

THE LUMP OF GOLD

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The lump of gold by Esther Baldwin Ferguson

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By

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CHAPTER I.

Since the days of 1852 Uncle had been a searcher for gold. Many times the god of fortune had filled his coffers with the glittering metal, which we are told paves the streets of heaven.

Certainly, no inhabitant of that place was more happy than he when richly rewarded after his toilsome efforts of separating the debris by rushing the water down the sluice boxes, leaving only the black sand and quicksilver, then delving in the bottom to scoop it.

Frequently the gold was only dust and required the aid of quicksilver, which separates into myriads of tiny balls like shot, when urged on by the swift current of water, rolled and tumbled along the surface and into every crack, corner and crevice of the boxes, gathering the millions of minute particles of gold in its embrace.

How Uncle's arms would ache after shoveling, picking, sweeping, and panning.

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Ah! the pains all forsook him as he took from the pan a massive lump that was the image of a large ball of silver.

Very well he knew its value as reckoned in dollars and cents. Experience had made him quite an accurate guesser. But it must be transmitted into gold, for silver had not much value as worth.

He placed it in a retort, and as the fire burned it into a red-hot heat, he watched the quicksilver flow out of a pipe into a pan of water, where it lay as calmly as though it had not been madly rushing, pell-mell, hurry-scurry, to grab and usurp unscrupulously every innocent, unspotted golden morsel as it made its debut into the world.

With satisfaction, Uncle took the lump from the retort, and viewed its brilliant, golden aspect. To him it meant a just and honest reward for his laborious efforts to enter the labyrinths and channels, which had sacredly guarded their untold wealth for ages. His patience and efforts had not flagged, and was ever on the alert for every stratum and substratum that indicated the sleeping place of gold.

He knew that the grand old snow-formed rivers from the high Sierras, which came roaring, tearing, flashing and splashing over stupendous precipices, entered many subterranean vaults of gold, and dashing them asunder, carried their riches in its billowy arm and distributed them in many of its byways, passages and gorges, where it would be difficult for even a necromancer of fate to find it.

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But Uncle's sagacity had prevailed, for the magnificent old river had left too many symbols in its wake. And nothing undaunted, he fearlessly prepared to disgregate its hidden treasures with pick and shovel in the hands of his trusty men, and blast the entrance to the golden cells with dynamite.

Was he a robber? No! For the Arch Being has placed His riches in such a manner that man can become its possessor by the sweat of his brow.

Uncle had not coveted his neighbor's belongings, neither was he avaricious, but he was well aware that that lump of gold was a sinecure that would help pave the avenues which would radiate a benefaction in the sunset of his life.

But how was he to keep this particular gold, which he had liberated from mother earth, free from blending with the contaminations to which its kind was subject? In his loyalty to benevolence he soliloquized as he still held it in his hand:

"My beauty, we must part. I cannot keep you. My depleted exchequer compels me. It is best. You have lain dormant for centuries, but now you have a mission before you. Shall it be to contribute to the morality of humanity, and help build up a structure of love, peace, and universal brotherhood, or shall you march in the footsteps of your predecessors, into the shadow of darkness from which every vestige of fellow-feeling is eliminated, and flaunt the finger of scorn at every noble deed

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performed, and gradually sink into the death-mire of iniquity?

"How can I trust you to go unattended, who so recently emerged from your cavernous home, where all is quietude and rest, into the great arena of surge, strife, and ostentatious usurpation?

"Must I be responsible for your manifestos? I unearthed you from your hiding place; I must be. Yet I know so few whom I can trust, to guard and care for you with strict candor and faith."

Spellbound he stood as though dreaming, as a soft, low, musical murmur reached his ear.

"Whence thy sadness, sire? Me thinks thou hast met with great sorrow. I am Fate, and at your service."

Turning, he met the glance of soft, brown, but rather melancholy eyes, belonging to a most charming female, robed in soft folds with fluffy ruffles of illusion.

Her voice was phantom-like, but not discordant. It appealed to his present mental sensibility in a most soothing manner, which was very pacifying.

Appearing not disturbed, but reluctant for digression, yet thankful, he answered: "Not sadness, my fairy friend, but a dilemma is before me to decide the future of this honestly acquired gold."

With a laugh that sounded more like a sylvan echo rolled and swirled by monstrous ocean waves from turreted castles back to lofty mountain heights