

THE KLONDIKE GOLD FIELDS

By TAPPAN ADNEY, AUTHOR OF "THE KLONDIKE STAMPEDE," ETC.

NOW THAT the great gold region of the Klondike is entering on its third year of unabated prosperity, it will be of interest to set down briefly the remarkable tale of its development, its present opportunities for gold hunters, and social life in the camps.

Klondike (it was then only the Yukon) lay for fifteen years known only to a small though constantly increasing band of hardy adventurers, who hoped one day to make a fortune, but who were contented if they made a "grub-stake" for the next year. Three to five hundred dollars represented a "grub-stake"; some made considerably more, but few made less. All the gold found was in surface diggings, and if there was any other the frost, which froze the ground to an unknown depth, made it impossible to learn. Thus as early as 1882 a party was camped over the richest part of El Dorado, in a place frosted with surface gold. This surface gold was as fine as cornmeal, and was secured from the "bars," or low banks of the rivers, by means of a "rocker"—a sort of box-like cradle, with a perforated metal top and a blanket set inside at an angle. A shovelful of dirt containing the gold was put into the metal top, water was poured in with a long-handled dipper, and at the same time the rocker was put in motion by means of an upright handle nailed to the side of the box. The larger rocks were lifted out by hand, but the residue was carried through by the water, the fine gold clinging to the blanket. After thirty to fifty "rockers" the blanket was taken out, and the "riffles"—a frame with cross pieces which prevents the gold from running out too rapidly—washed down to remove any gold that might cling thereto. This fine gold, in which there was also much worthless magnetic black sand and

valuable platinum (which the miners either did not recognize or consider worth saving), was turned into a bucket, along with a spoonful or more of quicksilver, and "jounced" up and down in the river. The miner wore hip rubber boots for that purpose. When all the gold had united with the quicksilver, and amalgam formed, the latter product was placed in a mining pan and carefully "panned" at the water's edge, until all the lighter dirt was washed out, when the mass was placed in a stout cotton bag, and the quicksilver squeezed out for further use. The lump was then placed in a pan over a fire, the heat of which expelled the remaining quicksilver, leaving a lump of fine gold, which was placed in a buckskin sack. There were only about two months in midsummer when mining could be done. The sun, rising to 80° in the shade, thawed the ground about a foot a day. But the system changed. In 1886, the first "coarse" gold in the Yukon was discovered on Forty-Mile, which resulted in an abandonment of fine gold digging. The rocker is retained to this day, and is always used where there is a scarcity of water. In later operations the finding of "coarse" gold made it possible to employ sluice-boxes. A sluice-box is twelve feet long by a foot wide, and about thirty or forty boxes are set upon posts at a certain grade, over the ground to be worked, leading from a dam at the head of the claim. The last half-dozen boxes of the string are fitted with "riffles," some being crosswise, others lengthwise, into the spaces of which the gold falls. Formerly the fine gold worked clean out of this crude contrivance and was lost.

Forty-Mile was the only stream discovered in which the bed rock came close to the surface; all

the others were covered, no one knew to what depth. With the long-handled California shovel a miner can shovel twelve or thirteen feet. He can shovel once upon a high platform, and thence into the boxes; but it is not profitable to handle the dirt more than twice. So, as the diggings of Bonanza and El Dorado average twenty to thirty feet, it will readily be seen that the Klondike would probably have remained unknown were it not for an accidental circumstance.

Some young men—boys they were called—tried thawing the ground with fire, but they were laughed at. A miner is pre-eminently a man of intelligence and resource, yet strangely slow to grasp an entirely new idea.

Hutchinson was one of the first to try burning. He had been working a bar during the summer, and could not reach some rich ground because of the water in the river. So, when winter set in, he conceived the ingenious plan of digging down through the ice, over a wide space. He was careful not to dig quite through. As the ice froze deeper day by day over the space he was digging, he reached the gravel bottom, having thus constructed a coffer-dam of ice around him. He placed a fire on the gravel, and took out some gold, but the heat of the fire melted his walls, and the water flooded him out. Next year, however, a miner by the name of "Kink" Miller thought it would be a good thing to "prospect" and fire a shallow claim he intended to work the following summer. After that, when it was seen what fire would do, a few others began to sink deeper holes. The next step, when bed rock had been reached, was to burn along the rock. This is termed "drifting," and only came into general use about three years before the Klondike