THREE PARTNERS:

OR,

The Big Strike on Heavy Tree Hill.

BY BRET HARTE.

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Alone by himself in a corner of the veranda, he was surprised that the interview had made so little impression upon him and had so little altered his conviction. His discovery that the announcement of his brother's death was a fiction did not affect the fact that though living she was dead to him, and apparently by her own consent. The contrast between her life and his during those five years had been cleverly accented by Mrs. Van Loo, whether intentionally or not, and he saw again, as last night, the full extent of his sentimental folly. He could not even condole with himself that he was the victim of miserable falsehoods that others had invented. She had accepted them and had even excused her desertion of him by that last deceit of the letter.

He drew out her photograph and again examined it, but not as a lover. Had she really grown slouter and more self-complacent? Was the spirituality and delicacy he had worshipped in her purely his own idiotic fancy? Had she always been like this? Yes. There was the girl who could weakly strive, weakly relenge herself, and weakly forget. There was the figure that he had expected to find carved upon the trunk that he had long sought that he might weep over. He laughed aloud.

It was very hot and he was stifling with inaction. What was Barker doing and why had not Stacy telegraphed to him? And what were those people in the courtyard doing? Were they discussing news of further disaster and ruin? Perhaps he was even now a beggar. Well, his fortune might go with his faith.

But the crowd was simply looking at the roof of the hotel, and he now saw that a black smoke was drifting across the courtyard and was conscious of a smell of soot and burning. He stepped down from the veranda among the mingled guests and servants, and saw that the smoke was only pouring from a chimney. He heard, too, that the chimney had been on fire, and that it was Mrs. Van Loo's bedroom chimney, and that when the startled servants had knocked at the locked door she told them that she was only burning some old letters and newspapers, the refuse of her trunks. There was naturally some indignation that the hotel had been so foolishly endangered, and in such scorching weather, and the manager had had a scene with her which resulted in her leaving the hotel indignantly with her half-packed boxes. But even after the smoke had died away and the fire had been extinguished in the chimney and hearth, there was an acrid smell of smouldering pine penetrating the upper floors of the hotel all that afternoon.

When Mrs. Van Loo drove away the manager returned with Demorest to the rooms. The marble hearth was smoked and discolored and still littered with charred ashes of burnt paper. "My belief is," said the manager darkly, "that the old hag came here just to burn up a lot of incriminating papers that her son had intrusted to her keeping. It looks mighty suspicious. You see she got up an awful lot of side when I told her I didn't reckon to run a smelting furnace in a wooden hotel with the thermometer at 100 in the office, and I reckon it was just an excuse for getting off in a hurry."

But the continued delay in Stacy's promised telegram had begun to work upon Demorest's usual equanimity, and he scarcely listened to his anxiety for his old partner. He knew that Stacy should have arrived in San Francisco by noon. He had almost determined to take the next train from the "Divide," when two horsemen dashed into the courtyard. There was the usual stir on the veranda and rush for news, but the two new arrivals turned out to be Barker, on a horse covered with foam, and a dashing, elegantly dressed stranger on a mustang as carefully groomed and as spotless as himself. Demorest instantly recognized Jack Hamlin.

He had not seen him since that day four years before when he had accompanied the three partners with their treasure to Boomville, and when he had handed him the mysterious packet. As he and Barker dismounted hurriedly and moved toward him he felt a premonition of something as fateful and important as then. In obedience to a sign from Barker he led them to a more secluded angle of the veranda. He could not help noticing that his younger partner's face was mobile as ever, but more thoughtful and older, yet his voice rang with the old Freemasonry of the camp as he said, with a laugh: "The signal has been given, and it's boot and saddle and away."

"But I have had no dispatch from Stacy," said Demorest, in surprise. "He was to telegraph to me from San Francisco in any emergency."

"He never got there at all," said Barker.

"LOOK," SAID JACK.

"Jack ran slap into Van Loo at the 'Divide,' and sent a dispatch to Jim, which stopped him half way, until Jack could reach him, which he nearly broke his neck to do, and then Jack finished up by bringing a message from Stacy to us that we should all meet together on the slope of Heavy Tree, near the Bar. I met Jack just as I was riding into the 'Divide,' and came back with him. He will tell you the rest, and you can swear by what Jack says, for he's white all through," he added, laying his hand affectionately on Hamlin's shoulder.

