

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

Down came the pick, up went the dust, down rattled the stones. He scarcely looked at the heap, but let the pick fall, and turned to leap from the hole. As he did so the corner of his eye, the corner only, caught the glitter—the precious, the dear, dull glitter which is the fairest sight earth holds for a digger's eyes. He swung round dropped on his knees, and clawing at the heap with his hands, dragged out—a nugget!

The sudden turn of the wheel of fortune stunned him for a moment. It was so unexpected, so unlooked for, that he could not believe it.

He took it up and weighed it in both hands. In nine months you learn something of the value of a nugget. Neville knew there was nearly a thousand pounds in the one he held in his hot, trembling palms.

He turned it over as a miser turns over his title-deeds, a bibliomaniac his rare first edition, a china maniac his most precious tea-pot. He held it close to his eyes, stroked it, even smelled it.

Nearly a thousand pounds! He sunk down in the pit, leaning against the side, and, still with his eyes fixed on it, thought of what he would do with it.

It was not a fortune; by no means; but a thousand pounds, let me remind you, is a large sum to drop into the hands of a youngster of nineteen, especially when a few minutes before his only valuable was a silver pencil-case, which he had parted with for meal.

With a thousand pounds he could go back to England, if not rich, as riches are counted, yet at any rate not a beggar. Jordan—one would laugh or sneer at him. A thousand pounds! He could buy land—a small farm—in Devonshire, and raise cattle. He could at any rate get out of this beastly, sun-smitten, plague-stricken dust-laden, blackguard-haunted Lorn Hope.

The thought recalled him to himself, sent the fire through his veins, imbued him with energy, strength, life, spirit.

He leaped, not climbed, out of the pit, with the precious nugget hidden under his tattered shirt, and ran toward the hut, and began turning out the contents of his box, flinging the things to right and left in a senseless kind of fashion. What he was trying to do was to look out some more decent apparel.

The old woman darkened the door-way. 'This yere's all I can get,' she croaked, holding up the bag, in the bottom of which was some meal. 'Tain't much, tain't half enough; but there don't seem no run on pencil cases.'

Neville turned his glowing face up to her.

'All right, Meth,' he said, with a laugh in his voice. 'It's all right; I've struck it; and he held up the nugget. 'Hush!' for the old woman had uttered a suppressed screech. 'Struck it just now, five minutes, half an hour—he didn't know how long he had been sitting in the pit staring at his nugget—just after you had gone. Grand, isn't it?'

'Lawk sakes!' mumbled the old woman. 'To think of it, and I'd 'ev bet my bottom dollar that there wasn't a spark of yellow on the whole claim.'

'That's just it! That's just the way of it,' said Neville, rapidly. 'It always comes when you don't expect it—when you're not looking for it; that's the charm of this confounded gold-digging business. But it's come; that's the main thing.'

'Let's wet it,' said Mrs. Methuselah.

Neville raked around the box.

'Sorry,' gave the Doc the last drop of liquor I had. Never mind, Meth; you shall have enough to swim in to-morrow. Let me see; this is the sixteenth, isn't it? Yes, the day the bank agent comes down. I'll take it down to the camp and swap it for notes, and then—' he drew a long breath.

'And then you're off,' said Mrs. Meth, stirring up the fire with one hand and turning out the meal into a basin with the other.

'Then I'm off, as you say,' he assented.

'No more Lorn Hope for me, thank you!'

'There might be more where that came from,' she said pointing a skinny finger at the yellow nugget lying beside him, within reach of his hand.

He shook his head.

'No; it's just a pocket, Meth; I know the look of it; and if there were—well, I don't think they would keep me. I'm sick of it—just sick of it. I want to go back. I'm homesick—do you understand?'

Rapidly making the meal into cakes, she nodded.

'That's it,' he said. 'Homesick—got the English fever on me, Meth. You don't know what that means? Lucky for you, perhaps. What's the time?'

He sprang up, and screening his eyes with his hand, looked at the sinking sun.

'The bank agent will be down at the camp, I should think. I'm off!'

'You'd best stop and get a cup o' tea and some at to eat,' said the old woman. 'You go rushing down there with that there nugget on an empty stomach and they'll get the best of you, Young 'Un.'

He laughed and pushed the short curly hair from his forehead.

'You speak the words of wisdom and truth, Old 'Un,' he said.

'I'll stay for tea; and, look here, I mean the square thing by you. You've stood by me through a long run of bad luck.'

