

BRET HARTE

THE THREE

PARTNERS

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PROLOGUE

The sun was going down on the Black Spur Range. The red light it had kindled there was still eating its way along the serried crest, showing through gaps in the ranks of pines, etching out the interstices of broken boughs, fading away and then flashing suddenly out again like sparks in burnt-up paper. Then the night wind swept down the whole mountain side, and began its usual struggle with the shadows upclimbing from the valley, only to lose itself in the end and be absorbed in the all-conquering darkness. Yet for some time the pines on the long slope of Heavy Tree Hill murmured and protested with swaying arms; but as the shadows stole upwards, and cabin after cabin and tunnel after tunnel were swallowed up, a complete silence followed. Only the sky remained visible—a vast concave mirror of dull steel, in which the stars did not seem to be set, but only reflected.

A single cabin door on the crest of Heavy Tree Hill had remained open to the wind and darkness. Then it was slowly shut by an invisible figure, afterwards revealed by the embers of the fire it was stirring. At first only this figure brooding over the hearth was shown, but as the flames leaped up, two other figures could be seen sitting motionless before it. When the door was shut, they acknowledged that interruption by slightly changing their position; the one who had risen to shut the door sank back into an invisible seat, but the attitude of each man was one of profound reflection or reserve, and apparently upon some common subject which made them respect each other's silence. However, this was at last broken by a laugh. It was a boyish laugh, and came from the youngest of the party. The two others turned their profiles and glanced inquiringly towards him, but did not speak.

"I was thinking," he began in apologetic explanation, "how mighty queer it was that while we were working like niggers on grub wages, without the ghost of a chance of making a strike, how we used to sit here, night after night, and flapdoodle and speculate about what we'd do if we ever DID make one; and now, Great Scott! that we HAVE made it, and are just wallowing in gold, here we are sitting as glum and silent as if we'd had a washout! Why, Lord! I remember one night—not so long ago, either—that you two quarreled over the swell hotel you were going to stop at in 'Frisco, and whether you wouldn't strike straight out for London and Rome and Paris, or go away to Japan and China and round by India and the Red Sea."

"No, we didn't QUARREL over it," said one of the figures gently; "there was only a little discussion."

"Yes, but you did, though," returned the young fellow mischievously, "and you told Stacy, there, that we'd better learn something of the world before we tried to buy it or even hire it, and that it was just as well to get the hayseed out of our hair and the slumgullion off our boots before we mixed in polite society."

"Well, I don't see what's the matter with that sentiment now," returned the second speaker good-humoredly; "only," he added gravely, "we didn't quarrel—God forbid!"

There was something in the speaker's tone which seemed to touch a common chord in their natures, and this was voiced by Barker with sudden and almost pathetic earnestness. "I tell you what, boys, we ought to swear here to-night to always stand by each other—in luck and out of it! We ought to hold ourselves always at each other's call. We ought to have a kind of password or signal, you know, by which we could summon each other at any time from any quarter of the globe!"

"Come off the roof, Barker," murmured Stacy, without lifting his eyes from the fire. But Demorest smiled and glanced tolerantly at the younger man.

“Yes, but look here, Stacy,” continued Barker, “comrades like us, in the old days, used to do that in times of trouble and adventures. Why shouldn’t we do it in our luck?”

“There’s a good deal in that, Barker boy,” said Demorest, “though, as a general thing, passwords butter no parsnips, and the ordinary, every-day, single yelp from a wolf brings the whole pack together for business about as quick as a password. But you cling to that sentiment, and put it away with your gold-dust in your belt.”

“What I like about Barker is his commodiousness,” said Stacy. “Here he is, the only man among us that has his future fixed and his preemption lines laid out and registered. He’s already got a girl that he’s going to marry and settle down with on the strength of his luck. And I’d like to know what Kitty Carter, when she’s Mrs. Barker, would say to her husband being signaled for from Asia or Africa. I don’t seem to see her tumbling to any password. And when he and she go into a new partnership, I reckon she’ll let the old one slide.”

“That’s just where you’re wrong!” said Barker, with quickly rising color. “She’s the sweetest girl in the world, and she’d be sure to understand our feelings. Why, she thinks everything of you two; she was just eager for you to get this claim, which has put us where we are, when I held back, and if it hadn’t been for her, by Jove! we wouldn’t have had it.”

“That was only because she cared for YOU,” returned Stacy, with a half-yawn; “and now that you’ve got YOUR share she isn’t going to take a breathless interest in US. And, by the way, I’d rather YOU’D remind us that we owe our luck to her than that SHE should ever remind YOU of it.”

“What do you mean?” said Barker quickly. But Demorest here rose lazily, and, throwing a gigantic shadow on the wall, stood between the two with his back to the fire. “He means,” he said slowly, “that you’re talking rot, and so is he. However, as yours comes from the heart and his from the head, I prefer yours. But you’re both making me tired. Let’s have a fresh deal.”

Nobody ever dreamed of contradicting Demorest. Nevertheless, Barker persisted eagerly: “But isn’t it better for us to look at this cheerfully and happily all round? There’s nothing criminal in our having made a strike! It seems to me, boys, that of all ways of making money it’s the squarest and most level; nobody is the poorer for it; our luck brings no misfortune to others. The gold was put there ages ago for anybody to find; we found it. It hasn’t been tarnished by man’s touch before. I don’t know how it strikes you, boys, but it seems to me that of all gifts that are going it is the straightest. For whether we deserve it or not, it comes to us first-hand—from God!”

The two men glanced quickly at the speaker, whose face flushed and then smiled embarrassedly as if ashamed of the enthusiasm into which he had been betrayed. But Demorest did not smile, and Stacy’s eyes shone in the firelight as he said languidly, “I never heard that prospecting was a religious occupation before. But I shouldn’t wonder if you’re right, Barker boy. So let’s liquor up.”

Nevertheless he did not move, nor did the others. The fire leaped higher, bringing out the rude rafters and sternly economic details of the rough cabin, and making the occupants in their seats before the fire look gigantic by contrast.

“Who shut the door?” said Demorest after a pause.

“I did,” said Barker. “I reckoned it was getting cold.”

“Better open it again, now that the fire’s blazing. It will light the way if any of the men from below want to drop in this evening.”

Stacy stared at his companion. “I thought that it was understood that we were giving them that dinner at Boomville tomorrow night, so that we might have the last evening here by ourselves in peace and quietness?”

“Yes, but if any one DID want to come it would seem churlish to shut him out,” said Demorest.

“I reckon you’re feeling very much as I am,” said Stacy, “that this good fortune is rather crowding to us three alone. For myself, I know,” he continued, with a backward glance towards a blanketed, covered pile in the corner of the cabin, “that I feel rather oppressed by—by its specific gravity, I calculate—and sort of crampy and twitchy in the legs, as if I ought to ‘lite’ out and do

something, and yet it holds me here. All the same, I doubt if anybody will come up—except from curiosity. Our luck has made them rather sore down the hill, for all they're coming to the dinner tomorrow.”

“That's only human nature,” said Demorest.

“But,” said Barker eagerly, “what does it mean? Why, only this afternoon, when I was passing the ‘Old Kentucky’ tunnel, where those Marshalls have been grubbing along for four years without making a single strike, I felt ashamed to look at them, and as they barely nodded to me I slinked by as if I had done them an injury. I don't understand it.”

“It somehow does not seem to square with this ‘gift of God’ idea of yours, does it?” said Stacy. “But we'll open the door and give them a show.”

As he did so it seemed as if the night were their only guest, and had been waiting on the threshold to now enter bodily and pervade all things with its presence. With that cool, fragrant inflow of air they breathed freely. The red edge had gone from Black Spur, but it was even more clearly defined against the sky in its towering blackness. The sky itself had grown lighter, although the stars still seemed mere reflections of the solitary pin-points of light scattered along the concave valley below. Mingling with the cooler, restful air of the summit, yet penetratingly distinct from it, arose the stimulating breath of the pines below, still hot and panting from the day-long sun. The silence was intense. The far-off barking of a dog on the invisible river-bar nearly a mile beneath them came to them like a sound in a dream. They had risen, and, standing in the doorway, by common consent turned their faces to the east. It was the frequent attitude of the home-remembering miner, and it gave him the crowning glory of the view. For, beyond the pine-hearsed summits, rarely seen except against the evening sky, lay a thin, white cloud like a dropped portion of the Milky Way. Faint with an indescribable pallor, remote yet distinct enough to assert itself above and beyond all surrounding objects, it was always there. It was the snow-line of the Sierras.

They turned away and silently reseated themselves, the same thought in the minds of each. Here was something they could not take away, something to be left forever and irretrievably behind,—left with the healthy life they had been leading, the cheerful endeavor, the undying hopefulness which it had fostered and blessed. Was what they WERE taking away worth it? And oddly enough, frank and outspoken as they had always been to each other, that common thought remained unuttered. Even Barker was silent; perhaps he was also thinking of Kitty.

Suddenly two figures appeared in the very doorway of the cabin. The effect was startling upon the partners, who had only just reseated themselves, and for a moment they had forgotten that the narrow band of light which shot forth from the open door rendered the darkness on either side of it more impenetrable, and that out of this darkness, although themselves guided by the light, the figures had just emerged. Yet one was familiar enough. It was the Hill drunkard, Dick Hall, or, as he was called, “Whiskey Dick,” or, indicated still more succinctly by the Hill humorists, “Alky Hall.”

