

BRET HARTE

THE HERITAGE OF
DEDLOW MARSH AND
OTHER TALES

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Marsh and Other Tales**

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Содержание

THE HERITAGE OF DEDLOW MARSH	5
I	5
II	9
III	15
IV	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

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THE HERITAGE OF DEDLOW MARSH

I

The sun was going down on the Dedlow Marshes. The tide was following it fast as if to meet the reddening lines of sky and water in the west, leaving the foreground to grow blacker and blacker every moment, and to bring out in startling contrast the few half-filled and half-lit pools left behind and forgotten. The strong breath of the Pacific fanning their surfaces at times kindled them into a dull glow like dying embers. A cloud of sand-pipers rose white from one of the nearer lagoons, swept in a long eddying ring against the sunset, and became a black and dropping rain to seaward. The long sinuous line of channel, fading with the light and ebbing with the tide, began to give off here and there light puffs of gray-winged birds like sudden exhalations. High in the darkening sky the long arrow-headed lines of geese and 'brant' pointed towards the upland. As the light grew more uncertain the air at times was filled with the rush of viewless and melancholy wings, or became plaintive with far-off cries and lamentations. As the Marshes grew blacker the far-scattered tussocks and accretions on its level surface began to loom in exaggerated outline, and two human figures, suddenly emerging erect on the bank of the hidden channel, assumed the proportion of giants.

When they had moored their unseen boat, they still appeared for some moments to be moving vaguely and aimlessly round the spot where they had disembarked. But as the eye became familiar with the darkness it was seen that they were really advancing inland, yet with a slowness of progression and deviousness of course that appeared inexplicable to the distant spectator. Presently it was evident that this seemingly even, vast, black expanse was traversed and intersected by inky creeks and small channels, which made human progression difficult and dangerous. As they appeared nearer and their figures took more natural proportions, it could be seen that each carried a gun; that one was a young girl, although dressed so like her companion in shaggy pea-jacket and sou'wester as to be scarcely distinguished from him above the short skirt that came halfway down her high india-rubber fishing-boots. By the time they had reached firmer ground, and turned to look back at the sunset, it could be also seen that the likeness between their faces was remarkable. Both, had crisp, black, tightly curling hair; both had dark eyes and heavy eyebrows; both had quick vivid complexions, slightly heightened by the sea and wind. But more striking than their similarity of coloring was the likeness of expression and bearing. Both wore the same air of picturesque energy; both bore themselves with a like graceful effrontery and self-possession.

The young man continued his way. The young girl lingered for a moment looking seaward, with her small brown hand lifted to shade her eyes,—a precaution which her heavy eyebrows and long lashes seemed to render utterly gratuitous.

"Come along, Mag. What are ye waitin' for?" said the young man impatiently.

"Nothin'. Lookin' at that boat from the Fort." Her clear eyes were watching a small skiff, invisible to less keen-sighted observers, aground upon a flat near the mouth of the channel. "Them chaps will have a high ole time gunnin' thar, stuck in the mud, and the tide goin' out like sixty!"

"Never you mind the sodgers," returned her companion, aggressively, "they kin take care o' their own precious skins, or Uncle Sam will do it for 'em, I reckon. Anyhow the people—that's you and me, Mag—is expected to pay for their foolishness. That's what they're sent yer for. Ye oughter to be satisfied with that," he added with deep sarcasm.

"I reckon they ain't expected to do much off o' dry land, and they can't help bein' queer on the water," returned the young girl with a reflecting sense of justice.

"Then they ain't no call to go gunnin', and wastin' Guv'nment powder on ducks instead o' Injins."

"That's so," said the girl thoughtfully. "Wonder ef Guv'nment pays for them frocks the Kernel's girls went cavortin' round Logport in last Sunday—they looked like a cirkis."

"Like ez not the old Kernel gets it outer contracts—one way or another. WE pay for it all the same," he added gloomily.

"Jest the same ez if they were MY clothes," said the girl, with a quick, fiery, little laugh, "ain't it? Wonder how they'd like my sayin' that to 'em when they was prancin' round, eh, Jim?"

But her companion was evidently unprepared for this sweeping feminine deduction, and stopped it with masculine promptitude.

"Look yer—instead o' botherin' your head about what the Fort girls wear, you'd better trot along a little more lively. It's late enough now."

"But these darned boots hurt like pizen," said the girl, limping. "They swallowed a lot o' water over the tops while I was wadin' down there, and my feet go swashin' around like in a churn every step."

"Lean on me, baby," he returned, passing his arm around her waist, and dropping her head smartly on his shoulder. "Thar!" The act was brotherly and slightly contemptuous, but it was sufficient to at once establish their kinship.

They continued on thus for some moments in silence, the girl, I fear, after the fashion of her sex, taking the fullest advantage of this slightly sentimental and caressing attitude. They were moving now along the edge of the Marsh, parallel with the line of rapidly fading horizon, following some trail only known to their keen youthful eyes. It was growing darker and darker. The cries of the sea-birds had ceased; even the call of a belated plover had died away inland; the hush of death lay over the black funereal pall of marsh at their side. The tide had run out with the day. Even the sea-breeze had lulled in this dead slack-water of all nature, as if waiting outside the bar with the ocean, the stars, and the night.

Suddenly the girl stopped and halted her companion. The faint far sound of a bugle broke the silence, if the idea of interruption could have been conveyed by the two or three exquisite vibrations that seemed born of that silence itself, and to fade and die in it without break or discord. Yet it was only the 'retreat' call from the Fort two miles distant and invisible.

The young girl's face had become irradiated, and her small mouth half opened as she listened. "Do you know, Jim," she said with a confidential sigh, "I allus put words to that when I hear it—it's so pow'ful pretty. It allus goes to me like this: 'Goes the day, Far away, With the light, And the night Comes along—Comes along—Comes along—Like a-a so-o-ong.'" She here lifted her voice, a sweet, fresh, boyish contralto, in such an admirable imitation of the bugle that her brother, after the fashion of more select auditors, was for a moment quite convinced that the words meant something. Nevertheless, as a brother, it was his duty to crush this weakness. "Yes; and it says: 'shut your head, Go to bed,'" he returned irascibly; "and YOU'D better come along, if we're goin' to hev any supper. There's Yeller Bob hez got ahead of us over there with the game already."

The girl glanced towards a slouching burdened figure that now appeared to be preceding them, straightened herself suddenly, and then looked attentively towards the Marsh.

"Not the sodgers again?" said her brother impatiently.

"No," she said quickly; "but if that don't beat anythin'! I'd hev sworn, Jim, that Yeller Bob was somewhere behind us. I saw him only jest now when 'Taps' sounded, somewhere over thar." She pointed with a half-uneasy expression in quite another direction from that in which the slouching Yellow Bob had just loomed.

"Tell ye what, Mag, makin' poetry outer bugle calls hez kinder muddled ye. THAT'S Yeller Bob ahead, and ye orter know Injins well enuff by this time to remember that they allus crop up jest when ye don't expect them. And there's the bresh jest afore us. Come!"

