

MINNIE'S DOWRY.

"No, mister, no, I won't go back from my word. The gir' fancies you, and you did me a good turn onst, I own that; and Jonathan Fairlop's not the man to forget how, but for you, his scalp would be swinging on the lodge-pole of some pesky Indian's wigwam. But there air two sides, Britisher, to a bargain, and I've the right, I guess, to tack a condition to what you call my consent. I'll not see Minnie married to a beggar; no, nor yet deal onfairly with my other children, that I may provide for her start in life. This I say, and this, Frank Meade, I'll hold to. If you kin clap down twenty thousand dollars on that table, say a year hence, day for day, I'll double them, and you and Minnie shall be man and wife. But if not, why, neighbour, you'll just consider the swap has fallen through, and make way for those that kin maintain a household in a kinder different fashion from what you could contrive at Burnt Flat, I reckon." And the obstinate old farmer brought down his heavy hand, with a sounding slap, on the massive table of black walnut wood, and stared me in the face with somewhat of the dull, half-menacing expression which we note in the eyes of an angry bull. He was one of those dogged, self-willed men who pride themselves on a cast-iron consistency of purpose, and well I knew that even poor Minnie's tearful gaze and beseeching look, far less any remonstrance of mine, would have no effect in modifying his resolution.

It was with a heavy heart that I rode back to my poor little farm at Burnt Flat, and a sigh, in which envy had no share, escaped me as I involuntarily contrasted my few maize fields and sparsely stocked yard with the well-stored pens and corrals crowded with cattle and horses, of the opulent neighbour, for the hand of whose youngest daughter I was a suitor. I was perfectly well aware of Mr. Fairlop's covert meaning, when he had hinted at my making way for another and a wealthier admirer of Minnie's. She had attracted, unfortunately, the notice of a middle-aged speculator in mining property, one Mr. Lloyd, a native of Pennsylvania I believe, but a resident in the little town of Pueblo, not far from the Goochatope Pass over the Rocky Mountains, on the south-western slope of which stood my own humble dwelling, and the much roomier house of Minnie's father. Old Jonathan Fairlop was a not unusual type of the Western borderer. He had come from Kentucky, as he boasted, a poor man, and after a struggling career on the frontier, during which his wife and only son had been murdered by the Indians, had become rich by the gainful traffic in hogs and horned beasts, great quantities of which he reared for the supply of the hungry miners of Pike's Peak. The service of which Mr. Fairlop spoke had simply been that chance had placed it in my power to save his life in a border raid when a roving band of the Blackfeet had swooped upon a wagon convoy west of the mountains. There was hard fighting, and the old farmer, who was unhorsed and prostrate, with a brace of tomahawks brandished above his defenceless head, had given himself up for lost, when three shots from my six-chambered revolver had turned the scale. In the first warmth of his gratitude Mr. Fairlop had readily agreed to regard me as his future son-in-law.

Gratitude, I am sorry to say, has a tendency to grow cool after a time, and just then, while everything had prospered with the wealthy American settler, a steady and consistent run of ill-luck threatened to overwhelm his English neighbour. My cattle strayed; a promising crop of young wheat and another of maize were devoured by the locusts from the alkaline deserts to the westward; of ninety choice merino sheep procured at much cost from the Atlantic seaboard, two-thirds were, through the carelessness of their mulatto shepherd, drowned by a freshet of the river near which they grazed. As a crowning calamity, a marauding party of the Crow tribe carried off my horses, on the sale of which I had in great measure relied for the means of extending my narrow domains, and I found myself an impoverished man, in spite of hard work and much self-denial, poorer by far than on the day when, with fifteen hundred pounds, my poor grandmother's legacy, in my pocket, I had landed on the quays of New York to exchange the position of a briefless barrister, with chambers in Harecourt Temple, for that of a farmer among the thinly-peopled regions of the Far West.

