



"The full, sensual lips wrinkled at the corners with
a sardonic humor."

(In a Hollow of the Hills)

In a Hollow of
the Hills

by

Bret Harte

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IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS.

CHAPTER I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless, he moved his horse, whose trampling hoofs beat out the last fallen spark. Complete darkness and silence again followed. Presently the first speaker continued: — "I reckon we 'll have to wait here till the next squall clears away the scud from the sky. Hello! What's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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