The 'bresh,' or low bushes, was really a line of stunted willows and alders that seemed to have gradually sunk into the level of the plain, but increased in size farther inland, until they grew to the height and density of a wood. Seen from the channel it had the appearance of a green cape or promontory thrust upon the Marsh. Passing through its tangled recesses, with the aid of some unerring instinct, the two companions emerged upon another and much larger level that seemed as illimitable as the bay. The strong breath of the ocean lying just beyond the bar and estuary they were now facing came to them salt and humid as another tide. The nearer expanse of open water reflected the after-glow, and lightened the landscape. And between the two wayfarers and the horizon rose, bleak and startling, the strange outlines of their home.

At first it seemed a ruined colonnade of many pillars, whose base and pediment were buried in the earth, supporting a long parallelogram of entablature and cornices. But a second glance showed it to be a one-storied building, upheld above the Marsh by numberless piles placed at regular distances; some of them sunken or inclined from the perpendicular, increasing the first illusion. Between these pillars, which permitted a free circulation of air, and, at extraordinary tides, even the waters of the bay itself, the level waste of marsh, the bay, the surges of the bar, and finally the red horizon line, were distinctly visible. A railed gallery or platform, supported also on piles, and reached by steps from the Marsh, ran around the building, and gave access to the several rooms and offices.

But if the appearance of this lacustrine and amphibious dwelling was striking, and not without a certain rude and massive grandeur, its grounds and possessions, through which the brother and sister were still picking their way, were even more grotesque and remarkable. Over a space of half a dozen acres the flotsam and jetsam of years of tidal offerings were collected, and even guarded with a certain care. The blackened hulks of huge uprooted trees, scarcely distinguishable from the fragments of genuine wrecks beside them, were securely fastened by chains to stakes and piles driven in the marsh, while heaps of broken and disjointed bamboo orange crates, held together by ropes of fibre, glistened like ligamented bones heaped in the dead valley. Masts, spars, fragments of shell-encrusted boats, binnacles, round-houses and galleys, and part of the after-deck of a coasting schooner, had ceased their wanderings and found rest in this vast cemetery of the sea. The legend on a wheel-house, the lettering on a stern or bow, served for mortuary inscription. Wailed over by the trade winds, mourned by lamenting sea-birds, once every year the tide visited its lost dead and left them wet with its tears.

To such a spot and its surroundings the atmosphere of tradition and mystery was not wanting. Six years ago Boone Culpepper had built the house, and brought to it his wife—variously believed to be a gypsy, a Mexican, a bright mulatto, a Digger Indian, a South Sea princess from Tahiti, somebody else's wife—but in reality a little Creole woman from New Orleans, with whom he had contracted a marriage, with other gambling debts, during a winter's vacation from his home in Virginia. At the end of two years she had died, succumbing, as differently stated, from perpetual wet feet, or the misanthropic idiosyncrasies of her husband, and leaving behind her a girl of twelve and a boy of sixteen to console him. How futile was this bequest may be guessed from a brief summary of Mr. Culpepper's peculiarities. They were the development of a singular form of aggrandizement and misanthropy. On his arrival at Logport he had bought a part of the apparently valueless Dedlow Marsh from the Government at less than a dollar an acre, continuing his singular investment year by year until he was the owner of three leagues of amphibious domain. It was then discovered that this property carried with it the WATER FRONT of divers valuable and convenient sites for manufactures and the commercial ports of a noble bay, as well as the natural embarcaderos of some 'lumbering' inland settlements. Boone Culpepper would not sell. Boone Culpepper would not rent or lease. Boone Culpepper held an invincible blockade of his neighbors, and the progress and improvement he despised—granting only, after a royal fashion, occasional license, revocable at pleasure, in the shape

of tolls, which amply supported him, with the game he shot in his kingfisher's eyrie on the Marsh. Even the Government that had made him powerful was obliged to 'condemn' a part of his property at an equitable price for the purposes of Fort Redwood, in which the adjacent town of Logport shared. And Boone Culpepper, unable to resist the act, refused to receive the compensation or quit-claim the town. In his scant intercourse with his neighbors he always alluded to it as his own, showed it to his children as part of their strange inheritance, and exhibited the starry flag that floated from the Fort as a flaunting insult to their youthful eyes. Hated, feared, and superstitiously shunned by some, regarded as a madman by others, familiarly known as 'The Kingfisher of Dedlow,' Boone Culpepper was one day found floating dead in his skiff, with a charge of shot through his head and shoulders. The shot-gun lying at his feet at the bottom of the boat indicated the 'accident' as recorded in the verdict of the coroner's jury—but not by the people. A thousand rumors of murder or suicide prevailed, but always with the universal rider, 'Served him right.' So invincible was this feeling that but few attended his last rites, which took place at high water. The delay of the officiating clergyman lost the tide; the homely catafalque—his own boat—was left aground on the Marsh, and deserted by all mourners except the two children. Whatever he had instilled into them by precept and example, whatever took place that night in their lonely watch by his bier on the black marshes, it was certain that those who confidently looked for any change in the administration of the Dedlow Marsh were cruelly mistaken. The old Kingfisher was dead, but he had left in the nest two young birds, more beautiful and graceful, it was true, yet as fierce and tenacious of beak and talon.

II

Arriving at the house, the young people ascended the outer flight of wooden steps, which bore an odd likeness to the companion-way of a vessel, and the gallery, or 'deck,' as it was called—where a number of nets, floats, and buoys thrown over the railing completed the nautical resemblance. This part of the building was evidently devoted to kitchen, dining-room, and domestic offices; the principal room in the centre serving as hall or living-room, and communicating on the other side with two sleeping apartments. It was of considerable size, with heavy lateral beams across the ceiling—built, like the rest of the house, with a certain maritime strength—and looked not unlike a saloon cabin. An enormous open Franklin stove between the windows, as large as a chimney, blazing with drift-wood, gave light and heat to the apartment, and brought into flickering relief the boarded walls hung with the spoils of sea and shore, and glittering with gun-barrels. Fowling-pieces of all sizes, from the long ducking-gun mounted on a swivel for boat use to the light single-barrel or carbine, stood in racks against the walls; game-bags, revolvers in their holsters, hunting and fishing knives in their sheaths, depended from hooks above them. In one corner stood a harpoon; in another, two or three Indian spears for salmon. The carpetless floor and rude chairs and settles were covered with otter, mink, beaver, and a quantity of valuable seal-skins, with a few larger pelts of the bear and elk. The only attempt at decoration was the displayed wings and breasts of the wood and harlequin duck, the muir, the cormorant, the gull, the gannet, and the femininely delicate half-mourning of petrel and plover, nailed against the wall. The influence of the sea was dominant above all, and asserted its saline odors even through the spice of the curling drift-wood smoke that half veiled the ceiling.

A berry-eyed old Indian woman with the complexion of dried salmon; her daughter, also with berry eyes, and with a face that seemed wholly made of a moist laugh; 'Yellow Bob,' a Digger 'buck,' so called from the prevailing ochre markings of his cheek, and 'Washooh,' an ex-chief; a nondescript in a blanket, looking like a cheap and dirty doll whose fibrous hair was badly nailed on his carved wooden head, composed the Culpepper household. While the two former were preparing supper in the adjacent dining-room, Yellow Bob, relieved of his burden of game, appeared on the gallery and beckoned mysteriously to his master through the window. James Culpepper went out, returned quickly, and after a minute's hesitation and an uneasy glance towards his sister, who had meantime pushed back her sou'wester from her forehead, and without taking off her jacket had dropped into a chair before the fire with her back towards him, took his gun noiselessly from the rack, and saying carelessly that he would be back in a moment, disappeared.

