

THE SLUCE ROBBER.

An Episode of the Early Mining Days at Grizzly Flat.

The Man Who Plundered at Honest Miners—How He Was Suspected, Detected and Punished—Camp Lynch Law.

San Francisco, Cal. Grizzly Flat was excited. Every body had quit work, and an ugly crowd of rough-looking miners gathered around the "Long Tom" saloon and Garber's store. From the appearance of things it was evident that something very unusual had happened. No ordinary shooting affair or mining accident would have kicked up such a fuss, and as for "a strike" or "a find," such things were of too frequent occurrence to make the boys knock off work and leave their claims at this time of day. The fact is, Grizzly Flat was enjoying its first red-hot sensation. Everything that preceded it, not excepting the murder of old man Moore and the lynching of Sydney Bill, was tame in comparison, and the occasion of it all was the arrest of a Mexican called "Gringo," for robbing sluices. This rascally work has been going on for months, the claims being visited day and night, the ruffies taken up, and the boxes raked and scraped as if with a fine-tooth comb. In spite of every precaution, such as a "clean-up" at the close of each day, work, instead of on Saturday night, as usual, the loss was considerable, to say nothing of the trouble and worry caused by it. Several companies stood guard with shotguns night after night, but the stealing went steadily on, and the perpetrator or perpetrators could not be detected. Naturally enough, the mysterious midnight visitor puzzled the boys awfully, and more than one man in camp began to be looked upon with suspicion.

STARTLING NEWS. In the midst of this anxiety and suspense, while all were worrying over these nocturnal depredations, word ran like wild fire along the camp and through the surrounding country that the thief had been caught at last. Sam Pritchard, who had been hired to stand watch over the "Gold Miners" claim, was the successful hunter, and immediately became the hero of the hour. Sam was a tall, lank, lantern-jawed Missourian, comparatively a new man on Grizzly Flat, and very few knew anything about him. He certainly didn't love work, although doing a little occasionally in the way of mining, while his vicious disposition and gambling propensities were not calculated to win him many friends. On the subject of sluice-robbing Sam had been the most indignant, notwithstanding he never owned a foot of ground, and was often heard to swear that the miscreant who would rob an honest miner ought to be strung up like a dog to the nearest tree. Very likely it was because of his zeal in this respect that caused him to be one of the first men placed on guard by the miners to protect their property and discover the guilty party or parties. Unlike several others, who were selected for the same duty, Sam preferred to "go it alone," stubbornly refusing to stand guard along with anybody else, and swearing, with a terrible oath, that he didn't propose to share either the regard or the glory with any man. His account of the discovery of the thief, and the manner in which he effected the capture, was that he had hidden himself behind a pile of railings, from which point he could have a good view of the sluices without being seen by the robber. About 3 o'clock in the morning, or between 2 and 3, he saw a man spying around in a stealthy manner, as if to make sure there was no danger, and then deliberately passed up and down the long line of sluice-boxes, bending over in a stooping position, and scraping up the dust as he went along. Bringing his shotgun to bear upon him, when he had come within close range, Sam made him his prisoner, and brought him into camp. This was substantially the story of the capture, as told by the long Missourian with a liberal embellishment of oaths. The way of it was that the Mexican—a lazy, idle, worthless fellow—was always cursing the Americans as "d— Gringos" (Yankees), and the latter, probably for this reason, and because the growing black-guard disliked it so much, fastened upon him the name of "Gringo" in return. All over the camp, among the miners, he was called nothing else, and the boys delighted to shout it after him wherever he went. Heretofore, however, whatever might be "Gringo's" shortcomings, he had never been suspected of being a thief. Still there was no very great surprise mingled with the popular indignation at finding this particular Mexican had been caught in the sluices.

