

FICTION

Bret Harte

On the Frontier

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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By Bret Harte

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CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

AT THE MISSION OF SAN CARMEL

PROLOGUE

It was noon of the 10th of August, 1838. The monotonous coast line between Monterey and San Diego had set its hard outlines against the steady glare of the Californian sky and the metallic glitter of the Pacific Ocean. The weary succession of rounded, dome-like hills obliterated all sense of distance; the rare whaling vessel or still rarer trader, drifting past, saw no change in these rusty undulations, barren of distinguishing peak or headland, and bald of wooded crest or timbered ravine. The withered ranks of wild oats gave a dull procession of uniform color to the hills, unbroken by any relief of shadow in their smooth, round curves. As far as the eye could reach, sea and shore met in one bleak monotony, flecked by no passing cloud, stirred by no sign of life or motion. Even sound was absent; the Angelus, rung from the invisible Mission tower far inland, was driven back again by the steady northwest trades, that for half the year had swept the coast line and left it abraded of all umbrage and color.

But even this monotony soon gave way to a change and another monotony as uniform and depressing. The western horizon, slowly contracting before a wall of vapor, by four o'clock had become a mere cold, steely strip of sea, into which gradually the northern trend of the coast faded and was lost. As the fog stole with soft step southward, all distance, space, character, and locality again vanished; the hills upon which the sun still shone bore the same monotonous outlines as those just wiped into space. Last of all, before the red sun sank like the descending host, it gleamed upon the sails of a trading vessel close in shore. It was the last object visible. A damp breath breathed upon it, a soft hand passed over the slate, the sharp pencilling of the picture faded and became a confused gray cloud.

The wind and waves, too, went down in the fog; the now invisible and hushed breakers occasionally sent the surf over the sand in a quick whisper, with grave intervals of silence, but with no continuous murmur as before. In a curving bight of the shore the creaking of oars in their rowlocks began to be distinctly heard, but the boat itself, although apparently only its length from the sands, was invisible.

"Steady, now; way enough." The voice came from the sea, and was low, as if unconsciously affected by the fog. "Silence!"

The sound of a keel grating the sand was followed by the order, "Stern all!" from the invisible speaker.

"Shall we beach her?" asked another vague voice.

"Not yet. Hail again, and all together."

"Ah hoy--oi--oi--oy!"

There were four voices, but the hail appeared weak and ineffectual, like a cry in a dream, and seemed hardly to reach beyond the surf before it was suffocated in the creeping cloud. A silence followed, but no response.

"It's no use to beach her and go ashore until we find the boat," said the first voice, gravely; "and we'll do that if the current has brought her here. Are you sure you've got the right bearings?"

"As near as a man could off a shore with not a blasted pint to take his bearings by."

There was a long silence again, broken only by the occasional dip of oars, keeping the invisible boat-head to the sea.

"Take my word for it, lads, it's the last we'll see of that boat again, or of Jack Cranch, or the captain's baby."

"It DOES look mighty queer that the painter should slip. Jack Cranch ain't the man to tie a granny knot."

"Silence!" said the invisible leader. "Listen."

A hail, so faint and uncertain that it might have been the long-deferred, far-off echo of their own, came from the sea, abreast of them.

"It's the captain. He hasn't found anything, or he couldn't be so far north. Hark!"

The hail was repeated again faintly, dreamily. To the seamen's trained ears it seemed to have an intelligent significance, for the first voice gravely responded, "Aye, aye!" and then said softly, "Oars."

The word was followed by a splash. The oars clicked sharply and simultaneously in the rowlocks, then more faintly, then still fainter, and then passed out into the darkness.

The silence and shadow both fell together; for hours sea and shore were impenetrable. Yet at times the air was softly moved and troubled, the surrounding gloom faintly lightened as with a misty dawn, and then was dark again; or drowsy, far-off cries and confused noises seemed to grow out of the silence, and, when they had attracted the weary ear, sank away as in a mocking dream, and showed themselves unreal. Nebulous gatherings in the fog seemed to indicate stationary objects that, even as one gazed, moved away; the recurring lap and ripple on the shingle sometimes took upon itself the semblance of faint articulate laughter or spoken words. But towards morning a certain monotonous grating on the sand, that had for many minutes alternately cheated and piqued the ear, asserted itself more strongly, and a moving, vacillating shadow in the gloom became an opaque object on the shore.

With the first rays of the morning light the fog lifted. As the undraped hills one by one bared their cold bosoms to the sun, the long line of coast struggled back to life again. Everything was unchanged, except that a stranded boat lay upon the sands, and in its stern sheets a sleeping child.

CHAPTER I.

The 10th of August, 1852, brought little change to the dull monotony of wind, fog, and treeless coast line. Only the sea was occasionally flecked with racing sails that outstripped the old, slow-creeping trader, or was at times streaked and blurred with the trailing smoke of a steamer. There were a few strange footprints on those virgin sands, and a fresh track, that led from the beach over the rounded hills, dropped into the bosky recesses of a hidden valley beyond the coast range.

It was here that the refectory windows of the Mission of San Carmel had for years looked upon the reverse of that monotonous picture presented to the sea. It was here that the trade winds, shorn of their fury and strength in the heated, oven-like air that rose from the valley, lost their weary way in the tangled recesses of the wooded slopes, and breathed their last at the foot of the stone cross before the Mission. It was on the crest of those slopes that the fog halted and walled in the sun-illuminated plain below; it was in this plain that limitless fields of grain clothed the fat adobe soil; here the Mission garden smiled over its hedges of fruitful vines, and through the leaves of fig and gnarled pear trees: and it was here that Father Pedro had lived for fifty years, found the prospect good, and had smiled also.

Father Pedro's smile was rare. He was not a Las Casas, nor a Junipero Serra, but he had the deep seriousness of all disciples laden with the responsible wording of a gospel not their own. And his smile had an ecclesiastical as well as a human significance, the pleasantest object in his prospect being the fair and curly head of his boy acolyte and chorister, Francisco, which appeared among the vines, and his sweetest pastoral music, the high soprano humming of a chant with which the boy accompanied his gardening.

Suddenly the acolyte's chant changed to a cry of terror. Running rapidly to Father Pedro's side, he grasped his sotana, and even tried to hide his curls among its folds.

"St! 'st!" said the Padre, disengaging himself with some impatience. "What new alarm is this? Is it Luzbel hiding among our Catalan vines, or one of those heathen Americanos from Monterey? Speak!"

"Neither, holy father," said the boy, the color struggling back into his pale cheeks, and an apologetic, bashful smile lighting his clear eyes. "Neither; but oh! such a gross, lethargic toad! And it almost leaped upon me."

"A toad leaped upon thee!" repeated the good father with evident vexation. "What next? I tell thee, child, those foolish fears are most unmeet for thee, and must be overcome, if necessary, with prayer and penance. Frightened by a toad! Blood of the Martyrs! 'Tis like any foolish girl!"

Father Pedro stopped and coughed.

"I am saying that no Christian child should shrink from any of God's harmless creatures. And only last week thou wast disdainful of poor Murieta's pig, forgetting that San Antonio himself did elect one his faithful companion, even in glory."

"Yes, but it was so fat, and so uncleanly, holy father," replied the young acolyte, "and it smelt so."

"Smelt so?" echoed the father doubtfully. "Have a care, child, that this is not luxuriousness of the senses. I have noticed of late you gather overmuch of roses and syringa, excellent in their way and in moderation, but still not to be compared with the flower of Holy Church, the lily."

"But lilies don't look well on the refectory table, and against the adobe wall," returned the acolyte, with a pout of a spoilt child; "and surely the flowers cannot help being sweet, any more than myrrh or incense. And I am not frightened of the heathen Americanos either NOW. There was a small one in the garden yesterday, a boy like me, and he spoke kindly and with a pleasant face."

"What said he to thee, child?" asked Father Pedro, anxiously.

"Nay, the matter of his speech I could not understand," laughed the boy, "but the manner was as gentle as thine, holy father."

"St, child," said the Padre impatiently. "Thy likings are as unreasonable as thy fears. Besides, have I not told thee it ill becomes a child of Christ to chatter with those sons of Belial? But canst thou not repeat the words--the WORDS he said?" he continued suspiciously.

"'Tis a harsh tongue the Americanos speak in their throat," replied the boy. "But he said 'Devilishnisse' and 'pretty-as-a-girl,' and looked at me."

The good father made the boy repeat the words gravely, and as gravely repeated them after him with infinite simplicity. "They are but heretical words," he replied in answer to the boy's inquiring look; "it is well you understand not English. Enough. Run away, child, and be ready for the Angelus. I will commune with myself awhile under the pear trees."

Glad to escape so easily, the young acolyte disappeared down the alley of fig trees, not without a furtive look at the patches of chickweed around their roots, the possible ambush of creeping or saltant vermin. The good priest heaved a sigh and glanced round the darkening prospect. The sun had already disappeared over the mountain wall that lay between him and the sea, rimmed with a faint white line of outlying fog. A cool zephyr fanned his cheek; it was the dying breath of the vientos generales beyond the wall. As Father Pedro's eyes were raised to this barrier, which seemed to shut out the boisterous world beyond, he fancied he noticed for the first time a slight breach in the parapet, over which an advanced banner of the fog was fluttering. Was it an omen? His speculations were cut short by a voice at his very side.

He turned quickly and beheld one of those "heathens" against whom he had just warned his young acolyte; one of that straggling band of adventurers whom the recent gold discoveries had scattered along the coast. Luckily the fertile alluvium of these valleys, lying parallel with the sea, offered no "indications" to attract the gold seekers. Nevertheless to Father Pedro even the infrequent contact with the Americanos was objectionable; they were at once inquisitive and careless; they asked questions with the sharp perspicacity of controversy; they received his grave replies with the frank indifference of utter worldliness. Powerful enough to have been tyrannical oppressors, they were singularly tolerant and gentle, contenting themselves with a playful, good-natured irreverence, which tormented the good father more than opposition. They were felt to be dangerous and subversive.

The Americano, however, who stood before him did not offensively suggest these national qualities. A man of middle height, strongly built, bronzed and slightly gray from the vicissitudes of years and exposure, he had an air of practical seriousness that commended itself to Father Pedro. To his religious mind it suggested self-consciousness; expressed in the dialect of the stranger it only meant "business."

"I'm rather glad I found you out here alone," began the latter; "it saves time. I haven't got to take my turn with the rest, in there"--he indicated the church with his thumb--"and you haven't got to make an appointment. You have got a clear forty minutes before the Angelus rings," he added, consulting a large silver chronometer, "and I reckon I kin git through my part of the job inside of twenty, leaving you ten minutes for remarks. I want to confess."

Father Pedro drew back with a gesture of dignity. The stranger, however, laid his hand upon the Padre's sleeve with the air of a man anticipating objection, but never refusal, and went on.

"Of course, I know. You want me to come at some other time, and in THERE. You want it in the reg'lar style. That's your way and your time. My answer is: it ain't MY way and MY time. The main idea of confession, I take it, is gettin' at the facts. I'm ready to give 'em if you'll take 'em out here, now. If you're willing to drop the Church and confessional, and all that sort o' thing, I, on my side, am willing to give up the absolution, and all that sort o' thing. You might," he added, with an unconscious touch of pathos in the suggestion, "heave in a word or two of advice after I get through; for instance, what YOU'D do in the circumstances, you see! That's all. But that's as you please. It ain't part of the business."

Irreverent as this speech appeared, there was really no trace of such intention in his manner, and his evident profound conviction that his suggestion was practical, and not at all inconsistent with ecclesiastical dignity, would alone have been enough to touch the Padre, had not the stranger's dominant personality already overridden him. He hesitated. The stranger seized the opportunity to take his arm, and lead him with the half familiarity of powerful protection to a bench beneath the refectory window. Taking out his watch again, he put it in the passive hands of the astonished priest, saying, "Time me," cleared his throat, and began:--

"Fourteen years ago there was a ship cruisin' in the Pacific, jest off this range, that was ez nigh on to a Hell afloat as anything rigged kin be. If a chap managed to dodge the cap'en's belayin-pin for a time, he was

bound to be fetched up in the ribs at last by the mate's boots. There was a chap knocked down the fore hatch with a broken leg in the Gulf, and another jumped overboard off Cape Corrientes, crazy as a loon, along a clip of the head from the cap'en's trumpet. Them's facts. The ship was a brigantine, trading along the Mexican coast. The cap'en had his wife aboard, a little timid Mexican woman he'd picked up at Mazatlan. I reckon she didn't get on with him any better than the men, for she ups and dies one day, leavin' her baby, a year-old gal. One of the crew was fond o' that baby. He used to get the black nurse to put it in the dingy, and he'd tow it astern, rocking it with the painter like a cradle. He did it--hatin' the cap'en all the same. One day the black nurse got out of the dingy for a moment, when the baby was asleep, leavin' him alone with it. An idea took hold on him, jest from cussedness, you'd say, but it was partly from revenge on the cap'en and partly to get away from the ship. The ship was well inshore, and the current settin' towards it. He slipped the painter--that man--and set himself adrift with the baby. It was a crazy act, you'd reckon, for there wasn't any oars in the boat; but he had a crazy man's luck, and he contrived, by sculling the boat with one of the seats he tore out, to keep her out of the breakers, till he could find a bight in the shore to run her in. The alarm was given from the ship, but the fog shut down upon him; he could hear the other boats in pursuit. They seemed to close in on him, and by the sound he judged the cap'en was just abreast of him in the gig, bearing down upon him in the fog. He slipped out of the dingy into the water without a splash, and struck out for the breakers. He got ashore after havin' been knocked down and dragged in four times by the undertow. He had only one idea then, thankfulness that he had not taken the baby with him in the surf. You kin put that down for him: it's a fact. He got off into the hills, and made his way up to Monterey."

"And the child?" asked the Padre, with a sudden and strange asperity that boded no good to the penitent; "the child thus ruthlessly abandoned--what became of it?"

"That's just it, the child," assented the stranger, gravely. "Well, if that man was on his death-bed instead of being here talking to you, he'd swear that he thought the cap'en was sure to come up to it the next minit. That's a fact. But it wasn't until one day that he--that's me--ran across one of that crew in Frisco. 'Hallo, Cranch,' sez he to me, 'so you got away, didn't you? And how's the cap'en's baby? Grown a young gal by this time, ain't she?' 'What are you talkin about,' ez I; 'how should I know?' He draws away from me, and sez, 'D--- it,' sez he, 'you don't mean that you' . . . I grabs him by the throat and makes him tell me all. And then it appears that the boat and the baby were never found again, and every man of that crew, cap'en and all, believed I had stolen it."

He paused. Father Pedro was staring at the prospect with an uncompromising rigidity of head and shoulder.

"It's a bad lookout for me, ain't it?" the stranger continued, in serious reflection.

"How do I know," said the priest harshly, without turning his head, "that you did not make away with this child?"

"Beg pardon."

"That you did not complete your revenge by--by--killing it, as your comrade suspected you? Ah! Holy Trinity," continued Father Pedro, throwing out his hands with an impatient gesture, as if to take the place of unutterable thought.

"How do YOU know?" echoed the stranger coldly.

"Yes."

The stranger linked his fingers together and threw them over his knee, drew it up to his chest caressingly, and said quietly, "Because you DO know."

The Padre rose to his feet.

"What mean you?" he said, sternly fixing his eyes upon the speaker. Their eyes met. The stranger's were gray and persistent, with hanging corner lids that might have concealed even more purpose than they showed. The Padre's were hollow, open, and the whites slightly brown, as if with tobacco stains. Yet they were the first to turn away.

"I mean," returned the stranger, with the same practical gravity, "that you know it wouldn't pay me to come here, if I'd killed the baby, unless I wanted you to fix things right with me up there," pointing skywards, "and get absolution; and I've told you THAT wasn't in my line."

"Why do you seek me, then?" demanded the Padre, suspiciously.

"Because I reckon I thought a man might be allowed to confess something short of a murder. If you're going to draw the line below that--"

"This is but sacrilegious levity," interrupted Father Pedro, turning as if to go. But the stranger did not make any movement to detain him.

"Have you implored forgiveness of the father--the man you wronged--before you came here?" asked the priest, lingering.

"Not much. It wouldn't pay if he was living, and he died four years ago."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am."

"There are other relations, perhaps?"

"None."

Father Pedro was silent. When he spoke again, it was with a changed voice. "What is your purpose, then?" he asked, with the first indication of priestly sympathy in his manner. "You cannot ask forgiveness of the earthly father you have injured, you refuse the intercession of holy Church with the Heavenly Father you have disobeyed. Speak, wretched man! What is it you want?"

"I want to find the child."

"But if it were possible, if she were still living, are you fit to seek her, to even make yourself known to her, to appear before her?"

"Well, if I made it profitable to her, perhaps."

"Perhaps," echoed the priest, scornfully. "So be it. But why come here?"

"To ask your advice. To know how to begin my search. You know this country. You were here when that boat drifted ashore beyond that mountain."

"Ah, indeed. I have much to do with it. It is an affair of the alcalde--the authorities--of your--your police."

"Is it?"

The Padre again met the stranger's eyes. He stopped, with the snuff box he had somewhat ostentatiously drawn from his pocket still open in his hand.

"Why is it not, Senor?" he demanded.

"If she lives, she is a young lady by this time, and might not want the details of her life known to any one."

"And how will you recognize your baby in this young lady?" asked Father Pedro, with a rapid gesture, indicating the comparative heights of a baby and an adult.

"I reckon I'll know her, and her clothes too; and whoever found her wouldn't be fool enough to destroy them."

"After fourteen years! Good! you have faith, Senor--"

"Cranch," supplied the stranger, consulting his watch. "But time's up. Business is business. Good-by; don't let me keep you."

He extended his hand.

The Padre met it with a dry, unsympathetic palm, as sere and yellow as the hills. When their hands separated, the father still hesitated, looking at Cranch. If he expected further speech or entreaty from him he was mistaken, for the American, without turning his head, walked in the same serious, practical fashion down the avenue of fig trees, and disappeared beyond the hedge of vines. The outlines of the mountain beyond were already lost in the fog. Father Pedro turned into the refectory.

"Antonio."

A strong flavor of leather, onions, and stable preceded the entrance of a short, stout vaquero from the little patio.

"Saddle Pinto and thine own mule to accompany Francisco, who will take letters from me to the Father

Superior at San Jose to-morrow at daybreak."

"At daybreak, reverend father?"

"At daybreak. Hark ye, go by the mountain trails and avoid the highway. Stop at no posada nor fonda, but if the child is weary, rest then awhile at Don Juan Briones' or at the rancho of the Blessed Fisherman. Have no converse with stragglers, least of all those gentile Americanos. So . . ."

The first strokes of the Angelus came from the nearer tower. With a gesture Father Pedro waved Antonio aside, and opened the door of the sacristy.

"Ad Majorem Dei Gloria."

CHAPTER II

The hacienda of Don Juan Briones, nestling in a wooded cleft of the foot-hills, was hidden, as Father Pedro had wisely reflected, from the straying feet of travelers along the dusty highway to San Jose. As Francisco, emerging from the canada, put spurs to his mule at the sight of the whitewashed walls, Antonio grunted.

"Oh aye, little priest! thou wast tired enough a moment ago, and though we are not three leagues from the Blessed Fisherman, thou couldst scarce sit thy saddle longer. Mother of God! and all to see that little mongrel, Juanita."

"But, good Antonio, Juanita was my play-fellow, and I may not soon again chance this way. And Juanita is not a mongrel, no more than I am."

"She is a mestiza, and thou art a child of the Church, though this following of gypsy wenches does not show it."

"But Father Pedro does not object," urged the boy.

"The reverend father has forgotten he was ever young," replied Antonio, sententiously, "or he wouldn't set fire and tow together."

"What sayest thou, good Antonio?" asked Francisco quickly, opening his blue eyes in frank curiosity; "who is fire, and who is tow?"

The worthy muleteer, utterly abashed and confounded by this display of the acolyte's direct simplicity, contented himself by shrugging his shoulders, and a vague "Quien sabe?"

"Come," said the boy, gayly, "confess it is only the aguardiente of the Blessed Fisherman thou missest. Never fear, Juanita will find thee some. And see! here she comes."

There was a flash of white flounces along the dark brown corridor, the twinkle of satin slippers, the flying out of long black braids, and with a cry of joy a young girl threw herself upon Francisco as he entered the patio, and nearly dragged him from his mule.

"Have a care, little sister," laughed the acolyte, looking at Antonio, "or there will be a conflagration. Am I the fire?" he continued, submitting to the two sounding kisses the young girl placed upon either cheek, but still keeping his mischievous glance upon the muleteer.

"Quien sabe?" repeated Antonio, gruffly, as the young girl blushed under his significant eyes. "It is no affair of mine," he added to himself, as he led Pinto away. "Perhaps Father Pedro is right, and this young twig of the Church is as dry and sapless as himself. Let the mestiza burn if she likes."

"Quick, Pancho," said the young girl, eagerly leading him along the corridor. "This way. I must talk with thee before thou seest Don Juan; that is why I ran to intercept thee, and not as that fool Antonio would signify, to shame thee. Wast thou ashamed, my Pancho?"

The boy threw his arm familiarly round the supple, stayless little waist, accented only by the belt of the light flounced saya, and said, "But why this haste and feverishness, 'Nita? And now I look at thee, thou hast been crying."

They had emerged from a door in the corridor into the bright sunlight of a walled garden. The girl dropped her eyes, cast a quick glance around her, and said,--

"Not here, to the arroyo," and half leading, half dragging him, made her way through a copse of manzanita and alder until they heard the faint tinkling of water. "Dost thou remember," said the girl, "it was here," pointing to an embayed pool in the dark current, "that I baptized thee, when Father Pedro first brought thee here, when we both played at being monks? They were dear old days, for Father Pedro would trust no one with thee but me, and always kept us near him."

"Aye and he said I would be profaned by the touch of any other, and so himself always washed and dressed me, and made my bed near his."

"And took thee away again, and I saw thee not till thou camest with Antonio, over a year ago, to the cattle branding. And now, my Pancho, I may never see thee again." She buried her face in her hands and

sobbed aloud.

The little acolyte tried to comfort her, but with such abstraction of manner and inadequacy of warmth that she hastily removed his caressing hand.

"But why? What has happened?" he asked eagerly.

The girl's manner had changed. Her eyes flashed, and she put her brown fist on her waist and began to rock from side to side.

"But I'll not go," she said viciously.

"Go where?" asked the boy.

"Oh, where?" she echoed, impatiently. "Hear me, Francisco; thou knowest I am, like thee, an orphan; but I have not, like thee, a parent in the Holy Church. For, alas," she added, bitterly, "I am not a boy, and have not a lovely voice borrowed from the angels. I was, like thee, a foundling, kept by the charity of the reverend fathers, until Don Juan, a childless widower, adopted me. I was happy, not knowing and caring who were the parents who had abandoned me, happy only in the love of him who became my adopted father. And now--" She paused.

"And now?" echoed Francisco, eagerly.

"And now they say it is discovered who are my parents."

"And they live?"

"Mother of God! no," said the girl, with scarcely filial piety. "There is some one, a thing, a mere Don Fulano, who knows it all, it seems, who is to be my guardian."

"But how? tell me all, dear Juanita," said the boy with a feverish interest, that contrasted so strongly with his previous abstraction that Juanita bit her lips with vexation.

"Ah! How? Santa Barbara! an extravaganza for children. A necklace of lies. I am lost from a ship of which my father--Heaven rest him--is General, and I am picked up among the weeds on the sea-shore, like Moses in the bulrushes. A pretty story, indeed."

"Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed Francisco, enthusiastically. "Ah, Juanita, would it had been me."

"THEE!" said the girl bitterly,--"thee! No!--it was a girl wanted. Enough, it was me."

"And when does the guardian come?" persisted the boy, with sparkling eyes.

"He is here even now, with that pompous fool the American alcalde from Monterey, a wretch who knows nothing of the country or the people, but who helped the other American to claim me. I tell thee, Francisco, like as not it is all a folly, some senseless blunder of those Americanos that imposes upon Don Juan's simplicity and love for them."

"How looks he, this Americano who seeks thee?" asked Francisco.

"What care I how he looks," said Juanita, "or what he is? He may have the four S's, for all I care. Yet," she added with a slight touch of coquetry, "he is not bad to look upon, now I recall him."

"Had he a long moustache and a sad, sweet smile, and a voice so gentle and yet so strong that you felt he ordered you to do things with out saying it? And did his eye read your thoughts?--that very thought that you must obey him?"

