

BRET HARTE

IN A HOLLOW
OF THE HILLS

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CHAPTER I

It was very dark, and the wind was increasing. The last gust had been preceded by an ominous roaring down the whole mountain-side, which continued for some time after the trees in the little valley had lapsed into silence. The air was filled with a faint, cool, sodden odor, as of stirred forest depths. In those intervals of silence the darkness seemed to increase in proportion and grow almost palpable. Yet out of this sightless and soundless void now came the tinkle of a spur's rowels, the dry crackling of saddle leathers, and the muffled plunge of a hoof in the thick carpet of dust and desiccated leaves. Then a voice, which in spite of its matter-of-fact reality the obscurity lent a certain mystery to, said:—

"I can't make out anything! Where the devil have we got to, anyway? It's as black as Tophet, here ahead!"

"Strike a light and make a flare with something," returned a second voice. "Look where you're shoving to—now—keep your horse off, will ye."

There was more muffled plunging, a silence, the rustle of paper, the quick spurt of a match, and then the uplifting of a flickering flame. But it revealed only the heads and shoulders of three horsemen, framed within a nebulous ring of light, that still left their horses and even their lower figures in impenetrable shadow. Then the flame leaped up and died out with a few zigzagging sparks that were falling to the ground, when a third voice, that was low but somewhat pleasant in its cadence, said:—

"Be careful where you throw that. You were careless last time. With this wind and the leaves like tinder, you might send a furnace blast through the woods."

"Then at least we'd see where we were."

Nevertheless, he moved his horse, whose trampling hoofs beat out the last fallen spark. Complete darkness and silence again followed. Presently the first speaker continued:—

"I reckon we'll have to wait here till the next squall clears away the scud from the sky? Hello! What's that?"

Out of the obscurity before them appeared a faint light,—a dim but perfectly defined square of radiance,—which, however, did not appear to illuminate anything around it. Suddenly it disappeared.

"That's a house—it's a light in a window," said the second voice.

"House be d—d!" retorted the first speaker. "A house with a window on Galloper's Ridge, fifteen miles from anywhere? You're crazy!"

Nevertheless, from the muffled plunging and tinkling that followed, they seemed to be moving in the direction where the light had appeared. Then there was a pause.

"There's nothing but a rocky outcrop here, where a house couldn't stand, and we're off the trail again," said the first speaker impatiently.

"Stop!—there it is again!"

The same square of light appeared once more, but the horsemen had evidently diverged in the darkness, for it seemed to be in a different direction. But it was more distinct, and as they gazed a shadow appeared upon its radiant surface—the profile of a human face. Then the light suddenly went out, and the face vanished with it.

"It IS a window, and there was some one behind it," said the second speaker emphatically.

"It was a woman's face," said the pleasant voice.

"Whoever it is, just hail them, so that we can get our bearings. Sing out! All together!"

The three voices rose in a prolonged shout, in which, however, the distinguishing quality of the pleasant voice was sustained. But there was no response from the darkness beyond. The shouting was repeated after an interval with the same result: the silence and obscurity remained unchanged.

"Let's get out of this," said the first speaker angrily; "house or no house, man or woman, we're not wanted, and we'll make nothing waltzing round here!"

"Hush!" said the second voice. "Sh-h! Listen."

The leaves of the nearest trees were trilling audibly. Then came a sudden gust that swept the fronds of the taller ferns into their faces, and laid the thin, lithe whips of alder over their horses' flanks sharply. It was followed by the distant sea-like roaring of the mountain-side.

"That's a little more like it!" said the first speaker joyfully. "Another blow like that and we're all right. And look! there's a lightenin' up over the trail we came by."

There was indeed a faint glow in that direction, like the first suffusion of dawn, permitting the huge shoulder of the mountain along whose flanks they had been journeying to be distinctly seen. The sodden breath of the stirred forest depths was slightly tainted with an acrid fume.

"That's the match you threw away two hours ago," said the pleasant voice deliberately. "It's caught the dry brush in the trail round the bend."

"Anyhow, it's given us our bearings, boys," said the first speaker, with satisfied accents. "We're all right now; and the wind's lifting the sky ahead there. Forward now, all together, and let's get out of this hell-hole while we can!"

It was so much lighter that the bulk of each horseman could be seen as they moved forward together. But there was no thinning of the obscurity on either side of them. Nevertheless the profile of the horseman with the pleasant voice seemed to be occasionally turned backward, and he suddenly checked his horse.

"There's the window again!" he said. "Look! There—it's gone again."

"Let it go and be d—d!" returned the leader. "Come on."

They spurred forward in silence. It was not long before the wayside trees began to dimly show spaces between them, and the ferns to give way to lower, thick-set shrubs, which in turn yielded to a velvety moss, with long quiet intervals of netted and tangled grasses. The regular fall of the horses' feet became a mere rhythmic throbbing. Then suddenly a single hoof rang out sharply on stone, and the first speaker reined in slightly.

"Thank the Lord we're on the ridge now! and the rest is easy. Tell you what, though, boys, now we're all right, I don't mind saying that I didn't take no stock in that blamed corpse light down there. If there ever was a will-o'-the-wisp on a square up mountain, that was one. It wasn't no window! Some of ye thought ye saw a face too—eh?"

"Yes, and a rather pretty one," said the pleasant voice meditatively.

"That's the way they'd build that sort of thing, of course. It's lucky ye had to satisfy yourself with looking. Gosh! I feel creepy yet, thinking of it! What are ye looking back for now like Lot's wife? Blamed if I don't think that face bewitched ye."

