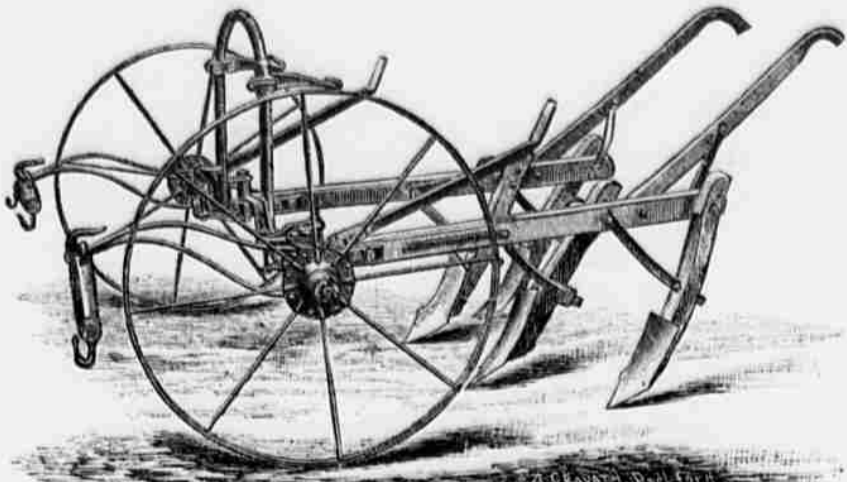


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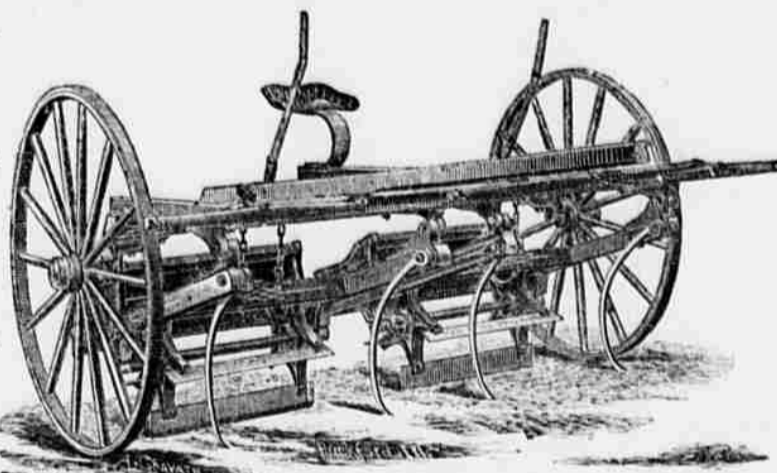
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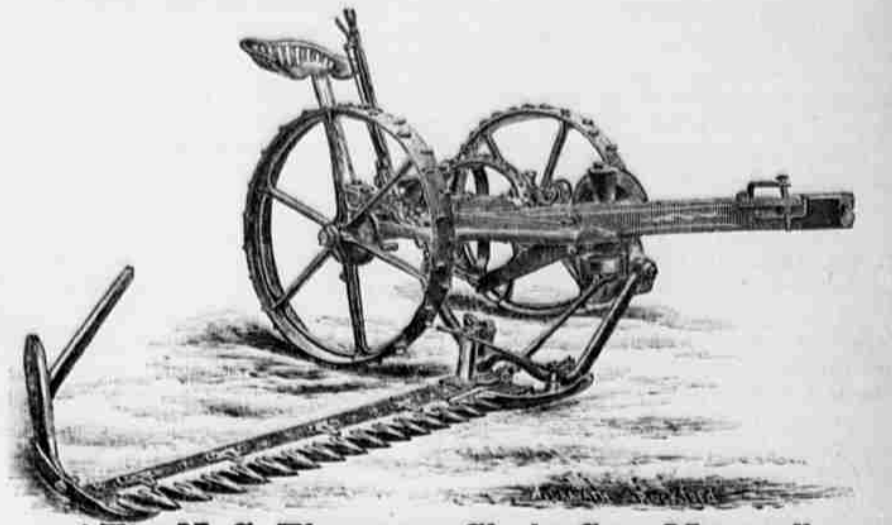
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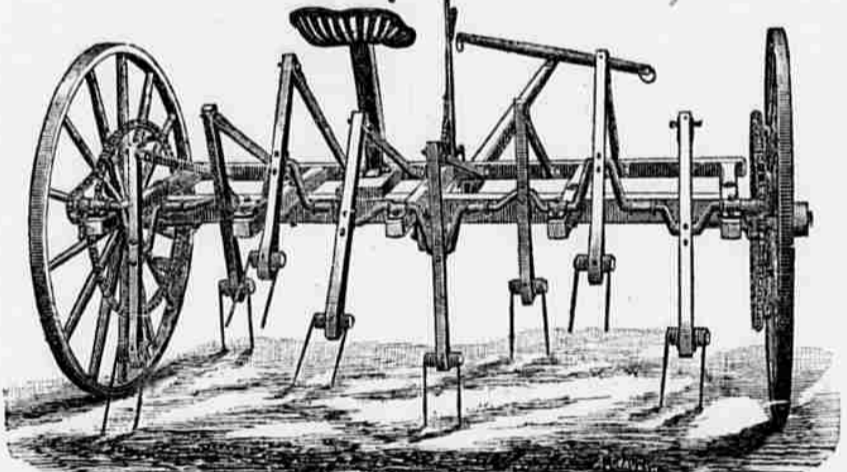
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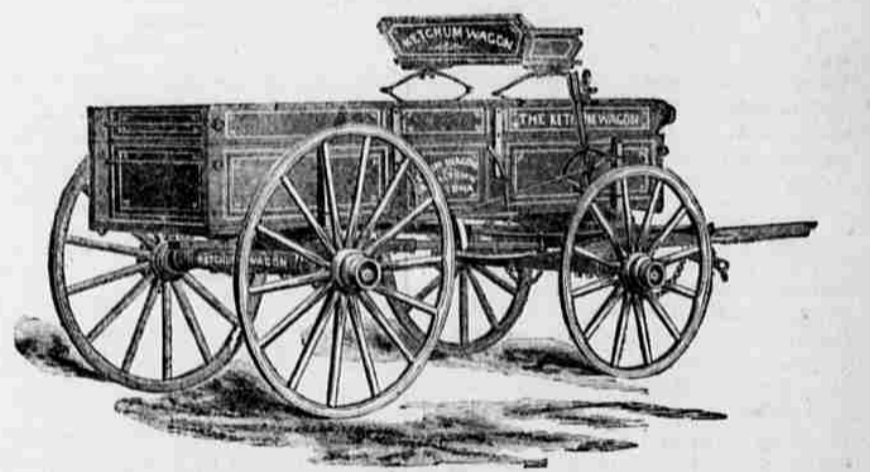
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LEFT OUT ON LONE STAR MOUNTAIN

BY BRET HARTE.

[Conclusion.]

The men looked at each other; the diversion was complete; a languid discussion of the probabilities of its being an earthquake or a blast followed, in the midst of which the Right Bower, who was working a little in advance of the others, uttered a warning cry and leaped from the race. His companions had barely time to follow before a sudden and inexplicable rise in the waters of the creek sent a swift irruption of the flood through the race. In an instant its choked and impeded channel was cleared, the race was free, and the scattered debris of logs and timber floated upon its easy current. Quick to take advantage of this labor-saving phenomenon, the Lone Star partners sprang into the water, and, by disentangling and directing the eddying fragments, completed their work.

"The Old Man oughter been here to see this," said the Left Bower; "it's just one of them climaxes of poetic justice he's always huntin' up. It's easy to see what's happened. One of them high-toned shrimps over in the Excelsior claim has put a blast in too near the creek. He's tumbled the bank into the creek and sent the back-water down here just to wash out our race. That's what I call poetical retribution."

"And who was it advised us to dam the creek below the race, and make it do the same thing?" asked the Right Bower; moodily.

"That was one of the Old Man's ideas, I reckon," said the Left Bower, dubiously.

