

THE BALL OF FORTUNE

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The Ball of Fortune by Charles Pearce

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CHARLES PEARCE

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OF FORTUNE**

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BALL OF FORTUNE.

BY

CHARLES PEARCE,

Author of "Frank the Fisherboy;" "The Golden Island," &c. &c.

ILLUSTRATED.



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THE BALL OF FORTUNE.

PROLOGUE.

THE scene is in California. From the borders of a noble river rises a series of eminences, in which, interspersed among the trees, can be seen a number of tents, with here and there a misshapen, yet picturesque log-hut. It is early morning, and, though the sun is shining brilliantly, it does not send forth a scorching heat, as presently it will do, when the gentle breeze which now and again stirs the foliage dies away. Down by the river are groups of men, some standing bare-legged in the stream, working with broad shovels, and others busily sifting and washing the fine sand which their comrades have just dug from the river's bed. All this digging, sifting, and washing have but one object—the finding of gold, and to this Californian gold-field have come men from nearly every nation under the sun—English,

French, Germans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and even Chinese.

In front of one of the log-huts already mentioned are three men sitting, or rather lounging, round a camp fire. Tea has just been made in the kettle, slung, gipsy fashion, over the fire, and this, with ship's biscuits, bought at the price of rich plum-cake from the store at the river-side, forms the breakfast.

"And so you're off to-day, Cap'en, air you?" said one of the group—a tall, lantern-jawed, sallow-faced Yankee, with little twinkling eyes and sandy hair.

"Aye, aye, Lampard," rejoined the man addressed, an Englishman every inch of him, with his blue eye, and brown beard and moustache just beginning to be streaked with gray. Captain Samuel Somerset carried his fifty years well in spite of his thirty years spent at sea, and storms and hard knocks had not dimmed the brightness of his eye, though they might have furrowed his cheek.

"Wa-al, now," resumed the Yankee, "I suppose, Cap'en, you've made a pretty tall pile. You've been at these diggings two years or more, hain't you?"

The Captain looked up sharply, as much as to say, "What is it to you how much gold I've found?"

"Yes," said he; "it's two years since I cleared

out at San Francisco and came right away up here. The crew went first, and then I followed. I tell you what, Lampard, when I got that thirst for the gold in me, I was bound to come, and no one on earth could prevent me. But it's over now. I've made my pile, and I'm back to old England, and I'll warrant it'll be a long time afore I'm afloat again."

"Mean to settle down, eh, Cap'en?"

"Aye. I've got a youngster there, d'ye see, and it's a matter o' some years since I set eyes on him. He'll have grown a fine little chap by this time."

"Wa-al, it's a nice thing to be ashore for a spell, but it don't suit me for long. I wish I'd had *your* luck, Cap'en, at Swallow's Gully."

"It isn't luck. A man who gambles away his gold as fast as he gets it can't expect to make much of a pile," replied Captain Somerset shortly.

"That's a fact; and if it hadn't been for that Chinaman Ah Ling Foo I'd ha' sworn off cards long ago. But the fit was on me, and I couldn't help it."

"Ah Ling Foo," repeated the Captain musingly.

"What's become of that thieving rascal?"

"Broke. Cleaned out. Smashed. Guess he's gone up to 'Frisco. Swallow's Gully's a long sight too hot for him."

"And a good thing too. A cunning scoundrel like that fellow ought to be lynched."

"I reckon he would have been if he'd stopped here much longer. He was cute enough to make tracks," returned Lampard coolly.

Captain Somerset did not reply, but rose to his feet and went into the log-hut, leaving the Yankee lying on the ground and gazing contemplatively at the fire.

We will follow the Captain into the hut.

There was little or no furniture inside. A rough box did duty for a table, and another box of a smaller size served for a chair. There was a rough shelf along the whole of one side, on which were arranged the Captain's household goods, including the indispensable frying-pan, a couple of tin pots, a washing-bowl, and a few tin plates. All these, as well as the furniture, he had sold to a neighbour who was only waiting until the Captain should clear out to take possession of the hut and its appurtenances.

Captain Somerset's preparations for departure were soon made. The most important piece of luggage—if luggage it could be called—was a certain leather belt of great width. To this belt was sewn a number of bags, making the belt no light weight to carry, and no wonder, for the bags were filled with gold dust.

The Captain fastened this belt on next his vest and beneath his flannel shirt. A pair of cow-hide boots reaching nearly to his knees, a broad-brimmed hat and a Mexican blanket, which served