"Saints preserve thee, Pancho! Of whom dost thou speak?"

"Listen, Juanita. It was a year ago, the eve of Natividad, he was in the church when I sang. Look where I would, I always met his eye. When the canticle was sung and I was slipping into the sacristy, he was beside me. He spoke kindly, but I understood him not. He put into my hand gold for an aguinaldo. I pretended I understood not that also, and put it into the box for the poor. He smiled and went away. Often have I seen him since, and last night, when I left the Mission, he was there again with Father Pedro."

"And Father Pedro, what said he of him?" asked Juanita.

"Nothing." The boy hesitated. "Perhaps--because I said nothing of the stranger."

Juanita laughed. "So thou canst keep a secret from the good father when thou carest. But why dost thou think this stranger is my new guardian?"

"Dost thou not see, little sister? he was even then seeking thee," said the boy with joyous excitement. "Doubtless he knew we were friends and playmates--may be the good father has told him thy secret. For it is no idle tale of the alcalde, believe me. I see it all! It is true!"

"Then thou wilt let him take me away," exclaimed the girl bitterly, withdrawing the little hand he had clasped in his excitement.

"Alas, Juanita, what avails it now? I am sent to San Jose, charged with a letter to the Father Superior, who will give me further orders. What they are, or how long I must stay, I know not. But I know this: the good Father Pedro's eyes were troubled when he gave me his blessing, and he held me long in his embrace. Pray Heaven I have committed no fault. Still it may be that the reputation of my gift hath reached the Father Superior, and he would advance me." And Francisco's eyes lit up with youthful pride at the thought.

Not so Juanita. Her black eyes snapped suddenly with suspicion, she drew in her breath, and closed her little mouth firmly. Then she began a crescendo.

Mother of God! was that all? Was he a child, to be sent away for such time or for such purpose as best pleased the fathers? Was he to know no more than that? With such gifts as God had given him, was he not at least to have some word in disposing of them? Ah! SHE would not stand it.

The boy gazed admiringly at the piquant energy of the little figure before him, and envied her courage. "It is the mestizo blood," he murmured to himself. Then aloud, "Thou shouldst have been a man, 'Nita."

"And thou a woman."

"Or a priest. Eh, what is that?"

They had both risen, Juanita defiantly, her black braids flying as she wheeled and suddenly faced the thicket, Francisco clinging to her with trembling hands and whitened lips. A stone, loosened from the hillside, had rolled to their feet; there was a crackling in the alders on the slope above them.

"Is it a bear, or a brigand?" whispered Francisco, hurriedly, sounding the uttermost depths of his terror in the two words.

"It is an eavesdropper," said Juanita, impetuously; "and who and why, I intend to know," and she started towards the thicket.

"Do not leave me, good Juanita," said the young acolyte, grasping the girl's skirt.

"Nay; run to the hacienda quickly, and leave me to search the thicket. Run!"

The boy did not wait for a second injunction, but scuttled away, his long coat catching in the brambles, while Juanita darted like a kitten into the bushes. Her search was fruitless, however, and she was returning impatiently when her quick eye fell upon a letter lying amidst the dried grass where she and Francisco had been seated the moment before. It had evidently fallen from his breast when he had risen suddenly, and been overlooked in his alarm. It was Father Pedro's letter to the Father Superior of San Jose.

In an instant she had pounced upon it as viciously as if it had been the interloper she was seeking. She knew that she held in her fingers the secret of Francisco's sudden banishment. She felt instinctively that this yellowish envelope, with its red string and its blotch of red seal, was his sentence and her own. The little mestiza had not been brought up to respect the integrity of either locks or seals, both being unknown in the patriarchal life of the hacienda. Yet with a certain feminine instinct she looked furtively around her, and even managed to dislodge the clumsy wax without marring the pretty effigy of the crossed keys impressed upon it. Then she opened the letter and read.

Suddenly she stopped and put back her hair from her brown temples. Then a succession of burning blushes followed each other in waves from her neck up, and died in drops of moisture in her eyes. This continued until she was fairly crying, dropping the letter from her hands and rocking to and fro. In the midst of this she quickly stopped again; the clouds broke, a sunshine of laughter started from her eyes, she laughed shyly, she laughed loudly, she laughed hysterically. Then she stopped again as suddenly, knitted her brows, swooped down once more upon the letter, and turned to fly. But at the same moment the letter was quietly but firmly taken from her hand, and Mr. Jack Cranch stood beside her.

Juanita was crimson, but unconquered. She mechanically held out her hand for the letter; the American took her little fingers, kissed them, and said:--

"How are you again?"

"The letter," replied Juanita, with a strong disposition to stamp her foot.

"But," said Cranch, with business directness, "you've read enough to know it isn't for you."

"Nor for you either," responded Juanita.

"True. It is for the Reverend Father Superior of San Jose Mission. I'll give it to him."

Juanita was becoming alarmed, first at this prospect, second at the power the stranger seemed to be gaining over her. She recalled Francisco's description of him with something like superstitious awe.

"But it concerns Francisco. It contains a secret he should know."

"Then you can tell him it. Perhaps it would come easier from you."

Juanita blushed again. "Why?" she asked, half dreading his reply.

"Because," said the American, quietly, "you are old playmates; you are attached to each other."

Juanita bit her lips. "Why don't you read it yourself?" she asked bluntly.

"Because I don't read other people's letters, and if it concerns me you'll tell me."

"What if I don't?"

"Then the Father Superior will."

"I believe you know Francisco's secret already," said the girl, boldly.

"Perhaps."

"Then, Mother of God! Senor Crancho, what do you want?"

"I do not want to separate two such good friends as you and Francisco."

"Perhaps you'd like to claim us both," said the girl, with a sneer that was not devoid of coquetry.

"I should be delighted."

"Then here is your occasion, Senor, for here comes my adopted father, Don Juan, and your friend, Senor Br--r--own, the American alcalde."

Two men appeared in the garden path below them. The stiff, glazed, broad-brimmed black hat, surmounting a dark face of Quixotic gravity and romantic rectitude, indicated Don Juan Briones. His companion, lazy, specious, and red-faced, was Senor Brown, the American alcalde.

"Well, I reckon we kin about call the thing fixed," said Senor Brown, with a large wave of the hand, suggesting a sweeping away of all trivial details. "Ez I was saying to the Don yer, when two high-toned gents like you and him come together in a delicate matter of this kind, it ain't no hoss trade nor sharp practice. The Don is that lofty in principle that he's willin' to sacrifice his affections for the good of the gal; and you, on your hand, kalkilate to see all he's done for her, and go your whole pile better. You'll make the legal formalities good. I reckon that old Injin woman who can swear to the finding of the baby on the shore will set things all right yet. For the matter o' that, if you want anything in the way of a certificate, I'm on hand always."

"Juanita and myself are at your disposition, caballeros," said Don Juan, with a grave exaltation. "Never let it be said that the Mexican nation was outdone by the great Americanos in deeds of courtesy and affection. Let it rather stand that Juanita was a sacred trust put into my hands years ago by the goddess of American liberty, and nurtured in the Mexican eagle's nest. Is it not so, my soul?" he added, more humanly, to the girl, when he had quite recovered from the intoxication of his own speech. "We love thee, little one, but we keep our honor."

"There's nothing mean about the old man," said Brown, admiringly, with a slight dropping of his left eyelid; "his head is level, and he goes with his party."

"Thou takest my daughter, Senor Cranch," continued the old man, carried away by his emotion; "but the American nation gives me a son."

"You know not what you say, father," said the young girl, angrily, exasperated by a slight twinkle in the American's eye.

"Not so," said Cranch. "Perhaps one of the American nation may take him at his word."

"Then, caballeros, you will, for the moment at least, possess yourselves of the house and its poor hospitality," said Don Juan, with time-honored courtesy, producing the rustic key of the gate of the patio. "It is at your disposition, caballeros," he repeated, leading the way as his guests passed into the corridor.

Two hours passed. The hills were darkening on their eastern slopes; the shadows of the few poplars that sparsedly dotted the dusty highway were falling in long black lines that looked like ditches on the dead level of the tawny fields; the shadows of slowly moving cattle were mingling with their own silhouettes, and becoming more and more grotesque. A keen wind rising in the hills was already creeping from the canada as from the mouth of a funnel, and sweeping the plains. Antonio had forgathered with the servants, had pinched the ears of the maids, had partaken of aguardiente, had saddled the mules,--Antonio was becoming impatient.

And then a singular commotion disturbed the peaceful monotony of the patriarchal household of Don Juan Briones. The stagnant courtyard was suddenly alive with peons and servants, running hither and thither. The alleys and gardens were filled with retainers. A confusion of questions, orders, and outcrys rent the air, the plains shook with the galloping of a dozen horsemen. For the acolyte Francisco, of the Mission San Carmel, had disappeared and vanished, and from that day the hacienda of Don Juan Briones knew him no more.

CHAPTER III

When Father Pedro saw the yellow mules vanish under the low branches of the oaks beside the little graveyard, caught the last glitter of the morning sun on Pinto's shining headstall, and heard the last tinkle of Antonio's spurs, something very like a mundane sigh escaped him. To the simple wonder of the majority of early worshippers--the half-breed converts who rigorously attended the spiritual ministrations of the Mission, and ate the temporal provisions of the reverend fathers--he deputed the functions of the first mass to a coadjutor, and, breviary in hand, sought the orchard of venerable pear trees. Whether there was any occult sympathy in his reflections with the contemplation of their gnarled, twisted, gouty, and knotty limbs, still bearing gracious and goodly fruit, I know not, but it was his private retreat, and under one of the most rheumatic and misshapen trunks there was a rude seat. Here Father Pedro sank, his face towards the mountain wall between him and the invisible sea. The relentless, dry, practical Californian sunlight falling on his face grimly pointed out a night of vigil and suffering. The snuffy yellow of his eyes was injected yet burning, his temples were ridged and veined like a tobacco leaf; the odor of desiccation which his garments always exhaled was hot and feverish, as if the fire had suddenly awakened among the ashes.

Of what was Father Pedro thinking?

He was thinking of his youth, a youth spent under the shade of those pear trees, even then venerable as now. He was thinking of his youthful dreams of heathen conquest, emulating the sacrifices and labors of Junipero Serra; a dream cut short by the orders of the archbishop, that sent his companion, Brother Diego, north on a mission to strange lands, and condemned him to the isolation of San Carmel. He was thinking of that fierce struggle with envy of a fellow creature's better fortune that, conquered by prayer and penance, left him patient, submissive, and devoted to his humble work; how he raised up converts to the faith, even taking them from the breast of heretic mothers.

He recalled how once, with the zeal of propagandism quickening in the instincts of a childless man, he had dreamed of perpetuating his work through some sinless creation of his own; of dedicating some virgin soul, one over whom he could have complete control, restricted by no human paternal weakness, to the task he had begun. But how? Of all the boys eagerly offered to the Church by their parents there seemed none sufficiently pure and free from parental taint. He remembered how one night, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin herself, as he firmly then believed, this dream was fulfilled. An Indian woman brought him a Waugee child--a baby-girl that she had picked up on the sea-shore. There were no parents to divide the responsibility, the child had no past to confront, except the memory of the ignorant Indian woman, who deemed her duty done, and whose interest ceased in giving it to the Padre. The austere conditions of his monkish life compelled him to the first step in his adoption of it--the concealment of its sex. This was easy enough, as he constituted himself from that moment its sole nurse and attendant, and boldly baptized it among the other children by the name of Francisco. No others knew its origin, nor cared to know. Father Pedro had taken a muchacho foundling for adoption; his jealous seclusion of it and his personal care was doubtless some sacerdotal formula at once high and necessary.

He remembered with darkening eyes and impeded breath how his close companionship and daily care of this helpless child had revealed to him the fascinations of that paternity denied to him; how he had deemed it his duty to struggle against the thrill of baby fingers laid upon his yellow cheeks, the pleading of inarticulate words, the eloquence of wonder-seeing and mutely questioning eyes; how he had succumbed again and again, and then struggled no more, seeing only in them the suggestion of childhood made incarnate in the Holy Babe. And yet, even as he thought, he drew from his gown a little shoe, and laid it beside his breviary. It was Francisco's baby slipper, a duplicate to those worn by the miniature waxen figure of the Holy Virgin herself in her niche in the transept.

Had he felt during these years any qualms of conscience at this concealment of the child's sex? None. For to him the babe was sexless, as most befitted one who was to live and die at the foot of the altar. There was no attempt to deceive God; what mattered else? Nor was he withholding the child from the ministrations of the sacred sisters; there was no convent near the Mission, and as each year passed, the difficulty of restoring her to the position and duties of her sex became greater and more dangerous. And

then the acolyte's destiny was sealed by what again appeared to Father Pedro as a direct interposition of Providence. The child developed a voice of such exquisite sweetness and purity that an angel seemed to have strayed into the little choir, and kneeling worshipers below, transported, gazed upwards, half expectant of a heavenly light breaking through the gloom of the raftered ceiling. The fame of the little singer filled the valley of San Carmel; it was a miracle vouchsafed the Mission; Don Jose Peralta remembered, ah yes, to have heard in old Spain of boy choristers with such voices!

And was this sacred trust to be withdrawn from him? Was this life which he had brought out of an unknown world of sin, unstained and pure, consecrated and dedicated to God, just in the dawn of power and promise for the glory of the Mother Church, to be taken from his side? And at the word of a self-convicted man of sin--a man whose tardy repentance was not yet absolved by the Holy Church. Never! never! Father Pedro dwelt upon the stranger's rejection of the ministrations of the Church with a pitiable satisfaction; had he accepted it, he would have had a sacred claim upon Father Pedro's sympathy and confidence. Yet he rose again, uneasily and with irregular steps returned to the corridor, passing the door of the familiar little cell beside his own. The window, the table, and even the scant toilette utensils were filled with the flowers of yesterday, some of them withered and dry; the white gown of the little chorister was hanging emptily against the wall. Father Pedro started and trembled; it seemed as if the spiritual life of the child had slipped away with its garments.

In that slight chill, which even in the hottest days in California always invests any shadow cast in that white sunlight, Father Pedro shivered in the corridor. Passing again into the garden, he followed in fancy the wayfaring figure of Francisco, saw the child arrive at the rancho of Don Juan, and with the fateful blindness of all dreamers projected a picture most unlike the reality. He followed the pilgrims even to San Jose, and saw the child deliver the missive which gave the secret of her sex and condition to the Father Superior. That the authority at San Jose might dissent with the Padre of San Carmel, or decline to carry out his designs, did not occur to the one-idea'd priest. Like all solitary people, isolated from passing events, he made no allowances for occurrences outside of his routine. Yet at this moment a sudden thought whitened his yellow cheek. What if the Father Superior deemed it necessary to impart the secret to Francisco? Would the child recoil at the deception, and, perhaps, cease to love him? It was the first time, in his supreme selfishness, he had taken the acolyte's feelings into account. He had thought of him only as one owing implicit obedience to him as a temporal and spiritual guide.

"Reverend Father!"

He turned impatiently. It was his muleteer, Jose. Father Pedro's sunken eye brightened.

"Ah, Jose! Quickly, then; hast thou found Sanchicha?"

"Truly, your reverence! And I have brought her with me, just as she is; though if your reverence make more of her than to fill the six-foot hole and say a prayer over her, I'll give the mule that brought her here for food for the bull's horns. She neither hears nor speaks, but whether from weakness or sheer wantonness, I know not."

"Peace, then! and let thy tongue take example from hers. Bring her with thee into the sacristy and attend without. Go!"

Father Pedro watched the disappearing figure of the muleteer and hurriedly swept his thin, dry hand, veined and ribbed like a brown November leaf, over his stony forehead, with a sound that seemed almost a rustle. Then he suddenly stiffened his fingers over his breviary, dropped his arms perpendicularly before him, and with a rigid step returned to the corridor and passed into the sacristy.

For a moment in the half-darkness the room seemed to be empty. Tossed carelessly in the corner appeared some blankets topped by a few straggling black horse tails, like an unstranded riata. A trembling agitated the mass as Father Pedro approached. He bent over the heap and distinguished in its midst the glowing black eyes of Sanchicha, the Indian centenarian of the Mission San Carmel. Only her eyes lived. Helpless, boneless, and jelly-like, old age had overtaken her with a mild form of deliquescence.

"Listen, Sanchicha," said the father, gravely. "It is important that thou shouldst refresh thy memory for a moment. Look back fourteen years, mother; it is but yesterday to thee. Thou dost remember the baby--a little muchacha thou broughtest me then--fourteen years ago?"

The old woman's eyes became intelligent, and turned with a quick look towards the open door of the church, and thence towards the choir.

The Padre made a motion of irritation. "No, no! Thou dost not understand; thou dost not attend me. Knowest thou of any mark of clothing, trinket, or amulet found upon the babe?"

The light of the old woman's eyes went out. She might have been dead. Father Pedro waited a moment, and then laid his hand impatiently on her shoulder.

"Dost thou mean there are none?"

A ray of light struggled back into her eyes.

"None."

"And thou hast kept back or put away no sign nor mark of her parentage? Tell me, on this crucifix."

The eyes caught the crucifix, and became as empty as the orbits of the carven Christ upon it.

Father Pedro waited patiently. A moment passed; only the sound of the muleteer's spurs was heard in the courtyard.

"It is well," he said at last, with a sigh of relief. "Pepita shall give thee some refreshment, and Jose will bring thee back again. I will summon him."

He passed out of the sacristy door, leaving it open. A ray of sunlight darted eagerly in, and fell upon the grotesque heap in the corner. Sanchicha's eyes lived again; more than that, a singular movement came over her face. The hideous caverns of her toothless mouth opened--she laughed. The step of Jose was heard in the corridor, and she became again inert.

The third day, which should have brought the return of Antonio, was nearly spent. Father Pedro was impatient but not alarmed. The good fathers at San Jose might naturally detain Antonio for the answer, which might require deliberation. If any mischance had occurred to Francisco, Antonio would have returned or sent a special messenger. At sunset he was in his accustomed seat in the orchard, his hands clasped over the breviary in his listless lap, his eyes fixed upon the mountain between him and that mysterious sea that had brought so much into his life. He was filled with a strange desire to see it, a vague curiosity hitherto unknown to his preoccupied life; he wished to gaze upon that strand, perhaps the very spot where she had been found; he doubted not his questioning eyes would discover some forgotten trace of her; under his persistent will and aided by the Holy Virgin, the sea would give up its secret. He looked at the fog creeping along the summit, and recalled the latest gossip of San Carmel; how that since the advent of the Americanos it was gradually encroaching on the Mission. The hated name vividly recalled to him the features of the stranger as he had stood before him three nights ago, in this very garden; so vividly that he sprang to his feet with an exclamation. It was no fancy, but Senor Cranch himself advancing from under the shadow of a pear tree.

"I reckoned I'd catch you here," said Mr. Cranch, with the same dry, practical business fashion, as if he was only resuming an interrupted conversation, "and I reckon I ain't going to keep you a minit longer than I did t'other day." He mutely referred to his watch, which he already held in his hand, and then put it back in his pocket. "Well! we found her!"

"Francisco," interrupted the priest with a single stride, laying his hand upon Cranch's arm, and staring into his eyes.

Mr. Cranch quietly removed Father Pedro's hand. "I reckon that wasn't the name as I caught it," he returned dryly. "Hadn't you better sit down?"

"Pardon me--pardon me, Senor," said the priest, hastily sinking back upon his bench, "I was thinking of other things. You--you--came upon me suddenly. I thought it was the acolyte. Go on, Senor! I am interested."

"I thought you'd be," said Cranch, quietly. "That's why I came. And then you might be of service too."

"True, true," said the priest, with rapid accents; "and this girl, Senor, this girl is--"

"Juanita, the mestiza, adopted daughter of Don Juan Briones, over on the Santa Clare Valley," replied Cranch, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, and then sitting down upon the bench beside Father Pedro.

The priest turned his feverish eyes piercingly upon his companion for a few seconds, and then doggedly fixed them upon the ground. Cranch drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket, cut off a portion, placed it in his cheek, and then quietly began to strap the blade of his jack-knife upon his boot. Father Pedro saw it from under his eyelids, and even in his preoccupation despised him.

"Then you are certain she is the babe you seek?" said the father, without looking up.

"I reckon as near as you can be certain of anything. Her age tallies; she was the only foundling girl baby baptized by you, you know,"--he partly turned round appealingly to the Padre,--"that year. Injin woman says she picked up a baby. Looks like a pretty clear case, don't it?"

"And the clothes, friend Cranch?" said the priest, with his eyes still on the ground, and a slight assumption of easy indifference.

"They will be forthcoming, like enough, when the time comes," said Cranch; "the main thing at first was to find the girl; that was MY job; the lawyers, I reckon, can fit the proofs and say what's wanted, later on."

"But why lawyers," continued Padre Pedro, with a slight sneer he could not repress, "if the child is found and Senor Cranch is satisfied?"

"On account of the property. Business is business!"

"The property?"

Mr. Cranch pressed the back of his knife-blade on his boot, shut it up with a click, and putting it in his pocket said calmly,--

"Well, I reckon the million of dollars that her father left when he died, which naturally belongs to her, will require some proof that she is his daughter."

He had placed both his hands in his pockets, and turned his eyes full upon Father Pedro. The priest arose hurriedly.

"But you said nothing of this before, Senor Cranch," said he, with a gesture of indignation, turning his back quite upon Cranch, and taking a step towards the refectory.

"Why should I? I was looking after the girl, not the property," returned Cranch, following the Padre with watchful eyes, but still keeping his careless, easy attitude.

"Ah, well! Will it be said so, think you? Eh! Bueno. What will the world think of your sacred quest, eh?" continued the Padre Pedro, forgetting himself in his excitement, but still averting his face from his companion.

"The world will look after the proofs, and I reckon not bother if the proofs are all right," replied Cranch, carelessly; "and the girl won't think the worse of me for helping her to a fortune. Hallo! you've dropped something." He leaped to his feet, picked up the breviary which had fallen from the Padre's fingers, and returned it to him with a slight touch of gentleness that was unsuspected in the man.

The priest's dry, tremulous hand grasped the volume without acknowledgment.

"But these proofs?" he said hastily; "these proofs, Senor?"

"Oh, well, you'll testify to the baptism, you know."

"But if I refuse; if I will have nothing to do with this thing! If I will not give my word that there is not some mistake," said the priest, working himself into a feverish indignation. "That there are not slips of memory, eh? Of so many children baptized, is it possible for me to know which, eh? And if this Juanita is not your girl, eh?"

"Then you'll help me to find who is," said Cranch, coolly.

Father Pedro turned furiously on his tormentor. Overcome by his vigil and anxiety. He was oblivious of everything but the presence of the man who seemed to usurp the functions of his own conscience. "Who are you, who speak thus?" he said hoarsely, advancing upon Cranch with outstretched and anathematizing fingers. "Who are you, Senor Heathen, who dare to dictate to me, a Father of Holy Church? I tell you, I will have none of this. Never! I will not. From this moment, you understand--nothing. I will never . . ."

He stopped. The first stroke of the Angelus rang from the little tower. The first stroke of that bell before whose magic exorcism all human passions fled, the peaceful bell that had for fifty years lulled the little fold

of San Carmel to prayer and rest, came to his throbbing ear. His trembling hands groped for the crucifix, carried it to his left breast; his lips moved in prayer. His eyes were turned to the cold, passionless sky, where a few faint, far-spaced stars had silently stolen to their places. The Angelus still rang, his trembling ceased, he remained motionless and rigid.

The American, who had uncovered in deference to the worshiper rather than the rite, waited patiently. The eyes of Father Pedro returned to the earth, moist as if with dew caught from above. He looked half absently at Cranch.

"Forgive me, my son," he said, in a changed voice. "I am only a worn old man. I must talk with thee more of this--but not to-night--not to-night;--to-morrow--to-morrow--to-morrow."

He turned slowly and appeared to glide rather than move under the trees, until the dark shadow of the Mission tower met and encompassed him. Cranch followed him with anxious eyes. Then he removed the quid of tobacco from his cheek.

"Just as I reckoned," remarked he, quite audibly. "He's clean gold on the bed rock after all!"

CHAPTER IV

That night Father Pedro dreamed a strange dream. How much of it was reality, how long it lasted, or when he awoke from it, he could not tell. The morbid excitement of the previous day culminated in a febrile exaltation in which he lived and moved as in a separate existence.

