps that fellow is trying to reach the others, who may have gone on ahead," he speculated mentally. "If he reaches them it will be so much the worse for me, for I can never fight two or more among these rocks and bushes. On Lilly. We must run him down at once!"

But the little mare could be urged no longer. She had reached her limit, and went forward with a doggedness that was pitiful to behold.

In five minutes Allen heard the clatter ahead drawing away from him. Soon it ceased entirely.

But he did not give up. It was not in his nature to surrender a cause so long as one spark of hope of success remained.

The mountain trail now led downward for a few hundred yards, and then wound through a rocky pass, dark and forbidding. Allen kept watch on either side for a possible ambush, but none presented itself.

"He has gone on, that is certain," he thought. "I rather guess he thinks to tire me out, knowing the condition my mare is in; but if he thinks that he is mistaken. I'll follow, if I have to do it on foot."

At last the trail left the rocky pass and came out upon some shelving rocks overlooking a deep canyon, at the bottom of which sparkled the swift-running stream. Here a rude bridge led to the other side, a bridge composed of slender trees and rough-hewn planks.

Without hesitation, Allen rode upon the bridge. As he did so a derisive laugh resounded from the other side of the canyon, and he saw the man he was after and two others ride into view.

Then, before he could turn back, Allen felt the bridge sagging beneath him. Suddenly it parted in the center, and horse and youth went plunging headlong toward the waters far beneath.

CHAPTER IV.

The Man in the Sink Hole

We will now return to the ranch and see how Chet and Paul were faring during their elder brother's absence.

Chet took the string of fish, and selecting two, began to clean them. He was used to the work, and did it with a dexterity and quickness that could not have been excelled. Ever since his mother had died it had fallen upon Chet's young shoulders to do the culinary work about the ranch home.

While Chet was thus engaged Paul busied himself in looking over the shotguns, cleaning and oiling them and then loading up.

The fish cooked, Chet set the table, putting on three plates, although he himself was almost certain Allen would not come back in time for the meal.

"It's queer, I've been thinking," remarked Paul, during the progress of the meal, "Allen said nothing about the result of his morning trip."

"He was too excited over the theft of the horses to think of anything else, I reckon," was the reply Chet made. "It was enough to upset any one's mind."

"At least he might have said if he had heard from Uncle Barnaby," grumbled Paul. "More particularly, as we were just dying to know."

"I imagine if he had heard he would have said so and left us the letter, Paul. Allen knows as well as you or I how anxious we really were."

"It's queer the way Uncle Barnaby disappeared," mused Paul, as he mashed the potatoes on his plate with a fork. "One would not think a man could go to San Francisco and disappear forever."

"He might if he went to Chinatown and got sandbagged or something like that."

"Oh, you don't really think such a thing would happen?"

"It might. Uncle was a great hand to see the sights, and also to make a show of his money, and the Chinese in San Francisco are, many of them, a bloodthirsty set."

"Do you really believe he discovered the rich mine he talked about?"

"He discovered something, that is certain. And he had faith enough in it to go to San Francisco in the hope of starting a company to develop the claim."

It was in this strain that the two boys talked on until long after the meal was finished, and while they are conversing let us take a brief glance at their former history.

As I have said, the three brothers were orphans, their parents having died several years before.

The ranch had belonged to their father, who had willed it to his three sons equally, and as none of them were yet of age, he had appointed his brother, Barnaby, his executor.

Barnaby Winthrop was an old prospector, who had spent a life among the hills, prospecting for gold and silver. As has been said, he was a peculiar man, but warm and generous hearted to the last degree.

As there was really little to do at the ranch but look after the cattle, the uncle had left the place in charge of the three boys and continued month in and month out ranging over the hills and among the mountains in search of the precious metal which lay hidden beneath the surface.

