

The Hold-up Near Badger's Bar.

BY EDMUND STUART ROCHE.



HE saloon of Mulcahy's Hotel was the general rendezvous of Big Bear when its citizens were at leisure, and it was there that Brisbane passed his last evening at the camp. He had come up to Big Bear in the interest of a non-resident client, to take formal possession of a small hydraulic property recently purchased, and to make definite arrangements as to the details of its future operation. This being satisfactorily accomplished, he had planned to return with all haste to civilization, and early in the evening made a movement to leave the room in order to complete preparations for an early start. As he approached the door, however, he was stopped by a gesture and word of invitation from Mulcahy to enter the little office, railed off at one corner of the room, and barely furnished with a desk and two wooden chairs.

"I'm askin' a favor," began Mulcahy. "There'll be no pack goin' out for three days yet, and I have to get some dust, which the boys have just brought up from my chum down the river, into the bank by Thursday, sure. Now, you'll be in before that, and would you mind just takin' it over the trail for me? It's not weighty and'll not be in your way."

Appreciative of much recent hospitable treatment at Mulcahy's hands, Brisbane readily undertook what at first thought seemed but a trifling commission. As they spoke, Mulcahy was already unlocking one of the little cupboards of the desk, and taking from it a small buckskin sack of gold dust, he handed it to Brisbane.

"It's as heavy for its size as a bad conscience!" said the latter, laughing.

"Only a trifle risin' ten pounds," responded Mulcahy, with a depreciatory wave of the hand, and giving his guest a memorandum for his guidance. Brisbane was not usually a critically cau-

tious or suspicious man, and yet no sooner had he received the little sack than he felt an exaggerated sense of responsibility. He even glanced uneasily here and there, as he crossed the crowded room, to see whether his transaction with Mulcahy had been observed.

The faces which he saw were, however, all familiar, and expressed not the slightest concern in him or his movements. Thus reassured, he would at once have dismissed all further anxiety from his mind, had he not for the first time noticed, as he turned toward the door, with a good-night word to Mulcahy, a stranger, seated apart from the rest in an armchair tilted back against the wall. The man seemed to be carefully observing him, and, as he met Brisbane's glance, at once turned his eyes away, and moved awkwardly in his chair. He was tall and thin, past middle life, with a clean-shaven face, sharply cut features, and small, alert black eyes. His long, straight hair was tinged with gray, and was brushed back from a high and narrow forehead. He was evidently a recent arrival, for his saddle-bags lay beside him on the floor. At sight of him and his suddenly averted eyes, Brisbane felt all his suspicions and uneasiness revive. Had he followed his first impulse he would have made inquiries about the stranger, of Mulcahy, but a sense of the absurdity of his misgivings checked him, and half laughing at himself, he went directly to his room. Here his newly assumed responsibility still weighed upon him, and after an interval of restless sleep, which came to him only after hours of wakefulness, he awoke with a start, worn and unrefreshed, with the first cold gray light of dawn.

Once he was on the trail, however, breathing the fresh, pine-scented morning air, his megrims left him for a time. The way was new to him, as he had reached Big Bear by riding up the river from the coast, and wishing to see what he could of the country, he had determined to still follow the trail inland until he reached the Fort Jones road.

Later in the day, when the sky grew overcast and the shadows of the pines and balsams deepened, while the rising evening wind in the tree tops mingled its sighs with the myriad complaining voices of the river far below, a nervous sense of loneliness oppressed him. Consequently it was with a feeling of relief that

at last he espied the little cluster of shabby buildings which formed the settlement of Badger's Bar, — a once prosperous mining town that now existed only as a convenient stopping place for the scant travel that passed up and down the river. As Brisbane rode up to the corral adjoining the two-storied, weather-worn structure which the sign "El Dorado House," in faded yellow letters, informed him was the "hotel," there was absolutely no living thing in sight except a ground-squirrel that scolded and chattered at him from the opening of its hole, under one of the rotting foundation beams, and a solitary hen pecking vigorously at sluggish flies on the threshold of the open doorway. Old cans, bones, and empty bottles were scattered about everywhere, and the whole aspect of the place was squalid and depressing.

