

The Skyland Treasure.

BY FRANK BAILEY MILLARD.



Y burro had begun to drag his left fore-foot, an old trick of his when he had satisfactorily settled in his own brute mind that he had done a full day's work. But I had a wholesome dread of camping among the dark tamaracks, where we walked, and so I struck the little fellow smartly upon the flank, and we made off briskly along the trail toward a spring I knew, in a more open country down the slope, where I could now fancy a bit of a pine fire blazing cheerily, and my tiny tin teakettle bubbling above it. Not that I blamed the burro for lagging. We had made a large day of it. I had tried to turn the jaunt from the Hetch-Hetchy to Merced into a very idler's progress, but the heady air of the Sierra had got into me, and there is a propelling force in it and its piney smells that is not easily resisted when you are twenty-four and foot free.

We had lost the sun in the tamaracks, but when we made a rocky turn into the open he blazed redly out of the dun smoke-drift that blurred into secrecy the folds of the great saw teeth, and there lay the gray mound of granite which was the spring sign and the evening goal.

"Preempted!" was surprised from me as I saw a man and a woman sitting by the spring, while a little farther along a strange ark of a wagon loomed queerly. Two gray horses stared at the burro, and then tried to break tether. I had forgotten that the spring was so near the road, which I was sorry to reach, for it led back to civilization.

There were "good evenings," and some free mountain talk, an invitation to make one camp-fire of it, and a three-cornered supper. This did not enchant me, for I was up there to lose myself, and could have wished them and their ark well away from my

spring. Still, as they were setting out to be agreeable, I could do no less, and the supper, in which I tasted anew the finger of woman, swelled the remnant of my gregariousness.

After the tea the blue tobacco smoke passed like dreams amid the branches, and Madame, her soft, round cheek showing white against the dark firs, picked away at a little mandolin.

Henry Nivaltone and his wife were really an interesting pair. They were well matched, as it seemed. I could see that he was to her a great man, and, as it came off the reel of talk, a great artist. They had traveled far in their land ark, which, as they talked, became the subject of a ravening curiosity on my part.

"Altogether we have lived in it about two years," Nivaltone said. "It is really a studio on wheels, and the only one I have ever seen. Come over and have a look at it. We are used to playing exhibitors, eh, Metta?"

She laughed, lark-like, and said: "And we don't mind it except when things are torn up."

It was something more than a mere wheeled box, this house-wagon. It was only a dove-cote of a home for two young people, but it was amazingly resourceful. There were all manner of hinged contrivances that you let down or pulled up, and of which you made seats, or a table, or a bed, or a pantry, or an easel; and the lifting of a little tin sheet in a corner disclosed a nutshell of a stove. So that the house was an atelier, a bedchamber, a kitchen, or anything you pleased, at very short notice.

"We cook our meals outside, except in bad weather," said the artist. "You see how practical it all is."

"For an artist," put in the Madame. A tone of pride went with this bit of professionalism.

Then I asked to see the sketches. There were not so very many of them, and not so ambitious a set of subjects. There were bosky bits in the Coast Range, pretty plays of chiaroscuro in the redwood deeps, and a striking El Capitan — over-toned, I thought, but yet faithful in drawing. Ah, here were figures — portraits in quiet color, a fleshly nude, with good skin tints.

"And this?" — I started. It was a creation. A most malign Mexican face, that of an ugly, sinister man, with eyes that were points of crude fire, peering out of a deep shadow and looking

with the intensity of a ferocious spirit upon another man, just starting out of sleep. The Mexican held aloft a long, glittering knife. It was a wood scene and a dark one, but from a camp-fire there came a glow upon the faces of the two that made murder and fear of murder stare forth as they stare in the life. It was a scene to go with you and to dart up in your dreams.

It was now near to night. We went back to the fire, which we made to blaze high, and the pipes were lit again. The artist told a tale or two of their voyagings in the land-ark, she putting in the right touch on occasion.