One day Uncle Barnaby had staggered into the house, weak and hungry. He had made a perilous trip up to a point theretofore considered unattainable. He announced that he had at last struck a mining spot that if properly worked would prove a bonanza. He refused to state the exact location and announced his intention of going at once to San Francisco to organize a company to open up a mine.

He started apparently in the best of health, and although he had been gone now a number of months, and they had been anxiously awaiting his reappearance, they had seen or heard nothing of him.

During this period the boys had had considerable trouble at home, which had occupied their attention. At the start some of the cattle had gone astray, and it had taken a ten days' hunt over the long range to find them. Then had come Captain Hank Grady, who had sought in various ways to get possession of the ranch, stating that their father had borrowed money from him and that it had not been paid back. The captain was known to be both mean and unscrupulous, and all of the boys doubted very much if he spoke the truth. But they had expected much more trouble from him before the end was reached, and they were destined not to be disappointed. Captain Grady knew the value of the ranch, even if the boys did not, and he meant to gain possession of it, if not by fair means, then by foul.

"We'll have to take a look for the cattle this afternoon," said Paul, some time after the conversation concerning Uncle Barnaby came to a close. "We don't want any of them to get in the sink hole again."

"That's so; we'll start at once, and we'll see to it that we lock up good," laughed Chet. "No more thieves wanted."

The house was soon tidied up, and then, after closing up everything well and setting an alarm to scare away any newcomer, Chet and Paul set out on foot over the rolling land which led from the river.

Half a mile beyond the rolling land was a nasty bit of spongy soil known as the sink hole. Not unfrequently the cattle would stray in this direction and more than one had sunk to death in the mire.

"Some cattle around there now!" cried Paul, as they drew close to the spot. "It's lucky we came this way."

"Go to the westward of them," said Chet. "We can drive them – " Chet broke off short, for just then a piercing cry rang in their ears:

"Help! help! For the sake of heaven, help!"

Chet and Paul were thrilled to the heart to hear that wild, agonizing cry for assistance which rang out so clearly on the afternoon air. Plainly a human being was in distress, and needed immediate assistance.

They looked around, but for several seconds saw nothing. Then the cry rang out again, more sharply, more pitifully than ever.

"Help! help! Save me from death!"

"Do you see him?" demanded Paul, breathlessly.

"No, I do not," rejoined Chet. "But he must be near. Did not the cry come from over there?" pointing with his finger to the right.

"I believe it did. Come on!"

Paul set off on a run around the edge of the sink hole, which was all of several hundred feet in diameter. Close behind him came Chet, wondering who the man could be and how they might assist him should he be beyond their reach.

Two dozen steps brought them in sight of the sufferer. He was a young man and his general dress and appearance betokened that he was a stranger in those parts, and, in fact, a stranger to the wilds; a city fellow, born and bred.

"Save me! Help!" cried the man for a third time. He was up to his middle in the spongy soil and sinking rapidly.

"Keep up your courage; we will assist you!" shouted Paul in return.

"Thank God, somebody has heard my cry!" murmured the man, gratefully. "You must be quick; I am sinking rapidly," he continued aloud.

"Have you anything in the shape of a rope with you?" asked Paul of Chet.

"I have not."

This was a sad predicament, as the man was all of three yards from solid ground. How to get to him was a question. But it was solved by Chet, as he brought a bit of stout cord from his pocket.

"Tie the two stocks of the guns together," he said. "This way; let me show you."

He held the two stocks side by side, so that they overlapped each other about eight or ten inches. The cord was hastily wound about them and tied, and it was Chet who thrust one of the gun barrels toward the sinking man, while he firmly grasped the other.

"Catch hold," he said. "Paul, help me land him."

The man caught the end of the gun and Paul took hold of Chet's hand. Two efforts were made, the first time the man letting the gun slip and sinking deeper than ever. But the second effort was successful, and, panting from his unusual exertion, the man reached the solid ground and fell exhausted.

CHAPTER V. Good Cause for Alarm

It was several minutes before the man who had been rescued from the sink hole could sit up and talk. His hat was gone, and with a dirty face and tangled, muddy hair, he presented a sorry spectacle.