This is what he remembered. He thought he had risen at night in a sudden horror of remorse, and making his way to the darkened church had fallen upon his knees before the high altar, when all at once the acolyte's voice broke from the choir, but in accents so dissonant and unnatural that it seemed a sacrilege, and he trembled. He thought he had confessed the secret of the child's sex to Cranch, but whether the next morning or a week later he did not know. He fancied, too, that Cranch had also confessed some trifling deception to him, but what, or why, he could not remember; so much greater seemed the enormity of his own transgression. He thought Cranch had put in his hands the letter he had written to the Father Superior, saying that his secret was still safe, and that he had been spared the avowal and the scandal that might have ensued. But through all, and above all, he was conscious of one fixed idea: to seek the seashore with Sanchicha, and upon the spot where she had found Francisco, meet the young girl who had taken his place, and so part from her forever. He had a dim recollection that this was necessary to some legal identification of her, as arranged by Cranch, but how or why he did not understand; enough that it was a part of his penance.

It was early morning when the faithful Antonio, accompanied by Sanchicha and Jose, rode forth with him from the Mission of San Carmel. Except on the expressionless features of the old woman, there was anxiety and gloom upon the faces of the little cavalcade. He did not know how heavily his strange abstraction and hallucinations weighed upon their honest hearts. As they wound up the ascent of the mountain he noticed that Antonio and Jose conversed with bated breath and many pious crossings of themselves, but with eyes always wistfully fixed upon him. He wondered if, as part of his penance, he ought not to proclaim his sin and abase himself before them; but he knew that his devoted followers would insist upon sharing his punishment; and he remembered his promise to Cranch, that for HER sake he would say nothing. Before they reached the summit he turned once or twice to look back upon the Mission. How small it looked, lying there in the peaceful valley, contrasted with the broad sweep of the landscape beyond, stopped at the further east only by the dim, ghost-like outlines of the Sierras. But the strong breath of the sea was beginning to be felt; in a few moments more they were facing it with lowered sombreros and flying serapes, and the vast, glittering, illimitable Pacific opened out beneath them.

Dazed and blinded, as it seemed to him, by the shining, restless expanse, Father Pedro rode forward as if still in a dream. Suddenly he halted, and called Antonio to his side.

"Tell me, child, didst thou not say that this coast was wild and desolate of man, beast, and habitation?"

"Truly I did, reverend father."

"Then what is that?" pointing to the shore.

Almost at their feet nestled a cluster of houses, at the head of an arroyo reaching up from the beach. They looked down upon the smoke of a manufactory chimney, upon strange heaps of material and curious engines scattered along the sands, with here and there moving specks of human figures. In a little bay a schooner swung at her cables.

The vaquero crossed himself in stupefied alarm. "I know not, your reverence; it is only two years ago, before the rodeo, that I was here for strayed colts, and I swear by the blessed bones of San Antonio that it was as I said."

"Ah! it is like these Americanos," responded the muleteer. "I have it from my brother Diego that he went from San Jose to Pescadero two months ago, across the plains, with never a hut nor fonda to halt at all the way. He returned in seven days, and in the midst of the plain there were three houses and a mill, and many people. And why was it? Ah! Mother of God! one had picked up in the creek where he drank that much of gold;" and the muleteer tapped one of the silver coins that fringed his jacket sleeves in place of buttons.

"And they are washing the sands for gold there now," said Antonio, eagerly pointing to some men

gathered round a machine like an enormous cradle. "Let us hasten on."

Father Pedro's momentary interest had passed. The words of his companions fell dull and meaningless upon his dreaming ears. He was conscious only that the child was more a stranger to him as an outcome of this hard, bustling life, than when he believed her borne to him over the mysterious sea. It perplexed his dazed, disturbed mind to think that if such an antagonistic element could exist within a dozen miles of the Mission, and he not know it, could not such an atmosphere have been around him, even in his monastic isolation, and he remain blind to it? Had he really lived in the world without knowing it? Had it been in his blood? Had it impelled him to--He shuddered and rode on.

They were at the last slope of the zigzag descent to the shore, when he saw the figures of a man and woman moving slowly through a field of wild oats, not far from the trail. It seemed to his distorted fancy that the man was Cranch. The woman! His heart stopped beating. Ah! could it be? He had never seen her in her proper garb: would she look like that? Would she be as tall? He thought he bade Jose and Antonio go on slowly before with Sanchicha, and dismounted, walking slowly between the high stalks of grain, lest he should disturb them. They evidently did not hear his approach, but were talking earnestly. It seemed to Father Pedro that they had taken each other's hands, and as he looked Cranch slipped his arm round her waist. With only a blind instinct of some dreadful sacrilege in this act, Father Pedro would have rushed forward, when the girl's voice struck his ear. He stopped, breathless. It was not Francisco, but Juanita, the little mestiza.

"But are you sure you are not pretending to love me now, as you pretended to think I was the muchacha you had run away with and lost? Are you sure it is not pity for the deceit you practiced upon me--upon Don Juan--upon poor Father Pedro?"

It seemed as if Cranch had tried to answer with a kiss, for the girl drew suddenly away from him with a coquettish fling of the black braids, and whipped her little brown hands behind her.

"Well, look here," said Cranch, with the same easy, good-natured, practical directness which the priest remembered, and which would have passed for philosophy in a more thoughtful man, "put it squarely, then. In the first place, it was Don Juan and the alcalde who first suggested you might be the child."

"But you have said you knew it was Francisco all the time," interrupted Juanita.

"I did; but when I found the priest would not assist me at first, and admit that the acolyte was a girl, I preferred to let him think I was deceived in giving a fortune to another, and leave it to his own conscience to permit it or frustrate it. I was right. I reckon it was pretty hard on the old man, at his time of life, and wrapped up as he was in the girl; but at the moment he came up to the scratch like a man."

"And to save him you have deceived me? Thank you, Senor," said the girl with a mock curtsy.

"I reckon I preferred to have you for a wife than a daughter," said Cranch, "if that's what you mean. When you know me better, Juanita," he continued, gravely, "you'll know that I would never have let you believe I sought in you the one if I had not hoped to find in you the other."

"Bueno! And when did you have that pretty hope?"

"When I first saw you."

"And that was--two weeks ago."

"A year ago, Juanita. When Francisco visited you at the rancho. I followed and saw you."

Juanita looked at him a moment, and then suddenly darted at him, caught him by the lapels of his coat and shook him like a terrier.

"Are you sure that you did not love that Francisco? Speak!" (She shook him again.) "Swear that you did not follow her!"

"But--I did," said Cranch, laughing and shaking between the clenching of the little hands.

"Judas Iscariot! Swear you do not love her all this while."

"But, Juanita!"

"Swear!"

Cranch swore. Then to Father Pedro's intense astonishment she drew the American's face towards her

own by the ears and kissed him.

"But you might have loved her, and married a fortune," said Juanita, after a pause.

"Where would have been my reparation--my duty?" returned Cranch, with a laugh.

"Reparation enough for her to have had you," said Juanita, with that rapid disloyalty of one loving woman to another in an emergency. This provoked another kiss from Cranch, and then Juanita said demurely,--

"But we are far from the trail. Let us return, or we shall miss Father Pedro. Are you sure he will come?"

"A week ago he promised to be here to see the proofs to-day."

The voices were growing fainter and fainter; they were returning to the trail.

Father Pedro remained motionless. A week ago! Was it a week ago since--since what? And what had he been doing here? Listening! He! Father Pedro, listening like an idle peon to the confidences of two lovers. But they had talked of him, of his crime, and the man had pitied him. Why did he not speak? Why did he not call after them? He tried to raise his voice. It sank in his throat with a horrible choking sensation. The nearest heads of oats began to nod to him, he felt himself swaying backwards and forwards. He fell--heavily, down, down, down, from the summit of the mountain to the floor of the Mission chapel, and there he lay in the dark.

"He moves."

"Blessed Saint Anthony preserve him!"

It was Antonio's voice, it was Jose's arm, it was the field of wild oats, the sky above his head,--all unchanged.

"What has happened?" said the priest feebly.

"A giddiness seized your reverence just now, as we were coming to seek you."

"And you met no one?"

"No one, your reverence."

Father Pedro passed his hand across his forehead.

"But who are these?" he said, pointing to two figures who now appeared upon the trail.

Antonio turned.

"It is the Americano, Senor Cranch, and his adopted daughter, the mestiza Juanita, seeking your reverence, methinks."

"Ah!" said Father Pedro.

Cranch came forward and greeted the priest cordially. "It was kind of you, Father Pedro," he said, meaningly, with a significant glance at Jose and Antonio, "to come so far to bid me and my adopted daughter farewell. We depart when the tide serves, but not before you partake of our hospitality in yonder cottage."

Father Pedro gazed at Cranch and then at Juanita.

"I see," he stammered. "But she goes not alone. She will be strange at first. She takes some friend, perhaps--some companion?" he continued, tremulously.

"A very old and dear one, Father Pedro, who is waiting for us now."

He led the way to a little white cottage, so little and white and recent, that it seemed a mere fleck of sea foam cast on the sands. Disposing of Jose and Antonio in the neighboring workshop and outbuildings, he assisted the venerable Sanchicha to dismount, and, together with Father Pedro and Juanita, entered a white palisaded enclosure beside the cottage, and halted before what appeared to be a large, folding trap-door, covering a slight, sandy mound. It was locked with a padlock; beside it stood the American alcalde and Don Juan Briones. Father Pedro looked hastily around for another figure, but it was not there.

"Gentlemen," began Cranch, in his practical business way, "I reckon you all know we've come here to identify a young lady, who"--he hesitated--"was lately under the care of Father Pedro, with a foundling picked up on this shore fifteen years ago by an Indian woman. How this foundling came here, and how I was concerned in it, you all know. I've told everybody here how I scrambled ashore, leaving that baby in the

dingy, supposing it would be picked up by the boat pursuing me. I've told some of you," he looked at Father Pedro, "how I first discovered, from one of the men, three years ago, that the child was not found by its father. But I have never told any one, before now, I KNEW it was picked up here.

"I never could tell the exact locality where I came ashore, for the fog was coming on as it is now. But two years ago I came up with a party of gold hunters to work these sands. One day, digging near this creek, I struck something embedded deep below the surface. Well, gentlemen, it wasn't gold, but something worth more to me than gold or silver. Here it is."

At a sign the alcalde unlocked the doors and threw them open. They disclosed an irregular trench, in which, filled with sand, lay the half-excavated stern of a boat.

"It was the dingy of the Trinidad, gentlemen; you can still read her name. I found hidden away, tucked under the stern sheets, mouldy and water-worn, some clothes that I recognized to be the baby's. I knew then that the child had been taken away alive for some purpose, and the clothes were left so that she should carry no trace with her. I recognized the hand of an Indian. I set to work quietly. I found Sanchicha here, she confessed to finding a baby, but what she had done with it she would not at first say. But since then she has declared before the alcalde that she gave it to Father Pedro, of San Carmel, and that here it stands-- Francisco that was! Francisca that it is!"

He stepped aside to make way for a tall girl, who had approached from the cottage.

Father Pedro had neither noticed the concluding words nor the movement of Cranch. His eyes were fixed upon the imbecile Sanchicha,--Sanchicha, on whom, to render his rebuke more complete, the Deity seemed to have worked a miracle, and restored intelligence to eye and lip. He passed his hand tremblingly across his forehead, and turned away, when his eye fell upon the last comer.

It was she. The moment he had longed for and dreaded had come. She stood there, animated, handsome, filled with a hurtful consciousness in her new charms, her fresh finery, and the pitiable trinkets that had supplanted her scapulary, and which played under her foolish fingers. The past had no place in her preoccupied mind; her bright eyes were full of eager anticipation of a substantial future. The incarnation of a frivolous world, even as she extended one hand to him in half-coquettish embarrassment she arranged the folds of her dress with the other. At the touch of her fingers, he felt himself growing old and cold. Even the penance of parting, which he had looked forward to, was denied him; there was no longer sympathy enough for sorrow. He thought of the empty chorister's robe in the little cell, but not now with regret. He only trembled to think of the flesh that he had once caused to inhabit it.

"That's all, gentlemen," broke in the practical voice of Cranch. "Whether there are proofs enough to make Francisca the heiress of her father's wealth, the lawyers must say. I reckon it's enough for me that they give me the chance of repairing a wrong by taking her father's place. After all, it was a mere chance."

"It was the will of God," said Father Pedro, solemnly.

They were the last words he addressed them. For when the fog had begun to creep inshore, hastening their departure, he only answered their farewells by a silent pressure of the hand, mute lips, and far-off eyes.

When the sound of their laboring oars grew fainter, he told Antonio to lead him and Sanchicha again to the buried boat. There he bade her kneel beside him. "We will do penance here, thou and I, daughter," he said gravely. When the fog had drawn its curtain gently around the strange pair, and sea and shore were blotted out, he whispered, "Tell me, it was even so, was it not, daughter, on the night she came?" When the distant clatter of blocks and rattle of cordage came from the unseen vessel, now standing out to sea, he whispered again, "So, this is what thou didst hear, even then." And so during the night he marked, more or less audibly to the half-conscious woman at his side, the low whisper of the waves, the murmur of the far-off breakers, the lightening and thickening of the fog, the phantoms of moving shapes, and the slow coming of the dawn. And when the morning sun had rent the veil over land and sea, Antonio and Jose found him, haggard, but erect, beside the trembling old woman, with a blessing on his lips, pointing to the horizon where a single sail still glimmered:--

"Va Usted con Dios."

A BLUE GRASS PENELOPE

CHAPTER I

She was barely twenty-three years old. It is probable that up to that age, and the beginning of this episode, her life had been uneventful. Born to the easy mediocrity of such compensating extremes as a small farmhouse and large lands, a good position and no society, in that vast grazing district of Kentucky known as the "Blue Grass" region, all the possibilities of a Western American girl's existence lay before her. A piano in the bare-walled house, the latest patented mower in the limitless meadows, and a silk dress sweeping the rough floor of the unpainted "meeting-house" were already the promise of those possibilities. Beautiful she was, but the power of that beauty was limited by being equally shared with her few neighbors. There were small, narrow, arched feet besides her own that trod the uncarpeted floors of outlying log-cabins with equal grace and dignity; bright, clearly opened eyes that were equally capable of looking unabashed upon princes and potentates, as a few later did, and the heiress of the county judge read her own beauty without envy in the frank glances and unlowered crest of the blacksmith's daughter. Eventually she had married the male of her species, a young stranger, who, as schoolmaster in the nearest town, had utilized to some local extent a scant capital of education. In obedience to the unwritten law of the West, after the marriage was celebrated the doors of the ancestral home cheerfully opened, and bride and bridegroom issued forth, without regret and without sentiment, to seek the further possibilities of a life beyond these already too familiar voices. With their departure for California as Mr. and Mrs. Spencer Tucker, the parental nest in the Blue Grass meadows knew them no more.

They submitted with equal cheerfulness to the privations and excesses of their new conditions. Within three years the schoolmaster developed into a lawyer and capitalist, the Blue Grass bride supplying a grace and ease to these transitions that were all her own. She softened the abruptness of sudden wealth, mitigated the austerities of newly acquired power, and made the most glaring incongruity picturesque. Only one thing seemed to limit their progress in the region of these possibilities. They were childless. It was as if they had exhausted the future in their own youth, leaving little or nothing for another generation to do.

A southwesterly storm was beating against the dressing-room windows of their new house in one of the hilly suburbs of San Francisco, and threatening the unseasonable frivolity of the stucco ornamentation of cornice and balcony. Mrs. Tucker had been called from the contemplation of the dreary prospect without by the arrival of a visitor. On entering the drawing-room she found him engaged in a half-admiring, half-resentful examination of its new furniture and hangings. Mrs. Tucker at once recognized Mr. Calhoun Weaver, a former Blue Grass neighbor; with swift feminine intuition she also felt that his slight antagonism was likely to be transferred from her furniture to herself. Waiving it with the lazy amiability of Southern indifference, she welcomed him by the familiarity of a Christian name.

"I reckoned that mebbee you opined old Blue Grass friends wouldn't naturally hitch on to them fancy doins," he said, glancing around the apartment to avoid her clear eyes, as if resolutely setting himself against the old charm of her manner as he had against the more recent glory of her surroundings, "but I thought I'd just drop in for the sake of old times."

"Why shouldn't you, Cal?" said Mrs. Tucker with a frank smile.

"Especially as I'm going up to Sacramento to-night with some influential friends," he continued, with an ostentation calculated to resist the assumption of her charms and her furniture. "Senator Dyce of Kentucky, and his cousin Judge Briggs; perhaps you know 'em, or may be Spencer--I mean Mr. Tucker--does."

"I reckon," said Mrs. Tucker smiling; "but tell me something about the boys and girls at Vineville, and about yourself. YOU'RE looking well, and right smart too." She paused to give due emphasis to this latter recognition of a huge gold chain with which her visitor was somewhat ostentatiously trifling.

"I didn't know as you cared to hear anything about Blue Grass," he returned, a little abashed. "I've been away from there some time myself," he added, his uneasy vanity taking fresh alarm at the faint suspicion of patronage on the part of his hostess. "They're doin' well, though; perhaps as well as some others."

"And you're not married yet," continued Mrs. Tucker, oblivious of the innuendo. "Ah, Cal," she added archly, "I am afraid you are as fickle as ever. What poor girl in Vineville have you left pining?"

The simple face of the man before her flushed with foolish gratification at this old-fashioned, ambiguous flattery. "Now look yer, Belle," he said, chuckling, "if you're talking of old times and you think I bear malice agin Spencer, why--"

But Mrs. Tucker interrupted what might have been an inopportune sentimental retrospect with a finger of arch but languid warning. "That will do! I'm dying to know all about it, and you must stay to dinner and tell me. It's right mean you can't see Spencer too; but he isn't back from Sacramento yet."

Grateful as a *tete-a-tete* with his old neighbor in her more prosperous surroundings would have been, if only for the sake of later gossiping about it, he felt it would be inconsistent with his pride and his assumption of present business. More than that, he was uneasily conscious that in Mrs. Tucker's simple and unaffected manner there was a greater superiority than he had ever noticed during their previous acquaintance. He would have felt kinder to her had she shown any "airs and graces," which he could have commented upon and forgiven. He stammered some vague excuse of preoccupation, yet lingered in the hope of saying something which, if not aggressively unpleasant, might at least transfer to her indolent serenity some of his own irritation. "I reckon," he said, as he moved hesitatingly towards the door, "that Spencer has made himself easy and secure in them business risks he's taking. That 'ere Alameda ditch affair they're talking so much about is a mighty big thing, rather TOO big if it ever got to falling back on him. But I suppose he's accustomed to take risks?"

"Of course he is," said Mrs. Tucker gayly. "He married ME."

The visitor smiled feebly, but was not equal to the opportunity offered for gallant repudiation. "But suppose you ain't accustomed to risks?"

"Why not? I married HIM," said Mrs. Tucker.

Mr. Calhoun Weaver was human, and succumbed to this last charming audacity. He broke into a noisy but genuine laugh, shook Mrs. Tucker's hand with effusion, said, "Now that's regular Blue Grass and no mistake!" and retreated under cover of his hilarity. In the hall he made a rallying stand to repeat confidentially to the servant who had overheard them: "Blue Grass, all over, you bet your life," and, opening the door, was apparently swallowed up in the tempest.

Mrs. Tucker's smile kept her lips until she had returned to her room, and even then languidly shone in her eyes for some minutes after, as she gazed abstractedly from her window on the storm-tossed bay in the distance. Perhaps some girlish vision of the peaceful Blue Glass plain momentarily usurped the prospect; but it is to be doubted if there was much romance in that retrospect, or that it was more interesting to her than the positive and sharply cut outlines of the practical life she now held. Howbeit she soon forgot this fancy in lazily watching a boat that, in the teeth of the gale, was beating round Alcatraz Island. Although at times a mere blank speck on the gray waste of foam, a closer scrutiny showed it to be one of those lateen-rigged Italian fishing boats that so often flecked the distant bay. Lost in the sudden darkening of rain, or reappearing beneath the lifted curtain of the squall, she watched it weather the island, and then turn its laboring but persistent course towards the open channel. A rent in the Indian-inky sky, that showed the narrowing portals of the Golden Gate beyond, revealed, as unexpectedly, the destination of the little craft, a tall ship that hitherto lay hidden in the mist of the Saucelito shore. As the distance lessened between boat and ship, they were again lost in the downward swoop of another squall. When it lifted, the ship was creeping under the headland towards the open sea, but the boat was gone. Mrs. Tucker in vain rubbed the pane with her handkerchief; it had vanished. Meanwhile the ship, as she neared the Gate, drew out from the protecting headland, stood outlined for a moment with spars and canvas hearsed in black against the lurid rent in the horizon, and then seemed to sink slowly into the heaving obscurity beyond. A sudden onset of rain against the windows obliterated the remaining prospect; the entrance of a servant completed the diversion.

"Captain Poindexter, ma'am!"

Mrs. Tucker lifted her pretty eyebrows interrogatively. Captain Poindexter was a legal friend of her husband, and had dined there frequently; nevertheless she asked: "Did you tell him Mr. Tucker was not at home?"

"Yes, 'm."

"Did he ask for ME?"

"Yes, 'm."

"Tell him I'll be down directly."

Mrs. Tucker's quiet face did not betray the fact that this second visitor was even less interesting than the first. In her heart she did not like Captain Poindexter. With a clever woman's instinct she had early detected the fact that he had a superior, stronger nature than her husband; as a loyal wife, she secretly resented the occasional unconscious exhibition of this fact on the part of his intimate friend in their familiar intercourse. Added to this slight jealousy, there was a certain moral antagonism between herself and the captain which none but themselves knew. They were both philosophers, but Mrs. Tucker's serene and languid optimism would not tolerate the compassionate and kind-hearted pessimisms of the lawyer. "Knowing what Jack Poindexter does of human nature," her husband had once said, "it's mighty fine in him to be so kind and forgiving. You ought to like him better, Belle." "And qualify myself to be forgiven," said the lady pertly. "I don't see what you're driving at, Belle; I give it up," had responded the puzzled husband. Mrs. Tucker kissed his high but foolish forehead tenderly, and said: "I'm glad you don't, dear."

Meanwhile her second visitor had, like the first, employed the interval in a critical survey of the glories of the new furniture, but with apparently more compassion than resentment in his manner. Once only had his expression changed. Over the fireplace hung a large photograph of Mr. Spencer Tucker. It was retouched, refined, and idealized in the highest style of that polite and diplomatic art. As Captain Poindexter looked upon the fringed hazel eyes, the drooping raven moustache, the clustering ringlets, and the Byronic full throat and turned-down collar of his friend, a smile of exhausted humorous tolerance and affectionate impatience curved his lips. "Well, you ARE a fool, aren't you?" he apostrophized it half-audibly.

He was standing before the picture as she entered. Even in the trying contiguity of that peerless work he would have been called a fine-looking man. As he advanced to greet her, it was evident that his military title was not one of the mere fanciful sobriquets of the locality. In his erect figure and the disciplined composure of limb and attitude there were still traces of the refined academic rigors of West Point. The pliant adaptability of Western civilization which enabled him, three years before, to leave the army and transfer his executive ability to the more profitable profession of the law, had loosed sash and shoulder-strap, but had not entirely removed the restraint of the one, or the bearing of the other.

"Spencer is in Sacramento," began Mrs. Tucker in languid explanation, after the first greetings were over.

"I knew he was not here," replied Captain Poindexter gently, as he drew the proffered chair towards her, "but this is business that concerns you both." He stopped and glanced upwards at the picture. "I suppose you know nothing of his business? Of course not," he added reassuringly, "nothing, absolutely nothing, certainly." He said this so kindly, and yet so positively, as if to promptly dispose of that question before going further, that she assented mechanically. "Well, then, he's taken some big risks in the way of business, and--well, things have gone bad with him, you know. Very bad! Really, they couldn't be worse! Of course it was dreadfully rash and all that," he went on, as if commenting upon the amusing waywardness of a child; "but the result is the usual smash-up of everything, money, credit, and all!" He laughed and added: "Yes, he's got cut off--mules and baggage regularly routed and dispersed! I'm in earnest." He raised his eyebrows and frowned slightly, as if to deprecate any corresponding hilarity on the part of Mrs. Tucker, or any attempt to make TOO light of the subject, and then rising, placed his hands behind his back, beamed half-humorously upon her from beneath her husband's picture, and repeated: "That's so."

