

XIV.

THE OLD PROSPECTOR'S AWAKING

FOR six weeks the Old Prospector lay fretting his life away in his shack, not so ill as to be in danger. The pneumonia had almost disappeared and the rheumatism had subsided, but yet such grave symptoms remained as made the doctor forbid his setting forth upon his annual quest of the Lost River. In these days his chief comfort was Shock, whose old habit of sharing his experiences in imagination with those who could not share them in reality, relieved for the Old Prospector many a monotonous hour.

But Shock's days, and most of his nights, even, were spent upon the trail rounding up "strays and mavericks," as Ike said, searching out the lonely bachelor shacks, and lonelier homes where women dwelt whose husbands' days were spent on the range, and whose nearest neighbour might be eight or ten miles away, bringing a touch of the outer world, and leaving a gleam of the light that he carried in his own sunny, honest face.

And so Shock soon came to know more of the far back settlers than did even the oldest timer; and, what was better, he began to establish among them some sort of social life. It was Shock, for instance,

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that discovered old Mrs. Hamilton and her two sons, and drove her after much persuasion eight miles over "The Rise," past which she had not set her foot for the nine long, sad years that had dragged out their lonely length since her husband left her alone with her two boys of seven and nine, to visit Mrs. Macnamara, the delicate wife of the rollicking Irish rancher, who, seldom out of the saddle himself, had never been able to understand the heart-hunger that only became less as her own life ran low. It was her little family growing up about her, at once draining her vitality but, thank God, nourishing in her heart hope and courage, that preserved for her faith and reason. It was a great day for the Macnamaras when their big friend drove over their next neighbour, Mrs. Hamilton, to make her first call.

• Another result of Shock's work became apparent in the gradual development of Loon Lake, or "The Lake," as it was most frequently named, into a centre of social life. In the first place a school had been established, in which Marion had been installed as teacher, and once the children came to the village it was easier for the parents to find their way thither.

Every week, too, The Kid and Ike found occasion to visit The Lake and call for Shock, who made his home, for the most part, with the Old Prospector. Every week, too, the doctor would appear to pay a visit to his patients; but, indeed, in some way or other the doctor was being constantly employed on cases discovered by Shock. The Macnamara's baby with

the club-foot, Scrub Kettle's girl with the spinal trouble; Lawrence Delamere, the handsome young English lad up in "The Pass," whose leg, injured in a mine accident, never would heal till the doctor had scraped the bone—these and many others owed their soundness to Shock's prospecting powers and to the doctor's skill. And so many a mile they drove together to their mutual good. For, while the doctor prosecuted with delight and diligence his healing art, all unconsciously he himself was regaining something of his freedom and manhood.

"Digs 'em up, don't he?" said Ike one Sunday, when the second flat of Jim Ross's store was filled with men and women who, though they had lived in the country for from two to twenty years, were still for the most part strangers to each other. "Digs 'em up like the boys dig the badgers. Got to come out of their holes when he gits after 'em."

"Dat's so," said Perault, who had become an ardent follower of Shock's. "Dat's so. All same lak ole boss."

"Prospector, eh?" said Ike.

"Oui. Prospector, sure enough, by gar!" replied Perault, with the emphasis of a man who has stumbled upon a great find; and the name came at once to be recognised as so eminently suitable that from that time forth it stuck, and all the more that before many weeks there was none to dispute the title with him.

All this time the Old Prospector fretted and wasted with an inward fever that baffled the doctor's skill,

and but for the visits of his friends and their constant assurances that next week would see him fit, the old man would have succumbed.

"It's my opinion," said Ike, who with The Kid had made a habit of dropping in for a visit to the sick man, and then would dispose themselves outside for a smoke, listening the while to the flow of song and story wherewith his daughter would beguile the old man from his weariness; "it's my opinion that it aint either that rheumatism nor that there pewmonia,"—Ike had once glanced at the doctor's label which distinguished the pneumonia medicine from that prescribed for rheumatism,—"*it aint either the rheumatism nor that there pewmonia,*" he repeated, "*that's a-killin' him.*"

"What then do you think it is, Ike?" said the doctor, to whom Ike had been confiding this opinion.

