

The Pioneers of Pike's Peak.

By BASIL TOZER.

IT was a perfect night, about the end of June, the sort of night common enough in Colorado at that time of the year. I remember it, for at the end of the game I rose from the card-table and strolled out into the cool, refreshing air. Overhead the stars were shining with extraordinary brilliancy in a sky so clear that one seemed almost to hear them winking. The moon had not yet risen above the range of mighty peaks which tower into the heavens until their crests gradually vanish into great belts of clouds, and at night seem to touch the lowermost of the celestial bodies; but a sort of halo, gradually broadening, served to show that presently the moon herself would shed a flood of light from the very summit of the highest peaks down into the little village nestling at the feet of the mighty range, and now practically wrapt in slumber. No sound broke the perfect stillness without. The very houses seemed to sleep.

It was only when I re-entered the heated atmosphere of the smoky "bar room" where my companions, grown tired of card-playing, were now quietly conversing, that I noticed an odd-looking and apparently elderly stranger seated alone beside a little window at the further end of the room. The window was open, and he was staring

through it vacantly, only interrupting his reverie now and again in order to blow a long cloud of smoke into the air. As I seated myself among my companions I cast a glance of inquiry in his direction.

"He came in five minutes ago," one of them answered.

"Who is he?"

"Some crank, I suppose. He has hardly stirred since he sat down there."

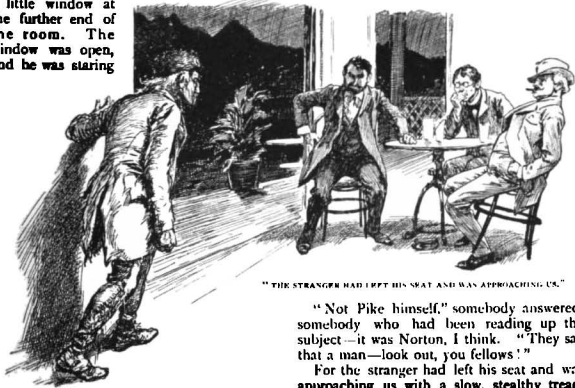
Though the room was a public one, only ourselves and the stranger now occupied it.

"What is he staring at?" someone asked, presently.

"Pike's Peak, apparently," replied Watson, who had called the stranger "some crank."

Though the words were spoken in an undertone, the "crank" evidently overheard them, for he turned his head and frowned. Then he resumed his former position—his vigil. Watson tapped his forehead significantly, and presently conversation drifted. It drifted from one topic to another, until the subject of American ways and customs, of America in general, of American scenery and landscapes, came uppermost.

"And who really was the first to reach the top of Pike's Peak?" Watson asked, looking round at us.



"THE STRANGER HAD LEFT HIS SEAT AND WAS APPROACHING US."

"Not Pike himself," somebody answered, somebody who had been reading up the subject—it was Norton, I think. "They say that a man—look out, you fellows!"

For the stranger had left his seat and was approaching us with a slow, stealthy tread,

his eyes oddly dilated. As he advanced we instinctively turned to face him. A man of immense proportions, and well over six feet in height, he could not have been over fifty years of age, though he looked quite sixty. His hair was white and rather long. He had evidently been handsome in his day, but now the face, neck, and hands were disfigured with numberless little sunken blotches in some ways resembling, though in reality quite unlike, the pits left by smallpox. He wore an old drab suit, a coon cap, thick boots, and leather leggings.

"Who did you say first saw Pike's Peak?" he asked, in a threatening, hollow voice. He had dropped into a chair upon the opposite side of the table beside me. As he spoke he looked me full in the eyes, and, placing both elbows upon the table very deliberately, rested his chin upon his fists. Norton, whom he had interrupted, came to the rescue.

"I believe that——"

"I first saw it! But do you know the story of our ascent?"

"I know only what I have read and been told," Norton said.

"You yourself have ascended Pike's Peak?"

"I have."