Everybody had seen that sodden, puffy, but good-humored face; everybody had felt the fiery exhalations of that enormous red beard, which always seemed to be kept in a state of moist, unkempt luxuriance by liquor; everybody knew the absurd dignity of manner and attempted precision of statement with which he was wont to disguise his frequent excesses. Very few, however, knew, or cared to know, the pathetic weariness and chilling horror that sometimes looked out of those bloodshot eyes.

He was evidently equally unprepared for the three silent seated figures before the door, and for a moment looked at them blankly with the doubts of a frequently deceived perception. Was he sure that they were quite real? He had not dared to look at his companion for verification, but smiled vaguely.

“Good-evening,” said Demorest pleasantly.

Whiskey Dick's face brightened. “Good-evenin', good-evenin' yourselves, boys—and see how you like it! Lemme interdrush my ole frien' William J. Steptoe, of Red Gulch. Stepsho—Steptoe—is shtay—ish stay—” He stopped, hiccupped, waved his hand gravely, and with an air of reproachful

dignity concluded, “sojourning for the present on the Bar. We wish to offer our congrashulashen and felish—felish—” He paused again, and, leaning against the door-post, added severely, “—itations.”

His companion, however, laughed coarsely, and, pushing past Dick, entered the cabin. He was a short, powerful man, with a closely cropped crust of beard and hair that seemed to adhere to his round head like moss or lichen. He cast a glance—furtive rather than curious around the cabin, and said, with a familiarity that had not even good humor to excuse it, “So you’re the gay galoots who’ve made the big strike? Thought I’d meander up the Hill with this old bloat Alky, and drop in to see the show. And here you are, feeling your oats, eh? and not caring any particular G-d d—n if school keeps or not.”

“Show Mr. Steptoe—the whiskey,” said Demorest to Stacy. Then quietly addressing Dick, but ignoring Steptoe as completely as Steptoe had ignored his unfortunate companion, he said, “You quite startled us at first. We did not see you come up the trail.”

“No. We came up the back trail to please Steptoe, who wanted to see round the cabin,” said Dick, glancing nervously yet with a forced indifference towards the whiskey which Stacy was offering to the stranger.

“What yer gettin’ off there?” said Steptoe, facing Dick almost brutally. “YOU know your tangled legs wouldn’t take you straight up the trail, and you had to make a circumbendibus. Gosh! if you hadn’t scented this lickler at the top you’d have never found it.”

“No matter! I’m glad you DID find it, Dick,” said Demorest, “and I hope you’ll find the liquor good enough to pay you for the trouble.”

Barker stared at Demorest. This extraordinary tolerance of the drunkard was something new in his partner. But at a glance from Demorest he led Dick to the demijohn and tin cup which stood on a table in the corner. And in another moment Dick had forgotten his companion’s rudeness.

Demorest remained by the door, looking out into the darkness.

“Well,” said Steptoe, putting down his emptied cup, “trot out your strike. I reckon our eyes are strong enough to bear it now.” Stacy drew the blanket from the vague pile that stood in the corner, and discovered a deep tin prospecting-pan. It was heaped with several large fragments of quartz. At first the marble whiteness of the quartz and the glittering crystals of mica in its veins were the most noticeable, but as they drew closer they could see the dull yellow of gold filling the decomposed and honeycombed portion of the rock as if still liquid and molten. The eyes of the party sparkled like the mica—even those of Barker and Stacy, who were already familiar with the treasure.

“Which is the richest chunk?” asked Steptoe in a thickening voice.

Stacy pointed it out.

“Why, it’s smaller than the others.”

“Heft it in your hand,” said Barker, with boyish enthusiasm.

The short, thick fingers of Steptoe grasped it with a certain aquiline suggestion; his whole arm strained over it until his face grew purple, but he could not lift it.

“Thar useter be a little game in the ‘Frisco Mint,” said Dick, restored to fluency by his liquor, “when thar war ladies visiting it, and that was to offer to give ‘em any of those little boxes of gold coin, that contained five thousand dollars, ef they would kindly lift it from the counter and take it away! It wasn’t no bigger than one of these chunks; but Jiminy! you oughter have seed them gals grip and heave on it, and then hev to give it up! You see they didn’t know anything about the paci—(hic) the speshif —” He stopped with great dignity, and added with painful precision, “the specific gravity of gold.”

“Dry up!” said Steptoe roughly. Then turning to Stacy he said abruptly, “But where’s the rest of it? You’ve got more than that.”

“We sent it to Boomville this morning. You see we’ve sold out our claim to a company who take it up to-morrow, and put up a mill and stamps. In fact, it’s under their charge now. They’ve got a gang of men on the claim already.”

“And what mout ye hev got for it, if it’s a fair question?” said Steptoe, with a forced smile.

Stacy smiled also. "I don't know that it's a business question," he said.

"Five hundred thousand dollars," said Demorest abruptly from the doorway, "and a treble interest."

The eyes of the two men met. There was no mistaking the dull fire of envy in Steptoe's glance, but Demorest received it with a certain cold curiosity, and turned away as the sound of arriving voices came from without.

"Five hundred thousand's a big figger," said Steptoe, with a coarse laugh, "and I don't wonder it makes you feel so d-d sassy. But it WAS a fair question."

Unfortunately it here occurred to the whiskey-stimulated brain of Dick that the friend he had introduced was being treated with scant courtesy, and he forgot his own treatment by Steptoe. Leaning against the wall he waved a dignified rebuke. "I'm sashified my ole frien' is akshuated by only businesh principles." He paused, recollected himself, and added with great precision: "When I say he himself has a valuable claim in Red Gulch, and to my shertain knowledge has received offers—I have said enough."

The laugh that broke from Stacy and Barker, to whom the infelicitous reputation of Red Gulch was notorious, did not allay Steptoe's irritation. He darted a vindictive glance at the unfortunate Dick, but joined in the laugh. "And what was ye goin' to do with that?" he said, pointing to the treasure.

"Oh, we're taking that with us. There's a chunk for each of us as a memento. We cast lots for the choice, and Demorest won,—that one which you couldn't lift with one hand, you know," said Stacy.

"Oh, couldn't I? I reckon you ain't goin' to give me the same chance that they did at the Mint, eh?"

Although the remark was accompanied with his usual coarse, familiar laugh, there was a look in his eye so inconsequent in its significance that Stacy would have made some reply, but at this moment Demorest re-entered the cabin, ushering in a half dozen miners from the Bar below. They were, although youngish men, some of the older locators in the vicinity, yet, through years of seclusion and uneventful labors, they had acquired a certain childish simplicity of thought and manner that was alternately amusing and pathetic. They had never intruded upon the reserve of the three partners of Heavy Tree Hill before; nothing but an infantine curiosity, a shy recognition of the partners' courtesy in inviting them with the whole population of Heavy Tree to the dinner the next day, and the never-to-be-resisted temptation of an evening of "free liquor" and forgetfulness of the past had brought them there now. Among them, and yet not of them, was a young man who, although speaking English without accent, was distinctly of a different nationality and race. This, with a certain neatness of dress and artificial suavity of address, had gained him the nickname of "the Count" and "Frenchy," although he was really of Flemish extraction. He was the Union Ditch Company's agent on the Bar, by virtue of his knowledge of languages.

Barker uttered an exclamation of pleasure when he saw him. Himself the incarnation of naturalness, he had always secretly admired this young foreigner, with his lacquered smoothness, although a vague consciousness that neither Stacy nor Demorest shared his feelings had restricted their acquaintance. Nevertheless, he was proud now to see the bow with which Paul Van Loo entered the cabin as if it were a drawing-room, and perhaps did not reflect upon that want of real feeling in an act which made the others uncomfortable.

The slight awkwardness their entrance produced, however, was quickly forgotten when the blanket was again lifted from the pan of treasure. Singularly enough, too, the same feverish light came into the eyes of each as they all gathered around this yellow shrine. Even the polite Paul rudely elbowed his way between the others, though his artificial "Pardon" seemed to Barker to condone this act of brutal instinct. But it was more instructive to observe the manner in which the older locators received this confirmation of the fickle Fortune that had overlooked their weary labors and years of waiting to lavish her favors on the new and inexperienced amateurs. Yet as they turned their dazzled eyes upon the three partners there was no envy or malice in their depths, no reproach on their lips, no

insincerity in their wondering satisfaction. Rather there was a touching, almost childlike resumption of hope as they gazed at this conclusive evidence of Nature's bounty. The gold had been there—THEY had only missed it! And if there, more could be found! Was it not a proof of the richness of Heavy Tree Hill? So strongly was this reflected on their faces that a casual observer, contrasting them with the thoughtful countenances of the real owners, would have thought them the lucky ones. It touched Barker's quick sympathies, it puzzled Stacy, it made Demorest more serious, it aroused Steptoe's active contempt. Whiskey Dick alone remained stolid and impassive in a desperate attempt to pull himself once more together. Eventually he succeeded, even to the ambitious achievement of mounting a chair and lifting his tin cup with a dangerously unsteady hand, which did not, however, affect his precision of utterance, and said:—

“Order, gentlemen! We'll drink success to—to”—

“The next strike!” said Barker, leaping impetuously on another chair and beaming upon the old locators—“and may it come to those who have so long deserved it!”

