

BRET HARTE

MRS. SKAGG'S

HUSBANDS AND OTHER

STORIES

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Содержание

MRS. SKAGGS'S HUSBANDS	4
PART I—WEST	4
PART II—EAST	27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

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MRS. SKAGGS'S HUSBANDS

PART I—WEST

The sun was rising in the foot-hills. But for an hour the black mass of Sierra eastward of Angel's had been outlined with fire, and the conventional morning had come two hours before with the down coach from Placerville. The dry, cold, dewless California night still lingered in the long canyons and folded skirts of Table Mountain. Even on the mountain road the air was still sharp, and that urgent necessity for something to keep out the chill, which sent the barkeeper sleepily among his bottles and wineglasses at the station, obtained all along the road.

Perhaps it might be said that the first stir of life was in the bar-rooms. A few birds twittered in the sycamores at the roadside, but long before that glasses had clicked and bottles gurgled in the saloon of the Mansion House. This was still lit by a dissipated-looking hanging-lamp, which was evidently the worse for having

been up all night, and bore a singular resemblance to a faded reveller of Angel's, who even then sputtered and flickered in HIS socket in an arm-chair below it,—a resemblance so plain that when the first level sunbeam pierced the window-pane, the barkeeper, moved by a sentiment of consistency and compassion, put them both out together.

Then the sun came up haughtily. When it had passed the eastern ridge it began, after its habit, to lord it over Angel's, sending the thermometer up twenty degrees in as many minutes, driving the mules to the sparse shade of corrals and fences, making the red dust incandescent, and renewing its old imperious aggression on the spiked bosses of the convex shield of pines that defended Table Mountain. Thither by nine o'clock all coolness had retreated, and the "outsides" of the up stage plunged their hot faces in its aromatic shadows as in water.

It was the custom of the driver of the Wingdam coach to whip up his horses and enter Angel's at that remarkable pace which the woodcuts in the hotel bar-room represented to credulous humanity as the usual rate of speed of that conveyance. At such times the habitual expression of disdainful reticence and lazy official severity which he wore on the box became intensified as the loungers gathered about the vehicle, and only the boldest ventured to address him. It was the Hon. Judge Beeswinger, Member of Assembly, who to-day presumed, perhaps rashly, on the strength of his official position.

"Any political news from below, Bill?" he asked, as the latter

slowly descended from his lofty perch, without, however, any perceptible coming down of mien or manner.

“Not much,” said Bill, with deliberate gravity. “The President o’ the United States hezn’t bin hisself sens you refoosed that seat in the Cabinet. The ginral feelin’ in perlitical circles is one o’ regret.”

Irony, even of this outrageous quality, was too common in Angel’s to excite either a smile or a frown. Bill slowly entered the bar-room during a dry, dead silence, in which only a faint spirit of emulation survived.

“Ye didn’t bring up that agint o’ Rothschild’s this trip?” asked the barkeeper, slowly, by way of vague contribution to the prevailing tone of conversation.

“No,” responded Bill, with thoughtful exactitude. “He said he couldn’t look inter that claim o’ Johnson’s without first consultin’ the Bank o’ England.”

The Mr. Johnson here alluded to being present as the faded reveller the barkeeper had lately put out, and as the alleged claim notoriously possessed no attractions whatever to capitalists, expectation naturally looked to him for some response to this evident challenge. He did so by simply stating that he would “take sugar” in his, and by walking unsteadily toward the bar, as if accepting a festive invitation. To the credit of Bill be it recorded that he did not attempt to correct the mistake, but gravely touched glasses with him, and after saying “Here’s another nail in your coffin,”—a cheerful sentiment, to which “And the hair all

off your head," was playfully added by the others,—he threw off his liquor with a single dexterous movement of head and elbow, and stood refreshed.

"Hello, old major!" said Bill, suddenly setting down his glass. "Are YOU there?"

It was a boy, who, becoming bashfully conscious that this epithet was addressed to him, retreated sideways to the doorway, where he stood beating his hat against the door-post with an assumption of indifference that his downcast but mirthful dark eyes and reddening cheek scarcely bore out. Perhaps it was owing to his size, perhaps it was to a certain cherubic outline of face and figure, perhaps to a peculiar trustfulness of expression, that he did not look half his age, which was really fourteen.