"And the story that goes with that picture of the Mexican and the sleeper, Mr. Nivaltone — let me hear that," I said.

The man and the wife looked at each other.

"Oh, yes," said she. "Why not?"

"Mind," I puffed out with the smoke, "I don't insist."

A night-hawk gave his coarse call, the burro he-hawed, a horse snorted, and a green pine bough crackled in the fire.

"It was over in Skyland, away back of Sonora, up where the red snow-plant grows," said the artist,—and I was glad he was an artist, for there was a chance for some color in the tale. "The roads were bad in Skyland, and they said we would never get to Eagle's Nest Camp; but our horses were stout, and the grades were not so very heavy. I was anxious to paint the Skyland country. There's a beautiful lake up there—a dark gem of cobalt blue, in a clean hard light, broken by snowy peaks, with the blackest of shadows — something nobody could possibly paint, you know; but then I would be daubing away at anything in those days. We left the wagon for days at a time and went afoot, for we were good at that sort of thing, and Metta could stand it as well as I. She is the best mountain climber I ever saw for a woman, and as for sleeping out, she doesn't mind it a bit.

"When we got through sketching and came down to the western part of the Skyland country, by the stage road, we were prepared for a good rest. For a time we found no proper place for a long encampment, and kept following the stage road down a slope that seemed interminable. Just toward dusk one evening, while searching for a camping place, we saw ahead a canvas-covered wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was moving

slowly down the grade, and it was not more than one hundred yards ahead when we first caught sight of it. As we drew near it began to go a whit faster and there was a deal of whip-cracking and calling to the horses, so that soon it gathered so much speed and bounded over the chuck-holes so wildly that it seemed rushing to perdition.

“Now what the rush was for I could not, for the life of me, make out. It made us both very curious, and we kept on after the runaways. Sometimes we heard the scream of their brake and fancied they were slackening, but they maintained their pace. Once I saw a dark head, in a white sombrero, around the right side of the front flap, and then another dark head, in a similar hat, darted from the left side. These glimpses of the men in the wagon did not please my fancy. They bobbed around a turn, and I heard them rattle down a steep little incline. It was some minutes before we reached the turn, and there before us lay a mile-long grade, cut sharp into the side of the mountain; but though we could see ahead for the whole of that mile, no white canvas was in sight. I hauled up short, and we stared into the deepening murk, but the whole turnout was gone! Metta shivered.

“‘It is a Flying Dutchman of a wagon — that’s all,’ said she. ‘I sha’n’t sleep well to-night!’

“I labored with her and with my own obtrusive sense of the superstitious, yet I was not comfortable. I had known strange things to happen in the mountains, but I had never before known a covered wagon, with two men and two horses, to melt into nothingness between breaths.

“It was impossible that they should have gone over the bank, for we would have heard the crash. It was nerve-raveling, this sort of thing, and it was quite a while before we thought of supper. At the foot of the little incline down which the strange wagon had passed there was a dry creek bed, with a bottom of ground granite, into which our wheels crunched lightly. Up this we drove a little way and found a good spring. Here the dry bed widened, with a fringe of young pines about it and a giant sequoia to awe us. One of the enormous black roots of the big tree curled above the spring, making a rude arch over it.

“Metta got some scraps together for a meal, and we ate in a

nibbling, nervous way. Our talk ran low, until I saw it was necessary to be gay and reassuring."

"Which was very much overdone," threw in the wife, tossing a pine cone into the fire and watching its splendid sputter.

"It came on inky dark in the hollow. I saw Metta safely asleep —"

"Or thought you did," she interrupted again, her hand fondling the mandolin in its bag.

"And then I took the lantern and walked down the road. I was looking for tracks, but the road was hard and there had been no rain for a month, so that what tracks I saw there below the dry wash might have been made by the stage or by any other wagon. So then I came along back up the road, and thinking possibly that the strangers might have turned down the creek bed to camp, I let the lantern light fall along the shining granite dust down that way. But not the slightest mark of wheel or hoof did I see.

