

Angel's Camp

“No!” Gilbert screamed. “No!”

The other men in the tent were used to long workdays with little sleep but this was getting to be too much. They woke, grumbled.

“Dammit, Gil. Shut up!”

One contemplated smothering Gil with his pillow.

Gilbert Pomfrey awoke from his nightmare but was not relieved by the reality of his surroundings: ankle-high mud, unwashed bodies, bed bugs and lice, and the late fall chill. He knew the hallucinations and high fever from the malaria he acquired in Panama had come back to haunt him. He'd traded away his last bottle of fever cure. No quinine tablets remained.

His father's words echoed in his overheated brain. Don't be a fool, son. Foolish boy.

The gold bug had bitten all of them. Every man there suffered from Gold Fever. They were all exhausted, played out – like many of their claims. Their hard work had not paid off. Resources had run out. They were left with a few dollars, only scraps to eat, selling any remaining clothes and equipment to survive. Winter was coming on fast in the Sierras. Wonder when the rain will turn to snow?

Gil still had his heavy coat and worn but sturdy boots, but not much more. He'd traded his last bottle of medicine for a battered hat. Somebody had snatched his while he was hunched over a sluice box. Back home, that might have been a prank by some kids. Here, it was outright thievery or a distraction to stop you from grabbing a bit of gold.

Outside in the drizzle, Gil paid his bit for breakfast. He poured some of the hot trough water called coffee. A Southerner brewed it to his liking from roasted roots. They still had a bit of bacon, and the cook would use the greasy pan for flapjacks.

“Gotta get outta here before I'm penniless or dead.”

He overheard someone say, “I'm leaving for Angel's Camp in a few hours. Wagon's gonna stop for me.”

Angels! A camp of angels? Gil clutched at the pendant he'd hung around his neck for safekeeping. It was the only possession he had from his departed mother. Nana had brought it back to her when she was a girl. Her sister had been taken to Lourdes, in France, to be cured.

Angels meant miracles. They had holy powers. God knows, I need a miracle about now. I must go there.

“Hey, Mister, I hear you’re going to Angel’s Camp in a wagon. Room for one more?”

“Just you? Prob’ly, for enough spondulix. That’s a fancy word I just learned for money.”

“What did you pay?”

“Gave him all my gold dust. Didn’t have much. And Grandpa’s watch. Still keeps good time.”

“I have a little money left. Wonder if I could sell my tools?”

“Ain’tcha gonna need ‘em later?”

“No, I’m going home. I quit. I’m Gilbert Pomfrey, Gil.”

“Nathaniel, Nat. Your luck’s been no good?”

“I’ve found gold a few times, but I haven’t kept any. I’ve been beaten up, robbed at gun point.”

“Ain’tcha got a gun?” Nat patted the side of his coat.

“No. I’ve never learned how to use one.”

“Hear that? The wagon’s coming. I’ll talk to Ben.” Nat walked toward the road. Gil followed.

“Would you take this for the fare?” Gil pulled a small nugget from his coat pocket.

Nat gasped. “I thought you didn’t have no more gold.”

“That’s the last of it,” Gil replied.

“Either one of you have a gun?” asked the wagon driver.

“I got a pistol,” offered Nat.

The wagon driver’s eyes moved to Gil. “Know how to shoot a rifle?”

“He’s a crack shot,” said Nat, who turned to Gil and nodded.

“Climb on up, boys.”

Gil chucked his tools into the wagon bed and joined Nat on the seat with the driver.

“What’s that thing you’re always touching under your shirt?”

“It’s my guardian angel, a good luck charm. It’s kept me safe all my life. Nat, what’s your story? How’d you end up here?”

“Not much to tell. Too many mouths to feed at home. Some of us had to go.”

“My father is a chemist with an apothecary shop. Mother died.”

“You know how to make medicaments?” asked Nat.