"I'm very thankful to you for what you have done," were his first words, accompanied by a look that told plainly he felt what he said. "I thought I was at the end of my string sure, as they say in these parts."

"I allow that's a bad hole to get into," returned Chet. "I wouldn't want to get into it myself."

"And may I ask to whom am I indebted for my life?" continued the man.

"My name is Chetwood Winthrop, and this is my brother Paul."

"I am exceedingly glad to know you, boys. My name is Noel Urner, and I am from New York. I am a stranger in Idaho, and I know nothing of such treacherous places as this – at least I did not know of them until a short while ago." And the man shuddered as the memory of his fearful experience flashed over him.

"It's one of the unpleasant things of the country," responded Paul, with a little laugh. "But how came you in it?" with a glance down at the spurs on the man's boots.

"I see you are looking at my spurs. Yes, I had a horse, but he is gone now."

"Gone! In the sink hole?" ejaculated Chet.

"No; he was stolen from me."

"Stolen!" Both boys uttered the word simultaneously.

"Yes. I was riding along when I came to a spot where I saw some flora which particularly interested me, for I am a botanist, although for pleasure only. I dismounted and tied my horse to a tree and climbed up to secure the specimens which were on a shelf of rock some thirty feet over my head. Soon I heard a clatter of horses' hoofs as they passed along the road. I came down with my specimens to see who the riders were, but they had already passed on, taking my horse with them."

"The horse thieves!" cried Chet.

And he told the man of the raid made on the ranch and how Allen had gone off in pursuit of the thieves. The reader can well imagine with what interest Noel Urner listened to the tale.

"One would not believe it possible!" he exclaimed, when Chet had wound up by saying he wished Allen would lay every one of the rascals low. "I fancied horse thievery was a thing only permitted in the wildest portions of the territories."

"There are horse thieves everywhere," said Paul. "Every one living for a hundred miles around has suffered during the past ten years. Sometimes we think them wiped out, and then, all of a sudden they start up again."

"Well, I trust your brother gets your horses back," said Noel Urner. "It's a pity he won't know enough to take mine away from the thieves, too!"

"He'll collar the thieves and all they have, if he gets half a chance, you can depend on that," said Chet. "But won't you come to our ranch with us? You can clean up there and have something to eat if you are hungry."

"Thank you, I will go gladly. Possibly you can sell me a headgear of some sort too."

"We can fit you out all right enough, sir."

It did not take the boys long to chase the cattle away from the sink hole, and this accomplished, they set off for the ranch with Noel Urner between them.

They found the young man an exceedingly bright and pleasant chap. He said he had come west two months before and had been spending over a month in San Francisco.

"I came out at the invitation of an old prospector," he said. "We were to meet in San Francisco, but when I arrived there I could not find my man. He belongs somewhere in this neighborhood. His name is Barnaby Winthrop. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Heard of him!" cried Chet.

"He is our uncle!" added Paul.

"Your uncle!" And now it was Noel Urner's turn to be surprised.

"Yes, our uncle, and he has been missing for several months," continued Paul. "Oh, tell us what you know of him at once, for we are dying to know!"

"The Barnaby Winthrop I mean had an undeveloped gold and silver mine he wished to open up."

"It was our uncle, beyond the shadow of a doubt," said Chet. "Our name is Winthrop, and Uncle Barnaby is our guardian. We can prove it to you by the papers, if you wish."

"I am willing to take your word, boys. But, you understand, one must be careful about speaking of mines in this section; at least I have been told so."

"Yes, we know about that," returned Paul. "Many a man has lost the chance of his life by advertising his knowledge too broadly. Others would gain a clew of a mine, hunt it up, and put in a claim before the original discoverer knew what was up."

"Exactly, and that is why I was slow in saying anything. But when you ask me to tell you about your uncle, I am sorry to say I know but very little, although I suspect much, now you say he has been missing so long."

