

## *A Gang of Three*

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The Tale of a Summer Episode at Hardacre Flat

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by Jennie Davis Burton

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It would be hard to find three rougher-looking men than the trio who slouched into Hardacre Flat at the close of a June day and took possession of a deserted cabin there; and had it not been for a fourth in their company, a mere smooth-faced youth, who created a favorable impression on the Hardacre men, it is likely that they would have received an order to march on before the sinking sun withdrew his last red tinge from the snow-capped peaks which bounded the horizon. Indeed, Digby Allison, who took it on himself to interview the strangers, afterward said as much.

“We’re a new camp, hyar, an’ hain’t got no organized perlice force nor city charter goin’ yet, but we know how to keep cl’ar of troublesome company,” he explained to these doubtful visitors. “Only las’ week we run out the two Carters for jumpin’ stumpy Treat’s claim agin law an’ reason, an’ fore that a Chinee who’d been spookin’ round our tools an’ fixins’, an’ jes the day ‘fore yistiddy, ole Sol Loomis what had this ‘ere cabin hyar, *he* went to start a graveyard up thar on the hill for raisin’ a rumpus in Jule Starr’s barroom, ‘kase Jule he’s swore that he’ll run a quiet, peaceable place ef he has to plant all his customers. Thet’s the sort o’ congregation we air, strangers, an’ ef yer minded to turn in an’ be good citizens, I dunno as thar’ll be ary objectin’ on the part of the boys.”

“We on’y calkilate to rest over a day or two,” spoke one of the gaunt, unshorn trio, but the boyish member of the party came easily forward and took the words out of his mouth.

“My pardners here hev had a hard time of it. Go shet in by the snow lastfall, an’ had a winter all to themselves in the mountains; mos’ starved to death, but pulled through on jerked b’ar meat—jerked the b’ar out’n his winter quarters, ye see—an’ then when spring come they was drowned out o’ their dugout by a spring freshet an’ kep’ prisoners on a pint in the canyon, an’ thet with one on ‘em takin’ down with the fever, an’ ‘nother breakin’ his leg, an’ t’other gettin’ chawed by a mountain lion, put heart out’n ‘em, till they’ve concluded they’d ruther make tracks back to the plains an’ go to work on the railroad than to hang out any longer, an’ that’s what they’re arter, only now they’re clean beat with the tramp an’ thought for to lay over hyar till they’d perk up a bit. We’ve got enough dust in the crowd to pay our way, I reckon,” he concluded, drawing out some small silver coins and a mere showing of gold dust.

“Reckon ye didn’t strike it very rich whar ye wor,” Allison remarked to the crowd, then fixed his attention on the prepossessing youth. “Ye seem to hev come off better’n yer pards,” he declared.

“Oh, I wasn’t with them through that hard winter of their discontent.’ I only fell in with them of late. I lost my own pardner comin’ up from t’other side of the range, an’ bein’ sorter fresh, I started off on my own hook, an’ they was good enough when I fell in with them to take me ‘long

in their scheme,” accompanying the words with a smile and a glance of grateful affection towards his fellows. So they took it, at least; and Allison was enough affected by the recital to flavor his report to the camp with a decided eulogy upon Grant Truebody, as he had discovered the young man to be named.

“This ’ere Truebody may think as he shet my eye, but he ain’t; an’ it’s him as is payin’ the way for the lot o’ them, an’ he ain’t any too well fixed as I see for myself. An’ I move, boys, that we make up suthin’ like a back-seat donation party, give ’em enough ter eat an’ ter drink an’ ter help ’em on ther way when they leaves us.”

The idea was taken up and carried out without loss of time, and the committee who visited the cabin left a substantial token of the good-will of the camp.

“Makes me feel like a blame skunk,” muttered one of the three older travelers after their visitors had left them.

“We cain’t well go back on the karicter Truebody hes give us, though,” from another.

“No, ’specially as we’ve been a-shettin’ of his eye. Seems some sort o’ rediculous now thet we should a-suspicioned him. We cain’t be a-givin’ away of our secret hyar, but we’ll take Truebody in with us in airnest when we start on the road agin.”

“Yer right, we will, Yellowstone.” All this muttered between themselves while Truebody was outside bidding goodnight to their guests.

For two or three days there was little seen of the three men around the camp; but Truebody, being fresher and having no need to seclude himself, mingled freely with the miners and made himself a favorite wherever he went. That was the way that he came to be on hand, hidden among the crowd, when the semi-weekly stage came in and dropped two passengers; and how he managed to learn their business in the short time which elapsed before he rejoined his comrades it would be hard to say, but dropping on a box which answered for a seat and keeping his eyes on a bit of stick he was whittling, he told them the news.