Left to herself, Maggie coolly pulled off her long boots and stockings, and comfortably opposed to the fire two very pretty feet and ankles, whose delicate purity was slightly blue-bleached by confinement in the tepid sea-water. The contrast of their waxen whiteness with her blue woolen skirt, and with even the skin of her sunburnt hands and wrists, apparently amused her, and she sat for some moments with her elbows on her knees, her skirts slightly raised, contemplating them, and curling her toes with evident satisfaction. The firelight playing upon the rich coloring of her face, the fringe of jet-black curls that almost met the thick sweep of eyebrows, and left her only a white strip of forehead, her short upper lip and small chin, rounded but resolute, completed a piquant and striking figure. The rich brown shadows on the smoke-stained walls and ceiling, the occasional starting into relief of the scutcheons of brilliant plumage, and the momentary glitter of the steel barrels, made a quaint background to this charming picture. Sitting there, and following some lingering memory of her tramp on the Marsh, she hummed to herself a few notes of the bugle call that had impressed her—at first softly, and finally with the full pitch of her voice.

Suddenly she stopped.

There was a faint and unmistakable rapping on the floor beneath her. It was distinct, but cautiously given, as if intended to be audible to her alone. For a moment she stood upright, her feet

still bare and glistening, on the otter skin that served as a rug. There were two doors to the room, one from which her brother had disappeared, which led to the steps, the other giving on the back gallery, looking inland. With a quick instinct she caught up her gun and ran to that one, but not before a rapid scramble near the railing was followed by a cautious opening of the door. She was just in time to shut it on the extended arm and light blue sleeve of an army overcoat that protruded through the opening, and for a moment threw her whole weight against it.

"A dhrop of whiskey, Miss, for the love of God."

She retained her hold, cocked her weapon, and stepped back a pace from the door. The blue sleeve was followed by the rest of the overcoat, and a blue cap with the infantry blazoning, and the letter H on its peak. They were for the moment more distinguishable than the man beneath them—grimed and blackened with the slime of the Marsh. But what could be seen of his mud-stained face was more grotesque than terrifying. A combination of weakness and audacity, insinuation and timidity struggled through the dirt for expression. His small blue eyes were not ill-natured, and even the intruding arm trembled more from exhaustion than passion.

"On'y a dhrop, Miss," he repeated piteously, "and av ye pleeze, quick! afore I'm stharved with the cold entoirely."

She looked at him intently—without lowering her gun.

"Who are you?"

"Thin, it's the truth I'll tell ye, Miss—whisth then!" he said in a half-whisper; "I'm a deserter!"

"Then it was YOU that was doggin' us on the Marsh?"

"It was the sarjint I was lavin', Miss."

She looked at him hesitatingly.

"Stay outside there; if you move a step into the room, I'll blow you out of it."

He stepped back on the gallery. She closed the door, bolted it, and still holding the gun, opened a cupboard, poured out a glass of whiskey, and returning to the door, opened it and handed him the liquor.

She watched him drain it eagerly, saw the fiery stimulant put life into his shivering frame, trembling hands, and kindle his dull eye—and—quietly raised her gun again.

"Ah, put it down, Miss, put it down! Fwhot's the use? Sure the bullets yee carry in them oiyes of yours is more deadly! It's out here oi'll sthand, glory be to God, all night, without movin' a fut till the sarjint comes to take me, av ye won't levil them oiyes at me like that. Ah, whirra! look at that now! but it's a gooddess she is—the livin' Jaynus of warr, standin' there like a statoo, wid her alybaster fut put forward."

In her pride and conscious superiority, any suggestion of shame at thus appearing before a common man and a mendicant was as impossible to her nature as it would have been to a queen or the goddess of his simile. His presence and his compliment alike passed her calm modesty unchallenged. The wretched scamp recognized the fact and felt its power, and it was with a superstitious reverence asserting itself through his native extravagance that he raised his grimy hand to his cap in military salute and became respectfully rigid.

"Then the sodgers were huntin' YOU?" she said thoughtfully, lowering her weapon.

"Thru for you, Miss—they worr, and it's meself that was lyn' flat in the ditch wid me faytures makin' an illigant cast in the mud—more betoken, as ye see even now—and the sarjint and his daytail thrampin' round me. It was thin that the mortal cold sthru' thro' me mouth, and made me wake for the whiskey that would resthore me."

"What did you desert fer?"

"Ah, list to that now! Fwhat did I desert fer? Shure ev there was the ghost of an inemy round, it's meself that would be in the front now! But it was the letthers from me ould mother, Miss, that is sthru' wid a mortal illness—long life to her!—in County Clare, and me sisthers in Ninth Avenue in New York, fornint the daypo, that is brekken their harruts over me listin' in the Fourth Infanthry

to do duty in a haythen wilderness. Av it was the cavalry—and it's me own father that was in the Innishkillen Dthragoons, Miss—oi wouldn't moind. Wid a horse betune me legs, it's on parade oi'd be now, Miss, and not wandhering over the bare flure of the Marsh, stharved wid the cold, the thirst, and hunger, wid the mud and the moire thick on me; facin' an illigant young leddy as is the ekal ov a Fayld Marshal's darter—not to sphake ov Kernal Preston's—ez couldn't hold a candle to her."

Brought up on the Spanish frontier, Maggie Culpepper was one of the few American girls who was not familiar with the Irish race. The rare smile that momentarily lit up her petulant mouth seemed to justify the intruder's praise. But it passed quickly, and she returned dryly:

"That means you want more drink, suthin' to eat, and clothes. Suppose my brother comes back and ketches you here?"

"Shure, Miss, he's just now hunten me, along wid his two haythen Diggers, beyond the laygoon there. It worr the yellar one that sphotted me lyin' there in the ditch; it worr only your own oiyes, Miss—more power to their beauty for that!—that saw me folly him unbeknownst here; and that desaved them, ye see!"

The young girl remained for an instant silent and thoughtful.

"We're no friends of the Fort," she said finally, "but I don't reckon for that reason my brother will cotton to YOU. Stay out thar where ye are, till I come to ye. If you hear me singin' again, you'll know he's come back, and ye'd better scoot with what you've already got, and be thankful."

She shut the door again and locked it, went into the dining-room, returned with some provisions wrapped in paper, took a common wicker flask from the wall, passed into her brother's bedroom, and came out with a flannel shirt, overalls, and a coarse Indian blanket, and, reopening the door, placed them before the astonished and delighted vagabond. His eye glistened; he began, "Glory be to God," but for once his habitual extravagance failed him. Nature triumphed with a more eloquent silence over his well-worn art. He hurriedly wiped his begrimed face and eyes with the shirt she had given him, and catching the sleeve of her rough pea-jacket in his dirty hand, raised it to his lips.

"Go!" she said imperiously. "Get away while you can."

"Av it vas me last words—it's speechless oi am," he stammered, and disappeared over the railing.

She remained for a moment holding the door half open, and gazing into the darkness that seemed to flow in like a tide. Then she shut it, and going into her bedroom resumed her interrupted toilette. When she emerged again she was smartly stockinged and slippers, and even the blue serge skirt was exchanged for a bright print, with a white fichu tied around her throat. An attempt to subdue her rebellious curls had resulted in the construction from their ruins of a low Norman arch across her forehead with pillared abutments of ringlets. When her brother returned a few moments later she did not look up, but remained, perhaps a little ostentatiously, bending over the fire.

