

Gassey Thompson's Prize Money.

By CHARLES CAREY.

THERE was a sharp contrast in the mental attitude of Gassey Thompson and his partner as they took their way up over the mountain toward Silver Plume. Flanders, the partner, was moody and pessimistic; Gassey, to outward appearances at least, buoyant and assured.

They were to take part that afternoon in a drilling contest—a holiday event which had been the sole topic of discussion throughout the surrounding region for the past four weeks. Flaming posters at every crossroads and gathering-place had announced it as a competition open to all Colorado miners, and deciding the championship of the State.

The contestants, operating in teams of two men each, were to demonstrate their skill upon a block of solid granite for a stretch of fifteen minutes, the men changing from striking to holding, turn and turn about, at the end of each minute. Cash prizes aggregating a thousand dollars were to be distributed, of which five hundred was to go to the first team, three hundred to the second, and a hundred and fifty to the third, and a hundred to the fourth. Such pecuniary awards were by no means to be despised, it will be admitted; but to Flanders and Gassey much more depended upon their success than the mere winning of a prize.

Through the combination of a run of bad luck in their mining operations, coupled with a long sickness that had disabled Flanders, they had become so involved financially that unless they could raise two hundred and fifty dollars to be paid over to a grasping landlord by the end of the month, they were in a fair way to forfeit their lease—a block of ground into which they had put the hopes and labor of a solid year, and which now for the first time gave promise of repaying them. To take either first or second prize in the forthcoming contest was their one chance of securing such a sum within the required time.

Under ordinary circumstances their well-known dexterity with hammer and drill would have made their prospect of winning one or the other almost a certainty. But Flanders was still weak from his recent illness, and even Gassey's optimism had to confess that on "form," at least, the result was very seriously in doubt.

Firm believer that he was in his lucky star, however, he strenuously combated his comrade's despondent view of the situation.

"Kin you look at that, Kid, an' still doubt?" he now demanded, drawing a long, free breath as they reached the crest of the rise, and the promise and hope of the morning smote them with the soft breeze that rustled up from the valley.

Gassey threw himself down upon the ground and drank in the prospect with an appreciative eye. About them stretched the radiant arch of sky, like a great translucent blue pearl; and all about were the clustering mountains, silent and solemn in their grandeur, their hoary peaks gleaming pink and orange and crimson where the sunlight flashed from summit to summit across the range.

Even Flanders was not insensible to the inspiring influence; but for pride's sake, and in the fear of over-confidence, he would not now recede from his position. He was one of the many who superstitiously believe that constant negation may avert ill-fortune.

