

In A Hollow OF THE HILLS

BY BRET HARTE
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CHAPTER II.

But Key's attention was presently directed to something more important to his present purpose. The keen wind which he had felt blowing through the chink 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 rushing in to fill the vacuum made by the conflagration, and it needed not his sensation of an acid starting in his eyes and an uncomfortable dryness in his throat which he was now feeling, 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 course 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 retrace 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 partly because he wished to go alone from a very singular feeling that while there he had witnessed the incident, it was something vaguely personal to himself. To this was also added the uneasy impression he had experienced 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 on account of Uncle Dick's evident responsibility for the origin of the fire, and the reflection that the inmates of the dwelling would have had ample warning in time to escape. But he and his companions might have helped them, and then— but here he stopped. Preble Key had not passed the age of romance, but like other romantics, he thought he had evaded it by treating it partially.

He had recalled a point 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 the 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 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 or covered with the mud which was on the trail as all other slippers were. If it was dropped by a passing traveler, that traveler must have passed Collinson's going over the hill the last twelve hours. It was scarcely possible that the shoe could have dropped from the heel without the wearer's knowing it, and that he would have dropped an object so small as this in the darkness of the night or in the darkness of the night. This 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 the upheaved strata, lay the charred and calcined remains of a dwelling house, leveled to the earth. Originally half hidden by a natural abatis of growing myrtle and cactuses that covered this conical spur of rock toward the trail, it must have stood within a hundred feet of them during their last ride.

Even in its utter and complete obliteration by the furious furnace blast that must have swept across it the evening before, there was still to be seen the unmistakable ground plan and outline of a four-roomed house. While everything that was combustible had been consumed, the masonry, 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 it stood. With a feeling of horror and desperation, Key at last returned to the dust two or three of the blackened heaps that lay before him. But there 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 usual unsightly cabin of frontier "partners" or a sylvan cottage—there was nothing left but the usual ignoble and unsavory ruins of burned-out human habitation.

And yet its very existence was a mystery. It had been unknown to Collinson's, his nearest neighbor, and it was possible that it was equally unknown to 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 hidden from the eyes of the intruder.

Then he suddenly started as he had never in his life before started at the face of a 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 face.

"Proposin' again?" said the proprietor of the mill, with his weary smile.

"No," said Key quickly, "only straightening my pack." The blood departed in his cheeks at his instinctive lie. He had carefully thought it out before he would have welcomed Collinson and told him all. But now a quick, unobtrusive glance upon him, perhaps his late and unobtrusive discovery of the existence of the hidden house. Perhaps he had spoken of some "silvery rock" the night before—perhaps knew something of the lodge itself. He turned upon him with an aggressive face. But Collinson's next words were in a friendly tone.

"I'm glad I found you, anyhow," he said. "You see, arter you left, I saw you turn off the trail and make for the burning woods instead of goin' north. I see to myself, that feller is making straight for Skinner's. He's arter worried about me and that empty pack, I hadn't oughter spoke that way afore you boys any how, and he'd takin' risks to help me. So I reckoned I'd throw my leg over Jimmy 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 pack barrel is filled." He glowed quite honestly with this sudden idea of remembering Collinson through his good fortune. "Let's go 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 a dull perseverance in his idea. "Why not, I'll ask you clear ahead?"

"Yes," said Key, hurriedly, "but it's been only a leap of the fire; it's still raging round the head. We must go back to the cross trail." His face was still glowing with his very equivocal and his anxiety to get his companion away. Only a few steps further would 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 maybe 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 retraced in slightly with a feeling of relief at being out of the hollow: "I was thoughtful, too, of what you'd ask about any one here," here unobtrusively drawing a "Well," said Key, with nervous impatience.

climbed the rock again and passed over the ruins again, this time kicking aside the charred heaps without a thought of what they had contained. Key was not an unfeeling man, he was not an unfeeling 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 spot of this moral romance, a momentary recognition of the Most High in this poetical retribution. He ran back quickly to his saddles, drew out one or two carefully written formal notices of pre-emption and claims, which he and his former companions had carried in their brief partnership, and finally returned to the hollow with 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, struck it in the ground a few feet from the debris of outcrop, and finally returned to the hollow. Then with a consciousness born of his own religious convictions, he deluged with his pickaxe enough of the brittle outcrop to constitute the presumption of "actual work" upon the claim legally required for its maintenance, and returned to his horse. With a feeling of horror and desperation, Key at last returned to the dust two or three of the blackened heaps that lay before him. But there 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 usual unsightly cabin of frontier "partners" or a sylvan cottage—there was nothing left but the usual ignoble and unsavory ruins of burned-out human habitation.