By this time the little party had reached the ranch house. They went inside, and despite the fact that the boys were impatient to hear what Noel Urner might have to say, they gave the young man time to wash up and make himself otherwise presentable, Chet in the meanwhile frying another fish and preparing a pot of coffee.

"This is just what I wished, and no mistake," said Noel Urner, as he set to with a hearty good will. "But I am sure you are impatient to learn something of your uncle, so I will not keep you waiting. To make my story plain, I will have to tell you something of myself also."

"In the first place I am a broker and speculator from New York city. I make a specialty of mining stocks, and own shares myself in half a dozen mines."

"About ten weeks or so ago I heard through a friend in San Francisco that Barnaby Winthrop was trying to form a company to develop a new strike in this vicinity. I wrote to him and he sent word back that if I would come on he would prove to me that he had a big thing, well worth looking into."

"I had other business west, and so at once started for San Francisco. Your uncle had given his address as the Golden Nugget House, a place I afterward learned was frequented by old-time miners and prospectors."

"I made inquiries at the Nugget House for your uncle, and to my astonishment learned that he had disappeared very mysteriously one night, leaving no trace behind him."

"What!" cried Paul, springing to his feet, and Chet was too astonished to speak.

"I do not wonder that you are astonished. Yes, he had disappeared, leaving his valise and overcoat behind him."

"I thought the matter so queer that I was on the point of notifying the police. But on calling at the post office for letters I received one from him stating that he was sorry, but he had come back to the place in question and found it not what he had anticipated, so he wouldn't bother me any more."

"I don't believe he came back!" ejaculated Chet. "If he had he would have stopped at the ranch."

"I agree with you."

"Have you that letter?" asked Paul, his voice trembling with excitement.

"I have."

"I would like to see it, please."

"Certainly." And Noel Urner brought forth a large flat pocketbook from which he extracted the communication in question.

Paul took it to the light and examined it closely.

"This is a forgery! Uncle Barnaby never wrote it."

"Let me see, Paul," ejaculated Chet.

He also examined the letter with as much care as his brother had displayed. There was not the slightest doubt of it. The letter was not genuine.

"It's certainly a bad state of affairs," said Noel Urner. "It makes the disappearance of your uncle look decidedly bad."

"It looks like foul play!" cried Paul. "Why should Uncle Barnaby leave the hotel in that fashion if all was perfectly straight?"

"It's like as not some mining town rascals got hold of his secret and then put him out of the way, so that they might profit by it," said Chet. "There are plenty of fellows mean enough for that."

"At first I was satisfied by the receipt of the letter," continued Noel Urner. "But the more I thought over the matter the more I became convinced that something was wrong; but in a different way from what you think. I imagined your uncle had found other speculators to go in with him and they had persuaded him to cut me off. That is why I started off, after settling my other business in California, to find your uncle and learn the truth. I was willing to lose a few weeks' time out here looking around, even if it didn't pay."

"We are very glad you came and that we found you," answered Paul. "I am sorry for only one thing, that Allen is not here to meet you."

"I am in no hurry to continue my journey; indeed, I do not see how I can without a horse. If you wish I will remain here until your brother returns."

"You are right welcome to do that," cried Chet. "As for not having a horse, you are no worse off than ourselves, for we are without an animal of any kind, outside of the cattle."

"Then, being equally bad off, we ought to make good friends," smiled Noel Urner. "I shall like staying on a ranch for a few days first rate, and you can rely on my giving you all the assistance in my power when it comes to finding out the fate of your uncle."

"We can't do anything until Allen returns," sighed Paul.

"Then we will hope that your brother returns speedily, and with good news."

"The best news will be his return with all our horses," returned Chet. "We can do nothing without our animals."

Alas! How little did both Chet and Paul dream of the terrible ordeal through which Allen was at that moment passing!

CHAPTER VI.

From One Peril to Another

"I am lost! Nothing can save me!"