Brisbane had, however, no choice in the selection of his quarters for the night, and, dismounting, walked to the door and knocked loudly. The fly-catching hen flew by him with shrill, irritating cackles, and then a thick silence settled again oppressively over the place. Once more he knocked, louder than before, and shouted, "Halloo, there!" into the cheerless room. A moment later he heard a chair move in the room beyond, an inner door was opened, and a blear-eyed, bent, old man approached him slowly. His dress was slovenly. A ragged straw hat, through the torn crown of which coarse wisps of iron-gray hair protruded, surmounted a coarse, besotted face bearing a fortnight's beard. Altogether he was a most unpromising and repellent-looking host. He barely replied to Brisbane's salutation, and sullenly leading the way to the row of open sheds in the corral, pointed out the hay and an almost empty grain bin, and then stood idly by, watching his guest at work. The sun was setting as Brisbane, following his host, returned to the house. One of two compartments, unlighted by any window and roughly boarded off from the large room was assigned to him as quarters for the night. This and the companion den bore the numbers "38" and "39" respectively, painted in unevenly lined figures on each door.

"Supper in a half hour!" growled his host, after lighting the candle on the table in the corner, as he closed the door.

Hardly had the old man gone, when Brisbane heard the sound of horses' hoofs before the house, a knocking, a loud call, and

again the slow step of his host, as he shuffled toward the outer door; and knew that some traveler had arrived. Tired from his day's journey, he stretched himself upon the bed to rest, and in a moment was in a doze, from which he was only awakened by a rap on his door, and a gruff announcement of "Supper!"

In the large room, at one end of a long table, dimly lighted, two plates were laid, and a thin, middle-aged, untidy woman who was pouring tea as he entered, motioned him to the vacant place. He took his seat, and glanced at the guest who was his *vis-a-vis* — doubtless the late arrival — when, to his amazement, he recognized the elderly stranger who had aroused his suspicions at Mulcahy's the night before. Brisbane bade him good evening, at the same time instinctively placing his hand on the little sack of gold dust in his coat pocket. With a short reply the man dropped his eyes to his plate, evidently wishing to be left to himself, and as Brisbane was of the same mind, the meal progressed in silence. When at last the stranger finished, he did not linger, but rose and passed directly towards the front room, in which a lamp had just been lighted, and which, judging from its furniture, — a desk, a rusty box-stove, a long settle, and a few wooden armchairs, much cut with initials and other devices by previous travelers, was evidently the office and lounging room of the hotel. As he crossed through the doorway, his watch chain caught upon the latch bar, and was broken by the wrench which followed, so that a locket charm attached to it fell upon the floor. With an impatient exclamation he stooped to recover it, and then passed on, leaving Brisbane to finish his supper alone.

When Brisbane finally sought the office it was unoccupied, but from the sounds issuing from the room adjoining his own, it was evident that "38" had been assigned to the stranger. With a vague idea of keeping awake as long as possible, he smoked a pipe, went to the corral to see how his horse was getting on, tried his eyes in reading, by the dim light of the smoky hanging lamp, of a "Daring Hold-up" in an old county paper found upon the desk, and having thus exhausted the evening resources of Badger's Bar, sought the stuffy hospitalities of "39" and went to bed. The unwonted nervousness which had come with the receipt of the buckskin sack had grown upon him. He was, if possible, more

uneasily anxious concerning it than he had been the night before, and changed it repeatedly from one place of concealment to another, and then was not content. When at last he extinguished his candle, the lamp in the office threw a feeble light through the open transom, and he lay for a long time watching a spider on the ceiling crossing and recrossing the dim track thus made, at intervals emerging from and disappearing into the blackness on either side. All sounds of movement had long since ceased in the stranger's room, and at length Brisbane fell asleep.