Everybody in Angel's knew the boy. Either under the venerable title bestowed by Bill, or as "Tom Islington," after his adopted father, his was a familiar presence in the settlement, and the theme of much local criticism and comment. His waywardness, indolence, and unaccountable amiability—a quality at once suspicious and gratuitous in a pioneer community like Angel's—had often been the subject of fierce discussion. A large and reputable majority believed him destined for the gallows; a minority not quite so reputable enjoyed his presence without troubling themselves much about his future; to one or two the evil predictions of the majority possessed neither novelty nor terror.

"Anything for me, Bill?" asked the boy, half mechanically,

with the air of repeating some jocular formulary perfectly understood by Bill.

“Anythin’ for you!” echoed Bill, with an overacted severity equally well understood by Tommy,—“anythin’ for you? No! And it’s my opinion there won’t be anythin’ for you ez long ez you hang around bar-rooms and spend your valooable time with loafers and bummers. Git!”

The reproof was accompanied by a suitable exaggeration of gesture (Bill had seized a decanter) before which the boy retreated still good-humoredly. Bill followed him to the door. “Dern my skin, if he hezn’t gone off with that bummer Johnson,” he added, as he looked down the road.

“What’s he expectin’, Bill?” asked the barkeeper.

“A letter from his aunt. Reckon he’ll hev to take it out in expectin’. Likely they’re glad to get shut o’ him.”

“He’s leadin’ a shiftless, idle life here,” interposed the Member of Assembly.

“Well,” said Bill, who never allowed any one but himself to abuse his protege, “seein’ he ain’t expectin’ no offis from the hands of an enlightened constitoency, it IS rayther a shiftless life.” After delivering this Parthian arrow with a gratuitous twanging of the bow to indicate its offensive personality, Bill winked at the barkeeper, slowly resumed a pair of immense, bulgy buckskin gloves, which gave his fingers the appearance of being painfully sore and bandaged, strode to the door without looking at anybody, called out, “All aboard,” with a perfunctory

air of supreme indifference whether the invitation was heeded, remounted his box, and drove stolidly away.

Perhaps it was well that he did so, for the conversation at once assumed a disrespectful attitude toward Tom and his relatives. It was more than intimated that Tom's alleged aunt was none other than Tom's real mother, while it was also asserted that Tom's alleged uncle did not himself participate in this intimate relationship to the boy to an extent which the fastidious taste of Angel's deemed moral and necessary. Popular opinion also believed that Islington, the adopted father, who received a certain stipend ostensibly for the boy's support, retained it as a reward for his reticence regarding these facts. "He ain't ruinin' hisself by wastin' it on Tom," said the barkeeper, who possibly possessed positive knowledge of much of Islington's disbursements. But at this point exhausted nature languished among some of the debaters, and he turned from the frivolity of conversation to his severer professional duties.

It was also well that Bill's momentary attitude of didactic propriety was not further excited by the subsequent conduct of his protege. For by this time Tom, half supporting the unstable Johnson, who developed a tendency to occasionally dash across the glaring road, but checked himself mid way each time, reached the corral which adjoined the Mansion House. At its farther extremity was a pump and horse-trough. Here, without a word being spoken, but evidently in obedience to some habitual custom, Tom led his companion. With the boy's assistance,

Johnson removed his coat and neckcloth, turned back the collar of his shirt, and gravely placed his head beneath the pump-spout. With equal gravity and deliberation, Tom took his place at the handle. For a few moments only the splashing of water and regular strokes of the pump broke the solemnly ludicrous silence. Then there was a pause in which Johnson put his hands to his dripping head, felt of it critically as if it belonged to somebody else, and raised his eyes to his companion. "That ought to fetch IT," said Tom, in answer to the look. "Ef it don't," replied Johnson, doggedly, with an air of relieving himself of all further responsibility in the matter, "it's got to, that's all!"

If "it" referred to some change in the physiognomy of Johnson, "it" had probably been "fetched" by the process just indicated. The head that went under the pump was large, and clothed with bushy, uncertain-colored hair; the face was flushed, puffy, and expressionless, the eyes injected and full. The head that came out from under the pump was of smaller size and different shape, the hair straight, dark, and sleek, the face pale and hollow-cheeked, the eyes bright and restless. In the haggard, nervous ascetic that rose from the horse-trough there was very little trace of the Bacchus that had bowed there a moment before. Familiar as Tom must have been with the spectacle, he could not help looking inquiringly at the trough, as if expecting to see some traces of the previous Johnson in its shallow depths.