Such was the agonizing thought which rushed into Allen Winthrop's mind as he felt himself plunging madly downward to the glittering waters far beneath him.

It must be confessed that the otherwise brave young ranchman was fearfully frightened at the dreadful peril which confronted him. He and his faithful mare were going down, and certain death seemed inevitable.

"Heaven help me!" he murmured to himself, and shutting his teeth hard, clung grimly to the saddle.

Out of the sunlight into the gloom and mist below descended horse and rider.

Scarcely two seconds passed and then, with a resounding splash, the animal and its living burden disappeared beneath the surface of the river and out of the sight of the rascals on the opposite side of the canyon.

"That settles him," cried one of the horse thieves, grimly. "He was a fool to follow us."

"Maybe he'll escape," ventured a second.

"Wot! Arfter sech a plunge?" returned the first speaker, sarcastically. "Wall, hardly, ter my reckonin'."

They shifted their positions on the brink of the opening, but try their best, could see nothing more of the young man or the mare.

It was now growing darker rapidly, and fifteen minutes later, satisfied that Allen had really taken a fall to his death, they continued on their way.

And poor Allen?

Down, down, down sank the mare and her hapless rider, until the very bottom of the river was struck.

The swiftly flowing tide caught both in its grasp, tumbled them over and over and sent them spinning onward. Allen's grasp on the saddle relaxed, and as it did so the young man lost consciousness.

How long he remained in this state Allen never knew. When he came to he was lying among brush, partly in the water and partly out.

He attempted to sit up and in doing so, slipped back beyond his depth. But the instinct of self-preservation still remained with him, and he made a frantic clutch at the brush and succeeded in pulling himself high and dry upon a grassy bank.

Here he lay for several minutes exhausted. He could not think, for his head felt as if it was swimming around in a balloon.

At last he began to come to himself and after a bit sat up to gaze about him. But all was dark and he could see little or nothing.

He remembered the great plunge he had taken and wondered what had become of Lilly. He called her with all the strength of his enfeebled lungs, but received no response.

"She must have been killed," he thought. "Poor Lilly! But had it not been for the protection her body gave me it is more than likely that my life would have been ended, too!" and he shuddered to think of his narrow escape.

It was nearly half an hour before Allen felt strong enough to rise up. His head felt light, and for a while he staggered like an intoxicated man.

He knew he was down in the canyon, and some distance below where the bridge had been. He wondered how he could ascend to the top of the rocks which presented themselves on the two sides.

"I can't climb up in this darkness," he said half aloud. "I might slip and break my neck. I had better walk along and hunt for some natural upward slope."

He started off along the river side, the top of the canyon towering nearly a hundred feet above his head as he proceeded. The opening gradually grew narrower, and with this the distance between the rocks and the water decreased, until there was hardly room left for Allen to walk.

"I must have made a mistake," was the mental conclusion which he arrived at. "I should have gone up the river instead of down. The chances are that I can't go over a hundred feet further, if as far."

Soon Allen came to a halt. The ground between the wall of the canyon and the water ceased just before him. Beyond the steep and bare rocks ran directly downward into the stream.

"That settles it," he muttered, in great disappointment. "All this traveling for nothing. And it's getting night over head, too! It's a shame!"

Allen paused to rest, for in his weak condition the walk had tired him greatly. Then he started to retrace his steps.

Hardly had he taken a yard's advance, when his left foot slipped upon a round stone. He was thrown over on his side, and before he could save himself went plunging headlong into the stream!

He essayed by every means in his power to regain the bank, but in vain. The current of the river was extra strong at this point – the width of the course having narrowed down – and before he could clutch the first thing he was carried to where nothing but the steep and slippery rocks presented themselves.

Vainly he put out his hands to stay his progress, vainly he tried by every means in his power to obtain some sort of hold on the rocks.

And now the surface of the river grew blacker as the rocks on both sides began, seemingly, to close in over his head.