'That's nothing,' she said, lifting the boiling kettle from the fire.

'But it is, and I'll stand by you, Meth. You shall have—let me see—you shall have fifty pounds.'

'Fifty pounds!'

She opened her lips and showed her toothless gums.

'Yes,' he said, 'and if my partner were here he should have half of it—the nugget, I mean.'

Then he clutched it up.

'All the better for you,' said the old woman, with a groan.

Neville nodded.

'Yes; and yet I wish he'd hung on. It's strange that I should have stayed.'

You believed in your luck, Young 'Un,' she mumbled. 'Nothing like sticking to your luck. Here's your tea, and here's a cake.'

He drank the awful mixture of currant bush and iron filings, and eat some of the hot meal-cake. Your gold diggers know not indigestion.

'Fifty pounds,' he said, as he set the tin mug down on the top of the box. 'That will give you a fresh start, eh, Meth?'

She laughed and crooned. He washed himself, thrust on a light pea-jacket, and with the precious nugget hidden beneath it, left the hut.

A new moon was rising placidly above the mountain range, its faintly defined crescent showing against the light from the west, in which the sun had set surrounded by golden fire.

Neville did not stop to admire or even notice the moon, but with the nugget pressed close to his heart, walked rapidly toward the camp. He passed his claim, glancing at it as a man glances at a much-loved mistress, picked his way past many a similar hole, threaded the tents and shanties which formed the outskirts of the camp, and presently neared the center—Sandy Macgregor's grog tent.

It was a larger tent than the rest, and Neville, as he approached it, saw the light of the candles and benzoline lamps shining through it. He also heard the buzz and murmur of voices. They floated through the evening air, still thick and heavy with the remnant of the day's heat. He trod lightly, springily, drawing strength and energy from the nugget pressed against his heart. He knew that the bank agent, if he had arrived, would be found here, and in imagination he already held and counted the precious notes which he would receive in exchange for his nugget.

He paused as he reached the tent, and drawing the lump of virgin gold from its hiding-place, he took a last look at it. Nearly a thousand pounds! Away flew his thoughts to England—dear, sweet, green-smelling England—a farm, lowing cattle, green fields, home! Oh, you discontented ones who dwell at home in the dear old land and grumble at the weather, and this, and the other, if you only knew how the wanderer longs for home, home!

The flap of the tent door was thrown back. He drew near and looked in.

Sandy was standing at the bar, behind a counter of rough deal. The place was full, but the men were not sitting and lying around playing cards or quarreling, but standing in a crowd, with all their faces turned toward the end of the tent.

Something unusual and out of the ordinary was going on.

Neville drew a little nearer and looked in. He saw, at the end of the big tent, a man standing on an upturned barrel. He was the spokesman of Lorn Hope, a ne'er-do-weel with the gift of gab—a man named Locket, and he was evidently holding forth.

He stood, ragged, with unkempt hair and long neglected beard, a tin can in one hand, the other held up to invoke silence. Neville, curious but impatient, listened, and this is what he heard.

'Now pards, the orator was saying, 'this yere's the case in a nutshell: a stranger comes to this yere camp—comes here from no one knows where or how, sick and sorry. And this yere stranger, after receiving every attention from our mutual friend, the Doc—'

'Three cheers for the Doc!' cried a voice thick with Macgregor's whisky, followed by 'Shut up! Turn it off!'

'After receiving every attention from the Doc,' continued the orator, 'this yere stranger hands in his checks. It ain't an unusual proceedin' in Lorn Hope, by no means—'

'A custom more honored in the breach than the observance,' called out the doctor. 'That's Shakespeare, boys.'

'Right your are, Doc, and you ought to know I was the shouted response.

'Order said the speaker on the barrel. 'This yere stranger cuts his cable, and upon my mortal soul, it's the best thing he could do.'

'Hear, hear!'

'There's no luck in Lorn Hope for the residents, leave alone a stranger, boys.'

'Hear, hear! with increased emphasis.

'The stranger goes,' continued the orator, 'but he leaves something more than his blessing behind. Boys, he leaves a child—a girl. And now, gentlemen, the question of this free and independent assemblage of Lorn Hope citizens is to decide what shall be done with the child.'

'Hear, hear! That's the question,' hiccupped a miner close to the entrance, against which Neville stood and watched and listened.