A narrow strip of willow, alder, and buckeye—a mere dusty, ravelled fringe of the green mantle that swept the high shoulders

of Table Mountain—lapped the edge of the corral. The silent pair were quick to avail themselves of even its scant shelter from the overpowering sun. They had not proceeded far, before Johnson, who was walking quite rapidly in advance, suddenly brought himself up, and turned to his companion with an interrogative “Eh?”

“I didn’t speak,” said Tommy, quietly.

“Who said you spoke?” said Johnson, with a quick look of cunning. “In course you didn’t speak, and I didn’t speak, neither. Nobody spoke. Wot makes you think you spoke?” he continued, peering curiously into Tommy’s eyes.

The smile which habitually shone there quickly vanished as the boy stepped quietly to his companion’s side, and took his arm without a word.

“In course you didn’t speak, Tommy,” said Johnson, deprecatingly. “You ain’t a boy to go for to play an ole soaker like me. That’s wot I like you for. Thet’s wot I seed in you from the first. I sez, ‘Thet ‘ere boy ain’t goin’ to play you, Johnson! You can go your whole pile on him, when you can’t trust even a bar-keep.’ Thet’s wot I said. Eh?”

This time Tommy prudently took no notice of the interrogation, and Johnson went on: “Ef I was to ask you another question, you wouldn’t go to play me neither,—would you, Tommy?”

“No,” said the boy.

“Ef I was to ask you,” continued Johnson, without heeding the

reply, but with a growing anxiety of eye and a nervous twitching of his lips,—“ef I was to ask you, fur instance, ef that was a jackass rabbit thet jest passed,—eh?—you’d say it was or was not, ez the case may be. You wouldn’t play the ole man on thet?”

“No,” said Tommy, quietly, “it WAS a jackass rabbit.”

“Ef I was to ask you,” continued Johnson, “ef it wore, say, fur instance, a green hat with yaller ribbons, you wouldn’t play me, and say it did, onless,”—he added, with intensified cunning,—“onless it DID?”

“No,” said Tommy, “of course I wouldn’t; but then, you see, IT DID.”

“It did?”

“It did!” repeated Tommy, stoutly; “a green hat with yellow ribbons—and—and—a red rosette.”

“I didn’t get to see the ros-ette,” said Johnson, with slow and conscientious deliberation, yet with an evident sense of relief; “but that ain’t sayin’ it warn’t there, you know. Eh?”

Tommy glanced quietly at his companion. There were great beads of perspiration on his ashen-gray forehead and on the ends of his lank hair; the hand which twitched spasmodically in his was cold and clammy, the other, which was free, had a vague, purposeless, jerky activity, as if attached to some deranged mechanism. Without any apparent concern in these phenomena, Tommy halted, and, seating himself on a log, motioned his companion to a place beside him. Johnson obeyed without a word. Slight as was the act, perhaps no other incident of their

singular companionship indicated as completely the dominance of this careless, half-effeminate, but self-possessed boy over this doggedly self-willed, abnormally excited man.

“It ain’t the square thing,” said Johnson, after a pause, with a laugh that was neither mirthful nor musical, and frightened away a lizard that had been regarding the pair with breathless suspense,—“it ain’t the square thing for jackass rabbits to wear hats, Tommy,—is it, eh?”

“Well,” said Tommy, with unmoved composure, “sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t. Animals are mighty queer.” And here Tommy went off in an animated, but, I regret to say, utterly untruthful and untrustworthy account of the habits of California fauna, until he was interrupted by Johnson.

“And snakes, eh, Tommy?” said the man, with an abstracted air, gazing intently on the ground before him.

“And snakes,” said Tommy; “but they don’t bite, at least not that kind you see. There!—don’t move, Uncle Ben, don’t move; they’re gone now. And it’s about time you took your dose.”

Johnson had hurriedly risen as if to leap upon the log, but Tommy had as quickly caught his arm with one hand while he drew a bottle from his pocket with the other. Johnson paused, and eyed the bottle. “Ef you say so, my boy,” he faltered, as his fingers closed nervously around it; “say ‘when,’ then.” He raised the bottle to his lips and took a long draught, the boy regarding him critically. “When,” said Tommy, suddenly. Johnson started, flushed, and returned the bottle quickly. But the color that had

risen to his cheek stayed there, his eye grew less restless, and as they moved away again, the hand that rested on Tommy's shoulder was steadier.

