

"THE YELLOW PATH"

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CHAPTER I.

It was the same day that Big Bill Barnes, Long Jim, George Smith and I had made up our minds to quit Tin Cup and strike for the Limestone hills, that we saw Bradenton Upton. He had plenty of names besides that, but that was his real name, and so I shall call him. My first sight of him comes back to me as clear as daylight.

He was shambling up the road from Quicktown; a tall, thin, yellowish man, with an uncertain, frightened way about him, so marked that it was the first thing you noticed in Henry. His shabby hands played out from the sleeves of a cut-away coat which had once been black, but was now greenish from fading. His eyes were set in a stare of apprehension on his shoulders—indeed, there was a hint of the same thing all over Bradenton—that he was the worst of men, and that he was the better for that air, God knows! It only marked the distance he had come down.

He stopped a few rods away from us, which was a strange thing in that country, where you could trust any one you met, and said "Good morning" to us civilly, and with a friendly smile. We returned the same heartily. A stranger was an event with us. Not for three months had we laid eyes on a human but our eyes were a little in the stood silent for a moment, looking around him, while he tapped the ground with the stick he carried for a cane.

Then he gave us a flying look. "You gentlemen are plunger miners, I suppose," he asked.

Bill, as the leader of the company, answered yes, that we were. "That line, to which George added: "Damn little, just at present." "Ah!" said Upton, "played out here, eh?" "Yep—that's about the size of it," answered Bill. "Come up and take a seat, partner."

The other hesitated as though he feared a trap, but seemed to think better of it. "Thank you, thank you," he said with a bow. "I will, if you don't mind." Thereupon he joined us and we got a better look at him. I have never seen a young man's face—that is a man under forty-five—which was so lined and worn. If ever trouble, deserved or undeserved, had written its name on a human countenance, it was on that of Bradenton Upton. I felt sorry for him and suspicious of him in the same breath. He was a man who had been to be feared, and yet to cunning and furtive to be altogether trusted.

Still he spoke fair and pleasantly, asking about our life and our work, talking as much with his hands as his mouth. My eye travelled from him to the other boys and marked the contrast. Next him, on the same log, sat Big Bill, with his great head covered with a mane of yellow hair, and beard, his fine blue eyes turned steadily on the stranger. Through a tear in the shirt he looked at us with a pair of legs for the other.

In the doorway of our cabin stood Long Jim, the Missouri foot four inches, as straight as the side of a house; as black as a white man could be, and with a regular eagle profile, fierce and stern as a hawk. Though, in fact, he was as kind and gentle a man as ever lived, except when angered, which seldom happened. In spite of his lean frame Jim was almost as strong a man as Big Bill, and was getting on getting one fall out of three when they wrestled.

George and I were the little fellows, but we were not weaklings or flinches. When it came to where quickness and agility counted, we pulled the scales down some, and for our weight we more than held our own in strength. There's plenty of bluff with all kinds of George could outlast me, but I could run or jump all around him, and either one of us could have taken that ramshackle stranger by the feet and snatched his head off, as the boys say.

In the meantime the man was talking to Bill, asking questions, as I have said; with an off-hand manner enough, yet I couldn't help but feel that he was serving a purpose of his own. Were we sure that the pay on Tin Cup was played out? he asked. To which Bill replied, with a laugh, that there could be no doubt of that. "Well, you are going to a place you call the Limestone—why do you pick out that?" asked the stranger. "Not on any very strong grounds," answered Bill. "There was once a man around here named Dutch Henry, and he fell down an old prospect hole and broke his back, and he fell and he was in his until he died. Poor old Henry always was loose in his upper story, and before he passed out, he made me a present of this." Bill pulled his gold sack out of his pocket, slowly untied the thongs, and drew from within a folded piece of wrapping paper. This he spread upon the log and smoothed out.

"This is my legacy from Henry," he said. "It's a kind of map he made of a piece of country he struck on one of his prospect holes. There was gold by the bushes in that place—see where the creek (that's that line) makes the turn? I can't make out his writing there—'cracked'—the stranger, "Let me see," cried the stranger, snatching the paper. "Why, yes, it says: 'The gold is on the left hand bar, where is so much iron stone'—what is iron stone?"

"Oh, part of the wash where there's gold, all over this country. That don't mean anything. Henry tried to tell me about a 'face'—is there anything about it here?"

The stranger looked over the paper carefully, finally gutting a finger on a line of Henry's angular writing. "Here you will find the cliff with all kinds of shapes on 'em in the limestone. A pile of rocks' would have been almost as good for a guide. "Still you're strong enough of this map to go out there?"

"Why, there isn't anything left for

us to do, unless we jump the country turned out rich dirt. You can scarcely look at him. There was a tinge of red in his gray cheeks and a light in his eye. This is always the way with a man who has been to the mines, and he got it in the bank. This man, on the strength of a fool map that meant nothing, had written its name on his face more than he had on his countenance. George noticed it, too, and winked across at me.

Well, if it was a dead-sure thing to him, it was only the same to us, and a chance to us, and what he evidently looked on as a great favor, we felt was an opportunity to join in a wild-goose chase.

For it must be understood that all gold countries have their little lies, and full-grown legends. "Lost Cabin Claims" exist in every country that has been worked. You can scarcely meet a miner who does not know of some wonderful discovery, all trace of which has afterwards been lost. As a consequence, old-timers look on these reports with a certain skepticism. Upton the simple truth about the map; that it was the work of a crazy old gopher, who had found gold in the limestone hills, and he had no more idea as to the exact place than we did.