"With all manner of absurd conjectures glimmering out from my cerebral background, I trod lightly back to my couch in the coarse sand. Being more than merely weary, I slept hard for awhile. Then a terrific roaring awoke me and I sneezed violently, for my nostrils were full of dust. I knew instantly what the roaring meant, for this was not my first Sierra wind storm, though it was certainly the heaviest, howlingest blast I have ever known. All the powers of the air were abroad and seemed bent on wildest doings. A crash and a great thump sent me bounding to Metta's side, and she woke with a scream. A limb from the big tree had fallen to the ground near us, and one of its sprays, waving in the great draught up the creek, was whipping my face. If ever fate was good to us, it was then, for we had been, at the farthest, only a matter of three feet from instant death.

"I heard the horses snort wildly and plunge about on the bed of the wash, and having seen Metta down to the road, I went over to the poor beasts and struggled with them through the wind till we were all out in an open place.

"We lay low and fancied the storm was quieting, but, of a sudden, there was a great throe of tempest, and we heard a tearing up and heaving, and then the earth quivered under us, while a sonorous boom broke through the scurrying air.

“ ‘The big tree’s gone!’ I shouted, with my mouth close to Metta’s ear.

“ ‘And the wagon, too!’ she said.

“I hurried up the wash, and came stumbling back, almost on all fours. ‘No, it’s safe!’ I yelled. ‘The sequoia went down the other way.’

“We kept shouting at each other, like lunatics, although we sat close together, and I am sure had we not clutched roots or brush we would have gone flying over the mountains. But soon there was a lull, and after an hour the wind was well down. With dawn came a perfect day, with soft sunshine and not a fern-spray moving. We had lost some light camp things, which had gone skyward, but we were full of the day and its goodness, and were for dancing in the creek bed and making a time of it.

“I should have been saddened by the prostration of the giant, whose fall marked the end of a life begun, perhaps, before Christ walked the earth or Homer sang of Helen. But somehow I could feel no great grief at that, for here in this fallen sequoia, with its mighty roots thrust high, and the sprawl of the black earth, was a great picture. I began to sketch without hurry, using care with my colors. While I painted, Metta botanized or hung about, watching me lay in the scene.

“ ‘It’s too bad about the spring,’ she remarked, as I threw in a little blur of steel gray, to stand for the bubbling water. ‘It’s sinking into the big hollow where the tree stood.’

“The trickling outlet from the spring had turned from its tiny track at the side of the wash and was dripping into the black earth along the great roots. It formed quite a pool at the edge of the hollow, but soon the tiny dam that held it broke, and the water made its angry little rush into the black hole. When the muddy pool was gone it left me staring very hard, for there lay revealed a scrap of the surface of a board, with rusty nailheads near its edges.

“I went over to the hollow and scraped off the loose, wet mold from the board with my mahl-stick. All its edges defined, it seemed about two feet wide and three feet long. In one corner were roughly cut the words ‘San Jose,’ and below these were a ring and cross. Thrusting my stick into the earth alongside the board, I quickly made out that it was the lid of a box.

“‘Of course it’s empty,’ said Metta, whose eyes looked unusually big; ‘but there *might* be something in it.’

“‘The axe will settle that without much delay,’ said I, and I stepped to the wagon.

“‘Quick!’ called Metta from the edge of the hole. ‘It’s sinking!’

“I ran to her, axe in hand, but before I could get any sort of hold upon the box it slid rapidly down into the hollow, bumping a root as it went, and turning partly over with a clinking sound that fairly froze my imagination.

“‘It *can’t* be anything — it *can’t* be!’ insisted Metta.

“‘Of course not,’ spoke the pessimist in me; ‘poor artists never have any such luck as that.’

“But I sprang into that hollow, pounced upon the box and swung the axe like a thing possessed. The thick lid of soggy red wood was splintered with a few hacks, and I pulled it off.

“‘Leather on top!’ cried Metta, jumping into the hole after me, regardless of mud or anything. ‘That’s a good sign.’

