

THE BANK OF CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER VIII. COMPACT.

"But why," I asked, "do you trust me, almost a stranger to you, with your secret?"

"For this reason," replied Broener. "First, because I believe I can trust you; secondly, I have long wanted a companion and assistant in one and the same person. The honest ones among the Bull Bar crowd will get drunk, and whisky reveals more secrets than women—though, for that matter, I think quite as many go-sips are running around in pantaloons as in petticoats. I need you to keep up a show of work on my bogus claim while I am in San Francisco. There I must go from time to time to get my quartz gold smelted and assayed. Miners' law requires one day's work in thirty on every claim in order to keep possession of it. I want you to potter around and keep up a show of work on the bank in front of the cabin. In the miners' estimation hereabouts you are to be my partner in that claim. I don't want to seem mysterious, and if I don't keep up a cluster of work about here I shall be, through leaving so often and letting the bank stand idle. Then I want you to slide up from time to time to our real claim on the mountain and see that it's all right. And while I think of it, mind you break no regular path going up and down. It's very natural for men prospecting about in strange places on finding any sort of a trail to follow it. I think it's the cattle instinct in man—the same that makes sheep and cows follow each other. Men who succeed I notice generally go out of beaten paths. So mind in your travels up and down from the 'Bank' to keep your footsteps as much as you can out of the same tracks. We must keep shady and lie low. It's not so much the fellows about here now that I fear. But new men are arriving all the time—restless, prying, searching—maybe knowing and reasoning as I have done on this matter, and if their eyes fall on a bit of that white rock on the mountain side or at its bottom they'll be clamoring up hunting for it. Should they do so in my absence and find no one in possession it would be all up with me, for there's no law now to regulate that description of claims—except the law of might. Now do you see how much I need you? You're quiet, shy and not talkative. Those qualities are all helps to me. A talkative man, with this secret inside of him, couldn't help in some way letting it out. He'd kill himself at last with hints and knowing grimaces. The best way to keep a secret is to forget it yourself—till it's wanted. What's always on the mind is very apt to write itself on the face. Make people suspect you know something they don't and you start 'em on the hunt to find it out. But what in thunder am I doing? Preaching and philosophizing. Let's go home and start a new brood of flap-jacks for supper."

Broener filled a sack with as much of the quartz as he could conveniently carry, and we took our way homeward. Ascending far out of sight and sound of the busy crowds below the eye fell on peak after peak, far and near, their sides covered with the dark green carpet of chaparral, which in places, as thrown in shadows, was almost black. There was no sight nor sound of living thing. A shadow floated along on the red earth. I looked up. It was a huge turkey buzzard wheeling through the air as noiseless as the shadows he cast.

There was something weird and gloomy in it all. The land did not seem made for human habitation. It seemed new, unfinished, as of recent date from some tremendous volcanic upheaval.

This impression quickly vanished on reaching Broener's cabin, now cast into a grateful and cooling shade by the afternoon sun. The long shadows of the hills on our bank of the stream were rapidly stealing up the sides of those on the other. The direct and oppressive outpour of noon heat was over, and now, past the middle of the afternoon, there seemed to come to men, animals and vegetation a new flood of vitality.

Broener had allowed the manzanita bush, its dark mahogany stem contrasting so strongly with its dark green leaves, to remain uncut all about his cabin.

"It screens me from observation," said he, "and I find it advantageous not to be seen in all my coinings and goings."

After supper he proposed a trip to the Bull Bar store (or trading post, as many called it), about two miles down the river. Thither we went.

"To go to the store" after supper is the regulation with five-sixths of the Bull Barites," said Broener. "They would consider their day incomplete without such a visit."

It was store, loading house, bar, post and express office combined—full of miners in their working clothes. Every barrel head was used as a seat; so were boxes, tables and the doorsill. As we entered, the proprietor, a small, energetic, bustling man, was scolding a giant in comparison with himself—"Big Dick"—for sitting on the counter.

"I want you to know," said he, "that this counter is to sell goods on, and not to sit on. If you want to retail yourself, get a counter of your own. You come up here every night and plank yourself on my counter as if I had built it for an arm chair. If you want to be sold I'll lay you on the shelf with the other goods, and take you down when called for. But I want you to keep your beef off my counter."

The giant took the reproof good naturedly, and moved off as desired.

