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THREE FORTUNES IN CALIFORNIA.

Colonel Houston's Experience—Washing Clothes and Keeping Hotel—In the Gold Mines—Back From the States—The Lost Fortune.

"A man can always make money if he really wants to," said Col. James Houston in the Leland hotel, as we talked of wealth and its uses. "I know what I say," he continued, "for I have made three fortunes myself, and would start out for a fourth if I had a single incentive: but what difference does it make to a man of my age, without a family, whether he is rich or poor? I am content, but I repeat my original proposition, if a man does not get rich, it is his own fault. To keep money is far more difficult than to get it."

"I think I could manage to keep it if I once got it," I replied.

"You think so; but its far more of a science than you think. All your friends and enemies conspire to rob you, and a man who holds it tight must make up his mind to be a curmudgeon. The rule for getting rich is easier to learn than the rule for keeping so. There is but one for the former and a dozen for the latter. I'll tell you how I made three fortunes, and you will see for yourself the principle.".

To look at the speaker no one would have dreamed that he was a man upon whom the Goddess of Fortune was frowning. He puffed a Havana and watched its smoke curl into wreaths.

"When people talk of self-made men they talk of what never existed," he began. "If ever a man could be called a truly self-made man, I am the one; yet I can see distinctly the combination of circumstances that helped me to my success, and to these I owe thanks just as much as if some one had started me by setting me up in business. Yes, more; for these helped me to help myself, while the latter might have made me weak and indolent. It is the man who knows how to use the adverse circumstances of his life that is sure to win on the homestretch. Most boys think work an evil and hate it. I was brought up to work, and though it is some time since these hands were soiled by labor"—glancing at his well-formed hands—"I have never forgotten to be thankful for the farm life that made it a necessity. A box of tools locked up is not half as useless as a man's hands when untrained to labor. Boys hate a flogging, but if I had not had one just when I did I should now be plowing the fields, piling up stones, and living on a farm in the western part of this state. It came just at the right time, roused every energy into action, and made me leave home at 16 to seek my fortune. I had read of hundreds of boys who had done the same thing. Why should I stay at home, and be the slave of an impatient man? I worked my way to this very city and found myself in the same condition of all I had read about, foot sore, alone, and without a cent.

"To be in the wilderness among wild animals, alone and unprotected," he continued, "is not a desirable position, but it is delightful compared with that of being in a crowded city without friends or money. I found myself after a few hours opposite the Astor house. Guests were just leaving the dining room and sauntering on the piazza. I was terribly hungry, and the odors from the kitchen drove me wild. I went to the office and asked for work and something to eat. I now see what a small chance I had of being successful, but then I did not know enough to realize my good luck. I stayed there two years, serving in many capacities, sometimes as porter, sometimes in the laundry, at others as general help. I learned many things which afterward made me a rich man. Best of all, I learned that I must save my money, and a cent never left my hands unless it brought a useful equivalent. When I saved enough to take me to California I bought a second-class ticket and started. I had no longing for the old home, though my mother's face was ever before me. I knew that she was happy in my freedom and the knowledge I sent her of my well being.

"After a long, tedious voyage we landed in California. San Francisco to-day and San Francisco twenty-nine years ago are two entirely different cities. It was then a place of fabulous possibilities; crude, energetic, undeveloped. It is now a finished city, already having left its first stage of development, and far on toward the ripeness that brings art, learning and culture. As I walked up from the wharf I was struck with this aspect of newness. Everything had the appearance of being hastily done until the time might come that the finishing up might be done. No one seemed to stop to speak, but worked as though the avenging furies were watching. The spirit of the place suited me. I felt that I had found my proper field, and already I could see myself working as fast as the rest at the building of a future fortune. Had I been asked how or in what way I could not have told, but I felt my success in my bones. I walked up the street, looked at the new buildings going up, and wondered whether I should not meet anyone I had ever known. No sooner had the thought passed through my mind than I heard my name shouted from a little wooden building in process of erection. I looked again. A young fellow had stopped hammering and was coming toward me. He was a boy who had left home a year before me. I have been glad many times in my life, but never as glad as then. I shook his hand as though I could never stop, until he broke away, saying: 'Over there's my tent. Come to-night and we'll talk. Can't stop now. I get $16 a day for driving nails in these boards. Try a hand?'

"'Not to-day, Jim. Thanks all the same, but I never could drive a nail.'

"I found my way to his tent that night. It was a rude affair, but he insisted on my sharing it with him, and I carried my trunk there. 'What's the reason no one wears clean linen here?' I asked.

"'No one has time to wash,' he replied. 'Do you know what it costs to have a biled shirt washed, without touching an iron to it?'

"'Can't guess. Mebbe twenty-five cents.'

"'A dollar.'

"'Jerusalem!'

"'I should say so.'

"'I'm going for a bit of a walk. I'll be back presently.'

"'All right. You're dead broke of course. Everyone is when he gets here. Take these till you get started," and he pushed into my hand five pieces of money that felt like silver dollars.

"They were twenty-dollar gold pieces. I looked at them when I got under a lamp. Then I wrapped them in a piece of paper, put them in my pocket, and said to myself, 'I'll never touch you, my beauties, except I am starving. Now for business.'

"I walked on till I found a little store where household things could be bought. I walked in, picked out a washtub, a washboard, a boiler, and a cake of soap. 'How much for these?' I asked of the man who owned the store.

"'Thirty-two dollars.'

"'All right; I'll pay for them tomorrow;' and I put them on my shoulder to carry off.

"'Not so fast. We don't do business that way. Pay as you go is our rule.'

"'In this case the rule must have an exception, for I shall take them, and bring the money for them in the morning.'

