
AN ADVENTURE UNDER GROUND.

BY W. D. HARRINGTON.

A STUDENT, fresh from the monotonous college course, I stood, one lovely evening in autumn, on a lofty peak of the Blue Ridge—the Pilot—listening with breathless attention to the story of an old man, whose sparse locks were blooming for the grave.

How alike were my own feelings and the emjnence upon which I stood! My youthful bosom was teeming with the brightest and most deceptive aspirations and hopes for honor. In the future I saw the laurel weaving itself into unfading wreaths to crown my brow, while my friends flattered and fostered the most presumptuous plans that my deluded

brain had concocted for an easy and uninterrupted flight up the ladder of fame. Beyond this, however, I aspired to fortune—to great riches. These I saw not how to obtain, but in the manly effort and untiring exertions of a well spent life, and even then fortune was uncertain. To my impatient soul this was a tiring and humiliating thought. From my boyhood I had revelled in day-dreams of palaces all my own, shining with the lavished luxuries of wealth, and surrounded with all the beauties and splendors that the hand of art could bestow. Hour after hour, had I wearied my brain, seeking to find some near

road to fortune—to heaps of glittering gold. But alas! I found it but in dreaming.

Near the spot where we then stood, a large unexplored subterraneous cave, regarded by the neighboring inhabitants with the greatest superstitious awe, seemed to undermine the peak. Of this cavern the old man's story related.

"Many years ago," said he, "a band of desperate highwaymen lived in these mountains. As a place of safety they hid, somewhere in that cave, a chest of gold, which is guarded by the spirit of one of their band, whom they murdered on the spot for that purpose. No man has ever been found with sufficient courage to enter and obtain it, and well there has not. By going to the mouth of the cave you will learn why. During the months of spring and autumn, the hideous voice of that evil spirit may be heard warning away all who might attempt to invade his dominions. Several years after this, the robbers were driven from the mountains and captured, and since then much of their hidden gold has been found in various places." Thus ended the old man's story.

My credulous mind believed every word of the tale, and I replied, boastingly:

"I have the courage, and I will hunt it. Should I find it, it will require more than one dead robber's ghost, to deter me from bringing away what of it I can carry."

"Ah, child!" said the old man, smiling, "I've heard many talk as you talk, and yet they went only where I have often been, and returned satisfied."

"Do you think," I asked, "that fear of a dead man's spirit can deter me from my purpose? No, if there is a chest of gold in that cave, with nothing intervening but a robber that has been in eternity for nearly a century, it shall be mine!"

Saying this, I left the good old man, and made my way to this Golconda, from which, my heart beat high with emotions, that I should extract my long sought-after fortune; while he, with tottering footsteps, wended his way down a narrow winding pathway to a valley, in which nestled his cottage.

Down rugged declivities, and bounding from rock to rock over frowning chasms, I at last reached a platform-looking space that took me to the mouth of the cavern. I approached the monster aperture, and halted to survey it. A faint unearthly struggle fell upon my ears—a noise indescribable—a sound I have heard only there, in my life.

"Can I face that music alone?" I asked myself.

My courage forsook me, and, in accordance with the old man's predictions, my determination yielded. I turned my face away. It was early twilight. The sun had set beyond and cast the shadow of the peak, down as far as the eye could see, upon the vernal landscape, dotted here and there with the mountaineer's home. Upon the right and left, the din of cataracts made nature's harmonious music, and seemed to censure my superstition. Once more I thought of the gold. Then on my mind flashed the image of her who had been the bright guiding-star of my existence—my boyhood's earliest love. She who had elevated my aspiration—whom I hoped to see mistress and queen of the most magnificent palace of my imagination, and the centre of its attractions.

"Jennie!"—I breathed the name—"for your sake I will brave the terrors of this horrible cavern—will hunt and bring from its dark recesses those treasures, if they be there, and lay them at your feet."

My mind was fully made up in that moment. I determined to make the adventure at all hazard.

I returned to the old man's cottage to spend the night, in order to make an early start on the morrow. After a night of wakeful dreams of gold, robbers and ghosts, all confused, the morning—a lovely morning—dawned; and partaking of a frugal breakfast, procuring a miner's lamp, a can of oil, and a box of matches, I was prepared for my adventure under ground.