"Bob allowed that the Fort boat was huntin' MEN—deserters, I reckon," said Jim aggrievedly. "Wanted me to believe that he SAW one on the Marsh hidin'. On'y an Injin lie, I reckon, to git a little extra fire-water, for toting me out to the bresh on a fool's errand."

"Oh, THAT'S where you went!" said Maggie, addressing the fire. "Since when hev you tuk partnership with the Guv'nment and Kernel Preston to hunt up and take keer of their property?"

"Well, I ain't goin' to hev such wreckage as they pick up and enlist set adrift on our marshes, Mag," said Jim decidedly.

"What would you hev done had you ketched him?" said Maggie, looking suddenly into her brother's face.

"Given him a dose of snipe-shot that he'd remember, and be thankful it wasn't slugs," said Jim promptly. Observing a deeper seriousness in her attitude, he added, "Why, if it was in war-time he'd get a BALL from them sodgers on sight."

"Yes; but YOU ain't got no call to interfere," said Maggie.

"Ain't I? Why, he's no better than an outlaw. I ain't sure that he hasn't been stealin' or killin' somebody over theer."

"Not that man!" said Maggie impulsively.

"Not what man?" said her brother, facing her quickly.

"Why," returned Maggie, repairing her indiscretion with feminine dexterity, "not ANY man who might have knocked you and me over on the marshes in the dusk, and grabbed our guns."

"Wish he'd hev tried it," said the brother, with a superior smile, but a quickly rising color. "Where d'ye suppose I'D hev been all the while?"

Maggie saw her mistake, and for the first time in her life resolved to keep a secret from her brother—overnight. "Supper's gettin' cold," she said, rising.

They went into the dining-room—an apartment as plainly furnished as the one they had quitted, but in its shelves, cupboards, and closely fitting boarding bearing out the general nautical suggestion of the house—and seated themselves before a small table on which their frugal meal was spread. In this tete-a-tete position Jim suddenly laid down his knife and fork and stared at his sister.

"Hello!"

"What's the matter?" said Maggie, starting slightly. "How you do skeer one."

"Who's been prinkin', eh?"

"My ha'r was in kinks all along o' that hat," said Maggie, with a return of higher color, "and I had to straighten it. It's a boy's hat, not a girl's."

"But that necktie and that gown—and all those frills and tuckers?" continued Jim generalizing, with a rapid twirling of his fingers over her. "Are you expectin' Judge Martin, or the Expressman this evening?"

Judge Martin was the lawyer of Logport, who had proven her father's will, and had since raved about his single interview with the Kingfisher's beautiful daughter; the Expressman was a young fellow who was popularly supposed to have left his heart while delivering another valuable package on Maggie in person, and had "never been the same man since." It was a well-worn fraternal pleasantry that had done duty many a winter's evening, as a happy combination of moral admonition and cheerfulness. Maggie usually paid it the tribute of a quick little laugh and a sisterly pinch, but that evening those marks of approbation were withheld.

"Jim dear," said she, when their Spartan repast was concluded and they were reestablished before the living-room fire. "What was it the Redwood Mill Kempany offered you for that piece near Dead Man's Slough?"

Jim took his pipe from his lips long enough to say, "Ten thousand dollars," and put it back again.

"And what do ye kalkilate all our property, letting alone this yer house, and the driftwood front, is worth all together?"

"Includin' wot the Gov'nment owes us?—for that's all ours, ye know?" said Jim quickly.

"No—leavin' that out—jest for greens, you know," suggested Maggie.

"Well nigh ont'er a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, I reckon, by and large."

"That's a heap o' money, Jim! I reckon old Kernel Preston wouldn't raise that in a hundred years," continued Maggie, warming her knees by the fire.

"In five million years," said Jim, promptly sweeping away further discussion. After a pause he added, "You and me, Mag, kin see anybody's pile, and go 'em fifty thousand better."

There were a few moments of complete silence, in which Maggie smoothed her knees, and Jim's pipe, which seemed to have become gorged and apoplectic with its owner's wealth, snored unctuously.

"Jim dear, what if—it's on'y an idea of mine, you know—what if you sold that piece to the Redwood Mill, and we jest tuk that money and—and—and jest lifted the ha'r offer them folks at Logport? Jest astonished 'em! Jest tuk the best rooms in that new hotel, got a hoss and buggy, dressed ourselves, you and me, fit to kill, and made them Fort people take a back seat in the Lord's Tabernacle, oncet for all. You see what I mean, Jim," she said hastily, as her brother seemed to be succumbing,

like his pipe, in apoplectic astonishment, "jest on'y to SHOW 'em what we COULD do if we keerd. Lord! when we done it and spent the money we'd jest snap our fingers and skip back yer ez nat'ral ez life! Ye don't think, Jim," she said, suddenly turning half fiercely upon him, "that I'd allow to LIVE among 'em—to stay a menet after that!"

Jim laid down his pipe and gazed at his sister with stony deliberation. "And—what—do—you—kalkilate—to make by all that?" he said with scornful distinctness.

"Why, jest to show 'em we HAVE got money, and could buy 'em all up if we wanted to," returned Maggie, sticking boldly to her guns, albeit with a vague conviction that her fire was weakened through elevation, and somewhat alarmed at the deliberation of the enemy.

"And you mean to say they don't know it now," he continued with slow derision.

"No," said Maggie. "Why, theer's that new school-marm over at Logport, you know, Jim, the one that wanted to take your picter in your boat for a young smuggler or fancy pirate or Eyetalian fisherman, and allowed that you'r handsomed some, and offered to pay you for sittin'—do you reckon SHE'D believe you owned the land her schoolhouse was built on. No! Lots of 'em don't. Lots of 'em thinks we're poor and low down—and them ez doesn't, thinks"—

"What?" asked her brother sharply.

"That we're MEAN."

The quick color came to Jim's cheek. "So," he said, facing her quickly, "for the sake of a lot of riff-raff and scum that's drifted here around us—jest for the sake of cuttin' a swell before them—you'll go out among the hounds ez allowed your mother was a Spanish nigger or a kanaka, ez called your father a pirate and landgrabber, ez much as allowed he was shot by some one or killed himself a purpose, ez said you was a heathen and a looney because you didn't go to school or church along with their trash, ez kept away from Maw's sickness ez if it was smallpox, and Dad's fun'ral ez if he was a hoss-thief, and left you and me to watch his coffin on the marshes all night till the tide kem back. And now you—YOU that jined hands with me that night over our father lyin' there cold and despised—ez if he was a dead dog thrown up by the tide—and swore that ez long ez that tide ebbed and flowed it couldn't bring you to them, or them to you agin! You now want—what? What? Why, to go and cast your lot among 'em, and live among 'em, and join in their God-forsaken holler foolishness, and—and—and"—

"Stop! It's a lie! I DIDN'T say that. Don't you dare to say it!" said the girl, springing to her feet, and facing her brother in turn, with flashing eyes.

For a moment the two stared at each other—it might have been as in a mirror, so perfectly were their passions reflected in each line, shade, and color of the other's face. It was as if they had each confronted their own passionate and willful souls, and were frightened. It had often occurred before, always with the same invariable ending. The young man's eyes lowered first; the girl's filled with tears.