'Nothing's known o' this yere stranger,' returned Locket. 'He don't leave no will, and he don't express no wish; and its left to the—the—he thought for a big and appropriate word, and found it at last—for the collective wisdom of Lorn Hope to decide. Here's the Doc—he was with the stranger at his last moments, and he's offered to take the child; but—the speaker paused—'it pears to me that the Doc has as much as he can do to look after himself; he ain't no millionaire.'

'Hear, hear, hear!' from all parts of the audience.

'Just so! Well, this yere child is a kid at present, but she'll grow up to be useful presently; and if anyone wants a promising young 'un as can be taught to cook and look after things, now's their chance.'

A hubbub of voices arose, almost drowning the speaker's last words, and in the midst of the noise Neville made his entrance without attracting any attention. He looked round the tent. It was filled with the Lorn Hope population, man, boy, woman. His bright young eye fell ultimately upon a group standing just beside the orator.

There were three or four women, and in their midst a young girl with gray eyes and dark hair. She looked half dazed with fear, and clung to one of the women with one hand, while the other held back the thick wealth of hair from her puzzled and frightened eyes.

The face, the eyes, smote Neville like a blow. He saw the bank agent sitting on a plank and watching the proceedings with a smile of indolent amusement; but even as he looked at the agent he forgot him; the girl's pale, frightened face fascinated, absorbed him.

'Here's this young girl,' resumed the orator, 'a-go-in' beggin', as you may say. Now who—'

'I'll take her! I'll take her!' rose from different parts of the crowd.

'Too many of you,' retorted the speaker tossing off a glass of Macgregor's whisky, and chucking the empty glass to the proprietor of the saloon; 'one at a time; you can't all have the same young orphan. What's to be done?'

'Put her up for sale!' cried a voice.

'The highest bidder has her.'

The orator paused a moment and seemed to consider the proposal, then he nodded.

'Right you are!' he said. 'That's fair and square. Here's a useful lot—a young girl that will learn to cook and work before you can say Jack Robinson; a sun-beam for any man's house, let him be whoever he may. Who bids for the orphan?'

The girl looked around at the hot, sun-burnt faces, and, her breath coming fast and quick, clung still more tightly to the woman nearest to her, and the woman tried to soothe her. The bank agent, smoking a big cigar, looked on with a smile. He was accustomed to the rough humor of a diggers' camp; but it had been reserved for Lorn Hope to afford a new excitement. The scene reminded him of the 'good' old slave times in the States.

'Now then shout the auctioneer, there's the rules and regulations; the orphan's to be disposed of to the highest bidder—'

'What are you going to do with the money?' demanded a voice. Locket considered a moment.

'We'll hand it to the doctor as the beginning of a fund for the great Lorn Hope Hospital.'

'A jail 'ud be more useful,' commented some one sarcastically.

'Or a cemetery and lunatic asylum combined,' yelled another.

'As you please, pards,' said Locket. 'We can decide what we will do with the money after we've got it. Jail, cemetery, hospital—'

'Or drinks round,' put in a voice.

'Whatever you like. Now, then,—first bid!'

The men looked round at one another and laughed half shyly, no one liking to make the first offer.

'What! I'm to start the running myself, eh?' said the auctioneer. 'All right.'

He took out some buttons and odds and ends from his pocket and pretended to count over a large quantity of coin.

'Well, to start you, here's a shilling.'

Somebody, half in fun, shouted:

'One and sixpence.'

The ball was started and ran merrily.

By sixpences and shillings and an occasional half crown the bidding was run up to three pounds.

There were only three men bidding, and presently with a laugh, one dropped out, leaving the contest to the two. Just as Locket was, in burlesque imitation of an auctioneer, exhorting and encouraging these two, Neville felt some one push lightly past him, and saw that it was Lavarick.

He had come into the tent in his usual stealthy fashion, and stood, his eyes fixed, the left, with the cast, on the girl, the other on the men. Neville disliked the man—suspected him of being the worst scoundrel in the camp—and instinctively put his hand over that part of his coat which covered his nugget.

Lavarick was not a digger, had never had a claim or taken a pick in his hand; and seeing that he did no work of any kind nor kept a store, and that he had never been actually caught stealing, some slight curiosity was felt by the camp as to how he lived. But it was only slight; persons living in glass houses are not only careful not to shyn stones, but shut their eyes when they pass one. Some said that Lavarick did a little gold-dealing with the men now and then, and that he made a little with cards. He wore what had once been a suit of black broad cloth, and the wit of the camp declared that Lavarick had 'done' six months in England for walking off with the money he was collecting at the door of a Dissenting chapel. He looked something like a broken clerk, and he was not unfrequently addressed as 'Under-taker.'