“‘Pooh!’ said I.

“But I dug at the leather with my fingers, and hauled away like a very fiend. It seemed to be a sort of bag — this leather — and it was tightly seamed. It had turned a rich brown from lying long in the ground, and it was moist and musty, and, truth to tell, it stank.

“‘Can’t you pull it out of the box?’ asked Metta.

“‘No,’ said I; ‘whatever of old iron or what not there is in it is too heavy.’

“‘Why don’t you cut it, then?’

“I fumbled for my knife, but I had left it at my easel. Metta ran to fetch it, while I, impatient, strained to lift the bag. I got hold of the tightly thonged mouth of it, where there was a bit of slack to be grasped, and managed to pull that above the box edge a little, but that was all I could do by way of lifting.

“Metta had the first slash at the bag.

“‘It’s tough,’ she said, and she plunged the blade in again, slitting the leather in the slack place at the mouth.

“‘Hallelujah!’ cried I, in a rhapsody. Then I grasped her about the waist, and we danced a breakdown right there in all that mud and mire.

“For the knife blade had flipped out a couple of big red coins — stained and streaked with rust, it was true, but as truly gold as any gold of Ophir!

“The coins fell in the mud, and when I picked them up I saw that they were double eagles. I plunged my hand into the slit and brought forth a dozen more coins, each one like the first. Then my fingers scooped out a heavy mass of minutely grained metal, which I knew at a glance for gold dust, as I had seen plenty of it in the placer mines. The bag was full of it. Here was a fortune!

“The dates of the coins were varied, but none were within twenty years of the time of our discovery. From this it seemed fair to argue that the box had been buried at the foot of the tree for a long time. Redwood has been known to lie in the ground for thirty years without rotting, so that the condition of the box meant nothing in the consideration of the matter of time. One thing was plain — so far as immediate possession went: this gold, whatever its value, was ours. We who an hour before had nothing but a wagon, two horses, a few dollars, and some dabs of paint, were now persons of wealth. The flood-gate of fortune had opened and poured in upon us. I had hated the men who moiled in the money mill, I had despised their wealth, and here was I, as sordidly happy as the vilest money grubber who ever banked his stack of stealings.

“The question of getting the gold away was not a hard one. There were our horses and wagon, and the deep locker under the floor of the vehicle would hold the gold dust easily enough. As for the coins, I had already pocketed them.

“‘Now for Europe, Egypt, India, everywhere!’ cried Metta, with a febrile look in her face. ‘But your art — you must not give that up. And to prove superior to your situation, you must stay right here until you have finished this last study.’

“‘Yes,’ said I absently, ‘but we must weigh out this gold dust in some way. I can rig up some scales, using the coins as a basis for weights. I think I can hit off its value after a fashion.’

“‘No — no weighing, no counting. You are not a mint laborer. You are an artist.’

“Somehow the word ‘artist’ sounded smaller than it had ever

sounded before. I was bent upon the weighing, and spent the better part of the day at it, in spite of my wife's protests. Toward evening, when I had roughly figured out that we had nearly ninety thousand dollars' worth of gold on our hands, and it had been safely stowed away in the wagon locker, I felt much wrought upon by the day's excitement; and as for Metta, she was in a highly nervous and almost hysterical state. And there we sat in that wagon, hugging ourselves and each other like two precious idiots.

"Then I heard a crunching in the gravel, and Jack, one of our horses, came dashing past, dragging a broken rope. I sprang out to secure him, but he ran break-neckedly along the creek bed, and crossing the road, kept on down the wash. We made turn after turn, and I must have chased a good quarter mile, when of a sudden Jack stopped short, as if frightened, and came back at a hard gallop. I was about to turn after him when I saw twisting through the underbrush a thin banner of blue smoke. Was it a camp-fire? I made another turn in the wash, and fairly fell back in dismay.

"There stood the Flying Dutchman, with its canvas sides flapping in the breeze, and two men sitting near it eating supper.