"Well, ef ye didn't mean that, what did ye mean?" said Jim, sinking, with sullen apology, back into his chair.

"I—only—meant it—for—for—revenge!" sobbed Maggie.

"Oh!" said Jim, as if allowing his higher nature to be touched by this noble instinct. "But I didn't jest see where the revenge kem in."

"No? But, never mind now, Jim," said Maggie, ostentatiously ignoring, after the fashion of her sex, the trouble she had provoked; "but to think—that—that—you thought"—(sobbing).

"But I didn't, Mag"—(caressingly).

With this very vague and impotent conclusion, Maggie permitted herself to be drawn beside her brother, and for a few moments they plumed each other's ruffled feathers, and smoothed each other's lifted crests, like two beautiful young specimens of that halcyon genus to which they were popularly supposed to belong. At the end of half an hour Jim rose, and, yawning slightly, said in a perfunctory way:

"Where's the book?"

The book in question was the Bible. It had been the self-imposed custom of these two young people to read aloud a chapter every night as their one vague formula of literary and religious discipline. When it was produced, Maggie, presuming on his affectionate and penitential condition, suggested that to-night he should pick out "suthin' interestin'." But this unorthodox frivolity was sternly put aside by Jim—albeit, by way of compromise, he agreed to "chance it," i. e., open its pages at random.

He did so. Generally he allowed himself a moment's judicious pause for a certain chaste preliminary inspection necessary before reading aloud to a girl. To-night he omitted that modest precaution, and in a pleasant voice, which in reading was singularly free from colloquial infelicities of pronunciation, began at once:

"Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty."

"Oh, you looked first," said Maggie.

"I didn't now—honest Injin! I just opened."

"Go on," said Maggie, eagerly shoving him and interposing her neck over his shoulder.

And Jim continued Deborah's wonderful song of Jael and Sisera to the bitter end of its strong monosyllabic climax.

"There," he said, closing the volume, "that's what I call revenge. That's the real Scripture thing—no fancy frills theer."

"Yes; but, Jim dear, don't you see that she treated him first—sorter got round him with free milk and butter, and reg'larly blandished him," argued Maggie earnestly.

But Jim declined to accept this feminine suggestion, or to pursue the subject further, and after a fraternal embrace they separated for the night. Jim lingered long enough to look after the fastening of the door and windows, and Maggie remained for some moments at her casement, looking across the gallery to the Marsh beyond.

The moon had risen, the tide was half up. Whatever sign or trace of alien footprint or occupation had been there was already smoothly obliterated; even the configuration of the land had changed. A black cape had disappeared, a level line of shore had been eaten into by teeth of glistening silver. The whole dark surface of the Marsh was beginning to be streaked with shining veins as if a new life was coursing through it. Part of the open bay before the Fort, encroaching upon the shore, seemed in the moonlight to be reaching a white and outstretched arm towards the nest of the Kingfisher.

III

The reveille at Fort Redwood had been supplemented full five minutes by the voice of Lieutenant George Calvert's servant, before that young officer struggled from his bed. His head was splitting, his tongue and lips were dry and feverish, his bloodshot eyes were shrinking from the insufferable light of the day, his mind a confused medley of the past night and the present morning, of cards and wild revelry, and the vision of a reproachfully trim orderly standing at his door with reports and orders which he now held composedly in his hand. For Lieutenant Calvert had been enjoying a symposium variously known as "Stag Feed" and "A Wild Stormy Night" with several of his brother officers, and a sickening conviction that it was not the first or the last time he had indulged in these festivities. At that moment he loathed himself, and then after the usual derelict fashion cursed the fate that had sent him, after graduating, to a frontier garrison—the dull monotony of whose duties made the Border horse-play of dissipation a relief. Already he had reached the miserable point of envying the veteran capacities of his superiors and equals. "If I could drink like Kirby or Crowninshield, or if there was any other cursed thing a man could do in this hole," he had wretchedly repeated to himself, after each misspent occasion, and yet already he was looking forward to them as part of a 'sub's' duty and worthy his emulation. Already the dream of social recreation fostered by West Point had been rudely dispelled. Beyond the garrison circle of Colonel Preston's family and two officers' wives, there was no society. The vague distrust and civil jealousy with which some frontier communities regard the Federal power, heightened in this instance by the uncompromising attitude the Government had taken towards the settlers' severe Indian policy, had kept the people of Logport aloof from the Fort. The regimental band might pipe to them on Saturdays, but they would not dance.

Howbeit, Lieutenant Calvert dressed himself with uncertain hands but mechanical regularity and neatness, and, under the automatic training of discipline and duty, managed to button his tunic tightly over his feelings, to pull himself together with his sword-belt, compressing a still cadet-like waist, and to present that indescribable combination of precision and jauntiness which his brother officers too often allowed to lapse into frontier carelessness. His closely clipped light hair, yet dripping from a plunge in the cold water, had been brushed and parted with military exactitude, and when surmounted by his cap, with the peak in an artful suggestion of extra smartness tipped forward over his eyes, only his pale face—a shade lighter than his little blonde moustache—showed his last night's excesses. He was mechanically reaching for his sword and staring confusedly at the papers on his table when his servant interrupted:

"Major Bromley arranged that Lieutenant Kirby takes your sash this morning, as you're not well, sir; and you're to report for special to the colonel," he added, pointing discreetly to the envelope.

Touched by this consideration of his superior, Major Bromley, who had been one of the veterans of last night's engagement, Calvert mastered the contents of the envelope without the customary anathema of specials, said, "Thank you, Parks," and passed out on the veranda.

The glare of the quiet sunlit quadrangle, clean as a well-swept floor, the whitewashed walls and galleries of the barrack buildings beyond, the white and green palisade of officers' cottages on either side, and the glitter of a sentry's bayonet, were for a moment intolerable to him. Yet, by a kind of subtle irony, never before had the genius and spirit of the vocation he had chosen seemed to be as incarnate as in the scene before him. Seclusion, self-restraint, cleanliness, regularity, sobriety, the atmosphere of a wholesome life, the austere reserve of a monastery without its mysterious or pensive meditation, were all there. To escape which, he had of his own free will successively accepted a fool's distraction, the inevitable result of which was, the viewing of them the next morning with tremulous nerves and aching eyeballs.

An hour later, Lieutenant George Calvert had received his final instructions from Colonel Preston to take charge of a small detachment to recover and bring back certain deserters, but notably

one, Dennis M'Caffrey of Company H, charged additionally with mutinous solicitation and example. As Calvert stood before his superior, that distinguished officer, whose oratorical powers had been considerably stimulated through a long course of "returning thanks for the Army," slightly expanded his chest and said paternally:

"I am aware, Mr. Calvert, that duties of this kind are somewhat distasteful to young officers, and are apt to be considered in the light of police detail; but I must remind you that no one part of a soldier's duty can be held more important or honorable than another, and that the fulfilment of any one, however trifling, must, with honor to himself and security to his comrades, receive his fullest devotion. A sergeant and a file of men might perform your duty, but I require, in addition, the discretion, courtesy, and consideration of a gentleman who will command an equal respect from those with whom his duty brings him in contact. The unhappy prejudices which the settlers show to the military authority here render this, as you are aware, a difficult service, but I believe that you will, without forgetting the respect due to yourself and the Government you represent, avoid arousing these prejudices by any harshness, or inviting any conflict with the civil authority. The limits of their authority you will find in your written instructions; but you might gain their confidence, and impress them, Mr. Calvert, with the idea of your being their AUXILIARY in the interests of justice—you understand. Even if you are unsuccessful in bringing back the men, you will do your best to ascertain if their escape has been due to the sympathy of the settlers, or even with their preliminary connivance. They may not be aware that inciting enlisted men to desert is a criminal offence; you will use your own discretion in informing them of the fact or not, as occasion may serve you. I have only to add, that while you are on the waters of this bay and the land covered by its tides, you have no opposition of authority, and are responsible to no one but your military superiors. Good-bye, Mr. Calvert. Let me hear a good account of you."

