

THE EAGLE'S NEST.

In the upper part of its course the South Yuba River dashes and boils through a tremendous canon for a distance of many miles. Everywhere from the town of Washington upward the mountains on both sides of the river, north and south, rise to such a height that one must "look twice" to see their tops. But down near Washington the enclosing mountains are not vertical, as are the walls of rock up where the river breaks down from the main range of the high Sierras. Up there the waters of the river thunder along between perpendicular walls hundreds of feet in height.

It is above this mighty canon that the waters of the river were, in the early days, turned into what was then known as Kidd's Ditch—I suppose the same that is now called the South Yuba Canal. In constructing this ditch it was necessary to build through the canon a large flume. This flume had to be carried along the vertical south wall of the canon for a great distance, at a height, in places, of from 300 to 500 feet above the bed of the river, and from 200 to 300 feet below the top of the wall, from which at several points lumber and timber were lowered by means of ropes.

The flume was supported on iron brackets, holes for which were drilled in the face of the cliff by men suspended on platforms like those used by house painters. These platforms were lowered from above by means of a strongly-anchored windlass. To construct a flume thus in mid-air was a costly and perilous work, but for gold men will venture all things—even life.

The men working on the flume in time became accustomed to the dizzy height, and indifferent to the dangers that beset them. In the work only two or three lives were lost. Though the men employed upon the flume seemed to move fearlessly about in their work, one not hardened to such business could with difficulty nerve himself to venture near enough to the awful chasm to look down to where the river boiled along its bottom.

Owing to the swiftness of the current through the canon, and to the many jutting ledges of rock, boulders, rapids, swirls and swashes, the water was everywhere churned into foam. Seen from the top of the cliff, the water in the channel of the river looked as white as milk.

One experienced very peculiar sensations while looking down upon the boiling and foaming waters—a very creepy, unpleasant feeling. In looking into space above, one feels all right, but on gazing into space below all is wrong; one's head seems turning upside down.

Besides this, there was in the scene something weird and unnatural. But what was it? Presently it occurred to one that what made the scene uncanny was the silence—the absence of the roar that should accompany waters so visibly tossed and agitated. Instead of the deafening roar and swash natural to such a scene, we only caught now and again, as brought near or wafted afar by the shifting winds, a faint and monotonous murmur—the one note into which were merged and blended all the pouring, plunging, splashing and dashing so far away below.

To stand on the brink of the chasm and look down upon the wild whirl of waters at its bottom, gave a man about the same uncanny feeling he would experience were he to see walls and buildings falling on all sides of him, without producing more sound than if they were walls and buildings of air—the structures of dream-land.

One Sunday while the work of carrying the big flume through the canon was in progress I went with a party of half-a-dozen miners and others from the town of Omega to see it. We had heard so many wonderful stories about the great undertaking, the difficulties that were being overcome, and so on, that we were all anxious to see with our own eyes what was being done.

In going to the point where the flume-building was in progress, we procured horses and took the main ridge above the town, where we had for nearly the whole distance a wagon road—the Bear Valley road, I believe it was called. When opposite where the flume was going in, we left the road, and, taking to the forest, zigzagged down the face of the mountain to the camp of the workmen. There was not another building of any kind within ten miles of the spot.

Being all young and full of fun we charged down upon the quiet camp like a band of wild Indians, and soon had the place in a considerable state of commotion, for we were received in about the same spirit as we exhibited by all who were visible about the camp. Then an irruption of visitors was not an every-day occurrence.

With our party went a Mr. Van Vrankin, the hotelkeeper of the town of Omega. He was the hero of our first adventure, as he came near being plunged head first into the abyss. On our arrival at the camp we had dismounted and tied our horses to some trees near the boarding house; that is, all except Van Vrankin, who being older than any other of the party, and more careful of his bones, had lagged behind, executing numerous elaborate zigzags on the face of the mountain.

When Van arrived, we were all out near

the verge of the chasm. Seeing us with a carpenter who was an old acquaintance, Van rode directly up to our party. Shaking hands with his friend he dismounted, and stood talking with his horse on his arm.