"I was only thinking about that fire you started," returned the other quietly. "I don't see it now."

"Well—if you did?"

"I was wondering whether it could reach that hollow."

"I reckon that hollow could take care of any casual nat'rel fire that came boomin' along, and go two better every time! Why, I don't believe there was any fire; it was all a piece of that infernal ignis fatuus phantasmagoriana that was played upon us down there!"

With the laugh that followed they started forward again, relapsing into the silence of tired men at the end of a long journey. Even their few remarks were interjectional, or reminiscent of topics whose freshness had been exhausted with the day. The gaining light which seemed to come from the ground about them rather than from the still, overcast sky above, defined their individuality more distinctly. The man who had first spoken, and who seemed to be their leader, wore the virgin unshaven

beard, mustache, and flowing hair of the Californian pioneer, and might have been the eldest; the second speaker was close shaven, thin, and energetic; the third, with the pleasant voice, in height, litheness, and suppleness of figure appeared to be the youngest of the party. The trail had now become a grayish streak along the level table-land they were following, which also had the singular effect of appearing lighter than the surrounding landscape, yet of plunging into utter darkness on either side of its precipitous walls. Nevertheless, at the end of an hour the leader rose in his stirrups with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There's the light in Collinson's Mill! There's nothing gaudy and spectacular about that, boys, eh? No, sir! it's a square, honest beacon that a man can steer by. We'll be there in twenty minutes." He was pointing into the darkness below the already descending trail. Only a pioneer's eye could have detected the few pin-pricks of light in the impenetrable distance, and it was a signal proof of his leadership that the others accepted it without seeing it. "It's just ten o'clock," he continued, holding a huge silver watch to his eye; "we've wasted an hour on those blamed spooks yonder!"

"We weren't off the trail more than ten minutes, Uncle Dick," protested the pleasant voice.

"All right, my son; go down there if you like and fetch out your Witch of Endor, but as for me, I'm going to throw myself the other side of Collinson's lights. They're good enough for me, and a blamed sight more stationary!"

The grade was very steep, but they took it, California fashion, at a gallop, being genuinely good riders, and using their brains as well as their spurs in the understanding of their horses, and of certain natural laws, which the more artificial riders of civilization are apt to overlook. Hence there was no hesitation or indecision communicated to the nervous creatures they bestrode, who swept over crumbling stones and slippery ledges with a momentum that took away half their weight, and made a stumble or false step, or indeed anything but an actual collision, almost impossible. Closing together they avoided the latter, and holding each other well up, became one irresistible wedge-shaped mass. At times they yelled, not from consciousness nor bravado, but from the purely animal instinct of warning and to combat the breathlessness of their descent, until, reaching the level, they charged across the gravelly bed of a vanished river, and pulled up at Collinson's Mill. The mill itself had long since vanished with the river, but the building that had once stood for it was used as a rude hostelry for travelers, which, however, bore no legend or invitatory sign. Those who wanted it, knew it; those who passed it by, gave it no offense.

Collinson himself stood by the door, smoking a contemplative pipe. As they rode up, he disengaged himself from the doorpost listlessly, walked slowly towards them, said reflectively to the leader, "I've been thinking with you that a vote for Thompson is a vote thrown away," and prepared to lead the horses towards the water tank. He had parted with them over twelve hours before, but his air of simply renewing a recently interrupted conversation was too common a circumstance to attract their notice. They knew, and he knew, that no one else had passed that way since he had last spoken; that the same sun had swung silently above him and the unchanged landscape, and there had been no interruption nor diversion to his monotonous thought. The wilderness annihilates time and space with the grim pathos of patience.

Nevertheless he smiled. "Ye don't seem to have got through coming down yet," he continued, as a few small boulders, loosened in their rapid descent, came more deliberately rolling and plunging after the travelers along the gravelly bottom. Then he turned away with the horses, and, after they were watered, he reentered the house. His guests had evidently not waited for his ministration. They had already taken one or two bottles from the shelves behind a wide bar and helped themselves, and, glasses in hand, were now satisfying the more imminent cravings of hunger with biscuits from a barrel and slices of smoked herring from a box. Their equally singular host, accepting their conduct as not unusual, joined the circle they had comfortably drawn round the fireplace, and meditatively kicking a brand back at the fire, said, without looking at them:—

"Well?"

"Well!" returned the leader, leaning back in his chair after carefully unloosing the buckle of his belt, but with his eyes also on the fire,— "well! we've prospected every yard of outcrop along the Divide, and there ain't the ghost of a silver indication anywhere."

"Not a smell," added the close-shaven guest, without raising his eyes.

They all remained silent, looking at the fire, as if it were the one thing they had taken into their confidence. Collinson also addressed himself to the blaze as he said presently: "It allus seemed to me that thar was something shiny about that ledge just round the shoulder of the spur, over the long canyon."

The leader ejaculated a short laugh. "Shiny, eh? shiny! Ye think THAT a sign? Why, you might as well reckon that because Key's head, over thar, is gray and silvery that he's got sabe and experience." As he spoke he looked towards the man with a pleasant voice. The fire shining full upon him revealed the singular fact that while his face was still young, and his mustache quite dark, his hair was perfectly gray. The object of this attention, far from being disconcerted by the comparison, added with a smile:

—
"Or that he had any silver in his pocket."

Another lapse of silence followed. The wind tore round the house and rumbled in the short, adobe chimney.

