

## The Abalone Twins.

BY PHILIP VERRILL MIGHELS.



HE wind from the hills was softly spreading on the air; the sun was smiling in its radiance from out a cloudless sky, and the broad Pacific swelled, and heaved, and flashed like an undulating cloth of diamond.

Years of beating on the Californian coast had robbed the rocky cliff of monster boulder hostages, that lay below in groups, some of them jagged, some all rounded and trimmed with the plush of moss and weed, yet the cliff stood proudly up and offered to the sea another scornful cheek to smite. A space to the south of the beach, less abrupt, and the boulders met, and the rock, as if to escape the waters, was deeply buried in the sand.

From a squatty little house, that stood to its knees in the grass, a man emerged, a long and bony Chinese, booted for wading, a basket on his back, and made his way to the sea by a trail through the rocks. In his hand he held a spear-like tool, armed on the end with a rusted iron chisel. He sang at a weird composition, for lately he had finished a small brass pipe of opium-tainted tobacco, while his meal of rice and seaweed gave to his system a circulating comfort.

Where a long and slippery reef of rocks projected like teeth above the ebbing tide, he shambled down, and prodding here and there with the spear, went slowly zigzagging outward. Now and again he stopped to lift or to pry a smaller rock from its nest of weed and barnacles, keenly gazing in the yawning maw thus created, in search of the gray and rough-backed abalones.

The house in the grass was a tumbled-up structure, suggesting a much-pelted target, for its roof was flat, and rocks were a-top to keep the boards from scudding away in the breezes that frequently blew. Its color was greenish and grayish, with the moss and the

painting of weather. It stood on a hillock, and between its "yard," and the rocks, and the beach of the sea, a winding road was curved around from the near-by woods.

Presently out of these woods appeared a man, who slowly and somewhat furtively advanced. His face was florid, jaws a-bristle with a stiff, black stubble of beard, eyes aluminum gray and restless. The red flannel shirt, faded trousers, shapeless hat, and wrinkled boots, that made his dress, were heavy with dust.

His gaze went rapidly from sea to house. In front of the latter, near the grass-grown road, a stand, constructed of the roughest of lumber, was fairly ablaze and glinting, in iridescent hues, with two or three dozen remarkably beautiful shells. They were polished abalones, radiant within with greens and purples, and the subtlest shades of highly tinted mother-of-pearl, red as ruby and garnet without, and mottled with grays that were warm, glossy, and brilliant as opal.

Leaning in diffidence against the stand, his plump little hand on a basket, his round face very coyly and wistfully inclined toward his feet, while his brown and wondering eyes looked slyly up at the staring man, was a very diminutive China boy, dressed in a blouse and thin, yellow trousers that hung in folds to the top of his small, stiff shoes. His cheeks were as rosy as a tinted russet apple, his hands were brown as bronze. The sun and the salt-laden breezes of the roaring Pacific had colored him boldly with master touches of health, and life, and beauty. On his head was a monster hat, a basin-shaped affair, wrought of bamboo strips, the crown no larger than a cup for tea, and jugged up like a small volcanic peak.

They stood there wondering, the dusty man from the mountains and the short little chap of the shore.

"Hullo, kid," said the man, "what's the matter of yeh?"

"You likee buy abalonee?" piped the shrill voice of the tender of the stand, who was growing unassured; "velly plitty abalonee."

"Putty, hey? Aberlonees, hey?" replied the stranger. "No, I don't."

"You manma velly muchee likee," piped the child, in echo of what he had learned, "velly plitty."

"Yeh don't tell," rejoined the man. Then he stood there

silently and shifted his weight from leg to leg, and thought and gazed so long that the China lad, embarrassed, sank slowly down, till it seemed as if he intended to crawl at the last beneath his hat. As it was, he sat in an odd little heap on the ground.

From a shed or low addition at the rear of the Chinaman's hut there started now a reddish horse, a thin and unambitious creature, that slowly trod about a circular path and turned a machine, to a pole or lever of which he was loosely secured. Sounds of a grumbling and then of a grinding, and grating, and gritting issued harshly on the air.

The stranger sauntered around. The horse, in walking tediously about, was turning wheels, that constantly complained, while sitting on the lever, a long, crooked stick in his hand, was apparently the same identical China lad who a moment before had been in front attending the stand. The same red cheeks, the same brown eyes, the round little face and the hands of bronze — everything was reproduced with an accuracy incredible. Round and round on the lever rode the tiny fellow, slashing mechanically now and again at the horse with his stick, but keeping his gaze, with astounding turnings of his much-behatted head, on the visiting man.