Van had a shepherd-dog he highly prized and this dog had come with him on the trip, as he and the horse Van rode were inseparable companions. Had the dog been left at home, he would have cried his heart out.

Now it so happened that there were two or three cows kept at the camp, and one of these had a calf that was kept in a pen near the lodging-house. As soon as Van halted and dismounted, his dog began prospecting the camp. About the first thing that attracted his attention was the calf, and he went to the pen to see it. No sooner, however, had he reached the pen than he was discovered by the mother of the calf. The cow charged with a snort of wrath, and the dog turned tail and fled toward his friend the horse.

Seeing the yelping dog coming, with the cow in full chase, the horse was startled, and throwing his head up, began backing toward the brink of the precipice. The more Van pulled, the higher the horse threw his head, and the faster he backed. In running backward the horse pulled Van with him, who, with feet braced, was sliding along on the carpet of pine needles quiet unaware of the near proximity of the precipice.

"Look out!" "Let go the horse?" "Look out for the canon!" cried a dozen voices, yet Van held on. Having been engaged in conversation from the moment of his arrival, he had not looked about him, and little thought he was so near a vertical precipice over seven hundred feet high.

Not heeding the babel of voices roaring at him, Van still pulled at his horse, which caused the animal to pull back all the more stubbornly, going squarely to the edge of the chasm.

"Let go the horse, for God's sake!" yelled the carpenter, at the same time making a rush for Van and grabbing him by the coat-tails. At the very instant he did so, the horse went over the brow of the cliff, the bridle luckily slipping out of Van's hand.

The horse seemed to cling to the brink a fraction of a second by his forefeet, and then disappeared. No sooner had the horse tumbled into the abyss than the dog ran to the verge, and without an instant's hesitation leaped over after him.

All was over so quickly that Van hardly realized what had happened, and would have run to the brink of the chasm to look after his horse and dog had not his friend the carpenter held him and told him of the danger. Van said afterward he thought all the time the fuss was about some little gully.

The next moment after saving Van, the carpenter was again all excitement. "My God!" cried he, "my God! the men below! the men on the flume are all killed!" and he ran to the railing by the windlass and looked over. After a glance he turned to us and said, "Thank God, they are all right!"

We afterwards ascertained by calling down to the men that the falling horse had passed only about ten feet in front of the end of the flume where they were at work.

One of the men said: "We thought old Satan was coming with one of his imps after him!" Another one said that they all very plainly "felt the wind" of the falling horse.

Looking down from the railing by the windlass we could see a black spot—the horse was black—at the edge of the milky stream. We could see nothing of the dog. We called down to the men three hundred feet below; they said the horse was motionless, but a speck that was probably the dog seemed to show some motion at times.

As the horse was in a place that could not be reached except by a tramp of five miles up the river to where a descent into the canon might be made, Van left ten dollars to be given to any one among the workmen who would bring out his saddle and bridle, and send them to Nevada City at the first opportunity. The man was also to bring out the dog, if he was not hurt beyond hope of recovery.

I may say right here that the man who next day descended into the canon found the dog with his back and both hind legs broken. The poor brute had dragged himself to the head of the dead horse, beside which he lay. He greeted the workman with glad barks. In order to give the dog a last gratification the man gave him all the water he could drink, and then put a bullet through his head.

The windlass and railing of which I have spoken were on a platform of timbers of large size and about seventy-five feet in length. The ends—there were a dozen logs—had been pushed out five or six feet over the brink of the precipice, while the "inshore" ends were anchored far back from the bank, and weighted with cribs of stone. When we had been shown this place, we could in safety stand and look down into the chasm.

As we were about starting for home, the men at the flume camp told us that about a mile-and-a-half down the river was to be seen the nest of a pair of eagles, in which were two eaglets. They said we might return that way and see the nest, which was on a scrub cedar growing on the verge of the precipice and projecting over the abyss.