His sincere and generous enthusiasm seemed to break the spell of silence that had fallen upon them. Other toasts quickly followed. In the general good feeling Barker attached himself to Van Loo with his usual boyish effusion, and in a burst of confidence imparted the secret of his engagement to Kitty Carter. Van Loo listened with polite attention, formal congratulations, but inscrutable eyes, that occasionally wandered to Stacy and again to the treasure. A slight chill of disappointment came over Barker's quick sensitiveness. Perhaps his enthusiasm had bored this superior man of the world. Perhaps his confidences were in bad taste! With a new sense of his inexperience he turned sadly away. Van Loo took that opportunity to approach Stacy.

“What's all this I hear of Barker being engaged to Miss Carter?” he said, with a faintly superior smile. “Is it really true?”

“Yes. Why shouldn't it be?” returned Stacy bluntly.

Van Loo was instantly deprecating and smiling. “Why not, of course? But isn't it sudden?”

“They have known each other ever since he's been on Heavy Tree Hill,” responded Stacy.

“Ah, yes! True,” said Van Loo. “But now”—

“Well—he's got money enough to marry, and he's going to marry.”

“Rather young, isn't he?” said Van Loo, still deprecatingly. “And she's got nothing. Used to wait on the table at her father's hotel in Boomville, didn't she?”

“Yes. What of that? We all know it.”

“Of course. It's an excellent thing for her—and her father. He'll have a rich son-in-law. About two hundred thousand is his share, isn't it? I suppose old Carter is delighted?”

Stacy had thought this before, but did not care to have it corroborated by this superfine young foreigner. “And I don't reckon that Barker is offended if he is,” he said curtly as he turned away. Nevertheless, he felt irritated that one of the three superior partners of Heavy Tree Hill should be thought a dupe.

Suddenly the conversation dropped, the laughter ceased. Every one turned round, and, by a common instinct, looked towards the door. From the obscurity of the hill slope below came a wonderful tenor voice, modulated by distance and spiritualized by the darkness:—

“When at some future day
I shall be far away,
Thou wilt be weeping,
Thy lone watch keeping.”

The men looked at one another. “That's Jack Hamlin,” they said. “What's he doing here?”

“The wolves are gathering around fresh meat,” said Steptoe, with his coarse laugh and a glance at the treasure. “Didn't ye know he came over from Red Dog yesterday?”

“Well, give Jack a fair show and his own game,” said one of the old locators, “and he’d clean out that pile afore sunrise.”

“And lose it next day,” added another.

“But never turn a hair or change a muscle in either case,” said a third. “Lord! I’ve heard him sing away just like that when he’s been leaving the board with five thousand dollars in his pocket, or going away stripped of his last red cent.”

Van Loo, who had been listening with a peculiar smile, here said in his most deprecating manner, “Yes, but did you never consider the influence that such a man has on the hard-working tunnelmen, who are ready to gamble their whole week’s earnings to him? Perhaps not. But I know the difficulties of getting the Ditch rates from these men when he has been in camp.”

He glanced around him with some importance, but only a laugh followed his speech. “Come, Frenchy,” said an old locator, “you only say that because your little brother wanted to play with Jack like a grown man, and when Jack ordered him off the board and he became sassy, Jack scooted him out the saloon.”

Van Loo’s face reddened with an anger that had the apparent effect of removing every trace of his former polished repose, and leaving only a hard outline beneath. At which Demorest interfered:—

“I can’t say that I see much difference in gambling by putting money into a hole in the ground and expecting to take more from it than by putting it on a card for the same purpose.”

Here the ravishing tenor voice, which had been approaching, ceased, and was succeeded by a heart-breaking and equally melodious whistling to finish the bar of the singer’s song. And the next moment Jack Hamlin appeared in the doorway.

Whatever was his present financial condition, in perfect self-possession and charming sang-froid he fully bore out his previous description. He was as clean and refreshing looking as a madrone-tree in the dust-blown forest. An odor of scented soap and freshly ironed linen was wafted from him; there was scarcely a crease in his white waistcoat, nor a speck upon his varnished shoes. He might have been an auditor of the previous conversation, so quickly and completely did he seem to take in the whole situation at a glance. Perhaps there was an extra tilt to his black-ribboned Panama hat, and a certain dancing devilry in his brown eyes—which might also have been an answer to adverse criticism.

“When I, his truth to prove, would trifle with my love,” he warbled in general continuance from the doorway. Then dropping cheerfully into speech, he added, “Well, boys, I am here to welcome the little stranger, and to trust that the family are doing as well as can be expected. Ah! there it is! Bless it!” he went on, walking leisurely to the treasure. “Triplets, too!—and plump at that. Have you had ‘em weighed?”

Frankness was an essential quality of Heavy Tree Hill. “We were just saying, Jack,” said an old locator, “that, giving you a fair show and your own game, you could manage to get away with that pile before daybreak.”

“And I’m just thinking,” said Jack cheerfully, “that there were some of you here that could do that without any such useless preliminary.” His brown eyes rested for a moment on Steptoe, but turning quite abruptly to Van Loo, he held out his hand. Startled and embarrassed before the others, the young man at last advanced his, when Jack coolly put his own, as if forgetfully, in his pocket. “I thought you might like to know what that little brother of yours is doing,” he said to Van Loo, yet looking at Steptoe. “I found him wandering about the Hill here quite drunk.”

“I have repeatedly warned him”—began Van Loo, reddening.

“Against bad company—I know,” suggested Jack gayly; “yet in spite of all that, I think he owes some of his liquor to Steptoe yonder.”

“I never supposed the fool would get drunk over a glass of whiskey offered in fun,” said Steptoe harshly, yet evidently quite as much disconcerted as angry.

“The trouble with Steptoe,” said Hamlin, thoughtfully spanning his slim waist with both hands as he looked down at his polished shoes, “is that he has such a soft-hearted liking for all weaknesses.

Always wanting to protect chaps that can't look after themselves, whether it's Whiskey Dick there when he has a pull on, or some nigger when he's made a little strike, or that straying lamb of Van Loo's when he's puppy drunk. But you're wrong about me, boys. You can't draw me in any game to-night. This is one of my nights off, which I devote exclusively to contemplation and song. But," he added, suddenly turning to his three hosts with a bewildering and fascinating change of expression, "I couldn't resist coming up here to see you and your pile, even if I never saw the one or the other before, and am not likely to see either again. I believe in luck! And it comes a mighty sight oftener than a fellow thinks it does. But it doesn't come to stay. So I'd advise you to keep your eyes skinned, and hang on to it while it's with you, like grim death. So long!"

Resisting all attempts of his hosts—who had apparently fallen as suddenly and unaccountably under the magic of his manner—to detain him longer, he stepped lightly away, his voice presently rising again in melody as he descended the hill. Nor was it at all remarkable that the others, apparently drawn by the same inevitable magnetism, were impelled to follow him, naturally joining their voices with his, leaving Steptoe and Van Loo so markedly behind them alone that they were compelled at last in sheer embarrassment to close up the rear of the procession. In another moment the cabin and the three partners again relapsed into the peace and quiet of the night. With the dying away of the last voices on the hillside the old solitude reasserted itself.

But since the irruption of the strangers they had lost their former sluggish contemplation, and now busied themselves in preparation for their early departure from the cabin the next morning. They had arranged to spend the following day and night at Boomville and Carter's Hotel, where they were to give their farewell dinner to Heavy Tree Hill. They talked but little together: since the rebuff his enthusiastic confidences had received from Van Loo, Barker had been grave and thoughtful, and Stacy, with the irritating recollection of Van Loo's criticisms in his mind, had refrained from his usual rallying of Barker. Oddly enough, they spoke chiefly of Jack Hamlin,—till then personally a stranger to them, on account of his infelix reputation,—and even the critical Demorest expressed a wish they had known him before. "But you never know the real value of anything until you're quitting it or it's quitting you," he added sententiously.

Barker and Stacy both stared at their companion. It was unlike Demorest to regret anything—particularly a mere social diversion.

"They say," remarked Stacy, "that if you had known Jack Hamlin earlier and professionally, a great deal of real value would have quitted you before he did."

"Don't repeat that rot flung out by men who have played Jack's game and lost," returned Demorest derisively. "I'd rather trust him than"—He stopped, glanced at the meditative Barker, and then concluded abruptly, "the whole caboodle of his critics."

They were silent for a few moments, and then seemed to have fallen into their former dreamy mood as they relapsed into their old seats again. At last Stacy drew a long breath. "I wish we had sent those nuggets off with the others this morning."

"Why?" said Demorest suddenly.

"Why? Well, d—n it all! they kind of oppress me, don't you see. I seem to feel 'em here, on my chest—all the three," returned Stacy only half jocularly. "It's their d—d specific gravity, I suppose. I don't like the idea of sleeping in the same room with 'em. They're altogether too much for us three men to be left alone with."

"You don't mean that you think that anybody would attempt"—said Demorest.

Stacy curled a fighting lip rather superciliously. "No; I don't think THAT—I rather wish I did. It's the blessed chunks of solid gold that seem to have got US fast, don't you know, and are going to stick to us for good or ill. A sort of Frankenstein monster that we've picked out of a hole from below."

