

“Tennessee’s Partner” Plot Summary

.....Everyone in the mining camp at Sandy Bar calls each other by nicknames, such as Dungaree Jack, the Iron Pirate, Boston, or Jay-bird.

.....The narrator then tells the story of one of the men from the camp, Tennessee's Partner.

.....In 1853, Tennessee's Partner travels to Stockton and comes back with a wife, a waitress he met in a hotel restaurant. The man who lives with them, Tennessee, one day makes a pass at her, and they run off to Marysville. There, they take up residence without first getting married. By and by, someone else smiles at her one day, and she runs off with him. Tennessee then returns to camp, and Tennessee's Partner greets him cordially. The other fellows at the camp are disappointed, for they had been expecting a shootout.

.....As time goes on, Tennessee's activities come under the scrutiny of the men of the camp. They know that he gambles and suspect that he steals. If he is a thief, probably his partner is too, the men believe. One day, a stranger reports that Tennessee robbed him of his money, knife, and pistols on the road to Red Dog. Men from both Sandy Bar and Red Dog then conduct an all-out manhunt for Tennessee. When they close in on him, he runs through Sandy Bar, firing his gun at a crowd outside the Arcade Saloon. When he reaches Grizzly Canyon, a stranger waylays him, threatens him with two pistols and a knife, and takes him into custody.

.....The evening is very warm. In a loft above the express office, Judge Lynch—Tennessee's captor—presides at his jury trial. Tennessee's Partner—a short, stout man with a sunburnt face—comes in wearing trousers soiled with red earth. After he sets down a carpetbag and mops his face with a handkerchief, the judge asks him whether he wants to speak on behalf of the prisoner.

.....“I come yar as Tennessee's pardner,” he says. “‘It ain't for me to say anything agin' him. And now, what's the case? Here's Tennessee wants money, wants it bad, and doesn't like to ask it of his old pardner. Well, what does Tennessee do? He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for HIM, and you fetches HIM.”

.....When the judge asks the prisoner whether he has anything to ask his friend, Tennessee's Partner interrupts to continue his testimony.

.....“Tennessee, thar, has played it pretty rough and expensive-like on a stranger, and on this yer camp,” he says.

.....To make things right, Tennessee's Partner offers compensation of \$1,700 in gold and a watch, which he dumps onto a table from his carpetbag. Others in the courtroom vehemently object, some reaching for weapons and another crying out, “Throw him from the window.”

.....The judge brings the courtroom to order. Tennessee laughs. Tennessee's Partner is then made to understand that he cannot buy Tennessee's freedom. After Tennessee's Partner restores his offerings to the carpetbag, the judge asks him whether he has anything to say to the prisoner. Tennessee's Partner says, “I just dropped in as I was passin' to see how things was gettin' on.” Then he leaves the courtroom.

.....The judge, meanwhile, regards the offer of gold and a watch for Tennessee's freedom as a bribe. He could have none of that. So, at dawn the next morning, Tennessee is marched off to Marley's Hill and hanged from a tree. Tennessee's Partner is waiting nearby with a donkey cart carrying an oblong box to claim the body for a funeral and burial. After the witnesses to the execution give him the corpse, he pulls a canvas over it, climbs into his seat, and coaxes the donkey forward.

.....As the cart rolls along, the men tag along. One of them, Jack Folinsbee, pretends to play a trombone. After the road narrows, the men walk in twos behind the cart. Folinsbee ceases his imaginary trombone solo when he fails to gain notice from his fellow marchers. As the procession passes through Grizzly Canyon between rows of redwood trees, a hare sits up at attention while squirrels observe from the trees.

When the cortege reaches Sandy Bar, it halts at a freshly dug grave in front of the cabin of Tennessee's Partner.

.....Declining offers of help, Tennessee's Partner takes the coffin onto his back and delivers it to the shallow grave. There, he nails the lid shut, stands on a mound of dirt, and launches into a speech while the other men seat themselves on stumps and boulders. After noting that he has brought Tennessee home from his wanderings, he says, "It ain't the first time that I've packed him on my back, as you see'd me now. It ain't the first time that I brought him to this yer cabin when he couldn't help himself . . . And now that it's the last time, why—you see it's rough on his pardner."