"But," said the man, "we do not feel afraid of your carrying off our pets. The nest is over a part of the canon that is about one thousand feet deep, and out on the branches of a nearly horizontal tree. Not a man in the state has the nerve to climb out along the trunk of that cedar and bring in the young eagles!"

We concluded to ride by the eagles' nest in returning, as it was not out of our way.

As we rode along down the river, all the talk was of the eagles. "Evidently no one working on the flume dare try to get the young eagles," said Van, who had made a bargain with one of our party to go home on foot and let him ride.

So much talk was made about going after the eagles that I at last said that I was not afraid to go out after them. I had gazed down into the canon so long from the windlass platform that I imagined I had cured myself of the dread of mere depth, and had gained such control of my head that I could trust it; besides, I would not look down into the canon. I would follow the rule of the rope-dancers, and see nothing but the trunk of the tree and the eaglets.

I was dared, hooted and scouted. Two or three were ready to put up fifty dollars to fifty cents, and as many more, one hundred dollars to one dollar, that I would not dare go out after the young eagles. I said I would consider the bets when I had seen the situation of the nest.

When we came to the nest, it was seen at a glance that it could not possibly have been so placed as to be more difficult of access. The cedar grew on the very brink of the precipice, rooted in a large cleft that contained some soil. It was only about eight inches in diameter, and extended almost horizontally from the brow of the precipice, which was vertical. Out about ten feet the tree put forth several branches, which spread out like a fan. The boughs of the tree formed a sort of platform on which was the nest and the young eagles, with naught below for a distance of a thousand feet more substantial than thin air.

The eaglets seemed to be pretty well feathered, and after a critical examination of them and the situation, I told my companions I would take all their bets and go out after the birds, but would not agree to bring them in, as they might perhaps fly away.

All held to their offers. I stripped to shirt and drawers. Then even such as before had been doubters began to believe me in earnest. Bob Paxton, a brother "Buckeye," earnestly labored to dissuade me from the undertaking. He had a real brotherly regard for me, not alone on that occasion, but to the last day of his life. Poor Bob! his bones lie now in the land of the Mormon.

An eagle that had been wheeling about at a height of some hundreds of feet above us—probably the mother bird—began to grow uneasy at the sight of our party so near its young. It uttered several shrill shrieks as it circled above our heads. Its cry was presently answered, and we saw coming from the north, as from the top of the great pine clad mountain on the opposite side of the river toward Eureka, the mate that had been called. The two shrieking birds swooped about in a manner so threatening that Bob Paxton said they would surely attack me if I ventured out near their young. He made me belt to my side a long "Arkansaw toothpick," which he always carried, and which he informed me would "cut like a razor."

The belting of my big knife completed my preparations for the perilous adventure. My determination was to see nothing except the tree and the eaglets. By persisting in that, I thought I could easily succeed in the venture. Had the tree been out on level ground, any one of the party could have climbed the nest in three minutes. All I had to do was to keep out of my head the awful below. I might look upward into space, for that I was accustomed to.

I was barefoot, and stripped to the undershirt and drawers. A silk handkerchief was bound tightly around my head. Amid a silence that was breathless I advanced to the verge of the cliff, and dropping to the ground, crawled astride the trunk of the little projecting cedar. I fixed my eyes on the young eagles, and and would see nothing else.

It was ten feet out to the nest. Soon I was out to where the branches put forth from the trunk and, spreading fan-like, formed the platform on which was the nest. I could almost reach it. The old eagles screamed nearer and nearer, and I could hear the whistling of the feathers in their wings as they swooped to and fro above my head.

The young eagles soon became alarmed. They reared up, spread their wings, and opening their great mouths, began to make a hissing noise. This appeared to enrage the parent birds, and one of them came so low as to brush my head.

Thus far I had not ventured to look up toward the old birds. Seated astride a pole only eight inches in diameter, I was not in a position to look aloft. Let any one make the experiment in a safe place on level ground, and he will at once discover that it is difficult to retain his balance—to escape toppling over.

After being touched by one of the old birds, I saw that it was absolutely necessary to pay some attention to them, or I should be struck on the head and knocked of my slender perch. Reaching out with



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