The misfortunes which had befallen me were simply such as are habitual to the pioneers of civilization, in the half-tamed lands that lie near the spurs of the gigantic mountain barrier that intersects North America, but I had had, as my neighbours in general were not slow to acknowledge, "a bad time" of it, in coming in for nearly every mishap, short of being scalped or having the roof tree burned over my head, frequent on the frontier. The rough, hardy fellows really sympathized with the young Britisher, knowing as they did that I had done my best, by thrift and toil, to earn a competence by every method known to Western agriculture. Mr. Fairlop, however, who had from the first derided my efforts as an improver, now proved himself a true Job's comforter in the hour of adversity. "Stick to hog and horn," he would say; "a good head of cattle and lots of live pork, with corn-cobs enough to put flesh on the beasts, are worth all your new-fangled nonsense ten times over, my chap. Your wheat, and your vines, and your soft-wools, might be all very well in California, but rough-and-ready is the watchword here, as you'll learn to your cost, I expect." And he favoured the suit of Hiram Lloyd, although Minnie could never be brought to regard otherwise than with repugnance the shifty eyes, hooked nose, and grizzled locks of the well-to-do pretender to her hand. Minnie was herself a gentle girl, voted on all hands to be unusually pretty, even for the wild West, where good looks are by no means a rarity, but neither so robust in health nor so resolute in disposition as were her two sisters, either of whom could back an unbroken horse, handle a rifle, or enforce discipline among a legion of semi-savage swine, with any maidens on the frontier. They were wont jestingly to declare that Minnie was a "city lady," and ought to have been reared in New York, not in the midst of the rugged freedom and coarse plenty of the Indian border.

That Minnie loved me I was well aware. Her own dear lips had shyly whispered the assurance of her affection over and over again, in answer to a lover's coaxing persistency; and, apart from that timid confession, I should have been blind could I not have seen the brightening of her dark-blue eyes, the sudden change of colour as the unbidden blush suffused her pale cheek, when I entered the Fairlop dwelling. She was usually silent and reserved, but with me she could talk, setting free the girlish fancies, the dainty little thoughts which would have met with scanty appreciation in her own narrow home circle. She was, indeed, better educated, fonder of reading and reverie, incomparably more refined than her blunt-

spoken, honest sisters, who were, to do them justice, very fond and proud of the slender little fairy, whose delicacy of aspect and address contrasted with their own vigorous exuberance of life. Old Fairlop, a widower these six years past, considered his youngest child as a poor helpless creature, unfit to battle with the world, and thought it would be the truest kindness to provide for her by uniting her to a "warm" husband. And of Hiram Lloyd's warmth, in a pecuniary sense, there could be no doubt.

Twenty thousand dollars! Where, within a year, could I hope to lay hands on so imposing an amount of cash? Little beyond a bare maintenance could be looked for from the produce of my farm, now that sheep-fold, horse-corral, and cattle-pen had been depleted of their four-footed tenants. The few fowls and pigs, the maize-fields and the garden that the locusts had left uninjured, the tobacco and the madder, would ensure a livelihood for myself and the hired servants, white and black. But as for making a fortune by my bucolical skill, that dream for the present was at an end. Yet a fortune—four thousand pounds sterling—I must make before the year was out, or bid adieu to the hopes of hailing charming Minnie as my wife. Mr. Fairlop was one of those stubborn men in whose dull eyes mercy is a weakness and relenting a foible. He might not absolutely compel Minnie to marry Hiram Lloyd, but of a surety he would take means effectually to prevent any further intercourse between his daughter and myself. Yes, I must become the possessor, within twelve months, of twenty thousand dollars, or for ever forfeit the hope of calling Minnie mine! Yet how, without anticipating a miracle to be worked on my behalf, could I expect to become the owner of such a lump of solid coin? America is the traditional El Dorado of the speculator, the land where fortunes grow and dwindle like the gourd of the prophet Jonah; and hence, perhaps, I felt less despondent than I might have done had I been at home in England.