Hamlin winced slightly. For he had not told Barker that his wife was with Van Loo, nor his first reason for interfering. But he related how he had finally overtaken Van Loo at Hill Top, and how the fugitive had disclosed Steptoe and Hall's conspiracy against the bank and Marshall as the price of his own release. On this news, remembering that Stacy had passed the 'Divide' on his way to the station, he had first sent a dispatch to him, and then met him at the first station on the road. "I reckon, gentlemen," said Hamlin, with an unusual earnestness in his voice, "that he'd not only got my telegram, but all the news that had been flying around this morning, for he looked like a man to whom it was just a 'boss up' whether he took his own life then and there, or was willing to have somebody else take it for him, for he said: 'I'll go myself,' and telegraphed to have the surveyor stopped from coming. Then he told me to tell you fellows and ask you to come, too." Jack paused and added half mischievously, "He prostrate figure of the nurse. But this saved sort of asked me what I would take to stand by him in the row, if there was one, and I told him I'd take—whisky! You see, boys, it's a kind of off night with me, and I wouldn't mind for the sake of old times to finish the game with old Steptoe that I began a matter of five years ago."

"All right," said Demorest, with a kindling eye. "I suppose we'd better start at once. One moment," he added. "Barker, boy, will you excuse me a moment? If I speak a word to Hamlin?" As Barker nodded and walked to the rails of the veranda Demorest took Hamlin aside. "You and I," he said hurriedly, "are single now. Barker has a wife and child. This is likely to be no child's play."

But Jack Hamlin was no fool, and from certain leading questions which Barker had already put, but which he had skillfully evaded, he surmised that Barker knew something of his wife's escapade. He answered a little more seriously than his wont: "I don't think as regards his wife that would make much difference to him or her how stiff the work was."

Demorest turned away with his last pang of bitterness. It needed only this confirmation of all that Stacy had hinted, of what he himself had seen in his brief interview with Mrs. Barker since his return to shake his last remaining faith. "We'll all go together, then," he said with a laugh, "as in the old times, and perhaps it's as well that we have no woman in our confidence."

An hour later the three men passed quietly out of the hotel, scarcely noticed by the other guests, who were oblivious of their absence during the evening. For Mrs. Barker, quite recovered from her fatiguing ride, was in high spirits and the most beautiful and spotless of summer gowns, and was considered quite a heroine by the other ladies as she dwelt upon the terrible heat of her return journey. "Only that I knew Mr. Barker would be worried—and the poor man actually walked a mile down the 'Divide' road to meet me—I believe I should have stayed there all day." She glanced around the other groups for Mrs. Horncastle, but that lady had early retired. Possibly she alone had noticed the absence of the two partners.

They sat up until quite late, for the heat appeared to grow still more oppressive, and the strange smell of burning wood revived the gossip about Mrs. Van Loo and her stupidity in setting fire to her chimney. Some averred that it would be days before the smell could be got out of the house; others referred it to the fires in the woods which were now dangerously near. One spoke of the isolated position of the house as affording the greatest security, but was met by the assertion of a famous mountaineer that the forest fires were wont to leap from crest to crest mysteriously without any apparent continuous contact. This led to more or less light-hearted conjecture of present danger and some amusing stories of hotel fires and their ludicrous revelations. There were also some entertaining speculations as to what they would do and what they would try to save in such an emergency.

"For myself," said Mrs. Barker, audaciously, "I should certainly let Mr. Barker look after 'Sta' and confine myself entirely to getting away with my diamonds. I know the wretch would never think of them."

