THE YOUNGEST PROSPECTOR IN CALAVERAS.

BY BRET HARTE.

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He was scarcely eight when it was believed that he could have reasonably laid claim to the above title. But he never did. He was a small boy, intensely freckled to the roots of his tawny hair, with even a suspicion of it in his almond-shaped but somewhat full eyes, which were the greenish hue of a ripe gooseberry. All this was very unlike his parents, from whom he diverged in resemblance in that fashion so often seen in the southwest of America, as if the youth of the boundless west had struck a new note of independence and originality, overriding all conservative and established rules of heredity. Something of this was also shown in a singular and remarkable reticence and firmness of purpose, quite unlike his family of schoolfellows. His mother was the wife of a teamster, who had apparently once "dumped" his family, consisting of a boy and two girls, on the roadside at Burnt Spring, with the canvas roof of his wagon to cover them, while he proceeded to deliver other freight not so exclusively his own at other stations along the road, returning to them on distant and separate occasions with slight additions to their stock, habitation, and furniture. In this way the canvas roof was finally shingled and the hut enlarged, and, under the quickening of a smiling California sky and the forcing of a teeming California soil, the chance-sown seed took root and became known as Medliker's ranch, or "Medliker's," with its bursting garden patch and its three sheds or "lean-to's."

The girls helped their mother in a childish imitative way; the boy, John Bunyan, after a more desultory and original fashion—when he was not "goin to" or ostensibly "coming from" school, for he was seldom actually there. Something of this fear was in the mind of Mrs. Medliker one morning as she looked up from the kettle she was scrubbing, with premonition of "more worriting," to behold Rev. Mr. Staples, the local minister, haul John Bunyan Medliker into the shanty with one hand. Letting Johnny go, he placed his back against the door and wiped his face with a red handkerchief. Johnny dropped into a chair, furtively glancing at the arm by which Mr. Staples had dragged him, and feeling it with the other hand to see if it was really longer.

"I've been requested by the schoolmaster," said Rev. Mr. Staples, putting his handkerchief back into his broad felt hat with a gasping smile, "to bring our young friend before you for a matter of counsel and discipline. I have done so, Sister Medliker, with some difficulty"—he looked down at John Bunyan, who again felt of his arm and was satisfied that it was longer—"but we must do our dooty even with difficulty to ourselves, and, perhaps, to others. Our young friend, John Bunyan, stands on a giddy height—on slippery places, and," consecutive metaphor, "his feet are taking fast hold of destruction." Here the child drew a breath of relief, possibly at the prospect of being on firm ground of any kind at last; but Sister Medliker, to whom the Staples style of exordium had only a Sabbath significance, turned to her offspring abruptly.

"And what's these yer doin's now, John, and me a-slavin' to send ye to school?"

Thus appealed to, Johnny looked for a reply at his feet, at his arm and at the kettle. Then he said: "I ain't done nothin', but he"—indicating Staples—"hez been nigh onter pullin' off my arm!"

"It's now almost a week ago," continued Mr. Staples, waving aside the interruption with a smile of painful Christian tolerance, "or perhaps ten days—I won't be too sure—that the schoolmaster discovered that Johnny had in his possession two or three flakes of fine river gold, each of the value of half a dollar, or perhaps 62½ cents. On being questioned where he got them he refused to say, although subsequently he alleged that he had 'found' them. It being a single instance, he was given the benefit of the doubt, and nothing more was said about it. But a few days after he was found trying to pass off at Mr. Smith's store two other flakes of a different size and a small nugget of the value of $4 or $5. At this point I was called in; he repeated to me, I grieve to say, the same untruthfulness, and when I suggested to him the obvious fact that he had taken it from one of the miner's sluice boxes and committed the grievous sin of theft, he wickedly denied it—so that we are prevented from carrying out the Christian command of restoring it even one fold, instead of four or five fold, as the Mosaic law might have required. We were, alas! unable to ascertain anything from the miners themselves, though I grieve to say they one and all agreed that their 'take' that week was not at all what they had expected. I even went so far as to admit the possibility of his own statement, and besought him at least to show me where he had found it. He at first refused with great stubbornness of temper, but later consented to accompany me privately this afternoon to the spot." Mr. Staples paused and, sinking his voice, gloomily and with his eyes fixed upon

JAKE WHISTELED. "THEN IT'S ONLY YOU YOURSELF."