"I know just what Stacy means," said Barker breathlessly, rounding his gray eyes. "I've felt it, too. Couldn't we make a sort of cache of it—bury it just outside the cabin for to-night? It would be sort of putting it back into its old place, you know, for the time being. IT might like it."

The other two laughed. "Rather rough on Providence, Barker boy," said Stacy, "handing back the Heaven-sent gift so soon! Besides, what's to keep any prospector from coming along and making a strike of it? You know that's mining law—if you haven't preempted the spot as a claim."

But Barker was too staggered by this material statement to make any reply, and Demorest arose. "And I feel that you'd both better be turning in, as we've got to get up early." He went to the corner of the cabin, and threw the blanket back over the pan and its treasure. "There that'll keep the chunks from getting up to ride astride of you like a nightmare." He shut the door and gave a momentary glance at its cheap hinges and the absence of bolt or bar. Stacy caught his eye. "We'll miss this security in San Francisco—perhaps even in Boomville," he sighed.

It was scarcely ten o'clock, but Stacy and Barker had begun to undress themselves with intervals of yawning and desultory talk, Barker continuing an amusing story, with one stocking off and his trousers hanging on his arm, until at last both men were snugly curled up in their respective bunks. Presently Stacy's voice came from under the blankets:—

"Hallo! aren't you going to turn in too?"

"Not yet," said Demorest from his chair before the fire. "You see it's the last night in the old shanty, and I reckon I'll see the rest of it out."

"That's so," said the impulsive Barker, struggling violently with his blankets. "I tell you what, boys: we just ought to make a watch-night of it—a regular vigil, you know—until twelve at least. Hold on! I'll get up, too!" But here Demorest arose, caught his youthful partner's bare foot which went searching painfully for the ground in one hand, tucked it back under the blankets, and heaping them on the top of him, patted the bulk with an authoritative, paternal air.

"You'll just say your prayers and go to sleep, sonny. You'll want to be fresh as a daisy to appear before Miss Kitty to-morrow early, and you can keep your vigils for to-morrow night, after dinner, in the back drawing-room. I said 'Good-night,' and I mean it!"

Protesting feebly, Barker finally yielded in a nestling shiver and a sudden silence. Demorest walked back to his chair. A prolonged snore came from Stacy's bunk; then everything was quiet. Demorest stirred up the fire, cast a huge root upon it, and, leaning back in his chair, sat with half-closed eyes and dreamed.

It was an old dream that for the past three years had come to him daily, sometimes even overtaking him under the shade of a buckeye in his noontide rest on his claim,—a dream that had never yet failed to wait for him at night by the fireside when his partners were at rest; a dream of the past, but so real that it always made the present seem the dream through which he was moving towards some sure awakening.

It was not strange that it should come to him to-night, as it had often come before, slowly shaping itself out of the obscurity as the vision of a fair young girl seated in one of the empty chairs before him. Always the same pretty, childlike face, fraught with a half-frightened, half-wondering trouble; always the same slender, graceful figure, but always glimmering in diamonds and satin, or spiritual in lace and pearls, against his own rude and sordid surroundings; always silent with parted lips, until the night wind smote some chord of recollection, and then mingled a remembered voice with his own. For at those times he seemed to speak also, albeit with closed lips, and an utterance inaudible to all but her.

"Well?" he said sadly.

"Well?" the voice repeated, like a gentle echo blending with his own.

"You know it all now," he went on. "You know that it has come at last,—all that I had worked for, prayed for; all that would have made us happy here; all that would have saved you to me has come at last, and all too late!"

"Too late!" echoed the voice with his.

"You remember," he went on, "the last day we were together. You remember your friends and family would have you give me up—a penniless man. You remember when they reproached you with

my poverty, and told you that it was only your wealth that I was seeking, that I then determined to go away and never to return to claim you until that reproach could be removed. You remember, dearest, how you clung to me and bade me stay with you, even fly with you, but not to leave you alone with them. You wore the same dress that day, darling; your eyes had the same wondering childlike fear and trouble in them; your jewels glittered on you as you trembled, and I refused. In my pride, or rather in my weakness and cowardice, I refused. I came away and broke my heart among these rocks and ledges, yet grew strong; and you, my love, YOU, sheltered and guarded by those you loved, YOU”—He stopped and buried his face in his hands. The night wind breathed down the chimney, and from the stirred ashes on the hearth came the soft whisper, “I died.”

“And then,” he went on, “I cared for nothing. Sometimes my heart awoke for this young partner of mine in his innocent, trustful love for a girl that even in her humble station was far beyond his hopes, and I pitied myself in him. Home, fortune, friends, I no longer cared for—all were forgotten. And now they are returning to me—only that I may see the hollowness and vanity of them, and taste the bitterness for which I have sacrificed you. And here, on this last night of my exile, I am confronted with only the jealousy, the doubt, the meanness and selfishness that is to come. Too late! Too late!”

The wondering, troubled eyes that had looked into his here appeared to clear and brighten with a sweet prescience. Was it the wind moaning in the chimney that seemed to whisper to him: “Too late, beloved, for ME, but not for you. I died, but Love still lives. Be happy, Philip. And in your happiness I too may live again”?

He started. In the flickering firelight the chair was empty. The wind that had swept down the chimney had stirred the ashes with a sound like the passage of a rustling skirt. There was a chill in the air and a smell like that of opened earth. A nervous shiver passed over him. Then he sat upright. There was no mistake; it was no superstitious fancy, but a faint, damp current of air was actually flowing across his feet towards the fireplace. He was about to rise when he stopped suddenly and became motionless.

He was actively conscious now of a strange sound which had affected him even in the preoccupation of his vision. It was a gentle brushing of some yielding substance like that made by a soft broom on sand, or the sweep of a gown. But to his mountain ears, attuned to every woodland sound, it was not like the gnawing of gopher or squirrel, the scratching of wildcat, nor the hairy rubbing of bear. Nor was it human; the long, deep respirations of his sleeping companions were distinct from that monotonous sound. He could not even tell if it were IN the cabin or without. Suddenly his eye fell upon the pile in the corner. The blanket that covered the treasure was actually moving!

He rose quickly, but silently, alert, self-contained, and menacing. For this dreamer, this bereaved man, this scornful philosopher of riches had disappeared with that midnight trespass upon the sacred treasure. The movement of the blanket ceased; the soft, swishing sound recommenced. He drew a glittering bowie-knife from his boot-leg, and in three noiseless strides was beside the pile. There he saw what he fully expected to see,—a narrow, horizontal gap between the log walls of the cabin and the adobe floor, slowly widening and deepening by the burrowing of unseen hands from without. The cold outer air which he had felt before was now plainly flowing into the heated cabin through the opening. The swishing sound recommenced, and stopped. Then the four fingers of a hand, palm downwards, were cautiously introduced between the bottom log and the denuded floor. Upon that intruding hand the bowie-knife of Demorest descended like a flash of lightning. There was no outcry. Even in that supreme moment Demorest felt a pang of admiration for the stoicism of the unseen trespasser. But the maimed hand was quickly withdrawn, and as quickly Demorest rushed to the door and dashed into the outer darkness.

For an instant he was dazed and bewildered by the sudden change. But the next moment he saw a dodging, doubling figure running before him, and threw himself upon it. In the shock both men fell, but even in that contact Demorest felt the tangled beard and alcoholic fumes of Whiskey

Dick, and felt also that the hands which were thrown up against his breast, the palms turned outward with the instinctive movement of a timid, defenseless man, were unstained with soil or blood. With an oath he threw the drunkard from him and dashed to the rear of the cabin. But too late! There, indeed, was the scattered earth, there the widened burrow as it had been excavated apparently by that mutilated hand—but nothing else!

He turned back to Whiskey Dick. But the miserable man, although still retaining a look of dazed terror in his eyes, had recovered his feet in a kind of angry confidence and a forced sense of injury. What did Demorest mean by attacking “innoshent” gentlemen on the trail outside his cabin? Yes! OUTSIDE his cabin, he would swear it!

“What were you doing here at midnight?” demanded Demorest.

What was he doing? What was any gentleman doing? He wasn’t any molly-coddle to go to bed at ten o’clock! What was he doing? Well—he’d been with men who didn’t shut their doors and turn the boys out just in the shank of the evening. He wasn’t any Barker to be wet-nursed by Demorest.

“Some one else was here!” said Demorest sternly, with his eyes fixed on Whiskey Dick. The dull glaze which seemed to veil the outer world from the drunkard’s pupils shifted suddenly with such a look of direct horror that Demorest was fain to turn away his own. But the veil mercifully returned, and with it Dick’s worked-up sense of injury. Nobody was there—not “a shole.” Did Demorest think if there had been any of his friends there they would have stood by like “dogsh” and seen him insulted?

Demorest turned away and re-entered the cabin as Dick lurched heavily forward, still muttering, down the trail. The excitement over, a sickening repugnance to the whole incident took the place of Demorest’s resentment and indignation. There had been a cowardly attempt to rob them of their miserable treasure. He had met it and frustrated it in almost as brutal a fashion: the gold was already tarnished with blood. To his surprise, yet relief, he found his partners unconscious of the outrage, still sleeping with the physical immobility of over-excited and tired men. Should he awaken them? No! He should have to awaken also their suspicions and desire for revenge. There was no danger of a further attack; there was no fear that the culprit would disclose himself, and to-morrow they would be far away. Let oblivion rest upon that night’s stain on the honor of Heavy Tree Hill.