"And you remember," broke in the Judge with animation, "alms said: 'Go slow, go slow. You just hold on and aithin' will happen.' And," he added, triumphantly, "you see aithin' has happened. I don't want to take credit to myself but I reckon on them Excelsior boys' been fools, and took the chances."

"And what if I happen to know that the Excelsior boys ain't blastin' to-day?" said the Right Bower, sarcastically.

As the Judge had evidently based his hypothesis on the alleged fact of a blast, he deftly evaded the point. "I ain't saying the Old Man's head ain't level on some things; he wants a little more sabb of the world. He's improved a good deal in ochure lately, and in poker--well! he's got that sorter dreamy, listenin'-to-the-angels kind of way that you can't exactly tell whether he's bluffin' or has got a full hand. Hasn't he?" he asked, appealing to Union Mills.

But that gentleman, who had been watching the dark face of the Right Bower, preferred to take what he believed to be his cue from him. "That ain't the question," he said virtuously; "we ain't takin' this up to make a card sharp out of him. We're not doin' Chittenden's work in this race-to-day for that. No, sir! We're teachin' him to paddle his own canoe." Not finding the sympathetic response he looked for in the Right Bower face, he turned to the Left.

"I reckon we were teachin' him our canoe was too full," was the Left Bower's

unexpected reply. "That's about the size of it."

The Right Bower shot a rapid glance under his brows at his brother. The latter, with his hands in his pockets, stared unconsciously at the rushing water and then quietly turned away. The Right Bower followed him. "Are you goin' back on us?" he asked.

"Are you?" responded the other.

"No!"

"No, then it is," returned the Left Bower quietly. The elder brother hesitated in half-angry embarrassment.

"Then what did you mean by sayin' we reckoned our canoe was too full?"

"That's that our idea," returned the Left Bower, indifferently. Confounded by this practical expression of his own unformulated good intentions, the Right Bower was staggered.

"Speaking of the Old Man," broke in the Judge, with characteristic infelicity, "I reckon he'll sort of miss us, times like these. We were allers runnin' him and bedevilin' him after work, just to get him excited and amusin', and he'll kinder miss that sorter stimulant. I reckon we'll miss it, too--somewhat. Don't you remember, boys, the night we put that little skull on him and made him believe we'd struck it rich in the bank of the creek, and got him so conceited he wanted to right off and settle our debts at once?"

"And how I came bustin' into the cabin with a pan full of iron pyrites and black sand," chuckled Union Mills, continuing the reminiscences, "and how them big gray eyes of his nearly bulged out of his head. Well, its some satisfaction to know we did our duty by the young fellow even in those little things."

He turned for confirmation of their general disinterestness to the Right Bower, but he was already striding away, unhesitatingly conscious of the lagging of his back. This movement again threw Union Mills and the Judge into feeble complicity in the rear, as the procession slowly straggled homeward from the creek.

Night had fallen. Their way through the shadow of the Lone Star mountain, deepened here and there by the slight bosky ridges that, starting from its base, cropt across the plain like vast roots of swelling trunk. The shadows were growing blacker as the moon began to assert itself over the rest of the valley, when the Right Bower halted suddenly on one of these ridges. The Left Bower lounded up to him, and stopped also, while the two others came up and completed the group. There's no light in the shanty, said the Right Bower in a low voice, half to himself and half in answer to their inquiring attitude. The men followed the direction of his finger. In the distance the outline of the Lone Star cabin stood out distinctly in the illumined space. There was the blank, sightless, external glitter of the moonlight on its two windows, that seemed to reflect its dim vacancy--empty alike of light and warmth and motion.

"That's sing'lar," said the Judge, in an awed whisper.

The Left Bower, by simply altering the position of his hands in his trousers pockets, managed to suggest that he knew perfectly the meaning of it--had always known it--but that being now, so to

speak, in the hands of fate, he was calous to eye. This much, at least, the elder brother read in his attitude. But anxiety at that moment was the controlling impulse of the Right Bower, as to a certain superstitious remorse was the instinct of the two others, and without heading the cynic the three started at a rapid pace for the cabin.