"No, gentlemen," said the leader reflectively, "this sort o' thing is played out. I don't take no more stock in that cock-and-bull story about the lost Mexican mine. I don't catch on to that Sunday-school yarn about the pious, scientific sharp who collected leaves and vegetables all over the Divide, all the while he scientifically knew that the range was solid silver, only he wouldn't soil his fingers with God-forsaken lucre. I ain't saying anything agin that fine-spun theory that Key believes in about volcanic upheavals that set up on end argentiferous rock, but I simply say that I don't see it—with the naked eye. And I reckon it's about time, boys, as the game's up, that we handed in our checks, and left the board."

There was another silence around the fire, another whirl and turmoil without. There was no attempt to combat the opinions of their leader; possibly the same sense of disappointed hopes was felt by all, only they preferred to let the man of greater experience voice it. He went on:—

"We've had our little game, boys, ever since we left Rawlin's a week ago; we've had our ups and downs; we've been starved and parched, snowed up and half drowned, shot at by road-agents and horse-thieves, kicked by mules and played with by grizzlies. We've had a heap o' fun, boys, for our money, but I reckon the picnic is about over. So we'll shake hands to-morrow all round and call it square, and go on our ways separately."

"And what do you think you'll do, Uncle Dick?" said his close-shaven companion listlessly.

"I'll make tracks for a square meal, a bed that a man can comfortably take off his boots and die in, and some violet-scented soap. Civilization's good enough for me! I even reckon I wouldn't mind 'the sound of the church-going bell' ef there was a theatre handy, as there likely would be. But the wilderness is played out."

"You'll be back to it again in six months, Uncle Dick," retorted the other quickly.

Uncle Dick did not reply. It was a peculiarity of the party that in their isolated companionship they had already exhausted discussion and argument. A silence followed, in which they all looked at the fire as if it was its turn to make a suggestion.

"Collinson," said the pleasant voice abruptly, "who lives in the hollow this side of the Divide, about two miles from the first spur above the big canyon?"

"Nary soul!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sartin! Thar ain't no one but me betwixt Bald Top and Skinner's—twenty-five miles."

"Of course, YOU'D know if any one had come there lately?" persisted the pleasant voice.

"I reckon. It ain't a week ago that I tramped the whole distance that you fellers just rode over."

"There ain't," said the leader deliberately, "any enchanted castle or cabin that goes waltzing round the road with revolving windows and fairy princesses looking out of 'em?"

But Collinson, recognizing this as purely irrelevant humor, with possibly a trap or pitfall in it, moved away from the fireplace without a word, and retired to the adjoining kitchen to prepare supper. Presently he reappeared.

"The pork bar'l's empty, boys, so I'll hev to fix ye up with jerked beef, potatoes, and flapjacks. Ye see, thar ain't anybody ben over from Skinner's store for a week."

"All right; only hurry up!" said Uncle Dick cheerfully, settling himself back in his chair, "I reckon to turn in as soon as I've rastled with your hash, for I've got to turn out agin and be off at sun-up."

They were all very quiet again,—so quiet that they could not help noticing that the sound of Collinson's preparations for their supper had ceased too. Uncle Dick arose softly and walked to the kitchen door. Collinson was sitting before a small kitchen stove, with a fork in his hand, gazing abstractedly before him. At the sound of his guest's footsteps he started, and the noise of preparation recommenced. Uncle Dick returned to his chair by the fire. Leaning towards the chair of the close-shaven man, he said in a lower voice:—

"He was off agin!"

"What?"

"Thinkin' of that wife of his."

"What about his wife?" asked Key, lowering his voice also.

The three men's heads were close together.

"When Collinson fixed up this mill he sent for his wife in the States," said Uncle Dick, in a half whisper, "waited a year for her, hanging round and boarding every emigrant wagon that came through the Pass. She didn't come—only the news that she was dead." He paused and nudged his chair still closer—the heads were almost touching. "They say, over in the Bar"—his voice had sunk to a complete whisper—"that it was a lie! That she ran away with the man that was fetchin' her out. Three thousand miles and three weeks with another man upsets some women. But HE knows nothing about it, only he sometimes kinder goes off looney-like, thinking of her." He stopped, the heads separated; Collinson had appeared at the doorway, his melancholy patience apparently unchanged.

"Grub's on, gentlemen; sit by and eat."

The humble meal was dispatched with zest and silence. A few interjectional remarks about the uncertainties of prospecting only accented the other pauses. In ten minutes they were out again by the fireplace with their lit pipes. As there were only three chairs, Collinson stood beside the chimney.

"Collinson," said Uncle Dick, after the usual pause, taking his pipe from his lips, "as we've got to get up and get at sun-up, we might as well tell you now that we're dead broke. We've been living for the last few weeks on Preble Key's loose change—and that's gone. You'll have to let this little account and damage stand over."

Collinson's brow slightly contracted, without, however, altering his general expression of resigned patience.

"I'm sorry for you, boys," he said slowly, "and" (diffidently) "kinder sorry for myself, too. You see, I reckoned on goin' over to Skinner's to-morrow, to fill up the pork bar'l and vote for Mesick and the wagon-road. But Skinner can't let me have anything more until I've paid suthin' on account, as he calls it."

"D'ye mean to say thar's any mountain man as low flung and mean as that?" said Uncle Dick indignantly.

"But it isn't HIS fault," said Collinson gently; "you see, they won't send him goods from Sacramento if he don't pay up, and he CAN'T if I DON'T. Sabe?"

"Ah! that's another thing. They ARE mean—in Sacramento," said Uncle Dick, somewhat mollified.

The other guests murmured an assent to this general proposition. Suddenly Uncle Dick's face brightened.

