

Elizabeth Gerberding

*The Golden
Chimney:
A Boy's Mine*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I DISCOVERY OF THE MINE

CHAPTER II THE PURCHASE

CHAPTER III THE SMUGGLERS' CACHE IS FOUND

CHAPTER IV FUNDS FOR THE ENTERPRISE

CHAPTER V BEN'S PARTNER PROVES A TRUMP

CHAPTER VI THE MULE AUCTION

CHAPTER VII BUILDING THE ARASTRA

CHAPTER VIII GOLD IN THE "JIGGER"

CHAPTER IX THE MYSTERIOUS CHINESE

CHAPTER X WORK STOPPED

CHAPTER XI A MIDNIGHT FIGHT

CHAPTER XII IN THE SICKROOM

CHAPTER XIII THE OPIUM RAID

CHAPTER XIV A CRIME DISCOVERED

CHAPTER XV BEN CHOOSES A PROFESSION

CHAPTER I DISCOVERY OF THE MINE

Table of Contents

Ben Ralston and his cousin Beth were sitting on the northern slope of Russian Hill, one of the many hills of San Francisco. At the foot of the elevation the black buildings and smokeless chimney of an abandoned smelting-works rose from the beach which skirted the hill. Beyond, the blue bay sparkled in the sunlight, except where fleeting cloud-shadows raced across its surface.

"I was born just about forty years too late," the boy remarked with emphasis.

"But the city's a big place, and it's getting bigger and bigger,—I heard a man say so to-day."

"I know all that, Beth; and the reason is, there are more people coming all the time. Every one who comes lessens my chances to get on. Forty years ago there weren't many folks here, but there were a heap of chances."

"I had a feeling when I came up here to-day that you weren't going to take that place in Stratton's store."

"What made you think so?"

"O, I just guessed so from the way you talked. You always talk that way when you're blue." She buried one of her hands in the shining sand on which it rested.

"Think,"—he pointed to the huge chimney at the foot of the hill,—“think of the gold the fire of that chimney has melted! And then expect me to be an errand boy at three dollars a week, with a chance of a raise to four in six months! I tell you, Beth, I can't do it. I'm not that kind. I'd get so wild thinking of it all. If it were something more to do,

or something where I could get ahead quicker, I wouldn't be so dead set against it."

"Syd would like the place, I think, if you're positive you'll not take it."

"Well, he's welcome to it. Perhaps he's the plodding kind,—though I never thought he was; but I've got two hundred dollars, and it's got to help me to something better."

"I thought you said it was three hundred?"

"So it was; but some more bills turned up and had to be paid, so it's dwindled. I've got it in the savings bank."

The girl looked at the massive pillar which reared itself before them.

"I should think some of the gold would have stuck to the chimney," she remarked.

Her companion suddenly grasped her wrist.

"Beth!" he exclaimed. His eyes glowed with excitement, and he sprang to his feet and whirled his hat around his head as he gave a cheer. Then he stood quite still and gazed at the chimney.

The girl looked at him in wonder. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know myself—exactly. Maybe, it's nothing, and maybe,—you've found my fortune."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, goosey, don't you see it yet? To buy the right to mine the soot for gold, the gold of the early days. Somehow, I've always felt that that would be the stuff to put me on my feet,—and here it is. Maybe, I've been mistaken,—maybe, I wasn't born too late, after all."

“Mine the soot! How can you?”

“Why not? I’ve heard of its having been done.” His face shone with hope. “No one’s ever thought of this!” he exclaimed. “Don’t you see it’s a big thing?” he questioned, as she did not speak.

“If you can only do it. Will old Madge give you leave?”

“He will if I pay him for it. He’d give me the right, too, to tear down the old sheds; and of course there’s gold under the crazy ramshackle things. They had so much of it in the early days that they weren’t any too careful.”

“Mr. Madge would be foolish to give you the right, if the gold is there.”

“He is sort of fool-crazy over his mines. He’s always telling every one all about them, how rich they are and all that. The biggest vein ever seen is always just ahead. He wouldn’t come down to mining soot.”

“But wouldn’t it be his gold if you found it on his land?”