"My child," said the good old man, as I took leave of him, "you are now about to embark in a dangerous undertaking—that of obtaining gold guarded by an evil spirit. I would advise you not to go; but since you seem determined to go, remember this advice: When you are making your researches, don't utter a word, though you may be tempted to speak. One word will place you at the mercy of this wicked ghost."

This ominous advice rather alarmed me at first, but feeling it to be only the result of superstition, I set out. On arriving at the cave, I lighted my lantern and walked resolutely in, shutting my eyes to any fears that even the unexplained noise, which was now extremely distressing, might produce in my mind.

To my astonishment, I found on entering the cave a splendid arched passage, with solid

granite walls, and a pavement underfoot as smooth as if it had been wrought by the stonemason's chisel. With this gratifying aspect of affairs, I pursued my journey for several hundred yards; when I found what I at first thought was a bluff termination. I glanced back through the straight, dark tunnel, and daylight at its entrance resembled a small, bright star. In the wall to the right I discovered a small door-like excavation, and through this I threaded my way, changing my direction square to the right. My situation was now more gloomy. The passage was narrow, ragged, and the projecting rocks above threatened to dislodge themselves upon my head, and crush me beneath their ponderous weight. At the same time an unwholesome stench greeted my olfactory organs, resembling that repulsive odor which arises from a vexed rattlesnake. The noise, too, though less uproarious, was more doleful, and terrified me worse; while my lamp burned dimly from the absence of oxygen, and I experienced considerable uneasiness at my lungs. In fact my situation was really alarming, and only a prospect of *gold* could have stimulated me to press onward.

Suddenly a chilling sensation passed over my body, and a tremendous echoing and re-echoing sound almost paralyzed the drums of my ears, while my light glared up, giving a new volume of light. Recovering from my bewilderment, I discovered that I had emerged from my narrow passage into a vast chamber of darkness. The apartment was filled with a thin cold mist which dampened my garments at once; and so stunning was the noise that I could not tell from what direction it proceeded. Stepping back to the narrow passage, however, I determined to grope my way by the wall to the right. Slowly and cautiously I bent forward, watching, to the extent of my vision, for the cherished object of my adventure. The wall was composed of crumbling slate, and the floor was of the same material, very wet. In a short time my journey was interrupted by a small stream of sparkling crystal water, which issued from the wall and ran off, whirling and eddying, diagonally in the direction I was taking. I dipped my hand into the water to ascertain its temperature, when I experienced a burning sensation, which caused me to draw it immediately out, and on examination I found the skin white and shrivelled as though I had plunged it into some powerful chemical. I changed my direction with the

course of the stream, and soon found where it terminated by sinking down among a mass of rocks at the base of what appeared to be a partition, which rose with a gradual inclination to the opposite side of the dark chamber. Here I solved the mystery of the strange noise that had so much terrified me. The water ran on these rocks and sank down between the interstices, and the air bursting up and rushing in to fill the vacuums caused by the escaping waters, made the struggling sound, heard from time immemorial at the mouth of the cavern. But why this only happened during the months of spring and autumn I could not tell, nor have I to this day been able to explain this strange phenomenon.

Demonstrating this fact tended to dishearten rather than relieve me. It gave me reason to suspect that the gold might also be a delusion. Holding up my lamp to scan the inclining partition, my eyes met, in the dim reflection of my light, the form of a man, lying apparently asleep on the cold wet rocks. Appalling sight! My brain reeled, and I barely sustained myself from falling. Panic-stricken and demoralized, I turned to retreat, but regaining my self-possession, and remembering that this might be the dead robber whose gold I sought, I nerved my courage to a desperate point, and snatching my pistol from my bosom, rushed to his side. Setting my foot on his breast, I uttered a loud exclamation of defiance, forgetting the old man's injunction to keep silent. Never shall I forget the sound of my own voice in that dismal abode.

The body did not yield to the pressure of my weight, and on examination, I found, that although the body of a man, with the features all perfect, except as changed in the hour of death, it had been metamorphosed into a hard composition resembling stone. By his side I discovered a billet of slate, upon which was written, with some pointed instrument, the following ominous inscription:

"Deluded here by a thirst after hidden gold—bewildered—unable to find my way out—I perish alone. 1810."