"You have seen the summit, then."

"Yes."

"And what did you notice there that struck you most—there, fifteen thousand feet above the sea's level?"

"Why, scenery that was perfectly grand."

"Yes, yes, I know—grand, magnificent, marvellous scenery. I know all that. But what else did you see?"

He paused. "Surely it is there," he muttered, "surely it is still there—it must be there—it *must* be there. Who could have removed it, eh?" he continued, aloud; "who could have taken it away? Tell me *that*."

Norton had an inspiration. What train of thought led up to that inspiration he says that to this day he cannot guess.

"Do you mean the stone?"

Instantly the stranger's expression changed. He looked round at us all quite intelligently.

"It is there, then?" he inquired, eagerly, bending forward across the table.

"Of course it is there," Norton and Watson replied in one breath. "Who could have taken it away?" Watson added, glancing towards us significantly, and suppressing a smile.

We were growing interested in this poor, demented creature.

"I can give you the inscription word for word," Norton said, wishing to propitiate him.

"Do! What is it? Tell me, what is it?"

"The inscription says: '*This stone is erected in memory of William Dawkins, James Weston, and Walter Hillier, Pioneers of Pike's Peak, who were devoured by mountain rats while endeavouring to reach this summit.*'"

"Ah!" he ejaculated, greatly relieved. "I am glad it is there—I am glad it is still there. Do you know the story of my friends, the story of those pioneers?"

He had grown suddenly calm. He seemed suddenly to have regained his reason.

"No; tell it to us," said Watson, carelessly blowing a cloud of smoke across the table. "But first, what will you take, sir? And won't you try a cigar?"

"Brandy," he exclaimed. "Then I will tell you all—all!"

Our interest and curiosity were now thoroughly aroused. We could see that the stranger was not a common brawler. He was quite sober, too, and though his mind was evidently unhinged, it was equally evident to us that he had intervals of lucidness. This seemed to be one of them. With provoking deliberation he reloaded his pipe. The glasses were refilled. We noticed that he poured brandy into his tumbler until it was three-parts full. Just then the moon shone over the summit of the famous Peak, and from where we sat the outline of the glorious mountain could be clearly discerned. Watson drew the stranger's attention to it. An odd, bitter smile flitted across his face. It was the first time that we had seen him smile. He sighed once, but did not utter a word. Again his gaze became riveted upon the gigantic Peak.

"Pike never would—never could have reached it. He tried to several times. Finally he stood upon a hill near the stalactite caves at the base of my mountain, and, pointing with his finger at the summit, said: 'No mortal man will ever tread that Peak!'"

Again he paused.

"But we—*we* were determined to. Our friends shook us by the hands and bade us farewell.

"'But you are fools,' they said. 'You will never come back. You don't know what you may meet in those mountains. You know what Pike said when he came back. You know the tales he told. And some things he would not tell.'"

"'Don't go, oh! don't go,' my wife cried, in agony."

"I loved her, yet I forced her from me. She was but a unit. In the success of our enterprise lay the welfare of thousands. I told her that to comfort her. It was the last time I saw her alive. My comrades—may God help them—had no wives. 'You are married,' they had said all along; 'you should not come.' But I was determined to go. Early in the morning we started. We took with us arms, food and drink for many days, and the bare necessities of life. We carried everything ourselves. We knew where and how Pike had failed. We should succeed.

"A week later we were fairly lunched, also

we were fairly in the midst of difficulties. The work was terribly severe, but we had determination, strength, and courage. We had expected to find obstacles, and in this we certainly were not disappointed. Here, enormous boulders which had to be circumvented; there, unlooked-for waterfalls and ravines that delayed us, besides vegetation so thick that in places we had literally to hack our way through it. All this impeded our progress enormously. And then the unknown dangers that Pike had hinted at. There might be snakes and reptiles, of sorts hitherto never heard of, concealed among those immense boulders; there might be death-dealing plants all around us—such plants flourish in South America; there might be—indeed, we did not know what there might not be. But of course we did not pause to consider these things."