Their way lay along the flank of Table Mountain,—a wandering trail through a tangled solitude that might have seemed virgin and unbroken but for a few oyster-cans, yeast-powder tins, and empty bottles that had been apparently stranded by the “first low wash” of pioneer waves. On the ragged trunk of an enormous pine hung a few tufts of gray hair caught from a passing grizzly, but in strange juxtaposition at its foot lay an empty bottle of incomparable bitters,—the chef-d'oeuvre of a hygienic civilization, and blazoned with the arms of an all-healing republic. The head of a rattlesnake peered from a case that had contained tobacco, which was still brightly placarded with the high-colored effigy of a popular danseuse. And a little beyond this the soil was broken and fissured, there was a confused mass of roughly hewn timber, a straggling line of sluicing, a heap of gravel and dirt, a rude cabin, and the claim of Johnson.

Except for the rudest purposes of shelter from rain and cold, the cabin possessed but little advantage over the simple savagery of surrounding nature. It had all the practical directness of the habitation of some animal, without its comfort or picturesque quality; the very birds that haunted it for food must have felt their own superiority as architects. It was inconceivably dirty, even with its scant capacity for accretion; it was singularly stale, even

in its newness and freshness of material. Unspeakably dreary as it was in shadow, the sunlight visited it in a blind, aching, purposeless way, as if despairing of mellowing its outlines or of even tanning it into color.

The claim worked by Johnson in his intervals of sobriety was represented by half a dozen rude openings in the mountain-side, with the heaped-up debris of rock and gravel before the mouth of each. They gave very little evidence of engineering skill or constructive purpose, or indeed showed anything but the vague, successively abandoned essays of their projector. To-day they served another purpose, for as the sun had heated the little cabin almost to the point of combustion, curling up the long dry shingles, and starting aromatic tears from the green pine beams, Tommy led Johnson into one of the larger openings, and with a sense of satisfaction threw himself panting upon its rocky floor. Here and there the grateful dampness was condensed in quiet pools of water, or in a monotonous and soothing drip from the rocks above. Without lay the staring sunlight,—colorless, clarified, intense.

For a few moments they lay resting on their elbows in blissful contemplation of the heat they had escaped. “Wot do you say,” said Johnson, slowly, without looking at his companion, but abstractly addressing himself to the landscape beyond,—“wot do you say to two straight games fur one thousand dollars?”

“Make it five thousand,” replied Tommy, reflectively, also to the landscape, “and I’m in.”

“Wot do I owe you now?” said Johnson, after a lengthened silence.

“One hundred and seventy-five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars,” replied Tommy, with business-like gravity.

“Well,” said Johnson, after a deliberation commensurate with the magnitude of the transaction, “ef you win, call it a hundred and eighty thousand, round. War’s the keerds?”

They were in an old tin box in a crevice of a rock above his head. They were greasy and worn with service. Johnson dealt, albeit his right hand was still uncertain,—hovering, after dropping the cards, aimlessly about Tommy, and being only recalled by a strong nervous effort. Yet, notwithstanding this incapacity for even honest manipulation, Mr. Johnson covertly turned a knave from the bottom of the pack with such shameless inefficiency and gratuitous unskilfulness, that even Tommy was obliged to cough and look elsewhere to hide his embarrassment. Possibly for this reason the young gentleman was himself constrained, by way of correction, to add a valuable card to his own hand, over and above the number he legitimately held.

Nevertheless, the game was unexciting, and dragged listlessly. Johnson won. He recorded the fact and the amount with a stub of pencil and shaking fingers in wandering hieroglyphics all over a pocket diary. Then there was a long pause, when Johnson slowly drew something from his pocket, and held it up before his companion. It was apparently a dull red stone.

“Ef,” said Johnson, slowly, with his old look of simple

cunning,—“ef you happened to pick up sich a rock ez that, Tommy, what might you say it was?”

“Don’t know,” said Tommy.

“Mightn’t you say,” continued Johnson, cautiously, “that it was gold, or silver?”

“Neither,” said Tommy, promptly.

“Mightn’t you say it was quicksilver? Mightn’t you say that ef thar was a friend o’ yourn ez knew war to go and turn out ten ton of it a day, and every ton worth two thousand dollars, that he had a soft thing, a very soft thing,—allowin’, Tommy, that you used sich language, which you don’t?”

“But,” said the boy, coming to the point with great directness, “DO you know where to get it? have you struck it, Uncle Ben?”