"They were the dark men who had driven in such a devil-may-care way down the grade. I thought it strange they had not started up when Jack came hoofing it so hard along the wash, but they had evidently not seen him and the light, shaley gravel had probably softened his sounds.

"I crept a little nearer, and saw that the men were 'Greasers' of a very low type. One of them had a dirty gray scar across his upper cheek, running nearly into his eye, and as his head turned and was caught by a pencil of light from the sinking sun, the scar took on a livid tint. The eyes were ferocious and were heavily bushed by the blackest of low brows. The nose was flat and the lips were protuberant. Altogether this was the most repulsive face I had ever looked upon. Evidently the man alongside was a lob of a fellow, but his head was in the shade of a tree trunk, so I did not make out much of it. The scar-faced man had an ugly knife in his belt, and there were rifles lying against a log.

"I went back a little way and sat down and thought very hard.

Why had these men flown before us on the grade, and how had they driven down the creek bed without leaving tracks? Then I thought of the storm and how it had flung the granite dust. It might have swept up their wheel marks and hoof prints. But the lantern search before the storm had revealed nothing of them. How was that?

"I walked back very slowly and with searching eyes. Soon I saw a stone in the creek bed, with a blue-gray mark upon it — just such a mark as a wagon wheel would leave; and nearer the road I found another similar mark upon another stone. Of a certainty they had driven down the dry bed after all. Near the road I searched the sides of the wash carefully, and I found foot-prints well up on the bank, where the ground was damp and heavy; and, looking still more carefully, I found two long green fir boughs cut from a near-by tree and slightly withered. As soon as I saw the boughs it came upon me how the tracks near the road might have been obliterated before the storm and before my search with the lantern. Walking along the bank, a man on each side of the creek could have swept out the tracks in a matter of five minutes as far down as the first turn in the wash, a few rods below; then by throwing in a few bits of dead brush, some stones and old moss, the swept surface could have been made to seem undisturbed.

"These surmises were satisfying to my sense of perception, but they were by no means reassuring. There was gold to guard, and here were sneaking campers who looked fit for any sort of villany. Did they know of the treasure? 'San Jose' and the cross! They were Spanish signs, safely enough. And these were men of Spanish tongue!

"I went back to camp, and without making much ado about it, got my rifle in trim, and put fresh cartridges in my six-shooter.

"'Ah, we're going to guard our treasure,' said Metta, laughing.

"'Yes,' said I, 'and I don't think we'll stop here much longer. Did Jack come back?'

"'I haven't seen him. Oh, he won't stray far from Jim. He'll be along pretty soon.'

"Daylight was nearly gone, and as I could not hunt horses in the dark, and had no wish to leave that wagon, I lay down and waited for the straying animal to return. I lay close beside the

wagon, and made Metta sleep inside. My rifle was beside me, and my revolver was in my hand. As I had no intention of sleeping, I had built a good fire near by. I had bunched up a lot of clothing, so that I could see well about and avoid surprise. But even a man of new wealth and heavy cares and forebodings may sometimes sleep, and I dozed off, recreantly, in those hours between midnight and three o'clock when it always seems hardest for me to keep awake.

"Into what peculiar state of subjective consciousness I now found myself it is not easy to describe. I was not really asleep in the ordinary sense, nor was I dreaming. Though my eyes must have been closed, I could see the wagon, and the fire, and the trees. External were everything to me, and my own entity was lost in them, also my sense of perspective. Like a kind of camera obscura, my mental vision played for some distance all about the camp, and the features of the landscape were sketched vividly upon my brain. The darkness did not seem to mar my sight in the least, and my range of vision was slowly extending. I saw Jack come back and take his place beside his mate. The circle widened, like a patch of sunlight falling from among dark clouds, and at last it took in the camp of the Mexicans. Both men were sitting by their wagon, each with rifle in hand. The scar-faced man was arguing with the other. I could see their lips move, and at times they made expressive gestures, truly Latin in their sweep and impatience. With rising heat, they glared at each other and made threatening movements. I saw the scar-faced man advance toward his companion. Then a great shadow blurred the whole scene, and I saw no more for a time, though I peered and peered through the darkness.