But I had had too much experience of the country of my adoption to believe that wealth or competence can be suddenly and easily acquired on the western side of the Atlantic. For commercial success I was without the ladder wherewith to climb. Politically I was a stranger in the land. One way, and one alone, seemed practicable. One ringing, tempting word, sounded in my ears as I lay asleep. And that word was—gold. Close by, among the sierras, for hundreds and thousands of miles to west and south, to north and east, gold and silver were to be had for the gathering, for those whose luck or skill guided them aright. I had talked with too many miners not to know the dark as well as the bright side of the gold seeker's venturesome life—the chill of disappointment, the broken health, the destitution, that were the meed of many an adventurer who began, high of heart and strong of hand. It was a lottery, with a terrible percentage of blanks. Hunger, fever, flood, and the risks from white outlaws and red-skinned robbers, levied, as I knew, heavy toll on the volunteer army of diggers. But if there were many blanks, there were some prizes, dazzling, superb baits that drew after them the minds of the covetous, and peopled Rush after Rush, in the effort to grow rich by a fortunate find. I had spoken with men who in a day had been lifted from poverty to opulence, and had heard them describe the fierce joy, the half incredulous exultation of that triumphant hour. Hitherto I had resisted the allurements of the gold digger's calling, but it had occurred to me, more than once, to traverse the hills in company with professional prospectors, men whose restless lives were passed in the quest for buried treasure, and who, as we rode along, had pointed out sundry spots as all but certain to harbour the precious metals. Now I was not, naturally, of a speculative turn of mind, and it took the collapse of my modest scheme of acquiring a substantial income by agriculture, coupled with Jonathan Fairlop's declaration that his daughter's bridegroom must be prepared with twenty thousand dollars on the wedding day, to induce me to turn my back on the regular industry of a farmer's life, and to cast in my lot with that of the toiling thousands, who strive to wrest from the stony wilderness its hidden riches. I set to work, then, manfully, having no common inducement to sustain my energies, and being young, strong, and inured to the labours which await the settler in the backwoods, and having withal a retentive memory for the hints and warnings which my mining acquaintances had let drop, I met with greater success than often accrues to a beginner. Within fifteen miles of my home at Burnt Flat was a partially explored region of ravines and gullies, whence both gold and silver had been collected in considerable quantities, until fashion, as potent in those wild regions as in Belgravia, had drawn off the diggers and delvers to newer gulches and placers.

With the aid of my hired hands I built a dam across a mountain stream, never yet known to run dry in the sultry season, set up cradles, sieves, and the other rude plant of the adventurer, and erected a shanty of bark and pine saplings to serve as a shelter by night. This done, I sent back my men to the farm, and applied myself seriously to the almost hopeless enterprise. Not that my hard exertions—and I worked very hard—were unrewarded. The daily yield of gold-dust washed from the sands of the river was rarely less than of one, occasionally of three, four, or five ounces. Twice, among the broken quartz stones of a reef, I came upon a pocket of nuggets, the net value of which amounted to several hundred dollars, and often, when seeking for gold, I met with unexpected lumps of virgin silver, well worth the gleaning. But all this did not go smooth with me, in spite of these happy accidents. My dam was breached by a sudden flood, and it cost me nineteen days to repair the damage, which the turbid water had done between sunset and moonrise. I rank two shafts, and never extracted from either of them as much gold as would make a lady's wedding ring. Twice I heard a panther snarling and whining around my door of tough bark, and another time I ran some risk of being robbed and maltreated, if not murdered, by a party of Indian prowlers who infested my lonely station, begging, bragging, and threatening alternately, until I drove them off with my rifle. I made some money, however, and on my occasional visits to the township in search of provisions, was warmly greeted by my well-wishers, and much encouraged by Minnie, who had the spice of romance in her nature which is seldom, I think, lacking in that of a woman, and who was at first very confident and sanguine as to her true lover's speedy and complete success. There were croakers, however, who shook their heads, and stilly remarked that twenty thousand dollars could not, like pea-nuts or cloud berries, be picked-up everywhere.

The prophets of evil, in the long-run, seemed likely to approve themselves accurate, for month after month slipped by; autumn gave place to winter, winter to spring, and I was very

far from my goal. Mr. Fairlop began to give ominous hints that the day of grace was almost spent, and Hiram Lloyd's hateful shadow frequently darkened the door of the rich settler; while Minnie, who had learned to look on my undertaking as all but hopeless, grew pale and thin, and there was at times a weird, wan glance in her dear eyes, a hectic crimson on her pale cheek, which boded no good. Even old Fairlop saw it, and gruffly told me that his daughter was "fretting herself ill," and uselessly. Still, he would not relent, neither would I desist, so long as strength was spared to me, from toils that every day grew more unrelenting. At last I acknowledged to myself that the task was a sheer impossibility.

I had but a short week or two left out of my year of probation, and little more than one-third of the large sum was forthcoming. The rest lay hidden in the rugged depths of the sierra. Yet, despairingly, half mechanically, I laboured on, deadening thought by downright bodily exhaustion, and adding, every day, to the shining heap that lay buried beneath the rude hearth of my hovel. It was now some time since I had visited either Burnt Flat or Fairlop's Clearing. The torrents were full of melted snows, and the bridge road difficult, while I was averse to discontinue my toil, even for a few hours. But three days remained to me, and, unless in that brief space some extraordinary stroke of good fortune should befall me, farewell to all my bright day-dreams of a happy life with Minnie.