Mrs. Tucker instinctively knew that he spoke the truth, and that it was impossible for him to convey it in any other than his natural manner; but between the shock and the singular influence of that manner she could at first only say, "You don't mean it!" fully conscious of the utter inanity of the remark, and that it seemed scarcely less cold-blooded than his own.

Poindexter, still smiling, nodded.

She arose with an effort. She had recovered from the first shock, and pride lent her a determined calmness that more than equaled Poindexter's easy philosophy.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"At sea, and I hope by this time where he can not be found or followed."

Was her momentary glimpse of the outgoing ship a coincidence, or only a vision? She was confused and

giddy, but, mastering her weakness, she managed to continue in a lower voice:

"You have no message for me from him? He told you nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," replied Poindexter. "It was as much as he could do, I reckon, to get fairly away before the crash came."

"Then you did not see him go?"

"Well, no," said Poindexter. "I'd hardly have managed things in this way." He checked himself and added, with a forgiving smile, "But he was the best judge of what he needed, of course."

"I suppose I will hear from him," she said quietly, "as soon as he is safe. He must have had enough else to think about, poor fellow."

She said this so naturally and quietly that Poindexter was deceived. He had no idea that the collected woman before him was thinking only of solitude and darkness, of her own room, and madly longing to be there. He said, "Yes, I dare say," in quite another voice, and glanced at the picture. But as she remained standing, he continued more earnestly, "I didn't come here to tell you what you might read in the newspapers to-morrow morning, and what everybody might tell you. Before that time I want you to do something to save a fragment of your property from the ruin; do you understand? I want you to make a rally, and bring off something in good order."

"For him?" said Mrs. Tucker, with brightening eyes.

"Well, yes, of course--if you like--but as if for yourself. Do you know the Rancho de los Cuervos?"

"I do."

"It's almost the only bit of real property your husband hasn't sold, mortgaged, or pledged. Why it was exempt, or whether only forgotten, I can't say."

"I'll tell you why," said Mrs. Tucker, with a slight return of color. "It was the first land we ever bought, and Spencer always said it should be mine and he would build a new house on it."

Captain Poindexter smiled and nodded at the picture. "Oh, he did say that, did he? Well, THAT'S evidence. But you see he never gave you the deed, and by sunrise to-morrow his creditors will attach it--unless--"

"Unless--" repeated Mrs. Tucker, with kindling eyes.

"Unless," continued Captain Poindexter, "they happen to find YOU in possession."

"I'll go," said Mrs. Tucker.

"Of course you will," returned Poindexter, pleasantly; "only, as it's a big contract to take, suppose we see how you can fill it. It's forty miles to Los Cuervos, and you can't trust yourself to steamboat or stage-coach. The steamboat left an hour ago."

"If I had only known this then!" ejaculated Mrs. Tucker.

"I knew it, but you had company then," said Poindexter, with ironical gallantry, "and I wouldn't disturb you." Without saying how he knew it, he continued, "In the stage-coach you might be recognized. You must go in a private conveyance and alone; even I can not go with you, for I must go on before and meet you there. Can you drive forty miles?"

Mrs. Tucker lifted up her abstracted pretty lids. "I once drove fifty--at home," she returned simply.

"Good! and I dare say you did it then for fun. Do it now for something real and personal, as we lawyers say. You will have relays and a plan of the road. It's rough weather for a pasear, but all the better for that. You'll have less company on the road."

"How soon can I go?" she asked.

"The sooner the better. I've arranged everything for you already," he continued with a laugh. "Come now, that's a compliment to you, isn't it?" He smiled a moment in her steadfast, earnest face, and then said, more gravely, "You'll do. Now listen."

He then carefully detailed his plan. There was so little of excitement or mystery in their manner that the servant, who returned to light the gas, never knew that the ruin and bankruptcy of the house was being told

before her, or that its mistress was planning her secret flight.

"Good afternoon; I will see you to-morrow then," said Poindexter, raising his eyes to hers as the servant opened the door for him.

"Good afternoon," repeated Mrs. Tucker quietly answering his look. "You need not light the gas in my room, Mary," she continued in the same tone of voice as the door closed upon him; "I shall lie down for a few moments, and then I may run over to the Robinsons for the evening."

She regained her room composedly. The longing desire to bury her head in her pillow and "think out" her position had gone. She did not apostrophize her fate, she did not weep; few real women do in the access of calamity, or when there is anything else to be done. She felt that she knew it all; she believed she had sounded the profoundest depths of the disaster, and seemed already so old in her experience that she almost fancied she had been prepared for it. Perhaps she did not fully appreciate it; to a life like hers it was only an incident, the mere turning of a page of the illimitable book of youth; the breaking up of what she now felt had become a monotony. In fact, she was not quite sure she had ever been satisfied with their present success. Had it brought her all she expected? She wanted to say this to her husband, not only to comfort him, poor fellow, but that they might come to a better understanding of life in the future. She was not perhaps different from other loving women who, believing in this unattainable goal of matrimony, have sought it in the various episodes of fortune or reverses, in the bearing of children, or the loss of friends. In her childless experience there was no other life that had taken root in her circumstances and might suffer transplantation; only she and her husband could lose or profit by the change. The "perfect" understanding would come under other conditions than these.

She would have gone superstitiously to the window to gaze in the direction of the vanished ship, but another instinct restrained her. She would put aside all yearning for him until she had done something to help him, and earned the confidence he seemed to have withheld. Perhaps it was pride--perhaps she never really believed his exodus was distant or complete.

With a full knowledge that to-morrow the various ornaments and pretty trifles around her would be in the hands of the law, she gathered only a few necessaries for her flight and some familiar personal trinkets. I am constrained to say that this self-abnegation was more fastidious than moral. She had no more idea of the ethics of bankruptcy than any other charming woman; she simply did not like to take with her any contagious memory of the chapter of the life just closing. She glanced around the home she was leaving without a lingering regret; there was no sentiment of tradition or custom that might be destroyed; her roots lay too near the surface to suffer from dislocation; the happiness of her childless union had depended upon no domestic centre, nor was its flame sacred to any local hearthstone. It was without a sigh that, when night had fully fallen, she slipped unnoticed down the staircase. At the door of the drawing-room she paused and then entered with the first guilty feeling of shame she had known that evening. Looking stealthily around she mounted a chair before her husband's picture, kissed the irreproachable moustache hurriedly, said, "You foolish darling, you!" and slipped out again. With this touching indorsement of the views of a rival philosopher, she closed the door softly and left her home forever.

CHAPTER II

The wind and rain had cleared the unfrequented suburb of any observant lounge, and the darkness, lit only by far-spaced, gusty lamps, hid her hastening figure. She had barely crossed the second street when she heard the quick clatter of hoofs behind her; a buggy drove up to the curbstone, and Poindexter leaped out. She entered quickly, but for a moment he still held the reins of the impatient horse. "He's rather fresh," he said, eying her keenly; "are you sure you can manage him?"

"Give me the reins," she said simply.

He placed them in the two firm, well-shaped hands that reached from the depths of the vehicle, and was satisfied. Yet he lingered.

"It's rough work for a lone woman," he said, almost curtly. "I can't go with you, but, speak frankly, is there any man you know whom you can trust well enough to take? It's not too late yet; think a moment!"

He paused over the buttoning of the leather apron of the vehicle.

"No, there is none," answered the voice from the interior; "and it's better so. Is all ready?"

"One moment more." He had recovered his half-bantering manner. "You HAVE a friend and countryman already with you, do you know? Your horse is Blue Grass. Good night."

With these words ringing in her ears she began her journey. The horse, as if eager to maintain the reputation which his native district had given his race, as well as the race of the pretty woman behind him, leaped impatiently forward. But pulled together by the fine and firm fingers that seemed to guide rather than check his exuberance, he presently struck into the long, swinging pace of his kind, and kept it throughout without "break" or acceleration. Over the paved streets the light buggy rattled, and the slender shafts danced around his smooth barrel, but when they touched the level high-road, horse and vehicle slipped forward through the night, a swift and noiseless phantom. Mrs. Tucker could see his graceful back dimly rising and falling before her with tireless rhythm, and could feel the intelligent pressure of his mouth until it seemed the responsive grasp of a powerful but kindly hand. The faint glow of conquest came to her cold cheek; the slight stirrings of pride moved her preoccupied heart. A soft light filled her hazel eyes. A desolate woman, bereft of husband and home, and flying through storm and night, she knew not where, she still leaned forward towards her horse. "Was he Blue Grass, then, dear old boy?" she gently cooed at him in the darkness. He evidently WAS, and responded by blowing her an ostentatious equine kiss. "And he would be good to his own forsaken Belle," she murmured caressingly, "and wouldn't let any one harm her?" But here, overcome by the lazy witchery of her voice, he shook his head so violently that Mrs. Tucker, after the fashion of her sex, had the double satisfaction of demurely restraining the passion she had evoked.

To avoid the more traveled thoroughfare, while the evening was still early, it had been arranged that she should at first take a less direct but less frequented road. This was a famous pleasure-drive from San Francisco, a graveled and sanded stretch of eight miles to the sea and an ultimate "cocktail," in a "stately pleasure-dome decreed" among the surf and rocks of the Pacific shore. It was deserted now, and left to the unobstructed sweep of the wind and rain. Mrs. Tucker would not have chosen this road. With the instinctive jealousy of a bucolic inland race born by great rivers, she did not like the sea; and again the dim and dreary waste tended to recall the vision connected with her husband's flight, upon which she had resolutely shut her eyes. But when she had reached it the road suddenly turned, following the trend of the beach, and she was exposed to the full power of its dread fascinations. The combined roar of sea and shore was in her ears; as the direct force of the gale had compelled her to furl the protecting hood of the buggy to keep the light vehicle from oversetting or drifting to leeward, she could no longer shut out the heaving chaos on the right from which the pallid ghosts of dead and dying breakers dimly rose and sank as if in awful salutation. At times through the darkness a white sheet appeared spread before the path and beneath the wheels of the buggy, which, when withdrawn with a reluctant hiss, seemed striving to drag the exhausted beach seaward with it. But the blind terror of her horse, who swerved at every sweep of the surge, shamed her own half-superstitious fears, and with the effort to control his alarm she regained her own self-possession, albeit with eyelashes wet not altogether with the salt spray from the sea. This was followed by a reaction, perhaps

stimulated by her victory over the beaten animal, when for a time, she knew not how long, she felt only a mad sense of freedom and power; oblivious of even her sorrows, her lost home and husband, and with intense feminine consciousness she longed to be a man. She was scarcely aware that the track turned again inland until the beat of the horse's hoofs on the firm ground and an acceleration of speed showed her she had left the beach and the mysterious sea behind her, and she remembered that she was near the end of the first stage of her journey. Half an hour later the twinkling lights of the roadside inn where she was to change horses rose out of the darkness.

Happily for her, the ostler considered the horse, who had a local reputation, of more importance than the unknown muffled figure in the shadow of the unfurled hood, and confined his attention to the animal. After a careful examination of his feet and a few comments addressed solely to the superior creation, he led him away. Mrs. Tucker would have liked to part more affectionately from her four-footed compatriot, and felt a sudden sense of loneliness at the loss of her new friend, but a recollection of certain cautions of Captain Poindexter's kept her mute. Nevertheless, the ostler's ostentatious adjuration of "Now then, aren't you going to bring out that mustang for the Senora?" puzzled her. It was not until the fresh horse was put to, and she had flung a piece of gold into the attendant's hand, that the "Gracias" of his unmistakable Saxon speech revealed to her the reason of the lawyer's caution. Poindexter had evidently represented her to these people as a native Californian who did not speak English. In her inconsistency her blood took fire at this first suggestion of deceit, and burned in her face. Why should he try to pass her off as anybody else? Why should she not use her own, her husband's name? She stopped and bit her lip.

It was but the beginning of an uneasy train of thought. She suddenly found herself thinking of her visitor, Calhoun Weaver, and not pleasantly. He would hear of their ruin tomorrow, perhaps of her own flight. He would remember his visit, and what would he think of her deceitful frivolity? Would he believe that she was then ignorant of the failure? It was her first sense of any accountability to others than herself, but even then it was rather owing to an uneasy consciousness of what her husband must feel if he were subjected to the criticisms of men like Calhoun. She wondered if others knew that he had kept her in ignorance of his flight. Did Poindexter know it, or had he only entrapped her into the admission? Why had she not been clever enough to make him think that she knew it already? For the moment she hated Poindexter for sharing that secret. Yet this was again followed by a new impatience of her husband's want of insight into her ability to help him. Of course the poor fellow could not bear to worry her, could not bear to face such men as Calhoun, or even Poindexter (she added exultingly to herself), but he might have sent her a line as he fled, only to prepare her to meet and combat the shame alone. It did not occur to her unsophisticated singleness of nature that she was accepting as an error of feeling what the world would call cowardly selfishness.

At midnight the storm lulled and a few stars trembled through the rent clouds. Her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and her country instincts, a little overlaid by the urban experiences of the last few years, came again to the surface. She felt the fresh, cool radiation from outlying, upturned fields, the faint, sad odors from dim stretches of pricking grain and quickening leaf, and wondered if at Los Cuervos it might be possible to reproduce the peculiar verdure of her native district. She beguiled her fancy by an ambitious plan of retrieving their fortunes by farming; her comfortable tastes had lately rebelled against the homeless mechanical cultivation of these desolate but teeming Californian acres, and for a moment indulged in a vision of a vine-clad cottage home that in any other woman would have been sentimental. Her cramped limbs aching, she took advantage of the security of the darkness and the familiar contiguity of the fields to get down from the vehicle, gather her skirts together, and run at the head of the mustang, until her chill blood was thawed, night drawing a modest veil over this charming revelation of the nymph and woman. But the sudden shadow of a coyote checked the scouring feet of this swift Camilla, and sent her back precipitately to the buggy. Nevertheless, she was refreshed and able to pursue her journey, until the cold gray of early morning found her at the end of her second stage.

Her route was changed again from the main highway, rendered dangerous by the approach of day and the contiguity of the neighboring rancheros. The road was rough and hilly, her new horse and vehicle in keeping with the rudeness of the route--by far the most difficult of her whole journey. The rare wagon tracks that indicated her road were often scarcely discernible; at times they led her through openings in the half-cleared woods, skirted suspicious morasses, painfully climbed the smooth, dome-like hills, or wound

along perilous slopes at a dangerous angle. Twice she had to alight and cling to the sliding wheels on one of those treacherous inclines, or drag them from impending ruts or immovable mire. In the growing light she could distinguish the distant, low-lying marshes eaten by encroaching sloughs and insidious channels, and beyond them the faint gray waste of the Lower Bay. A darker peninsula in the marsh she knew to be the extreme boundary of her future home: the Rancho de los Cuervos. In another hour she began to descend to the plain, and once more to approach the main road, which now ran nearly parallel with her track. She scanned it cautiously for any early traveler; it stretched north and south in apparent unending solitude. She struck into it boldly, and urged her horse to the top of his speed, until she reached the cross road that led to the rancho. But here she paused and allowed the reins to drop idly on the mustang's back. A singular and unaccountable irresolution seized her. The difficulties of her journey were over; the rancho lay scarcely two miles away; she had achieved the most important part of her task in the appointed time, but she hesitated. What had she come for? She tried to recall Poindexter's words, even her own enthusiasm, but in vain. She was going to take possession of her husband's property, she knew, that was all. But the means she had taken seemed now so exaggerated and mysterious for that simple end that she began to dread an impending something, or some vague danger she had not considered, that she was rushing blindly to meet. Full of this strange feeling she almost mechanically stopped her horse as she entered the cross road.

From this momentary hesitation a singular sound aroused her. It seemed at first like the swift hurrying by of some viewless courier of the air, the vague alarm of some invisible flying herald, or like the inarticulate cry that precedes a storm. It seemed to rise and fall around her as if with some changing urgency of purpose. Raising her eyes she suddenly recognized the two far-stretching lines of telegraph wire above her head, and knew the aeolian cry of the morning wind along its vibrating chords. But it brought another and more practical fear to her active brain. Perhaps even now the telegraph might be anticipating her! Had Poindexter thought of that? She hesitated no longer, but laying the whip on the back of her jaded mustang again hurried forward.

As the level horizon grew more distinct, her attention was attracted by the white sail of a small boat lazily threading the sinuous channel of the slough. It might be Poindexter arriving by the more direct route from the steamboat that occasionally lay off the ancient embarcadero of the Los Cuervos Rancho. But even while watching it her quick ear caught the sound of galloping hoofs behind her. She turned quickly and saw she was followed by a horseman. But her momentary alarm was succeeded by a feeling of relief as she recognized the erect figure and square shoulders of Poindexter. Yet she could not help thinking that he looked more like a militant scout, and less like a cautious legal adviser, than ever.

With unaffected womanliness she rearranged her slightly disordered hair as he drew up beside her. "I thought you were in yonder boat," she said.

"Not I," he laughed; "I distanced you by the high road two hours, and have been reconnoitring, until I saw you hesitate at the cross roads."

"But who is in the boat?" asked Mrs. Tucker, partly to hide her embarrassment.

"Only some early Chinese market gardener, I dare say. But you are safe now. You are on your own land. You passed the boundary monument of the rancho five minutes ago. Look! All you see before you is yours from the embarcadero to yonder Coast Range."

The tone of half-raillery did not, however, cheer Mrs. Tucker. She shuddered slightly and cast her eyes over the monotonous sea of tule and meadow.

"It doesn't look pretty, perhaps," continued Poindexter, "but it's the richest land in the State, and the embarcadero will some day be a town. I suppose you'll call it Blue Grassville. But you seem tired!" he said, suddenly dropping his voice to a tone of half-humorous sympathy.

Mrs. Tucker managed to get rid of an impending tear under the pretense of clearing her eyes. "Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"Nearly. You know," he added with the same half-mischievous, half-sympathizing gayety, "it's not exactly a palace you're coming to. Hardly. It's the old casa that has been deserted for years, but I thought it better you should go into possession there than take up your abode at the shanty where your husband's farm-hands are. No one will know when you take possession of the casa, while the very hour of your arrival at the

shanty would be known; and if they should make any trouble--"

"If they should make any trouble?" repeated Mrs. Tucker, lifting her frank, inquiring eyes to Poindexter.

His horse suddenly rearing from an apparently accidental prick of the spur, it was a minute or two before he was able to explain. "I mean if this ever comes up as a matter of evidence, you know. But here we are!"

What had seemed to be an overgrown mound rising like an island out of the dead level of the grassy sea now resolved itself into a collection of adobe walls, eaten and incrustated with shrubs and vines, that bore some resemblance to the usual uninhabited-looking exterior of a Spanish-American dwelling. Apertures that might have been lance-shaped windows or only cracks and fissures in the walls were choked up with weeds and grass, and gave no passing glimpse of the interior. Entering a ruinous corral they came to a second entrance, which proved to be the patio or courtyard. The deserted wooden corridor, with beams, rafters, and floors whitened by the eternal sun and wind, contained a few withered leaves, dryly rotting skins, and thongs of leather, as if undisturbed by human care. But among these scattered debris of former life and habitation there was no noisome or unclean suggestion of decay. A faint, spiced odor of desiccation filled the bare walls. There was no slime on stone or sun-dried brick. In place of fungus or discolored moisture the dust of efflorescence whitened in the obscured corners. The elements had picked clean the bones of the crumbling tenement ere they should finally absorb it.

A withered old peon woman, who in dress, complexion, and fibrous hair might have been an animated fragment of the debris, rustled out of a low vaulted passage and welcomed them with a feeble crepitation. Following her into the dim interior Mrs. Tucker was surprised to find some slight attempt at comfort and even adornment in the two or three habitable apartments. They were scrupulously clean and dry, two qualities which in her feminine eyes atoned for poverty of material.

"I could not send anything from San Bruno, the nearest village, without attracting attention," explained Poindexter; "but if you can manage to picnic here for a day longer, I'll get one of our Chinese friends here," he pointed to the slough, "to bring over, for his return cargo from across the bay, any necessaries you may want. There is no danger of his betraying you," he added, with an ironical smile; "Chinamen and Indians are, by an ingenious provision of the statute of California, incapable of giving evidence against a white person. You can trust your handmaiden perfectly--even if she can't trust YOU. That is your sacred privilege under the constitution. And now, as I expect to catch the up boat ten miles from hence, I must say 'good-by' until to-morrow night. I hope to bring you then some more definite plans for the future. The worst is over." He held her hand for a moment, and with a graver voice continued, "You have done it very well--do you know--very well!"

In the slight embarrassment produced by his sudden change of manner she felt that her thanks seemed awkward and restrained. "Don't thank me," he laughed, with a prompt return of his former levity, "that's my trade. I only advised. You have saved yourself like a plucky woman--shall I say like Blue Grass? Good-by!" He mounted his horse, but, as if struck by an after-thought, wheeled and drew up by her side again. "If I were you I wouldn't see many strangers for a day or two, and listen to as little news as a woman possibly can." He laughed again, waved her a half-gallant, half-military salute, and was gone. The question she had been trying to frame, regarding the probability of communication with her husband, remained unasked. At least she had saved her pride before him.

Addressing herself to the care of her narrow household, she mechanically put away the few things she had brought with her, and began to readjust the scant furniture. She was a little discomposed at first at the absence of bolts, locks, and even window-fastenings until assured, by Concha's evident inability to comprehend her concern, that they were quite unknown at Los Cuervos. Her slight knowledge of Spanish was barely sufficient to make her wants known, so that the relief of conversation with her only companion was debarred her, and she was obliged to content herself with the sapless, crackling smiles and withered genuflexions that the old woman dropped like dead leaves in her path. It was staring noon when, the house singing like an empty shell in the monotonous wind, she felt she could stand the solitude no longer, and, crossing the glaring patio and whistling corridor, made her way to the open gateway.

But the view without seemed to intensify her desolation. The broad expanse of the shadowless plain reached apparently to the Coast Range, trackless and unbroken save by one or two clusters of dwarfed oaks, which at that distance were but mossy excrescences on the surface, barely raised above the dead

level. On the other side the marsh took up the monotony and carried it, scarcely interrupted by undefined water-courses, to the faintly marked out horizon line of the remote bay. Scattered and apparently motionless black spots on the meadows that gave a dreary significance to the title of "the Crows" which the rancho bore, and sudden gray clouds of sand-pipers on the marshes, that rose and vanished down the wind, were the only signs of life. Even the white sail of the early morning was gone.

She stood there until the aching of her straining eyes and the stiffening of her limbs in the cold wind compelled her to seek the sheltered warmth of the courtyard. Here she endeavored to make friends with a bright-eyed lizard, who was sunning himself in the corridor; a graceful little creature in blue and gold, from whom she felt at other times she might have fled, but whose beauty and harmlessness solitude had made known to her. With misplaced kindness she tempted it with bread-crumbs, with no other effect than to stiffen it into stony astonishment. She wondered if she should become like the prisoners she had read of in books, who poured out their solitary affections on noisome creatures, and she regretted even the mustang, which with the buggy had disappeared under the charge of some unknown retainer on her arrival. Was she not a prisoner? The shutterless windows, yawning doors, and open gate refuted her suggestion, but the encompassing solitude and trackless waste still held her captive. Poindexter had told her it was four miles to the shanty; she might walk there. Why had she given her word that she would remain at the rancho until he returned?

The long day crept monotonously away, and she welcomed the night which shut out the dreary prospect. But it brought no cessation of the harassing wind without, nor surcease of the nervous irritation its perpetual and even activity wrought upon her. It haunted her pillow even in her exhausted sleep, and seemed to impatiently beckon her to rise and follow it. It brought her feverish dreams of her husband, footsore and weary, staggering forward under its pitiless lash and clamorous outcry; she would have gone to his assistance, but when she reached his side and held out her arms to him it hurried her past with merciless power, and, bearing her away, left him hopelessly behind. It was broad day when she awoke. The usual night showers of the waning rainy season had left no trace in sky or meadow; the fervid morning sun had already dried the patio; only the restless, harrying wind remained.

Mrs. Tucker arose with a resolve. She had learned from Concha on the previous evening that a part of the shanty was used as a tienda or shop for the laborers and rancheros. Under the necessity of purchasing some articles, she would go there and for a moment mingle with those people, who would not recognize her. Even if they did, her instinct told her it would be less to be feared than the hopeless uncertainty of another day. As she left the house the wind seemed to seize her as in her dream, and hurry her along with it, until in a few moments the walls of the low casa sank into the earth again and she was alone, but for the breeze on the solitary plain. The level distance glittered in the sharp light, a few crows with slant wings dipped and ran down the wind before her, and a passing gleam on the marsh was explained by the far-off cry of a curlew.