THE CAMP AT FEVER HEAT. Daylight saw the little camp fairly boiling with excitement. More than one rough-looking miner, even before knowing anything beyond that "a granger" had been caught robbing sluices," hercey demanded that he be swung up without judge or jury. "Hang him!" was the general verdict, without waiting for the evidence or going through the forms of trial. Fortunately for the miserable wretch, there were cooler heads among the savage crowd that cursed and howled at him as he lay there, tied like a dog to a heavy bench in the cabin of John Martin, one of the "solid" men of Grizzly Flat. Martin had his hands full that morning. He was a heavy loser by the sluice robbing, and probably for that reason the unfortunate "Gringo" had been turned over to him by his captor. But John Martin did not believe in hanging a man first and trying him afterwards, as did so many of his rash and excited associates, even if he were "nothing but a granger, anyhow." It was no easy task, however, to restrain the popular fury, particularly when the chain-lightning whiskey began to make itself felt as the day wore on. Pritchard made himself particularly active in demanding summary vengeance, and the glory of his exploit gave him great influence with the exasperated multitude. "Let a hang him to a tree," he shouted, "and you bet we won't have any more sluice-robbing in this camp. That his advice would have been fol-

lowed there can be no question, had not Mr. Martin and a few friends he had called to his assistance bravely interposed between the Mexican and the jury of the mob, for such it might fairly be called. Through their active exertions and earnest appeals it was at last determined to

GIVE HIM A TRIAL. For this purpose a miners' jury was formed, then and there, under a big oak tree, with John Martin for judge of the impromptu court. But little time was wasted on technicalities or anything else, and the whole trial did not consume an hour. The principal witness was Pritchard, who detailed the manner of the discovery and arrest, and added that "Gringo" had offered to give him five thousand dollars to let him go. The prisoner, through an interpreter, was permitted to make a statement. He declared that there was not one word of truth in Pritchard's testimony; that he was going up the creek to his cabin, having been down at a Spanish dance-house until after 2 o'clock in the morning; that he had been drinking, and hardly knew what he was doing, until Pritchard grabbed him by the collar, and threatened to blow his brains out; that all this occurred on the public road, and he was not in nor near the sluices. One or two miners testified to having seen "Gringo" at a late hour in the fandango, where he was making a nuisance of himself as usual—drinking, quarreling and cursing everybody.

AN UGLY CIRCUMSTANCE. There was one circumstance in the case which looked particularly bad for the Mexican. When first brought in he repeatedly declared that he had no money, while on being searched, to his apparent astonishment and consternation, nearly two ounces of coarse gold was found upon him. He could give no account of how he got the dust, and swore some one must have put it in his pocket. The "jury" laughed outright when the poor "Gringo" told his story, in which the host of spectators joined with hearty good will. From that moment the prisoner evidently realized, as the boys said, that he had "gone up the flume." Even John Martin, who had asked Sam Pritchard a good many suspicious questions, as if he did not feel entirely satisfied with the truth of his statement, was clearly staggered by this circumstance. Nevertheless, when it was proposed to hang the Mexican, Martin strenuously objected and urged some other kind of punishment. "You see, boys," he said, "there may be something wrong in this matter, after all, though it certainly looks bad for Gringo. I know he's a mean, worthless, good-for-nothing fellow, but I don't like the idea of hanging a man on this evidence. I don't exactly know why, for he certainly appears to be guilty, but something seems to say within me that we haven't got the right man yet." Somehow his eyes met those of Pritchard as he said this, and more than one noticed that Sam turned pale and covered beneath that meaning glance.

