MC2397

POOR DOCUMENT

A New and Charming Feature!

We have purchased the right to reproduce, and shall in a few days begin the publication of

A SERIES OF SHORT STORIES

(Novelettes), By Popular Writers.

These Novelettes will be SUPERBLY ILLUSTRATED by the Most Competent Newspaper Artists in this Country.

HERE IS THE LIST—READ IT!

"On the Edge of a Falling Torrent."

The Story of a Masterpiece

ORIGINAL AND COPYRIGHTED.

By HENRY JAMES, JR.

IN TWO PARTS.

Containing Five Illustrations.

The Treasure of Franchard

BY

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON,

he Popular Novelist, Now Prominently Before the Public.

FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS.

"The Treasure of Franchard," Cried the Doctor.

She was Alive with Beauty.

HAND TO HAND.

ORIGINAL AND COPYRIGHTED.

BY

REBECCA HARDING DAVIS,

Whose Name is Sufficient Guaranty in any Household.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

Emphasize the Leading Incidents of the Story.

THE BLUE VASE.

By S. BARING GOULD.

A Charming Story of the Time of Frederick the Great of Prussia.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS.

"Treason—yes!" Shouted the Angry King.

Van Deckermann's Bargain.

By M. THEED.

CONTAINING

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

Of which the one here shown is a fair sample.

"You are the Luckiest Man I Know."

If You Are Not a Subscriber, Place Your Name on Our List At Once.

Due announcement will be made as to the dates when the several Novelettes (and the various installments of each) will appear.

LOOK OUT FOR THEM!

You Cannot Afford to Miss One of These!

THE BANK OF CALIFORNIA

BY PRENTICE MULFORD.

[COPYRIGHTED BY THE AUTHOR. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

[CONTINUED.]

By noon he had left off the drudging ascents and descents of the mountain to the river to wash his prospects. He was occupied entirely with the "float quartz," here thickly scattered about as it had rolled from the vein, knocking the fragments to pieces. He had found gold. Uttering a joyous "Whoopee!" he put a chunk of the quartz in his bag, and then another and another. His feelings and mine at that time were certainly in strong contrast to each other.

He crawled up gradually toward the shelf on which lay the "Bank." It inclined somewhat toward the river and then jumped off abruptly, making a perpendicular face four or five feet in height. Pratt could now see that the quartz had rolled from this shelf, and that the vein must be somewhere at or near its top.

"It's up there!" I heard him mutter, "and mighty rich, too!"

I heard him scrambling up the wall of rock, assisting himself by roots and bushes growing in the crevices. I heard him pant. All beside was still—the stillness of the California summer noon day—nothing of life in sight save a black buzzard wheeling above, his shadow floating along the ground.

Pratt had gained the top of the shelf. He made his way directly toward the face of the precipice. He burst through the chapparal, and I was disclosed to him, seated on a rock, about ten feet from the vein.

"Holloa!" was his involuntary exclamation; "you here?"

"Yes, I'm here," I replied.

"Well, well!" He was evidently at a loss what next to say or do. "It's a hot day, isn't it?"

"Pretty hot," I remarked. I thought it was or would be soon in every sense, and the shadow of a laugh came over me as I thought of "talking weather" at such a juncture.

Mr. Pratt sat himself also down upon a rock, drew a rusty red bandana, mopped with it his face and partly bald head, and said "Whew!" Then he poked the ground before him with the end of his hammer, and I poked Mother Earth before me with a stick.

It was clear to me that Mr. Pratt intended to stay here and wait for my going. It was clear to me that I should remain—though I did not like so to do. The situation was somewhat akin to that in which two gentlemen calling on the same lady sometimes find themselves—and of all work sitting your man out ranks among the hardest. Both of us recognized silence as the factor most efficacious for the removal of his adversary—only while Mr. Pratt hoped that the dullness of his company might remove me, I had no hope that my taciturnity would remove Mr. Pratt from the vicinity of the golden mistress he knew was near.