She had walked for an hour, upheld by the stimulus of light and morning air, when the cluster of scrub oaks, which was her destination, opened enough to show two rambling sheds, before one of which was a wooden platform containing a few barrels and bones. As she approached nearer, she could see that one or two horses were tethered under the trees, that their riders were lounging by a horse-trough, and that over an open door the word Tienda was rudely painted on a board, and as rudely illustrated by the wares displayed at door and window. Accustomed as she was to the poverty of frontier architecture, even the crumbling walls of the old hacienda she had just left seemed picturesque to the rigid angles of the thin, blank, unpainted shell before her. One of the loungers, who was reading a newspaper aloud as she advanced, put it aside and stared at her; there was an evident commotion in the shop as she stepped upon the platform, and when she entered, with breathless lips and beating heart, she found herself the object of a dozen curious eyes. Her quick pride resented the scrutiny and recalled her courage, and it was with a slight coldness in her usual lazy indifference that she leaned over the counter and asked for the articles she wanted.

The request was followed by a dead silence. Mrs. Tucker repeated it with some hauteur.

"I reckon you don't seem to know this store is in the hands of the sheriff," said one of the loungers.

Mrs. Tucker was not aware of it.

"Well, I don't know any one who's a better right to know than Spence Tucker's wife," said another with a coarse laugh. The laugh was echoed by the others. Mrs. Tucker saw the pit into which she had deliberately

walked, but did not flinch.

"Is there any one to serve here?" she asked, turning her clear eyes full upon the bystanders.

"You'd better ask the sheriff. He was the last one to SARVE here. He sarved an attachment," replied the inevitable humorist of all Californian assemblages.

"Is he here?" asked Mrs. Tucker, disregarding the renewed laughter which followed this subtle witticism.

The loungers at the door made way for one of their party, who was half dragged, half pushed into the shop. "Here he is," said half a dozen eager voices, in the fond belief that his presence might impart additional humor to the situation. He cast a deprecating glance at Mrs. Tucker and said, "It's so, madam! This yer place is attached; but if there's anything you're wanting, why I reckon, boys,"--he turned half appealingly to the crowd,--"we could oblige a lady." There was a vague sound of angry opposition and remonstrance from the back door of the shop, but the majority, partly overcome by Mrs. Tucker's beauty, assented. "Only," continued the officer explanatorily, "ez these yer goods are in the hands of the creditors, they ought to be represented by an equivalent in money. If you're expecting they should be charged--"

"But I wish to PAY for them," interrupted Mrs. Tucker, with a slight flush of indignation; "I have the money."

"Oh, I bet you have!" screamed a voice, as, overturning all opposition, the malcontent at the back door, in the shape of an infuriated woman, forced her way into the shop. "I'll bet you have the money! Look at her, boys! Look at the wife of the thief, with the stolen money in diamonds in her ears and rings on her fingers. SHE'S got money if WE'VE none. SHE can pay for what she fancies, if we haven't a cent to redeem the bed that's stolen from under us. Oh yes, buy it all, Mrs. Spencer Tucker! buy the whole shop, Mrs. Spencer Tucker, do you hear? And if you ain't satisfied then, buy my clothes, my wedding ring, the only things your husband hasn't stolen."

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Tucker coldly, turning towards the door. But with a flying leap across the counter her relentless adversary stood between her and retreat.

"You don't understand! Perhaps you don't understand that your husband not only stole the hard labor of these men, but even the little money they brought here and trusted to his thieving hands. Perhaps you don't know that he stole my husband's hard earnings, mortgaged these very goods you want to buy, and that he is to-day a convicted thief, a forger, and a runaway coward. Perhaps, if you can't understand ME, you can read the newspaper. Look!" She exultingly opened the paper the sheriff had been reading aloud, and pointed to the displayed headlines. "Look! there are the very words, 'Forgery, Swindling, Embezzlement!' Do you see? And perhaps you can't understand this. Look! 'Shameful Flight. Abandons his Wife. Runs off with a Notorious--'"

"Easy, old gal, easy now. D--n it! Will you dry up? I say. STOP!"

It was too late!

The sheriff had dashed the paper from the woman's hand, but not until Mrs. Tucker had read a single line, a line such as she had sometimes turned from with weary scorn in her careless perusal of the daily shameful chronicle of domestic infelicity. Then she had coldly wondered if there could be any such men and women; and now! The crowd fell back before her; even the virago was silenced as she looked at her face. The humorist's face was as white, but not as immobile, as he gasped, "Christ! if I don't believe she knew nothin' of it!"

For a moment the full force of such a supposition, with all its poignancy, its dramatic intensity, and its pathos, possessed the crowd. In the momentary clairvoyance of enthusiasm they caught a glimpse of the truth, and by one of the strange reactions of human passion they only waited for a word of appeal or explanation from her lips to throw themselves at her feet. Had she simply told her story they would have believed her; had she cried, fainted, or gone into hysterics, they would have pitied her. She did neither. Perhaps she thought of neither, or indeed of anything that was then before her eyes. She walked erect to the door and turned upon the threshold. "I mean what I say," she said calmly. "I don't understand you. But whatever just claims you have upon my husband will be paid by me, or by his lawyer, Captain Poindexter."

She had lost the sympathy but not the respect of her hearers. They made way for her with sullen deference as she passed out on the platform. But her adversary, profiting by the last opportunity, burst into

an ironical laugh.

"Captain Poindexter, is it? Well, perhaps he's safe to pay YOUR bill, but as for your husband's--"

"That's another matter," interrupted a familiar voice with the greatest cheerfulness; "that's what you were going to say, wasn't it? Ha! ha! Well, Mrs. Patterson," continued Poindexter, stepping from his buggy, "you never spoke a truer word in your life. One moment, Mrs. Tucker. Let me send you back in the buggy. Don't mind ME. I can get a fresh horse of the sheriff. I'm quite at home here. I say, Patterson, step a few paces this way, will you? A little further from your wife, please. That'll do. You've got a claim of five thousand dollars against the property, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that woman just driving away is your one solitary chance of getting a cent of it. If your wife insults her again, that chance is gone. And if YOU do--"

"Well?"

"As sure as there is a God in Israel and a Supreme Court of the State of California, I'll kill you in your tracks! . . . Stay!"

Patterson turned. The irrepressible look of humorous tolerance of all human frailty had suffused Poindexter's black eyes with mischievous moisture. "If you think it quite safe to confide to your wife this prospect of her improvement by widowhood, you may!"

CHAPTER III

Mr. Patterson did not inform his wife of the lawyer's personal threat to himself. But he managed, after Poindexter had left, to make her conscious that Mrs. Tucker might be a power to be placated and feared. "You've shot off your mouth at her," he said argumentatively, "and whether you've hit the mark or not you've had your say. Ef you think it's worth a possible five thousand dollars and interest to keep on, heave ahead. Ef you rather have the chance of getting the rest in cash, you'll let up on her." "You don't suppose," returned Mrs. Patterson contemptuously, "that she's got anything but what that man of hers--Poindexter--lets her have?" "The sheriff says," retorted Patterson surlily, "that she's notified him that she claims the rancho as a gift from her husband three years ago, and she's in POSSESSION now, and was so when the execution was out. It don't make no matter," he added, with gloomy philosophy, "who's got a full hand as long as WE ain't got the cards to chip in. I wouldn't 'a' minded it," he continued meditatively, "ef Spence Tucker had dropped a hint to me afore he put out." "And I suppose," said Mrs. Patterson angrily, "you'd have put out too?" "I reckon," said Patterson simply.

Twice or thrice during the evening he referred, more or less directly, to this lack of confidence shown by his late debtor and employer, and seemed to feel it more keenly than the loss of property. He confided his sentiments quite openly to the sheriff in possession, over the whiskey and euchre with which these gentlemen avoided the difficulties of their delicate relations. He brooded over it as he handed the keys of the shop to the sheriff when they parted for the night, and was still thinking of it when the house was closed, everybody gone to bed, and he was fetching a fresh jug of water from the well. The moon was at times obscured by flying clouds, the avant-couriers of the regular evening shower. He was stooping over the well, when he sprang suddenly to his feet again. "Who's there?" he demanded sharply.

"Hush!" said a voice so low and faint it might have been a whisper of the wind in the palisades of the corral. But, indistinct as it was, it was the voice of the man he was thinking of as far away, and it sent a thrill of alternate awe and pleasure through his pulses.

He glanced quickly around. The moon was hidden by a passing cloud, and only the faint outlines of the house he had just quitted were visible. "Is that you, Spence?" he said tremulously.

"Yes," replied the voice, and a figure dimly emerged from the corner of the corral.

"Lay low, lay low, for God's sake," said Patterson, hurriedly throwing himself upon the apparition. "The sheriff and his posse are in there."

"But I must speak to you a moment," said the figure.

"Wait," said Patterson, glancing towards the building. Its blank, shutterless windows revealed no inner light; a profound silence encompassed it. "Come quick," he whispered. Letting his grasp slip down to the unresisting hand of the stranger, he half-dragged, half-led him, brushing against the wall, into the open door of the deserted bar-room he had just quitted, locked the inner door, poured a glass of whiskey from a decanter, gave it to him, and then watched him drain it at a single draught. The moon came out, and, falling through the bare windows full upon the stranger's face, revealed the artistic but slightly disheveled curls and moustache of the fugitive, Spencer Tucker.

Whatever may have been the real influence of this unfortunate man upon his fellows, it seemed to find expression in a singular unanimity of criticism. Patterson looked at him with a half-dismal, half-welcoming smile. "Well, you are a h--ll of a fellow, ain't you?"

Spencer Tucker passed his hand through his hair and lifted it from his forehead, with a gesture at once emotional and theatrical. "I am a man with a price on me!" he said bitterly. "Give me up to the sheriff, and you'll get five thousand dollars. Help me, and you'll get nothing. That's my d---d luck, and yours too, I suppose."

"I reckon you're right there," said Patterson gloomily. "But I thought you got clean away. Went off in a ship--"

"Went off in a boat to a ship," interrupted Tucker savagely; "went off to a ship that had all my things on board--everything. The cursed boat capsized in a squall just off the Heads. The ship, d--n her, sailed away,

the men thinking I was drowned, likely, and that they'd make a good thing off my goods, I reckon."

"But the girl, Inez, who was with you, didn't she make a row?"

"Quien sabe?" returned Tucker, with a reckless laugh. "Well, I hung on like grim death to that boat's keel until one of those Chinese fishermen, in a 'dug-out,' hauled me in opposite Saucelito. I chartered him and his dug-out to bring me down here."

"Why here?" asked Patterson, with a certain ostentatious caution that ill-concealed his pensive satisfaction.

"You may well ask," returned Tucker, with an equal ostentation of bitterness, as he slightly waved his companion away. "But I reckoned I could trust a white man that I'd been kind to, and who wouldn't go back on me. No, no, let me go! Hand me over to the sheriff!"

Patterson had suddenly grasped both the hands of the picturesque scamp before him, with an affection that for an instant almost shamed the man who had ruined him. But Tucker's egotism whispered that this affection was only a recognition of his own superiority, and felt flattered. He was beginning to believe that he was really the injured party.

"What I HAVE and what I have HAD is yours, Spence," returned Patterson, with a sad and simple directness that made any further discussion a gratuitous insult. "I only wanted to know what you reckoned to do here."

"I want to get over across the Coast Range to Monterey," said Tucker. "Once there, one of those coasting schooners will bring me down to Acapulco, where the ship will put in."

Patterson remained silent for a moment. "There's a mustang in the corral you can take--leastways, I shan't know that it's gone--until to-morrow afternoon. In an hour from now," he added, looking from the window, "these clouds will settle down to business. It will rain; there will be light enough for you to find your way by the regular trail over the mountain, but not enough for any one to know you. If you can't push through to-night, you can lie over at the posada on the summit. Them greasers that keep it won't know you, and if they did they won't go back on you. And if they did go back on you, nobody would believe them. It's mighty curious," he added, with gloomy philosophy, "but I reckon it's the reason why Providence allows this kind of cattle to live among white men and others made in his image. Take a piece of pie, won't you?" He continued, abandoning this abstract reflection and producing half a flat pumpkin pie from the bar. Spencer Tucker grasped the pie with one hand and his friend's fingers with the other, and for a few moments was silent from the hurried deglutition of viand and sentiment. "YOU'RE a white man, Patterson, anyway," he resumed. "I'll take your horse, and put it down in our account, at your own figure. As soon as this cursed thing is blown over, I'll be back here and see you through, you bet. I don't desert my friends, however rough things go with me."

"I see you don't," returned Patterson, with an unconscious and serious simplicity that had the effect of the most exquisite irony. "I was only just saying to the sheriff that if there was anything I could have done for you, you wouldn't have cut away without letting me know." Tucker glanced uneasily at Patterson, who continued, "Ye ain't wanting anything else?" Then observing that his former friend and patron was roughly but newly clothed, and betrayed no trace of his last escapade, he added, "I see you've got a fresh harness."

"That d---d Chinaman bought me these at the landing; they're not much in style or fit," he continued, trying to get a moonlight view of himself in the mirror behind the bar, "but that don't matter here." He filled another glass of spirits, jauntily settled himself back in his chair, and added, "I don't suppose there are any girls around, anyway."

"Cept your wife; she was down here this afternoon," said Patterson meditatively.

Mr. Tucker paused with the pie in his hand. "Ah, yes!" He essayed a reckless laugh, but that evident simulation failed before Patterson's melancholy. With an assumption of falling in with his friend's manner, rather than from any personal anxiety, he continued, "Well?"

"That man Poindexter was down here with her. Put her in the hacienda to hold possession afore the news came out."

"Impossible!" said Tucker, rising hastily. "It don't belong--that is--" he hesitated.

"Yer thinking the creditors 'll get it, mebbe," returned Patterson, gazing at the floor. "Not as long as she's in it; no sir! Whether it's really hers, or she's only keeping house for Poindexter, she's a fixture, you bet. They're a team when they pull together, they are!"

The smile slowly faded from Tucker's face, that now looked quite rigid in the moonlight. He put down his glass and walked to the window as Patterson gloomily continued, "But that's nothing to you. You've got ahead of 'em both, and had your revenge by going off with the gal. That's what I said all along. When folks--especially women folks--wondered how you could leave a woman like your wife, and go off with a scallawag like that gal, I allers said they'd find out there was a reason. And when your wife came flaunting down here with Poindexter before she'd quite got quit of you, I reckon they began to see the whole little game. No sir! I knew it wasn't on account of the gal! Why, when you came here to-night and told me quite nat'ral-like and easy how she went off in the ship, and then calmly ate your pie and drank your whiskey after it, I knew you didn't care for her. There's my hand, Spence; you're a trump, even if you are a little looney, eh? Why, what's up?"

Shallow and selfish as Tucker was, Patterson's words seemed like a revelation that shocked him as profoundly as it might have shocked a nobler nature. The simple vanity and selfishness that made him unable to conceive any higher reason for his wife's loyalty than his own personal popularity and success, now that he no longer possessed that eclat, made him equally capable of the lowest suspicions. He was a dishonored fugitive, broken in fortune and reputation--why should she not desert him! He had been unfaithful to her from wildness, from caprice, from the effect of those fascinating qualities; it seemed to him natural that she should be disloyal from more deliberate motives, and he hugged himself with that belief. Yet there was enough doubt, enough of haunting suspicion that he had lost or alienated a powerful affection, to make him thoroughly miserable. He returned his friend's grasp convulsively and buried his face upon his shoulder. But he was not above feeling a certain exultation in the effect of his misery upon the dog-like, unreasoning affection of Patterson, nor could he entirely refrain from slightly posing his affliction before that sympathetic but melancholy man. Suddenly he raised his head, drew back, and thrust his hand into his bosom with a theatrical gesture.

"What's to keep me from killing Poindexter in his tracks?" he said wildly.

"Nothin' but HIS shooting first," returned Patterson, with dismal practicality. "He's mighty quick, like all them army men. It's about even, I reckon, that he don't get ME first," he added in an ominous voice.

"No!" returned Tucker, grasping his hand again. "This is not your affair, Patterson; leave him to me when I come back."

"If he ever gets the drop on me, I reckon he won't wait," continued Patterson lugubriously. "He seems to object to my passin' criticism on your wife, as if she was a queen or an angel."

The blood came to Spencer's cheek, and he turned uneasily to the window. "It's dark enough now for a start," he said hurriedly, "and if I could get across the mountain without lying over at the summit, it would be a day gained."

Patterson arose without a word, filled a flask of spirit, handed it to his friend, and silently led the way through the slowly falling rain and the now settled darkness. The mustang was quickly secured and saddled, a heavy poncho afforded Tucker a disguise as well as a protection from the rain. With a few hurried, disconnected words, and an abstracted air, he once more shook his friend's hand and issued cautiously from the corral. When out of earshot from the house he put spurs to the mustang, and dashed into a gallop.

To intersect the mountain road he was obliged to traverse part of the highway his wife had walked that afternoon, and to pass within a mile of the casa where she was. Long before he reached that point his eyes were straining the darkness in that direction for some indication of the house which was to him familiar. Becoming now accustomed to the even obscurity, less trying to the vision than the alternate light and shadow of cloud or the full glare of the moonlight, he fancied he could distinguish its low walls over the monotonous level. One of those impulses which had so often taken the place of resolution in his character suddenly possessed him to diverge from his course and approach the house. Why, he could not have explained. It was not from any feeling of jealous suspicion or contemplated revenge--that had passed with the presence of Patterson; it was not from any vague lingering sentiment for the woman he had wronged--

he would have shrunk from meeting her at that moment. But it was full of these and more possibilities by which he might or might not be guided, and was at least a movement towards some vague end, and a distraction from certain thoughts he dared not entertain and could not entirely dismiss. Inconceivable and inexplicable to human reason, it might have been acceptable to the Divine omniscience for its predestined result.

He left the road at a point where the marsh encroached upon the meadow, familiar to him already as near the spot where he had embarked from the Chinaman's boat the day before. He remembered that the walls of the hacienda were distinctly visible from the tules where he had hidden all day, and he now knew that the figures he had observed near the building, which had deterred his first attempts at landing, must have been his wife and his friend. He knew that a long tongue of the slough filled by the rising tide followed the marsh, and lay between him and the hacienda. The sinking of his horse's hoofs in the spongy soil determined its proximity, and he made a detour to the right to avoid it. In doing so, a light suddenly rose above the distant horizon ahead of him, trembled faintly, and then burned with a steady lustre. It was a light at the hacienda. Guiding his horse half abstractedly in this direction, his progress was presently checked by the splashing of the animal's hoofs in the water. But the turf below was firm, and a salt drop that had spattered to his lips told him that it was only the encroaching of the tide in the meadow. With his eyes on the light, he again urged his horse forward. The rain lulled, the clouds began to break, the landscape alternately lightened and grew dark; the outlines of the crumbling hacienda walls that enshrined the light grew more visible. A strange and dreamy resemblance to the long blue-grass plain before his wife's paternal house, as seen by him during his evening rides to courtship, pressed itself upon him. He remembered, too, that she used to put a light in the window to indicate her presence. Following this retrospect, the moon came boldly out, sparkled upon the overflow of silver at his feet, seemed to show the dark, opaque meadow beyond for a moment, and then disappeared. It was dark now, but the lesser earthly star still shone before him as a guide, and pushing towards it, he passed in the all-embracing shadow.

CHAPTER IV

As Mrs. Tucker, erect, white, and rigid, drove away from the tienda, it seemed to her to sink again into the monotonous plain, with all its horrible realities. Except that there was now a new and heart-breaking significance to the solitude and loneliness of the landscape, all that had passed might have been a dream. But as the blood came back to her cheek, and little by little her tingling consciousness returned, it seemed as if her life had been the dream, and this last scene the awakening reality. With eyes smarting with the moisture of shame, the scarlet blood at times dyeing her very neck and temples, she muffled her lowered crest in her shawl and bent over the reins. Bit by bit she recalled, in Poindexter's mysterious caution and strange allusions, the corroboration of her husband's shame and her own disgrace. This was why she was brought hither--the deserted wife, and abandoned confederate! The mocking glitter of the concave vault above her, scoured by the incessant wind, the cold stare of the shining pools beyond, the hard outlines of the Coast Range, and the jarring accompaniment of her horse's hoofs and rattling buggy wheels alternately goaded and distracted her. She found herself repeating "No! no! no!" with the dogged reiteration of fever. She scarcely knew when or how she reached the hacienda. She was only conscious that as she entered the patio the dusty solitude that had before filled her with unrest now came to her like balm. A benumbing peace seemed to fall from the crumbling walls; the peace of utter seclusion, isolation, oblivion, death! Nevertheless, an hour later, when the jingle of spurs and bridle were again heard in the road, she started to her feet with bent brows and a kindling eye, and confronted Captain Poindexter in the corridor.

"I would not have intruded upon you so soon again," he said gravely, "but I thought I might perhaps spare you a repetition of the scene of this morning. Hear me out, please," he added, with a gentle, half-deprecating gesture, as she lifted the beautiful scorn of her eyes to his. "I have just heard that your neighbor, Don Jose Santierra, of Los Gatos, is on his way to this house. He once claimed this land, and hated your husband, who bought of the rival claimant, whose grant was confirmed. I tell you this," he added, slightly flushing as Mrs. Tucker turned impatiently away, "only to show you that legally he has no rights, and you need not see him unless you choose. I could not stop his coming without perhaps doing you more harm than good; but when he does come, my presence under this roof as your legal counsel will enable you to refer him to me." He stopped. She was pacing the corridor with short, impatient steps, her arms dropped, and her hands clasped rigidly before her. "Have I your permission to stay?"

She suddenly stopped in her walk, approached him rapidly, and fixing her eyes on his, said--

"Do I know ALL, now--everything?"

He could only reply that she had not yet told him what she had heard.

"Well," she said scornfully, "that my husband has been cruelly imposed upon--imposed upon by some wretched woman, who has made him sacrifice his property, his friends, his honor--everything but me?"

"Everything but whom?" gasped Poindexter.

"But ME!"

Poindexter gazed at the sky, the air, the deserted corridor, the stones of the patio itself, and then at the inexplicable woman before him. Then he said gravely, "I think you know everything."

"Then if my husband has left me all he could--this property," she went on rapidly, twisting her handkerchief between her fingers, "I can do with it what I like, can't I?"

"You certainly can."

"Then sell it," she said, with passionate vehemence. "Sell it--all! everything! And sell these." She darted into her bedroom, and returned with the diamond rings she had torn from her fingers and ears when she entered the house. "Sell them for anything they'll bring, only sell them at once."

"But for what?" asked Poindexter, with demure lips but twinkling eyes.

"To pay the debts that this--this--woman has led him into; to return the money she has stolen!" she went on rapidly, "to keep him from sharing her infamy! Can't you understand?"

"But, my dear madam," began Poindexter, "even if this could be done--"

"Don't tell me 'if it could'--it MUST be done. Do you think I could sleep under this roof, propped up by the timbers of that ruined tienda? Do you think I could wear those diamonds again, while that termagant shop-woman can say that her money bought them? No. If you are my husband's friend you will do this--for--for his sake." She stopped, locked and interlocked her cold fingers before her, and said, hesitating and mechanically, "You meant well, Captain Poindexter, in bringing me here, I know! You must not think that I blame you for it, or for the miserable result of it that you have just witnessed. But if I have gained anything by it, for God's sake let me reap it quickly, that I may give it to these people and go! I have a friend who can aid me to get to my husband or to my home in Kentucky, where Spencer will yet find me, I know. I want nothing more." She stopped again. With another woman the pause would have been one of tears. But she kept her head above the flood that filled her heart, and the clear eyes fixed upon Poindexter, albeit pained, were undimmed.

"But this would require time," said Poindexter, with a smile of compassionate explanation; "you could not sell now, nobody would buy. You are safe to hold this property while you are in actual possession, but you are not strong enough to guarantee it to another. There may still be litigation; your husband has other creditors than these people you have talked with. But while nobody could oust you--the wife who would have the sympathies of judge and jury--it might be a different case with any one who derived title from you. Any purchaser would know that you could not sell, or if you did, it would be at a ridiculous sacrifice."