"It's frettin'; frettin' after the trail and the Lost River. For thirteen years he's chased that river, and he'll die a-chasin' it."

"Well, he'll certainly die if he starts after it in his present condition."

"Maybe so, doctor. I wouldn't interdict any opinion of yours. But I reckon he'd die a mighty sight easier."

"Well, Ike, my boy," said the doctor in his gentle voice, "perhaps you are right, perhaps you're right. The suggestion is worth considering."

And the result seemed to justify Ike's opinion, for from the day that the doctor fixed the time for the

Old Prospector's departure the fever abated, his philosophic calm returned, he became daily stronger and daily more cheerful and courageous, and though he was troubled still with a cough he departed one bright day, with Perault, in high spirits.

"I shall remember you all," he cried, waving his hand gaily in farewell. "Doctor, I shall build you a hospital where your skill will have opportunity and scope. Mr. Macgregor, your heart will be delighted with that church-manse-school building of yours." This was Shock's pet scheme for the present. "To all of you suitable rewards. This time I see success. Farewell."

After he had turned away he reined back his pony and addressed Shock again.

"Mr. Macgregor," he said, with almost solemn earnestness, "I give my daughter into your charge. I am sure you will watch over her. She will be comfortable with Josie, and she will be safe under your care."

His spirit of enthusiastic confidence caught all the crowd standing by, so that they gave him a hearty cheer in farewell.

"Did not say what he would give us, eh, Carroll?" said Crawley, who with Carroll stood at the back of the crowd.

"Blanked old fool!" growled Carroll.

"And yet he has a marvellous instinct for mines," said Crawley, "and this time he has got something more than usual in his head, I believe. He has been particularly secretive. I could not get anything out

of him. Guess he means to euchre us out of our share of anything big, partner."

"Curse him for an owld thief!" said Carroll. "I'll have it out av his hide, so I will, if he tries that."

"Then, Carroll, you'll have to do it when his big friend is not round."

Carroll's answer was a perfect flood of profanity, copious enough to include not only the Old Prospector, Shock, all the relatives living and dead, but Crawley, who stood listening with a sarcastic grin on his evil face.

"Well, well," at last said Crawley soothingly, "your time will come. And, partner, you may depend on me when it comes. I owe him something, too, and I would rather pay it than get a mine."

The days that followed the Old Prospector's departure were lonely enough for his daughter. Her father's illness had brought to them both the inestimable boon of mutual acquaintance and affection. It was the girl's first experience of having near her one to whom she could freely give the long-hoarded treasures of her love; and now that he was gone she could only wonder how she could have lived so long without him. It was well for her that she had her school, which she transferred now to her father's house, for though Shock occupied the inner room he was very little at home.

In addition to the school there was Patsy, who, never very strong, had not regained even his puny strength since the operation. Every fine day Marion would take the little lad for a glorious canter up the

trail that ran along The Lake, but the day was never complete to Patsy unless it included a visit to the Jumping Rock, and there a tale, and at least one song. In these rides Stanton, as often as he visited the village, would join, and then it was the Swallow that the little cripple would ride, holding his reins in cowboy style high in one hand, and swaying with careless security in the saddle, and all the more because of the strong arm about him.

These were happy days to Patsy, happy to young Stanton, happier than she knew to Marion, and all the happier by contrast to the dark, sad days that followed.

About three weeks after the Old Prospector's departure a half-breed, on a cayuse wet and leg-wearry, appeared at the Loon Lake Stopping Place, asking for the preacher.

"Blanked if I know!" growled Carroll. "Off on some fool hunt or other."

"Ask Ike there," said Crawley, who was sitting on the stoop. "You belong to his flock, don't you, Ike? Elder, aint you?"

"His flock?" echoed Ike. "Wouldn't mind if I did. I'd be sure of my company, which I can't always be almost anywhere else. Wantin' the preacher, eh?" turning to the half-breed.

"Letter from de old man."

"What old man? Let me see it," said Crawley quickly. "Ah! 'Rev. Mr. Macgregor, or one of his friends.' Guess this is from the Old Prospector, eh?"

The half-breed nodded.

"Where is he?"

"Way up in mountain," he said, waving his hand toward the hills.