He rolled a small barrel before the opening, smoothed the dislodged earth, replaced the pan with its treasure, and trusted that in the bustle of the early morning departure his partners might not notice any change. Stopping before the bunk of Stacy he glanced at the sleeping man. He was lying on his back, but breathing heavily, and his hands were moving towards his chest as if, indeed, his strange fancy of the golden incubus were being realized. Demorest would have wakened him, but presently, with a sigh of relief, the sleeper turned over on his side. It was pleasanter to look at Barker, whose damp curls were matted over his smooth, boyish forehead, and whose lips were parted in a smile under the silken wings of his brown mustache. He, too, seemed to be trying to speak, and remembering some previous revelations which had amused them, Demorest leaned over him fraternally with an answering smile, waiting for the beloved one’s name to pass the young man’s lips. But he only murmured, “Three—hundred—thousand dollars!” The elder man turned away with a grave face. The influence of the treasure was paramount.

When he had placed one of the chairs against the unprotected door at an angle which would prevent any easy or noiseless intrusion, Demorest threw himself on his bunk without undressing, and turned his face towards the single window of the cabin that looked towards the east. He did not apprehend another covert attempt against the gold. He did not fear a robbery with force and arms, although he was satisfied that there was more than one concerned in it, but this he attributed only to the encumbering weight of their expected booty. He simply waited for the dawn. It was some time before his eyes were greeted with the vague opaline brightness of the firmament which meant the vanishing of the pallid snow-line before the coming day. A bird twittered on the roof. The air was chill; he drew his blanket around him. Then he closed his eyes, he fancied only for a moment, but when he opened them the door was standing open in the strong daylight. He sprang to his feet, but the

next moment he saw it was only Stacy who had passed out, and was returning fully dressed, bringing water from the spring to fill the kettle. But Stacy's face was so grave that, recalling his disturbed sleep, Demorest laughingly inquired if he had been haunted by the treasure. But to his surprise Stacy put down the kettle, and, with a hurried glance at the still sleeping Barker, said in a low voice:—

“I want you to do something for me without asking why. Later I will tell you.”

Demorest looked at him fixedly. “What is it?” he said.

“The pack-mules will be here in a few moments. Don't wait to close up or put away anything here, but clap that gold in the saddle-bags, and take Barker with you and ‘lite’ out for Boomville AT ONCE. I will overtake you later.”

“Is there no time to discuss this?” asked Demorest.

“No,” said Stacy bluntly. “Call me a crank, say I'm in a blue funk”—his compressed lips and sharp black eyes did not lend themselves much to that hypothesis—“only get out of this with that stuff, and take Barker with you! I'm not responsible for myself while it's here.”

Demorest knew Stacy to be combative, but practical. If he had not been assured of his partner's last night slumbers he might have thought he knew of the attempt. Or if he had discovered the turned-up ground in the rear of the cabin his curiosity would have demanded an explanation. Demorest paused only for a moment, and said, “Very well, I will go.”

“Good! I'll rouse out Barker, but not a word to him—except that he must go.”

The rousing out of Barker consisted of Stacy's lifting that young gentleman bodily from his bunk and standing him upright in the open doorway. But Barker was accustomed to this Spartan process, and after a moment's balancing with closed lids like an unwrapped mummy, he sat down in the doorway and began to dress. He at first demurred to their departure except all together—it was so unfraternal; but eventually he allowed himself to be persuaded out of it and into his clothes. For Barker had also had HIS visions in the night, one of which was that they should build a beautiful villa on the site of the old cabin and solemnly agree to come every year and pass a week in it together. “I thought at first,” he said, sliding along the floor in search of different articles of his dress, or stopping gravely to catch them as they were thrown to him by his partners, “that we'd have it at Boomville, as being handier to get there; but I've concluded we'd better have it here, a little higher up the hill, where it could be seen over the whole Black Spur Range. When we weren't here we could use it as a Hut of Refuge for broken-down or washed-out miners or weary travelers, like those hospices in the Alps, you know, and have somebody to keep it for us. You see I've thought even of THAT, and Van Loo is the very man to take charge of it for us. You see he's got such good manners and speaks two languages. Lord! if a German or Frenchman came along, poor and distressed, Van Loo would just chip in his own language. See? You've got to think of all these details, you see, boys. And we might call it ‘The Rest of the Three Partners,’ or ‘Three Partners' Rest.’”

“And you might begin by giving us one,” said Stacy. “Dry up and drink your coffee.”

“I'll draw out the plans. I've got it all in my head,” continued the enthusiastic Barker, unheeding the interruption. “I'll just run out and take a look at the site, it's only right back of the cabin.” But here Stacy caught him by his dangling belt as he was flying out of the door with one boot on, and thrust him down in a chair with a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

“Keep the plans in your head, Barker boy,” said Demorest, “for here are the pack mules and packer.” This was quite enough to divert the impressionable young man, who speedily finished his dressing, as a mule bearing a large pack-saddle and two enormous saddle-bags or pouches drove up before the door, led by a muleteer on a small horse. The transfer of the treasure to the saddle-bags was quickly made by their united efforts, as the first rays of the sun were beginning to paint the hillside. Shading his keen eyes with his hand, Stacy stood in the doorway and handed Demorest the two rifles. Demorest hesitated. “Hadn't YOU better keep one?” he said, looking in his partner's eyes with his first challenge of curiosity. The sun seemed to put a humorous twinkle into Stacy's glance as he returned, “Not much! And you'd better take my revolver with you, too. I'm feeling a little better

now,” he said, looking at the saddlebags, “but I’m not fit to be trusted yet with carnal weapons. When the other mule comes and is packed I’ll overtake you on the horse.”

A little more satisfied, although still wondering and perplexed, Demorest shouldered one rifle, and with Barker, who was carrying the other, followed the muleteer and his equipage down the trail. For a while he was a little ashamed of his part in this unusual spectacle of two armed men convoying a laden mule in broad daylight, but, luckily, it was too early for the Bar miners to be going to work, and as the tunnelmen were now at breakfast the trail was free of wayfarers. At the point where it crossed the main road Demorest, however, saw Steptoe and Whiskey Dick emerge from the thicket, apparently in earnest conversation. Demorest felt his repugnance and half-restrained suspicions suddenly return. Yet he did not wish to betray them before Barker, nor was he willing, in case of an emergency, to allow the young man to be entirely unprepared. Calling him to follow, he ran quickly ahead of the laden mule, and was relieved to find that, looking back, his companion had brought his rifle to a “ready,” through some instinctive feeling of defense. As Steptoe and Whiskey Dick, a moment later discovering them, were evidently surprised, there seemed, however, to be no reason for fearing an outbreak. Suddenly, at a whisper from Steptoe, he and Whiskey Dick both threw up their hands, and stood still on the trail a few yards from them in a burlesque of the usual recognized attitude of helplessness, while a hoarse laugh broke from Steptoe.

“D–d if we didn’t think you were road-agents! But we see you’re only guarding your treasure. Rather fancy style for Heavy Tree Hill, ain’t it? Things must be gettin’ rough up thar to hev to take out your guns like that!”

Demorest had looked keenly at the four hands thus exhibited, and was more concerned that they bore no trace of wounds or mutilation than at the insult of the speech, particularly as he had a distinct impression that the action was intended to show him the futility of his suspicions.

“I am glad to see that if you haven’t any arms in your hands you’re not incapable of handling them,” said Demorest coolly, as he passed by them and again fell into the rear of the muleteer.

But Barker had thought the incident very funny, and laughed effusively at Whiskey Dick. “I didn’t know that Steptoe was up to that kind of fun,” he said, “and I suppose we DID look rather rough with these guns as we ran on ahead of the mule. But then you know that when you called to me I really thought you were in for a shindy. All the same, Whiskey Dick did that ‘hands up’ to perfection: how he managed it I don’t know, but his knees seemed to knock together as if he was in a real funk.”

Demorest had thought so too, but he made no reply. How far that miserable drunkard was a forced or willing accomplice of the events of last night was part of a question that had become more and more repugnant to him as he was leaving the scene of it forever. It had come upon him, desecrating the dream he had dreamt that last night and turning its hopeful climax to bitterness. Small wonder that Barker, walking by his side, had his quick sympathies aroused, and as he saw that shadow, which they were all familiar with, but had never sought to penetrate, fall upon his companion’s handsome face, even his youthful spirits yielded to it. They were both relieved when the clatter of hoofs behind them, as they reached the valley, announced the approach of Stacy. “I started with the second mule and the last load soon after you left,” he explained, “and have just passed them. I thought it better to join you and let the other load follow. Nobody will interfere with THAT.”

“Then you are satisfied?” said Demorest, regarding him steadfastly.

“You bet! Look!”

He turned in his saddle and pointed to the crest of the hill they had just descended. Above the pines circling the lower slope above the bare ledges of rock and outcrop, a column of thick black smoke was rising straight as a spire in the windless air.

“That’s the old shanty passing away,” said Stacy complacently. “I reckon there won’t be much left of it before we get to Boomville.”