"Likee buy abalonce?" he shrilly piped from his lever, like a parrot. "Velly plitty, takee home for mamma!"

"Ye u go tuh heck," the visitor answered. "I tole yeh once I didn't." He thrust his large, hairy hands in his pockets and stood thinking "at" the timid little driver such a time that the latter gradually snuggled very closely to the pole and attempted, as his brother had, to hide beneath his hat.

"Koy yong foy toi," called a high falsetto voice from the shed. The boy responded by cutting at the horse, for the steed had all but ceased to move at all. The stranger started, turned, and looked toward the place whence the voice had proceeded.

What he saw was a Chinese woman. She was evidently wife of the man who had gone to hunt in the rocks for more of the shells, and mother of the chaps of the hats. Before a ponderous revolving wheel of stone she was perched on a stool, a shell in her hands, holding it firmly and bearing it hard on the grinding surface, to polish the back. Her hands were grimy and streaked

with lines of sand and muddy water; her clothes were soiled; but her face was joyous and warmed with color, and she hummed at a Chinese melody in keeping with the rumbling of the stone. From time to time she dipped the shell in a can of muddy water near, when the grit departing showed a wondrous spot, jeweled with tints of the opal and ruby, where the hard and rough and apparently hopeless back of the house that once had harbored Señor Abalone, had succumbed to the polishing process.

The quick, hard eyes of the man turned hither and yon, from one of the curious objects in the shed to another. Fish, cut open and spread out flatly, were drying here and there against the walls; nets were draped from nails, or depended from the roofs in swags and pendants; baskets, of odd and often attractive designs, were piled together or strewn about on the ground; and near the woman was a tray with the two or three shells she could grind before the night.

Fifteen minutes the visitor stood, absorbing the sights and muttering observations to himself. The slightest of noises then attracted his gaze to the right, and he there beheld the first little lad he had seen, regarding himself with much timidity. From this one to the one astride the lever he looked alternately.

"Pair of aberlony twins," he hoarsely muttered. "Don't see what in hell they're doin' way up here. 'Spose they lug the bloody things to 'Frisco bye'm bye, to sell."

He walked to the shed to stand and watch the woman at her work. She ground for a time, seemingly oblivious of everything of earth. Sousing her shell in the water, she turned.

"Likee buy abalone? Velly plitty," she rehearsed in a voice a trifle softer than the voices of the lads. Then she added in a moment, "Velly plitty for mamma," and her whole supply of the English language was all but exhausted and done.

The citizen grinned. "Naw," said he, in a milder tone, "don't want 'um; not to-day." He started along the road, but paused to look at the place and nod his head approvingly. "Not so dang bad," he grumbled. The brown little chaps were gazing intently where he stood. "Bloody putty kids, them, dang 'um. What in heck they givin' me, anyhow?—Plitty fer mamma'—dang 'um." Slowly walking, he entered the trees and plodded out of view.

The Chinaman, down on the jutting reef of rocks, hunted in patience, turning the smaller boulders, jumping from place to place, prying, twisting, and delving. The reef, so much and thoroughly searched, was seemingly barren of more of the creatures he sought.

For over an hour the tide had been low, and nothing made heavy the basket. Toiling somewhat blindly to turn a stubborn rock, he lost himself in the nearest approach to enthusiastic endeavor of which his kind is capable. Down came the rock when he almost had it toppling. His spear weapon was caught and held so firmly that none of his efforts availed to drag it forth.

Suddenly, just to the front, a large, flat-round surface, seen before but classified as rock, was slowly raised. A huge abalone was lifting its shell, not three long strides away.

Quickly, cunningly, abandoning spear and all, he glided forward and caught the shell abruptly, under the edge, with his long, bony fingers. A tug he gave, but with strange results; the shell closed powerfully down, with a quickness so amazing that his hands were caught, and held as if beneath a ponderous, immovable weight.

Crying aloud with pain and fright, he jerked and tore at the shell, to tear it away from the granite.

The rocks themselves had been easier to lift.

He thrashed, he screamed for help, but the abalone merely closed a trifle harder on the bones of all his fingers. Up and upwards lapped the fawning tide, swashing, seething, then retreating, as a creature playing with a victim. The roar of the breakers on the boulders of the beach drowned his cries as they boomed, and frothed, and rose upon the cliff.

The Chinese woman, as the wind increased, climbed from her stool, and trotted to the front of the house to look toward the sea. She knew it was past the time for the man to be returning. Only the gulls, however, that flapped on aimless wings, came up from the rocks.