“No, ’twouldn’t. Not any more his than mine. The Works were just a mill to crush everybody’s ore; and what’s left is for the sweeper. Besides, the land is only leased, anyway, and if I go open-handed and buy the right to sweep, what I find’s mine.”

“I should think that some of it would be his, too.”

“I don’t see it that way. A girl’s always got such cranky ideas of business.”

“Well, we won’t quarrel about it until you get it. Shall you put in all your money?”

“Every cent, if I have to. I’d like mighty well to have some left, though, for the expense of working the thing.”

“O, Ben, suppose you shouldn’t find any gold?”

“That’s the chance I’ve got to take. But you shall have anything you want, Beth.”

Her face flushed as she saw him glance at her shabby shoes and frock, and she tried to cover her feet with the hem of her dress.

“These are trifles,” she bravely said, pointing to them; “but what I should like would be more schooling.”

“You shall go to school, and before I get any gold either. I know a way to fix it.”

“Don’t anger Mr. Hodges, will you, Ben?” She turned an anxious face toward him.

“I won’t. I didn’t tell you that I found a note of his for ninety dollars among father’s papers.”

“No. You don’t expect to get it?”

“Of course not; but I can hold it over his head for nearly two years yet.”

Her face brightened. “And make him let me go to school! That isn’t a bad scheme.”

“We’re doing great things in schemes to-day. Let’s go through the old Works!” He seized her hand and they tore down the hillside, until they stood, out of breath, before the nailed gates.

Grim and gaunt the building faced them. Boards were nailed over the broken windows, and there were gaping sags in the roof.

Ben found an aperture in the fence, and they squeezed themselves through it into the yard.

“Here,” he cried, “is where they dumped the ore! Beth, millions have lain where we are standing!”

She did not appear to be greatly impressed by this dramatic statement, and nervously glanced about.

“I should think tramps would sleep here.”

“No fear of that,” he replied; “it’s too cold. Come inside!”

She followed him timorously, feeling the mystery of a vacant house, the unseen presence of former occupants.

“See!” Ben eagerly exclaimed, “there is where the boilers stood. And there,”—he pointed to where some twisted and rusty pipes loosely hung against the wall, like petrified serpents,—“is where the tanks stood in which they washed the gold. They washed it before melting it into bricks. Father has told me how the men used to stand knee-deep in it in the tanks and shovel it out, just as if they were shoveling coal.”

“They must have lost a lot.”

“It couldn’t be helped. And no one’s ever worked it over!”

“What was that!”

“Nothing but a loose shingle in the roof. Why, Beth, I didn’t know you were such a coward.”

“I’m not a coward; but I don’t like spooky places.” She looked apprehensively toward a dark corner.

“Spooky! Well, I hope some old miner’s ghost will kindly show me where to dig, that’s all. See how wide the cracks are in the floor of this shed,” he said, as he looked through an opening which led to an adjoining building. “There are thousands of dollars in the dirt under it—probably.”

They peered into the black cracks and could almost fancy they saw the glitter of the precious metal. The boy threw back his head and gazed at the massive brickwork of the chimney.

“It’s a chance, of course, but I’m going to take it. It’s funny to think of mining for gold in the heart of San Francisco in 1901!” He laughed and gave a low whistle.

“I’m so afraid you’ll lose all you’ve got,” she said. Then she suddenly made up her mind to side with him. “But, after all, there’s a risk in everything. I’d do it, if I were you, Ben,” she stoutly affirmed. “There’s lots of risks I’d take if I were a man.”

“That’s got some grit to it,” Ben approvingly replied. His seventeen-year-old vanity was flattered by being called a man.

“You see,” he continued, “if I’d been taught a trade it would be different; or if father had had any business to leave me. But he was just like old Madge,—wouldn’t do anything but trade in mines. He always had a big fortune just in sight, but it never came near enough to catch.”

“That’s a hard way to live.”

“Yes. It wore mother out; never to know from month to month whether we were going to stay or move on, or what our income would be. I believe all old miners are alike. Once a miner, always a miner. The gold fever of early times bewitched them for all the rest of their lives.”

“Take care you’re not bewitched, too.”

“It’s entirely different with me,” he began.