Johnson looked carefully around. “I hev, Tommy. Listen. I know whar thar’s cartloads of it. But thar’s only one other specimen—the mate to this yer—thet’s above ground, and thet’s in ‘Frisco. Thar’s an agint comin’ up in a day or two to look into it. I sent for him. Eh?”

His bright, restless eyes were concentrated on Tommy’s face now, but the boy showed neither surprise nor interest. Least of all did he betray any recollection of Bill’s ironical and gratuitous corroboration of this part of the story.

“Nobody knows it,” continued Johnson, in a nervous whisper,—“nobody knows it but you and the agint in ‘Frisco. The boys workin’ round yar passes by and sees the old man grubbin’ away, and no signs o’ color, not even rotten quartz; the boys loafin’

round the Mansion House sees the old man lyin' round free in bar-rooms, and they laughs and sez, 'Played out,' and specters nothin'. Maybe ye think they specters suthin now, eh?" queried Johnson, suddenly, with a sharp look of suspicion.

Tommy looked up, shook his head, threw a stone at a passing rabbit, but did not reply.

"When I fust set eyes on you, Tommy," continued Johnson, apparently reassured, "the fust day you kem and pumped for me, an entire stranger, and hevin no call to do it, I sez, 'Johnson, Johnson,' sez I, 'yer's a boy you kin trust. Yer's a boy that won't play you; yer's a chap that's white and square,'—white and square, Tommy: them's the very words I used."

He paused for a moment, and then went on in a confidential whisper, "'You want capital, Johnson,' sez I, 'to develop your resources, and you want a pardner. Capital you can send for, but your pardner, Johnson,—your pardner is right yer. And his name, it is Tommy Islington.' Them's the very words I used."

He stopped and chafed his clammy hands upon his knees. "It's six months ago sens I made you my pardner. Thar ain't a lick I've struck sens then, Tommy, thar ain't a han'ful o' yearth I've washed, thar ain't a shovelful o' rock I've turned over, but I tho't o' you. 'Share, and share alike,' sez I. When I wrote to my agint, I wrote ekal for my pardner, Tommy Islington, he hevin no call to know ef the same was man or boy."

He had moved nearer the boy, and would perhaps have laid his hand caressingly upon him, but even in his manifest

affection there was a singular element of awed restraint and even fear,—a suggestion of something withheld even his fullest confidences, a hopeless perception of some vague barrier that never could be surmounted. He may have been at times dimly conscious that, in the eyes which Tommy raised to his, there was thorough intellectual appreciation, critical good-humor, even feminine softness, but nothing more. His nervousness somewhat heightened by his embarrassment, he went on with an attempt at calmness which his twitching white lips and unsteady fingers made pathetically grotesque. “Thar’s a bill o’ sale in my bunk, made out accordin’ to law, of an ekal ondivided half of the claim, and the consideration is two hundred and fifty thousand dollars,—gambling debts,—gambling debts from me to you, Tommy,—you understand?”—nothing could exceed the intense cunning of his eye at this moment,—“and then thar’s a will.”

“A will?” said Tommy, in amused surprise.

Johnson looked frightened.

“Eh?” he said, hurriedly, “wot will? Who said anythin’ ‘bout a will, Tommy?”

“Nobody,” replied Tommy, with unblushing calm.

Johnson passed his hand over his cold forehead, wrung the damp ends of his hair with his fingers, and went on: “Times when I’m took bad ez I was to-day, the boys about yer sez—you sez, maybe, Tommy—it’s whiskey. It ain’t, Tommy. It’s pizen,—quicksilver pizen. That’s what’s the matter with me. I’m salviated! Salviated with merkery.

"I've heerd o' it before," continued Johnson, appealing to the boy, "and ez a boy o' permiskus reading, I reckon you hev too. Them men as works in cinnabar sooner or later gets salviated. It's bound to fetch 'em some time. Salviated by merkery."

"What are you goin' to do for it?" asked Tommy.

"When the agint comes up, and I begins to realize on this yer mine," said Johnson, contemplatively, "I goes to New York. I sez to the barkeep' o' the hotel, 'Show me the biggest doctor here.' He shows me. I sez to him, 'Salviated by merkery,—a year's standin',—how much?' He sez, 'Five thousand dollars, and take two o' these pills at bedtime, and an ekil number o' powders at meals, and come back in a week.' And I goes back in a week, cured, and signs a certifikit to that effect."