Again she came in half an hour, to shield her eyes and scan the prospect far and wide. At length she ran to the edge of the cliff. A bending figure, struggling and screaming, was frothing the water that rose above its knees. The two little lads saw her run

to the trail, saw her slip from sight, and together they sat on the step of the door, hand in hand, to wait.

Louder and louder grew the voice of the sea. The wind was fresher, and the birds aloft went flapping and circling out and away. The horse at the lever hung his head and lifted a hoof. The long, soft hours of the warm afternoon glided uncounted away.

Sitting on the step, holding each to the wee bronze hand of the other, the two little fellows waited and waited.

The sun began at its low, western painting, splashing with red and gold the rifts in the huge cloudy masses. The long, gray horizon merged with the dark, leaden sky.

Walking rapidly, heavily, glancing often back, the dusty visitor of hours before abruptly appeared in front of the shanty.

"Hey," said he, looking rapidly about, "where's yer dad? Where's yer mammy?"

"Likee buy abalonee?" murmured one of the children, the two arising timidly; "velly plitty abalonee."

"Naw, yeh dang little shaver. Where's yer dad? I likee buy pants, boots." He brushed the two aside hurriedly and went within. The children moved in a backward, wistful manner to the stand, and took a shell apiece, in the hands disengaged, as if to guard the property.

The man came out again, muttering curses. He went to the cliff, to peer about, rapidly. Down in the rocks, tossed by the sea, was something floating. He gazed at it sharply — a long, still minute. Then back to the cabin he hurried.

"Yeh pore little devils," he said to the boys, "an' don't know nuthin' about it. Well, hang the luck, it's no biz of mine. An' some of them duds I've got tuh hev."

The little fellows watched him enter the house again, and both little grips were tightened on the shells.

It was dusky now, and the man, when he reappeared, clad in the garments of the Chinaman, was quickly clutched in an arm apiece of the anxious little boys.

"Hey — I ain't yer dad!" he blurted, starting.

With a silent gasp the small, round Chinese children edged away, to stand there wistfully looking in his face.

"Yeh pore little devils," he slowly repeated, "what'll yeh do?"

May not be a wagon er nuthin' comin' by fer ten er fifteen days. Hang yer luck, yeh got tuh take yer chances, same as all of us. Putty little kids. If they's any good of wishes of sech as Billy Young, I wishes yeh luck."

He turned no less than seven times to see them standing in the fading light, and then the woods received him to the shadows.

The moon that climbed above the trees, to silver-plate the grass and rocks, bestowed its glory on the shanty's front, and wantoned with the abalone mirrors on the stand, making a gleaming constellation there, shot with arrow beams of green and ruby lights. And searching about, the cold, white light found the two little lads sitting as before on the steps, their large brown eyes afraid of the stillness, yet their heavy heads nodding and nodding toward the realm of dreams. Each was holding still to the hand of his brother, each was clinging faithfully still to a shell.

The reddish horse had parted his harness and wandered away, feeding slowly as he went.

It was late in the night when the twigs and grass betrayed approaching steps.

"Yeh dang little kids," said the voice of the man who twice already had come to the place, "I couldn't git away. Hang yeh, anyhow — what in bloody thunder d'yeh mean by coddin' a tough 'bout his mother, hey? Here, yeh pore little cusses, we gotter shake this joint — most too near the bloody road — they might be somebody come — an' mebbe not. An' dang me, Johny, I'd starve meself, on nuthin' but rice an' hay."

He lifted the two frightened children till their clasping hands were held athwart his neck, and supporting each on a vigorous arm, strode away to the blackness of the forest.

The morning dawned but slowly in the dense, chilly shade of the towering redwoods, and out of the chimney and the holes in the roof of the long-abandoned camp of hunters the thin blue smoke ascended lazily.

Bare of head, vigorously washed in the cold, bright spring, the man prepared a breakfast, and spread it on the rickety affair that answered for a table.

"What in heck's the matter, kids?" said he, "can't yeh go the bacon an' beans? Ain't yeh used to nuthin' but rice an' hay? Ain't scared, air yeh, kids? Nuthin' to make yeh scared of Billy Young. Guess yeh couldn't a slept too bloody hunky. What'll I do with yeh, anyhow?"

They swallowed dumbly, a trifle of the food he placed in their trembling mouths, but edged away to the basin hats at the earliest chance, their questioning eyes forever on the face of the man.