I had laid myself down to sleep, worn out with toil and care, and slept soundly, wrapped in the buffalo robe that did duty for a bed, my head pillowed on my saddle, and my weapons, rifle and revolver, by my side. I was awakened, abruptly, by the sound of my own name, so it seemed to me, uttered by a female voice, unlikely as was such a contingency in that remote nook. For a moment I thought that the sighing of the wind, or the scream of a bird of prey, perched on the cliffs above, had deceived my sleeping ear, but no! It was a woman's voice, calling on, "Frank—Frank," and I hastily started up, and opening the door of the hut, beheld in the silvery moonlight the outlines of a female form. Hurrying up, I saw with infinite surprise that it was Minnie herself who stood before me. She looked strangely pale, but very beautiful; her dark hair, no doubt loosened in the rough and rapid ride, hung loose about her shoulders, and her manner was singularly earnest and excited for one usually so gentle and meek.

"This is no time for sleep!" she said, eagerly; "Up, up, and be doing, before the precious hours are gone. Take what you need for digging, and come with me, my own! I have ridden fast and far to guide you to where it awaits you."

"What, Minnie?" I asked, much perplexed by her words and manner.

"Gold!" she replied, with a quivering emphasis. "Much gold! your fortune, love, and my dowry. I will be your guide."

"You, darling," I answered, trying to take her hand; "You are ill, I fear, or in distress,—" She interrupted me at once, shrinking back, at the same time, so as to avoid my touch.

"Frank," she said, with passionate, pleading earnestness; "let me have my way in this. You'll never repent it, believe me. Do Minnie Fairlop's bidding, without remonstrance, without question, for this once. Come, come, why are you so sluggish?"

Puzzled by Minnie's vehement energy of address, so utterly new to me, I thought it best to humour her, and accordingly fetched from my hut the pick, shovel, crowbar, and lighted lantern, saying, with a smile, that I was now ready, like a true knight, to obey my lady's behest.

At the same time I looked around, wondering, for her horse. I remembered, however, that she might probably have secured the bridle to a tree in the thicket within easy rifle shot, and made up my mind not to vex her by idle queries. With a wave of her white hand she signed to me to follow, and set forth, at a rapid pace, towards the frowning gorge of the Sasquewash torrent, threading her way, without hesitation, among boulders and tangled brushwood, until, in a narrow and gloomy ravine, she halted before a black stone that bore some fanciful resemblance to a pulpit.

"Here! dig here!" she said eagerly; "work, Frank, as you never worked before. You stand upon gold."

She gave no reason for this bold assertion, but there is something contagious in strong and genuine conviction, and in this instance I surrendered myself completely to the impulse of the moment, and, clearing away with my shovel the black alluvial soil, struck lustily with my pickaxe into the rocky stratum beneath. So far as I could distinguish by the dim light of the lantern beside me, the minerals which my pick disturbed were precisely such as I had met with in twenty excavations eagerly commenced and abandoned in disgust. Yes, there was the curved gneiss, the brittle hornblende, the fallacious sparkle of yellow mica, the black basalt, the water-worn gravel varied by thin streaks of milky quartz or of dark ferruginous sand. What could have caused Minnie's visit, her fancy respecting the richness of this particular spot, and the singular alteration in her manner? So far as I knew, she had never before entered the ravine whither she had guided me, while of gold-digging she was necessarily ignorant. Was her mind affected by the mental strain which she had for some time endured, or—

Ha! What was that? The sharp point of my pick had pierced, with a dull thud, into something softer than rock, softer even than the hardened clay that gave us so much trouble in cleaving through the bed of many a dried-up stream, and in freeing the tool I encountered a slight but perceptible resistance. I held up, within the radius of the light that streamed from the lantern, the end of the pick, and lo! a flake of something yellow and bright was sticking to the polished metal. Another blow, and another, and I had transfigured, and was dragging to the surface a weighty, wedge-shaped, glittering mass, with threads of gold and small cubes of crystalline quartz clinging to it. Gold! gold! I fell on my knees, and in a sort of amazement, lifted the huge nugget in my outspread hands. It was heavy, from twenty to thirty pounds weight, as I guessed; such a lump of the virgin metal as seldom gladdens the eye of a digger, and worth, at the lowest computation, six thousand dollars. I laid the mass down on the grass beside me, and looked up, as if to seek an explanation, at Minnie's pale lovely face. Her eyes flashed, and her lips were trembling. "Quick, Frank, quick!" she cried; "work on, work like a man, and do not linger on the very threshold of your fortune. Win wealth, win me, poor boy, and spare not pain or toil in the few hours that are left—see, see, the yellow vein yonder, trending south. That is what the miners call a heart-lode, is it not? Follow it, and be rich. I