She listened to him abstractedly, walked to the end of the corridor, returned, and without looking up, said--

"I suppose you know her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"This woman. You have seen her?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"And you are his friend! That's strange." She raised her eyes to his. "Well," she continued impatiently, "who is she? and what is she? You know that surely?"

"I know no more of her than what I have said," said Poindexter. "She is a notorious woman."

The swift color came to Mrs. Tucker's face as if the epithet had been applied to herself. "I suppose," she said in a dry voice, as if she were asking a business question, but with an eye that showed her rising anger-- "I suppose there is some law by which creatures of this kind can be followed and brought to justice--some law that would keep innocent people from suffering for their crimes?"

"I am afraid," said Poindexter, "that arresting her would hardly help these people over in the tienda."

"I am not speaking of them," responded Mrs. Tucker, with a sudden sublime contempt for the people whose cause she had espoused: "I am talking of my husband."

Poindexter bit his lip. "You'd hardly think of bringing back the strongest witness against him," he said bluntly.

Mrs. Tucker dropped her eyes and was silent. A sudden shame suffused Poindexter's cheek; he felt as if he had struck that woman a blow. "I beg your pardon," he said hastily, "I am talking like a lawyer to a lawyer." He would have taken any other woman by the hand in the honest fullness of his apology, but something restrained him here. He only looked down gently on her lowered lashes, and repeated his question if he should remain during the coming interview with Don Jose: "I must beg you to determine quickly," he added, "for I already hear him entering the gate."

"Stay," said Mrs. Tucker, as the ringing of spurs and clatter of hoofs came from the corral. "One moment." She looked up suddenly, and said, "How long had he known her?" But before he could reply there was a step in the doorway, and the figure of Don Jose Santierra emerged from the archway.

He was a man slightly past middle age, fair and well shaven, wearing a black broadcloth serape, the deeply embroidered opening of which formed a collar of silver rays around his neck, while a row of silver buttons down the side seams of his riding trousers, and silver spurs, completed his singular equipment. Mrs. Tucker's swift feminine glance took in these details, as well as the deep salutation, more formal than the exuberant frontier politeness she was accustomed to, with which he greeted her. It was enough to arrest her first impulse to retreat. She hesitated and stopped as Poindexter stepped forward, partly interposing between

them, acknowledging Don Jose's distant recognition of himself with an ironical accession of his usual humorous tolerance. The Spaniard did not seem to notice it, but remained gravely silent before Mrs. Tucker, gazing at her with an expression of intent and unconscious absorption.

"You are quite right, Don Jose," said Poindexter, with ironical concern, "it is Mrs. Tucker. Your eyes do NOT deceive you. She will be glad to do the honors of her house," he continued, with a simulation of appealing to her, "unless you visit her on business, when I need not say I shall be only too happy, to attend you, as before."

Don Jose, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows, allowed himself to become conscious of the lawyer's meaning. "It is not of business that I come to kiss the Senora's hand to-day," he replied, with a melancholy softness; "it is as her neighbor, to put myself at her disposition. Ah! the what have we here for a lady?" he continued, raising his eyes in deprecation of the surroundings; "a house of nothing, a place of winds and dry bones, without refreshments, or satisfaction, or delicacy. The Senora will not refuse to make us proud this day to send her of that which we have in our poor home at Los Gatos, to make her more complete. Of what shall it be? Let her make choice. Or if she would commemorate this day by accepting of our hospitality at Los Gatos, until she shall arrange herself the more to receive us here, we shall have too much honor."

"The Senora would only find it the more difficult to return to this humble roof again, after once leaving it for Don Jose's hospitality," said Poindexter, with a demure glance at Mrs. Tucker. But the innuendo seemed to lapse equally unheeded by his fair client and the stranger. Raising her eyes with a certain timid dignity which Don Jose's presence seemed to have called out, she addressed herself to him.

"You are very kind and considerate, Mister Santierra, and I thank you. I know that my husband"--she let the clear beauty of her translucent eyes rest full on both men--"would thank you too. But I shall not be here long enough to accept your kindness in this house or in your own. I have but one desire and object now. It is to dispose of this property, and indeed all I possess, to pay the debt of my husband. It is in your power, perhaps, to help me. I am told that you wish to possess Los Cuervos," she went on, equally oblivious of the consciousness that appeared in Don Jose's face, and a humorous perplexity on the brow of Poindexter. "If you can arrange it with Mr. Poindexter, you will find me a liberal vendor. That much you can do, and I know you will believe I shall be grateful. You can do no more, unless it be to say to your friends that Mrs. Belle Tucker remains here only for that purpose, and to carry out what she knows to be the wishes of her husband." She paused, bent her pretty crest, dropped a quaint curtsy to the superior age, the silver braid, and the gentlemanly bearing of Don Jose, and with the passing sunshine of a smile disappeared from the corridor.

The two men remained silent for a moment, Don Jose gazing abstractedly on the door through which she had vanished, until Poindexter, with a return of his tolerant smile, said, "You have heard the views of Mrs. Tucker. You know the situation as well as she does."

"Ah, yes; possibly better."

Poindexter darted a quick glance at the grave, sallow face of Don Jose, but detecting no unusual significance in his manner, continued, "As you see, she leaves this matter in my hands. Let us talk like business men. Have you any idea of purchasing this property?"

"Of purchasing, ah, no."

Poindexter bent his brows, but quickly relaxed them with a smile of humorous forgiveness. "If you have any other idea, Don Jose, I ought to warn you, as Mrs. Tucker's lawyer, that she is in legal possession here, and that nothing but her own act can change that position."

"Ah, so."

Irritated at the shrug which accompanied this, Poindexter continued haughtily, "If I am to understand, you have nothing to say--"

"To say, ah, yes, possibly. But"--he glanced toward the door of Mrs. Tucker's room--"not here." He stopped, appeared to recall himself, and with an apologetic smile and a studied but graceful gesture of invitation, he motioned to the gateway, and said, "Will you ride?"

"What can the fellow be up to?" muttered Poindexter, as with an assenting nod he proceeded to remount his horse. "If he wasn't an old hidalgo, I'd mistrust him. No matter! here goes!"

The Don also remounted his half-broken mustang; they proceeded in solemn silence through the corral, and side by side emerged on the open plain. Poindexter glanced around; no other being was in sight. It was not until the lonely hacienda had also sunk behind them that Don Jose broke the silence.

"You say just now we shall speak as business men. I say no, Don Marco; I will not. I shall speak, we shall speak, as gentlemen."

"Go on," said Poindexter, who was beginning to be amused.

"I say just now I will not purchase the rancho from the Senora. And why? Look you, Don Marco;" he reined in his horse, thrust his hand under his serape, and drew out a folded document: "this is why."

With a smile, Poindexter took the paper from his hand and opened it. But the smile faded from his lips as he read. With blazing eyes he spurred his horse beside the Spaniard, almost unseating him, and said sternly, "What does this mean?"

"What does it mean?" repeated Don Jose, with equally flashing eyes, "I'll tell you. It means that your client, this man Spencer Tucker, is a Judas, a traitor! It means that he gave Los Cuervos to his mistress a year ago, and that she sold it to me--to me, you hear!--ME, Jose Santierra, the day before she left! It means that the coyote of a Spencer, the thief, who bought these lands of a thief, and gave them to a thief, has tricked you all. Look," he said, rising in his saddle, holding the paper like a baton, and defining with a sweep of his arm the whole level plain, "all these lands were once mine, they are mine again to-day. Do I want to purchase Los Cuervos? you ask, for you will speak of the BUSINESS. Well, listen. I HAVE purchased Los Cuervos, and here is the deed."

"But it has never been recorded," said Poindexter, with a carelessness he was far from feeling.

"Of a verity, no. Do you wish that I should record it?" asked Don Jose, with a return of his simple gravity.

Poindexter bit his lip. "You said we were to talk like gentlemen," he returned. "Do you think you have come into possession of this alleged deed like a gentleman?"

Don Jose shrugged his shoulders. "I found it tossed in the lap of a harlot. I bought it for a song. Eh, what would you?"

"Would you sell it again for a song?" asked Poindexter.

"Ah! what is this?" said Don Jose, lifting his iron-gray brows; "but a moment ago we would sell everything, for any money. Now we would buy. Is it so?"

"One moment, Don Jose," said Poindexter, with a baleful light in his dark eyes. "Do I understand that you are the ally of Spencer Tucker and his mistress, that you intend to turn this doubly betrayed wife from the only roof she has to cover her?"

"Ah, I comprehend not. You heard her say she wished to go. Perhaps it may please ME to distribute largess to these cattle yonder, I do not say no. More she does not ask. But YOU, Don Marco, of whom are you advocate? You abandon your client's mistress for the wife, is it so?"

"What I may do you will learn hereafter," said Poindexter, who had regained his composure, suddenly reining up his horse. "As our paths seem likely to diverge, they had better begin now. Good morning."

"Patience, my friend, patience! Ah, blessed St. Anthony, what these Americans are! Listen. For what YOU shall do, I do not inquire. The question is to me what I"--he emphasized the pronoun by tapping himself on the breast--"I, Jose Santierra, will do. Well, I shall tell you. To-day, nothing. To-morrow, nothing. For a week, for a month, nothing! After, we shall see."

Poindexter paused thoughtfully. "Will you give your word, Don Jose, that you will not press the claim for a month?"

"Truly, on one condition. Observe! I do not ask you for an equal promise, that you will not take this time to defend yourself." He shrugged his shoulders. "No! It is only this. You shall promise that during that time the Senora Tucker shall remain ignorant of this document."

Poindexter hesitated a moment. "I promise," he said at last.

"Good. Adios, Don Marco."

"Adios, Don Jose."

The Spaniard put spurs to his mustang and galloped off in the direction of Los Gatos. The lawyer remained for a moment gazing on his retreating but victorious figure. For the first time the old look of humorous toleration with which Mr. Poindexter was in the habit of regarding all human infirmity gave way to something like bitterness. "I might have guessed it," he said, with a slight rise of color. "He's an old fool; and she--well, perhaps it's all the better for her!" He glanced backwards almost tenderly in the direction of Los Cuervos, and then turned his head towards the embarcadero.

As the afternoon wore on, a creaking, antiquated ox-cart arrived at Los Cuervos, bearing several articles of furniture, and some tasteful ornaments from Los Gatos, at the same time that a young Mexican girl mysteriously appeared in the kitchen, as a temporary assistant to the decrepit Concha. These were both clearly attributable to Don Jose, whose visit was not so remote but that these delicate attentions might have been already projected before Mrs. Tucker had declined them, and she could not, without marked discourtesy, return them now. She did not wish to seem discourteous; she would like to have been more civil to this old gentleman, who still retained the evidences of a picturesque and decorous past, and a repose so different from the life that was perplexing her. Reflecting that if he bought the estate these things would be ready to his hand, and with a woman's instinct recognizing their value in setting off the house to other purchasers' eyes, she took a pleasure in tastefully arranging them, and even found herself speculating how she might have enjoyed them herself had she been able to keep possession of the property. After all, it would not have been so lonely if refined and gentle neighbors, like this old man, would have sympathized with her; she had an instinctive feeling that, in their own hopeless decay and hereditary unfitness for this new civilization, they would have been more tolerant of her husband's failure than his own kind. She could not believe that Don Jose really hated her husband for buying of the successful claimant, as there was no other legal title. Allowing herself to become interested in the guileless gossip of the new handmaiden, proud of her broken English, she was drawn into a sympathy with the grave simplicity of Don Jose's character, a relic of that true nobility which placed this descendant of the Castilians and the daughter of a free people on the same level.

In this way the second day of her occupancy of Los Cuervos closed, with dumb clouds along the gray horizon, and the paroxysms of hysterical wind growing fainter and fainter outside the walls; with the moon rising after nightfall, and losing itself in silent and mysterious confidences with drifting scud. She went to bed early, but woke past midnight, hearing, as she thought, her own name called. The impression was so strong upon her that she rose, and, hastily enwrapping herself, went to the dark embrasures of the oven-shaped windows, and looked out. The dwarfed oak beside the window was still dropping from a past shower, but the level waste of marsh and meadow beyond seemed to advance and recede with the coming and going of the moon. Again she heard her name called, and this time in accents so strangely familiar that with a slight cry she ran into the corridor, crossed the patio, and reached the open gate. The darkness that had, even in this brief interval, again fallen upon the prospect she tried in vain to pierce with eye and voice. A blank silence followed. Then the veil was suddenly withdrawn; the vast plain, stretching from the mountain to the sea, shone as clearly as in the light of day; the moving current of the channel glittered like black pearls, the stagnant pools like molten lead; but not a sign of life nor motion broke the monotony of the broad expanse. She must have surely dreamed it. A chill wind drove her back to the house again; she entered her bedroom, and in half an hour she was in a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER V

The two men kept their secret. Mr. Poindexter convinced Mrs. Tucker that the sale of Los Cuervos could not be effected until the notoriety of her husband's flight had been fairly forgotten, and she was forced to accept her fate. The sale of her diamonds, which seemed to her to have realized a singularly extravagant sum, enabled her to quietly reinstate the Pattersons in the tienda and to discharge in full her husband's liabilities to the rancheros and his humbler retainers.

Meanwhile the winter rains had ceased. It seemed to her as if the clouds had suddenly one night struck their white tents and stolen away, leaving the unvanquished sun to mount the vacant sky the next morning alone, and possess it thenceforward unchallenged. One afternoon she thought the long sad waste before her window had caught some tint of gayer color from the sunset; a week later she found it a blazing landscape of poppies, broken here and there by blue lagoons of lupine, by pools of daisies, by banks of dog-roses, by broad outlying shores of dandelions that scattered their lavish gold to the foot of the hills, where the green billows of wild oats carried it on and upwards to the darker crest of pines. For two months she was dazzled and bewildered with color. She had never before been face to face with this spendthrift Californian Flora, in her virgin wastefulness, her more than goddess-like prodigality. The teeming earth seemed to quicken and throb beneath her feet; the few circuits of a plough around the outlying corral were enough to call out a jungle growth of giant grain that almost hid the low walls of the hacienda. In this glorious fecundity of the earth, in this joyous renewal of life and color, in this opulent youth and freshness of soil and sky, it alone remained, the dead and sterile Past, left in the midst of buoyant rejuvenescence and resurrection, like an empty churchyard skull upturned on the springing turf. Its bronzed adobe walls mocked the green vine that embraced them, the crumbling dust of its courtyard remained ungerminating and unfruitful; to the thousand stirring voices without, its dry lips alone remained mute, unresponsive and unchanged.

During this time Don Jose had become a frequent visitor at Los Cuervos, bringing with him at first his niece and sister in a stately precision of politeness that was not lost on the proud Blue Grass stranger. She returned their visit at Los Gatos, and there made the formal acquaintance of Don Jose's grandmother, a lady who still regarded the decrepit Concha as a giddy muchacha, and who herself glittered as with the phosphorescence of refined decay. Through this circumstance she learned that Don Jose was not yet fifty, and that his gravity of manner and sedateness was more the result of fastidious isolation and temperament than years. She could not tell why the information gave her a feeling of annoyance, but it caused her to regret the absence of Poindexter, and to wonder, also somewhat nervously, why he had lately avoided her presence. The thought that he might be doing so from a recollection of the innuendoes of Mrs. Patterson caused a little tremor of indignation in her pulses. "As if--" but she did not finish the sentence even to herself, and her eyes filled with bitter tears.

Yet she had thought of the husband who had so cruelly wronged her less feverishly, less impatiently than before. For she thought she loved him now the more deeply, because, although she was not reconciled to his absence, it seemed to keep alive the memory of what he had been before his one wild act separated them. She had never seen the reflection of another woman's eyes in his; the past contained no haunting recollection of waning or alienated affection; she could meet him again, and, clasping her arms around him, awaken as if from a troubled dream without reproach or explanation. Her strong belief in this made her patient; she no longer sought to know the particulars of his flight, and never dreamed that her passive submission to his absence was partly due to a fear that something in his actual presence at that moment would have destroyed that belief forever.

For this reason the delicate reticence of the people at Los Gatos, and their seclusion from the world which knew of her husband's fault, had made her encourage the visits of Don Jose, until from the instinct already alluded to she one day summoned Poindexter to Los Cuervos, on the day that Don Jose usually called. But to her surprise the two men met more or less awkwardly and coldly, and her tact as hostess was tried to the utmost to keep their evident antagonism from being too apparent. The effort to reconcile their mutual discontent, and some other feeling she did not quite understand, produced a nervous excitement which called the blood to her cheek and gave a dangerous brilliancy to her eyes, two circumstances not

unnoticed nor unappreciated by her two guests. But instead of reuniting them, the prettier Mrs. Tucker became, the more distant and reserved grew the men, until Don Jose rose before the usual hour, and with more than usual ceremoniousness departed.

"Then my business does not seem to be with HIM?" said Poindexter, with quiet coolness, as Mrs. Tucker turned her somewhat mystified face towards him. "Or have you anything to say to me about him in private?"

"I am sure I don't know what you both mean," she returned with a slight tremor of voice. "I had no idea you were not on good terms. I thought you were! It's very awkward." Without coquetry and unconsciously she raised her blue eyes under her lids until the clear pupils coyly and softly hid themselves in the corners of the brown lashes, and added, "You have both been so kind to me."

"Perhaps that is the reason," said Poindexter, gravely. But Mrs. Tucker refused to accept the suggestion with equal gravity, and began to laugh. The laugh, which was at first frank, spontaneous, and almost child-like, was becoming hysterical and nervous as she went on, until it was suddenly checked by Poindexter.

"I have had no difficulties with Don Jose Santierra," he said, somewhat coldly ignoring her hilarity, "but perhaps he is not inclined to be as polite to the friend of the husband as he is to the wife."

"Mr. Poindexter!" said Mrs. Tucker quickly, her face becoming pale again.

"I beg your pardon!" said Poindexter, flushing; "but--"

"You want to say," she interrupted coolly, "that you are not friends, I see. Is that the reason why you have avoided this house?" she continued gently.

"I thought I could be of more service to you elsewhere," he replied evasively. "I have been lately following up a certain clue rather closely. I think I am on the track of a confidante of--of--that woman."

A quick shadow passed over Mrs. Tucker's face. "Indeed!" she said coldly. "Then I am to believe that you prefer to spend your leisure moments in looking after that creature to calling here?"

Poindexter was stupefied. Was this the woman who only four months ago was almost vindictively eager to pursue her husband's paramour! There could be but one answer to it--Don Jose! Four months ago he would have smiled compassionately at it from his cynical pre-eminence. Now he managed with difficulty to stifle the bitterness of his reply.

"If you do not wish the inquiry carried on," he began, "of course--"

"I? What does it matter to me?" she said coolly. "Do as you please."

Nevertheless, half an hour later, as he was leaving, she said, with a certain hesitating timidity, "Do not leave me so much alone here, and let that woman go."

This was not the only unlooked-for sequel to her innocent desire to propitiate her best friends. Don Jose did not call again upon his usual day, but in his place came Dona Clara, his younger sister. When Mrs. Tucker had politely asked after the absent Don Jose, Dona Clara wound her swarthy arms around the fair American's waist and replied, "But why did you send for the abogado Poindexter when my brother called?"

"But Captain Poindexter calls as one of my friends," said the amazed Mrs. Tucker. "He is a gentleman, and has been a soldier and an officer," she added with some warmth.

"Ah, yes, a soldier of the law, what you call an oficial de policia, a chief of gendarmes, my sister, but not a gentleman--a camarero to protect a lady."

Mrs. Tucker would have uttered a hasty reply, but the perfect and good-natured simplicity of Dona Clara withheld her. Nevertheless, she treated Don Jose with a certain reserve at their next meeting, until it brought the simple-minded Castilian so dangerously near the point of demanding an explanation which implied too much that she was obliged to restore him temporarily to his old footing. Meantime she had a brilliant idea. She would write to Calhoun Weaver, whom she had avoided since that memorable day. She would say she wished to consult him. He would come to Los Cuervos; he might suggest something to lighten this weary waiting; at least she would show them all that she had still old friends. Yet she did not dream of returning to her Blue Grass home; her parents had died since she left; she shrank from the thought of dragging her ruined life before the hopeful youth of her girlhood's companions.

Mr. Calhoun Weaver arrived promptly, ostentatiously, oracularly, and cordially, but a little coarsely. He had--did she remember?--expected this from the first. Spencer had lost his head through vanity, and had

attempted too much. It required foresight and firmness, as he himself--who had lately made successful "combinations" which she might perhaps have heard of--well knew. But Spencer had got the "big head." "As to that woman--a devilish handsome woman too!--well, everybody knew that Spencer always had a weakness that way, and he would say--but if she didn't care to hear any more about her--well, perhaps she was right. That was the best way to take it." Sitting before her, prosperous, weak, egotistical, incompetent, unavailable, and yet filled with a vague kindness of intent, Mrs. Tucker loathed him. A sickening perception of her own weakness in sending for him, a new and aching sense of her utter isolation and helplessness, seemed to paralyze her.

"Nat'rally you feel bad," he continued, with the large air of a profound student of human nature. "Nat'rally, nat'rally you're kept in an uncomfortable state, not knowing jist how you stand. There ain't but one thing to do. Jist rise up, quiet like, and get a divorce agin Spencer. Hold on! There ain't a judge or jury in California that wouldn't give it to you right off the nail, without asking questions. Why, you 'ld get it by default if you wanted to; you 'ld just have to walk over the course! And then, Belle," he drew his chair still nearer her, "when you've settled down again--well!--I don't mind renewing that offer I once made ye, before Spencer ever came round ye--I don't mind, Belle, I swear I don't! Honest Injin! I'm in earnest, there's my hand!"

Mrs. Tucker's reply has not been recorded. Enough that half an hour later Mr. Weaver appeared in the courtyard with traces of tears on his foolish face, a broken falsetto voice, and other evidence of mental and moral disturbance. His cordiality and oracular predisposition remained sufficiently to enable him to suggest the magical words "Blue Grass" mysteriously to Concha, with an indication of his hand to the erect figure of her pale mistress in the doorway, who waved to him a silent but half-compassionate farewell.

At about this time a slight change in her manner was noticed by the few who saw her more frequently. Her apparently invincible girlishness of spirit had given way to a certain matronly seriousness. She applied herself to her household cares and the improvement of the hacienda with a new sense of duty and a settled earnestness, until by degrees she wrought into it not only her instinctive delicacy and taste, but part of her own individuality. Even the rude rancheros and tradesmen who were permitted to enter the walls in the exercise of their calling began to speak mysteriously of the beauty of this garden of the almarjal. She went out but seldom, and then accompanied by the one or the other of her female servants, in long drives on unfrequented roads. On Sundays she sometimes drove to the half-ruined mission church of Santa Inez, and hid herself, during mass, in the dim monastic shadows of the choir. Gradually the poorer people whom she met in these journeys began to show an almost devotional reverence for her, stopping in the roads with uncovered heads for her to pass, or making way for her in the tienda or plaza of the wretched town with dumb courtesy. She began to feel a strange sense of widowhood, that, while it at times brought tears to her eyes, was, not without a certain tender solace. In the sympathy and simpleness of this impulse she went as far as to revive the mourning she had worn for her parents, but with such a fatal accenting of her beauty, and dangerous misinterpreting of her condition to eligible bachelors strange to the country, that she was obliged to put it off again. Her reserve and dignified manner caused others to mistake her nationality for that of the Santierras, and in "Dona Bella" the simple Mrs. Tucker was for a while forgotten. At times she even forgot it herself. Accustomed now almost entirely to the accents of another language and the features of another race, she would sit for hours in the corridor, whose massive bronzed inclosure even her tasteful care could only make an embowered mausoleum of the Past, or gaze abstractedly from the dark embrasures of her windows across the stretching almarjal to the shining lagoon beyond that terminated the estuary. She had a strange fondness for this tranquil mirror, which under sun or stars always retained the passive reflex of the sky above, and seemed to rest her weary eyes. She had objected to one of the plans projected by Poindexter to redeem the land and deepen the water at the embarcadero, as it would have drained the lagoon, and the lawyer had postponed the improvement to gratify her fancy. So she kept it through the long summer unchanged save by the shadows of passing wings or the lazy files of sleeping sea-fowl.