Considerably moved by Colonel Preston's manner, which was as paternal and real as his rhetoric was somewhat perfunctory, Calvert half forgot his woes as he stepped from the commandant's piazza. But he had to face a group of his brother officers, who were awaiting him.

"Good-bye, Calvert," said Major Bromley; "a day or two out on grass won't hurt you—and a change from commissary whiskey will put you all right. By the way, if you hear of any better stuff at Westport than they're giving us here, sample it and let us know. Take care of yourself. Give your men a chance to talk to you now and then, and you may get something from them, especially Donovan. Keep your eye on Ramon. You can trust your sergeant straight along."

"Good-bye, George," said Kirby. "I suppose the old man told you that, although no part of a soldier's duty was better than another, your service was a very delicate one, just fitted for you, eh? He always does when he's cut out some hellish scrub-work for a chap. And told you, too, that as long as you didn't go ashore, and kept to a dispatch-boat, or an eight-oared gig, where you couldn't deploy your men, or dress a line, you'd be invincible."

"He did say something like that," smiled Calvert, with an uneasy recollection, however, that it was THE part of his superior's speech that particularly impressed him.

"Of course," said Kirby gravely, "THAT, as an infantry officer, is clearly your duty."

"And don't forget, George," said Rollins still more gravely, "that, whatever may befall you, you belong to a section of that numerically small but powerfully diversified organization—the American Army. Remember that in the hour of peril you can address your men in any language, and be perfectly understood. And remember that when you proudly stand before them, the eyes not only of your own country, but of nearly all the others, are upon you! Good-bye, Georgey. I heard the major hint something about whiskey. They say that old pirate, Kingfisher Culpepper, had a stock of the real thing from Robertson County laid in his shebang on the Marsh just before he died. Pity we aren't on terms with them, for the cubs cannot drink it, and might be induced to sell. Shouldn't wonder, by the way, if your friend M'Caffrey was hanging round somewhere there; he always had a keen scent."

You might confiscate it as an "incitement to desertion," you know. The girl's pretty, and ought to be growing up now."

But haply at this point the sergeant stopped further raillery by reporting the detachment ready; and drawing his sword, Calvert, with a confused head, a remorseful heart, but an unfaltering step, marched off his men on his delicate mission.

It was four o'clock when he entered Jonesville. Following a matter-of-fact idea of his own, he had brought his men the greater distance by a circuitous route through the woods, thus avoiding the ostentatious exposure of his party on the open bay in a well-manned boat to an extended view from the three leagues of shore and marsh opposite. Crossing the stream, which here separated him from the Dedlow Marsh by the common ferry, he had thus been enabled to halt unperceived below the settlement and occupy the two roads by which the fugitives could escape inland. He had deemed it not impossible that, after the previous visit of the sergeant, the deserters hidden in the vicinity might return to Jonesville in the belief that the visit would not be repeated so soon. Leaving a part of his small force to patrol the road and another to deploy over the upland meadows, he entered the village. By the exercise of some boyish diplomacy and a certain prepossessing grace, which he knew when and how to employ, he became satisfied that the objects of his quest were not THERE—however, their whereabouts might have been known to the people. Dividing his party again, he concluded to take a corporal and a few men and explore the lower marshes himself.

The preoccupation of duty, exercise, and perhaps, above all, the keen stimulus of the iodine-laden salt air seemed to clear his mind and invigorate his body. He had never been in the Marsh before, and enjoyed its novelty with the zest of youth. It was the hour when the tide of its feathered life was at its flood. Clouds of duck and teal passing from the fresh water of the river to the salt pools of the marshes perpetually swept his path with flying shadows; at times it seemed as if even the uncertain ground around him itself arose and sped away on dusky wings. The vicinity of hidden pools and sloughs was betrayed by startled splashing; a few paces from their marching feet arose the sunlit pinions of a swan. The air was filled with multitudinous small cries and pipings. In this vocal confusion it was some minutes before he recognized the voice of one of his out-flankers calling to the other.

An important discovery had been made. In a long tongue of bushes that ran down to the Marsh they had found a mud-stained uniform, complete even to the cap, bearing the initial of the deserter's company.

"Is there any hut or cabin hereabouts, Schmidt?" asked Calvert.

"Dot vos schoost it, Lefdennun," replied his corporal. "Dot vos de shanty from der Kingvisher—old Gulbebber. I pet a dollar, py shimminy, dot der men haf der gekommt."

He pointed through the brake to a long, low building that now raised itself, white in the sunlight, above the many blackened piles. Calvert saw in a single reconnoitring glance that it had but one approach—the flight of steps from the Marsh. Instructing his men to fall in on the outer edge of the brake and await his orders, he quickly made his way across the space and ascended the steps. Passing along the gallery he knocked at the front door. There was no response. He repeated his knock. Then the window beside it opened suddenly, and he was confronted with the double-muzzle of a long ducking-gun. Glancing instinctively along the barrels, he saw at their other extremity the bright eyes, brilliant color, and small set mouth of a remarkably handsome girl. It was the fact, and to the credit of his training, that he paid more attention to the eyes than to the challenge of the shining tubes before him.

"Jest stop where you are—will you!" said the girl determinedly.

Calvert's face betrayed not the slightest terror or surprise. Immovable as on parade, he carried his white gloved hand to his cap, and said gently, "With pleasure."

"Oh yes," said the girl quickly; "but if you move a step I'll jest blow you and your gloves offer that railin' inter the Marsh."

"I trust not," returned Calvert, smiling.

"And why?"

"Because it would deprive me of the pleasure of a few moments' conversation with you—and I've only one pair of gloves with me."

He was still watching her beautiful eyes—respectfully, admiringly, and strategically. For he was quite convinced that if he DID move she would certainly discharge one or both barrels at him.

"Where's the rest of you?" she continued sharply.

"About three hundred yards away, in the covert, not near enough to trouble you."

"Will they come here?"

"I trust not."

"You trust not?" she repeated scornfully. "Why?"

"Because they would be disobeying orders."

She lowered her gun slightly, but kept her black brows levelled at him. "I reckon I'm a match for YOU," she said, with a slightly contemptuous glance at his slight figure, and opened the door. For a moment they stood looking at each other. He saw, besides the handsome face and eyes that had charmed him, a tall slim figure, made broader across the shoulders by an open pea-jacket that showed a man's red flannel shirt belted at the waist over a blue skirt, with the collar knotted by a sailor's black handkerchief, and turned back over a pretty though sunburnt throat. She saw a rather undersized young fellow in a jaunty undress uniform, scant of gold braid, and bearing only the single gold shoulder-bars of his rank, but scrupulously neat and well fitting. Light-colored hair cropped close, the smallest of light moustaches, clear and penetrating blue eyes, and a few freckles completed a picture that did not prepossess her. She was therefore the more inclined to resent the perfect ease and self-possession with which the stranger carried off these manifest defects before her.