He edged and glided among the crowd until he had reached the end of the table, and with his left eye still on the girl, listened to Locket and the two men with an expression of suppressed eagerness and excitement, and when Locket shouted, 'three pounds nine—going, going! Ned you've got a handy parlor-maid, in the future, cheap as dirt—going, going!' Lavarick held up a dirty paw, and with a sickly smile of assumed indifference, said:

'Three pounds ten.'

'Halloo!' exclaimed Locket. 'Here's another. Bravo, Undertaker! But ain't you rather premature? It's a live orphan we're disposing of.'

The roar that followed drowned a faint cry of terror that escaped the child's quivering lips, but Neville heard it, and his face grew pale and his eyes flashed.

He pushed aside the man in front of him and stepped forward.

'Four pounds,' he said, quietly; but his voice was clear and distinct enough, though low, to be heard by all, and there was a ring in it that caused the laughter to stop suddenly, and drew every eye upon him.

The child, after that one glance at Lavarick, had turned and hidden her face against the breast of the woman to whom she was clinging, and she turned her head and looked over her shoulder at Neville, and he caught the look of anguished entreaty in the big gray eyes.

'And here's another!' cried Locket; 'and the Young 'Un, too! Cupid versus the Undertaker and Long Ned and four pounds. Four pounds! No more shillings, gentlemen. We'll have pounds now. I see that hospital, Doc—in my mind's eye, I do.'

Lavarick looked at Neville with an ugly sneer. He knew that the lad had had a run of bad luck, and his partner had left the claim in disgust, and he smiled contemptuously.

'Well, five pounds,' he said.

'Six.'

'Seven.'

'Eight.'

'Ten.'

'Twenty.'

'Forty.'

An intense silence prevailed as the bidding rose. The two men stood divided by the rickety table, looking at each other, Lavarick with the same sickly smile on his face and the suppressed eagerness with his ill-shaped mouth, Neville with his lips set square and his blue eyes stern and determined.

The burlesque had died out of Locket's manner, and a grim seriousness had taken its place. Every man in the crowd recognized that a change had come over the spirit of the dream, and what had begun as a piece of fun had developed into terrible earnest.

'One hundred,' said Lavarick.

The crowd exchanged glances of amazement, and waited breathlessly.

'Has he got the money? and where did he get it?' ran round.

'One hundred and fifty,' said Neville.

'He's got the money, or he wouldn't bid. He's straight enough, the Young 'Un is; but where did he get it?'

'Two hundred,' dropped from Lavarick's lips.

Quick as thought, Neville retorted with:

'Two hundred and fifty.'

Locket raised his eyes and looked at Neville with a cunning suspicion.

'Is it a game of bluff?' he said. 'Is the Young 'Un just a drawing me out for fun of the time?'

An angry murmur arose.

'I should recommend any gentleman inclined to play that game to drop it,' remarked Locket, grimly. 'We are serious now. This is business, eh, boys?'

A shout of assent rose.

'Oh, I'm right,' said Lavarick. 'I've got what I bid; I'm not bluffing—I'm not. As to him—'

Neville did not condescend to assert his solvency.

'Is the bid against me?' he asked, looking up at the auctioneer. 'If not, I claim—'

'Three hundred,' broke in Lavarick.

'Four,' was the sharp response of Neville.

The crowd drew a long breath.

'We shall want that lunatic asylum, anyhow,' remarked the wit, dryly; but no one laughed at the sally.

'Five!' snarled Lavarick.

Neville instantly bid 'Six.'

The crowd pressed close up to the two men. The excitement became feverish.

Lavarick, his face pale and distorted, paused a moment, then said:

'Seven.'

A roar went up, but as it died away, Neville's voice was heard to utter, 'Eight.'

He, too, was pale. He had weighed his nugget. There was not a thousand pounds in it—say nine hundred and sixty, after deducting the agent's charges. It was just possible that Lavarick possessed more—he was a dark horse—and would outbid him.

He could see the girl's eyes fixed on him as if she had no power to with-

draw them, and they, seemed to be burning his heart and sending fire instead of blood through his veins. He would save her, it it cost him every ounce, every pennyweight of his precious nugget.

Lavarick stood, his hands writhing at his sides, his eyes looking first at Neville and then at the child.

'Eight hundred and fifty,' dropped slowly from his lips.