“One’s a detective officer thet’s on the track of a reg’lar desperado, a bloody terror of a feller what’s been cuttin’ his capers along o’ his gang—three of ’em all told—over on the Nevada side, an’ t’other’s a nice motherly sort of a old lady what’s seen trouble, an’ she’s on the hunt of her son as come West nigh upon five years ago to make a fortin’ for her an’ fell into hard luck. She ain’t heerd from him now for a matter of eighteen months, an’ she’s startin’ out to ax every man she meets if he ever knowed Billy Cartright, who had blue eyes an’ brown hair an’ red cheeks, suthin’ such a lookin’ lad as me I reckon, if the mines hain’t changed him. You bean’t any of ye go a knowledge of the feller, hev ye?”

He gave a sidelong glance which took note of the three disturbed faces, and a moment or two afterward got up and sauntered away. When he returned, after a time, the older of the three tramping miners began to speak.

“We know as how we kin depend on you, Truebody, but we’ve concluded that mebbe it’ll be better for you ef we don’t tell ye too much of the bizness what’s takin’ us off in a hurry. We’re a-

goin' to slide out unbeknownst to the camp as soon's it's dark enough, an' bein' as we've took you in for a pard, ef you're minded to go 'long we'll make ye welcome."

"I think I'd better stay here," said Truebody, regretfully. "Sorry to leave you, old fellows, but I've had chances offered me, an' it's time I was doin' suthin'. We'd a-had to part anyways 'fore very long."

"Wall," said Yellowstone, with a deep-drawn breath, "it's for you to choose, an' bein' as you've 'lected to stay we'd like to give ye a cormission to do for us. We ain't jes' as hard up as we've seed fit to seem, so if ye'll give back that 'ere dust to the camp or let 'em turn it over in hull to you, an' take this 'ere purse I'll leave ye to that 'ere ole woman—I've a ole mother of my own some'eres, God bless her!—you'll be a-doin' us all a favor which this 'ere little reminder from the three of us to you don't nearaway aquar' up."

Truebody pocketed the three different packages of dust which were intrusted to him, wrung the hand of each with tears in his eyes, and saw them off when the gloom of the evening deepened sufficiently to veil their movements. They were scarcely three miles from the camp when the thud of galloping hoofs was heard on the trail behind them, and in a brief space of time they were surrounded by a dozen angry miners whose numbers were further augmented as a straggling line of followers came up. "Ye guv us the slip airlier'n we looked for, fellers," spoke the leader of the party, after his first command of "Hands up!" "S'arch 'em, boys; let's see what they've got." No attention was paid to the indignant protests of the three, and by the light of the pine torches which had been hastily secured, their possessions were held up to the sight of the crowd—among them several buckskin pouches which they had carried concealed in their ragged clothing.

"Thar's a pile o' the stuff here, my lads, by the heft; now to see ef thar's any o' the Hardacre dust?" saying which the leader poured some of the contents from one of them upon his horny palm.

A look of blank wonder and incredulity settled upon his countenance, and he hurriedly examined the remaining bags. One and all of them contained clean river sand, weighed with slugs of lead. Great in disappointing power as this discovery was to the pursuing miners, it was greater to the pursued. They stared as if some trick of evil magic had taken place under their eyes. Then Yellowstone faced the leader of the other party wrathfully, as he demanded:

"What's come of our dust? We had it afore we started, when we divvied for Truebody. We've been robbed—that's all there is of it—we've been robbed. Ye'll hev to s'arch yer own men now ef ye want our gold, but I tell ye we won't give it up so easy; it's cost us too dear." In the excitement of the next few moments but one fact was clearly apparent.

"I reckon it's true enough that you robbers hev been robbed, but that's no reason why you shouldn't get your dues, so ye'd better be sayin' yer pra'rs 'stid o' grumblin', for we've a way of doin' the bizness up quick for thieves an' cut-throats such as you-uns."

"Who calls us them names?" demanded Yellowstone, sternly.

"Why, the detective, to be sure. Whar is he, boys? He'd ort to be hyar. I dunno as it's ary great odds; the hangin' kin go on jus' the same, so ef some o' you boys'll bring a rope—"

“Hold on! I tell you, we are innocent men. Take us back and see if your detective will say we are the ones he is arter. Give us that much show for our lives. There are enough of ye to guard agin us escapin’.”