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that claim until Collinson had satisfied himself of the whereabouts of the missing proprietors. Was he quite sure that Collinson would not revisit the spot when he was gone. But he was equal to the emergency.

He had intended to leave his horse with Skinner as security for Collinson's propensities, but Skinner's liberality had made this unnecessary, and he offered it to Collinson to use, and keep for him until called for. This would enable his companion to "pack" his goods on the mule, and oblige him to return to the mill by the wagon road and "outside trail," as more commodious for two animals.

"You ain't afraid of the road gent's?" suggested a bystander, "they swarm on Gallop's Ridge, and they 'hold up' the down stage only last week."

"They're not so lively since the deputy sheriff's got a new idea about them, and have been lying low in the brush near Lead Top," returned the man. "Anyhow, they don't stop teams nor packs, unless there's a chance of their getting some fancy horseflesh by it, and I reckon they ain't much to tempt them that," he added with a satirical side glance at his customer's cattle. But Key was a captain starting in the express wagon, giving a farewell shake to his patient companion's hand, and the inquiries pleasantly passed unnoticed. Nevertheless, as the express wagon rolled away his active fancy caught at and disposed of this new danger that might threaten the hidden wealth of his claim. But he reflected that for a time, at least, only the crude ore would be taken out and shipped to Marysville in a shape that offered no profit to the highwaymen. Had it been a gold mine! But here again was the interposition of Providence.

In five days Preble Key returned to Skinner's with a foreman and ten men and an unlimited credit to draw upon at Marysville. Expeditions of this kind created no surprise at Skinner's. They had before this entered the wilderness gayly, none knew where or what for; the estate and silent works had kept their secret while they had evaporated, none knew when or where—often, alas! with an unpaid account at Skinner's. In a week a rambling abode of pine logs occupied the site of the mysterious ruins and contained the party. In two weeks excavations had been made and the whole face of the outcrop was exposed. In three weeks every vestige of former tenancy which the fire had not consumed was trampled out by the alien feet of the toilers of the "Sylvan Silver Hollow Company." None of Key's former companions would have recognized the hollow in its blackened leveling and rocky foundation. Even Collinson would not have remembered this stripped rock and the heaps of debris as the place where he had overtaken Key. And Key himself had forgotten in his triumph everything but the chance excitement that led to his success.

Perhaps it was well, therefore, that one night, when the darkness had mercifully fallen upon the scene of sylvan desolation, and more inconspicuous and unsavory human restoration, and the low murmur of the pines occasionally swelled up from the still unsearched mountain side, a loud shout and the tramping of horses' feet awoke the dwellers in the shanty. Springing to their feet they hurriedly seized their weapons and rushed out, only to be confronted by a dark, motionless ring of horsemen, two flaming torches of pine knots and a low but distinct voice of authority. Even in their excitement, half-wakened suspicion, and confusion it had a singular note of calm preparation and conscious power.

"Drop those guns. Hold up your hands. We've got you cornered!"

Key was no coward, the men, though flushed, were not crazed, but they obeyed. "Trot out your leader! Let him stand out there clear, beside that torch!"

One of the flaming pine knots disengaged itself from the dark circle and moved to the center as Preble Key, cool and confident, stepped beside it.

"That was the man I knew a good while ago. He served as a newspaper correspondent during one of the Indian wars and I became much attached to him."

"I didn't know that you formed attachments," she replied.

"Oh, I don't, but once in a great while they form themselves, and when they do, they are strong. I never reason with a friendship. It must be prompted by justice."

"Who was that?"

"The State of California," said the voice.

"There are no such names among my party," "Who are you?"

"The president of the Sylvan Silver Hollow Company, and those are my workmen."