So we sat one full hour, and the longest hour of my life. Pratt made the first move. He commenced examining the rock near the solid mountain formation. Nearer he advanced toward the place where Broener had screened the worked portion of the vein with a layer of cut brush. He was in the act of removing this when I called out: "Don't touch that brush, please!"

"Why not?" said Pratt, looking back.

"Never mind why not. Don't touch it," I said, advancing toward him, feeling as if on my way to the scaffold.

"Well, young man, do you own this mountain?" he said.

"I own that brush, that's all," was my reply.

The brush was ranged against the white streak of rock for not more than ten or twelve feet. Pratt passed it. His eye fell on one end of the vein—untouched there by the pick. He commenced chipping it with his hammer.

"You must let that rock alone," I said, going toward him.

Pratt was now up and doing. The war had commenced.

"Oh, come!" he exclaimed, "don't you fool around me any more. You must be off your head. This mountain's as much mine as yours."

"That's my claim," I said. "Let it alone."

Momentary wonder showed itself in Pratt's eyes that any one else should know of gold in this form.

"Your claim," said he, "up here! What sort of diggings do you call these anyway?"

"Perhaps you know as well as I. But that's my claim by right of discovery."

"Where's your notices?"

The written notice on the ground was then indispensable to hold a claim. We had none. Broener had put none up, knowing it would attract attention.

"Where's your tools?" he continued.

Tools left on a claim were regarded as most important proofs of possession. Broener had hidden away those he used—where I knew not.

"No notices, no tools and no work done, and you call this a claim?" said Pratt derisively.

Clearly as to the mining rights of the period Pratt had the best of me. I felt the moral weakness of the situation. Pratt seemed also to know his own strength and my weakness in this respect. Meantime he had taken out his six-shooter and cocked it. He stood facing me, and had the "drop" on me. I was powerless. "Now, young man," said he, "I give you while I count ten to get off this ground, and if you don't I'll put a ball through you. D'ye hear? Get! Vamos! One—two—three—" As he spoke he made a step backward. It was all a jumble of rocks and fallen bowlders about. He missed his footing, stumbled over behind a huge bowlder, his right arm, with finger on the trigger, involuntarily jerked upward, and the pistol was discharged.

As he spoke, he made a step backward.

I stood in the same spot, how many minutes I know not, expecting, half hoping, to see Pratt reappear. All was silent. Full of dread I approached the spot where he had fallen. I stood on the rock and looked over it. There lay Pratt, the pistol dropped from his hand, and the blood oozing from a wound in the right temple.

CHAPTER XI.

LIFE.

I had now a dead man on my hands and didn't know what to do with him. Pratt bore on me mentally with as great a weight, dead, as he had while living. He would be soon missed and sought for by his partner. Hillyear would find his prospect holes. This would bring the search in the neighborhood of the claim. If I told my story of the manner in which he met his death, I should be hardly credited. Then it would lead indirectly to the discovery of the "Bank." In whatever way I looked I saw perplexity.

But something must be done. The day was waning. I covered the body with brush and returned home.

Nearing it, I saw Hillyear standing at his cabin door, cooking supper. They built their fire outside for sake of comfort. A frying pan was propped up so as to receive the heat from a bed of glowing coals, and in it was their evening's baking of bread. He was looking from time to time up the river with that air of expectancy which accompanies the act of waiting for some one who has overstayed the usual time. As I drew near he hailed me.

"Seen anything of Pratt?"

What was I to say? I had seen the last of him. I felt already like a murderer, because, circumstantially, I was in the position of one. People talk as if a "clear conscience" was equal to any situation. I did not find it so. "I saw him about three hours ago going up the river," was my reply.

"Where was he?" asked Hillyear.