"Look here! I know Skinner, and I'll stop there— No, blank it all! I can't, for it's off my route! Well, then, we'll fix it this way. Key will go there and tell Skinner that I say that I'LL send the money to that Sacramento hound. That'll fix it!"

Collinson's brow cleared; the solution of the difficulty seemed to satisfy everybody, and the close-shaven man smiled.

"And I'll secure it," he said, "and give Collinson a sight draft on myself at San Francisco."

"What's that for?" said Collinson, with a sudden suffusion on each cheek.

"In case of accident."

"Wot accident?" persisted Collinson, with a dark look of suspicion on his usually placid face.

"In case we should forget it," said the close-shaven man, with a laugh.

"And do you suppose that if you boys went and forgot it that I'd have anything to do with your d—d paper?" said Collinson, a murky cloud coming into his eyes.

"Why, that's only business, Colly," interposed Uncle Dick quickly; "that's all Jim Parker means; he's a business man, don't you see. Suppose we got killed! You've that draft to show."

"Show who?" growled Collinson.

"Why,—hang it!—our friends, our heirs, our relations—to get your money, hesitated Uncle Dick.

"And do you kalkilate," said Collinson, with deeply laboring breath, "that if you got killed, that I'd be coming on your folks for the worth of the d—d truck I giv ye? Go 'way! Lemme git out o' this. You're makin' me tired." He stalked to the door, lit his pipe, and began to walk up and down the gravelly river-bed. Uncle Dick followed him. From time to time the two other guests heard the sounds of alternate protest and explanation as they passed and repassed the windows. Preble Key smiled, Parker shrugged his shoulders.

"He'll be thinkin' you've begrudged him your grub if you don't—that's the way with these business men," said Uncle Dick's voice in one of these intervals. Presently they reentered the house, Uncle Dick saying casually to Parker, "You can leave that draft on the bar when you're ready to go to-morrow;" and the incident was presumed to have ended. But Collinson did not glance in the direction of Parker for the rest of the evening; and, indeed, standing with his back to the chimney, more than once fell into that stolid abstraction which was supposed to be the contemplation of his absent wife.

From this silence, which became infectious, the three guests were suddenly aroused by a furious clattering down the steep descent of the mountain, along the trail they had just ridden! It came near, increasing in sound, until it even seemed to scatter the fine gravel of the river-bed against the sides of the house, and then passed in a gust of wind that shook the roof and roared in the chimney. With one common impulse the three travelers rose and went to the door. They opened it to a blackness that seemed to stand as another and an iron door before them, but to nothing else.

"Somebody went by then," said Uncle Dick, turning to Collinson. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Nary," said Collinson patiently, without moving from the chimney.

"What in God's name was it, then?"

"Only some of them boulders you loosed coming down. It's touch and go with them for days after. When I first came here I used to start up and rush out into the road—like as you would—yellin' and screechin' after folks that never was there and never went by. Then it got kinder monotonous, and I'd lie still and let 'em slide. Why, one night I'd a' sworn that some one pulled up with a yell and shook the door. But I sort of allowed to myself that whatever it was, it wasn't wantin' to eat, drink, sleep, or it would come in, and I hadn't any call to interfere. And in the mornin' I found a rock as big as that box, lying chock-a-block agin the door. Then I knowed I was right."

Preble Key remained looking from the door.

"There's a glow in the sky over Big Canyon," he said, with a meaning glance at Uncle Dick.

"Saw it an hour ago," said Collinson. "It must be the woods afire just round the bend above the canyon. Whoever goes to Skinner's had better give it a wide berth."

Key turned towards Collinson as if to speak, but apparently changed his mind, and presently joined his companions, who were already rolling themselves in their blankets, in a series of wooden bunks or berths, ranged as in a ship's cabin, around the walls of a resinous, sawdusty apartment that had been the measuring room of the mill. Collinson disappeared,—no one knew or seemed to care where,—and, in less than ten minutes from the time that they had returned from the door, the hush of sleep and rest seemed to possess the whole house. There was no light but that of the fire in the front room, which threw flickering and gigantic shadows on the walls of the three empty chairs before it. An hour later it seemed as if one of the chairs were occupied, and a grotesque profile of Collinson's slumbering—or meditating—face and figure was projected grimly on the rafters as though it were the hovering guardian spirit of the house. But even that passed presently and faded out, and the beleaguering darkness that had encompassed the house all the evening began to slowly creep in through every chink and cranny of the rambling, ill-jointed structure, until it at last obliterated even the faint embers on the hearth. The cool fragrance of the woodland depths crept in with it until the steep of human warmth, the reek of human clothing, and the lingering odors of stale human victual were swept away in that incorruptible and omnipotent breath. An hour later—and the wilderness had repossessed itself of all.

Key, the lightest sleeper, awoke early,—so early that the dawn announced itself only in two dim squares of light that seemed to grow out of the darkness at the end of the room where the windows looked out upon the valley. This reminded him of his woodland vision of the night before, and he lay and watched them until they brightened and began to outline the figures of his still sleeping companions. But there were faint stirrings elsewhere,—the soft brushing of a squirrel across the shingled roof, the tiny flutter of invisible wings in the rafters, the "peep" and "squeak" of baby life below the floor. And then he fell into a deeper sleep, and awoke only when it was broad day.

The sun was shining upon the empty bunks; his companions were already up and gone. They had separated as they had come together,—with the light-hearted irresponsibility of animals,—without regret, and scarcely reminiscence; bearing, with cheerful philosophy and the hopefulness of a future unfettered by their past, the final disappointment of their quest. If they ever met again, they would laugh and remember; if they did not, they would forget without a sigh. He hurriedly dressed himself, and went outside to dip his face and hands in the bucket that stood beside the door; but the clear air, the dazzling sunshine, and the unexpected prospect half intoxicated him.