Johnny, continued slowly: "When I state that, after several times trying to evade me on the way, he finally led me to the top of Bald hill, where there is not a scrap of soil and not the slightest indication, and still persisted that he found it there, you will understand, Sister Medliker, the incorrigibility of his conduct and how he has added the sin of 'false witness' to his breaking of the eighth commandment. But I leave him to your Christian discipline! Let us hope that, if, through his stiff-necked obduracy, he has haply escaped the vengeance of man's law, he will not escape the rod of the domestic tabernacle."

"Ye kin leave him to me," said Mrs. Medliker in her anxiety to get rid of the parson, assuming a confidence she was far from feeling.

"So be it, Sister Medliker," said Staples, drawing a long, satisfactory breath; "and let us trust that when you have rastled with his flesh and spirit you will bring us joyful tidings to Wednesday's Mothers' Meeting."

He clapped his soft hat on his head, cast another glance at the wicked Johnny, opened the door with his hand behind him, and backed himself into the road.

"Now, Johnny," said Mrs. Medliker, setting her lips together as the door closed, "look me right in the face, and say where you stole that gold."

But Johnny evidently did not think that his mother's face at that moment offered any moral support, for he didn't look at her; but after gazing at the kettle, said slowly: "I didn't steal no gold."

"Then," said Mrs. Medliker triumphantly, "if ye didn't steal it, you'd say right off how ye got it."

Children are often better logicians than their elders. To John Bunyan the stealing of gold and the mere refusal to say where he got it were two distinct and separate things; that the negation of the second proposition meant the affirmation of the first he could not accept. But then children are also imitative and fearful of the older intellect. It struck Johnny that his mother might be right, and that to her it really meant the same thing. So, after a moment's silence, he replied more confidently: "I suppose I stole it."

But he was utterly unprepared for the darkening change in his mother's face, and her furious accents. "You stole it?—you stole it, you limb! And you sit there and brazenly tell me! Who did you steal it from? Tell me quick, afore I wring it out of you!"

Completely astounded and bewildered at this new turn of affairs, Johnny again fell back upon the dreadful truth and gasped, "I don't know."

"You don't know, you devil! Did you take it from Frazer's?"

"No."

"From the Simmons Brothers?"

"No."

"From the Blazing Star company?"

"No."

"From a store?"

"No."

"Then, in created goodness!—where did you get it?"

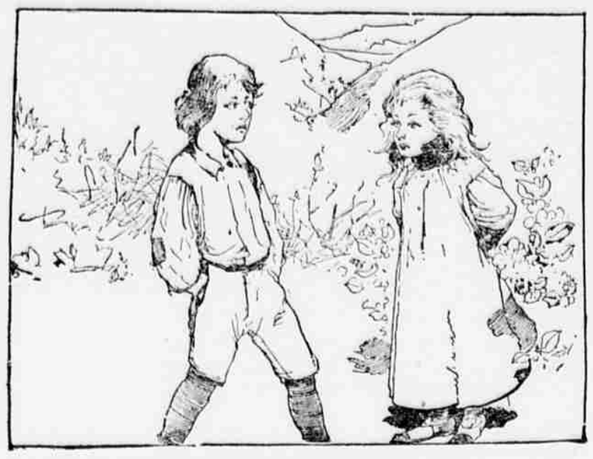
Johnny raised his brown gooseberry eyes for a single instant to his mother's and said: "I found it."

Mrs. Medliker gasped again and stared hopelessly at the ceiling. Yet she was conscious of a certain relief. After all, it was possible that he had found it—liar as he undoubtedly was.

"Then, why don't you say where, you awful child?"

"Don't want to!"

Johnny would have liked to add that he saw no reason why he should tell. Other people who found gold were not obliged to tell. There was Jim Brody, who had struck



"YOU INGIN," SAID JOHNNY.

a lead and kept the locality secret. Nobody forced him to tell. Nobody called him a thief; nobody had dragged him about by the arm until he showed it. Why was it wrong that a little boy should find gold? It wasn't agin the commandments. Mr. Staples had never got up and said: "Thou shalt not find gold!" His mother had never made him pray not to find it! The schoolmaster had never read him awful stories of boys who found gold and never said anything about it, and so came to a horrid end. All this crowded his small boy's mind, and, crowding, choked his small boy's utterances.

"You jest wait till your father comes home," said Mrs. Medliker, "and he'll see whether you 'want to' or not. And now get yourself off to bed and stay there."