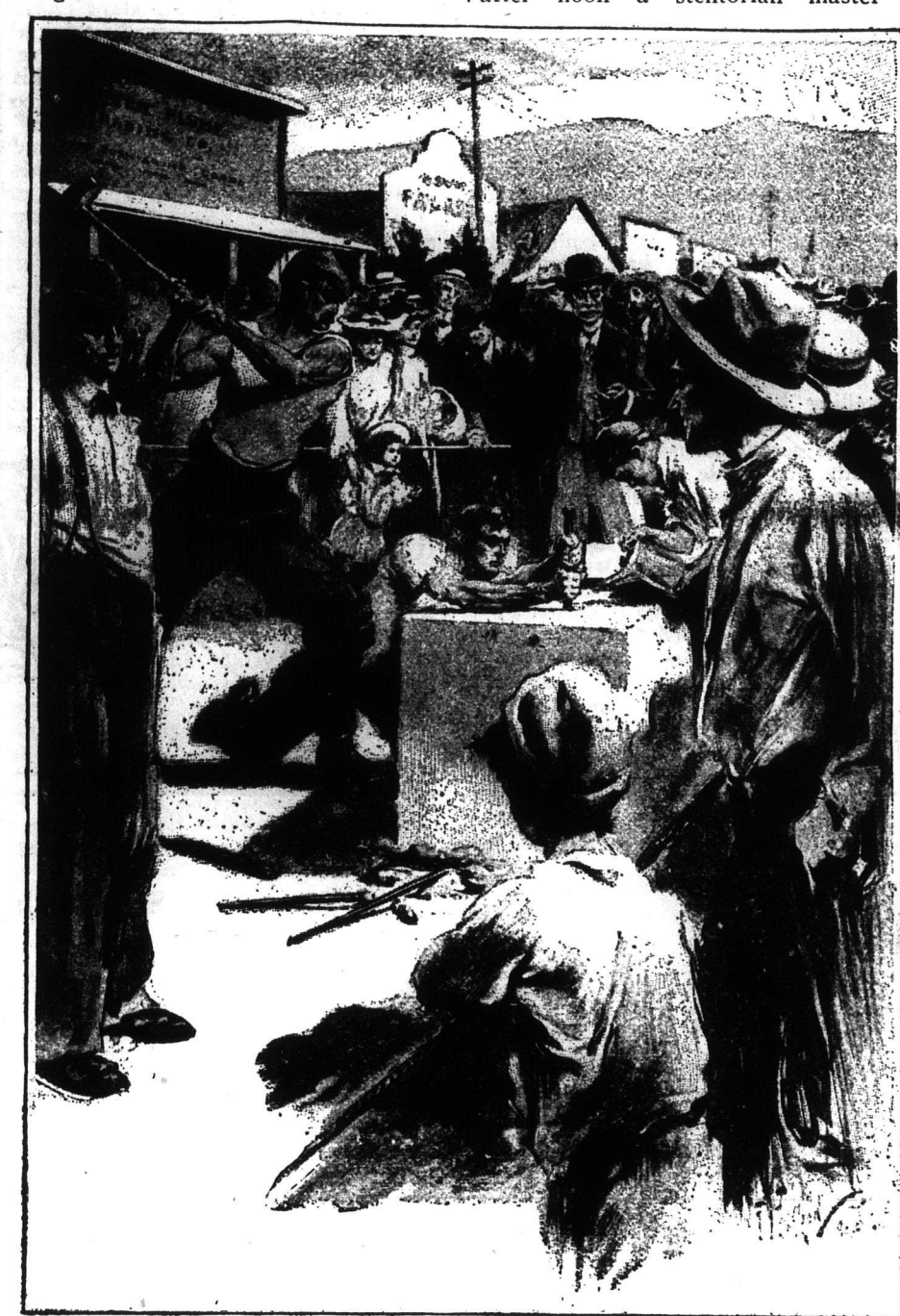
"I don't see that that proves nothin'," he dissented. "Every other team's a seein' the same; an' we can't all win."

"Kid," observed Gassey, with a whimsical shake of the head, "you sure ain't no better 'n that there Thomas what the parson preached about at Buck Pingree's funeral. You'd never be satisfied, neither, till you got them paws o' yours in the nail-prints.

Now, s' for me, the wind up here keeps a talkin' to me, an' it whispers straight ahead: 'You're goin' to win! You're goin' to win! You're goin' to win! Can't you hear it?'"

"Not me," returned the unpoetic Flanders. "All it says to me is there's two darn fools layin' up here a sweatin' from the climb, an' if they let this cold wind blow on 'em much longer they'll both be so stiff that they can't lift their arms much less swing no jack in a drillin' match!"

Gassey could not but agree to the reason of the suggestion; so, with a sigh for the beauty he was forced to leave, he arose to his feet and accompanied his companion down into the village.



The crowd eagerly followed every movement of the two sweating, straining men.

II.

Early as it was, a typical holiday throng was already assembled at Silver Plume, and every hour was adding to its number. There were miners of every rank and condition—brawny Swedes with their wives and flaxen-poll progeny; solid Cornishmen; keenwitted Irish; college-bred Americans, their Eastern drawl veneered with the breezy slang of the West; men from the Middle States, men from "Dixie," the corn-fed scions of Missouri and Arkansas—a cosmopolitan array. There were also the superintendents of the various mines in the neighborhood, shrewd, alert fellows for the most part, with eyeglasses perched upon their noses, and wives who comported themselves as the grandes dames of the occasion. added to these were the storekeepers from the surrounding towns, the gamblers, a Chinaman or two, and a sprinkling of inquisitive tourists.

Taken all in all, it was a good-natured, jovial, bantering sort of

crowd. The women stood about in little groups, exchanging gossip and housewifely experiences, while the sterner sex, ranged in platoons before the saloon bars, or congregated in knots up and down the board sidewalks, discussed in excited colloquy the chances of the various contestants in the forthcoming games.