They reached it silently, as the moon, now riding high in the heavens, seemed to touch it with the tender grace and hushed repose of a tomb. It was with something of this feeling that the Right Bower softly pushed open the door; it was with something of this dread that the two others lingered on the threshold, until the Right Bower, after vainly trying to stir the dead embers on the hearth into life with his foot, struck a match and lit their solitary candle. Its flickering light revealed the familiar interior unchanged in aught but one thing. The bunk that the Old Man had occupied was stripped of its blankets; the few cheap ornaments and photographs were gone; the rude poverty of the bare boards and scant pallet looked up at them unrelieved by the bright face and gracious youth that had once made them tolerable. In the grim irony of that exposure their own penury was doubly conscious. The little knapsack, the teacup and coffee-pot that had hung near his bed were gone also. The most indignant protest, the most pathetic of the letters he had composed and rejected, whose torn fragments littered the floor, could never have spoken with the eloquence of this empty space. The men exchanged no words; the solitude of the cabin, instead of drawing them together, seemed to isolate each one in selfish distrust of the others. Even the unthinking garrulity of Union Mills and the Judge was checked. A moment later, when the Left Bower entered the cabin, the presence was scarcely noticed.

The silence was broken by a joyous exclamation from the Judge. He had discovered the Old Man's rifle in the corner, where it had been at first overlooked. "He ain't gone yet, gentlemen, for yer's his rifle," he broke in, with a feverish return of volubility and a high, excited falsetto. "He wouldn't have left this behind. No! I knowed it from the first. He's just outside a bit, foragin' for wood and water. No, sir! Comin' along here I said to Union Mills, didn't I? 'Bet your life the Old Man's not far off, even if he ain't in the cabin.' Why, the moment I stepped foot--"

"And I said comin' along," interrupted Union Mills, with equally reviving mendacity, "like as not he's hangin' round yer and lyin' low just to give us a surprise. He's ho!"

"He's gone for good, and he left that rifle here on purpose," said the Left Bower in a low voice, taking the weapon almost tenderly in his hands.

"Drop it then!" said the Right Bower. The voice was that of his brother, but suddenly changed with passion. The two other partners instinctively drew back in alarm.

"I'll not leave it there for the first comin'," said the Left Bower, calmly, "because we've been fools and he too. It's too good a weapon for that."

"Drop it, I say!" said the Right Bower, with a savage stride toward him.

The younger brother brought the rifle

to a half charge with a white face but a steady eye.

"Stop where you are!" he said collectively. "Don't row with me, because you haven't either the grit to stick to your ideas or the heart to confess them wrong. We've followed your lead, and--here we are! The camp's broken up--the Old Man's gone--and we're going. And as for the rifle--"

"Drop it, do you hear?" shouted the Right Bower, clinging to that one idea with the blind pertinacity of rage and a losing cause. "Drop it!"

The Left Bower drew back, but his brother had seized the barrel with both hands. There was a momentary struggle, a flash through the half-lighted cabin, and a shattering report. The two men fell back from each other; the rifle dropped on the floor between them.

The whole thing was over so quickly that the other two partners had not time to obey their common impulse to separate them, and consequently even now could scarcely understand what had passed. It was over so quickly that the two actors themselves walked back to their places, scarcely realizing their own act.

A dead silence followed. The Judge and Union Mills looked at each other in dazed astonishment, and then nervously set about their former habits, apparently in that fatuous belief common to such natures, that they were ignoring a painful situation. The Judge drew the barrel toward him, picked up the cards, and began mechanically "to make a patience," on which Union Mills gazed with ostentatious interest, but with eyes furiously conscious of the rigid figure of the Right Bower by the chimney and the abstracted face of the Left Bower at the door. Ten minutes had passed in this occupation, the Judge and Union Mills conversing in the furtive whispers of children unavailably but fascinatedly present at a family quarrel, when a light step was heard upon the crackling brushwood outside, and the bright panting face of the Old Man appeared upon the threshold. There was a shout of joy. In another moment he was half buried in the bosom of the Right Bower's shirt, half dragged into the lap of the Judge, upsetting the barrel, and completely encompassed by the Left Bower and Union Mills. With the enthusiastic utterance of his name the spell was broken.