A SHOCKING SCENE. Martin's efforts finally prevailed, so far as the prisoner's life was concerned, notwithstanding the ominous murmurs of the angry crowd, who were evidently disappointed at the prospect of his escaping the extreme penalty of Judge Lynch. The disappointment was not of long duration, however, as the jury speedily resolved, as a sort of a compromise, that the prisoner should be stripped and given fifty lashes. This was deemed satisfactory all around with the exception of the wretched victim, who seemed to have a mortal horror of the whipping proposed. Up to this time he had suddenly refused to ask for mercy; but now, with terror depicted in every feature of his vicious, ugly face, he begged frantically for them to hang him. He was not afraid to die, but grow sick and faint at the very thought of receiving fifty lashes. The poor creature's pleadings were unavailing, and more dead than alive, he was dragged to the improvised whipping post. Some difficulty was anticipated in getting anybody to do the flogging, but Pritchard stepped forward and volunteered for the brutal work. No one disputed his fitness for the job, and the zeal with which he performed his horrible task was testified to by the agonizing groans and yells of the suffering wretch, whose blood spouted at every cruel blow. Strong men grew sick at the horrible sight, and Mr. Martin's interference, after thirty-five lashes had been given, met with general approval. Bleeding and rounded, his hair matted with thick livid welts, showing the fearful vigor of his punishment, the crushed and trembling victim was led away to a neighboring cabin. Kindly hands assisted all they could to relieve his pain, and in a short while he sunk off towards the Spanish quarter of Grizzly Flat, muttering as he went the most fearful imprecations on the accused Gringos.

MORE MISCHIEF ON FOOT. Three months rolled away, and Grizzly Flat was at rest. The terrible example made of "Gringo" had borne good fruit. No more sluice-boxes were invaded; no more midnight ruffies made upon the claims. Sam Pritchard meanwhile had grown quite dissipated after his famous exploit, and spent the liberal reward received in drinking, carousing and gambling. The capture of poor "Gringo," although netting \$1,000, had done him no good, that was evident. Strangely enough, at the expiration of the time mentioned, notwithstanding the bloody lesson taught to evildoers, and the additional fact that "Gringo" had disappeared immediately after the whipping, the miners discovered that the old game was being played again by somebody. Once more there was disappointment and cursing over rilled sluices; once more there could be seen indisputable signs of the boxes being scraped and despoiled of their golden store, night after night; and once again the angry, outraged miners uttered curses both loud and deep, set on foot their number to guard the claims at night, and named death at this time to any one caught in the act of robbery. John Martin, as before, was again one of the heaviest sufferers, and Pritchard was in the habit of laughingly saying to him that but for his "having the hand" greater, there would have been an end to sluice-robbing on Grizzly Flat. Martin accepted these pro-

voking taunts quietly. He said nothing, and took his place at the window and down the hole as usual, but a close observer would have noticed that he was very earnestly thinking about something. One day, after they had all knocked off work, he went down the creek to the cabin of a man named Hogue, who had been once a well known detective in a large eastern city. After shaking hands and jaking a seat on an old rickety bench which served for a chair, Martin said: "Hogue, I've come down to get your opinion on a matter that has been troubling me for some time. You know, as well as I do, what has been going on in this camp in the way of sluice-robbing. You saw that poor devil of a Mexican whipped nearly to death only a short time ago. He has left the Flat, gone the Lord knows where, and got the stealing goods on just as had an ever. Now, you have had some experience in this sort of thing, and I want to tell you what I think and get your advice. I may do a certain man wrong by my suspicions, and that is why I have come to you."

He then related to him how he had never been fully satisfied of the Mexican's guilt, despite of appearances to the contrary; that he had from the first a suspicion in his mind that Sam Pritchard himself was the really party, and that he, Hogue, in the light of what had occurred since, thought so more than twice. The ex-detective listened patiently to the end, and then said: "When I was in the old business to home we had just one way at the beginning to treat a case like this. We watched our man. Why, sir, day and night, for months at a time, I've followed my man like his shadow. Sometimes he would get away, for sometimes they beat the best of us, but five times out of ten we would bag him as sure as fate. Now, Mr. Martin, you have roused my old professional feeling, as it were, and if you say the word I'll tell you before you're a week older whether Sam Pritchard is doing this business."