Demorest and Barker stared. “You fired it?” said Barker, trembling with excitement.

“Yes,” said Stacy. “I couldn’t bear to leave the old rookery for coyotes and wild-cats to gather in, so I touched her off before I left.”

“But”—said Barker.

“But,” repeated Stacy composedly. “Hallo! what’s the matter with that new plan of ‘The Rest’ that you’re going to build, eh? You don’t want them BOTH.”

“And you did this rather than leave the dear old cabin to strangers?” said Barker, with kindling eyes. “Stacy, I didn’t think you had that poetry in you!”

“There’s heaps in me, Barker boy, that you don’t know, and I don’t exactly sabe myself.”

“Only,” continued the young fellow eagerly, “we ought to have ALL been there! We ought to have made a solemn rite of it, you know,—a kind of sacrifice. We ought to have poured a kind of libation on the ground!”

“I did sprinkle a little kerosene over it, I think,” returned Stacy, “just to help things along. But if you want to see her flaming, Barker, you just run back to that last corner on the road beyond the big red wood. That’s the spot for a view.”

As Barker—always devoted to a spectacle—swiftly disappeared the two men faced each other. “Well, what does it all mean?” said Demorest gravely.

“It means, old man,” said Stacy suddenly, “that if we hadn’t had nigger luck, the same blind luck that sent us that strike, you and I and that Barker over there would have been swirling in that smoke up to the sky about two hours ago!” He stopped and added in a lower, but earnest voice, “Look here, Phil! When I went out to fetch water this morning I smelt something queer. I went round to the back of the cabin and found a hole dug under the floor, and piled against the corner wall a lot of brush-wood and a can of kerosene. Some of the kerosene had been already poured on the brush. Everything was ready to light, and only my coming out an hour earlier had frightened the devils away. The idea was to set the place on fire, suffocate us in the smoke of the kerosene poured into the hole, and then to rush in and grab the treasure. It was a systematic plan!”

“No!” said Demorest quietly.

“No?” repeated Stacy. “I told you I saw the whole thing and took away the kerosene, which I hid, and after you had gone used it to fire the cabin with, to see if the ones I suspected would gather to watch their work.”

“It was no part of their FIRST plan!” said Demorest, “which was only robbery. Listen!” He hurriedly recounted his experience of the preceding night to the astonished Stacy. “No, the fire was an afterthought and revenge,” he added sternly.

“But you say you cut the robber in the hand; there would be no difficulty in identifying him by that.”

“I wounded only a HAND,” said Demorest. “But there was a HEAD in that attempt that I never saw.” He then revealed his own half-suspicions, but how they were apparently refuted by the bravado of Steptoe and Whiskey Dick.

“Then that was the reason THEY didn’t gather at the fire,” said Stacy quickly.

“Ah!” said Demorest, “then YOU too suspected them?”

Stacy hesitated, and then said abruptly, “Yes.”

Demorest was silent for a moment.

“Why didn’t you tell me this this morning?” he said gently.

Stacy pointed to the distant Barker. “I didn’t want you to tell him. I thought it better for one partner to keep a secret from two than for the two to keep it from one. Why didn’t you tell me of your experience last night?”

“I am afraid it was for the same reason,” said Demorest, with a faint smile. “And it sometimes seems to me, Jim, that we ought to imitate Barker’s frankness. In our dread of tainting him with our own knowledge of evil we are sending him out into the world very poorly equipped, for all his three hundred thousand dollars.”

“I reckon you’re right,” said Stacy briefly, extending his hand. “Shake on that!”

The two men grasped each other’s hands.

“And he’s no fool, either,” continued Demorest. “When we met Steptoe on the road, without a word from me, he closed up alongside, with his hand on the lock of his rifle. And I hadn’t the heart to praise him or laugh it off.”

Nevertheless they were both silent as the object of their criticism bounded down the trail towards them. He had seen the funeral pyre. It was awfully sad, it was awfully lovely, but there was something grand in it! Who could have thought Stacy could be so poetic? But he wanted to tell them something else that was mighty pretty.

“What was it?” said Demorest.

“Well,” said Barker, “don’t laugh! But you know that Jack Hamlin? Well, boys, he’s been hovering around us on his mustang, keeping us and that pack-mule in sight ever since we left. Sometimes he’s on a side trail off to the right, sometimes off to the left, but always at the same distance. I didn’t like to tell you, boys, for I thought you’d laugh at me; but I think, you know, he’s taken a sort of shine to us since he dropped in last night. And I fancy, you see, he’s sort of hanging round to see that we get along all right. I’d have pointed him out before only I reckoned you and Stacy would say he was making up to us for our money.”

“And we’d have been wrong, Barker boy,” said Stacy, with a heartiness that surprised Demorest, “for I reckon your instinct’s the right one.”

“There he is now,” said the gratified Barker, “just abreast of us on the cut-off. He started just after we did, and he’s got a horse that could have brought him into Boomville hours ago. It’s just his kindness.”

He pointed to a distant fringe of buckeye from which Jack Hamlin had just emerged. Although evidently holding in a powerful mustang, nothing could be more unconscious and utterly indifferent than his attitude. He did not seem to know of the proximity of any other traveler, and to care less. His handsome head was slightly thrown back, as if he was caroling after his usual fashion, but the distance was too great to make his melody audible to them, or to allow Barker’s shout of invitation to reach him. Suddenly he lowered his tightened rein, the mustang sprang forward, and with a flash of silver spurs and bridle fripperies he had disappeared. But as the trail he was pursuing crossed theirs a mile beyond, it seemed quite possible that they should again meet him.

They were now fairly into the Boomville valley, and were entering a narrow arroyo bordered with dusky willows which effectually excluded the view on either side. It was the bed of a mountain torrent that in winter descended the hillside over the trail by which they had just come, but was now sunk into the thirsty plain between banks that varied from two to five feet in height. The muleteer had advanced into the narrow channel when he suddenly cast a hurried glance behind him, uttered a “Madre de Dios!” and backed his mule and his precious freight against the bank. The sound of hoofs on the trail in their rear had caught his quicker ear, and as the three partners turned they beheld three horsemen thundering down the hill towards them. They were apparently Mexican vaqueros of the usual common swarthy type, their faces made still darker by the black silk handkerchief tied round their heads under their stiff sombreros. Either they were unable or unwilling to restrain their horses in their headlong speed, and a collision in that narrow passage was imminent, but suddenly, before reaching its entrance, they diverged with a volley of oaths, and dashing along the left bank of the arroyo, disappeared in the intervening willows. Divided between relief at their escape and indignation at what seemed to be a drunken, feast-day freak of these roystering vaqueros, the little party reformed, when a cry from Barker arrested them. He had just perceived a horseman motionless in the arroyo who, although unnoticed by them, had evidently been seen by the Mexicans. He had apparently leaped into it from the bank, and had halted as if to witness this singular incident. As the clatter of the vaqueros’ hoofs died away he lightly leaped the bank again and disappeared. But in that single glimpse of him they recognized Jack Hamlin. When they reached the spot where he had halted, they

could see that he must have approached it from the trail where they had previously seen him, but which they now found crossed it at right angles. Barker was right. He had really kept them at easy distance the whole length of the journey.

But they were now reaching its end. When they issued at last from the arroyo they came upon the outskirts of Boomville and the great stage-road. Indeed, the six horses of the Pioneer coach were just panting along the last half mile of the steep upgrade as they approached. They halted mechanically as the heavy vehicle swayed and creaked by them. In their ordinary working dress, sunburnt with exposure, covered with dust, and carrying their rifles still in their hands, they, perhaps, presented a sufficiently characteristic appearance to draw a few faces—some of them pretty and intelligent—to the windows of the coach as it passed. The sensitive Barker was quickest to feel that resentment with which the Pioneer usually met the wide-eyed criticism of the Eastern tourist or “greenhorn,” and reddened under the bold scrutiny of a pair of black inquisitive eyes behind an eyeglass. That annoyance was communicated, though in a lesser degree, even to the bearded Demorest and Stacy. It was an unexpected contact with that great world in which they were so soon to enter. They felt ashamed of their appearance, and yet ashamed of that feeling. They felt a secret satisfaction when Barker said, “They’d open their eyes wider if they knew what was in that pack-saddle,” and yet they corrected him for what they were pleased to call his “snobbishness.” They hurried a little faster as the road became more frequented, as if eager to shorten their distance to clean clothes and civilization.

Only Demorest began to linger in the rear. This contact with the stagecoach had again brought him face to face with his buried past. He felt his old dream revive, and occasionally turned to look back upon the dark outlines of Black Spur, under whose shadow it had returned so often, and wondered if he had left it there forever, and it were now slowly exhaling with the thinned and dying smoke of their burning cabin.

His companions, knowing his silent moods, had preceded him at some distance, when he heard the soft sound of ambling hoofs on the thick dust, and suddenly the light touch of Jack Hamlin’s gauntlet on his shoulder. The mustang Jack bestrode was reeking with grime and sweat, but Jack himself was as immaculate and fresh as ever. With a delightful affectation of embarrassment and timidity he began flicking the side buttons of his velvet vaquero trousers with the thong of his riata. “I reckoned to sling a word along with you before you went,” he said, looking down, “but I’m so shy that I couldn’t do it in company. So I thought I’d get it off on you while you were alone.”