It was still later, when exhausted by the heat and some reaction from the excitement of the day, that they at last deserted the veranda for their rooms, and for a while the shadowy bulk of the whole building was picked out with regularly spaced lights from its open windows, until now these finally faded and went out one by one. An hour later the whole building had sunk to rest. It was said that it was only 4 in the morning when a yawning porter, having put out the light in a dark, upper corridor, was amazed by a dull glow from the top of the wall, and awoke to the fact that a red fire, as yet smokeless and flameless, was creeping along the cornice. He ran to the office and gave the alarm, but on returning with assistance was stopped in the corridor by an impenetrable wall of smoke veined with murky flames. The alarm was given in all the lower floors and the occupants rushed from their beds half dressed to the courtyard, only to see, as they afterward averred, the flames burst like cannon discharges from the upper windows and unite above the crackling roof. So sudden and complete was the catastrophe, although slowly prepared by a leak in the overheated chimney between the floors, that even the excitement of fear and exertion was spared the survivors. There was bewilderment and stupor, but neither uproar nor confusion. People found themselves wandering in the woods, half awake and half dressed, from the balconies they had descended and the windows they had leaped they knew not how. Others on the upper floor neither awoke nor moved from their beds, but were suffocated without a cry. From the first an instinctive idea of the hopelessness of combating the conflagration possessed them all; to a blind, automatic feeling to flee the building was added the slow mechanism of the somnambulist; delicate women walked speechlessly, but securely, along ledges and roofs from which they would have fallen by the mere light of reason and of day. There was no crowding or impeding haste in their dumb exodus. It was only when Mrs. Barker awoke dishevelled in the court yard, and with a hysterical outcry rushed back into the hotel, that there was any sign of panic. For Mrs. Horncastle, who was standing near her, fully dressed, as if from some night long vigil, quickly followed her. The half frantic woman was making directly for her own apartments again, whose windows those in the court yard could see were already belching smoke. Suddenly Mrs. Horncastle stopped with a bitter cry and clasped her forehead. It had just flashed upon her that Mrs. Barker had told her only a few hours before that "Sta" had been removed with the nurse to the upper floor. It was not the forgotten child that Mrs. Barker was returning for, but her diamonds! Mrs. Horncastle called her; she did not reply. The smoke was already pouring down the staircase. Mrs. Horncastle hesitated for a moment only, and then, drawing a long breath, dashed up the stairs. On the first landing she stumbled over something—the prostrate figure of the nurse. But this saved her, for she found that near the floor she could breathe more freely. Before her appeared to be an open door. She crept along toward it on her hands and knees. The frightened cry of a child, awakened from its sleep in the dark, gave her nerve to pierce across the room and dash open the window. By the flashing light she could see a little figure rising from a bed. It was "Sta." There was not a moment to be lost, for the open window was beginning to draw the smoke from the passage. Luckily, the boy, by some childish instinct, threw his arms around her neck and left her hands free. Whispering him to hold tight, she clambered out of the window. A narrow ledge of cornice scarcely wide enough for her feet ran along the house to a distant balcony. With her back to the flames she shuffled her feet along the cornice to get away from the smoke, which now poured directly from the window. Then she grew dizzy; the weight of the child on her bosom seemed to be toppling her forward toward the abyss below. She closed her eyes, frantically grasping the child with crossed arms on her breast as she stood on the ledge, until, as seen from below through the twisting smoke, she might have seemed a figure of the Madonna and child nailed in the wall. Then a voice from above called to her, "Courage!" and she felt the flap of a twisted sheet lowered from an upper window against her face. She grasped it eagerly; it held firmly. Then she heard a cry from below, saw them carrying a ladder, and at last was lifted with her burden from the ledge by powerful hands. Then only did she raise her eyes to the upper window, whence had come her help. Smoke and flame were pouring from it. The unknown hero who had sacrificed his only chance of escape to her remained forever unknown.

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Only four miles away that night a group of men were waiting for the dawn in the shadow of a pine near Heavy Tree bar. As the sky glowed redly over the crest between them and Hymettus, Hamlin said:

JACK'S BULLET PIERCED STEPTOE'S BRAIN.

"Another one of those forest fires. It's this side of Black Spur, and a big one, I reckon."

"Do you know," said Barker, thoughtfully, "I was thinking of the time the old cabin burned up on Heavy Tree. It looks to be about in the same place."

"Hush!" said Stacy sharply.

CHAPTER IX.