The abandoned mill stretched beside him in all the pathos of its premature decay. The ribs of the water-wheel appeared amid a tangle of shrubs and driftwood, and were twined with long grasses and straggling vines; mounds of sawdust and heaps of "brush" had taken upon themselves a velvety moss where the trickling slime of the vanished river lost itself in sluggish pools, discolored with the dyes of redwood. But on the other side of the rocky ledge dropped the whole length of the valley, alternately bathed in sunshine or hidden in drifts of white and clinging smoke. The upper end of the long canyon, and the crests of the ridge above him, were lost in this fleecy cloud, which at times seemed to overflow the summits and fall in slow leaps like lazy cataracts down the mountain-side. Only the range before the ledge was clear; there the green pines seemed to swell onward and upward in long mounting billows, until at last they broke against the sky.

In the keen stimulus of the hour and the air Key felt the mountaineer's longing for action, and scarcely noticed that Collinson had pathetically brought out his pork barrel to scrape together a few remnants for his last meal. It was not until he had finished his coffee, and Collinson had brought up his horse, that a slight sense of shame at his own and his comrades' selfishness embarrassed his parting with his patient host. He himself was going to Skinner's to plead for him; he knew that Parker had left the draft,—he had seen it lying in the bar,—but a new sense of delicacy kept him from alluding to it now. It was better to leave Collinson with his own peculiar ideas of the responsibilities

of hospitality unchanged. Key shook his hand warmly, and galloped up the rocky slope. But when he had finally reached the higher level, and fancied he could even now see the dust raised by his departing comrades on their two diverging paths, although he knew that they had already gone their different ways,—perhaps never to meet again,—his thoughts and his eyes reverted only to the ruined mill below him and its lonely occupant.

He could see him quite distinctly in that clear air, still standing before his door. And then he appeared to make a parting gesture with his hand, and something like snow fluttered in the air above his head. It was only the torn fragments of Parker's draft, which this homely gentleman of the Sierras, standing beside his empty pork barrel, had scattered to the four winds.

CHAPTER II

Key's attention was presently directed to something more important to his present purpose. The keen wind which he had faced in mounting the grade had changed, and was now blowing at his back. His experience of forest fires had already taught him that this was too often only the cold air rushing in to fill the vacuum made by the conflagration, and it needed not his sensation of an acrid smarting in his eyes, and an unaccountable dryness in the air which he was now facing, to convince him that the fire was approaching him. It had evidently traveled faster than he had expected, or had diverged from its course. He was disappointed, not because it would oblige him to take another route to Skinner's, as Collinson had suggested, but for a very different reason. Ever since his vision of the preceding night, he had resolved to revisit the hollow and discover the mystery. He had kept his purpose a secret,—partly because he wished to avoid the jesting remarks of his companions, but particularly because he wished to go alone, from a very singular impression that although they had witnessed the incident he had really seen more than they did. To this was also added the haunting fear he had felt during the night that this mysterious habitation and its occupants were in the track of the conflagration. He had not dared to dwell upon it openly on account of Uncle Dick's evident responsibility for the origin of the fire; he appeased his conscience with the reflection that the inmates of the dwelling no doubt had ample warning in time to escape. But still, he and his companions ought to have stopped to help them, and then—but here he paused, conscious of another reason he could scarcely voice then, or even now. Preble Key had not passed the age of romance, but like other romancists he thought he had evaded it by treating it practically.

Meantime he had reached the fork where the trail diverged to the right, and he must take that direction if he wished to make a detour of the burning woods to reach Skinner's. His momentary indecision communicated itself to his horse, who halted. Recalled to himself, he looked down mechanically, when his attention was attracted by an unfamiliar object lying in the dust of the trail. It was a small slipper—so small that at first he thought it must have belonged to some child. He dismounted and picked it up. It was worn and shaped to the foot. It could not have lain there long, for it was not filled nor discolored by the wind-blown dust of the trail, as all other adjacent objects were. If it had been dropped by a passing traveler, that traveler must have passed Collinson's, going or coming, within the last twelve hours. It was scarcely possible that the shoe could have dropped from the foot without the wearer's knowing it, and it must have been dropped in an urgent flight, or it would have been recovered. Thus practically Key treated his romance. And having done so, he instantly wheeled his horse and plunged into the road in the direction of the fire.

But he was surprised after twenty minutes' riding to find that the course of the fire had evidently changed. It was growing clearer before him; the dry heat seemed to come more from the right, in the direction of the detour he should have taken to Skinner's. This seemed almost providential, and in keeping with his practical treatment of his romance, as was also the fact that in all probability the fire had not yet visited the little hollow which he intended to explore. He knew he was nearing it now; the locality had been strongly impressed upon him even in the darkness of the previous evening. He had passed the rocky ledge; his horse's hoofs no longer rang out clearly; slowly and perceptibly they grew deadened in the springy mosses, and were finally lost in the netted grasses and tangled vines that indicated the vicinity of the densely wooded hollow. Here were already some of the wider spaced vanguards of that wood; but here, too, a peculiar circumstance struck him. He was already descending the slight declivity; but the distance, instead of deepening in leafy shadow, was actually growing lighter. Here were the outskirting sentinels of the wood—but the wood itself was gone! He spurred his horse through the tall arch between the opened columns, and pulled up in amazement.