“We’ve seen you once or twice before, this morning,” said Demorest pleasantly, “and we were sorry you didn’t join us.”

“I reckon I might have,” said Jack gayly, “if my horse had only made up his mind whether he was a bird or a squirrel, and hadn’t been so various and promiscuous about whether he wanted to climb a tree or fly. He’s not a bad horse for a Mexican plug, only when he thinks there is any devilment around he wants to wade in and take a hand. However, I reckoned to see the last of you and your pile into Boomville. And I DID. When I meet three fellows like you that are clean white all through I sort of cotton to ‘em, even if I’M a little of a brunette myself. And I’ve got something to give you.”

He took from a fold of his scarlet sash a small parcel neatly folded in white paper as fresh and spotless as himself. Holding it in his fingers, he went on: “I happened to be at Heavy Tree Hill early this morning before sun-up. In the darkness I struck your cabin, and I reckon—I struck somebody else! At first I thought it was one of you chaps down on your knees praying at the rear of the cabin, but the way the fellow lit out when he smelt me coming made me think it wasn’t entirely fasting and prayer. However, I went to the rear of the cabin, and then I reckoned some kind friend had been bringing you kindlings and firewood for your early breakfast. But that didn’t satisfy me, so I knelt down as he had knelt, and then I saw—well, Mr. Demorest, I reckon I saw JUST WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN! But even then I wasn’t quite satisfied, for that man had been grubbing round as if searching for something. So I searched too—and I found IT. I’ve got it here. I’m going to give it to you, for it may some day come in handy, and you won’t find anything like it among the folks where you’re going.

It's something unique, as those fine-art-collecting sharps in 'Frisco say—something quite matchless, unless you try to match it one day yourself! Don't open the paper until I run on and say 'So long' to your partners. Good-by.”

He grasped Demorest's hand and then dropped the little packet into his palm, and ambled away towards Stacy and Barker. Holding the packet in his hand with an amused yet puzzled smile, Demorest watched the gambler give Stacy's hand a hearty farewell shake and a supplementary slap on the back to the delighted Barker, and then vanish in a flash of red sash and silver buttons. At which Demorest, walking slowly towards his partners, opened the packet, and stood suddenly still. It contained the dried and bloodless second finger of a human hand cut off at the first joint!

For an instant he held it at arm's length, as if about to cast it away. Then he grimly replaced it in the paper, put it carefully in his pocket, and silently walked after his companions.

CHAPTER I

A strong southwester was beating against the windows and doors of Stacy's Bank in San Francisco, and spreading a film of rain between the regular splendors of its mahogany counters and sprucely dressed clerks and the usual passing pedestrian. For Stacy's new banking-house had long since received the epithet of "palatial" from an enthusiastic local press fresh from the "opening" luncheon in its richly decorated directors' rooms, and it was said that once a homely would-be depositor from One Horse Gulch was so cowed by its magnificence that his heart failed him at the last moment, and mumbling an apology to the elegant receiving teller, fled with his greasy chamois pouch of gold-dust to deposit his treasure in the dingy Mint around the corner. Perhaps there was something of this feeling, mingled with a certain simple-minded fascination, in the hesitation of a stranger of a higher class who entered the bank that rainy morning and finally tendered his card to the important negro messenger.

The card preceded him through noiselessly swinging doors and across heavily carpeted passages until it reached the inner core of Mr. James Stacy's private offices, and was respectfully laid before him. He was not alone. At his side, in an attitude of polite and studied expectancy, stood a correct-looking young man, for whom Mr. Stacy was evidently writing a memorandum. The stranger glanced furtively at the card with a curiosity hardly in keeping with his suggested good breeding; but Stacy did not look at it until he had finished his memorandum.

"There," he said, with business decision, "you can tell your people that if we carry their new debentures over our limit we will expect a larger margin. Ditches are not what they were three years ago when miners were willing to waste their money over your rates. They don't gamble THAT WAY any more, and your company ought to know it, and not gamble themselves over that prospect." He handed the paper to the stranger, who bowed over it with studied politeness, and backed towards the door. Stacy took up the waiting card, read it, said to the messenger, "Show him in," and in the same breath turned to his guest: "I say, Van Loo, it's George Barker! You know him."

"Yes," said Van Loo, with a polite hesitation as he halted at the door. "He was—I think—er—in your employ at Heavy Tree Hill."

"Nonsense! He was my partner. And you must have known him since at Boomville. Come! He got forty shares of Ditch stock—through you—at 110, which were worth about 80! SOMEBODY must have made money enough by it to remember him."

"I was only speaking of him socially," said Van Loo, with a deprecating smile. "You know he married a young woman—the hotel-keeper's daughter, who used to wait at the table—and after my mother and sister came out to keep house for me at Boomville it was quite impossible for me to see much of him, for he seldom went out without his wife, you know."

"Yes," said Stacy dryly, "I think you didn't like his marriage. But I'm glad your disinclination to see him isn't on account of that deal in stocks."

"Oh no," said Van Loo. "Good-by."

But, unfortunately, in the next passage he came upon Barker, who with a cry of unfeigned pleasure, none the less sincere that he was feeling a little alien in these impressive surroundings, recognized him. Nothing could exceed Van Loo's protest of delight at the meeting; nothing his equal desolation at the fact that he was hastening to another engagement. "But your old partner," he added, with a smile, "is waiting for you; he has just received your card, and I should be only keeping you from him. So glad to see you; you're looking so well. Good-by! Good-by!"

Reassured, Barker no longer hesitated, but dashed with his old impetuosity into his former partner's room. Stacy, already deeply absorbed in other business, was sitting with his back towards him, and Barker's arms were actually encircling his neck before the astonished and half-angry man looked up. But when his eyes met the laughing gray ones of Barker above him he gently disengaged

himself with a quick return of the caress, rose, shut the door of an inner office, and returning pushed Barker into an armchair in quite the old suppressive fashion of former days. Yes; it was the same Stacy that Barker looked at, albeit his brown beard was now closely cropped around his determined mouth and jaw in a kind of grave decorum, and his energetic limbs already attuned to the rigor of clothes of fashionable cut and still more rigorous sombreness of color.

“Barker boy,” he began, with the familiar twinkle in his keen eyes which the younger partner remembered, “I don’t encourage stag dancing among my young men during bank hours, and you’ll please to remember that we are not on Heavy Tree Hill”—

“Where,” broke in Barker enthusiastically, “we were only overlooked by the Black Spur Range and the Sierran snow-line; where the nearest voice that came to you was quarter of a mile away as the crow flies and nearly a mile by the trail.”

“And was generally an oath!” said Stacy. “But you’re in San Francisco NOW. Where are you stopping?” He took up a pencil and held it over a memorandum pad awaitingly.

“At the Brook House. It’s”—

“Hold on! ‘Brook House,’” Stacy repeated as he jotted it down. “And for how long?”

“Oh, a day or two. You see, Kitty”—

Stacy checked him with a movement of his pencil in the air, and then wrote down, “‘Day or two.’ Wife with you?”

“Yes; and oh, Stacy, our boy! Ah!” he went on, with a laugh, knocking aside the remonstrating pencil, “you must listen! He’s just the sweetest, knowingest little chap living. Do you know what we’re going to christen him? Well, he’ll be Stacy Demorest Barker. Good names, aren’t they? And then it perpetuates the dear old friendship.”

Stacy picked up the pencil again, wrote “Wife and child S. D. B.,” and leaned back in his chair. “Now, Barker,” he said briefly, “I’m coming to dine with you tonight at 7.30 sharp. THEN we’ll talk Heavy Tree Hill, wife, baby, and S. D. B. But here I’m all for business. Have you any with me?”

Barker, who was easily amused, had extracted a certain entertainment out of Stacy’s memorandum, but he straightened himself with a look of eager confidence and said, “Certainly; that’s just what it is—business. Lord! Stacy, I’m ALL business now. I’m in everything. And I bank with you, though perhaps you don’t know it; it’s in your Branch at Marysville. I didn’t want to say anything about it to you before. But Lord! you don’t suppose that I’d bank anywhere else while you are in the business—checks, dividends, and all that; but in this matter I felt you knew, old chap. I didn’t want to talk to a banker nor to a bank, but to Jim Stacy, my old partner.”

“Barker,” said Stacy curtly, “how much money are you short of?”

At this direct question Barker’s always quick color rose, but, with an equally quick smile, he said, “I don’t know yet that I’m short at all.”

“But I do!”

“Look here, Jim: why, I’m just overloaded with shares and stocks,” said Barker, smiling.

“Not one of which you could realize on without sacrifice. Barker, three years ago you had three hundred thousand dollars put to your account at San Francisco.”

“Yes,” said Barker, with a quiet reminiscent laugh. “I remember I wanted to draw it out in one check to see how it would look.”

“And you’ve drawn out all in three years, and it looks d–d bad.”

“How did you know it?” asked Barker, his face beaming only with admiration of his companion’s omniscience.

“How did I know it?” retorted Stacy. “I know YOU, and I know the kind of people who have unloaded to you.”

“Come, Stacy,” said Barker, “I’ve only invested in shares and stocks like everybody else, and then only on the best advice I could get: like Van Loo’s, for instance,—that man who was here just now, the new manager of the Empire Ditch Company; and Carter’s, my own Kitty’s father. And when

I was offered fifty thousand Wide West Extensions, and was hesitating over it, he told me YOU were in it too—and that was enough for me to buy it.”