An abandoned tunnel—an irregular orifice in the mountain flank which looked like a dried-up sewer that had disgorged through its opening the refuse of the mountain in red slime, gravel and a peculiar clay known as "cement" in a foul streak down its side—a narrow ledge on either side, broken up by heaps of quartz, tailings, and rock, and half hidden in scrub oak and myrtle—a decaying cabin of logs, bark and cobblestones—these made up the exterior of the Marshall claim. To this defacement of the mountain, the rude clearing of thicket and underbrush by fire or blasting, the lopping of tree boughs, and the decapitation of saplings, might be added the debris and ruins of half-civilized occupancy. The ground before the cabin was covered with broken hoops and casks and the castoff rags of blankets and clothing. The whole claim, in its unsavory, unpicturesque details and its vulgar story, of sordid, reckless, and selfish occupancy and abandonment, was a foul blot on the landscape, which the first rosy dawn only made the more offending. Surely the last spot in the world that men should quarrel and fight for.

So thought George Barker, as with his companions they moved in single file slowly toward it. The little party consisted only of himself, Demorest and Stacy; Marshall and Hamlin, according to a pre-arranged plan, were still in ambush to join them at the first appearance of Steptoe and his gang. The claim was yet unoccupied; they had secured their first success. Steptoe's followers, unaware that his design had been discovered, and confident that they could easily reach the claim before Marshall and the surveyor, had lingered. Some of them had held a drunken carouse at their rendezvous at Heavy Tree. Others were still engaged in procuring shovels and picks and pans for their mock equipment as miners, and this, again, gave Marshall's adherents the advantage. They knew that their opponents would probably first approach the empty claim incumbered only with their peaceful implements, while they themselves had brought their rifles with them.

Stacy, who by tacit consent led the party, on reaching the claim at once posted Demorest and Barker each behind a separate heap of quartz tailings on the ledge, which afforded them a capital breastwork, and stationed himself at the mouth of the tunnel which was nearest the trail. It had already been arranged what each man was to do. They were in possession. For the rest they must wait. What they thought at that moment no one knew. Their characteristic appearance had slightly changed. The melancholy and philosophic Demorest was alert and bitter, Barker's changeful face had become fixed and steadfast. Stacy alone wore his "fighting look," which the others had remembered.

They had not long to wait. The sounds of rude laughter, coarse skylarking and voices more or less still confused with half-spent liquor, came from the rock trail. And then Steptoe appeared with part of his straggling followers, who were celebrating their easy invasion by scattering their picks and shovels and beating madly upon their tins and prospecting pans. The three partners quickly recognized the stamp of the strangers in spite of their peaceful implements. They were the waifs and strays of San Francisco wharves, of Sacramento dens, of dissolute mountain towns; and there was not, probably, a single actual miner among them. A raging scorn and contempt took possession of Barker and Demorest, but Stacy knew their exact value. As Steptoe passed before the opening of the tunnel he heard the cry of "Halt!"

He looked up. He saw Stacy not thirty yards before him with his rifle at half-cock. He saw Barker and Demorest, fully armed, rise from behind their breastworks of rock along the ledge and thus fully occupy the claim. But he saw more. He saw that his plot was known. Outlaw and desperado as he was he saw that he had lost his moral power in this actual possession, and that from that moment he must be the aggressor. He saw he was fighting no irresponsible hirelings like his own, but men of position and importance, whose loss would make a stir. Against their rifles the few revolvers that his men chanced to have slung to them were of little avail. But he was not cowed, although his few followers stumbled together at this momentary check, half angrily, half timorously, like wolves without a leader. "Bring up the other men and their guns," he whispered fiercely to the nearest. Then he faced Stacy.

"Who are you to stop peaceful miners going to work on their own claim?" he said coarsely. "I'll tell you who, boys," he added, suddenly turning to his men with a hoarse laugh. "It ain't even the bank. It's only Jim Stacy that the bank kicked out yesterday to save itself—Jim Stacy and his broken-down pals. And what's the thief doing here—in Marshall's tunnel—the only spot that Marshall can claim? We ain't no particular friends o' Marshall's, though we're neighbors on the same claim, but we ain't going to see Marshall ousted by tramps. Are we, boys?"