"The man laughed, said he liked my pluck and let me carry off my spoils. Before bedtime I had a pile of clothes to wash that amazed me. I made $126 next day, wore my fingers sore, paid for my outfit, and engaged a Chinaman to help me. Before a week was over I had women to iron the clothes, and was running an extensive laundry. Here my experience at the Astor House came in, and I was known far and wide as the New York man who had started the San Francisco laundry. I built myself a tent, put out a shingle, bought a donkey and cart, and made money hand over fist. At one dollar a piece it did not take long to wash shirts enough to make a hundred, and then a thousand dollars. In two years I was carrying on an immense business, and two years later sailed for New York a rich man.

"I am not telling the story how I lost my money, so I'll merely say that before nine months had passed I found myself again bound to California in pursuit of money. To tell the truth I did not feel bad at the prospect of going over the same experience again. There is an enjoyment in making money far greater than in spending it. I had sold out my old business, so was forced to look for a new way of getting rich. When I landed the gold fever was at its height. Men were leaving for the diggings by hundreds. I took it into my head to join a company and started for the Stanislaus river. The rough journey overland somewhat dampened my ardor, but I pressed on till I reached the camp. I found a good claim worked by two men. The third man had just gone back sick. 'What'll you take for his share of the claim and let me in?' I asked.

"'Three thousand dollars,' was their reply.

"'But I have no money now—am dead broke,' I rejoined.

"'No matter. We like your looks, and you can soon make enough to pay us. Pitch in.'

"I took a pick in my hand and went to work. At night the insides of my hands were covered with blisters and so sore I could not move my fingers but I had had an unusually good day and had made $500 in dust. If it had been $5,000 it would have made no difference. I could not sleep my hands hurt me so badly. Next morning I said to my partners: 'I'll give you the dust—and claim—if you'll call it a square deal.'

"'You're welcome to the dust; but why not stay and make a fortune?'

"'Because I can't dig. Never could. If a fortune can't be made in any other way, I shall be poor till I die. Look at my hands. I would not work another day with pick and shovel for ten times as much. You're good fellows, and I hope to see you again. I'm greatly obliged for the dust, and will leave you the claim to divide between you—'

"So we parted. I found a crowd going back to Sacramento, and joined it. Half way there provisions ran out, and we were in a bad fix. Some one said a few miles further we would find a sort of tavern where we could rest, fill up and take a new start. Of all the vile cooking that we found, there was the worst. Hungry as we were, we could scarcely swallow the food, that cost us its weight in gold. A happy thought struck me. I would not go on, but would buy out this man and set up a tavern where man and beast could get good food. He was glad to sell, took my ticket, and went on with the crowd. I was a good cook, thanks to my experience in New York, and caravans soon made it a rule to stop both ways and lay in provisions. I was obliged to build larger, and at the end of five years sold out to a man, pocketed half a million, and sailed for home. I often think of those times and smile at my life, but it was full of enjoyment, and one of the most peculiar features was my difficulty in hiding my money. There was no banks then, and men were rough. I used my small mustard boxes for packing away all twenty-dollar gold pieces. As fast as I had one filled I would dig a place under some tree and bury it. My brains were constantly kept busy trying to remember where and how many there were. When I was paid in dust I filled small buckskin bags and did the same.

"Again I lost all. Again I started for the old place, where money had come so freely at my bidding. I could not hope to begin a new industry, for the city had made giant strides toward perfection. My old laundry was sending its wagons through the city by scores, with my name upon them, but the business was now so great that it was held by a corporation. I knew why I should not try a hotel again, though why I could never have told, and I wondered to myself what next I would turn my hand to. As usual I landed in 'Frisco and looked about me. Banks were insecure. I was well-known and honored, and urged to go into banking. This brought me a third and greater fortune than ever. You will see in every case the same law followed, leading to the same result. It is now many years since I came back, sought my friends, went to the old farm, found father and mother gone where those who had lived before them were laid, had a fine monument placed above them, and then set my two brothers up in business. They failed, and I lost a pile. They feel bitter because I won't repeat the kindness, and never come near me. I am poor, comparatively, compelled to go down town daily, do not dare to go back to old California again, for the spirit of luxury has so taken possession of her that I can better live here than there. Every one calls me a lucky dog. Suppose I am. But I am free to own that the happiest day of my life was when I had built a tent for my laundry, bought my donkey and cart, and in the light of the setting sun seated myself at the door to meditate on the name I should paint on the cart. That was the proudest moment of my life, for it was the first assurance of future success. It was not that I was proud of my establishment, but I saw in the difficulties overcome a certainty of mastering others, and the pleasures this gave me words cannot describe."

"How many failed where you succeeded?" I asked.

"Hundreds, probably."

"And why?"

"Because they did not know the law that governs riches."

"To meet a want, and meet it well. To make money and save it."

"Explain."

"Well, when I went to San Francisco the first time, I saw at a glance that every one was crazy over gold. As a consequence they did not take time to be cleanly. There was no one wise enough or sharp enough to see that money could be made just as rapidly washing clothes as in any other way. While my old friend was rejoicing in being able to earn $16 a day driving nails, I saw an opportunity of doing better, and increasingly better, filling a great need, and giving work to others. When I started the hotel it was on the same principle and with like result. With banking the same. It has never failed—will never fail. Of course in an older country the possibilities are not so great, because fewer needs exist, but always there are niches to fill by those fitted for the place. Another element of success is to know how to work. You smile. It is years since I have been called on to labor, but my hands could do at one time of my life anything I wished. I have grown indifferent to ambition, and am content to live as I do."—*N. Y. Sun.*

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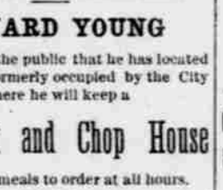

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