There was manifest reluctance on the part of the Hardacre faction, but they complied with this pleading at last, and when the three prisoners were brought before the detective he surprised their captors by declaring utter ignorance of them.

“They’re none of ’em my man, that’s certain. I’ve got him; caught him neatly enough while you were off on this wild goose chase. Two of you found out you’d been robbed afore you left the camp, and jumped at it that these men robbed you; but I reckon you kin lay it to my capture, for I found him playin’ a skin game an’ cleanin’ you all out while you were arter his friends. I’ve a little fortin in dust here for them that kin prove their ownership.”

Amid the plunder of the thief the lost dust of the accused miners was readily found by their description, as, coming from another locality, it differed widely in appearance from the gold found at Hardacre Flat; yet I doubt if one of them would have willingly recovered it at the price they paid in learning that the notorious desperado and common thief of the camp was no other than their boyish companion, Truebody.

“He kin look harmless enough, but he’s the very wust cuss I ever clapped the nippers on,” declared the officer, admiringly. “He’d a fooled me if I hadn’t a got all his p’intns from one of his pards who we took last fall; t’other one’s gone clean out of my knowledge, so I reckon I’ll have to be satisfied with two out of the gang of three.”

“My friends thar kin tell ye what came of him,” said Truebody, brazenly, and addressing them, added: “He wor known as Billy Cartright.”

Yellowstone, who was the recognized spokesman of his party, looked grave.

“That chap wor a pardner of our’n fer a short spell,” he explained. “He come on us arter we’d found a pocket an’ nighabout made up our pile, an’ talked so smooth that we tuk him in an’ guv him a show, an’ he paid us by runnin’ off with our dust in the night, but we ketched up to him an’ done for him as you-uns came nigh to doin’ for us to-night—strung him to the nearest limb, but he didn’t give us back our gold which he’d made away with, cached, I reckon, when he found we wor comin’ up to him. However that may be, we never found it, so we went back to our diggin’s an’ got ketched by the snow as he’s told ye.”

“You didn’t find it for the best of reasons,” put in Truebody, with a chuckle. “I were up thar, in hidin’, an’ got it from him. Ye see, we two had spotted you three, an’ schemed between us to get your boodle, but Cartright was fool enough to be caught, while I went on to the settlements an’ put in the winter, gettin’ rid o’ the dust. Thinkin’, when spring opened, ye’d likely be back thar took me up for the second time, an’ the poor mouth ye made didn’t shut my eye. I got them sandbags made ready to swap with ye whenever the chance should come; seems, though, that I waited too long.”

The regret in his tone was all for himself; he had no compunctions for having robbed his companions who had taken him in as one of themselves.

“Our dealin’s with Cartright made us ’spicious of every one,” Yellowstone went on. “It was ’kase Truebody hyar old us his ole mother was s’archin’ for him, an’ we couldn’t bring oursel’s to tell her what a mean end he’d come to, that we cut the camp. I hope an’ pray we won’t hev to tell her yit.”

Unseen by the throng of men who pressed around the detective and his prisoner the wrinkled old woman was skirting the edges of the crowd, peering into the faces of all near her; but now as she heard Yellowstone’s words she pressed on to his side.

“He told you wrong, then. It’s my son I’m lookin’ for an’ my name’s Armstrong. He’s a good lad, an’ I brought him up honest, an’ he’s done no harm, I’m sure of that, if he has been misfortnit. You—you’ve a look like him somehow about the eyes. Oh, sir, if I could only find him, my David, my little lad!”

The man who had been known to his comrades only as Yellowstone stood staring into her upturned face, his own changing, paling, lighting then with a sudden wonderful glow.

“Why!” burst from his lips, breathlessly; “I’m blessed ef it isn’t *my* old woman. It’s *my* old mother, boys,” he beamed rapturously upon the crowd, and then the trembling, faithful old creature was caught close in the strong, tender arms of the son. Truebody, meanwhile, though seeming to submit without a struggle, was slyly working himself free from his bonds, and when this diversion occurred, he made a spring forward, and striking right and left, managed to clear the crowd; then started to run like a deer for the nearest cover. He had gained half the distance to it when some pistol shots followed him, going wide of the mark; then came the sharp crack of the rifle, caught by the detective from a miner’s hands. The youthful desperado leaped high in the air and fell, a dark heap among the shadows of the night, where it lay motionless. A brief span of life devoted to evil and ending in darkness; a fitting end for his career.

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