"No, by G—d!" said his followers, dropping the pans and seizing their picks and revolvers. They understood the appeal to arms, if not to reason. For an instant the fight seemed imminent. Then the voice from behind them said:

"You needn't trouble yourselves about that! I'm Marshall! I sent these gentlemen to occupy the claim until I came here with the surveyor," and two men stepped from a thicket of myrtle in the rear of Steptoe and his followers. The speaker, Marshall, was a thin, slight, overworked, over-aged man; his companion, the surveyor, was equally slight, but red-bearded, spectacled and professional looking, with a long traveling duster that made him appear even clerical. They were scarcely a physical addition to Stacy's party, whatever might be their moral and legal support.

But it was just this support that Steptoe strangely clung to in his designs for the future, and a wild idea seized him. The surveyor was really the only disinterested witness between the two parties. If Steptoe could confuse his mind before the actual fighting—from which he would, of course, escape as a non-combatant—it would go far afterward to rehabilitate Steptoe's party. "Very well, then," he said to Marshall, "I shall call this gentleman to witness that we have been attacked here in peaceable possession of our part of the claim by these armed strangers, and, whether they are acting on your order or not, their blood will be on your head."

"Then I reckon," said the surveyor, as he tore away his beard, wig, spectacles and mustache, and revealed the figure of Jack Hamlin, "that I'm about the last witness that Mr. Steptoe-Horncastle ought to call, and about the last witness that he ever will call!"

But he had not calculated upon the desperation of Steptoe over the failure of this last hope. For there sprang up in the outlaw's brain the same hideous idea that he voiced to his companions at the "Divide." With a hoarse cry to his followers, he crashed his pickax into the brain of Marshall, who stood near him, and sprang forward. Three or four shots were exchanged. Two of his men fell, a bullet from Stacy's rifle pierced his leg, and he dropped forward on one knee. He heard the steps of his reinforcements with their weapons coming close behind him, and rolled aside on the sloping ledge to let them pass. But he rolled too far. He felt himself slipping down the mountain side in the slimy shoot of the tunnel. He made a desperate attempt to recover himself, but the treacherous drift of the loose debris rolled with him, as if he were part of its refuse, and, carrying him down, left him unconscious, but otherwise uninjured, in the bushes of the second ledge 500 feet below.

When he recovered his senses the shouts and outcries above him had ceased. He knew he was safe. The ledge could only be reached by a circuitous route three miles away. He knew, too, that if he could only reach a point of outcrop 100 yards away he could easily descend to the stage road down the gentle slope of the mountain hidden in a growth of hazelbrush. He bound up his wounded leg and dragged himself on his hands and knees laboriously to the outcrop. He did not look up; since his pick had crashed into Marshall's brain he had but one blind thought before him—to escape at once! That his revenge and compensation would come later he never doubted. He limped and crept, rolled and fell from bush to bush through the sloping thickets until he saw the red road a few feet below him.

If he only had a horse he could put miles between him and any present pursuit! Why should he not have one? The road was frequented by solitary horsemen, miners and Mexicans. He had his revolver with him; what mattered the life of another man if he escaped the consequences of the one he had just taken! He heard the clatter of hoofs; two priests on mules rode slowly by; he ground his teeth with disappointment. But they had scarcely passed before another and more rapid clatter came from their rear. It was a lad on horseback. He started. It was his own son!

He remembered in a flash how the boy had said he was coming to meet the padre at the station on that day. His first impulse was to hide himself, his wound and his defeat from the lad, but the blind idea of escape was still paramount. He leaned over the bank and called to him. The astonished lad cantered eagerly to his side.

"Give me your horse, Eddy," said the father; "I'm in bad luck and must get."

The boy glanced at his father's face, at his tattered garments and bandaged leg, and read the whole story. It was a familiar page to him. He paled first and then flushed, and then, with an odd glitter in his eyes, said: "Take me with you, father. Do! You always did before. I'll bring you luck."

Desperation is superstitious. Why not take him? They had been lucky before, and the two together might confound any description of their identity to the pursuers. "Help me up, Eddy, and then get up before me."

"Behind, you mean," said the boy with a laugh, as he helped his father into the saddle.

"No," said Steptoe harshly. "Before me, do you hear? And if anything happens behind you, don't look! If I drop off don't stop! Don't get down, but go on and leave me! Do you understand?" he repeated almost savagely.

"Yes," said the boy, tremulously.