The features of the dead man showed him to have been a youth very near my own age, and I was struck with the similitude of our appearance. The hair stood an end on my head, as I glanced round at the dark vault—this weird dungeon of death—and thought of my alarming condition. My golden dream was broken, and I thought only of escape. I hastened back up the stream, and took the

direction of the wall in my old footsteps, until I found the passage that had brought me here. I commenced my ascent, nevertheless, under some strange apprehension. I did not go far, before, to my alarm and mortification, I found since I had passed in, the walls had crumbled and fallen, completely shutting up all avenues of escape. Excited to desperation, I tried my strength in removing the stones, but not one could I budge.

"My God!" I shouted, "am I here, buried alive?" An unearthly echo mimicked my wallings:

"Buried alive!"

In wild frenzy, I ran back to the dark chamber, hoping that I had taken a wrong passage. I took the direction of the wall to the left, and after a time, found where it intersected with the partition. I changed my course with the partition, and soon reached its base, where the struggling waters sank down among the rocks. There still lay the stone man, my only companion, whose example I had imitated, and whose awful fate I was destined soon to share.

I was determined not to perish, however, until the last effort had been made to escape; I therefore crossed over the stream, and followed the partition back to the wall. I was not long in finding myself back to where the stream issued from the wall, thereby demonstrating the fact that the cave was a vast rotunda, with the stream and partition cutting its centre. Hopeless, I groped to that spot where lay the body of one who had felt the same agonies that were then tormenting my bosom, and whose spirit had been set free from this dismal prison-house by the angel of death. I seated myself by his side, for under the awful apprehensions of death which stared me in the face as an only alternative, I forgot all superstitious fears.

"Gave my life for a golden dream!" I soliloquized. "Doomed to perish—to eke out my life by degrees—far away from the face of man. Where no soft, sympathizing hand will hold up my aching head, or gentle, loving voice cheer my sinking spirit."

I reached forth my hand to rewrite the inscription on the stone and date 18—, when a thought flashed into my mind, that I would ascend the partition and examine the upper regions of the cave. I did so, accordingly, and on reaching its intersection with the wall, I found an aperture which seemed to wind upwards with a gradual ascent. Although I cherished not the faintest hope of escape by

following it, yet I resolved to do so, and die at its terminus; at least away from that gloomy dungeon, whose mystic atmosphere would change my flesh to stone after my death. After many hours of toil, I saw my doom. The passage terminated on a natural platform. Overcome with fatigue, despair, and hunger, I threw myself upon my knees and petitioned to Heaven that death might soon end my miseries. I then prostrated myself upon the rocks, and passed off into a delicious slumber. On waking, I found my lamp had burned out, and I was in darkness. I rose up to relight it, when glancing upwards—something I did not do on my arrival there, exhausted and hopeless as I was—my eyes fell upon a bright star. Was it a delusion? I examined well. It was reality! I saw a small opening, to which if I could ascend, I should make my escape. I lit my lamp and began to examine the actual condition of affairs. On the right, left, and in front, as I stood upon the platform, I found the same perpendicular walls, which led me to think, on my arrival there, that my passage had terminated; but to the rear, I found a ragged wall up which I thought, by extraordinary exertions, I could ascend to the opening. I set aside my lamp, as it could only be of disadvantage to me, and began my dangerous ascension. By almost superhuman efforts, I at last reached the aperture, and with an extraordinary bound, sprang out joyfully into the open air once more. I found myself upon the topmost summit of the lofty Pilot, while the star-spangled concave of heaven shone brightly over my head. Once more I looked down, in the dim starlit horizon, upon the abode of man, and heartily thanked a kind Providence for my deliverance from a death too horrible to be contemplated.

I descended the mountain-side and repaired to the cottage of my old friend, who informed me that I had been gone two days, and nearly two nights. With as little delay as possible, I tipped my hat to the giant beak, with its gloomy cavern and chest of hidden gold, and returned to my humble home, where, with the object of my early love, I have found the hidden treasure, of more value than great riches, in learning the lesson, that contentment with our lot, in all the vicissitudes of life, is the only road to happiness.