Great heavens! I thought, how much of this game of evasion am I to play from this out. I said: "He passed the cabin about nine this morning, and went into the chapparal about yonder," and I pointed to the spot where I had seen Pratt disappear at the hour I named. Hillyear resumed his cooking. I went into my cabin and took a big draught of whisky. Broener always had on hand a demijohn of the best. There are times when one's system is not equal to the making of strength from ordinary food. I hold alcohol as a food—an artificial one, and an unhealthy one for steady use.

After supper I trudged down to the store, for I wanted other than my own thoughts that evening for company. The Bull Bar nucleus for goods and gossip was full as usual of miners, raising a dense fog of tobacco smoke, whose flavor was more than relished with emanations from codfish, onions and whisky. Mr. Rankin had received that day a new supply of provisions from Stockton, and was scolding his partner, who acted as buyer and teamster combined, for the poor quality of some cigars he had brought up.

"If you buy any more cigars like them," said he, "I want you to hire and bring up some men to smoke them. These poor creatures about here haven't lungs strong enough to draw on 'em. They want all their strength to draw rocks out of the bed of the river, and it's for my interest to see that it's saved for that purpose, at the rate I'm chalking up flour, boots and whisky against them."

"Got any better cigars than the last lot?" asked a miner, who, just coming in, had not heard Rankin's last remark.

"Yes," replied Rankin. "Splendid lot—Havanas—only it wants a bull team to draw one. Try one. You'll find it'll last *you* a month. Just the quality to suit your case. You smoke too much. These cigars are got up express to cure people of smoking. One'll last an ordinary man a whole year. Ask Mike, my partner. He had 'em made to order."

Rankin's gabble was a relief. Big Dick came in, and forgetting past admonitions, hoisted his huge proportions on the limited area of counter uncovered by goods, and immediately got off again with a quickness that suggested some uncomfortable sensation.

"Glad it works," said Rankin. "Nothin' but a needle stuck through the wood. Some folkses heads are too thick to take a hint. Then we try some other part. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again,'" chimed Rankin, and then added: "Needles and pins, Needles and pins, When you get married your trouble begins.'"

Presently Hillyear entered. A cloud seemed to come with him. To me it was as if the vindictive spirit of the dead man kept him company.

He looked about anxiously, as if with the hope that Pratt might be present. I knew the meaning of that look.

Hillyear was a slow-moving man, apparently a follower of Pratt and led by him. Without his partner he seemed lost.

"Has anybody seen Pratt to-day? He hasn't come back," after a time he asked, in his heavy, drawling way (a sentence with him seemed always a matter of previous deep and labored study, and when asked the simplest question the time that elapsed before he replied was exasperating to an eager inquirer).

"Why, I saw him pliking along Scrub mountain to-day," said one of the crowd. "What's he gunnin' after up there, anyhow?"

"Holder, didn't I see you crawlin' among the bushes up there to-day?" said one Bill Sefter. "That red shirt you've got on looks like the one I saw."

Fool that I was! I had not thought of wearing a garb which would show so conspicuously against the dark bottle green of the chapparal.

"Yes, I took a stroll that way," I said. I felt forced into such reply. He continued:

"What did yer find to shoot up there? Rattlesnakes or jackass rabbits? I heard a shot."

That was Pratt's pistol. Sights and sounds seemed drawing their meshes about me. Hillyear was looking at me in his stolid fashion as if some faint glimmer of an idea were creeping into his brain.

"I shot nothing," was my reply.

The talk then drifted toward mysterious murders and robberies—then common in that country—and cases were mentioned which had finally been traced to men—neighbors of the slain—whose lives had previously shown no such inclination.

Rankin's humor inclined him ever to give an individual the very characteristic which he most lacked. Slow men he spoke of as marvels of dispatch, taciturn men as disturbing all about by the clatter of their tongues. I, with my shy, quiet, reticent manner, evidently ranked with him as a most peaceable character. It seemed to me then as if some fiend prompted him to the remark:

"Shouldn't wonder if Holder had waylaid and murdered Pratt. Put another man in his private graveyard."