Johnny knew that his father—whose teams had increased to five wagons, and whose route extended forty miles further—was not due for a week, and that the catastrophe was yet remote. His present punishment he had expected. He went into the adjoining bedroom, which he occupied with his sister, and began to undress. He lingered for some time over one stocking and finally cautiously removed from it a small piece of flake gold which he had kept concealed all day under his big toe to the great discomfort of that member. But this was only a small, ordinary, self-martyrdom of boyhood. He scratched a boyish hieroglyphic on the metal, and when his mother's back was turned scraped a small hole in the adobe wall, inserted the gold in it, covered it up with a plaster made of the moistened debris. It was safe—so was his secret—for it need not, perhaps, be stated here that Johnny had told the truth and had honestly found the gold! But where?—yes, that was his own secret! And now, Johnny, with the instinct of all young animals, dismissed the whole subject from his mind, and reclining comfortably upon his arm, fell into an interesting study of the habits of the red ant, as exemplified in a crack of the adobe wall, and with the aid of a burnt match succeeded in diverting for the rest of the afternoon the attention of a whole laborious colony.

The next morning, however, brought trouble to him in the curiosity of his sisters, heightened by their belief that he could at any moment be taken off to prison—which was their understanding of their mother's story. I grieve to say that to them this invested him with a certain romantic heroism, from the gratification of which the hero himself was not exempt. Nevertheless, he successfully evaded their questioning, and on broader impersonal grounds. As girls, it was none of their business! He wasn't a-goin' to tell them his secrets! And what did they know about gold, any way? They couldn't tell it from brass! The attitude of his mother was, however, still perplexing. She was no longer actively indignant, but treated him with a mysterious reserve that was the more appalling. The fact was that she no longer believed in his theft—indeed, she had never seriously accepted it—but his strange reticence and secretiveness piqued her curiosity, and even made her a little afraid of him. The capacity for keeping a secret she believed was manlike, and reminded her—for no reason in the world—of Jim Medliker, her husband, whom she feared. Well, she would let them fight it out between them. More than that, she was finally obliged to sink her reserve in employing him in the necessary "chores" for the house, and he was sent on an errand to the country store at the cross roads. But he first extracted his gold flake from the wall and put it in his pocket.

On arriving at the store, it was plain even to his boyish perception that the minister had circulated his miserable story. Two or three of the customers spoke to each other in whisper, and looked at him. More than that, when he began his homeward journey he saw that two of the loungers were evidently following him. Half in timidity and half in boyish mischief he once or twice strayed from the direct road, and snatched a fearful joy in observing their equal divergence. As he passed Mr. Staples' house he saw that reverend gentleman sneak out of his back gate, and, without seeing the two others, join in the inquisitorial procession. But the events of the past day had had their quickening effect upon Johnny's intellect. A brilliantly wicked thought struck him. As he was passing a perfectly bare spot on the road he managed, without being noticed, to cast his glittering flake of gold on the sterile ground at the other side of the road, where the minister's path would lie. Then, at a point where the road turned, he concealed himself in the brush. The Rev. Mr. Staples hurried forward as he lost sight of the boy in the sweep of the road, but halted suddenly. Johnny's heart leaped. The minister looked around him, stopped, picked up the piece of gold, thrust it hurriedly in his waistcoat pocket and continued his way. When he reached the turn of the road, before passing it he availed himself of his solitude to pause and again examine the treasure, and again return it to his pocket. But, to Johnny's surprise, he here turned back, walked quickly to the spot where he had found it, carefully examined the locality, kicking the loose soil and stones around with his feet until he had apparently satisfied himself that there was no more, and no gold-bearing indications in the soil. At this moment, however, the two other inquisitors came in sight, and Mr. Staples turned quickly and hurried on. Before he had passed the brush where Johnny was concealed the two men overtook him and exchanged greetings. They both spoke of "Johnny" and his crime, of having followed him with a view of finding out where he went to procure his gold, and of his having again evaded them. Mr. Staples agreed with their purpose, but, to Johnny's intense astonishment, said nothing about his own find! When they had passed on the boy slipped from his place of concealment and followed them at a distance until his own house came in view. Here the two men diverged, but the minister continued on toward the other "store" and postoffice on the main road.