There was a movement and sound of whispering in the hither dark and silent circle. Then the voice rose again:

"Have the papers to prove it?"

"And the warrant of the sheriff of Sierra."

There was a pause and the voice continued:

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks. I came here the day of the fire and took up this claim."

"There was no other house here?"

"There were ruins; you can see them still. It may have been a burned up cabin."

The voice disengaged itself from the vague background and came slowly forward:

"This was a den of thieves. It was the hiding place of Joaquin Ramon and his gang of road agents. I've been hunting this spot for three weeks. And now it's all up."

There was a laugh from Key's men, but it was checked as the owner of the voice slowly ranged up beside the burning torch and they saw his face. It was drawn and grim with the defeat of a brave man.

"Won't you come in and take something?" said Key, kindly.

"No, I'm sorry to have disturbed ye as it is. But I suppose it's all in the day's work. Good night. Forward there, get!"

The two torches danced forward with the tracing of dim shadows in this procession; there was a clatter over the rocks and they were gone. And as Key gazed after them he felt that with them had passed the only shadow that lay upon his hollow future. With the last tenant of the burnt and prohibited outcrop as for the future he was henceforth forever safe in his claim and his discovery. And yet oddly enough at that moment, for the first time in three weeks, there passed before his fancy with a stirring of reproach, a vision of the face that he had seen at the window.

(To be continued.)



THE CAPTAIN'S WIFE BY ODIE READ

(Copyright, 1895.)

Strum had never ceased to regret that he had been compelled to leave the army. Just why he left was not known, but there was a general agreement that it was on account of a duel. It was known that he had killed a civilian named Letherton, the son of a prominent judge. Strum was a captain. Once he distinguished himself by leading a desperate charge against the Sioux Indians, and the road to promotion was easy—but then came trouble and he left the army. He was rather gruff, a typical cavalryman, but he could be entertaining. Women called him a charming oddity; men were inclined to let him have

"Why, Agnes, what is the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, something. What is it? Have I said anything to wound you?"

"No, nothing has been said."

"Then I must say that I'll be hanged if I understand you. Just now you were as lively as a cricket; now you are in the dumps. Agnes, that's no way to make a home cheerful."

"Perhaps not," she repeated. "I indulge in no perplexities. I know it isn't. But come, we'll have some music."

A few evenings later George Hukey came home with the captain. He was dignified and thoughtful, and during the evening he addressed but few remarks to the mistress of the house. The captain was plain and said that women were truer than men. Hukey turned to Mrs. Strum and asked:

"Do you think so?"

"They are nearly always as true as they are permitted to be," she answered. "Circumstances could make a saint a liar."

He made no reply, he silently smoked his cigar. It was evident that the hostess and the visitor were not pleased with each other.

During the three months that followed, Hukey was several times a guest at the

captain's house, but never did he loosen the reserve that had at first tightened about him. One evening the captain was to drive into Fort Smith to take him out home. He did drive in, but not to bring Hukey out. Mrs. Strum was ill.

"Old fellow, I'm devilish sorry," the captain said.

"Oh, it can't be helped. Some other time will do well."

Two weeks passed. The captain's wife was worse. One evening the captain drove rapidly into town.

"Old man," said he, busily, addressing his friend, "my wife is dying. She has sent me for you—must see you. Get in!"

Without saying a word Hukey got into the buggy. And not a word was spoken during the drive.

When Hukey entered the room the woman was nearly gone. She motioned him to kneel and he knelt by the bedside. She put her arm around her neck—while perched by his side the captain, standing near, drew back with a gasp.

It was all over. A neighbor stood in the door, but in hand. His wife was offering her services.

"Both of you step out a moment," the captain said, and turning to Hukey, who stood leaning against the mantel-piece, he sternly added, "You stay here."

Hukey bowed the man and his wife withdrew. The captain closed the door, walked across the room, opened a drawer, took out two pistols, placed them on a table, and, looking back at Hukey, remarked:

"Here or at the grave?"

"As you say."

"She will be buried Wednesday. At the grave—Wednesday night—10 o'clock. Good-night."

