

Jem and the Golden Reward

Goldtown Beginnings Series

Jem Strikes Gold

Jem's Frog Fiasco

Jem and the Mystery Thief

Jem Digs Up Trouble

Jem and the Golden Reward

Jem's Wild Winter



Jem and the Golden Reward



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Illustrated by Okan Bülbül



Jem and the Golden Reward

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New Words

Aye (*I*)—a Scottish word that means “yes”

Bootjack—a gold camp near Goldtown

delighted—pleased, happy

echoed—a sound that repeats over and over
after the first sound is made

laddie—a boy

misery—a deep sadness

och (*auck*)—a Scottish word that shows
surprise

retriever—a breed of dog that brings ducks
and other birds back to a hunter

'rithmetic—a short way of saying
arithmetic; math

Scotland—a small country in Europe; part
of the island of Great Britain

telegram—a message sent over telegraph
wires

venom—poison from a rattlesnake or other
animal



CHAPTER 1

September Storm

“Jeremiah!”

Jem sucked in his breath. Mama meant business when she used his full first name.

“Jeremiah Isaiah Coulter!”

Roasted rattlesnakes!

Did Mama have to shout Jem’s whole, entire name so it was heard by every miner along Cripple Creek?

He looked around.

Half a dozen miners were lined up on their gold claims.

They didn’t pay any attention to Mama’s shouts. They were too busy panning for gold.

A sudden rainstorm had filled the creek overnight. Everybody was surprised.

Especially Jem. It never rained in September.

Well, almost never.

Last night's thunderstorm had dumped buckets of rain. The muddy trickle had turned into a rushing creek.

Quick as a wink, Jem had grabbed his gold pan this morning and headed for the creek. He didn't even eat breakfast.

A gold miner never knew how long the water would flow this time of year.

"Jeremiah Isai—"

"Coming, Mama!" Jem hollered.

What was the big hurry?

Lumpy breakfast mush—even soaked in molasses—was nothing to get in a hurry about.

Jem dumped the sand, gravel, and water from his gold pan. He rubbed the mud off his pants.

Then he ran back to the tent on his family's gold claim.

"The creek is full, Mama," Jem said, out of breath. "I have to eat fast and get back to—"

He stopped short.



His little sister, Ellie, sat on the split-log bench at the outdoor table.

She was dressed in her best dress—the one with the colored apron that she always wore to Sunday school.

Only, today was not Sunday.

“Sit down and eat your breakfast,” Mama said.

She plunked a bowl of steaming hot cereal down at Jem’s place.

Jem sat. He and Ellie looked at each other.

“Why are you dressed up for Sunday school?” he asked.

For once, chatterbox Ellie didn’t answer.

Instead, she spooned another bite of mush into her mouth and didn’t say a word.

But her hand was shaking. She looked scared.

“For goodness’ sake, Jem.” Mama put her hands on her hips. “Today must have flown right out of your head.”

Jem’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean, Mama?”

“No gold panning today. You need to eat quick and change into clean clothes for school.”

School! Jem groaned, but only to himself.

Mama was right. The first day of school had flown out of Jem’s head as soon as he saw Cripple Creek.

No wonder Ellie was dressed up. But why did she look scared?

Jem nudged her. “You told me last spring you wished you could go to school.”

Ellie shrugged.

“Now your wish is coming true.” Jem swallowed his lumpy mush.

“I changed my mind,” Ellie whispered. “I want to stay home and play with Nugget.”

The golden dog lifted his head. *Woof!*

His tail thumped the ground.

For once, no dust puffed up. The dirt was too wet.

Jem wanted to stay home and play with Nugget too.

He wanted to pan gold in the swollen creek. He wanted to help Pa and their friend Strike-it-rich Sam wash gold in the rocker box.

“I bet the storm washed more gold down the creek,” Jem said. “Can’t I stay home and pan? Just for today?”

“Me too, Mama.” Ellie raised her voice. “Just one more day?”

Mama shook her head. “I won’t hear of you children missing even one day of school.”

Jem didn't say anything out loud, but he was thinking a lot.

Learning the three Rs—reading, writing, and 'rithmetic—was important to Mama and Pa.

Very important.

Mama had more to say. "You children should be grateful. Goldtown has a good school. Miss Cheney is a fine teacher."

She sighed. "The teacher in Bootjack moved away, so now they have no school."

Mama made it sound like not having a school was the worst thing that could happen in a mining town.

Jem thought it would be the *best* thing that could happen. He secretly wished he lived in Bootjack.

Lucky ducks! The kids in Bootjack could run and play all day long.

They could pan for gold. They could explore old coyote holes.

They could—

Mama clapped her hands. "Enough day-dreaming. You can't be late on the first day of school."

Jem washed down the last of his mush with four big gulps of water.

Mama shooed him into the tent to change. "Make sure you comb your hair," she called.

Jem changed his clothes, scrubbed his face in a bucket of cold water, and ran a comb through his dark hair.

When he returned, Mama handed him the tin lunch pail. "Look after your sister, Jeremiah. It's her first day of school."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And come straight home after school."

Jem nodded and started walking toward town.

Ellie dragged her feet behind him.

Woof! Nugget leaped up.

Mama caught the dog just in time.

"You're staying home."

"Sorry, Nugget," Jem called over his shoulder.

Nugget whimpered and flopped to the ground beside Mama.

Halfway to school, Ellie grabbed Jem's hand.

He tried to peel away her fingers, but she wouldn't let go.

“You can't hold my hand all the way to school,” Jem hissed. “What will the other kids say?”

Ellie held on tighter.

Jem rolled his eyes.

This was going to be his worst first day of school ever.