Happily unconscious of the previous excitement that had provoked this spontaneous unanimity of greeting, the Old Man, equally relieved, at once broke into a feverish announcement of his discovery. He painted the details with, I fear, a slight exaggeration of coloring, due partly to his own excitement and partly to justify their own. But he was strangely conscious that these bankrupt men appeared less elated with their personal interest in their stroke of fortune than with his own success. "I told you he'd do it," said the Judge, with a reckless unscrupulousness of statement that carried everybody with it--"Look at him! the game little pup." "O no! he ain't the right breed--is he?" echoed Union Mills with arch irony, while the Right and Left Bower, grasping either hand, pressed a proud but silent greeting that was wholly delicious. It was not without difficulty that he could at last prevail upon them to return with him to the scene

of his discovery, or even then restrain them from attempting to carry him thither on their shoulders, on the plea of his previously prolonged exertions. Once only there was a momentary embarrassment. "Then you fired that shot to bring me back?" said the Old Man, gratefully. In the awkward silence that followed the hands of the two brothers sought and grasped each other penitently.

"Yes," interposed the Judge, with delicate tact; "ye see the Right and Left Bower almost quarreled to see which should be the first to fire for ye. I disremember which did." "I never touched the trigger," said the Left Bower, hastily. With a hurried backward kick the Judge resumed: "It went off sorter spontaneously."

The difference in the sentiment of the procession that once morisued from the Lone Star cabin did not fail to show itself in each individual partner according to his temperament. The subtle tact of Union Mills, however, in expressing awakened respect for their fortunate partner by addressing him, as if unconsciously, as "Mr. Ford," was at first discomposing, but even this was forgotten in their breathless excitement as they neared the base of the mountain. When they had crossed the creek the Right Bower stopped reflectively.

"You say you heard the slide come down before you left the cabin?" he said, turning to the Old Man.

"Yes; but I did not know then what it was. It was about an hour and a half after you left," was the reply.

"Then look here boys," continued the Right Bower, with superstitious exultation, "it was the slide that tumbled into the creek, overflowed it and helped us clear of the race."

It seemed so clearly that Providence had taken the partners of the Lone Star directly in hand that they faced the assurance of conquerors. They paused only on the summit to allow the Old Man to lead the way to the slope that held their treasure. He advanced cautiously to the edge of the crumbling cliff, stopped, looked bewildered, advanced again, and then remained white and immovable. In an instant the Right Bower was at his side.

"Is anything the matter? Don't--look so, Old Man, for God's sake!"

The Old Man pointed to the dull, smooth, black side of the mountain, without a crag, break or protuberance, and said with ashen lips:

"It's gone!"

And it was gone! A second slide had taken place, stripping the flank of the mountain, and burying the treasure and weak implement that had marked its side deep under a chaos of rock and debris at its base.

"Thank God!" The blank faces of his companions turned quickly to the Right Bower. "Thank God!" he repeated, with his arm round the neck of the Old Man. "Had he stayed behind he would have been buried too." He paused, and, pointing solemnly to the depths below, said: "And thank God for showin' us where we may yet labor for it in hope and patience like honest men."

The men silently bowed their heads and slowly descended the mountain. But when they had reached the plain one of

them called out to the others to watch a star that seemed to be rising and moving toward them over the hushed and sleeping valley.

"It's only the stage coach, boys," said the Left Bower, smiling; "the coach that was to take us away."

In the security of their new-found fraternity they resolved to wait and see it pass. As it swept by with flash of light, beat of hoofs, and jingle of harness, the only real presence in the dreamy landscape, the driver shouted a hoarse greeting to the phantom partners, audible only

to the Judge, who was nearest the vehicle.

"Did you hear--did you hear what he said, boys?" he gasped, turning to his companions. "No! Shake hands all around, boys! God bless you all, boys! To think we didn't know it all this while!"

"Know what?"

"Merry Christmas!"

BRET HARTE.

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