"Yes," added another second fiddle humorist. "That's what he knocks off work so early for in the morning."

"And the last man's blood is on his pants now!" added a third.

I had worn a pair of white duck working trousers and a spot of the blood from Pratt's body had smeared them near the feet—I had not noticed it before.

This remark called to me the attention of all in the dingy store. Their eyes seemed to burn through me. I felt as if in the dock tried, convicted, sentenced.

I left soon afterward. Hillyear's route home was mine. We were obliged to walk near each other on the narrow, rocky trail, wide enough for a single traveler. With all the dark suspicion which I feared existed in his mind concerning me I felt sorry for him. I felt when about him that his was one of those natures, born to follow—the trail had picked him up as he would a stray dog looking for a master, and that with the instinct of the animal he had become attached to Pratt and was grieving for him.

I tried in vain that night to sleep. So soon as my body was at rest, and my brain became more active than ever, its picturings vibrating from Pratt's body to the store, and from the scenes of that day to the possible ones of to-morrow.

Something must be done with that body. Where it was it must not remain.

You know how in our minds come floating memories—recent or remote, important or trivial, and of no apparent relation to the main subject of thought. So in my mental vision that night came the black buzzard I had seen in the sky the day before the scene of the tragedy, and his bit of black shadow floating on the ground by me.

That buzzard! That buzzard and his companions would to-morrow show to the searchers surely where the body lay! No animal in that country may die on highway or by way, on plain, gulch or mountain, and though it be ever so thickly screened by bushes, though not one of these scavengers be visible, yet within a few hours trooping they come, led by some wondrous faculty of scent or vision to the carcass, their feast.

That body, I must remove, and this very night. I jumped up, dressed myself in the darkness, and in a few minutes was stumbling up the mountain side. An "old moon" gave me its fading yellowish light. Much of the trail, both up and down, lay in almost total darkness. Where the pines grew thickly sometimes I lost my way entirely. I groped and stumbled over bush and rock. In two hours I was again on the spot.

It was my intent to drag the body down the mountain side and throw it in the river. Whether it was found far or near, it would, I thought, lessen and break the web of circumstantial evidence I saw weaving about me. It would put Pratt off the ground I must frequeat.

The fragment of moon remaining was just above the dark outline of the hills on the other side of the river. In ten minutes I should be left in total darkness.

I commenced removing the brush from Pratt's body. I took it first from the legs and trunk. The face I didn't want to see if possible. I worked the slower as I approached the head. The moon sunk entirely behind the dark ridge opposite. I removed the brush from the head. I had reached the last branch covering it. I attempted to remove that. Something seemed to hold it with feeble resistance. I stooped lower, shivering. The branch was clutched in Pratt's right hand. Yet the body lay in corpse-like rigidity. It did not seem, as I then saw it, the act of a live man. It seemed a dead body holding on with a dead life. Almost desperate with horror, I tugged at the branch. Then I heard Pratt's voice saying faintly: "It's not your mountain!"

CHAPTER XII.

SUSPICION.

Bending over Pratt I put to him the usual idiotic question under such circumstances:

"Pratt! are you alive?"

"Pratt, are you alive."

The words came from him in a feeble, whining tone:

"No, no! not that way. The lead's higher up—mighty rich, too!"

I managed to get him off the shelf. Further I could not. The only accessible route home wound in places about projections of the mountain several hundred feet perpendicular above the foaming river, where a sound man needed all his strength and nerve to keep a sure footing.

"Them mint fellows are sharp. Jack Hillyear, mind you bake your next batch of bread clean through. Run a straw through—dough sticks if 'tain't done; don't put pork in till beans be boiled so you can squash 'em—else, hard as rocks."

So he rambled on. His words concerning the mint people suggested to me Broener's remark as to their curiosity regarding his quartz assays and their whereabouts. Pratt was evidently delirious. I thought to utilize this wit wandering and said:

"Did the mint people send you up here?"