He was almost tempted to cry out for help, and took a breath for that purpose, but the sound was not uttered. What would be the use? Not a soul would hear him.

On and on went the young ranchman, the waters growing more cold each instant and the prospects more gloomy. He was half tempted to give himself up for lost.

It was an easy matter to keep himself on the surface, for he was really a good swimmer, but now the current was so strong that he could scarcely touch either side of its rocky confines as he was swept along, he knew not where. Allen had never explored this stream, and this to him made the immediate future look blacker than ever.

"If it ends in some sort of a sink hole, I'm a goner sure," he thought. "But I never heard of such a hole up here among the mountains, so I won't give up just yet."

Hardly had the thought occupied his mind when, on looking up, he saw the last trace of evening fade from sight. The river had entered a cavern! He was now underground!

It may well be imagined with what dismay Allen, stout-hearted as he was, viewed the turn of the situation. Here he was being borne swiftly along on an underground river, he knew not where. It was a situation calculated to chill the bravest of hearts.

All was pitch black around and overhead; beneath was the silent and cold water, and the only sound that fell upon his ears was the rushing along of the stream.

As well as he was able, Allen put out his hands before him, to ward off the shock of a sudden contact of any sort, for he did not know but that he might be dashed upon a jagged rock at any instant. Then he prayed earnestly for deliverance.

On and on he swept, the stream several times making turns, first to one side and then to the other. Once his hand came brushing up to a series of rocks, but before he could grasp them he was hurled onward in an awful blackness.

A quarter of an hour went by – a time that to the young man seemed like an age – and during that period he surmised that he must have traveled a mile or more.

Then the current appeared to slacken up, and he had a feeling come over him as if the space overhead had become larger.

"This must be an underground lake," he thought. "Now if I – Ah, bottom!"

His thought came to a sudden termination, for his feet had touched upon a sloping rock but a few feet below the surface of the stream. The rock sloped to his right, and, moving in that direction, Allen, to his great joy, soon emerged upon a stony shore.

He took several cautious steps in as many different directions and felt nothing. He was truly high and dry at last.

This fact was a cheering one, but there was still a dismal enough outlook. Where was he and how would he ever be able to gain the outer world once more?

CHAPTER VII.

The Cave in the Mountain

Allen was too exhausted to do more than move about cautiously. He felt for the edge of the stream, and then moved away from it for several yards.

His hand came in contact with a dried bush and several sticks of wood, all of which had probably floated in at one time on the stream, and these at once made him think of a fire. What a relief a bit of light would be!

In his life on the long range, Allen had found a watertight matchbox very useful. He felt in his pocket and found the article still safe. He opened it with fingers that trembled a little; but the matches were still dry, and in a trice one was struck and lit.

He held the match under some of the driest of the brush, and had the satisfaction of seeing it blaze up. He piled the stuff up, and on top placed several heavy sticks. Soon he had a fire which blazed merrily.

The light illumined the cavern, casting a ruddy glare on the rocks and the rippling water. It was a weird and uncanny scene, and he shivered involuntarily. He would have given a good deal to have been in the outer world once more.

Allen saw that the river had simply widened at the spot, and that a hundred yards further on it flowed into a narrow channel, as before. Only on the side which he occupied was there anything in the shape of a shore. Opposite the rocks stood straight up, and were covered with moss and slime.

"If I am to get out, it must be from this shore upward," Allen thought as he surveyed the situation. "I can never get back on the river. One could never row even a boat against that current."

The shore was not more than thirty or forty feet wide. It was backed up by rocks, but Allen was glad to see that they did not present an unbroken surface. There were numerous fissures, and in one place the opening was a dozen feet in width.

Selecting the brightest of the firebrands Allen, left the vicinity of the stream and started to explore this opening. He was in great hopes that it would lead upward and that he would thus be enabled to climb out of his prison – for to him that damp, dark place was nothing less.