“Yes, but we didn’t go into it at his figures.”

“No,” said Barker, with an eager smile, “but you SOLD at his figures, for I knew that when I found that YOU, my old partner, was in it; don’t you see, I preferred to buy it through your bank, and did at 110. Of course, you wouldn’t have sold it at that figure if it wasn’t worth it then, and neither I nor you are to blame if it dropped the next week to 60, don’t you see?”

Stacy’s eyes hardened for a moment as he looked keenly into his former partner’s bright gray ones, but there was no trace of irony in Barker’s. On the contrary, a slight shade of sadness came over them. “No,” he said reflectively, “I don’t think I’ve ever been foolish or followed out my OWN ideas, except once, and that was extravagant, I admit. That was my idea of building a kind of refuge, you know, on the site of our old cabin, where poor miners and played-out prospectors waiting for a strike could stay without paying anything. Well, I sunk twenty thousand dollars in that, and might have lost more, only Carter—Kitty’s father—persuaded me—he’s an awful clever old fellow—into turning it into a kind of branch hotel of Boomville, while using it as a hotel to take poor chaps who couldn’t pay, at half prices, or quarter prices, PRIVATELY, don’t you see, so as to spare their pride,—awfully pretty, wasn’t it?—and make the hotel profit by it.”

“Well?” said Stacy as Barker paused.

“They didn’t come,” said Barker.

“But,” he added eagerly, “it shows that things were better than I had imagined. Only the others did not come, either.”

“And you lost your twenty thousand dollars,” said Stacy curtly.

“FIFTY thousand,” said Barker, “for of course it had to be a larger hotel than the other. And I think that Carter wouldn’t have gone into it except to save me from losing money.”

“And yet made you lose fifty thousand instead of twenty. For I don’t suppose HE advanced anything.”

“He gave his time and experience,” said Barker simply.

“I don’t think it worth thirty thousand dollars,” said Stacy dryly. “But all this doesn’t tell me what your business is with me to-day.”

“No,” said Barker, brightening up, “but it is business, you know. Something in the old style—as between partner and partner—and that’s why I came to YOU, and not to the ‘banker.’ And it all comes out of something that Demorest once told us; so you see it’s all us three again! Well, you know, of course, that the Excelsior Ditch Company have abandoned the Bar and Heavy Tree Hill. It didn’t pay.”

“Yes; nor does the company pay any dividends now. You ought to know, with fifty thousand of their stock on your hands.”

Barker laughed. “But listen. I found that I could buy up their whole plant and all the ditching along the Black Spur Range for ten thousand dollars.”

“And Great Scott! you don’t think of taking up their business?” said Stacy, aghast.

Barker laughed more heartily. “No. Not their business. But I remember that once Demorest told us, in the dear old days, that it cost nearly as much to make a water ditch as a railroad, in the way of surveying and engineering and levels, you know. And here’s the plant for a railroad. Don’t you see?”

“But a railroad from Black Spur to Heavy Tree Hill—what’s the good of that?”

“Why, Black Spur will be in the line of the new Divide Railroad they’re trying to get a bill for in the legislature.”

“An infamous piece of wildcat jobbing that will never pass,” said Stacy decisively.

“They said BECAUSE it was that, it would pass,” said Barker simply. “They say that Watson’s Bank is in it, and is bound to get it through. And as that is a rival bank of yours, don’t you see, I

thought that if WE could get something real good or valuable out of it,—something that would do the Black Spur good,—it would be all right.”

“And was your business to consult me about it?” said Stacy bluntly.

“No,” said Barker, “it’s too late to consult you now, though I wish I had. I’ve given my word to take it, and I can’t back out. But I haven’t the ten thousand dollars, and I came to you.”

Stacy slowly settled himself back in his chair, and put both hands in his pockets. “Not a cent, Barker, not a cent.”

“I’m not asking it of the BANK,” said Barker, with a smile, “for I could have gone to the bank for it. But as this was something between us, I am asking you, Stacy, as my old partner.”

“And I am answering you, Barker, as your old partner, but also as the partner of a hundred other men, who have even a greater right to ask me. And my answer is, not a cent!”

Barker looked at him with a pale, astonished face and slightly parted lips. Stacy rose, thrust his hands deeper in his pockets, and standing before him went on:—

“Now look here! It’s time you should understand me and yourself. Three years ago, when our partnership was dissolved by accident, or mutual consent, we will say, we started afresh, each on our own hook. Through foolishness and bad advice you have in those three years hopelessly involved yourself as you never would have done had we been partners, and yet in your difficulty you ask me and my new partners to help you out of a difficulty in which they have no concern.”

“Your NEW partners?” stammered Barker.

“Yes, my new partners; for every man who has a share, or a deposit, or an interest, or a dollar in this bank is my PARTNER—even you, with your securities at the Branch, are one; and you may say that in THIS I am protecting you against yourself.”

“But you have money—you have private means.”

“None to speculate with as you wish me to—on account of my position; none to give away foolishly as you expect me to—on account of precedent and example. I am a soulless machine taking care of capital intrusted to me and my brains, but decidedly NOT to my heart nor my sentiment. So my answer is, not a cent!”

Barker’s face had changed; his color had come back, but with an older expression. Presently, however, his beaming smile returned, with the additional suggestion of an affectionate toleration which puzzled Stacy.

“I believe you’re right, old chap,” he said, extending his hand to the banker, “and I wish I had talked to you before. But it’s too late now, and I’ve given my word.”

“Your WORD!” said Stacy. “Have you no written agreement?”

“No. My word was accepted.” He blushed slightly as if conscious of a great weakness.

“But that isn’t legal nor business. And you couldn’t even hold the Ditch Company to it if THEY chose to back out.”

“But I don’t think they will,” said Barker simply. “And you see my word wasn’t given entirely to THEM. I bought the thing through my wife’s cousin, Henry Spring, a broker, and he makes something by it, from the company, on commission. And I can’t go back on HIM. What did you say?”

Stacy had only groaned through his set teeth. “Nothing,” he said briefly, “except that I’m coming, as I said before, to dine with you to-night; but no more BUSINESS. I’ve enough of that with others, and there are some waiting for me in the outer office now.”

Barker rose at once, but with the same affectionate smile and tender gravity of countenance, and laid his hand caressingly on Stacy’s shoulder. “It’s like you to give up so much of your time to me and my foolishness and be so frank with me. And I know it’s mighty rough on you to have to be a mere machine instead of Jim Stacy. Don’t you bother about me. I’ll sell some of my Wide West Extension and pull the thing through myself. It’s all right, but I’m sorry for you, old chap.” He glanced around the room at the walls and rich paneling, and added, “I suppose that’s what you have to pay for all this sort of thing?”

Before Stacy could reply, a waiting visitor was announced for the second time, and Barker, with another hand-shake and a reassuring smile to his old partner, passed into the hall, as if the onus of any infelicity in the interview was upon himself alone. But Stacy did not seem to be in a particularly accessible mood to the new caller, who in his turn appeared to be slightly irritated by having been kept waiting over some irksome business. “You don’t seem to follow me,” he said to Stacy after reciting his business perplexity. “Can’t you suggest something?”

“Well, why don’t you get hold of one of your board of directors?” said Stacy abstractedly. “There’s Captain Drummond; you and he are old friends. You were comrades in the Mexican War, weren’t you?”

“That be d–d!” said his visitor bitterly. “All his interests are the other way, and in a trade of this kind, you know, Stacy, that a man would sacrifice his own brother. Do you suppose that he’d let up on a sure thing that he’s got just because he and I fought side by side at Cerro Gordo? Come! what are you giving us? You’re the last man I ever expected to hear that kind of flapdoodle from. If it’s because your bank has got some other interest and you can’t advise me, why don’t you say so?” Nevertheless, in spite of Stacy’s abrupt disclaimer, he left a few minutes later, half convinced that Stacy’s lukewarmness was due to some adverse influence. Other callers were almost as quickly disposed of, and at the end of an hour Stacy found himself again alone.

But not apparently in a very satisfied mood. After a few moments of purely mechanical memoranda-making, he rose abruptly and opened a small drawer in a cabinet, from which he took a letter still in its envelope. It bore a foreign postmark. Glancing over it hastily, his eyes at last became fixed on a concluding paragraph. “I hope,” wrote his correspondent, “that even in the rush of your big business you will sometimes look after Barker. Not that I think the dear old chap will ever go wrong—indeed, I often wish I was as certain of myself as of him and his insight; but I am afraid we were more inclined to be merely amused and tolerant of his wonderful trust and simplicity than to really understand it for his own good and ours. I know you did not like his marriage, and were inclined to believe he was the victim of a rather unscrupulous father and a foolish, unequal girl; but are you satisfied that he would have been the happier without it, or lived his perfect life under other and what you may think wiser conditions? If he **WROTE** the poetry that he **LIVES** everybody would think him wonderful; for being what he is we never give him sufficient credit.” Stacy smiled grimly, and penciled on his memorandum, “He wants it to the amount of ten thousand dollars.” “Anyhow,” continued the writer, “look after him, Jim, for his sake, your sake, and the sake of—**PHIL DEMOREST.**”

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