"Mr. Rankin," said another customer, "are those canned oysters of your goods?"

"Good!" replied Mr. Rankin. "Of course not. They're Baltimore oysters, put up rotten, shipped round Cape Horn rotten, sold to me in Stockton rotten, and hauled up here by a bull team rotten. Just smell of 'em!" and Mr. Rankin shoved the can under his customer's nose.

"I'll take a can, anyway," said the miner, who did not seem at all affected by Mr. Rankin's peculiar recommendation of his wares. "How much are they?"

"Two dollars."

The miner produced his buckskin and poured a little dust into the gold scales. Mr. Rankin looked critically at it and put it in a flat brass pan, narrowing toward one end, with sides half an inch in height—a "blow pan."

"Mr. S. P. Willets," said Rankin, "I don't sell my oysters for sand. Your dust isn't clean—never is. Maybe some other store-keeper will buy black or gray sand of you, but I can't."

Black sand, in reality an oxide of iron, is the invariable accompaniment of gold as grabbed from the soil, and very difficult to be



"This counter is to sell goods on," said Broener.

"Have you any good butter?" asked an other.

"Yes, an article here which for axle grease will beat the oldest man in the mine. English butter. Made to grease the wheels of her majesty's carriage. Dollar a pound. Want some?"

"Yes, Glanimo half a pound."

"He plays that well on the boys," whispered Broener to me. "Did you ever notice, with nine people out of ten, that if you tell them of anything you want to sell that it's bad they'll believe the contrary? Maybe it's because we've all dropped unconsciously into the habit of thinking each other liars."

There was a noisy game of cards, and at every second the well-worn pastboards were thumped on the table with resounding whacks. Mr. Rankin, who's not selling goods was setting rows of tumblers on the bar and a black bottle before them in response to the frequent call of the players stuck for the drinks.

Broener seemed well acquainted with the place and its habits. My presence with him attracted some curiosity.

"Brother," I heard some one inquire of him in a low voice, referring to myself.

"No, nephew," was his reply. "Just out from the states. Been down to the bay to bring him up."

"How does your claim pan out?" asked another.

"Good for five dollars a day yet," said Broener. "I don't want to work it all out. Afraid I shan't get another like it."

"You seem to take life pretty easy," remarked the last inquirer.

"Why should I take life hard?" replied Broener. "But why do you think I take things easy?"

"Because you don't work hard like the rest of the boys," was the answer.

"I don't believe in hard work," replied Broener, filling his pipe. "I think the best work is the work that's easiest done. I knock off early in the afternoon so that I may have some time to cook my grub decently, wash my flannels and make my cabin comfortable without using up every bit of strength in my body. You see I expect to be dodging around when most of you fellows that take life so hard are cold in your graves—if you're lucky enough to get a grave. You're using up now more strength than you've got to spare and patching up the rents in it with whisky. It's all very nice working in the river till you shiver, and then coming out and warming up with whisky every fifteen minutes. But you'll pay for it inside of ten years. How much run per day did the Willow Bar boys use when they were building that wing dam?"

"Used to send a two gallon demijohn twice a day to be filled," said a slow, heavy voice, and the manner of saying it seemed to imply that it was something to boast of.

"And amongst ten of you. All right. Mining by steam power. Speaking of whisky, let's all take a drink," said Broener. "Come! All hands! Fill in! Forward with your banners!"

The company present gathered before the bar. The bottle and glasses were again set out. All waited with a rigid decorum until each glass was filled and ready, and then with a "here's luck!" and a solemn, simultaneous gulp, the fluid was poured down, with an occasional rasper, "He—m—" or an eager grasping for the water pitcher, testified to the vigorous rawness of corn whisky.

"A sad and solemn performance," said Broener. "Another screw in our respective collars. Boys, who bosses this bar, we or John Barleycorn?"

"Barleycorn, I guess," said a piping voice.

"Reed's got 'em. Snakes. Alone in his cabin for two weeks with a five-gallon demijohn of whisky. Saw him as I was comin' up sweepin' his doorstep like fury. Asked him what was the matter. Lord, how he yelled: 'Matter? Matter enough. Can't you see? The house is full of bugs and beetles, snakes and centipedes, horned toads and bumble bees, and I can't keep 'em out!' I vomited."