Encouraged by a look of interest in Tommy's eye, he went on.

"So I gets cured. I goes to the barkeep', and I sez, 'Show me the biggest, fashionblest house thet's for sale yer.' And he sez, 'The biggest, nat'rally b'longs to John Jacob Astor.' And I sez, 'Show him,' and he shows him. And I sez, 'Wot might you ask for this yer house?' And he looks at me scornful, and sez, 'Go 'way, old man; you must be sick.' And I fetches him one over the left eye, and he apologizes, and I gives him his own price for the house. I stocks that house with mohogany furniture and pervisions, and thar we lives, you and me, Tommy, you and me!"

The sun no longer shone upon the hillside. The shadows of the pines were beginning to creep over Johnson's claim, and the air within the cavern was growing chill. In the gathering darkness his

eyes shone brightly as he went on: "Then thar comes a day when we gives a big spread. We invites govners, members o' Congress, gentlemen o' fashion, and the like. And among 'em I invites a Man as holds his head very high, a Man I once knew; but he doesn't know I knows him, and he doesn't remember me. And he comes and he sits opposite me, and I watches him. And he's very airy, this Man, and very chipper, and he wipes his mouth with a white hankercher, and he smiles, and he ketches my eye. And he sez, 'A glass o' wine with you, Mr. Johnson'; and he fills his glass and I fills mine, and we rises. And I heaves that wine, glass and all, right into his damned grinnin' face. And he jumps for me,—for he is very game, this Man, very game,—but some on 'em grabs him, and he sez, 'Who be you?' And I sez, 'Skaggs! damn you, Skaggs! Look at me! Gimme back my wife and child, gimme back the money you stole, gimme back the good name you took away, gimme back the health you ruined, gimme back the last twelve years! Give 'em to me, damn you, quick, before I cuts your heart out!' And naterally, Tommy, he can't do it. And so I cuts his heart out, my boy; I cuts his heart out."

The purely animal fury of his eye suddenly changed again to cunning. "You think they hangs me for it, Tommy, but they don't. Not much, Tommy. I goes to the biggest lawyer there, and I says to him, 'Salviated by merkery,—you hear me,—salviated by merkery.' And he winks at me, and he goes to the judge, and he sez, 'This yer unfortnet man isn't responsible,—he's been salviated by merkery.' And he brings witnesses; you comes,

Tommy, and you sez ez how you've seen me took bad afore; and the doctor, he comes, and he sez as how he's seen me frightful; and the jury, without leavin' their seats, brings in a verdict o' justifiable insanity,—salviated by merkery."

In the excitement of his climax he had risen to his feet, but would have fallen had not Tommy caught him and led him into the open air. In this sharper light there was an odd change visible in his yellow-white face,—a change which caused Tommy to hurriedly support him, half leading, half dragging him toward the little cabin. When they had reached it, Tommy placed him on a rude "bunk," or shelf, and stood for a moment in anxious contemplation of the tremor-stricken man before him. Then he said rapidly: "Listen, Uncle Ben. I'm goin' to town—to town, you understand—for the doctor. You're not to get up or move on any account until I return. Do you hear?" Johnson nodded violently. "I'll be back in two hours." In another moment he was gone.

For an hour Johnson kept his word. Then he suddenly sat up, and began to gaze fixedly at a corner of the cabin. From gazing at it he began to smile, from smiling at it he began to talk, from talking at it he began to scream, from screaming he passed to cursing and sobbing wildly. Then he lay quiet again.

He was so still that to merely human eyes he might have seemed asleep or dead. But a squirrel, that, emboldened by the stillness, had entered from the roof, stopped short upon a beam above the bunk, for he saw that the man's foot was slowly and cautiously moving toward the floor, and that the man's eyes were

as intent and watchful as his own. Presently, still without a sound, both feet were upon the floor. And then the bunk creaked, and the squirrel whisked into the eaves of the roof. When he peered forth again, everything was quiet, and the man was gone.

An hour later two muleteers on the Placerville Road passed a man with dishevelled hair, glaring, bloodshot eyes, and clothes torn with bramble and stained with the red dust of the mountain. They pursued him, when he turned fiercely on the foremost, wrested a pistol from his grasp, and broke away. Later still, when the sun had dropped behind Payne's Ridge, the underbrush on Deadwood Slope crackled with a stealthy but continuous tread. It must have been an animal whose dimly outlined bulk, in the gathering darkness, showed here and there in vague but incessant motion; it could be nothing but an animal whose utterance was at once so incoherent, monotonous, and unremitting. Yet, when the sound came nearer, and the chaparral was parted, it seemed to be a man, and that man Johnson.