The crowd waited. The auctioneer stood with upheld hand.

'Going at eight hundred and fifty,' he said, grimly. 'Going, going!'

'Nine hundred!' said Neville.

A shout rose. Locket commanded silence. A dense stillness fell instantly, and all eyes were fixed on Lavarick. He turned red, then white; his lips opened as if he were about to speak; then, with a sinister smile, he turned aside.

'Going, gone!' cried Locket.

The tent shook with the roar that rose in a deafening volley, and rose yet again as Neville grimly unbuttoned his coat and dropped the nugget on the table. The crowd pressed forward with a renewed shout, this time of delighted astonishment at the dramatic finale.

'Bravo, Young 'Un! Bravo!' they yelled; and a dozen grimy hands were thrust forward toward him. 'Tell us, Young 'Un, is it your pile, or is there more behind? Where did you get it? What's its weight?'

These and a score of similar questions were yelled at him. Neville held up his hand for silence.

'There's no more; it's my pile,' he said, as quietly as usual. 'There's nearly a thousand pounds there.' He laid one hand on the nugget and beckoned to the bank agent with the other. 'I leave it in your charge, Mr. Smith,' he said. 'Pay for my bid and hand me the rest to-morrow.'

The agent nodded. The crowd closed round the nugget, staring at it. Neville turned to the group of women and held out his hand to the child.

'Will you come with me?' he said.

The great eyes stared at him for a moment vacantly, and with no sign of sense or comprehension. Something in his pitying blue eyes seemed to awaken the intelligence which the prolonged terror had numbed—almost slain—and she leaned toward him.

He took her hand. It was cold as ice and quivering like a leaf in the wind; but she staggered, and he took her up in his arms bodily and strode toward the opening of the tent.

As he did so, Lavarick glided out sideways, with a hand thrust in his breast-pocket. Neville slung the child quickly but gently over his left shoulder, leaving his right hand free, and quietly drew out his revolver.

'Go back and stop there!' he said.

Lavarick, with an affection of surprise, drew out the remnant of a pocket-handkerchief as if he had only intended blowing his nose; but he shrunk back and Neville passed him, with the child still over his shoulder and the revolver still in his hand, went out into the open air.

CHAPTER III.

The night air cooled Neville Lynne's excitement somewhat, and as he made his way over the rough, uneven ground toward his hut, walking as quickly as he could, he began to realize what he had done.

He had spent his whole fortune, barring a few pounds, in buying the young girl lying across his shoulder, and he asked himself the question which many a man has asked upon finding himself the purchaser of some lot at a sale.

'What on earth shall I do with it?'

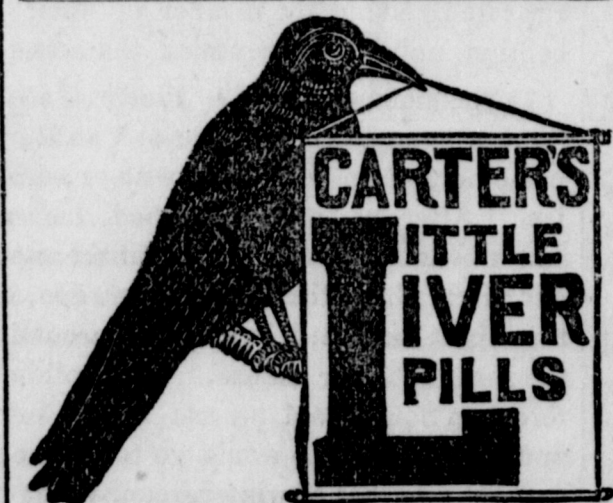
Nine hundred pounds! His all! He laughed grimly; and yet if it had had to be done again he would have done it. Standing opposite that cadaverous, evil-looking face of Lavarick, with the child's wonderful gray eyes burning their way into his heart, he had felt that he would have bid the clothes off his back before Lavarick should have had her.

She lay quite motionless and inert against his heart, and Neville deemed it best to say nothing to her. He could feel her heart panting against his, and her breath coming still in frightened little pants against his cheek; and once when a digger stumbled past them, her hands clutched Neville's shirt spasmodically.

The inspired idiot who invented the copy book heading, says that 'The truly courageous are always humane,' and young Neville with the pluck of a bull-dog, possessed the tender heart of a woman.

They reached the hut, and at the sound of his footsteps Mrs. Meth appeared at the door-way, holding the tallow candle above her head and peering at them.

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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