"Well, the preacher isn't here. It must be important," continued Crawley. "I suppose I might as well open it, especially as it is likely it will be something about outfit. Eh, Carroll?"

He was about to tear the letter open when Ike interposed.

"Hold up, there. It strikes me you're a little rapid in your conclusions. Let's have a look at the letter."

Crawley very unwillingly gave it up.

"One of his friends," read Ike, with some difficulty, "You count yourself in there, do you?" to Crawley. "You'd be mighty lucky if he agreed with you on that there point. Now I judge this ought to go to the preacher or, if he aint round, to the young lady."

So saying, Ike, without another glance at the disappointed Crawley, strode away with the letter to find Marion.

He found her busy in the school. She read the letter, looked at Ike with white face and wide-open eyes, read it a second time, and said, "He wants Mr. Macgregor, quick—and me. He is ill. Oh, Ike!" she cried suddenly, "he is ill, and Mr. Macgregor is away."

"Where did he go?" said Ike shortly.

"I heard him say to Willow Creek, to the Martins. The doctor is with him."

"The Martins, eh? Why, that's only eight miles,

I reckon. Well, git yourself ready and your horse. I'll be back in an hour and a half."

He turned away, but after he had gone a few steps he strode back.

"No use lookin' like that," he said almost gruffly. "We'll git a wagon and bring him home easy. A wagon's easier than ridin', though 'taint likely he's very bad."

"Bad!" exclaimed Marion, with a sob. "Oh, Ike, you don't know my father. If he were not bad he would not——" Here her voice failed her.

"Don't you worry, miss. We'll be on the trail in two hours. And look here, we'll want beddin' and lots of things, so hustle." And Ike set off with long strides. "Hustle's the word for her. Got to keep her busy, poor girl!" he said to himself. "Guess he's a goner. You bet that old chap don't weaken for no belly-ache. He's right bad."

The only wagon in the place belonged to Carroll.

"Want your wagon and outfit, Carroll," said Ike briefly. "Old Prospector's pretty bad. Got to get him home."

Carroll growled a refusal. He had never recovered his wonted good nature since his encounter with Shock, and his resentment against the one man seemed to poison his whole nature against all.

"What!" said Ike, amazed at Carroll's refusal. In that country men in need of anything helped themselves without reference to the owner.

"Why, sure, Carroll," interposed Crawley hastily. "You'll let Ike have that wagon. I tell you what,

I'll drive it for him.' (Shut up, Carroll!" he said in an aside. "When do you start, Ike? Two hours? I'll be there."

In an hour and a half, true to his word, Ike was back with Shock and the doctor. Before another half hour had gone past they were all on the trail, Marion riding her pony, Shock and the doctor in the buckboard, and Crawley driving the wagon, in which, besides mattress and bedding, were saddles for use when the trail should forbid wheels.

After long hesitation Ike decided that he ought not to join the party.

"That there Crawley," he argued to himself, "aint to be trusted, especially when he's goin' round lookin' like a blank hyena. But I guess I'll have to let him go and git back to the ranch." And so with an uneasy feeling Ike watched them set off.

Half-way back to the ranch he met his boss.

"Hello, Ike," saluted The Kid gaily. "You're needing a powder. Off your feed, eh?"

"Howdy, boss," replied the cowboy gravely. "I'm feelin' proper enough, but there's others not so frisky."

"What's up, Ike? Your grandmother poorly?"

"Well, do you know," said Ike, watching The Kid keenly with his half shut eyes, "there's been a great mix-up at The Lake there. A breed, half dead with the saddle, came from the Old Prospector askin' for the preacher. Guess the old chap's about quittin' the trail."

The Kid's hand tightened on the reins.

"Hit him there, I reckon," grunted Ike to himself, but the other paid no attention. "So," continued Ike, "they've all gone off."

"Who?"

"Why the hull town, seemingly. There's the preacher, and the doctor, and that there Crawley with Carroll's wagon outfit. They looked a little like a circus, except that there wan't any wild animals. Unless you'd count Crawley for a monkey, which would be rather hard on the monkey, I guess." Ike chuckled, a rare chuckle that seemed to begin a long way below his diaphragm and work slowly up to his lips.