"Got 'er lie low a week, yeh see," he told them in confidence presently, "an' it's forty mile if I lugged yeh 'crost to Chinees Camp, to yer kind, an' 'crost every road in kingdom."

In the afternoon a drizzling rain descended. He placed the children in the blankets of his bunk and patched the roof. The two little fellows sat there slowly winking, their hats on their heads, holding each other still by the hand, grasping as ever the two bejeweled shells.

At night he piled the wood up high on the fire. Darkness came early, clinging, it seemed, to the falling drops of rain. He left them his coat, and wended his way through the dripping trees, miles and miles to the ocean.

The Chinese man's cabin was dark and silent in the rain. He loaded a sack with the rice and weeds, and floundered back through the gloom.

Yet the following day the tiny fellows of bronze were never a whit more eager to eat, never responsive with smiles or words.

"Say," said the man, "Billy Young ain't never hurt *yeu* little devils—never hurt yer mammy, neither. Couldn't yeh cod a tough ole cuss 'bout thet mamma racket, hey?"

The trees and vines of a farm, in the black of night, ten good miles from the forest camp, he robbed of apples and grapes, to carry home to the wistful chaps. The dog was abroad; and running through the brush, the man was thrown and his ankle wrenched; but he limped away with the clumsy sack.

The ankle was swollen and red when at length he came to the cabin. The candle being lighted, he looked in the bunk. Sitting up as usual, blinking dumbly, the two little fellows regarded him in silence.



"See here, little mugs," he said to them tenderly, "nights is fer sleepin'. Yeh can't be healthy an' sit there thet a-way — an' never eatin' skasely a bite. Billy Young ain't a hull lot of shakes on singing songs, but I reckon he kin try, if yeh like." He cleared his throat and started several times. "Too high, I reckon," or "thet's too low," he muttered, until at length he struck a possible key.

"Way down upon the Swanee River,  
Fur, fur away,  
There's where muh heart — te dum  
Te dumpty —  
Dum — in the sweet by'm bye,"

he sang, time after time. At length the monotony soothed the children to a sort of hypnotic slumber, in which they sank slowly down in the blankets.

The week that followed saw the two little Chinese boys grow pale, thin, and faded. Their eyes seemed constantly increasing in size. The man, who lay for hours at a time racked by pain in the red and puffed-out ankle, watched them hopelessly, his eager eyes grown brilliant, his bearded face becoming thin and drawn.

"See here, my pore little babies," said he, "we got to git yeh down to Chinee Camp, with wimmin Chinees, er bust a leg."

He wrapped his ankle tightly about with long strips of cloth. A package of food he fastened to his belt.

It was night. Taking the children in his long, strong arms, their hands tightly clasped at the back of his neck, he limped away.

Over the ridges, down through the hollows, fording the ditches and climbing the cañons, he plodded on, singing his song and guarding the two from jolt and jar of the long and lonely journey.

At the fork of a road a post was standing, dim in the darkness of the coming dawn — a post with a placard, grayish white. Pausing here to rest, the traveler lighted a match and held it aloft. The face of the placard blanched in the glare, and black as holes were the letters of the printing on its surface.

#### REWARD.

Ten thousand dollars reward will be paid for the arrest of the "Lone Highwayman," who robbed the Molodero stage, Friday, September 30, at Sweeny's Bend. Man supposed to be "Billy Young," alias "Black Bill," alias "Shot-gun Billy." Described as medium height, broad shoulders, short, black beard, steel-gray eyes. Above reward will be paid for apprehension and detention at Willow Grove.

WELLS, FARGO & CO. EXPRESS,

"Kerrect," said the man, and limped away in the woods to lie in the brush for the passing of day.

Again in the night he staggered doggedly forward. Hills and valleys he slowly crossed. The dawn found him far from cover. Slowly limping, toiling hard for every step, he made for a hay-stack, standing erect in a field.

One of the children awoke at the touch of the hay. "Likee buy — abalonee?" he lisped in a whisper, feebly raising the shell he clutched; "velly — plitty; —you mamma — velly muchee — likee."

Late in the afternoon the man awoke. His face, shaggy and haggard, came slowly up from the hay. He winked in the light heavily, gazing unmoved and unconcerned down the double muzzle of a shot-gun held at his head a yard away.

"Don't shoot, Jimmv," he hoarsely whispered, "the aberlony twins is a-sleepin'."

A second man came rudely up. "Huh," said he, "them Coolie kids air dead."

Wearily Billy Young extended his hands, and the captor slipped the cuffs of steel on the limp and careless wrists.