.....He picks up a shovel, saying the funeral is over, and thanks the men for their trouble. While the men walk away, Tennessee's Partner begins shoveling the dirt into the grave. Several moments later, the men turn around and see Tennessee's Partner sitting on the filled-in grave holding his red bandanna to his face. Or is it just his red face they see. At a distance, they couldn't be sure.

.....In the days after the funeral, an investigation clears him of any guilt in his partner's wrongdoing. The men of Sandy Bar then call on him to express condolences and kindnesses. Thereafter, his health begins to decline. Finally, he becomes bedridden.

.....One evening during the rainy season, when heavy rain swells the river, Tennessee's Partner says it's time to hitch up his cart and go for Tennessee. His attendant stops him from getting out of bed. However, Tennessee's Partner continues his task from his bed.

....."There, now, steady, 'Jinny'—steady, old girl. How dark it is! Look out for the ruts—and look out for him, too, old gal. Sometimes, you know, when he's blind-drunk, he drops down right in the trail. . . . Thar he is—coming this way, too—all by himself, sober, and his face a-shining. Tennessee! Pardner!"

.....The narrator says, "And so they met. And so they met. And so they met."

.....The reader learns later that this stranger is the judge in Tennessee's trial, Judge Lynch. Keep in mind here that one of the reasons that the men of Sandy Bar look with suspicion on Tennessee is that he is a gambler. But Lynch is also a gambler, as indicated by his use of card-playing lingo—"two bowers and an ace."

.....At this point, one can speculate that Lynch lied about the theft of his pistols and knife because he wanted to get even with Tennessee. Perhaps Tennessee beat Lynch in a card game—or cheated him. The following passage describing courtroom proceedings further implicates the judge in a scheme to undo Tennessee:

The Judge appeared to be more anxious than the prisoner, who, otherwise unconcerned, evidently took a grim pleasure in the responsibility he had created. "I don't take any hand in this yer game," had been his invariable but good-humored reply to all questions. The Judge . . . for a moment vaguely regretted that he had not shot him 'on sight' that morning."

.....Now here is something else: Why is the judge named Lynch? The lower-cased verb *lynch* means to hang a person who has not received a fair trial.

.....But even if Tennessee is guilty of the crime with which he is charged, the penalty—hanging—is excessive.



Climax

.....The climax occurs when Tennessee's partner offers a bagful of gold and a watch for Tennessee's freedom, an offer which the judge refuses to accept.

Conflict

.....Tennessee and his partner are in conflict with the other Sandy Bar miners, who believe Tennessee is a thief and his partner is his accomplice. The men hang Tennessee without sufficient evidence but exonerate his partner.

Themes

Brotherly Love

.....The title character remains a steadfast friend to Tennessee in spite of the latter's drinking and other faults. He is even willing to surrender all his gold and his watch if the court dismisses the suit against Tennessee. When he is dying, his last thoughts are of his friend.

Injustice

.....Tennessee supposedly stole pistols and a knife from a stranger on the road to Red Dog. However, it is the stranger who reports the alleged theft. There are no witnesses to verify his report. Nevertheless, the men of Red Dog and Sandy Bar assume that Tennessee is guilty and form search parties to track him down. A stranger captures Tennessee in Grizzly Canyon after the two men have the following verbal exchange:

"What have you got there?—I call," said Tennessee, quietly. "Two bowers and an ace," said the stranger, as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie knife. "That takes me," returned Tennessee; and with this gamblers' epigram, he threw away his useless pistol, and rode back with his captor.

.....This passage reveals that the stranger has two guns and a knife, the same items that Tennessee was said to have stolen. But in his confrontation with the stranger, Tennessee has only one gun. Could it be that this stranger is the same stranger who reported the theft of his guns and knife? If so, why does he still have them? And why does Tennessee have only a "useless pistol"?