"What the deuce are you talking about?" enquired The Kid. "What has Crawley got to do with this?"

"Why," said Ike in a surprised tone, "dunno, onless he's a friend of the old man's. They do have a lot of business together seemingly. Or perhaps as company for the gel."

"The girl! Steady there, Swallow," to his mare, for Swallow had given a sudden spring. "What girl?" demanded The Kid. "Why don't you talk sense? You didn't say anything about a girl."

"Why, didn't I mention about that gel? Well, I'm gettin' forgetful. Why, what gel do you think? They aint growin' on rose bushes or old willows round here, so far as I've seen. Now, how many gels have you observed in your pilgrimages round that town?"

"Oh, blank you for an idiot!" said The Kid wrathfully. "Do you mean that the—Miss Mow-

bray has gone off with the rest?" In spite of his splendid self-control, as The Kid spoke the name a red flush on his face could be suddenly seen through the brown tan.

Ike nodded gravely.

"Yes, she's gone. But she'll be all right. The preacher's there. He'll be busy with the old man, of course, but he'll find some time for her. And then there's the other chap, you know. He's been mighty kind to-day, mighty kind, and considerable, too. Can't say as I'd just cotton to him, but when he likes he's ingraciousin' ways, mighty ingraciousin' ways."

"Oh!" roared The Kid. "Crawley——" Then he looked at his cowboy's face. "Confound you, Ike! So you were pulling my leg a little, were you? Never mind, my day will come."

With this he turned the Swallow toward the Lake and set off.

"Good-bye," called out Ike. "Where you going?"

"Oh, I say," cried The Kid, wheeling the Swallow.

"What trail did they take?"

"You mean Crawley?" inquired Ike.

With a curse The Kid bore down upon him.

"Which way did they go?" he demanded.

"Okanagan trail," said Ike, with a slow grin. "So long."

"Good-bye, Ike. You'll see me when I come back." And The Kid waved his hand, and gave the Swallow her head.

Ike looked after him, and allowed himself the very unusual indulgence of a hearty laugh.

"Well," he said, "I tried to help Crawley a little, but somehow it didn't seem to go right."

A tail chase is a long chase, and so The Kid found it, for the speed and endurance of the Swallow were both fully tested before the advance party were overtaken.

As he came in sight of them he pulled himself up with the question, "What am I doing here? What is my business with that party?" For a mile or so he rode slowly, keeping out of their sight, trying to find such answer to this question as would satisfy not so much himself but those before him, to whom, somehow, he felt an answer was due. The difficulty of explaining his presence became sensibly greater as he pictured himself attempting to make it clear to Crawley.

"It is none of his business, anyway," at length he said impatiently. "She doesn't want him around. How did he know?"

Crawley was a man of some parts. He had money and ability. He was a scholar, and could talk well about rocks and plants. The Kid had heard him discourse to the Old Prospector and Marion many a day on these subjects, and intelligently, too.

"Well," he said at length, "I may be of some use, anyway. Surely a fellow has a right to offer his services to his friends in trouble."

With this explanation on his lips he sailed down upon the company. Marion and the half-breed were

riding far in front, Crawley following as closely as he could with the wagon. Some distance in the rear were Shock and the doctor in the buckboard. The Kid could hear Crawley pointing out to Marion in a loud voice the striking features of the beauty that lay around them in such a wealth and variety of profusion. The words of Ike came to his mind, "mighty ingraciousin'."

"Confound his impudence!" he growled. "I wonder if she knows the kind of snake he is? I believe I'll tell her, for her own sake. No, that won't do, either. Well, I guess I must wait my chance." But the chance seemed slow in coming.

"Thought I would ride after you and offer—see if you—if I could be of service."

"And we are very glad to have you," said Shock heartily.

"Yes, we found you useful on occasion before, and doubtless shall again," said the doctor, in a tone of pleasant sufferance.

The Kid reined up behind the buckboard, waiting for an excuse to ride forward, but for miles finding none.

"I wonder now," said Shock at length, "if we had not better stop and have tea, and then ride till dark before we camp. If Marion is not tired that would be the better way."

"I'll ride up and ask," said The Kid eagerly, and before any other suggestion could be made he was gone.

The proposition found acceptance with Marion,