“No, it isn’t,” she interrupted. “But I’m with you, Ben. O, what a crazy scheme it is!” She laughed at his troubled face. “What was that? It is something in the house!”

“It’s some one in the yard,” Ben replied, looking out.

A man’s figure appeared in the doorway.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Madge,” Ben said. “We are viewing your property. With a floor, this would make a first-rate skating-rink.”

The man came toward them. Of medium stature, with a halting gait, as though his joints were rusty, he helped himself along by the aid of a stout hooked cane. A sparse gray beard covered the lower part of his face, which was flushed from liquor. He looked uncomfortably warm, and he took off his shabby broad-brimmed hat and ran his fingers through his hair until it stood erect in tufts.

“A skating-rink! Like as not ’twould come down about your heads. Run home, girl,” he said to Beth; “this is no place for you.”

“We were just going when you came in,” Ben replied, before she could answer. “Good-night.”

“Didn’t you want to talk to him about the scheme?” she asked, when they were out of hearing.

“Not when he’s in that condition. I wouldn’t take advantage of him. Run home, now, before Mrs. Hodges has a chance to scold.”

“She’ll scold, anyway,” the girl replied. Then she shrugged her shoulders as if to dismiss an unpleasant subject, and her face brightened. “Race you to the Point, Ben!” she cried, placing one foot forward for the start.

He did not respond, but gazed at her with a preoccupied air.

“One, two!” Still he made no answer. Her expectant attitude changed and her arms fell to her sides, while a look of disappointment spread over her face. “I think it’s just horrid if you’re going to be poky and grown-up! I don’t see

why people can't work and play too; but it seems they never do. Just because you're three years older than me, you think you're grown up!"

"Why, Beth, what's come over you?"

"You're a man all at once; that's all. I s'pose now we can't have any more fun with stilts and tar-barrels. Nor fly kites, nor run races, nor—nor do anything we used to do! I hate the scheme,—I do!"

Ben laughed. "Come on," he said; "I'll race you."

Off they went, flying along the beach until they came up, breathless, against the wooded slopes of Black Point. They climbed up the bank until they reached the ramparts.

"That was fine!" Beth said, seating herself on the grassy slope. "Now, you can tell me some more about your plan. I don't hate it any more."

Spread before them was the bay, dotted with craft. Across the channel the Marin County hills rose abruptly from the water's edge. At Fort Point, which jutted out beyond the promontory on which they were sitting, some experiments in a new explosive were being made. They watched the flash and report and the little cloud of dust the charge made when it struck the opposite shore. Above them, on a higher embankment, a sentry paced to and fro, his bayonet glistening in the sunlight.

"So, Dame Trot scolds a good deal, does she?" Ben remarked, ignoring the invitation to expatiate on the scheme. "I must stop calling her that. Her name's Mrs. Hodges."

"Yes, she does. I don't think she means to, though," she added. "I think she's been disappointed in so many things

that it's made her cross with everything. If it wasn't for poor little Sue I couldn't stand it."

"Sue would miss you—if you should go away."

"I know she would—terribly."

"You've thought of going, then?"

"O, sometimes I think of it; but when Sue turns her poor little face and looks at me, I can't bear to think any more about it."

"Doesn't she look so at her mother, too?"

"Yes; but her mother always seems to want to get her out of her sight. She wouldn't hurt her, of course; but it seems as if she held a grudge against God and Sue for her being so deformed. Somehow, she acts as if she held both of them responsible for the child's misery."

"Most mothers would be more tender to such a child."

"I know it,—just cuddle it up in their arms, away from all the rest of the world! But she doesn't. I guess it's because she's so selfish. She wants everything of hers to be the best. Of course it isn't, and so she's always complaining."

"I know. And I say, Beth, do you know that ill-humor's catching? I don't like to hear you say that you 'hate' things."

"You know I don't mean it."

"Then, don't say it. But how are the boys? Are they good to Sue?"

"O, yes; how could they help it? Even Hodges is different to her."

"How's Syd? Somehow, I've got sort of turned against him lately."

"He's just the same old Syd. You say you've turned against him lately; but you know, Ben Ralston, that you