The wood, indeed, was gone, and the whole hollow filled with the already black and dead stumps of the utterly consumed forest! More than that, from the indications before him, the

catastrophe must have almost immediately followed his retreat from the hollow on the preceding night. It was evident that the fire had leaped the intervening shoulder of the spur in one of the unaccountable, but by no means rare, phenomena of this kind of disaster. The circling heights around were yet untouched; only the hollow, and the ledge of rock against which they had blundered with their horses when they were seeking the mysterious window in last evening's darkness, were calcined and destroyed. He dismounted and climbed the ledge, still warm from the spent fire. A large mass of grayish outcrop had evidently been the focus of the furnace blast of heat which must have raged for hours in this spot. He was skirting its crumbling debris when he started suddenly at a discovery which made everything else fade into utter insignificance. Before him, in a slight depression formed by a fault or lapse in the upheaved strata, lay the charred and incinerated remains of a dwelling-house leveled to the earth! Originally half hidden by a natural abattis of growing myrtle and ceanothus which covered this counter-scarp of rock towards the trail, it must have stood within a hundred feet of them during their halt!

Even in its utter and complete obliteration by the furious furnace blast that had swept across it, there was still to be seen an unmistakable ground plan and outline of a four-roomed house. While everything that was combustible had succumbed to that intense heat, there was still enough half-fused and warped metal, fractured iron plate, and twisted and broken bars to indicate the kitchen and tool shed. Very little had, evidently, been taken away; the house and its contents were consumed where they stood. With a feeling of horror and desperation Key at last ventured to disturb two or three of the blackened heaps that lay before him. But they were only vestiges of clothing, bedding, and crockery—there was no human trace that he could detect. Nor was there any suggestion of the original condition and quality of the house, except its size: whether the ordinary unsightly cabin of frontier "partners," or some sylvan cottage—there was nothing left but the usual ignoble and unsavory ruins of burnt-out human habitation.

And yet its very existence was a mystery. It had been unknown at Collinson's, its nearest neighbor, and it was presumable that it was equally unknown at Skinner's. Neither he nor his companions had detected it in their first journey by day through the hollow, and only the tell-tale window at night had been a hint of what was even then so successfully concealed that they could not discover it when they had blundered against its rock foundation. For concealed it certainly was, and intentionally so. But for what purpose?

He gave his romance full play for a few minutes with this question. Some recluse, preferring the absolute simplicity of nature, or perhaps wearied with the artificialities of society, had secluded himself here with the company of his only daughter. Proficient as a pathfinder, he had easily discovered some other way of provisioning his house from the settlements than by the ordinary trails past Collinson's or Skinner's, which would have betrayed his vicinity. But recluses are not usually accompanied by young daughters, whose relations with the world, not being as antagonistic, would make them uncertain companions. Why not a wife? His presumption of the extreme youth of the face he had seen at the window was after all only based upon the slipper he had found. And if a wife, whose absolute acceptance of such confined seclusion might be equally uncertain, why not somebody else's wife? Here was a reason for concealment, and the end of an episode, not unknown even in the wilderness. And here was the work of the Nemesis who had overtaken them in their guilty contentment! The story, even to its moral, was complete. And yet it did not entirely satisfy him, so superior is the absolutely unknown to the most elaborate theory.

His attention had been once or twice drawn towards the crumbling wall of outcrop, which during the conflagration must have felt the full force of the fiery blast that had swept through the hollow and spent its fury upon it. It bore evidence of the intense heat in cracked fissures and the crumbling debris that lay at its feet. Key picked up some of the still warm fragments, and was not surprised that they easily broke in a gritty, grayish powder in his hands. In spite of his preoccupation with the human interest, the instinct of the prospector was still strong upon him, and he almost mechanically

put some of the pieces in his pockets. Then after another careful survey of the locality for any further record of its vanished tenants, he returned to his horse. Here he took from his saddle-bags, half listlessly, a precious phial encased in wood, and, opening it, poured into another thick glass vessel part of a smoking fluid; he then crumbled some of the calcined fragments into the glass, and watched the ebullition that followed with mechanical gravity. When it had almost ceased he drained off the contents into another glass, which he set down, and then proceeded to pour some water from his drinking-flask into the ordinary tin cup which formed part of his culinary traveling-kit. Into this he put three or four pinches of salt from his provision store. Then dipping his fingers into the salt and water, he allowed a drop to fall into the glass. A white cloud instantly gathered in the colorless fluid, and then fell in a fine film to the bottom of the glass. Key's eyes concentrated suddenly, the listless look left his face. His fingers trembled lightly as he again let the salt water fall into the solution, with exactly the same result! Again and again he repeated it, until the bottom of the glass was quite gray with the fallen precipitate. And his own face grew as gray.

His hand trembled no longer as he carefully poured off the solution so as not to disturb the precipitate at the bottom. Then he drew out his knife, scooped a little of the gray sediment upon its point, and emptying his tin cup, turned it upside down upon his knee, placed the sediment upon it, and began to spread it over the dull surface of its bottom with his knife. He had intended to rub it briskly with his knife blade. But in the very action of spreading it, the first stroke of his knife left upon the sediment and the cup the luminous streak of burnished silver!