She laid aside the gun, put her hands deep in the pockets of her pea-jacket, and, slightly squaring her shoulders, said curtly, "What do you want?"

"A very little information, which I trust it will not trouble you to give me. My men have just discovered the uniform belonging to a deserter from the Fort lying in the bushes yonder. Can you give me the slightest idea how it came there?"

"What right have you trapseing over our property?" she said, turning upon him sharply, with a slight paling of color.

"None whatever."

"Then what did you come for?"

"To ask that permission, in case you would give me no information."

"Why don't you ask my brother, and not a woman? Were you afraid?"

"He could hardly have done me the honor of placing me in more peril than you have," returned Calvert, smiling. "Then I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Culpepper?"

"I'm Jim Culpepper's sister."

"And, I believe, equally able to give or refuse the permission I ask."

"And what if I refuse?"

"Then I have only to ask pardon for having troubled you, go back, and return here with the tide. You don't resist THAT with a shotgun, do you?" he asked pleasantly.

Maggie Culpepper was already familiar with the accepted theory of the supreme jurisdiction of the Federal Sea. She half turned her back upon him, partly to show her contempt, but partly to evade the domination of his clear, good-humored, and self-sustained little eyes.

"I don't know anythin' about your deserters, nor what rags o' theirs happen to be floated up here," she said, angrily, "and don't care to. You kin do what you like."

"Then I'm afraid I should remain here a little longer, Miss Culpepper; but my duty"—

"Your wot?" she interrupted, disdainfully.

"I suppose I AM talking shop," he said smilingly. "Then my business"—

"Your business—pickin' up half-starved runaways!"

"And, I trust, sometimes a kind friend," he suggested, with a grave bow.

"You TRUST? Look yer, young man," she said, with her quick, fierce, little laugh, "I reckon you TRUST a heap too much!" She would like to have added, "with your freckled face, red hair, and little eyes"—but this would have obliged her to face them again, which she did not care to do.

Calvert stepped back, lifted his hand to his cap, still pleasantly, and then walked gravely along the gallery, down the steps, and towards the cover. From her window, unseen, she followed his neat little figure moving undeviatingly on, without looking to the left or right, and still less towards the house he had just quitted. Then she saw the sunlight flash on cross-belt plates and steel barrels, and a light blue line issued from out the dark green bushes, round the point, and disappeared. And then it suddenly occurred to her what she had been doing! This, then, was her first step towards that fancy she had so lately conceived, quarrelled over with her brother, and lay awake last night to place anew, in spite of all opposition! This was her brilliant idea of dazzling and subduing Logport and the Fort! Had she grown silly, or what had happened? Could she have dreamed of the coming of this whipper-snapper, with his insufferable airs, after that beggarly deserter? I am afraid that for a few moments the miserable fugitive had as small a place in Maggie's sympathy as the redoubtable whipper-snapper himself. And now the cherished dream of triumph and conquest was over! What a "looney" she had been! Instead of inviting him in, and outdoing him in "company manners," and "fooling" him about the deserter, and then blazing upon him afterwards at Logport in the glory of her first spent wealth and finery, she had driven him away!

And now "he'll go and tell—tell the Fort girls of his hairbreadth escape from the claws of the Kingfisher's daughter!"

The thought brought a few bitter tears to her eyes, but she wiped them away. The thought brought also the terrible conviction that Jim was right, that there could be nothing but open antagonism between them and the traducers of their parents, as she herself had instinctively shown! But she presently wiped that conviction away also, as she had her tears.

Half an hour later she was attracted by the appearance from the windows of certain straggling blue spots on the upland that seemed moving diagonally towards the Marsh. She did not know that it was Calvert's second "detail" joining him, but believed for a moment that he had not yet departed, and was strangely relieved. Still later the frequent disturbed cries of coot, heron, and marsh-hen, recognizing the presence of unusual invaders of their solitude, distracted her yet more, and forced her at last with increasing color and an uneasy sense of shyness to steal out to the gallery for a swift furtive survey of the Marsh. But an utterly unexpected sight met her eyes, and kept her motionless.

The birds were rising everywhere and drifting away with querulous perturbation before a small but augmented blue detachment that was moving with monotonous regularity towards the point of bushes where she had seen the young officer previously disappear. In their midst, between two soldiers with fixed bayonets, marched the man whom even at that distance she instantly recognized as the deserter of the preceding night, in the very clothes she had given him. To complete her consternation, a little to the right marched the young officer also, but accompanied by, and apparently on the most amicable terms with, Jim—her own brother!

To forget all else and dart down the steps, flying towards the point of bushes, scarcely knowing why or what she was doing, was to Maggie the impulse and work of a moment. When she had reached it the party were not twenty paces away. But here a shyness and hesitation again seized her, and she shrank back in the bushes with an instinctive cry to her brother inarticulate upon her lips. They came nearer, they were opposite to her; her brother Jim keeping step with the invader, and even conversing with him with an animation she had seldom seen upon his face—they passed! She had been unnoticed except by one. The roving eye of the deserter had detected her handsome face among the leaves, slightly turned towards it, and poured out his whole soul in a single swift wink of eloquent but indescribable confidence.

When they had quite gone, she crept back to the house, a little reassured, but still tremulous. When her brother returned at nightfall, he found her brooding over the fire, in the same attitude as on the previous night.

"I reckon ye might hev seen me go by with the sodgers," he said, seating himself beside her, a little awkwardly, and with an unusual assumption of carelessness.

Maggie, without looking up, was languidly surprised. He had been with the soldiers—and where?

"About two hours ago I met this yer Leftenant Calvert," he went on with increasing awkwardness, "and—oh, I say, Mag—he said he saw you, and hoped he hadn't troubled ye, and—and—ye saw him, didn't ye?"

Maggie, with all the red of the fire concentrated in her cheek as she gazed at the flame, believed carelessly "that she had seen a shrimp in uniform asking questions."

"Oh, he ain't a bit stuck up," said Jim quickly, "that's what I like about him. He's ez nat'ral ez you be, and tuck my arm, walkin' around, careless-like, laffen at what he was doin', ez ef it was a game, and he wasn't sole commander of forty men. He's only a year or two older than me—and—and"—he stopped and looked uneasily at Maggie.

"So ye've bin craw-fishin' agin?" said Maggie, in her deepest and most scornful contralto.

"Who's craw-fishin'?" he retorted, angrily.

"What's this backen out o' what you said yesterday? What's all this trucklin' to the Fort now?"

"What? Well now, look yer," said Jim, rising suddenly, with reproachful indignation, "darned if I don't jest tell ye everythin'. I promised HIM I wouldn't. He allowed it would frighten ye."

"FRIGHTEN ME!" repeated Maggie contemptuously, nevertheless with her cheek paling again. "Frighten me—with what?"

"Well, since yer so cantankerous, look yer. We've been robbed!"