The opening was filled with loose stones, and Allen had to be careful for fear of spraining an ankle, or worse. He moved along slowly, halting every few steps to survey the scene ahead.

Twenty yards distant from the entrance to the fissure Allen came to a turn to the left. Here was a narrow opening just large enough for him to pass through. Beyond was another cavern-like spot not over ten yards in width and height and of interminable length.

Fearful of losing his way, Allen hesitated about advancing. But presently he plucked up courage, and, holding down his firebrand, he allowed it to burn up again and then proceeded along the chamber.

The flooring was uneven and covered with loose rocks and stones. Huge stalactites hung down from overhead, and in several spots the moisture dripped down with weird hollow sounds.

"I would like to know how far underground I really am," was Allen's earnest mental speculation as he came to a halt beside a tiny stream which flowed from one side of the cavern to the other. "If there was only some slope which led upward it would be more encouraging. But it's about as flat as a bit of prairie land."

Allen hopped over the stream, and, assured that he could easily retrace his steps if necessary, continued on his search, his firebrand held over his head.

It was a discouraging journey when the end was reached. Before him arose a solid wall not less than twenty feet in height, at which elevation the cavern appeared to continue. Allen gazed up at the wall with a hopeless look on his face.

"Humph! How in the name of creation am I to climb up there?" he muttered. "It's as steep as the side of a house and twice as slippery. If I can't find some sort of stepping places I reckon I'm beaten and booked to go back to where I started from."

Waving the firebrand to make it burn the brighter, Allen began to scrutinize the face of the wall before him. He started at one end, resolved that not a foot of the surface should escape him.

He had traveled along some fifteen feet when he came to something that made him start back in astonishment.

"Great Caesar!"

Before him were a number of letters, cut in smooth rock, which was apparently quite soft. The letters read:

Barnaby Winthrop's Mine.

Allen stared at the letters on the rock as if he had not spelled out the words aright. But there was no mistake. They really read "Barnaby Winthrop's Mine."

"Well, if this isn't the most wonderful discovery ever made!" ejaculated the young man, finally. "So this is the place that Uncle Barnaby talked of as being the richest claim in Idaho. I wonder how he ever found it?"

While Allen stood close to the rocky wall he reached the conclusion that his uncle must have come there by the river, but whether a voluntary or involuntary passenger he could not decide. He knew Uncle Barnaby was exceedingly fearless, but was there any human being who would take the awful risk of a journey on that underground river, not knowing to where it led?

"He must have been caught, just as I was," said Allen to himself, at last. "And that being so, the question is, how did he manage, after he was once here, to get *out*?"

While Allen was debating this question he cast his eyes about for some means of scaling the wall. He walked along its face until the very end was reached, and there, to his joy, discovered a dozen rudely cut niches, some of them were close together and others nearly a yard apart, but, with the end of the firebrand between his teeth, he had no great difficulty in pulling himself up to the level of the flooring of the cavern above.

Allen now found himself in an opening not over fifty yards square. The roofing was hardly out of reach, and the young man saw at a glance that the quartz rock was full of virgin gold and silver. It was a veritable bonanza.

"A million dollars or more!" he cried, enthusiastically. "Uncle Barnaby struck it rich for once. I wonder why he don't come back and begin operations. It's queer I didn't get word from him."

Allen could not help but spend some time in looking around, so fascinating was the sight of the precious metal as it shimmered here and there in the ruddy glare of the torch. His uncle would be rich indeed, and he knew that he and his brothers would not be forgotten by their generous guardian.

But soon the thought of escape came back to him. Was there an opening to the outer world, or was he entombed alive?

At the far end of the chamber, after a long search, Allen came to a narrow passageway, which he was compelled to enter on hands and knees. It led upward and he had great hopes that ere long he would emerge into the outer air once more.

But he was doomed to disappointment. The passageway led around numerous curves, and long before the end was reached his torch went out, and he was left in total darkness. He crawled on and on, until finally he brought up against a solid wall.

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