He stood up and drew a long breath to still the beatings of his heart. Then he rapidly re-climbed the rock, and passed over the ruins again, this time plunging hurriedly through, and kicking aside the charred heaps without a thought of what they had contained. Key was not an unfeeling man, he was not an unrefined one: he was a gentleman by instinct, and had an intuitive sympathy for others; but in that instant his whole mind was concentrated upon the calcined outcrop! And his first impulse was to see if it bore any evidence of previous examination, prospecting, or working by its suddenly evicted neighbors and owners. There was none: they had evidently not known it. Nor was there any reason to suppose that they would ever return to their hidden home, now devastated and laid bare to the open sunlight and open trail. They were already far away; their guilty personal secret would keep them from revisiting it. An immense feeling of relief came over the soul of this moral romancer; a momentary recognition of the Most High in this perfect poetical retribution. He ran back quickly to his saddle-bags, drew out one or two carefully written, formal notices of preemption and claim, which he and his former companions had carried in their brief partnership, erased their signatures and left only his own name, with another grateful sense of Divine interference, as he thought of them speeding far away in the distance, and returned to the ruins. With unconscious irony, he selected a charred post from the embers, stuck it in the ground a few feet from the debris of outcrop, and finally affixed his "Notice." Then, with a conscientiousness born possibly of his new religious convictions, he dislodged with his pickaxe enough of the brittle outcrop to constitute that presumption of "actual work" upon the claim which was legally required for its maintenance, and returned to his horse. In replacing his things in his saddle-bags he came upon the slipper, and for an instant so complete was his preoccupation in his later discovery, that he was about to throw it away as useless impedimenta, until it occurred to him, albeit vaguely, that it might be of service to him in its connection with that discovery, in the way of refuting possible false claimants. He was not aware of any faithlessness to his momentary romance, any more than he was conscious of any disloyalty to his old companions, in his gratification that his good fortune had come to him alone. This singular selection was a common experience of prospecting. And there was something about the magnitude of his discovery that seemed to point to an individual achievement. He had made a rough calculation of the richness of the lode from the quantity of precipitate in his rude experiment; he had estimated its length, breadth, and thickness from his slight knowledge of geology and the theories then ripe; and the yield would be colossal! Of

course, he would require capital to work it, he would have to "let in" others to his scheme and his prosperity; but the control of it would always be HIS OWN.

Then he suddenly started as he had never in his life before started at the foot of man! For there was a footfall in the charred brush; and not twenty yards from him stood Collinson, who had just dismounted from a mule. The blood rushed to Key's pale face.

"Prospectin' agin?" said the proprietor of the mill, with his weary smile.

"No," said Key quickly, "only straightening my pack." The blood deepened in his cheek at his instinctive lie. Had he carefully thought it out before, he would have welcomed Collinson, and told him all. But now a quick, uneasy suspicion flashed upon him. Perhaps his late host had lied, and knew of the existence of the hidden house. Perhaps—he had spoken of some "silvery rock" the night before—he even knew something of the lode itself. He turned upon him with an aggressive face. But Collinson's next words dissipated the thought.

"I'm glad I found ye, anyhow," he said. "Ye see, arter you left, I saw ye turn off the trail and make for the burning woods instead o' goin' round. I sez to myself, 'That fellow is making straight for Skinner's. He's sorter worried about me and that empty pork bar'l,'—I hadn't oughter spoke that away afore you boys, anyhow,—'and he's takin' risks to help me.' So I reckoned I'd throw my leg over Jenny here, and look arter ye—and go over to Skinner's myself—and vote."

"Certainly," said Key with cheerful alacrity, and the one thought of getting Collinson away; "we'll go together, and we'll see that that pork barrel is filled!" He glowed quite honestly with this sudden idea of remembering Collinson through his good fortune. "Let's get on quickly, for we may find the fire between us on the outer trail." He hastily mounted his horse.

"Then you didn't take this as a short cut," said Collinson, with dull perseverance in his idea. "Why not? It looks all clear ahead."

"Yes," said Key hurriedly, "but it's been only a leap of the fire, it's still raging round the bend. We must go back to the cross-trail." His face was still flushing with his very equivocating, and his anxiety to get his companion away. Only a few steps further might bring Collinson before the ruins and the "Notice," and that discovery must not be made by him until Key's plans were perfected. A sudden aversion to the man he had a moment before wished to reward began to take possession of him. "Come on," he added almost roughly.

But to his surprise, Collinson yielded with his usual grim patience, and even a slight look of sympathy with his friend's annoyance. "I reckon you're right, and mebbe you're in a hurry to get to Skinner's all along o' MY business, I oughtn't hev told you boys what I did." As they rode rapidly away he took occasion to add, when Key had reined in slightly, with a feeling of relief at being out of the hollow, "I was thinkin', too, of what you'd asked about any one livin' here unbeknownst to me."

"Well," said Key, with a new nervousness.

"Well; I only had an idea o' proposin' that you and me just took a look around that holler whar you thought you saw suthin'!" said Collinson tentatively.

"Nonsense," said Key hurriedly. "We really saw nothing—it was all a fancy; and Uncle Dick was joking me because I said I thought I saw a woman's face," he added with a forced laugh.

Collinson glanced at him, half sadly. "Oh! You were only funnin', then. I oughter guessed that. I oughter have knowed it from Uncle Dick's talk!" They rode for some moments in silence; Key preoccupied and feverish, and eager only to reach Skinner's. Skinner was not only postmaster but "registrar" of the district, and the new discoverer did not feel entirely safe until he had put his formal notification and claims "on record." This was no publication of his actual secret, nor any indication of success, but was only a record that would in all probability remain unnoticed and unchallenged amidst the many other hopeful dreams of sanguine prospectors. But he was suddenly startled from his preoccupation.

"Ye said ye war straightenin' up yer pack just now," said Collinson slowly.

"Yes!" said Key almost angrily, "and I was."

"Ye didn't stop to straighten it up down at the forks of the trail, did ye?"