He would have told his mother what he had seen and his surprise that the minister had not spoken of finding the gold to the other men, but he was checked—first, by his mother's attitude toward him, which was clearly the same as the minister's, and, second, by the knowledge that she would have condemned his dropping the gold in the minister's path, though he knew not why or asked his reason for it, which he was equally sure he could not formulate, though he also knew not why. But that evening, as he was returning from the spring with water, he heard the minister's voice in the kitchen. It had been a day of surprises and revelations to Johnny, but the climax seemed to be reached as he entered the room and he now stood transfixed and open-mouthed as he heard Mr. Staples say:

"It's all very well, Sister Medliker, to comfort your heart with vain hopes and delusions. A mother's leanin's is the soul's deceivin's, and yer leanin' on a broken reed. If the boy truly found that gold he'd have come to ye and said: 'Behold, mother, I have found gold in the highways and byways—rejoice and be exceedin' glad!' and hev poured it inter yer lap. Yes," continued Mr. Staples aggressively to the boy, as he saw him stagger back with his pail in hand, "yes, sir, that would have been the course of a Christian child!"

For a moment Johnny felt the blood boiling in his ears, and a thousand words seemed crowding in his throat. "Then!" he gasped and choked. "Then!" he began again—and stopped with the suffocation of indignation.

But Mr. Staples saw in his agitation only an awakened conscience, and, nudging Mrs. Medliker, leaned eagerly forward for a reply. "Then," he repeated, with suave encouragement, "go on, Johnny! Speak it out!"

"Then," said Johnny, in a high, shrill falsetto that startled them, "then what for did you pick up that piece o' gold in the road this arternoon, and say nothin' of it to the man who follered ye? Ye did; I reed yer! And ye didn't say nothin' of it to anybody; and ye ain't sayin' nothin' of it now ter maw! And ye've got it in yer vest! And it's mine; and I dropped it! Gimme it."

Astonishment, confusion and rage swelled and empurpled Staples' face. It was his turn to gasp for breath. Yet, in the same moment he made an angry dash at the boy. But Mrs. Medliker interfered. This was an entirely new feature in the case. Great is the power of gold. A single glance at the minister's confusion had convinced her that Johnny's accusation was true, and it was Johnny's money—constructively hers—that the minister was concealing. His mere possession of that gold had more effect in straightening out her loose logic than any sense of his hypocrisy.

"You leave the boy be, Brother Staples," said Mrs. Medliker, sharply. "I reckon wot's his is his'n, spite of whar he got it."

Mr. Staples saw his mistake and smiled painfully as he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. "I believe I did pick up something," he said, "that may or may not have been gold, but I have dropped it again or thrown it away, and really it is of little concern in our moral lesson. For we have only his word that it was really his! How do we know it?"

"'Cos it has my marks on it," said Johnny quickly; "it had a criss-cross I scratched on it. I kin tell it good enuf."

Mr. Staples turned suddenly pale and rose. "Of course," he said to Mrs. Medliker with painful dignity, "if you set so much value upon a mere worldly trifle I will endeavor to find it. It may be in my other pocket." He backed out of the door in his usual fashion, but instantly went over to the postoffice, where, as he afterward alleged, he had changed the ore for coin in a moment of inadvertence. But Johnny's hieroglyphics were found on it, and in some mysterious way the story got about. It had two effects that Johnny did not dream of. It had forced his mother into an attitude of complicity with him; it had raised up for him a single friend. Jake Stielitzer, quartz miner, had declared that Burnt Spring was "playing it low down" on Johnny! That if they really believed that the boy took gold from their sluice boxes it was their duty to watch their claims and not the boy. That it was only their excuse for "snooping" after him, and they only wanted to find his "strike," which was as much his as their claims were their own! All this with great proficiency of epithet, but also a still more recognized proficiency with the revolver, which made the former respected.

"That's the real nigger in the fence, Johnny," said Jake, twirling his huge mustache; "and they only want to know where your lead is—and don't you tell 'em! Let 'em bile over with waitin' first, and that'll put the fire out. Does yer pop know?"

"No," said Johnny.

"Nor yer mar?"

"No."

Jake whistled. "Then it's only you, yourself?"

Johnny nodded violently and his brown eyes glistened.

"It's a heap of information to be packed away in a chap of your size, Johnny. Makes you feel kinder crowded inside—eh? Must keep it to yourself, eh?"

"Have to," said Johnny with a gasp that was a little like a sigh.