On one of these afternoons she noticed a slowly moving carriage leave the high road and cross the almarjal skirting the edge of the lagoon. If it contained visitors for Los Cuervos they had evidently taken a shorter cut without waiting to go on to the regular road which intersected the highway at right angles a mile farther on. It was with some sense of annoyance and irritation that she watched the trespass, and finally saw the vehicle approach the house. A few moments later the servant informed her that Mr. Patterson

would like to see her alone. When she entered the corridor, which in the dry season served as a reception hall, she was surprised to see that Patterson was not alone. Near him stood a well-dressed handsome woman, gazing about her with good-humored admiration of Mrs. Tucker's taste and ingenuity.

"It don't look much like it did two years ago," said the stranger cheerfully. "You've improved it wonderfully."

Stiffening slightly, Mrs. Tucker turned inquiringly to Mr. Patterson. But that gentleman's usual profound melancholy appeared to be intensified by the hilarity of his companion. He only sighed deeply and rubbed his leg with the brim of his hat in gloomy abstraction.

"Well! go on, then," said the woman, laughing and nudging him. "Go on--introduce me--can't you? Don't stand there like a tombstone. You won't? Well, I'll introduce myself." She laughed again, and then, with an excellent imitation of Patterson's lugubrious accents, said, "Mr. Spencer Tucker's wife that IS, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Spencer Tucker's sweetheart that WAS! Hold on! I said THAT WAS. For true as I stand here, ma'am--and I reckon I wouldn't stand here if it wasn't true--I haven't set eyes on him since the day he left you."

"It's the Gospel truth, every word," said Patterson, stirred into a sudden activity by Mrs. Tucker's white and rigid face. "It's the frozen truth, and I kin prove it. For I kin swear that when that there young woman was sailin' out the Golden Gate, Spencer Tucker was in my bar room; I kin swear that I fed him, licked him, give him a hoss and set him in his road to Monterey that very night."

"Then, where is he now?" said Mrs. Tucker, suddenly facing them.

They looked at each other, and then looked at Mrs. Tucker. Then both together replied slowly and in perfect unison, "That's--what--we--want--to--know." They seemed so satisfied with this effect that they as deliberately repeated, "Yes--that's--what--we--want--to--know."

Between the shock of meeting the partner of her husband's guilt and the unexpected revelation to her inexperience, that in suggestion and appearance there was nothing beyond the recollection of that guilt that was really shocking in the woman--between the extravagant extremes of hope and fear suggested by their words, there was something so grotesquely absurd in the melodramatic chorus that she with difficulty suppressed a hysterical laugh.

"That's the way to take it," said the woman, putting her own good-humored interpretation upon Mrs. Tucker's expression. "Now, look here! I'll tell you all about it." She carefully selected the most comfortable chair, and sitting down, lightly crossed her hands in her lap. "Well, I left here on the 13th of last January on the ship Argo, calculating that your husband would join the ship just inside the Heads. That was our arrangement, but if anything happened to prevent him, he was to join me in Acapulco. Well! He didn't come aboard, and we sailed without him. But it appears now he did attempt to join the ship, but his boat was capsized. There, now, don't be alarmed! he wasn't drowned, as Patterson can swear to--no, catch HIM! not a hair of him was hurt; but I--I was bundled off to the end of the earth in Mexico, alone, without a cent to bless me. For true as you live, that hound of a captain, when he found, as he thought, that Spencer was nabbed, he just confiscated all his trunks and valuables and left me in the lurch. If I hadn't met a man down there that offered to marry me and brought me here, I might have died there, I reckon. But I did, and here I am. I went down there as your husband's sweetheart, I've come back as the wife of an honest man, and I reckon it's about square!"

There was something so startlingly frank, so hopelessly self-satisfied, so contagiously good-humored in the woman's perfect moral unconsciousness, that even if Mrs. Tucker had been less preoccupied her resentment would have abated. But her eyes were fixed on the gloomy face of Patterson, who was beginning to unlock the sepulchres of his memory and disinter his deeply buried thoughts.

"You kin bet your whole pile on what this Mrs. Captin Baxter--ez used to be French Inez of New Orleans--hez told ye. Ye kin take everything she's unloaded. And it's only doin' the square thing to her to say, she hain't done it out o' no cussedness, but just to satisfy herself, now she's a married woman and past such foolishness. But that ain't neither here nor there. The gist of the whole matter is that Spencer Tucker was at the tienda the day after she sailed and after his boat capsized." He then gave a detailed account of the interview, with the unnecessary but truthful minutiae of his class, adding to the particulars already known

that the following week he visited the Summit House and was surprised to find that Spencer had never been there, nor had he ever sailed from Monterey.

"But why was this not told to me before?" said Mrs. Tucker, suddenly. "Why not at the time? Why," she demanded almost fiercely, turning from the one to the other, "has this been kept from me?"

"I'll tell ye why," said Patterson, sinking with crushed submission into a chair. "When I found he wasn't where he ought to be, I got to lookin' elsewhere. I knew the track of the hoss I lent him by a loose shoe. I examined; and found he had turned off the high road somewhere beyond the lagoon, jist as if he was makin' a bee line here."

"Well," said Mrs. Tucker, breathlessly.

"Well," said Patterson, with the resigned tone of an accustomed martyr, "mebbe I'm a God-forsaken idiot, but I reckon he DID come yer. And mebbe I'm that much of a habitooal lunatic, but thinking so, I calkulated you'd know it without tellin'."

With their eyes fixed upon her, Mrs. Tucker felt the quick blood rush to her cheeks, although she knew not why. But they were apparently satisfied with her ignorance, for Patterson resumed, yet more gloomily:--

"Then if he wasn't hidin' here bekownst to you, he must have changed his mind agin and got away by the embarcadero. The only thing wantin' to prove that idea is to know how he got a boat, and what he did with the hoss. And thar's one more idea, and ez that can't be proved," continued Patterson, sinking his voice still lower, "mebbe it's accordin' to God's laws."

Unsympathetic to her as the speaker had always been and still was, Mrs. Tucker felt a vague chill creep over her that seemed to be the result of his manner more than his words. "And that idea is . . . ?" she suggested with pale lips.

"It's this! Fust, I don't say it means much to anybody but me. I've heard of these warnings afore now, ez comin' only to folks ez hear them for themselves alone, and I reckon I kin stand it, if it's the will o' God. The idea is then--that--Spencer Tucker--WAS DROWNED in that boat; the idea is"--his voice was almost lost in a hoarse whisper--"that it was no living man that kem to me that night, but a spirit that kem out of the darkness and went back into it! No eye saw him but mine--no ears heard him but mine. I reckon it weren't intended it should." He paused, and passed the flap of his hat across his eyes. "The pie, you'll say, is agin it," he continued in the same tone of voice,--"the whiskey is agin it--a few cuss words that dropped from him, accidental like, may have been agin it. All the same they mout have been only the little signs and tokens that it was him."

But Mrs. Baxter's ready laugh somewhat rudely dispelled the infection of Patterson's gloom. "I reckon the only spirit was that which you and Spencer consumed," she said, cheerfully. "I don't wonder you're a little mixed. Like as not you've misunderstood his plans." Patterson shook his head. "He'll turn up yet, alive and kicking! Like as not, then, Poindexter knows where he is all the time."

"Impossible! He would have told me," said Mrs. Tucker, quickly.

Mrs. Baxter looked at Patterson without speaking. Patterson replied by a long lugubrious whistle.

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Tucker, drawing back with cold dignity.

"You don't?" returned Mrs. Baxter. "Bless your innocent heart! Why was he so keen to hunt me up at first, shadowing my friends and all that, and why has he dropped it now he knows I'm here, if he didn't know where Spencer was?"

"I can explain that," interrupted Mrs. Tucker, hastily, with a blush of confusion. "That is--I--"

"Then mebbe you kin explain too," broke in Patterson with gloomy significance, "why he has bought up most of Spencer's debts himself, and perhaps you're satisfied it ISN'T to hold the whip hand of him and keep him from coming back openly. Pr'aps you know why he's movin' heaven and earth to make Don Jose Santierra sell the ranch, and why the Don don't see it all."

"Don Jose sell Los Cuervos! Buy it, you mean?" said Mrs. Tucker. "I offered to sell it to him."

Patterson arose from the chair, looked despairingly around him, passed his hand sadly across his forehead, and said: "It's come! I knew it would. It's the warning! It's suthing betwixt jim-jams and doddering idjiocy. Here I'd hev been willin' to swear that Mrs. Baxter here told me SHE had sold this yer ranch nearly two

years ago to Don Jose, and now you--"

"Stop!" said Mrs. Tucker, in a voice that chilled them.

She was standing upright and rigid, as if stricken to stone. "I command you to tell me what this means!" she said, turning only her blazing eyes upon the woman.

Even the ready smile faded from Mrs. Baxter's lips as she replied hesitatingly and submissively: "I thought you knew already that Spencer had given this ranch to me. I sold it to Don Jose to get the money for us to go away with. It was Spencer's idea--"

"You lie!" said Mrs. Tucker.

There was a dead silence. The wrathful blood that had quickly mounted to Mrs. Baxter's cheek, to Patterson's additional bewilderment, faded as quickly. She did not lift her eyes again to Mrs. Tucker's, but, slowly raising herself from her seat, said, "I wish to God I did lie; but it's true. And it's true that I never touched a cent of the money, but gave it all to him!" She laid her hand on Patterson's arm, and said, "Come! let us go," and led him a few steps towards the gateway. But here Patterson paused, and again passed his hand over his melancholy brow. The necessity of coherently and logically closing the conversation impressed itself upon his darkening mind. "Then you don't happen to have heard anything of Spencer?" he said sadly, and vanished with Mrs. Baxter through the gate.

Left alone to herself, Mrs. Tucker raised her hands above her head with a little cry, interlocked her rigid fingers, and slowly brought her palms down upon her upturned face and eyes, pressing hard as if to crush out all light and sense of life before her. She stood thus for a moment motionless and silent, with the rising wind whispering without and flecking her white morning dress with gusty shadows from the arbor. Then, with closed eyes, dropping her hands to her breast, still pressing hard, she slowly passed them down the shapely contours of her figure to the waist, and with another cry cast them off as if she were stripping herself of some loathsome garment. Then she walked quickly to the gateway, looked out, returned to the corridor, unloosening and taking off her wedding-ring from her finger as she walked. Here she paused, then slowly and deliberately rearranged the chairs and adjusted the gay-colored rugs that draped them, and quietly re-entered her chamber.

Two days afterwards the sweating steed of Captain Poindexter was turned loose in the corral, and a moment later the captain entered the corridor. Handing a letter to the decrepit Concha, who seemed to be utterly disorganized by its contents, and the few curt words with which it was delivered, he gazed silently upon the vacant bower, still fresh and redolent with the delicacy and perfume of its graceful occupant, until his dark eyes filled with unaccustomed moisture. But his reverie was interrupted by the sound of jingling spurs without, and the old humor struggled back in his eyes as Don Jose impetuously entered. The Spaniard started back, but instantly recovered himself.

"So I find you here. Ah! it is well!" he said passionately, producing a letter from his bosom. "Look! Do you call this honor? Look how you keep your compact!"

Poindexter coolly took the letter. It contained a few words of gentle dignity from Mrs. Tucker, informing Don Jose that she had only that instant learned of his just claims upon Los Cuervos, tendering him her gratitude for his delicate intentions, but pointing out with respectful firmness that he must know that a moment's further acceptance of his courtesy was impossible.

"She has gained this knowledge from no word of mine," said Poindexter, calmly. "Right or wrong, I have kept my promise to you. I have as much reason to accuse you of betraying my secret in this," he added coldly, as he took another letter from his pocket and handed it to Don Jose.

It seemed briefer and colder, but was neither. It reminded Poindexter that as he had again deceived her she must take the government of her affairs in her own hands henceforth. She abandoned all the furniture and improvements she had put in Los Cuervos to him, to whom she now knew she was indebted for them. She could not thank him for what his habitual generosity impelled him to do for any woman, but she could forgive him for misunderstanding her like any other woman, perhaps she should say, like a child. When he received this she would be already on her way to her old home in Kentucky, where she still hoped to be able by her own efforts to amass enough to discharge her obligations to him.

"She does not speak of her husband, this woman," said Don Jose, scanning Poindexter's face. "It is

possible she rejoins him, eh?"

"Perhaps in one way she has never left him, Don Jose," said Poindexter, with grave significance.

Don Jose's face flushed, but he returned carelessly, "And the rancho, naturally you will not buy it now?"

"On the contrary, I shall abide by my offer," said Poindexter, quietly.

Don Jose eyed him narrowly, and then said, "Ah, we shall consider of it."

He did consider it, and accepted the offer. With the full control of the land, Captain Poindexter's improvements, so indefinitely postponed, were actively pushed forward. The thick walls of the hacienda were the first to melt away before them; the low lines of corral were effaced, and the early breath of the summer trade winds swept uninterruptedly across the now leveled plain to the embarcadero, where a newer structure arose. A more vivid green alone marked the spot where the crumbling adobe walls of the casa had returned to the parent soil that gave it. The channel was deepened, the lagoon was drained, until one evening the magic mirror that had so long reflected the weary waiting of the Blue Grass Penelope lay dull, dead, lustreless, an opaque quagmire of noisome corruption and decay to be put away from the sight of man forever. On this spot the crows, the titular tenants of Los Cuervos, assembled in tumultuous congress, coming and going in mysterious clouds, or laboring in thick and writhing masses, as if they were continuing the work of improvement begun by human agency. So well had they done the work that by the end of a week only a few scattered white objects remained glittering on the surface of the quickly drying soil. But they were the bones of the missing outcast, Spencer Tucker!

The same spring a breath of war swept over a foul, decaying quagmire of the whole land, before which such passing deeds as these were blown as vapor. It called men of all rank and condition to battle for a nation's life, and among the first to respond were those into whose boyish hands had been placed the nation's honor. It returned the epaulets to Poindexter's shoulder with the addition of a double star, carried him triumphantly to the front, and left him, at the end of a summer's day and a hard-won fight, sorely wounded, at the door of a Blue Grass farmhouse. And the woman who sought him out and ministered to his wants said timidly, as she left her hand in his, "I told you I should live to repay you."

LEFT OUT ON LONE STAR MOUNTAIN.

CHAPTER I

There was little doubt that the Lone Star claim was "played out." Not dug out, worked out, washed out, but PLAYED out. For two years its five sanguine proprietors had gone through the various stages of mining enthusiasm; had prospected and planned, dug and doubted. They had borrowed money with hearty but unredeeming frankness, established a credit with unselfish abnegation of all responsibility, and had borne the disappointment of their creditors with a cheerful resignation which only the consciousness of some deep Compensating Future could give. Giving little else, however, a singular dissatisfaction obtained with the traders, and, being accompanied with a reluctance to make further advances, at last touched the gentle stoicism of the proprietors themselves. The youthful enthusiasm which had at first lifted the most ineffectual trial, the most useless essay, to the plane of actual achievement, died out, leaving them only the dull, prosaic record of half-finished ditches, purposeless shafts, untenable pits, abandoned engines, and meaningless disruptions of the soil upon the Lone Star claim, and empty flour sacks and pork barrels in the Lone Star cabin.

They had borne their poverty, if that term could be applied to a light renunciation of all superfluities in food, dress, or ornament, ameliorated by the gentle depredations already alluded to, with unassuming levity. More than that: having segregated themselves from their fellow-miners of Red Gulch, and entered upon the possession of the little manzanita-thicketed valley five miles away, the failure of their enterprise had assumed in their eyes only the vague significance of the decline and fall of a general community, and to that extent relieved them of individual responsibility. It was easier for them to admit that the Lone Star claim was "played out" than confess to a personal bankruptcy. Moreover, they still retained the sacred right of criticism of government, and rose superior in their private opinions to their own collective wisdom. Each one experienced a grateful sense of the entire responsibility of the other four in the fate of their enterprise.

On December 24, 1863, a gentle rain was still falling over the length and breadth of the Lone Star claim. It had been falling for several days, had already called a faint spring color to the wan landscape, repairing with tender touches the ravages wrought by the proprietors, or charitably covering their faults. The ragged seams in gulch and canyon lost their harsh outlines, a thin green mantle faintly clothed the torn and abraded hillside. A few weeks more, and a veil of forgetfulness would be drawn over the feeble failures of the Lone Star claim. The charming derelicts themselves, listening to the raindrops on the roof of their little cabin, gazed philosophically from the open door, and accepted the prospect as a moral discharge from their obligations. Four of the five partners were present. The Right and Left Bowers, Union Mills, and the Judge.

It is scarcely necessary to say that not one of these titles was the genuine name of its possessor. The Right and Left Bowers were two brothers; their sobriquets, a cheerful adaptation from the favorite game of euchre, expressing their relative value in the camp. The mere fact that Union Mills had at one time patched his trousers with an old flour sack legibly bearing that brand of its fabrication, was a tempting baptismal suggestion that the other partners could not forego. The Judge, a singularly inequitable Missourian, with no knowledge whatever of the law, was an inspiration of gratuitous irony.

Union Mills, who had been for some time sitting placidly on the threshold with one leg exposed to the rain, from a sheer indolent inability to change his position, finally withdrew that weather-beaten member, and stood up. The movement more or less deranged the attitudes of the other partners, and was received with cynical disfavor. It was somewhat remarkable that, although generally giving the appearance of healthy youth and perfect physical condition, they one and all simulated the decrepitude of age and invalidism, and after limping about for a few moments, settled back again upon their bunks and stools in their former positions. The Left Bower lazily replaced a bandage that he had worn around his ankle for weeks without any apparent necessity, and the Judge scrutinized with tender solicitude the faded cicatrix of a scratch upon his arm. A passive hypochondria, born of their isolation, was the last ludicrously pathetic touch to their situation.

The immediate cause of this commotion felt the necessity of an explanation.

"It would have been just as easy for you to have stayed outside with your business leg, instead of dragging it into private life in that obtrusive way," retorted the Right Bower; "but that exhaustive effort isn't

going to fill the pork barrel. The grocery man at Dalton says--what's that he said?" he appealed lazily to the Judge.

"Said he reckoned the Lone Star was about played out, and he didn't want any more in his--thank you!" repeated the Judge with a mechanical effort of memory utterly devoid of personal or present interest.

"I always suspected that man, after Grimshaw begun to deal with him," said the Left Bower. "They're just mean enough to join hands against us." It was a fixed belief of the Lone Star partners that they were pursued by personal enmities.

"More than likely those new strangers over in the Fork have been paying cash and filled him up with conceit," said Union Mills, trying to dry his leg by alternately beating it or rubbing it against the cabin wall. "Once begin wrong with that kind of snipe and you drag everybody down with you."

This vague conclusion was received with dead silence. Everybody had become interested in the speaker's peculiar method of drying his leg, to the exclusion of the previous topic. A few offered criticism, no one assistance.

"Who did the grocery man say that to?" asked the Right Bower, finally returning to the question.

"The Old man," answered the Judge.

"Of course," ejaculated the Right Bower sarcastically.

"Of course," echoed the other partners together. "That's like him. The Old Man all over!"

It did not appear exactly what was like the Old Man, or why it was like him, but generally that he alone was responsible for the grocery man's defection. It was put more concisely by Union Mills.

"That comes of letting him go there! It's just a fair provocation to any man to have the Old Man sent to him. They can't, sorter, restrain themselves at him. He's enough to spoil the credit of the Rothschilds."

"That's so," chimed in the Judge. "And look at his prospecting. Why, he was out two nights last week, all night, prospecting in the moonlight for blind leads, just out of sheer foolishness."

"It was quite enough for me," broke in the Left Bower, "when the other day, you remember when, he proposed to us white men to settle down to plain ground sluicing, making 'grub' wages just like any Chinaman. It just showed his idea of the Lone Star claim."

"Well, I never said it afore," added Union Mills, "but when that one of the Mattison boys came over here to examine the claim with an eye to purchasin', it was the Old Man that took the conceit out of him. He just as good as admitted that a lot of work had got to be done afore any pay ore could be realized. Never even asked him over to the shanty here to jine us in a friendly game; just kept him, so to speak, to himself. And naturally the Mattisons didn't see it."

A silence followed, broken only by the rain monotonously falling on the roof, and occasionally through the broad adobe chimney, where it provoked a retaliating hiss and splutter from the dying embers of the hearth. The Right Bower, with a sudden access of energy, drew the empty barrel before him, and taking a pack of well-worn cards from his pocket, began to make a "solitaire" upon the lid. The others gazed at him with languid interest.

"Makin' it for anythin'?" asked Mills.

The Right Bower nodded.

The Judge and Left Bower, who were partly lying in their respective bunks, sat up to get a better view of the game. Union Mills slowly disengaged himself from the wall and leaned over the "solitaire" player. The Right Bower turned the last card in a pause of almost thrilling suspense, and clapped it down on the lid with fateful emphasis.

"It went!" said the Judge in a voice of hushed respect. "What did you make it for?" he almost whispered.

"To know if we'd make the break we talked about and vamose the ranch. It's the FIFTH time today," continued the Right Bower in a voice of gloomy significance. "And it went agin bad cards too."

"I ain't superstitious," said the Judge, with awe and fatuity beaming from every line of his credulous face, "but it's flyin' in the face of Providence to go agin such signs as that."

"Make it again, to see if the Old Man must go," suggested the Left Bower.

The suggestion was received with favor, the three men gathering breathlessly around the player. Again the fateful cards were shuffled deliberately, placed in their mysterious combination, with the same ominous result. Yet everybody seemed to breathe more freely, as if relieved from some responsibility, the Judge accepting this manifest expression of Providence with resigned self-righteousness.

"Yes, gentlemen," resumed the Left Bower, serenely, as if a calm legal decision had just been recorded, "we must not let any foolishness or sentiment get mixed up with this thing, but look at it like business men. The only sensible move is to get up and get out of the camp."

"And the Old Man?" queried the Judge.

"The Old Man--hush! he's coming."

The doorway was darkened by a slight lissome shadow. It was the absent partner, otherwise known as "the Old Man." Need it be added that he was a BOY of nineteen, with a slight down just clothing his upper lip!

"The creek is up over the ford, and I had to 'shin' up a willow on the bank and swing myself across," he said, with a quick, frank laugh; "but all the same, boys, it's going to clear up in about an hour, you bet. It's breaking away over Bald Mountain, and there's a sun flash on a bit of snow on Lone Peak. Look! you can see it from here. It's for all the world like Noah's dove just landed on Mount Ararat. It's a good omen."

From sheer force of habit the men had momentarily brightened up at the Old Man's entrance. But the unblushing exhibition of degrading superstition shown in the last sentence recalled their just severity. They exchanged meaning glances. Union Mills uttered hopelessly to himself: "Hell's full of such omens."

Too occupied with his subject to notice this ominous reception, the Old Man continued: "I reckon I struck a fresh lead in the new grocery man at the Crossing. He says he'll let the Judge have a pair of boots on credit, but he can't send them over here; and considering that the Judge has got to try them anyway, it don't seem to be asking too much for the Judge to go over there. He says he'll give us a barrel of pork and a bag of flour if we'll give him the right of using our tail-race and clean out the lower end of it."

"It's the work of a Chinaman, and a four days' job," broke in the Left Bower.

"It took one white man only two hours to clean out a third of it," retorted the Old Man triumphantly, "for I pitched in at once with a pick he let me have on credit, and did that amount of work this morning, and told him the rest of you boys would finish it this afternoon."

A slight gesture from the Right Bower checked an angry exclamation from the Left. The Old Man did not notice either, but, knitting his smooth young brow in a paternally reflective fashion, went on: "You'll have to get a new pair of trousers, Mills, but as he doesn't keep clothing, we'll have to get some canvas and cut you out a pair. I traded off the beans he let me have for some tobacco for the Right Bower at the other shop, and got them to throw in a new pack of cards. These are about played out. We'll be wanting some brushwood for the fire; there's a heap in the hollow. Who's going to bring it in? It's the Judge's turn, isn't it? Why, what's the matter with you all?"

The restraint and evident uneasiness of his companions had at last touched him. He turned his frank young eyes upon them; they glanced helplessly at each other. Yet his first concern was for them, his first instinct paternal and protecting. He ran his eyes quickly over them; they were all there and apparently in their usual condition. "Anything wrong with the claim?" he suggested.

Without looking at him the Right Bower rose, leaned against the open door with his hands behind him and his face towards the landscape, and said, apparently to the distant prospect: "The claim's played out, the partnership's played out, and the sooner we skedaddle out of this the better. If," he added, turning to the Old Man, "if YOU want to stay, if you want to do Chinaman's work at Chinaman's wages, if you want to hang on to the charity of the traders at the Crossing, you can do it, and enjoy the prospects and the Noah's doves alone. But we're calculatin' to step out of it."