"He was up here yesterday afternoon," said another. "Come walking into the store quiet enough until he saw Rankin behind the counter; took him for a mule team, I guess. Anyway, he made for him with a black-snake whip, singing out: 'Whoa! Whoa! Haw—Git up thar!' How Rankin did git from behind that counter and old Reed after him, up the hill. The boys got after 'em and started Reed home. Nice man to be laying round loose. Somebody ought to look after him."

"He came here a fortnight ago to lay in his winter's provisions," said Rankin. "I asked him to make out his order. Well, he said he guessed he'd have a sack of flour, ten pounds of pork, four pounds of sugar, three of coffee, and so on, as he went along lessening the number of pounds until he got to the whisky. He said of that he'd have a barrel. I cut him down to five gallons. I s'pose he commenced on that before tackling the grub."

"I wish," said one, "I had his claim, any way, on that point of rocks. They say he's got pickle jars full of dust buried under his tent. I saw him take ten ounces one day out of a pot hole myself."

"Yes, he's one of your lucky ones. Run, luck and a Boston sailor go together. Put Reed without a cent on a bar nobody ever got a color from before, fill him full of whisky, and give him a pan and an iron spoon, and he'll pull straight for the only \$500 *chispa* on the bar. Ef I could manage Reed I'd break him in and use him for a gold pinter, as I would Brass here to pinter for gold," said the Dick.

summet by his repeated very draughts, and to all but him invisible. It was a horrible sound in the darkness and stillness of the night, issuing, as it did, from the base of a craggy mountain which lowered in the blackness against the sky.

"They call it living," said Broener. "Poor chaps. Its the best they can do. They're good fellows. But half of them are killing themselves, because, for the first time in their lives, they find themselves freed from all social restraints and in a country where a man can do pretty much as he pleases, so long as he pays his bills and minds his own business."

"They're living now," he continued, "on the stable yard muck hill side of life, and call it independence. That is to say, independence with them means disregard for dress, rough language, and a cutting away from all the amenities, manners and polish of the older settlements. It is a great mistake. They can't always remain in it. They've got to lead a life, refine it, polish it in spite of themselves, and ten years hence you'll find a portion of the fellows on this bar living in towns and cities in grand houses, and clothed in purple and fine linen."

CHAPTER IX. CLOUDS.

Broener remained with me several months before making another trip to San Francisco. He taught me "panning out" and the use of the rocker. I agonized for days before getting the knack of that instrument. It is to be rocked with the left hand, while water is poured by the right on the dirt in the top sieve, and my right and left arms seemed continually trying to do each other's work the right shaking and the left the pouring—at least, they'd make efforts to that effect—and often was I so irritated by the seeming contrariness, both of my arms and the machine, that I was tempted to kick it to pieces.

Broener would laugh, saying: "Take it easier. Sit down and let your mind rest. There's where the trouble lies. Your mind is trying to educate your body to the unaccustomed movement, and it's hard work at first for both teacher and scholar. Don't get angry. Recollect how many times you fell down when you were trying to walk."

In a few days I mastered the rocker. Before leaving Broener thus advised me: "I will leave you twenty ounces of river dust. Use it when you trade at Rankin's. I've salted the claim here beside. You don't know what that means? Scattered Stanislaus river gold dust broadcast in it, so it'll bound to yield four or five dollars a day with easy work. That'll keep up the reputation of the claim. We must soon be making something here. If I salted it with Tuolumne river dust or dust from the dry diggings, the trader would detect it. That would excite their curiosity, and that's what we want of all things to ward off."

"I want to make as quick work as possible," he continued, "of the 'Bank' on the mountain. I don't think it's a vein that'll hold out long. It's not the right formation. The ledge is the same on both sides—granite—and that's not a good holding ledge for gold. A quartz vein to hold out should lie between two different kinds of rock—say, granite and slate. How this gold-bearing quartz got poured in between them, as it is apt to be, the Lord only knows. I think ours is a short-lived deposit—mighty rich so long as it lasts, but when it gives out it will peter all out—like some people's goodness when the temptation becomes too strong."

It was about the first of March when Broener made this trip to San Francisco. On leaving, he said to me:

"Watch the 'Bank' very carefully, but don't touch it. I want to do all the work on it myself. Go to it every day, and keep an eye on all stragglers, prospectors and strangers, and the more eyes and no account a man looks, the more you want to look out for him."