And our reason for following such a blind lead was as he had said. There was absolutely nothing else left for us to do.

George seconded Bill's offer hospitably. "Why, yes; join the gang, my friend," he said. "Bring along your wannegan. We start to-morrow."

Upton seemed confused. Again he uttered his thanks; but said he had a friend with him, that he really, he didn't think he would put us to such trouble, and if we didn't mind, he and his friend would follow on our trail, a mile or so behind.

There was a sneaky way in his manner of speaking that didn't please me a cent's worth, so I put in my little say, saying him sharply I spoke. "This is a free country, partner," said I, "and you can spread yourself out wherever you like, but it seems to me we might as well travel in a bunch."

But no, he preferred his own way, and after a few more words, he gave us good-bay and limped along back the way he came; leaving me, for one, with a very poor idea of him.

I found the other boys no better pleased when we came to talk it over, but if there is one thing that gets ground into you following the mines it is to give the other fellow a fair chance before you jump on him. So we dropped Mr. Upton (although we didn't know his name at the time) and turned to our own plans.

Hank Johnson left his team and wagon behind him when he quit Tin Cup the summer before. They were in awful lot. The poor old horses had just about strength enough to walk, and the wagon was wired up and malled up and tied until there wasn't a sound place to put another patch on it still it was a team and a wagon, and would save us packing until we got into the bad country. There we could cash the extra grub, and turn the horses out to grass until we came back again.

Bill caught up old Tom and Jerry, while George and I greased the wagon with strips of bacon-fat. Jim gathered over the cook truck and put away the blankets and tent, so we were ready to pull out by 3 that afternoon.

We put in the rest of the day mending clothes, if you could call what we wore clothes. There wasn't such a thing as a whole garment in the crowd. The wagon was made up of a couple of hundred yards of flannel, and there was sound cloth to sew a place on in our rigs. Old flour-sacks made up the most of them. You can make a shirt very easily by cutting three holes in it, and sewing on three arms, of course, but you don't miss them after awhile.

Who cared, anyhow? There wasn't a soul to see us, and we had no one to June now. Last winter had been pretty rough, but last winter was over. That night we rolled in early, but I couldn't sleep. There was a sort of fidgety when there's a move over, and this particular move meant a whole lot to all of us, for we were flat-busted and fat. There was just a dust, the old man's face. It translated, "Is that what you mean?"

"It must have been what he was driving at, but that's no clew, either. There's plenty of bluff with all kinds of shapes on 'em in the limestone. A pile of rocks' would have been almost as good for a guide. "Still you're strong enough of this map to go out there?"

"Why, there isn't anything left for

a smoke and a quiet swear. Pretty soon George came out and sat down beside me.

"He picked up a handful of pebbles, and snapped them into the creek. "I used to be a great shot playing miggles when I was a kid at school," says he, and then after a bit, "I'd like to see the Hudson again." He pointed up. "Don't it seem queer that the folks back in God's country are looking at that same moon? Kifka of makes you feel near them?"

"I'd bet it's worth speaking of sheriffs, that's he's the last man that fellow would want to see," said Jim slowly. "Why, what do you know about him, Long?" asked Bill. "I don't know nothing about him except the way he kind of wiggles, and always when you look at him you find he's looking at you. He's got a man's done dirt of some kind, now you bet. Why, he was scared of his life of us, asserted Jim. "What was he afraid of?" asked Bill. "I don't like such ways," replied Jim shaking his head solemnly. "Here, George put in with an earnestness that I understood after last night's talk."

"You ought to go light on what a man has been or done, Jim. You hit me on the head with this country when you talk that way." "Aw!" cried Jim, with an impatient wave of his arm. "I ain't cutting at you, but that you keep close behind us. Make your own camp, if you want to, but keep within reach so if anything happens to you, we can lend you a hand—otherwise, back you go. There ain't any sense nor decency in the way you're acting."

Here Upton felt called upon to do a little bluffing. "I don't see what right you have to talk to me like that," says he standing up and facing Bill with quite a swagger. "You take a good deal on yourself and I shall go on or not as I see fit!" "Even if I say no?" asked Bill politely.

"Why, who are you?" demanded Upton. Bill looked at him a minute and smiled, then he turned to the boy and said kindly, "I'm only doing this for your good; it would be almost sure death for you to be lost in the Limestone—sure death for you," wheezing on Upton, "why, you bag of bones! I could throw you back if I wanted to. Now you keep close to the procession or I'll take you across my knee and warm you!" At this we left them.

We made this way until the sun was about an hour high. I don't think I covered over two miles in a straight line, although our trail must have measured ten, at least. It was too hard work trying to take things easy like this; besides, the high horse had to go on the foot, Jim had caught his hand in a right of the rope and while George and I, coxing and struggling and using warm language occasionally, guided our trotters down. We made out this way until the sun was about an hour high. I don't think I covered over two miles in a straight line, although our trail must have measured ten, at least. It was too hard work trying to take things easy like this; besides, the high horse had to go on the foot, Jim had caught his hand in a right of the rope and while George and I, coxing and struggling and using warm language occasionally, guided our trotters down. We made out this way until the sun was about an hour high. 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