At one end of the village a rude grand-stand had been erected, and a section of the road in front of it was roped off as an arena for the exhibition of the day's sports. Hither, after the contents of dinner baskets had been duly discussed, slowly verged the crowd, and an hour and a half after noon a stentorian master of

odds against the pair were ten to two, Ingram and Thomas being held as the probable victors at even money, with few takers.

A flush of mortified wrath spread over Gassey's countenance as he beheld posted figures and saw how contemptuously they were rated. Flanders attempted a feeble joke.

"I guess they've got us sized about right," he commented. "You're the ten spot, an' I'm the duce in this deal, an' we can't beat even a little pair."

"Don't you never believe it, Kid," said Gassey, with a flash of the blue eyes and a determined toss of the head. "Bettin' never yet settled nothin' that I know of, an' when this is over, some o' them tin-horn gamblers that's so frisky now may wish they'd kep' their dust in their clo'se!"

"Didn't I tell you that luck was comin' our way?" Gassey added triumphantly a moment later, when the lots had been drawn and they were scheduled for the last trial. "Every one o' these suckers has to take their whack at it afore us, an' when our turn comes, we kin tell jes' exactly what we got to do!"

The first team up, Dorsey and O'Halloran, made twenty-seven inches and a half.

"Not so bad fur them," commented Gassey patronizingly; "but remember, Kid, they wasn't a night in our practice that we didn't do better 'n that."

The Swede pair, which came next, "fell down" badly on their score, making but twenty-four inches within the allotted time. McNamara and O'Toole, who followed, were disqualified early in their trial by the battering of a defective drill. Dalton and Gurnsey again made Gassey look thoughtful, however, for they scored a total of twenty-eight and three-quarters, and Mike Smith and Leabo immediately tied this tally.

Pemberton and Snodgrass dropped to bottom figures with twenty-three and a half; and then the crowd gave a roar of welcome, for Bill Ingram and his thick-set muscular comrade came forth to display their vaunted prowess.

After each stroke by the hammerman of this twain would come a chorus of encouraging shouts.

"Now she takes it!" they would call. "Come down on 'er, old man! Smash 'er, Shorty! Smash 'er!"

The spectators rocked backwards and forwards in their enthusiasm with each rise and fall of the hammer, as if by so doing they could aid the drillers in their panting efforts.

"Time!" shouted the referee; and Gassey dubiously shook his head. Under the lusty blows of Ingram and Shorty, the steel had penetrated to a depth of thirty-three inches. To win the prize, he and Flanders would have to beat that, and tie the world's record.

Nevertheless, there was nothing lost to his nonchalant air of self-assurance as he stepped forward in response to the umpire's call, shedding his coat and peeling his flannel shirt over his head as he came. Thus divested, his low-cut, sleeveless undershirt revealed his broad chest—white from the collar line, where the thick red tan of his neck and face commenced—the bulging shoulder muscles at his back, and those mighty arms, stubbly from elbow to wrist with a fell of short, yellow hair. His sturdy nether limbs were encased in faded blue overalls stuffed into the top of grease-spattered miners' boots, and he wore an old black cap drawn down over his eyes.

Critically he scanned the preparations for the test; inconsequent and heedless as he might be about most things, it was certain that on an occasion of this kind he did not propose to fail through any lack of foresight. He squinted at the sun, and then had the block moved, to prevent the possibility of any dazzling reflection interfering with the accuracy of aim. He rang each drill to assure himself of its temper, and arranged them in an orderly sequence. Severely and at

ceremonies formally opened the celebration.

There were all the rough jousts of skill and endurance which so appeal to the Anglo-Saxon heart—foot races, sack races, wheelbarrow races, chasing the greased pig, jumping matches, wrestling bouts, a prize drill between two rival fire companies, and finally the paramount event of the day, the two-handed drilling contest.

Eight teams were entered for the event, and they were the pick of the region—Mike Smith and Sam Leabo, Dalton and Guernsey from Boulder, Pemberton and Red Snodgrass from up on Cripple Creek, Bill Ingram and Shorty Thomas, Dorsey and O'Halloran, Christiansen and Big Ole from Georgetown, McNamara and O'Toole, and Gassey Thompson and Flanders.

Under ordinary circumstances, the last-named duo would unquestionably have ruled favorites in the betting; but Flanders' incapacitated condition was known, and there was doubt whether he could withstand the strain; so the