I was left alone. But six months had elapsed since I left Eastport. I had now time and solitude to think things and myself over. I seemed to have lived ten years in as many weeks. Eastport and my Eastport self seemed of some remote period. I was part and parcel of a new life, and new surroundings and new men—not a mere looker on, but a watcher vitally interested in every movement about me, because it might deeply affect my own fortunes.

Above and beyond all in my reflections stood out this man Broener. In one sense, I was his follower, absorbed by him, led by him. He was entire master of the situation. I looked up to him and admired his keenness of judgment, his ease and adaptability to men and circumstances, his outside appearance of recklessness, which seemed but a cloak for the caution underneath.

Yet I did not feel wholly to like Broener. One reason was, he repelled anything like a warm expression of friendship.

"Don't try to thank me for what you say I've done for you," he remarked one evening, when in certain set and to some extent previously-composed phraseology, I attempted to do so. "You owe me nothing. You are as useful to me as I am to you. We suit and fit into each other for the time being. Some power-fashioned us to do so. Thank that, whatever it is, not me. When things shape themselves for us to part, we part—according to the same law—for our mutual advantage. We may part friends, perhaps enemies. We can't tell what we shall grow into or what may grow into us that'll make us friendly, indifferent or hostile to each other. That's my doctrine. In plain, old-fashioned words, it's every man for himself in reality and the Old Scratch take the hindmost. You don't like it, I see. You believe in friendship to the last and clinging to whatever you like until it's in the last stage of decay and killing you with its poison. You believe in hanging on to a friend while he, maybe, out of pure ignorance or selfishness, is through his weakness, dragging you to ruin along with him. I don't. I like strong people so long as they are strong. I pity them if they become weak. I cut from a cripple when he leans on me too heavily."

"And how with women?" I asked.

"That's somewhat another affair. I am as to women a tyrant in this way. I, or rather the nature inside of me, exacts of a woman who attracts my admiration—or compels it, rather—that she shall continue to do so. If she doesn't, I cut, the same as with men. To remain 'true,' as it is called, is for me to remain a hypocrite and pretend a sentiment which is not felt."

Broener seemed to me an iceberg, glittering in the sunlight and reflecting that light from a thousand pinnacles, but cold to the touch; full of power, too, but unpleasant to near approach; pleasing only so long as one maintained the proper distance.

Yet socially, he was ever to me most fascinating, and when he chose could make one forget him as the iceberg. An educated man, but not a pedant; book learned, but not bookish or book talkative; alive to the past, but as much if not more fully so to the present, and especially keen in seeing and more in making others see the "points" in the varied array of human nature on Bull Bar.

It is true much of his conversation was interlarded with the slang and common phraseology of the day.

"I like," he said, "the luxury at times of talking en deshabille. It's hard work to feel obliged continually to express oneself in a limber dress of nouns, verbs and prepositions previously arranged for you by some old pedant. Why couldn't there be a compromise made between book English and every day English? 'Twould make life easier. There's a good deal of slang, too, born of necessity. Times, eras, circumstances develop expressions which can only belong to that time and era. People must have their every day words as they have their every day clothes."

In a letter from home it was casually mentioned that Blanche Setton had left Eastport and was living, they believed, in New York. She had become, it was added, more mysterious than ever, and had quite surrounded herself from Eastport people. From Blanche herself I heard nothing. One of her remarks on the evening we parted was that she would "write if she had anything to write," and would like me to do the same. She disliked, she said, to have letters expected of her at regular intervals by any one. It was too much like correspondence by machinery.

About a fortnight after Broener left, a stranger came stampering along the bank and I stopped at the hole from which I was talking and washing gravel. I was somewhat excited that day from having come on a deposit of hard, heavy gravel, lying on the ledge and in a deep crevice. It was yielding richly and without aid of any of Broener's "salting." When a man knows that every bucket he dumps into his "lead sieve" is to wash out fifteen or twenty dollars, work becomes more like play. Occasionally I would pick a bit of "shot" or coarse gold from the dirt, and dirt must be very rich to show gold on the surface. Usually that metal is about the last thing to be seen, so marked is its tendency to sink underneath the lighter gravel.