It caused Jake to look at him attentively. "See here, Johnny," he said, "now ef ye wanted to tell somebody about it—somebody as was a friend of yours—me, f'r instance?"

Johnny slowly withdrew the freckled, warty little hand that had been resting confidingly in Jake's and gently sidled away from him. Jake burst into a loud laugh.

"All right, Johnny boy," he said with a hearty slap upon the boy's back, "keep yer head shut ef yer wanter! Only ef anybody else comes bummin' round ye, like this, jest turn him over to me and I'll lift him outer his boots!"

Jake kept his word and his distance thereafter. Indeed, it was after his first and last conversation with him that the influence of his powerful protection was so strong that all active criticisms of Johnny ceased, and only a respectful surveillance of his movements lingered in the settlement. I do not know that this was altogether distasteful to the child; it would have been strange, indeed, if he had not felt at times exalted over this mysterious influence that he seemed to have acquired over his fellow creatures. If he were merely hunting blackberries in the brush, he was always sure, sooner or later, to find a ready hand offered to help and accompany him; if he trapped a squirrel or tracked down a wild bees' hoard, he generally found a smiling face watching him. Prospectors sometimes stopped him with: "Well, Johnny! as a chipper and far-minded boy, now whar would you advise us to dig?" I grieve to say that Johnny was not above giving his advice—and that it was invariably of not the smallest use to the recipient.

And so the days passed. Mr. Medliker's absence was protracted, and the hour of retribution and punishment still seemed far away. The blackberries ripened and dried upon the hillside; and the squirrels had gathered their hoards; the bees no longer came and went through the thicket, but Johnny was still in daily, mysterious possession of his grains of gold! And then one day—after the fate of all heroic humanity—his secret imperilled by the blandishments and machinations of the all-powerful sex.

Florry Fraser was a little playmate of Johnny's. Why, with his doubts of his elder sister's intelligence and integrity, he should have selected a child two years younger and of singular simplicity was, like his other secret, his own. What she saw in him to attract her was equally strange; possibly it may have been his brown gooseberry eyes or his warts, but she was quite content to trot after him like a young squaw, carrying his "bowarrow" or his "trap," supremely satisfied to share his woodland knowledge or his scantier confidences. For nobody who knew Johnny suspected that she was privy to his great secret. Howbeit, wherever his ragged straw hat, thatched with his tawny hair, was detected in the brush the little nankeen sunbonnet of Florry was sure to be discerned not far behind. For two weeks they had not seen each other. A fell disease, nurtured in ignorance, dirt and carelessness, was striking right and left through the valleys of the foothills, and Florry, whose sister had just recovered from an attack, had been sequestered with her. But one morning, as Johnny was bringing his wood from the stack behind the house, he saw, to his intense delight, a picket of the road fence slipped aside by a small red hand, and a moment after Florry squeezed herself through the narrow opening. Her round cheeks were slightly flushed, and there was a scrap of red flannel around her plump throat that heightened the whiteness of her skin.

"My!" said Johnny, with half real, half affected admiration, "how splendiferous!"

"Sore throat," said Florry, in a whisper, trying to insert her two chubby fingers between the bandage and her chin. "I mussent go outer the garden patch! I mussent stay long, for they'll ketch me outer bed!"

"Outer bed?" repeated Johnny, with intense admiration, as he perceived for the first time that Florry was in a flannel nightgown, with bare legs and feet.

"Ess."

Whereupon these two delightful imps chuckled and wagged their heads with a sincere enjoyment that this mere world could not give. Johnny slipped off his shoes and stockings and hurriedly put them on the infant Florry, securing them from falling off with a thick cord. This added to their enjoyment.

"We can play cubby house in the stone heap," whispered Florry.

"Hol' on till I tote in this wood," said Johnny. "You hide till I come back."

Johnny swiftly delivered his load with an alacrity he had never shown before. Then they played "cubby house" not fifty feet from the cabin, with a hushed but guilty satisfaction. But presently it palled. Their domain was too circumscribed for variety. "Robinson Crusoe up the tree" was impossible, as being visible from the house windows. Johnny was at his wit's end. Florry was fretful and fastidious. Then a great thought struck him and left him cold.

"If I show you a show, you won't tell?" he said suddenly.

"No."

"Wish yer-ma-die?"

"Ess."

"Got any penny?"

"No."

"Got any slate pencil?"

"No."