"Robbed?" echoed Maggie, facing him.

"Yes, robbed by that same deserter. Robbed of a suit of my clothes, and my whiskey-flask, and the darned skunk had 'em on. And if it hadn't bin for that Leftenant Calvert, and my givin' him permission to hunt him over the Marsh, we wouldn't have caught him."

"Robbed?" repeated Maggie again, vaguely.

"Yes, robbed! Last night, afore we came home. He must hev got in yer while we was comin' from the boat."

"Did, did that Leftenant say so?" stammered Maggie.

"Say it, of course he did! and so do I," continued Jim, impatiently. "Why, there were my very clothes on his back, and he daren't deny it. And if you'd hearkened to me jest now, instead of flyin' off in tantrums, you'd see that THAT'S jest how we got him, and how me and the Leftenant joined hands in it. I didn't give him permission to hunt deserters, but THIEVES. I didn't help him to ketch the man that deserted from HIM, but the skunk that took MY clothes. For when the Leftenant found the man's old uniform in the bush, he nat'rally kalkilated he must hev got some other duds near by in some underhand way. Don't you see? eh? Why, look, Mag. Darned if you ain't skeered after all! Who'd hev thought it? There now—sit down, dear. Why, you're white ez a gull."

He had his arm round her as she sank back in the chair again with a forced smile.

"There now," he said with fraternal superiority, "don't mind it, Mag, any more. Why, it's all over now. You bet he won't trouble us agin, for the Leftenant sez that now he's found out to be a thief, they'll jest turn him over to the police, and he's sure o' getten six months' state prison fer stealin' and burglarin' in our house. But"—he stopped suddenly and looked at his sister's contracted face; "look yer, Mag, you're sick, that's what's the matter. Take suthin'"—

"I'm better now," she said with an effort; "it's only a kind o' blind chill I must hev got on the Marsh last night. What's that?"

She had risen, and grasping her brother's arm tightly had turned quickly to the window. The casement had suddenly rattled.

"It's only the wind gettin' up. It looked like a sou'wester when I came in. Lot o' scud flyin'. But YOU take some quinine, Mag. Don't YOU go now and get down sick like Maw."

Perhaps it was this well-meant but infelicitous reference that brought a moisture to her dark eyes, and caused her lips to momentarily quiver. But it gave way to a quick determined setting of her whole face as she turned it once more to the fire, and said, slowly:

"I reckon I'll sleep it off, if I go to bed now. What time does the tide fall."

"About three, unless this yer wind piles it up on the Marsh afore then. Why?"

"I was only wonderin' if the boat wus safe," said Maggie, rising.

"You'd better hoist yourself outside some quinine, instead o' talken about those things," said Jim, who preferred to discharge his fraternal responsibility by active medication. "You aren't fit to read tonight."

"Good night, Jim," she said suddenly, stopping before him.

"Good night, Mag." He kissed her with protecting and amiable toleration, generously referring her hot hands and feverish lips to that vague mystery of feminine complaint which man admits without indorsing.

They separated. Jim, under the stimulus of the late supposed robbery, ostentatiously fastening the doors and windows with assuring comments, calculated to inspire confidence in his sister's startled heart. Then he went to bed. He lay awake long enough to be pleasantly conscious that the wind had increased to a gale, and to be lulled again to sleep by the cosy security of the heavily timbered and tightly sealed dwelling that seemed to ride the storm like the ship it resembled. The gale swept through the piles beneath him and along the gallery as through bared spars and over wave-washed decks. The whole structure, attacked above, below, and on all sides by the fury of the wind, seemed at times to be lifted in the air. Once or twice the creaking timbers simulated the sound of opening doors and passing footsteps, and again dilated as if the gale had forced a passage through. But Jim slept on peacefully, and was at last only aroused by the brilliant sunshine staring through his window from the clear wind-swept blue arch beyond.

Dressing himself lazily, he passed into the sitting-room and proceeded to knock at his sister's door, as was his custom; he was amazed to find it open and the room empty. Entering hurriedly, he saw that her bed was undisturbed, as if it had not been occupied, and was the more bewildered to see a note ostentatiously pinned upon the pillow, addressed in pencil, in a large school-hand, "To Jim."

Opening it impatiently, he was startled to read as follows:—

"Don't be angry, Jim dear—but it was all my fault—and I didn't tell you. I knew all about the deserter, and I gave him the clothes and things that they say he stole. It was while you was out that night, and he came and begged of me, and was mournful and hidjus to behold. I thought I was helping him, and getting our revenge on the Fort, all at the same time. Don't be mad, Jim dear, and do not be frightened fer me. I'm going over thar to make it all right—to free HIM of stealing—to have YOU left out of it all—and take it all on myself. Don't you be a bit feared for me. I ain't skeert of the wind or of going. I'll close reef everything, clear the creek, stretch across to Injen Island, hugg the Point, and bear up fer Logport. Dear Jim—don't get mad—but I couldn't bear this fooling of you nor HIM—and that man being took for stealing any longer!—Your loving sister,
MAGGIE."

With a confused mingling of shame, anger, and sudden fear he ran out on the gallery. The tide was well up, half the Marsh had already vanished, and the little creek where he had moored his skiff was now an empty shining river. The water was everywhere—fringing the tussocks of salt

grass with concentric curves of spume and drift, or tumultuously tossing its white-capped waves over the spreading expanse of the lower bay. The low thunder of breakers in the farther estuary broke monotonously on the ear. But his eye was fascinated by a dull shifting streak on the horizon, that, even as he gazed, shuddered, whitened along its whole line, and then grew ghastly gray again. It was the ocean bar.

IV

"Well, I must say," said Cicely Preston, emphasizing the usual feminine imperative for perfectly gratuitous statement, as she pushed back her chair from the commandant's breakfast table, "I MUST really say that I don't see anything particularly heroic in doing something wrong, lying about it just to get other folks into trouble, and then rushing off to do penance in a high wind and an open boat. But she's pretty, and wears a man's shirt and coat, and of course THAT settles anything. But why earrings and wet white stockings and slippers? And why that Gothic arch of front and a boy's hat? That's what I simply ask;" and the youngest daughter of Colonel Preston rose from the table, shook out the skirt of her pretty morning dress, and, placing her little thumbs in the belt of her smart waist, paused witheringly for a reply.

"You are most unfair, my child," returned Colonel Preston gravely. "Her giving food and clothes to a deserter may have been only an ordinary instinct of humanity towards a fellow-creature who appeared to be suffering, to say nothing of M'Caffrey's plausible tongue. But her periling her life to save him from an unjust accusation, and her desire to shield her brother's pride from ridicule, is altogether praiseworthy and extraordinary. And the moral influence of her kindness was strong enough to make that scamp refuse to tell the plain truth that might implicate her in an indiscretion, though it saved him from state prison."

"He knew you wouldn't believe him if he had said the clothes were given to him," retorted Miss Cicely, "so I don't see where the moral influence comes in. As to her periling her life, those Marsh people are amphibious anyway, or would be in those clothes. And as to her motive, why, papa, I heard you say in this very room, and afterwards to Mr. Calvert, when you gave him instructions, that you believed those Culpeppers were capable of enticing away deserters; and you forget the fuss you had with her savage brother's lawyer about that water front, and how you said it was such people who kept up the irritation between the Civil and Federal power."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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