The stranger watched me some minutes in silence. He was a man of middle age, peaked in feature, and without further describing his appearance I will say only that he made me feel disagreeable. The air felt middle-aged about him. I felt from the moment his look was fixed on me a danger—and no small one.

My apprehensions were increased on seeing that he carried a hammer—a mineralogist's hammer, shaped expressly for breaking up small pieces of rock. I knew by this he was one of the "new men" Broener had feared, who would soon come here to hunt quartz.

"How's payin'?" asked the stranger.

"Middling," I replied, curtly.

"Been how long?"

"No," I said.

"Any ground open here to new comers?"

"I don't know."

"Ground claimed next to you?"

"You must try for yourself. Take up a claim, and if anybody holds it they'll be around quick enough."

The stranger came close to the edge of the hole, peered into it, and then, without further ceremony, jumped therein as I was on my way to the rocker. I heard the clatter he made in so doing, and immediately came back without putting my bucket of dirt through the rocker. He was kneeling down, looking very closely at the face of the gravel, near the ledge, and had just pulled therefrom a bit of quartz about as large as one's fist. Holding it up to the light he exclaimed: "Quartz gold by thunder!" It was a specimen, and I could see gold on its sides.

"And you will please let the gold and everything else in this claim alone," I said, jumping down and snatching the rock from his hands.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, young man. I don't want your gold. I s'pose a man can look at it, can't he?" said he.

"He can look where he has a right to," was my reply. "But you have no more business on my ground here than in my house, and you ought to know it."

He clambered out of the hole, taking all my peace of mind with him as he went. In his discovery of that bit of white rock, flecked with the yellow metal, I saw no end of future trouble. It was giving the bound the true scent, and I felt that this man would never cease his efforts till he had run the game to earth.

All this came to me in a moment. The brightness of the day had gone. Before, I had been singing in a jolly fashion to myself and living in bits of air castles, as fancy built them—among which my speedy return to Eastport, as a comparative nabob, was not the smallest or least glittering.

Bad came to worse. That very afternoon Mr. Jehiel Pratt located a thirty-three foot claim adjoining ours and commenced the building of his cabin on it. That his principal object was to hunt quartz in the neighborhood I was certain. That he had, without knowing it, placed himself in the best position for spying our movements was also certain.

Next day came more cause for apprehension. Pratt was joined by a partner, a thick-set, black-bearded, coarse-looking man. Here were two near neighbors, and both enemies. War was fully declared between us, though no high words passed. It was the silent, secret war of intent on one side to find, on the other to conceal.

Of course, Pratt and his companion would remark my frequent absence from my claim. They would be hunting quartz up and down the mountain, and would be certain to intercept me in my daily trips to and from the "Bank." Then I remembered with dismay that the mountain side was strewn with bits of quartz, its milky whiteness bringing it out in strong contrast with the red soil, and that, in small and large fragments, it was especially thick near the claim. Now, these before-uncollected masses of rock seemed to me as so many finger posts pointing out to all our treasure. I passed the whole night in a fever, and suffered a dozen realities in imagination concerning my coming troubles with Pratt & Co.

I wrote immediately to Broener, informing him of the trouble. But in those days communication by mail with San Francisco was slow. A week at least would elapse before Broener could get my letter and return.

CHAPTER X. DEATH!

Within three days Pratt and his partner, Mr. Moore, had consulted their usual Pratt

I saw starting out one morning with horn and hammer. I knew by these tools he was after quartz. Hillyear remained behind to work the bank near them, probably to make expenses.

Quartz prospectors used to carry a bit of cow's horn, so cut as to form an elliptical shaped bowl. It was better for washing pulverized quartz than the larger gold pan.

Pratt took a route through the chaparral near the base of the mountain on the side where lay our "Bank." I worked a couple of hours in a miserable state of mind and then betook my exit to the "Bank," intending there to wash my dirt and guard it. In imagination I saw Pratt already there gloating over the rich find. I composed the words in

which I should first address him. I framed his answer and attitudes toward me. I pictured our gradual working up to actual hostilities, and then—I stopped in a slough of indolence.

Those were days when all disputes, especially those regarding property, had in the case out of ten, but one prospect of settling amicably. That was by knife or pistol. This was the unwritten law of the land and stronger far than its written, which was generally a mockery and a discarded formality.