He paused, however, in order to take another great gulp of brandy. It seemed to stimulate him. His eyes glistened.

"Over a fortnight went by. We were growing more and more accustomed to meeting difficulties and to overcoming them, for many obstacles at first sight insurmountable



"DON'T GO, OH! DON'T GO."

proved in the end to be less formidable than we had anticipated. And as we gradually mounted higher and higher, our spirits steadily rose as if in sympathy. Far down in the valley we had once or twice during our progress caught glimpses of this very townlet, now called Colorado Springs, also of the village of Manitou. Tiny villages, indeed, they were in those days, and as we saw them from those great heights they looked like chessboards stretched out upon the vast expanse of prairie. And still we fought our way upward, upward, always upward.

"How long our expedition had been started I cannot quite remember, when the nature of the surroundings gradually changed greatly. In place of

rock and black soil we now found vast tracts of a sandy formation. The undergrowth was still dense, however, though here and there thousands upon thousands of slim fir trees lay rotting upon the ground, evidently swept down by some terrific storm—for storms in these mountains sweep down trees as a reaping machine sweeps down standing corn. Sometimes we came upon broad, open spaces—spaces swept clear apparently in early days by giant waterfalls long since dried up. Then, as we penetrated still higher, the temperature of course became colder and colder, the atmosphere more and more rarefied—the vegetation at the same time naturally decreasing in density and the trees in size. Even the boulders grew smaller. Indeed, they now looked as though in prehistoric times they had all been flung together by a tremendous seismic disturbance, many of them being crushed to pieces in the process.

"'Have you noticed,' one of my comrades remarked one day, as we prepared to rest and refresh ourselves, 'what a quantity of insects there are up here? And the rats, too, are getting more plentiful. We seldom see any of those grey squirrels now.'

"As he spoke he stamped his foot upon an immense brown spider that was running away. Its body burst with a crack, and glutinous liquid spurted out all round his boot. Almost instantly several more spiders ran out from beneath a large stone as though to ascertain what had happened. They stopped. For a moment they seemed for all the world as if they looked at us—looked at us with a malignant, vindictive expression. Then they scuttled away.

"I believe I felt several of those spiders scampering over my face last night," he

we had made good progress, when suddenly, to our surprise, we came upon a large, sloping tract of bare white sand. The sun, still high in the heavens, shed its rays slantingly across it, and at first sight the sand seemed to be alive with small, moving bodies.

"Talk of spiders!" Dawkins said, laughing. "Did you ever see anything like that?"

"We had long ago, in previous expeditions, grown accustomed to surprises. Few things astonished us now. Never in our lives, however, had we seen such an assemblage of



"FOR A MOMENT THEY SEEMED AS IF THEY LOOKED AT US."

continued. "You fellows had better be careful; I am told they bite like the mischief. These mountains are famous for them, and—just look at that!"

"A couple of large rats were chasing an enormous spider across a long flat boulder. A moment later spider and rats disappeared over the edge.

"They say that mountain rats will devour any living thing," Weston said, presently. "They will eat us if we don't watch them," he ended in jest.

"During the earlier part of the afternoon

'lucky insects,' as some senseless folk call them. There must have been thousands upon thousands of them running about in every direction, colliding with one another and tumbling over one another apparently for no particular reason. The sight made me think of a gigantic ant's nest overrun with mammoth ants, and an odd sort of smell that for several days had pervaded the air, and caused us to wonder more than once whence it came, here struck our nostrils with renewed strength. The smell was the smell of spiders.

"Now, as we stepped forward into this open tract, a strange thing happened, for the entire space which a moment before had been alive became in an instant motionless. The spiders were all there, right before us, but of one accord they had stopped running. Oddly enough, too, every spider was now facing us. Instinctively we felt that we had become objects of intense curiosity. And as we stood there, interested and amused, we could distinctly see the spiders' great eyes sticking out and evidently watching us. The sight would have given women, and many a man for that matter, 'the creeps,' as I believe a certain sort of nervous affection is called. We rather enjoyed it.