"I may have," said Key nervously. "But why?"

"Ye won't mind my axin' ye another question, will ye? Ye ain't carryin' round with ye no woman's shoe?"

Key felt the blood drop from his cheeks. "What do you mean?" he stammered, scarcely daring to lift his conscious eyelids to his companion's glance. But when he did so he was amazed to find that Collinson's face was almost as much disturbed as his own.

"I know it ain't the square thing to ask ye, but this is how it is," said Collinson hesitatingly. "Ye see just down by the fork of the trail where you came I picked up a woman's shoe. It sorter got me! For I sez to myself, 'Thar ain't no one bin by my shanty, comin' or goin', for weeks but you boys, and that shoe, from the looks of it, ain't bin there as many hours.' I knew there wasn't any wimin hereabouts. I reckoned it couldn't hev bin dropped by Uncle Dick or that other man, for you would have seen it on the road. So I allowed it might have bin YOU. And yer it is." He slowly drew from his pocket—what Key was fully prepared to see—the mate of the slipper Key had in his saddle-bags! The fair fugitive had evidently lost them both.

But Key was better prepared now (perhaps this kind of dissimulation is progressive), and quickly alive to the necessity of throwing Collinson off this unexpected scent. And his companion's own suggestion was right to his hand, and, as it seemed, again quite providential! He laughed, with a quick color, which, however, appeared to help his lie, as he replied half hysterically, "You're right, old man, I own up, it's mine! It's d—d silly, I know—but then, we're all fools where women are concerned—and I wouldn't have lost that slipper for a mint of money."

He held out his hand gayly, but Collinson retained the slipper while he gravely examined it.

"You wouldn't mind telling me where you mought hev got that?" he said meditatively.

"Of course I should mind," said Key with a well-affected mingling of mirth and indignation. "What are you thinking of, you old rascal? What do you take me for?"

But Collinson did not laugh. "You wouldn't mind givin' me the size and shape and general heft of her as wore that shoe?"

"Most decidedly I should do nothing of the kind!" said Key half impatiently. "Enough, that it was given to me by a very pretty girl. There! that's all you will know."

"GIVEN to you?" said Collinson, lifting his eyes.

"Yes," returned Key sharply.

Collinson handed him the slipper gravely. "I only asked you," he said slowly, but with a certain quiet dignity which Key had never before seen in his face, "because thar was suthin' about the size, and shape, and fillin' out o' that shoe that kinder reminded me of some 'un; but that some 'un—her as mought hev stood up in that shoe—ain't o' that kind as would ever stand in the shoes of her as YOU know at all." The rebuke, if such were intended, lay quite as much in the utter ignoring of Key's airy gallantry and levity as in any conscious slur upon the fair fame of his invented Dulcinea. Yet Key oddly felt a strong inclination to resent the aspersion as well as Collinson's gratuitous morality; and with a mean recollection of Uncle Dick's last evening's scandalous gossip, he said sarcastically, "And, of course, that some one YOU were thinking of was your lawful wife."

"It war!" said Collinson gravely.

Perhaps it was something in Collinson's manner, or his own preoccupation, but he did not pursue the subject, and the conversation lagged. They were nearing, too, the outer edge of the present conflagration, and the smoke, lying low in the unburnt woods, or creeping like an actual exhalation of the soil, blinded them so that at times they lost the trail completely. At other times, from the intense heat, it seemed as if they were momentarily impinging upon the burning area, or were being caught in a closing circle. It was remarkable that with his sudden accession of fortune Key seemed to lose his usual frank and careless fearlessness, and impatiently questioned his companion's woodcraft. There were intervals when he regretted his haste to reach Skinner's by this shorter cut, and began to

bitterly attribute it to his desire to serve Collinson. Ah, yes! it would be fine indeed, if just as he were about to clutch the prize he should be sacrificed through the ignorance and stupidity of this heavy-handed moralist at his side! But it was not until, through that moralist's guidance, they climbed a steep acclivity to a second ridge, and were comparatively safe, that he began to feel ashamed of his surly silence or surlier interruptions. And Collinson, either through his unconquerable patience, or possibly in a fit of his usual uxorious abstraction, appeared to take no notice of it.

A sloping table-land of weather-beaten boulders now effectually separated them from the fire on the lower ridge. They presently began to descend on the further side of the crest, and at last dropped upon a wagon-road, and the first track of wheels that Key had seen for a fortnight. Rude as it was, it seemed to him the highway to fortune, for he knew that it passed Skinner's and then joined the great stage-road to Marysville,—now his ultimate destination. A few rods further on they came in view of Skinner's, lying like a dingy forgotten winter snowdrift on the mountain shelf.

It contained a post-office, tavern, blacksmith's shop, "general store," and express-office, scarcely a dozen buildings in all, but all differing from Collinson's Mill in some vague suggestion of vitality, as if the daily regular pulse of civilization still beat, albeit languidly, in that remote extremity. There was anticipation and accomplishment twice a day; and as Key and Collinson rode up to the express-office, the express-wagon was standing before the door ready to start to meet the stagecoach at the cross-roads three miles away. This again seemed a special providence to Key. He had a brief official communication with Skinner as registrar, and duly recorded his claim; he had a hasty and confidential aside with Skinner as general storekeeper, and such was the unconscious magnetism developed by this embryo millionaire that Skinner extended the necessary credit to Collinson on Key's word alone. That done, he rejoined Collinson in high spirits with the news, adding cheerfully, "And I dare say, if you want any further advances Skinner will give them to you on Parker's draft."

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