"Ain't got any pins nor nothin'? You kin go in for a pin."

But Florry had none of childhood's fluctuating currency with her, having, so to speak, no pockets.

"Well," said Johnny, brightening up, "ye kin go in for luv."

The child clipped him with her small arms and smiled, and, Johnny leading the way, they crept on all fours through the thick ferns until they paused before a deep fissure in the soil half overgrown with bramble. In its depths they could hear the monotonous trickle of water. It was really the source of the spring that afterward reappeared fifty yards nearer the road, and trickled into an unfailing pool known as the Burnt Spring, from the brown color of the surrounding bracken. It was the water supply of the ranch, and the reason for Mr. Medliker's original selection of that site. Johnny lingered for an instant, looked carefully around and then lowered himself into the fissure. A moment later he reached up his arms to Florry, lowered her also, and both disappeared from view. Yet from time to time their voices came faintly from below—with the gurgle of water—as of festive gnomes at play.

At the end of ten minutes they reappeared a little muddy, a little bedraggled, but flushed and happy. There were two pink spots on Florry's cheeks, and she clasped something tightly in her little red fist.

"There," said Johnny, when they were seated in the straw again; "now mind you, don't tell."

But here suddenly Florry's lips began to quiver, and she gave vent to a small howl of anguish.

"You ain't bit by a trant'ler nor nothin'?" said Johnny, anxiously. "Hush up!"

"N—o—o! But—"

"But what?" said Johnny.

"Mar said I must tell! Mar said I was to fin' out where you get the truly gold! Mar said I was to get you to take me," howled Florry, in an agony of remorse.

Johnny gasped. "You Injin!" he began.

"But I won't Johnny!" said Florry, clutching his leg frantically. "I won't and I shan't! I ain't no Injin!"

Then, between her sobs, she told him how her mother and Mr. Staples had said that she was to ask Johnny the next time they met to take her where he found the "truly gold," and she was to remember where it was and to tell them. And they were going to give her a new dolly and a hunk of gingerbread. "But I won't—and I shan't!" she said passionately. She was quite pale again.

Johnny was convinced, but thoughtful. "Tell 'em," he said hoarsely, "tell 'em a big whopper! They won't know no better. They'll never guess where." And he briefly recounted the wild goose chase he had given the minister.

"And get the dolly and the cake," said Florry, her eyes shining through her tears.

"In course," said Johnny. "They'll get the dolly back, but you kin have eated the cake first." They looked at each other, and their danced together over this heaven-sent inspiration. Then Johnny took off her shoes and stockings, rubbed her cold feet with his dirty handkerchief and said: "Now you trot over to your mar!"

He helped her through the loose picket of the fence and was turning away when her faint voice again called to him:

"Johnny!"

He turned back; she was standing on the other side of the fence holding out her arms to him. He went to her with shining eyes, lifted her up, and from her hot but loving little lips took a fatal kiss.

For, only an hour later, Mrs. Fraser found Florry in her bed, tossing with a high fever and a light head. She was talking of "Johnny" and "gold," and had a flake of metal in her tiny fist. When Mr. Staples was sent for, and with the mother and father, hung anxiously above her bed, to their eager questioning they could only find out that Florry had been to a high mountain, ever so far away, and on the top of it there was gold lying around, and a shining figure was giving it away to the people.

"And who were the people, Florry, dear?" said Mr. Staples, persuasively; "anybody ye know here?"

"They woz angels," said Florry, with a frightened glance over her shoulder.

I grieve to say that Mr. Staples did not look as pleased as the celestial vision as he might have, and poor Mrs. Fraser probably saw that in her child's face which drove other things from her mind. Yet Mr. Staples persisted.

"And who led you to this beautiful mountain? Was it Johnny?"

"No."

"Who then?"

Florry opened her eyes on the speaker. "I fink it was Dod," she said, and closed them again.

But here Dr. Duchesne hurried in, and after a single glance at the child hustled Mr. Staples from the room, for there were grave complications that puzzled him. Florry seemed easier and quieter under his kindly voice and touch, but did not speak again—and so, slowly sinking, passed away that night in a dreamless sleep. This was followed by a mad panic at Burnt Spring the next day, and Mrs. Medliker fled with her two girls to Sacramento, leaving Johnny, ostensibly strong and active, to keep house until his father's return. But Mr. Medliker's return was again delayed, and in the epidemic, which had now taken a fast hold of the settlement, Johnny's secret—and indeed the boy himself—was quite forgotten. It was only on Mr. Medliker's arrival that it was known he had been lying dangerously ill, alone in the abandoned house. In his strange reticence and firmness of purpose he had kept his sufferings to himself—as he had his other secret—and they were revealed only in the wasted, hollow figure that feebly opened the door to his father.