"'Pish! you hideous things,' Dawkins said, pitching a pebble into their midst. In less than a minute hardly a spider was to be seen.

"'If we describe that sight when we get back we shall be called liars, to say the least,' Weston said, glancing at his watch. 'I've seen insects in my time, but never anything like that. Why, it's past three o'clock.'

"The offensive smell was still strong in the air, and as we progressed it increased. Once or twice it became almost unbearable. We had now a long stretch of clear going before us, so we hastened to avail ourselves of it by advancing briskly. And still we saw spiders at every turn, spiders running in under every stone, spiders by the hundred sunning themselves on every rock and boulder—great brown spiders, with fat, oval bodies, and with thick, hairy legs bent in grotesque curves. I kicked over a stunted little tree that lay rotting—ugh! quite two or three hundred spiders must have scuttled away from under it.

"'This is getting beyond a joke,' Hillier, who seldom spoke and was generally considered surly, suddenly said. 'I tell you what it is: these spiders will go for us.'

"'Like Weston's rats!' Dawkins said, laughing at him; and we were still chaffing Hillier and Weston when Dawkins happened to look round.

"'Why, Harry!' he exclaimed.

"There was anxiety in his tone, and I felt his hand grip my shoulder. And no wonder. Though anything but a coward, Dawkins could not help at once realizing what we all realized a moment later, namely, that Hillier's evil omen was more than likely to come true, and, realizing at the same instant our utter helplessness should such a thing occur, a sickening sense of fear had come over him.

"For there, barely fifty yards away, a reddish-brown mass gradually assuming the form of a crescent was steadily, swiftly gliding over the sand, steadily and swiftly overtaking us. And as it approached we could see thousands upon thousands of spiders hastening towards it from every side and quickly increasing its size. The swarm when first we saw it must have covered between twelve and fifteen square feet. Before it had glided over another twenty yards of sand the entire mass was nearly one-third as large again. Yet a sort of horrible fascination kept us rooted to the spot where we now stood watching the swarm approach. In order to brace up our courage we told one another that the spiders could not be pursuing us at all; that if we moved aside they would pass us by. But in our hearts we knew that we tried to think a lie. And when we moved aside in order to convince ourselves, the creeping crescent immediately swayed round towards us and seemed if anything to advance more quickly."

The stranger poured out another tumblerful of brandy, swallowed about a third of it, and, growing more and more excited, continued:—

"Suddenly the intense horror of the situation flashed across my mind and struck terror into our hearts. For what could we do to avert the terrible fate that threatened us? Savage animals we might have coped with; treacherous human beings, even, we might have bested; but now we were face to face with a peril totally unexpected, utterly loathsome and unassailable.

"'Our only chance lies in flight,' Hillier said, bitterly.

"'Flight! and where shall we fly to? The top of the mountain, I suppose! Look there, Hillier.'

"It was Dawkins who spoke, and he spoke in tones of scorn. Looking round us, we now saw what we had not noticed before. We were surrounded. Everywhere we saw spiders—spiders approaching in brown, gliding crescents of varying sizes. And over a hundred yards away the largest and darkest mass of all could clearly be distinguished, also winding its way along the sand, also approaching, also inclosing us. And as this great crescent surged undulatingly, unswervingly across hillocks and irregularities in the surface of the sandy soil, it resembled the great waves of a sluggish, turbid stream leaving a factory sluice.

"'Fire into them!' I exclaimed, slipping a couple of shot cartridges into my gun. The two charges cut a lane into the approaching wave, but almost instantly the lane closed up,

and the undulating mass advanced as if nothing had happened. Together Dawkins and Weston fired four barrels. Rather a broader lane this time; but again it closed up. I had reloaded.

"'Give them a volley,' Weston called out; 'that may turn them.'