"All right," said the father, with a softer voice, as he passed his arm round the boy's body and lifted the reins. "Hold tight when we come to the cross-roads, for we'll take the first turn, for old luck's sake, to the mission."

They were the last words exchanged between them, for as they wheeled rapidly to the left at the cross-roads Jack Hamlin and Demorest swung as quickly out of another road to the right immediately behind them. Jack's challenge to "Halt!" was only answered by Steptoe's horse springing forward under the sharp lash of the rials.

"Hold up!" said Jack suddenly, laying his hand upon the rifle which Demorest had lifted to his shoulder. "He's carrying some one. A wounded comrade, I reckon. We don't want him. Swing out and go for the horse, well forward, in the neck or shoulder."

Demorest swung far out to the right of the road and raised his rifle. As it cracked Steptoe's horse seemed to have suddenly struck some obstacle ahead of him rather than to have been hit himself, for his head went down with his forefeet under him, and he turned a half-somersault on the road, flinging his two riders a dozen feet away.

Steptoe scrambled to his knees, revolver in hand, but the other figure never moved. "Hands up!" said Jack, sighting his own weapon. The reports seemed simultaneous, but Jack's bullet had pierced Steptoe's brain even before the outlaw's pistol exploded harmlessly in the air.

The two men dismounted, but by a common instinct they both ran to the prostrate figure that had never moved.

"By G—d! it's a boy!" said Jack, leaning over the body and lifting the shoulders from which the head hung loosely. "Neck broken and dead as his pal." Suddenly he started, and, to Demorest's astonishment, began hurriedly pulling off the glove from the boy's limp right hand.

"What are you doing?" demanded Demorest, in creeping horror.

"Look!" said Jack, as he laid bare the small, white hand. The two first fingers were merely unsightly stumps that had been hidden in the padded glove.

"Good God! Van Loo's brother!" said Demorest, recoiling.

"No!" said Jack, with a grim face. "It's what I have long suspected—it's Steptoe's son!"

"His son?" repeated Demorest.

"Yes," said Jack; and he added, after looking at the two bodies with a long-drawn whistle of concern, "and I wouldn't, if I were you, say anything of this to Barker."

"Why?" said Demorest.

"Well," returned Jack, "when our scrimmage was over down there, and they brought the news to Barker that his wife and her diamonds were burned up at the hotel, you remember that they said that Mrs. Horncastle had saved his boy."

"Yes," said Demorest; "but what has that to do with it?"

"Nothing, I reckon," said Jack, with a shrug of his shoulders "only Mrs. Horncastle was the mother of the boy that's lying there."

Two years later, as Demorest and Stacy sat before the fire in the old cabin on Marshall's claim—now legally their own—they looked down from the door beyond the great bulk of Black Spur to the pallid snow line of the Sierras, still as remote and unchanged to them as when they had gazed upon it from Heavy Tree Hill. And, for the matter of that, they themselves seemed to have been left so unchanged that, even now, as in the old days, it was Barker's voice as he greeted them from the darkening trail that alone broke their reverie.

"Well," said Demorest, cheerfully, "your usual luck, Barker boy!" for they already saw in his face the happy light they had once seen there on an eventful night seven years ago.

"I'm to be married to Mrs. Horncastle next month," he said, breathlessly, "and little Sta loves her already as if she was his own mother. Wish me joy."

A slight shadow passed over Stacy's face. But his hand was the first to grasp Barker's and his voice the first to say "Amen!"

(The End.)

With all the culture of the ancients they had no champagne. If they had only known Cook's Imperial Extra Dry!

The Latest Slang.

"What gear do you ride?" is the latest slang expression. It was coined by Captain Anson of the Chicago Base Ball club and promises to meet with great favor, says the Times-Herald. Just before a recent game was called a man, who confessed that he was a base ball crank, stepped up to Captain Anson and told him how to win the championship.

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When the man got through talking Captain Anson scrutinized him closely and finally ejaculated in a tone of disgust:

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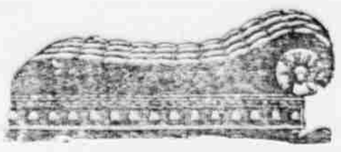

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