On which intelligence Mr. Staples was, as usual, promptly on the spot with his story of Johnny's secret to his father, and his usual eager questioning to the fast sinking boy. "And now, Johnny," he said, leaning over the bed, "tell us all. There is one from whom no secrets are hid. Remember, too, that dear Florry, who is now with the angels, has already confessed."

Perhaps it was because Johnny, even at that moment, hated the man; perhaps it was because at that moment he loved and believed in Florry, or perhaps it was only that because at that moment he was nearer the greater truth than his questioner, but he said in a husky voice, "You lie!"

Staples drew back with a flushed face, but lips that writhed in a paused and still persistent eagerness. "But, Johnny, at least, tell us where—wh—wow—wow."

I am obliged to admit that these undignified accents came from Mr. Staples' own lips, and were due to the sudden pressure of Mr. Medliker's arm around his throat. The teamster was irascible and prompt through much mule driving, and his arm was, from the same reason, strong and sinewy. Mr. Staples felt himself garroted and dragged from the room, and only came to under the stars outside, with the hoarse voice of Mr. Medliker in his ears:

"You're a minister of the gospel, I know, but ef ye say another word to my Johnny, I'll knock the gospel stuffin' out of ye. Ye hear me! I've driven mules afore!"

He then strode back into the room. "Ye needn't answer, Johnny—he's gone."

But so, too, had Johnny, for he never answered the question in this world—nor, please God, was he required to in the next. He lay still and dead. The community was scandalized the next day when Mr. Medliker sent for a minister from Sacramento to officiate at his child's funeral in place of Mr. Staples, and then the subject was dropped.

But the influence of Johnny's hidden treasure still remained as a superstition in the locality. Prospecting parties were continually made up to discover the unknown claim, but always from evidence and data altogether apocryphal. It was even alleged that a miner had one night seen the little figures of Johnny and Florry walking over the hilltop, hand in hand, but that they had vanished among the stars at the very moment he thought he had discovered their secret. And then it was forgotten; the prosperous Mr. Medliker, now the proprietor of a stage coach route, moved away to Sacramento; Medliker's ranch became a station for changing horses, and, as the new railway in time superseded even that, sunk into a blacksmith's shop on the outskirts of the new town of Burnt Spring. And then one day, six years after, news fell as a bolt from the blue!

It was thus recorded in the county paper: "A piece of rare good fortune, involving, it is said, the development of a lead of extraordinary value, has lately fallen to the lot of Mr. John Silsbee, the popular blacksmith, on the site of the old Medliker ranch. In clearing out the failing watercourse known as Burnt Spring, Mr. Silsbee came upon a rich ledge or pocket at the actual source of the spring—a fissure in the ground a few rods from the road. The present yield has been estimated to be from eight to ten thousand dollars. But the event is considered as one of the most remarkable instances of the vagaries of 'prospecting' ever known, as this valuable 'pot-hole' existed undisturbed for eight years not fifty yards from the old cabin that was in former time the residence of J. Medliker, esq., and the station of the Pioneer Stage company, and was utterly unknown and unsuspected by the previous inhabitants! Verily, truth is stranger than fiction!" BRET HARTE.

Dog Tells Time by the Clock.

H. C. Peterson, a workman at the cottonseed mill of Paris, Ky., owns a dog, Nick, that can tell the time of day. It is Nick's duty to take his master's dinner to him in a little pail, and should Mrs. Peterson by any mischance overlook the matter the dog is sure to remind her in proper time by bringing the bucket and urging her to fill it. At first it was supposed to be the dog's intuition merely that enabled him to know the hour, but he has many times been seen watching the clock, and once, when Mrs. Peterson set the hands ahead to test the matter, Nick brought the dinner pail promptly on the stroke of 12, though in reality it was only 11.

Nick is as familiar with the whistles as Peterson is himself and always sees to it that his master is awake at the proper time each morning to begin his work. If Peterson oversleeps himself Nick is sure to be on the alert and at the first sound of the early whistle runs to the bedside and barks until his master is awake.