"Put fresh salt on a bird's tail, an' you'll catch a weasel asleep," was his reply. Then his mind seemed to leap into the old channel. "It's rich—mighty rich—and they can't hold it all."

The thing to be done was to get Pratt to his cabin. Evidently his brain was affected by the wound. I left him and hurried to Hillyear.

Their cabin was built as thousands were in those days—an envelope of cotton drilling about a light wooden frame. There was no wooden door to knock against, or any other method to rouse the inmates save by calling. Call I did, but Hillyear seemed sleeping the sleep of the just. At last, out of patience, I pitched a rock into the frail structure. It tore through the cloth. Hillyear's reply was a shot, which was not to be wondered at.

"For heaven's sake, Hillyear, don't fire! It's me. I've found Pratt. He's hurt badly," I cried.

"Who's me?" asked Hillyear, after one of his periods of silence.

I heard him cocking his pistol. "It's I—Holder. Come and help me get Pratt down off the mountain. He's lying there with a gash in his head."

Mr. Hillyear now relapsed into silence. I knew not whether he was trying to frame an idea into a sentence or peering out to get an aim at me.

"Ain't you coming?" I cried at last. "Are you going to help me get Pratt down. He'll die before we get to him."

"How—did—you—come—to—find—him?" came at length from Mr. Hillyear's lips, with a sort of clownish judicial gravity.

"Good heavens!" I said. "Will you stay there all night and ask questions, while your partner is bleeding to death! Do you suppose I'd get out of my bed to stand and call here like a fool for nothing?"

"What's the muss?" cried a voice in the darkness. It was Bill Sefter, who lived about an eighth of a mile distant. He had come, roused by the shot and the sound of voices.

"I've found Pratt badly hurt on Scrub mountain, and am trying to get Hillyear to help me down with him. Hillyear won't believe me, and that's what's the matter."

"Hillyear, get up! Don't be a fool," said Sefter.

Hillyear finally replied: "All—right! I'm—comin'!" with an expression as if he had had no doubts as to the genuineness of the news, and had but momentarily heard of it.

Our party reached Pratt, where I had left him. With great difficulty we managed to carry him down the mountain. His utterances on the way down all bore vaguely on quartz hunting and the last scene of which he had been conscious while in his right mind. To Sefter, they were a puzzle. To Hillyear, I knew not how much or how little meaning they conveyed. To myself they were a source of great uneasiness. They bore first on the secret of our claim. Next, they might confirm a suspicion, which, if not already developed, I knew was likely to be, through the singular circumstances attending my finding Pratt so far up Scrub mountain in the dead of night. It needed but a word of his delirious utterance to make known that we had quarreled.

We left Pratt in his cabin. Sefter, whose curiosity was evidently much aroused, said to me, just what I expected he would:

"How did you come to find Pratt away up there?"

I told Sefter that I heard Pratt's voice in the night up the mountain, which was true, but not in the sense I left Sefter to infer. I held that evasion was justifiable under the circumstances. It's not so much what we tell that may damage us as the construction placed on it by those it may be told to. The only way I know of when certain questions are asked that many people will ask, to avoid evasion or untruthfulness, is to say "it's none of your business." That, as society is now constituted and complicated, would be quite impossible.

"I wonder who shot him?" continued Sefter.

"Shot himself, maybe." I replied.

"Queer business, anyway," was Sefter's final remark, as he trudged off home.

I saw by his manner that he was full of curiosity, and being full of curiosity would be soon full of theories as to the cause of Pratt's hurt, and that as curiosity and theories are contagious, he would in a short time inoculate all Bull Bar with them.

Next day I visited Pratt. His head had been hurt both by the ball and the fall. The bullet had gashed the temple—not very deeply. The concussion from the fall seemed to have most affected him. That one or other of these wounds had affected his brain was very evident without the pompous declaration of the physician, who had been summoned, to that effect.