Sounds of a closing door and of retreating feet, and the penetrating fatty smell of an unsnuffed candle, half awakened him, but suggested nothing definite to his drowsy consciousness. Again he was disturbed by a clatter among the old tins strewn upon the road outside, as they were struck by the hoofs of a horse moving rapidly away. The hanging lamp in the "office" had gone out, or been extinguished, and the darkness was intense. He groped for a match, and lit his candle. His first waking thought was of the little sack of gold dust, and he hurriedly felt for it in the saddle-bags slung over the chair by his bedside. To his amazement and dismay, the sack was gone! For a moment a magnified sense of his loss overwhelmed him. How could he explain its disappearance, with any hope of being believed? How could he make good the loss? Cursing the easy good nature which had thus involved him, his suspicions turned instinctively to the stranger in the adjoining room. Hastily half dressing, he hastened to the door of "38," listened for a moment, and hearing no sound within, knocked sharply at the door. Receiving no response, he hurriedly entered. The room was empty! His neighbor had decamped! He ran through the open door of the "office," and on to the corral, where, by the dull, early morning light, he saw at a glance that the stranger's horse was gone. As he turned toward the house, his host was at the bars. "Leavin'?" briefly inquired the latter.

"Where is the man who came last night?" asked Brisbane anxiously, ignoring the old man's question.

"Had breakfast and's went."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Ten minutes, maybe."

Brisbane waited for no more, but, paying his bill, he saddled his horse with nervous haste, hurried to "39" for his revolver, mounted, and was away, following the fresh tracks of the stranger's horse. The little stretch of road before the house presently dwindled to a narrow but well-worn trail, leading up a flat, sandy cañon. Brisbane rode as for his life.

"I must get back the sack!" was the one thought in his mind, and the hoof beats of his horse and the creak of his cadenced stirrup leathers seemed to give rhythmic repetition to the words. The way was heavy with sand, and wound sharply about among the scrub-oak and *manzanita*, so that he had in some degree to slacken the gait at which he had set out; but despite his ten minutes' start, the man ahead would need more than a good horse, freely ridden, to escape even now. The next moment, as Brisbane rounded a little wooded point, he drew a breath of relief. There, not forty yards before him on the trail, was the elderly stranger, riding at an easy lope, evidently unconscious of pursuit. His head was bent to the chilly morning wind which swept down the cañon, and the long ends of the worsted muffler tied about his throat streamed out like clumsy pennants behind him. His saddle-bags flapped awkwardly as he rode, and his pursuer's eyes, jealously fixed upon them as the probable repository of the stolen sack, brightened as he seemed to detect a particular heaviness in the right-hand bag.

"It is there!" thought Brisbane, and at the same instant, still urging on his horse, he shouted, "Halt! Hold up your hands!" and emphasized his demand by firing in the air. The stranger turned quickly at sound of the shot, and seeing himself covered by Brisbane's revolver, reined in, and at the second harsh command, "Hold up your hands, you thieving scoundrel!" turned gray with fright, and hastily complied. Brisbane was by his side in a moment.

"Turn over that dust!" he demanded. "Where is it?"

The stranger said nothing, but nodded his head toward the heavier of the two bags. He was trembling from head to foot, as Brisbane, with eyes never leaving him for an instant, fumbled at the strap of the saddle-bag, and, this unfastened, felt for the sack of gold dust. Yes, his eyes had served him well. The bag was there; and in another moment he had dropped it into the pocket

of his coat with a sense of inexpressible relief, as he felt its weight drag heavily upon him.

"Now go!" said Brisbane, "and don't turn 'round, or I'll shoot!"

The stranger needed no second suggestion, but put spurs to his horse and was off like the wind. Altogether it had turned out a much tamer affair than Brisbane had anticipated. Still, he felt rather proud of his achievement, and his thoughts were altogether self-complacent as he rode slowly back to Badger's Bar. Day was just breaking as he led his horse into the corral, and fed and watered him. The smoke from the kitchen chimney, and the rattling of dishes, assured him that his breakfast was in course of preparation, and he reentered his room to complete his somewhat fragmentary toilet, and make ready for his journey. Throwing aside a pillow from the bed to get his watch, which he had placed under it the night before, he stood for a moment dazed and motionless, almost doubting his senses, fairly stupefied by what he saw. There, on the mattress, close beside his watch, lay a little buckskin sack, seemingly the double of the one he had just rescued from the stranger. Was it witchcraft? Was he dreaming, or were there, in fact, two separate and distinct little buckskin sacks in his possession?