As the captain approached the grave he saw Hukey seated on a bench under the trees. The moon was full. He walked up and, without speaking, sat down upon the bench. He saw Key clinging to Hukey's knees. The captain took out two pistols and placed them upon the grass. They caught a gleam from the moon. For a time there was silence. The captain spoke.

"And your indifference was put out?"

"Yes."

"You met her alone—you deceived me."

"No."

"Will you defend yourself?"

"No."

"You will simply let me shoot you?"

"Yes."

"When did you meet her?"

"Before you did."

"Huh! What did she say to you when—when she put her arm about your neck?"

"She told me why our engagement had been broken. It was all a mistake—a cruel persecution, but she did not learn the truth until after she was married and then she was too noble to speak of it."

"Huh! Did she tell you that she loved you?"

"Yes."

The captain reached over and took up one of the pistols. "There you are," he said, pointing to the other one. Hukey got up and kicked the pistol. It fell on the grass. He sat down. The captain spoke. "You loved her?"

"Yes."

"You will not defend yourself?"

"I will not."

"I see. You want to be with her—you want me to kill you. I will see you damned first. Good-night."

He did.

Post-Did you feel the force and directness of that pointed article I left for you this morning?

Editor, indignantly—So it was you who put that terrible pin in my chair, was it, you scoundrel.—New York Journal.

She, pretending buff—Are you sorry you kissed me?

He, making sudden discovery—Yes; inasmuch as your little brother is under the sofa, and your father standing on the stairs.—Tit-Bits.



At the Opening.

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 visited the little hollow that 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 became deadened and lost in the springy mosses and finally the netted grasses and tangled vines that indicated the vicinity of the densely wooded hollow. Here, too, were already some of the wider spaced vanguards of that wood—but here 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 no means rare phenomena of the wood, but the wood itself was gone. He spurred his horse through the tall grass between the opened columns and pulled up in amazement.

The wood, indeed, was gone, and the whole hollow filled with the silvery black and dead stumps of the utterly consumed forest. More than that, from the indications before him the catastrophe must have almost immediately followed their 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 those unaccountable but by no means rare phenomena of this form of disaster. The creeling heights around were yet untouched; only the hollow and the ledge of rock beside it, against which they had blundered with their horses when they were seeking the open space window in the darkness of the evening before, were consumed and destroyed. He dismounted and climbed the ledge, still warm with the spent fire. A large mass of grayish outcrop had evidently been the focus of the furnace blast of heat that must have raged in this spot. He was skirting its crumbling debris, when he started suddenly at a discovery which made everything else fade into insignificance. Before him, in a slight depression formed by a fault or lapse in

the fork of the trail where you came I picked up a woman's shoe. It sorter git 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 wigwag hereabouts. I reckoned it couldn't hev been dropped by Uncle Dick or that other man, for you would have seen it on the road. So I allowed it might have been 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 bag! The fair fugitive had evidently lost them both.

But Key was better prepared now—perhaps the sort of disimulation 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—almost providential! He laughed, with a quick chuck, which, however, seemed to help his lie, as he replied, half hysterically, "You're right, old man; I own up, it's mine! It's silly, I know, but then, we're all fools where women are concerned, and I wouldn't have lost that slipper for a mile of money."

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

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

"Of course I should," said Key, with a well affected mingling of mirth and indignation. "That's the way with you, you old villain! What do you take me for?"

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

"Most decidedly I should do nothing of the kind," said Key half impatiently. "Enough that it was made by a very pretty girl. That'll tell you what you want."

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

"Yes," returned Key audaciously.

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 that was within about the size and shape and fit of that shoe that kinder reminded me of some one. But that some one—her as mout hev stood up in that shoe ain't of that kind as you know it all."

The rebuke—such as it was—was not seen in his face, because that was Key's airy gallantry and levity than in any conscious air upon the fair frame of his invented Dolores. Yet Key oddly felt a strong inclination to resent the aspersions as well as Collinson's gratuitous morality, and with a mean recollection of Uncle Dick's sarcasm, he said, "You're kidding me, sarcastically. And, of course, that some one you were thinking of was your lawful wife."

"It was," said Collinson gravely.

Perhaps it was something in Collinson's manner or his own occupation, but he did not pursue the subject, and the conversation turned to the present configuration, the outer wood of the present configuration, 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