I was out a fortnight. I decided the "last resort." I decided myself as a physical coward. I longed for something in my composition which would make me face a pistol or go into a row with a man, apparent just to "take the chances" as I had known some men to do. I admired such men for this quality (whether a real absence of fear or insensibility to results I know not) and deplored, ay, loathed myself, because I did not have it. I saw in imagination everything leading to such termination between myself and Pratt. Whether he would fight or not I never asked. I put him up unconsciously as a man who was "on the shoot"—a desperate character.

True, I had struck P. H. the second officer of the Ann Mary Ann, and quite surprised and even gratified I was to find I could strike on occasions. But that was done on the "spur of the moment." Had I gone down to the ship expecting such an attack, revolving it, living it over in mind, I would not like to have had much wagered on me as to whether I should have gained the time longed for in need of physical combativeness.

I arrived at the "Bank." All was silent and undisturbed. I remained there several hours, hearing in every sound the new prospector's approaching footsteps. He did not come. I wished at times he would, and end the waiting and suspense. I wondered where he might be. Finally, my anxiety becoming unendurable, I resolved to try and find out. So I let myself down the mountain side through the chaparral toward the river.

I had gone down about three hundred feet and heard near by the sound of a pick. Creeping through the brush I saw it was Pratt. He dug to the ledge, here but a few inches from the surface, filled his horn with the red dirt and trudged down to the river to wash it. I crept softly after him. Washing the dirt, with what results I could not tell, from his manner, he struck up the mountain again and dug another horn full, about one hundred feet to the north of the first. The result of this washing seemed, judging from his manner, more satisfactory. He then traveled a thousand feet further up stream, ascended the mountain again, dug a horn full on a level with the first. He washed it, and took his horn. I presumed he did not get the "color." He dug another horn about two hundred feet nearer the first. The chaparral was more open where he worked, and I could plainly see him from my place of concealment. Evidently this prospect did not suit him. The next, taken within one hundred feet of the last, seemed to yield something. The afternoon was now far advanced. Pratt ceased work and took his way home. So did I.

It was some satisfaction for me to find that Pratt had not "hit" directly on the "Bank." Pondering over the matter that night after I had retired, I grew for a time some comfort in the hope that he might drift in his work away from it. This gave me some mental rest until a fiend dropped into my head—a new and most alarming theory, based on his notions as seen that day. Pratt's little prospect holes, I noticed, were dug over an area broad at the base of the mountain, but narrowing more and more as he went up. What did that mean? In a flash I saw what, and jumped out of my blankets with the shock of the discovery. He was horning gold which had washed down from the "Bank." The "Bank" did not cover much ground. Probably the colors washed from it by the elemental wear and tear of centuries would not be found at the base of the mountain much beyond a line four or five hundred feet in length. Outside of this, at either end, the soil would be barren of gold. Inside of that number of feet it would yield the color, and this color-yielding ground would narrow as it went up the mountain until it reached the lead it had rolled from—the fountain head, the "Bank." Roll a bag of shot down an inclined plane and you have the idea. The farther the shot roll the more will they spread. So with gold rolled from any quartz vein on a mountain side as the top of the vein rock has rotted away and left the metal "free." Pratt was on the true scent. Day by day, narrowing as he went up, was he tracking the game to its den. I had, then, to stay by the claim and watch the enemy's gradual approach.

Next morning I reloaded my six-shooter, previously firing the old charges, which I feared might be damp. A few minutes after I heard Pratt banging away, obviously similarly occupied. I prepared my weapon for coming possibilities with a very faint heart. I did so, only because it was the thing to do—the custom of the country. I felt the whole moral influence of the time (or immoral, if you please) forcing me thus to prepare for war, while I was sick of war and all that appertained to it.

By ten o'clock I was on guard again, watching Pratt. The enemy was gradually advancing and converging on our works. He was already one hundred feet higher up and so much nearer the "Bank." His prospect holes now covered only an area of three hundred feet.

By noon he had left off the dredging ascents and descents of the mountain to the river to wash his prospects. He was occupied entirely with the "float quartz," here thickly scattered about as it had rolled from the vein, knocking the fragments to pieces. He had found gold. Uttering a joyous "Whoop-ee!" he put a chunk of the quartz in his bag, and then another and another. His feelings and mine at that time were certainly in strong contrast to each other.