Sefter was present when I entered. Pratt was lying on his bed silent, but the sight of me seemed to excite his brain to action, and set in motion the thoughts, scenes and emotions common to the occurrence at the claim. They ran dangerously near, but did not actually reveal me as a participator.

"No tools! no notices!" he cried. "Pretty way to hold a claim."

"What claim, Pratt!" said Sefter.

The sick man's eye fell on Sefter with a gleam of cunning. "No claim," he said. "We're after rattlesnake oil. Hunting snakes in the chapparal. There's one now—on the lead. If yer not off while I count ten, I'll put a ball through ye. One—two—three—oh!" and he shrieked as if with pain.

Hillyear spoke:

"He—must—be kept—quiet. It—is the—doctor's—orders. The—doctor—says—his—sary—brullum—is—something—or—other."

"Queer business—queer business!" was Sefter's remark, as we left the house together. "I think he's had a shootin' scrape with somebody."

Broener returned. I felt that I could now shift a part of the business to other shoulders.

He heard my story. At its conclusion he settled back and laughed.

"Regular dime novel, isn't it?" said he. "Write it, print it, sell it. Well, young man, you're improving rapidly. I congratulate you. I couldn't have wished you anything better than the experience you've gone through. You needed it. You're the kind that must be put in very hot water to draw anything out of you."

"But won't this put all Bull Bar on the scent of the 'Bank'?" I asked.

"First, let's compound some whisky with sugar, lemons and nutmeg. Before we talk business let's fix things so as to make business a pleasure, not by pouring the stuff down raw as the fools do at the store yonder, but dress up the fluid decently and tastefully before we put it down. There would be far less drunkards if every man was compelled by law to dress up and trim up his drinks in this way before he swallowed them." He continued as he sipped his punch: "Make yourself easy, Holder, about the claim. You have fixed that all right, or the Fates have for you. Pratt won't go up there for a while, now that his wits are knocked out of his head, which for our purpose is better far than knocking them out of his body. Because I'm fool enough to believe that if his wits were out of his body they'd be in much better shape to come back and reveal our secret than as they now are chained to a cracked skull, and therefore in bad working order. Hillyear, from what you say, is, I judge, only an appendage of Pratt's, and not able to do anything without him. At all events, I'll find out soon. As for the 'Bank,' I think I've got the cream out of it already. It's only a feeder to some bigger vein in the mountain. That can lay for awhile. I've got four or five caches of quartz up there that I haven't shown you. We'll get it all down this week and hush up things for the present. There's, I think, your fair share of divvy, so far as we've gone," and he put in my hands a mint certificate of deposit for $14,000. "If the rock that's mined out goes down as I think it will, you'll have as much more coming to you. Are you satisfied?"

Satisfied! Less than a year from home and the possessor of what in Eastport was deemed a "small fortune." In the well-worn phrase, I wanted to "pour forth my thanks."

I said: "I wish I could fitly express my feeling and gratitude to you."

"I'm glad you can't," said Broener, interrupting me. "It's a good thing for you that you can't. I hate effusiveness. You may in part thank your reticence and undemonstrativeness for what you call your luck. I don't want any gushers about me. Besides, you've earned what you got—every cent of it. Fate put you and me together, and with that put it in your way. There's no thanks nor gratitude in the matter. I hate people always overwhelmed with gratitude. They're the sort who, if ever they do you what's called a favor, never forget it, and, in effect, want to be paid for it forever afterward. Let's change the subject. There's a traveling theatre company at Chinese Camp to-night. Let's go and see the show. You need a change from the ghastly buzzard spying and body hunting business. Get Rankin's horse, I'll take mine, and we'll gallop over there."

On applying, Mr. Rankin said he would gladly hire me his horse. The animal, he added, was vicious, shied at his own shadow, "bucked" frequently and had been the death of two men. As we were leaving he called out to Broener: "The coroner lives at one end of the camp and is lightenin' on an inquest when sober. The undertaker lives at the other. You'd better take the cloth for the young man's shroud along with you. They know that horse up there and always