"We did so; but by the time the smoke had cleared away the swarm had well-nigh resumed its normal size and shape. Could we sweep a lane with our eight barrels and then rush through it? No, that was obviously impossible: the width of the waves was too great. And still recruits were pouring in upon every side, and as we fired volley after volley into the quickly approaching swarms, in the vain hope of turning them, the distant ravines rang again and again with echoes.

For a moment the stranger stopped. His pupils were widely distended. His limbs trembled. He clutched the table frantically in order to support himself.

"Suddenly I saw several spiders run up Weston's face and fix upon his eyes. With a scream he dashed them away, but as he did so his eye began to swell, for the brutes had bitten him badly."

He stopped again. He was quivering all over with the excitement. The brandy was taking effect. Suddenly he dashed from his seat to the furthest corner of the room.

"Keep them from me! Keep them off!" he cried, glaring wildly all round the floor. "Look at them now—look at them—ah! God help me!—help me!—*help me!*"

He sprang to right and left, then towards



"WE FIRED VOLLEY AFTER VOLLEY."

"'My God! we are done for,' came despairingly from Hillier, as for the twentieth time he closed his gun with a snap.

"Our barrels had now become almost too hot to hold, and still the hideous, crawling waves, which must have contained trillions of spiders, were fast approaching with a strange, swaying motion, and rapidly narrowing our little circle. In a few minutes they would be upon us, overrunning us, dragging us down. Already many stragglers were running up our legs and over our bodies. Now, the first swarm was so near that we could distinctly hear it rushing upon us, and—ah! the smell, how it still hangs in my nostrils"

the door. Perspiration was pouring down his face. Then suddenly he snatched blindly at imaginary spiders running up his sleeves and legs, running up his body, running over his head, over his face, over his eyes, into his mouth. It was a dreadful sight.

"Stop him!" Watson cried, jumping from his seat and rushing towards him, but as he approached the maniac a blindly directed blow from the latter's fist nearly stunned him, and the inn-keeper and two rough-looking men entered the room.

"Hold him, boys," the inn-keeper said, calmly, and as the two men pounced upon the stranger the inn-keeper sauntered towards us.



"THE TWO MEN POUNCED UPON THE STRANGER."

"Poor fellow," he said, "I always have to be ready for him—look at him now, yet the doctors pronounce him sane. He often is sane, of course, but when I heard him starting on the spiders, and on brandy as well, I knew what to expect."

"Is there any truth in his spider story?"

"Any truth? It's all truth; at least, that's my belief. Though I was quite a lad at the time the expedition started, I can remember it well. Four of them there were, all strong and hearty when they set out. Two months later *he* came back."

"Did he alone escape?"

"He alone came back—came back quite done for and disfigured all over with red blotches. Afterwards they turned into pits. Look at them now on his face and neck, but they are all over his body, too—all over every inch of him. Some years later another expedition went up and reached the summit, but they always maintained that rats, not spiders, devoured those poor fellows, so they set a stone with an inscription upon it at the top of the mountain—you have seen it, no doubt?"

"What do you, yourself, think they were killed by?"

"Think? I don't think anything. As sure as you are standing there they were eaten up by swarms of great spiders, as Mad Harry has told you. I have heard him tell the story often enough, and he always tells the same story; but when he drinks brandy while he's telling it he nearly always gets into that state sooner or later, and I get these men to hold him until he recovers. Besides, those marks are not rats' bites. They are not a bit like rats' bites. No, I believe that what he says about the rats is true: that is, that a perfect army of them suddenly came down upon the spiders and routed the lot, but not before the other three men had succumbed, or had been so sucked out of blood that they soon died of exhaustion. Ah! it's a horrible place, that mountain," he said, looking at its rugged peak so clearly outlined in the moonlight. "Though you can go up one side of it now by the track, easily enough, you don't know what horrors may exist in other parts of it. Many a man has gone into those mountains, but very few have ever returned."