“Quite a few. My father compounds his own line of patent medicines. I brought the most popular, Mrs. Bradley’s Tummy

Trouble and Seneca Chief's Indian Brave Fever Fighter. And quinine tablets.

"Then why'd you go grubbing around in the mud?" asked Nat. "There's lotsa sick folks here. You could make some spondulix."

"You sound like my father."

"My pa had me working on ships in Baltimore harbor long as I can remember. Wasn't hard to join a crew sailing for San Francisco. Did you come round the Horn, Gil?"

"No. I corresponded with one of my father's suppliers who ships out of Boston. He said it was a lot shorter to stop in Panama and travel across the isthmus to a ship on the other side. Atlantic to Pacific. Sounded simple."

"It wasn't?"

"No, Nat. We paddled in dugout boats called bungos. Then, we packed the gear onto mules or our backs and rode or walked. It's jungle down there—hot, sweaty, clouds of mosquitos, snakes. That's when I started suffering with rheumatism and the ague. Surely needed my fever cure and quinine."

"You see? Medicine's important."

"Yes, I'm learning that. I traded away most of the rest to get passage to the gold fields. Prices in California are exorbitant. Only smart thing I did was to buy tools before I left, but I've had to carry them everywhere.

"I stopped first at a place called Black Creek. Heard that Indians working for a Captain Weber had found gold there. I dug along the bank and pulled up a few little nuggets and panned some flakes. But a couple of Mexican men with pistols told me I didn't belong there."

"You needed a gun."

"Yes, they told me I'd better find a way to hide my valuables if I wasn't going to fight back. Then they laughed and took the bottle I'd filled with bits of gold. I followed the river to a place called Washington, but a lot of men from China started moving in, so I ended up a bit farther to the north." I went thousands of miles away to avoid joining my father's business, to make my own fortune. Now, I'm the humblest of ditch diggers.

The rain was letting up when Ben stopped the wagon. "Get down."

"What?"

"Thanks for the nugget, Gil. My brother Ben knows a Mexican fellah with some mules to sell. Angel's Camp is a few miles

that way.” Nat pointed to a trail on the left as he pushed Gil off the bench.

Gil grabbed the wheel spokes to control his fall. The wagon rattled away with his tools in the back.

Mud sucked at his boots as Gil slogged along. He was filthy and famished. It was getting dark, but he knew the canvas structures up the road were real and he rushed into the first one.

“I’m looking for the angels.”

“Angel’s? It’s across the creek. Henry ain’t there no more. Couple other guys bought the store.”

Gil stared. “No, the angels. The miracle. I need a miracle.”

Is he crazy? Nah, prob’ly another starving, exhausted miner at the end of his rope.

“Looks like you could use some grub. If you help me bring in the merchandise stacked under the tarp, I’ll give you a meal. I made some stew for tonight. If you don’t mind sharing a spoon, you can have what’s left in the pot. Bread’s from yesterday. There’s still some coffee.”

“I still have a cup and a spoon, and just a soupcon of dignity left.”

Educated man. “Can you do figures?”

“I was my father’s assistant in his apothecary shop. I can keep books, compound some medicaments, and make sales.”

“I need an assistant. You’re hired. Sorry, I’m Charles R. Handy. Charlie.”

“Gil. Gilbert Pomfrey from Philadelphia.”

“Let me get some paper and write you a bill of sale. After you eat, go down to the saloon and ask about a bath and a shave. Third tent on the left across the creek. There’s a sign pinned on the flap. You can take these clothes with you. Ned Jorgensen ordered them last time he come in here. You’re about the same size.”

“When is Ned coming to pick them up?”

“Oh, Ned won’t be back. He made a strike. Couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Went out and got drunk with the first nuggets he picked up. He’s sleeping under the dirt.”

When Gil returned, he fell into a deep sleep on the empty cot next to his new boss.

Charlie stirred. “Don’t you worry, Gil. I know the territory. You got business skills. We’ll strike it rich. We have a bright future ahead as storekeepers here in Angel’s Camp and beyond.”