Aghast at the preposterous but only possible explanation of it all which suddenly flashed upon him, he sank back in a chair, overcome by mingled consternation and amusement.

Now he vaguely remembered that just before he had dropped to sleep he had, as a climax to his attempt at concealment, taken the sack from his saddle-bags and hidden it in its present resting place, and in his startled, hurried search in the morning, with the mists of sleep still clouding his memory, he had quite forgotten the change and gone off on a false scent. He had simply held up the elderly stranger!

Brisbane wiped the perspiration from his forehead, groaning audibly. What should he do? How could he extricate himself from his present embarrassing, even dangerous position? It was too late now to think of overtaking the stranger and returning his property. Even were it possible to do so, he could hardly hope that his explanation would be seriously received. He would

simply be turned over to an officer. He could not stay where he was and run the risk of arrest in this out-of-the-way place where there were no friends to vouch for him. At that very moment there might be a sheriff's *poursue* after him. He dared not confide in his sinister-looking host, and much less did he dare to entrust to him the gold dust. Two things only seemed plain: he must get away from Badger's as quickly as he could, and take his accumulated treasure with him; then, of course, he must look up the stranger later on, restore his property, and apologize. While these thoughts passed through his mind, Brisbane packed his saddle-bags, and then, hurrying through his breakfast, settled for the meal, threw himself on his horse, and clattered away.

About two miles out from Badger's the trail forked, one fork leading—as he had learned from his host—towards Yreka, whence the stage ran by Mount Shasta to what was then the railroad terminus at Redding, and the other towards Fort Jones, from which place another stage line ran by Trinity to the same goal. At this division of the trail Brisbane halted only a moment to consider his choice of route. The stranger had taken the trail toward Fort Jones, as fresh horse tracks plainly showed. He must take the other, and by hard riding he might yet be in season for that morning's coach.

As he urged his horse up cañons and along seemingly innumerable ridges, it seemed to him that he heard an approaching *poursue* in each stone that rolled down the mountain side, and in his own heartbeats the sounds of hot pursuit. Gradually the trail descended to a broad valley; it entered a well-traveled road, and presently, not three miles away, he saw the thick cluster of brick and wooden buildings which marked his immediate destination. As he rode up toward the little brick hotel, his horse panting and in a foam of sweat, he saw that he was only just in time for the coach. Indeed, the driver was just gathering up his reins and slackening his brake to start. Brisbane tried to call out, but was so choked with dust, and worn out with the hurry of his flight, that he could only wave his hand frantically at the driver.

"Hold on, Hank! Here's another passenger, I reckon," shouted a man on the hotel porch, and Hank "held on" while Brisbane, hurriedly dismounting, arranged in a few words to have his horse

sent back to Badger's, to be thence taken on to Big Bear with the pack train. Then, shaking the dust from his clothes as best he could, he entered the coach with his precious saddle-bags, and sank back in the comfortable leather seat, noting with a sigh of relief that the only other passengers were a man of about his own age and a young girl. For the present, at least, he had avoided the sheriff's *posse*.