"But I haven't said I wanted to do it ALONE," protested the Old Man with a gesture of bewilderment.

"If these are your general ideas of the partnership," continued the Right Bower, clinging to the established hypothesis of the other partners for support, "it ain't ours, and the only way we can prove it is to stop the foolishness right here. We calculated to dissolve the partnership and strike out for ourselves elsewhere.

You're no longer responsible for us, nor we for you. And we reckon it's the square thing to leave you the claim and the cabin, and all it contains. To prevent any trouble with the traders, we've drawn up a paper here--"

"With a bonus of fifty thousand dollars each down, and the rest to be settled on my children," interrupted the Old Man, with a half-uneasy laugh. "Of course. But--" he stopped suddenly, the blood dropped from his fresh cheek, and he again glanced quickly round the group. "I don't think--I--I quite sabe, boys," he added, with a slight tremor of voice and lip. "If it's a conundrum, ask me an easier one."

Any lingering doubt he might have had of their meaning was dispelled by the Judge. "It's about the softest thing you kin drop into, Old Man," he said confidentially; "if I hadn't promised the other boys to go with them, and if I didn't need the best medical advice in Sacramento for my lungs, I'd just enjoy staying with you."

"It gives a sorter freedom to a young fellow like you, Old Man, like goin' into the world on your own capital, that every Californian boy hasn't got," said Union Mills, patronizingly.

"Of course it's rather hard papers on us, you know, givin' up everything, so to speak; but it's for your good, and we ain't goin' back on you," said the Left Bower, "are we, boys?"

The color had returned to the Old Man's face a little more quickly and freely than usual. He picked up the hat he had cast down, put it on carefully over his brown curls, drew the flap down on the side towards his companions, and put his hands in his pockets. "All right," he said, in a slightly altered voice. "When do you go?"

"To-day," answered the Left Bower. "We calculate to take a moonlight pasear over to the Cross Roads and meet the down stage at about twelve to-night. There's plenty of time yet," he added, with a slight laugh; "it's only three o'clock now."

There was a dead silence. Even the rain withheld its continuous patter, a dumb, gray film covered the ashes of the hushed hearth. For the first time the Right Bower exhibited some slight embarrassment.

"I reckon it's held up for a spell," he said, ostentatiously examining the weather, "and we might as well take a run round the claim to see if we've forgotten nothing. Of course, we'll be back again," he added hastily, without looking at the Old Man, "before we go, you know."

The others began to look for their hats, but so awkwardly and with such evident preoccupation of mind that it was not at first discovered that the Judge had his already on. This raised a laugh, as did also a clumsy stumble of Union Mills against the pork barrel, although that gentleman took refuge from his confusion and secured a decent retreat by a gross exaggeration of his lameness, as he limped after the Right Bower. The Judge whistled feebly. The Left Bower, in a more ambitious effort to impart a certain gayety to his exit, stopped on the threshold and said, as if in arch confidence to his companions, "Darned if the Old Man don't look two inches higher since he became a proprietor," laughed patronizingly, and vanished.

If the newly-made proprietor had increased in stature, he had not otherwise changed his demeanor. He remained in the same attitude until the last figure disappeared behind the fringe of buckeye that hid the distant highway. Then he walked slowly to the fire-place, and, leaning against the chimney, kicked the dying embers together with his foot. Something dropped and splattered in the film of hot ashes. Surely the rain had not yet ceased!

His high color had already fled except for a spot on either cheek-bone that lent a brightness to his eyes. He glanced around the cabin. It looked familiar and yet strange. Rather, it looked strange BECAUSE still familiar, and therefore incongruous with the new atmosphere that surrounded it--discordant with the echo of their last meeting, and painfully accenting the change. There were the four "bunks," or sleeping berths, of his companions, each still bearing some traces of the individuality of its late occupant with a dumb loyalty that seemed to make their light-hearted defection monstrous. In the dead ashes of the Judge's pipe, scattered on his shelf, still lived his old fire; in the whittled and carved edges of the Left Bower's bunk still were the memories of bygone days of delicious indolence; in the bullet-holes clustered round a knot of one of the beams there was still the record of the Right Bower's old-time skill and practice; in the few engravings of female loveliness stuck upon each headboard there were the proofs of their old extravagant devotion--all a mute protest to the change.

He remembered how, a fatherless, truant schoolboy, he had drifted into their adventurous, nomadic life,

itself a life of grown-up truancy like his own, and became one of that gypsy family. How they had taken the place of relations and household in his boyish fancy, filling it with the unsubstantial pageantry of a child's play at grown-up existence, he knew only too well. But how, from being a pet and protege, he had gradually and unconsciously asserted his own individuality and taken upon his younger shoulders not only a poet's keen appreciation of that life, but its actual responsibilities and half-childish burdens, he never suspected. He had fondly believed that he was a neophyte in their ways, a novice in their charming faith and indolent creed, and they had encouraged it; now their renunciation of that faith could only be an excuse for a renunciation of HIM. The poetry that had for two years invested the material and sometimes even mean details of their existence was too much a part of himself to be lightly dispelled. The lesson of those ingenuous moralists failed, as such lessons are apt to fail; their discipline provoked but did not subdue; a rising indignation, stirred by a sense of injury, mounted to his cheek and eyes. It was slow to come, but was none the less violent that it had been preceded by the benumbing shock of shame and pride.

I hope I shall not prejudice the reader's sympathies if my duty as a simple chronicler compels me to state, therefore, that the sober second thought of this gentle poet was to burn down the cabin on the spot with all its contents. This yielded to a milder counsel--waiting for the return of the party, challenging the Right Bower, a duel to the death, perhaps himself the victim, with a crushing explanation in extremis, "It seems we are ONE too many. No matter; it is settled now. Farewell!" Dimly remembering, however, that there was something of this in the last well-worn novel they had read together, and that his antagonist might recognize it, or even worse, anticipate it himself, the idea was quickly rejected. Besides, the opportunity for an apotheosis of self-sacrifice was past. Nothing remained now but to refuse the proffered bribe of claim and cabin by letter, for he must not wait their return. He tore a leaf from a blotted diary, begun and abandoned long since, and essayed to write. Scrawl after scrawl was torn up, until his fury had cooled down to a frigid third personality. "Mr. John Ford regrets to inform his late partners that their tender of house, of furniture," however, seemed too inconsistent with the pork-barrel table he was writing on; a more eloquent renunciation of their offer became frivolous and idiotic from a caricature of Union Mills, label and all, that appeared suddenly on the other side of the leaf; and when he at last indited a satisfactory and impassioned exposition of his feelings, the legible addendum of "Oh, ain't you glad you're out of the wilderness!"--the forgotten first line of a popular song, which no scratching would erase--seemed too like an ironical postscript to be thought of for a moment. He threw aside his pen and cast the discordant record of past foolish pastime into the dead ashes of the hearth.

How quiet it was. With the cessation of the rain the wind too had gone down, and scarcely a breath of air came through the open door. He walked to the threshold and gazed on the hushed prospect. In this listless attitude he was faintly conscious of a distant reverberation, a mere phantom of sound--perhaps the explosion of a distant blast in the hills--that left the silence more marked and oppressive. As he turned again into the cabin a change seemed to have come over it. It already looked old and decayed. The loneliness of years of desertion seemed to have taken possession of it; the atmosphere of dry rot was in the beams and rafters. To his excited fancy the few disordered blankets and articles of clothing seemed dropping to pieces; in one of the bunks there was a hideous resemblance in the longitudinal heap of clothing to a withered and mummied corpse. So it might look in after years when some passing stranger--but he stopped. A dread of the place was beginning to creep over him; a dread of the days to come, when the monotonous sunshine should lay bare the loneliness of these walls; the long, long days of endless blue and cloudless, overhanging solitude; summer days when the wearying, incessant trade winds should sing around that empty shell and voice its desolation. He gathered together hastily a few articles that were especially his own--rather that the free communion of the camp, from indifference or accident, had left wholly to him. He hesitated for a moment over his rifle, but, scrupulous in his wounded pride, turned away and left the familiar weapon that in the dark days had so often provided the dinner or breakfast of the little household. Candor compels me to state that his equipment was not large nor eminently practical. His scant pack was a light weight for even his young shoulders, but I fear he thought more of getting away from the Past than providing for the Future.

With this vague but sole purpose he left the cabin, and almost mechanically turned his steps towards the creek he had crossed that morning. He knew that by this route he would avoid meeting his companions; its difficulties and circuitousness would exercise his feverish limbs and give him time for reflection. He had determined to leave the claim, but whence he had not yet considered. He reached the bank of the creek

where he had stood two hours before; it seemed to him two years. He looked curiously at his reflection in one of the broad pools of overflow, and fancied he looked older. He watched the rush and outset of the turbid current hurrying to meet the South Fork, and to eventually lose itself in the yellow Sacramento. Even in his preoccupation he was impressed with a likeness to himself and his companions in this flood that had burst its peaceful boundaries. In the drifting fragments of one of their forgotten flumes washed from the bank, he fancied he saw an omen of the disintegration and decay of the Lone Star claim.

The strange hush in the air that he had noticed before--a calm so inconsistent with that hour and the season as to seem portentous--became more marked in contrast to the feverish rush of the turbulent water-course. A few clouds lazily huddled in the west apparently had gone to rest with the sun on beds of somnolent poppies. There was a gleam as of golden water everywhere along the horizon, washing out the cold snowpeaks, and drowning even the rising moon. The creek caught it here and there, until, in grim irony, it seemed to bear their broken sluice-boxes and useless engines on the very Pactolian stream they had been hopefully created to direct and carry. But by some peculiar trick of the atmosphere, the perfect plenitude of that golden sunset glory was lavished on the rugged sides and tangled crest of the Lone Star mountain. That isolated peak, the landmark of their claim, the gaunt monument of their folly, transfigured in the evening splendor, kept its radiance unquenched long after the glow had fallen from the encompassing skies, and when at last the rising moon, step by step, put out the fires along the winding valley and plains, and crept up the bosky sides of the canyon, the vanishing sunset was lost only to reappear as a golden crown.

The eyes of the young man were fixed upon it with more than a momentary picturesque interest. It had been the favorite ground of his prospecting exploits, its lowest flank had been scarred in the old enthusiastic days with hydraulic engines, or pierced with shafts, but its central position in the claim and its superior height had always given it a commanding view of the extent of their valley and its approaches, and it was this practical pre-eminence that alone attracted him at that moment. He knew that from its crest he would be able to distinguish the figures of his companions, as they crossed the valley near the cabin, in the growing moonlight. Thus he could avoid encountering them on his way to the high road, and yet see them, perhaps, for the last time. Even in his sense of injury there was a strange satisfaction in the thought.

The ascent was toilsome, but familiar. All along the dim trail he was accompanied by gentler memories of the past, that seemed, like the faint odor of spiced leaves and fragrant grasses wet with the rain and crushed beneath his ascending tread, to exhale the sweeter perfume in his effort to subdue or rise above them. There was the thicket of manzanita, where they had broken noonday bread together; here was the rock beside their maiden shaft, where they had poured a wild libation in boyish enthusiasm of success; and here the ledge where their first flag, a red shirt heroically sacrificed, was displayed from a long-handled shovel to the gaze of admirers below. When he at last reached the summit, the mysterious hush was still in the air, as if in breathless sympathy with his expedition. In the west, the plain was faintly illuminated, but disclosed no moving figures. He turned towards the rising moon, and moved slowly to the eastern edge. Suddenly he stopped. Another step would have been his last! He stood upon the crumbling edge of a precipice. A landslide had taken place on the eastern flank, leaving the gaunt ribs and fleshless bones of Lone Star mountain bare in the moonlight. He understood now the strange rumble and reverberation he had heard; he understood now the strange hush of bird and beast in brake and thicket!

Although a single rapid glance convinced him that the slide had taken place in an unfrequented part of the mountain, above an inaccessible canyon, and reflection assured him his companions could not have reached that distance when it took place, a feverish impulse led him to descend a few rods in the track of the avalanche. The frequent recurrence of outcrop and angle made this comparatively easy. Here he called aloud; the feeble echo of his own voice seemed only a dull impertinence to the significant silence. He turned to reascend; the furrowed flank of the mountain before him lay full in the moonlight. To his excited fancy, a dozen luminous star-like points in the rocky crevices started into life as he faced them. Throwing his arm over the ledge above him, he supported himself for a moment by what appeared to be a projection of the solid rock. It trembled slightly. As he raised himself to its level, his heart stopped beating. It was simply a fragment detached from the outcrop, lying loosely on the ledge but upholding him by ITS OWN WEIGHT ONLY. He examined it with trembling fingers; the encumbering soil fell from its sides and left its smoothed and worn protuberances glistening in the moonlight. It was virgin gold!

Looking back upon that moment afterwards, he remembered that he was not dazed, dazzled, or startled. It did not come to him as a discovery or an accident, a stroke of chance or a caprice of fortune. He saw it all in that supreme moment; Nature had worked out their poor deduction. What their feeble engines had essayed spasmodically and helplessly against the curtain of soil that hid the treasure, the elements had achieved with mightier but more patient forces. The slow sapping of the winter rains had loosened the soil from the auriferous rock, even while the swollen stream was carrying their impotent and shattered engines to the sea.

What mattered that his single arm could not lift the treasure he had found! What mattered that to unfix those glittering stars would still tax both skill and patience! The work was done, the goal was reached! even his boyish impatience was content with that. He rose slowly to his feet, unstrapped his long-handled shovel from his back, secured it in the crevice, and quietly regained the summit.

It was all his own! His own by right of discovery under the law of the land, and without accepting a favor from THEM. He recalled even the fact that it was HIS prospecting on the mountain that first suggested the existence of gold in the outcrop and the use of the hydraulic. HE had never abandoned that belief, whatever the others had done. He dwelt somewhat indignantly to himself on this circumstance, and half unconsciously faced defiantly towards the plain below. But it was sleeping peacefully in the full sight of the moon, without life or motion. He looked at the stars; it was still far from midnight. His companions had no doubt long since returned to the cabin to prepare for their midnight journey. They were discussing him, perhaps laughing at him, or worse, pitying him and his bargain. Yet here was his bargain! A slight laugh he gave vent to here startled him a little, it sounded so hard and so unmirthful, and so unlike, as he oddly fancied, what he really THOUGHT. But WHAT did he think?

Nothing mean or revengeful; no, they never would say THAT. When he had taken out all the surface gold and put the mine in working order, he would send them each a draft for a thousand dollars. Of course, if they were ever ill or poor he would do more. One of the first, the very first things he should do would be to send them each a handsome gun and tell them that he only asked in return the old-fashioned rifle that once was his. Looking back at the moment in after years, he wondered that, with this exception, he made no plans for his own future, or the way he should dispose of his newly acquired wealth. This was the more singular as it had been the custom of the five partners to lie awake at night, audibly comparing with each other what they would do in case they made a strike. He remembered how, Alnaschar-like, they nearly separated once over a difference in the disposal of a hundred thousand dollars that they never had, nor expected to have. He remembered how Union Mills always began his career as a millionaire by a "square meal" at Delmonico's; how the Right Bower's initial step was always a trip home "to see his mother"; how the Left Bower would immediately placate the parents of his beloved with priceless gifts (it may be parenthetically remarked that the parents and the beloved one were as hypothetical as the fortune); and how the Judge would make his first start as a capitalist by breaking a certain faro bank in Sacramento. He himself had been equally eloquent in extravagant fancy in those penniless days, he who now was quite cold and impassive beside the more extravagant reality.

How different it might have been! If they had only waited a day longer! if they had only broken their resolves to him kindly and parted in good will! How he would long ere this have rushed to greet them with the joyful news! How they would have danced around it, sung themselves hoarse, laughed down their enemies, and run up the flag triumphantly on the summit of the Lone Star Mountain! How they would have crowned him "the Old Man," "the hero of the camp!" How he would have told them the whole story; how some strange instinct had impelled him to ascend the summit, and how another step on that summit would have precipitated him into the canyon! And how--but what if somebody else, Union Mills or the Judge, had been the first discoverer? Might they not have meanly kept the secret from him; have selfishly helped themselves and done--

"What YOU are doing now."

The hot blood rushed to his cheek, as if a strange voice were at his ear. For a moment he could not believe that it came from his own pale lips until he found himself speaking. He rose to his feet, tingling with shame, and began hurriedly to descend the mountain.

He would go to them, tell them of his discovery, let them give him his share, and leave them forever. It

was the only thing to be done, strange that he had not thought of it at once. Yet it was hard, very hard and cruel to be forced to meet them again. What had he done to suffer this mortification? For a moment he actually hated this vulgar treasure that had forever buried under its gross ponderability the light and careless past, and utterly crushed out the poetry of their old, indolent, happy existence.

He was sure to find them waiting at the Cross Roads where the coach came past. It was three miles away, yet he could get there in time if he hastened. It was a wise and practical conclusion of his evening's work, a lame and impotent conclusion to his evening's indignation. No matter. They would perhaps at first think he had come to weakly follow them, perhaps they would at first doubt his story. No matter. He bit his lips to keep down the foolish rising tears, but still went blindly forward.

He saw not the beautiful night, cradled in the dark hills, swathed in luminous mists, and hushed in the awe of its own loveliness! Here and there the moon had laid her calm face on lake and overflow, and gone to sleep embracing them, until the whole plain seemed to be lifted into infinite quiet. Walking on as in a dream, the black, impenetrable barriers of skirting thickets opened and gave way to vague distances that it appeared impossible to reach, dim vistas that seemed unapproachable. Gradually he seemed himself to become a part of the mysterious night. He was becoming as pulseless, as calm, as passionless.

What was that? A shot in the direction of the cabin! yet so faint, so echoless, so ineffective in the vast silence, that he would have thought it his fancy but for the strange instinctive jar upon his sensitive nerves. Was it an accident, or was it an intentional signal to him? He stopped; it was not repeated, the silence reasserted itself, but this time with an ominous death-like suggestion. A sudden and terrible thought crossed his mind. He cast aside his pack and all encumbering weight, took a deep breath, lowered his head and darted like a deer in the direction of the challenge.

CHAPTER II

The exodus of the seceding partners of the Lone Star claim had been scarcely an imposing one. For the first five minutes after quitting the cabin, the procession was straggling and vagabond. Unwonted exertion had exaggerated the lameness of some, and feebleness of moral purpose had predisposed the others to obtrusive musical exhibition. Union Mills limped and whistled with affected abstraction; the Judge whistled and limped with affected earnestness. The Right Bower led the way with some show of definite design; the Left Bower followed with his hands in his pockets. The two feebler natures, drawn together in unconscious sympathy, looked vaguely at each other for support.

"You see," said the Judge, suddenly, as if triumphantly concluding an argument, "there ain't anything better for a young fellow than independence. Nature, so to speak, points the way. Look at the animals."

"There's a skunk hereabouts," said Union Mills, who was supposed to be gifted with aristocratically sensitive nostrils, "within ten miles of this place; like as not crossing the Ridge. It's always my luck to happen out just at such times. I don't see the necessity anyhow of trapesing round the claim now, if we calculate to leave it to-night."

Both men waited to observe if the suggestion was taken up by the Right and Left Bower moodily plodding ahead. No response following, the Judge shamelessly abandoned his companion.

"You wouldn't stand snoopin' round instead of lettin' the Old Man get used to the idea alone? No; I could see all along that he was takin' it in, takin' it in, kindly but slowly, and I reckoned the best thing for us to do was to git up and git until he'd got round it." The Judge's voice was slightly raised for the benefit of the two before him.

"Didn't he say," remarked the Right Bower, stopping suddenly and facing the others, "didn't he say that that new trader was goin' to let him have some provisions anyway?"

Union Mills turned appealingly to the Judge; that gentleman was forced to reply, "Yes; I remember distinctly he said it. It was one of the things I was particular about on his account," responded the Judge, with the air of having arranged it all himself with the new trader. "I remember I was easier in my mind about it."

"But didn't he say," queried the Left Bower, also stopping short, "suthin' about it's being contingent on our doing some work on the race?"

The Judge turned for support to Union Mills, who, however, under the hollow pretense of preparing for a long conference, had luxuriously seated himself on a stump. The Judge sat down also, and replied, hesitatingly, "Well, yes! Us or him."

"Us or him," repeated the Right Bower, with gloomy irony. "And you ain't quite clear in your mind, are you, if YOU haven't done the work already? You're just killing yourself with this spontaneous, promiscuous, and premature overwork; that's what's the matter with you."

"I reckon I heard somebody say suthin' about it's being a Chinaman's three-day job," interpolated the Left Bower, with equal irony, "but I ain't quite clear in my mind about that."

"It'll be a sorter distraction for the Old Man," said Union Mills, feebly--"kinder take his mind off his loneliness."

Nobody taking the least notice of the remark, union Mills stretched out his legs more comfortably and took out his pipe. He had scarcely done so when the Right Bower, wheeling suddenly, set off in the direction of the creek. The Left Bower, after a slight pause, followed without a word. The Judge, wisely conceiving it better to join the stronger party, ran feebly after him, and left Union Mills to bring up a weak and vacillating rear.

Their course, diverging from Lone Star Mountain, led them now directly to the bend of the creek, the base of their old ineffectual operations. Here was the beginning of the famous tail-race that skirted the new trader's claim, and then lost its way in a swampy hollow. It was choked with debris; a thin, yellow stream that once ran through it seemed to have stopped work when they did, and gone into greenish liquidation.

They had scarcely spoken during this brief journey, and had received no other explanation from the Right Bower, who led them, than that afforded by his mute example when he reached the race. Leaping into it without a word, he at once began to clear away the broken timbers and driftwood. Fired by the spectacle of what appeared to be a new and utterly frivolous game, the men gayly leaped after him, and were soon engaged in a fascinating struggle with the impeded race. The Judge forgot his lameness in springing over a broken sluice-box; Union Mills forgot his whistle in a happy imitation of a Chinese coolie's song. Nevertheless, after ten minutes of this mild dissipation, the pastime flagged; Union Mills was beginning to rub his leg when a distant rumble shook the earth. 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 o' them climaxes of poetic justice he's always huntin' up. It's easy to see what's happened. One o' 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 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, "I allus said, 'Go slow, go slow. You just hold on and suthin' will happen.' And," he added, triumphantly, "you see suthin' has happened. I don't want to take credit to myself, but I reckoned on them Excelsior boys bein' 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 sabe of the world. He's improved a good deal in euchre lately, and in poker--well! he's got that sorter dreamy, listenin'-to-the-angels kind o' 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 step to make a card sharp out of him. We're not doin' Chinamen'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's 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 waters, 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 saying we reckoned our canoe was too full?"

"Wasn't that our idea?" returned the Left Bower, indifferently. Confounded by this practical expression of his own unformulated good intentions, the Right Bower was staggered.

"Speakin' of the Old Man," broke in the Judge, with characteristic infelicity, "I reckon he'll sort o' 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 sort o' stimulat'in'. I reckon we'll miss it too, somewhat. Don't you remember, boys, the night we put up that little sell 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 go off and settle all 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, it's some satisfaction to know we did our duty by the young fellow even in those little things." He turned for confirmation of their general disinterestedness to the Right Bower, but he was already striding away, uneasily conscious of the lazy following of the Left Bower, like a laggard conscience at 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 lay through the shadow of Lone Star Mountain, deepened here and there by the slight, bosky ridges that, starting from its base, crept across the plain like vast roots of its 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 lounged 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 black outline of the Lone Star cabin stood out distinctly in the illumined space. There was the blank, sightless, external glitter of 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 callous to it. 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 a certain superstitious remorse was the instinct of the two others, and without heeding 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 still 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, his 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, foraging for wood and water. No, sir! Coming 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 coming 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! 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 here for the first comer," 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 towards 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 collectedly. "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 d---d 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 had 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 towards him, picked up the cards, and began mechanically to "make a patience," on which Union Mills gazed with ostentatious interest, but with eyes furtively 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 unavoidably 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." "Oh 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 half new to him, but 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 previous 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 spontaneous."

The difference in the sentiment of the procession that once more issued 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 an 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 out the race!"

It seemed so clear that Providence had taken the partners of the Lone Star directly in hand that they faced the toilsome ascent of the mountain with 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--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 the 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 showing 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 towards 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 round, boys! God bless you all, boys! To think we didn't know it all this while!"

"Know what?"

"Merry Christmas!"