"At last my mental search-light glowed again, and I saw the scar-faced man walking up the creek bed. As he neared our camp he came more slowly and carefully. Reaching the road, he paused for a moment and then half walked and half crept toward us. Soon he was near the wagon, and coming up to it, on the side farthest from me, he leaned his rifle against it. He was trembling, and I saw him wipe the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. Then he pulled from his belt his long knife, and crept with infinite caution toward me.

"I now felt a returning sense of my own ego, and with it came a prickly, cold, palpitating fear, such as I had never known before. And yet I could not stir an eyelid. The man was now right over me. He lifted his knife. His eyes were full of murder. He seemed to be seeking out my heart, and I felt as though I were helping him in the search. In his way he seemed as much wrought up as I was, and the moisture was again gathering on his brow. He knelt closer, and raised his knife a little higher for that awful thrust. Just then a drop of sweat trickled down his forehead and fell upon my right hand — the hand that held the pistol. Starting violently, I awoke, and turned quickly in a spasm of fright. The knife descended, but it only pierced my sleeve, and before he could recover himself my pistol had flashed out and he fell headlong into the ashes by the camp-fire.

"I saw that he was badly wounded. I turned about in vague fear of his fellow of the camp, who, I thought, might be near at hand, but I neither saw nor heard him. I went down the wash to the road, bidding Metta remain inside the wagon; but there was no sign of any further attack, so I returned to camp.

"*'Dios!*' I heard my man groan. I fetched him some water.

"He lived through the night, but not until he saw death well upon him did he tell his story of the gold.

"The tale began in the early sixties, when the Skyland country rung with the miner's pick, and the placers were washing down into the streams. A band of sluice robbers had purloined gold dust from near and far, generally in small quantities that had come from this or that claim. A vigilance committee had been formed, and the work of exterminating the band had been so nearly successful that only one man, old Francisco Calderez, had remained alive. He had hidden the robber's treasure in one place and another until it rested at the foot of the sequoia. Calderez fell ill and died before he could get the gold away. His two stepsons were his only relations of any sort. In ransacking his papers after his death they found a memorandum regarding the treasure, but though they had searched far for the gold, they had not found it until a week before our coming. They had immediately hired a team and wagon, and would have taken the treasure away but that we had chanced along and marred their plans.

“‘But San Jose and the cross — whose marks were those?’ I asked.

“‘Old Francisco — he cutta them,’ said the Mexican. ‘San Jose his patron san. He cutta them for the luck.’

“The man died, cursing and praying by turns.

“Just as the sun rose through the pines next morning I stole cautiously down the dry wash towards the Mexicans’ camp. There beside a log lay the scar-faced man’s companion in the calm rigor of death, his hands sprawled out and his knife lying under one of them. That was how the quarrel had ended.

“I went back to camp and harnessed up. By evening we were at Sonora, and the gold was safe in bank, where, being weighed, it was found to be worth a trifle over eighty thousand dollars. After inquiry, I saw there was not the smallest likelihood of my finding the miners to whom the gold had belonged. There were many of them, they had nearly all left the country, and were scattered far.

“I sent the gold to San Francisco by express. In a month we were in France. Since then we have traveled the world well over. But somehow, in all the years we have spent abroad, and after all we have enjoyed among the art treasures of Paris, of Venice, and of Rome, we never have been quite so happy as when tooling about in the mountains in our old studio wagon, building our own camp-fires, cooking our own dinners, and breathing the air that makes men free and keeps their souls alive.”

“And painting,” said the wife, her hand stealing into his under cover of the mandolin bag. “His great landscape will hang in the Salon next year.” And the tone that went with the words was such that I would the Rejection Committee had heard its melting optimism. “The scene is in the upper Skyland — those peaks and the blue lake which he told you were unpaintable. But *he* can paint them.”