During the next ten minutes he lay back among the leather cushions, utterly exhausted, his eyes closed, his brain reviewing rapidly the astounding chain of events that had involved him in such an absurd yet dangerous predicament. As the coach drew up at his next stopping place, however, he sprung up and stared anxiously around him. Seeing nothing more alarming than the retreating figure of the other man, who had signaled for the coach to stop while he climbed up on the seat beside the driver, Brisbane sank back again. By this time, however, he had recovered sufficiently from his reckless ride to consider a plan of action. Plunging his hand into his saddle-bag, he took out the fatal bag of buckskin of which he had feloniously possessed himself. The bag was unsealed and fastened merely by a buckskin thong. Undoing the knot, with fingers that trembled in spite of himself, he peered in, hoping to find some clue to its owner's identity. At the first glance it appeared to contain only some ounces of gold dust and a few small nuggets. The next moment, however, he pulled out a small package wrapped in a piece of newspaper. Just as he was about to undo the wrappings, the coach lurched suddenly to one side, throwing Brisbane back violently, while something flashed from his hand to the floor, where it lay half way between the two seats. It was a gold locket, whose case, opened by the jar, revealed a girl's face. A charming face it was, Brisbane could see, as he made a motion as though to pick it up. As he did so he stopped short, his hand still outstretched, his eyes fastened on the countenance of the girl opposite. She, too, had made a motion as though to recover the locket, and now she, too, sat with her hand apparently frozen into its position. But it was not her attitude, nor yet her hand — small and daintily gloved — that attracted Brisbane's attention. It was the fact that her face was the same as that which looked out of the locket!

As Brisbane gazed into the questioning gray-blue eyes, and noticed the troubled curve of the small mouth, he felt that no sheriff's *posse* could have so distressed him as did this girl of eighteen. In a second it had flashed upon him that this was the locket broken from the chain of the elderly stranger the night before, and that the girl was some relative, probably his daughter.

Another movement of his other hand resulted in a similar movement on the part of his companion. It was like a parrying with invisible swords. Brisbane took a long breath and, reminding himself that, after all, the girl could know nothing of the real facts of the case, he suddenly swept the trinket towards him with his left foot, and snatching it from the floor, held it toward his companion with all the self-possession he could muster.

"This is yours, I believe?" he said a little thickly.

The girl accepted the trinket, turned it over, closed the spring, and then looked sharply back at Brisbane.

"Where — where did you find this?" she cried anxiously. "You found it, did you not?"

"Well — hardly that!" replied Brisbane, rather taken aback by this very natural inquiry. "You know the face?" he asked.

"As a matter of course. You, yourself, have recognized the likeness. I had it painted for papa, and gave it to him not a month ago. But if you did not exactly find it, as you say, how did you come by it? Did papa entrust it to you?"

"I doubt if he looked at it in just that light, you know," explained Brisbane, with growing embarrassment; "but yet, in a sense, he did entrust it to me."

"Oh, then you know papa! How delightful! When and where did you see him last?"

"I — I met — or rather I overtook him before daylight this morning, near a place called Badger's Bar. Our interview was very short," stammered Brisbane, and then feeling that he had floundered about quite enough in his efforts to lead up diplomatically to his disclosure, he took a bold plunge, and, as concisely as he could, gave an account of his adventures from the time of his receiving the gold dust. "And now as you already have the locket," he concluded, "let me lighten my conscience by surrendering the gold dust."

"I positively decline to receive it," replied the girl, laughing. "You must hand it to papa himself, when we reach Redding." And then, in answer to a look of surprise and inquiry, she explained that her father, Mr. Henry Weeks, of San Francisco, was to meet her on the arrival of the stage, and take her home by rail; that she had been visiting an uncle engaged in several large mining enterprises in the North, while her father had been for the first time up the river beyond Big Bear, to look over some until now unvisited hydraulic property in which he was interested.

When the stage at last reached Redding, Brisbane's companion stepped lightly from the coach, and running to her father, threw her arms about his neck, and kissed him again and again. "And to think, papa, dear, that you should actually have been waylaid and robbed! It was simply dreadful! But I have recovered your gold dust, papa, and captured the robber! Hand papa his property at once, if you please, sir!" she demanded, with a charming air of mock command.

As a mediator, Miss Weeks was necessarily a success. Explanations and apologies were soon made and smilingly accepted, and within an hour the three were seated in the cars together, and on their way to San Francisco.

Some six months afterwards, as Brisbane was about starting on his wedding journey, his father-in-law caused him no small embarrassment, by handing him a little buckskin sack of gold dust identical in weight and appearance with the one of which he had been relieved by Brisbane at Badger's Bar.

"I well know your taste for such trifles," he said, with a smile. "I should perhaps have added the miniature, but you won't care for that now that you have the original."