THE TWO MEN SEPARATED. John Martin went back to his claim as usual, but Hogue had to "lay off" for a few days, on account of a spell of sickness. Forty-eight hours had not elapsed from the date of John Martin's visit to the ex-detective, until Grizzly Flat had another sensation. This time it was not "a dirty granger," but Sam Pritchard, himself, who was dragged before the rough jurors of the miners on a charge of robbing sluices. The evidence was overwhelming. Hogue had done his work well. The guilty wretch, caught in the act, while plundering the very claim he had been paid to guard and defend, confessed his crime and begged piteously for mercy. There was no need of a trial in his case, except to say what should be the punishment. Judge Lynch was unable to make a decision, but the jury unanimously decided that such a man wasn't fit to live, and gave him notice the next morning at sunrise to prepare to meet his Maker. They were all satisfied now that the Mexican, who had been so barbarously treated, was an innocent man, and were furiously indignant at the perjury and brutality of the wretch who has got them into that ugly scrape. As for Pritchard, a more craven-hearted specimen of a wretch could not be imagined. He was utterly broken down, and seemed to think himself one utterly without hope, either in this world or the world to come. After it was known that he was to be hanged at sunrise, he admitted to Mr. Martin and several others that poor "Gringo" had suffered unjustly. He had been afraid of suspicion attaching to himself, and therefore seized the drunken Mexican while on his way home, in order to make his victim's guilt appear more certain he had, without any trouble, put the gold dust into his pocket. Pritchard, unlike the unfortunate "Gringo," begged lustily for life on any terms. "Do with me as you did the Granger," he implored. "Why should you hang me, and let him go? Ain't an American as good as a Granger?" as if forgotten that the poor Mexican was innocent of any crime whatever. The dreadful punishment of the law, the bare thought of which had frightened "Gringo" almost to death, was eagerly prayed for by the wretched criminal, whose cowardly whining and pleading was sickening to hear.

THE EXECUTION AT SUNRISE. Slowly the night wore away, notwithstanding that many of the boys, instead of going to their cabins, got on a big spree, and made Grizzly Flat very lively with their noisy revelry. Long before sun-up the miners came looking in from all quarters. These, however, were the only ones who were there. The Spanish and Mexican population were on hand in large numbers, while a sprinkling of Digger Indians hovered around the outskirts of the town. One of the first men to make his appearance in the morning of the execution was the unhappy "Gringo," who said he had come many a long mile to "see the fun." When the prisoner was brought out, being helped along by a sturdy miner on each side, "Gringo" could no longer restrain his vindictive joy. With scowling face he pressed up close to the doomed man, and began savagely showering upon him a torrent of Spanish billingsgate. This conduct, despite his admitted grievance, was too cowardly to suit the demizens of Grizzly Flat, and they soon drove "Gringo" back, and gave him to understand that he must keep quiet or leave the camp. After considering the matter, however, it was deemed no more than fair to let the rascally Mexican put the rope around Sam's neck, and it was observed that many of his countrymen eagerly came forward to assist in the work of death. No gallows was erected, but when the last minute had arrived, one end of the long rope was thrown over the stout limb of an old oak tree and the other made into a noose, and securely fastened about Pritchard's neck. The miserable man was too far gone to stand alone, and between fright and whiskey (freely given him by the boys) he seemed to be almost unconscious. Suddenly, at a signal agreed upon, a hundred strong hands seized the fatal rope, and with a wild shout the guilty wretch was launched into eternity.

A MORTUOUS HOLIDAY. After the hanging, but few of the miners returned to work, and Grizzly Flat enjoyed a noisy, drunken, riotous holiday. Whiskey flowed like water, and the fandango and gambling dens were liberally patronized. Among the most active participants in these boisterous festivities was the Mexican "Gringo," who succeeded during the night in starting a big row between a party of Americans and a number of his countrymen, in which pistols and knives were freely used and more than one man badly injured. Next day the Flat resumed its wonted appearance; the boys went back to their labors, and the claims presented the usual scene of cheerful, happy, busy life which characterized mining operations in the good old early days.

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