Above the baying of phantasmal hounds that pressed him hard and drove him on, with never rest or mercy; above the lashing of a spectral whip that curled about his limbs, sang in his ears, and continually stung him forward; above the outcries of the unclean shapes that thronged about him,—he could still distinguish one real sound,—the rush and sweep of hurrying waters. The Stanislaus River! A thousand feet below him drove its yellowing current. Through all the vacillations of his unseated mind he had clung to one idea,—to reach the river, to lave in

it, to swim it if need be, but to put it forever between him and the harrying shapes, to drown forever in its turbid depths the thronging spectres, to wash away in its yellow flood all stains and color of the past. And now he was leaping from boulder to boulder, from blackened stump to stump, from gnarled bush to bush, caught for a moment and withheld by clinging vines, or plunging downward into dusty hollows, until, rolling, dropping, sliding, and stumbling, he reached the river-bank, whereon he fell, rose, staggered forward, and fell again with outstretched arms upon a rock that breasted the swift current. And there he lay as dead.

A few stars came out hesitatingly above Deadwood Slope. A cold wind that had sprung up with the going down of the sun fanned them into momentary brightness, swept the heated flanks of the mountain, and ruffled the river. Where the fallen man lay there was a sharp curve in the stream, so that in the gathering shadows the rushing water seemed to leap out of the darkness and to vanish again. Decayed drift-wood, trunks of trees, fragments of broken sluicing,—the wash and waste of many a mile,—swept into sight a moment, and were gone. All of decay, wreck, and foulness gathered in the long circuit of mining-camp and settlement, all the dregs and refuse of a crude and wanton civilization, reappeared for an instant, and then were hurried away in the darkness and lost. No wonder that as the wind ruffled the yellow waters the waves seemed to lift their unclean hands toward the rock whereon the fallen man lay, as if eager to

snatch him from it, too, and hurry him toward the sea.

It was very still. In the clear air a horn blown a mile away was heard distinctly. The jingling of a spur and a laugh on the highway over Payne's Ridge sounded clearly across the river. The rattling of harness and hoofs foretold for many minutes the approach of the Wingdam coach, that at last, with flashing lights, passed within a few feet of the rock. Then for an hour all again was quiet. Presently the moon, round and full, lifted herself above the serried ridge and looked down upon the river. At first the bared peak of Deadwood Hill gleamed white and skull-like. Then the shadows of Payne's Ridge cast on the slope slowly sank away, leaving the unshapely stumps, the dusty fissures, and clinging outcrop of Deadwood Slope to stand out in black and silver. Still stealing softly downward, the moonlight touched the bank and the rock, and then glittered brightly on the river. The rock was bare and the man was gone, but the river still hurried swiftly to the sea.

"Is there anything for me?" asked Tommy Islington, as, a week after, the stage drew up at the Mansion House, and Bill slowly entered the bar-room. Bill did not reply, but, turning to a stranger who had entered with him, indicated with a jerk of his finger the boy. The stranger turned with an air half of business, half of curiosity, and looked critically at Tommy. "Is there anything for me?" repeated Tommy, a little confused at the silence and scrutiny. Bill walked deliberately to the bar, and, placing his back against it, faced Tommy with a look of demure enjoyment.

“Ef,” he remarked slowly,—“ef a hundred thousand dollars down and half a million in perspektive is ennything, Major, THERE IS!”

MRS. SKAGGS’S HUSBANDS.

PART II—EAST

It was characteristic of Angel's that the disappearance of Johnson, and the fact that he had left his entire property to Tommy, thrilled the community but slightly in comparison with the astounding discovery that he had anything to leave. The finding of a cinnabar lode at Angel's absorbed all collateral facts or subsequent details. Prospectors from adjoining camps thronged the settlement; the hillside for a mile on either side of Johnson's claim was staked out and pre-empted; trade received a sudden stimulus; and, in the excited rhetoric of the "Weekly Record," "a new era had broken upon Angel's." "On Thursday last," added that paper, "over five hundred dollars was taken in over the bar of the Mansion House."

Of the fate of Johnson there was little doubt. He had been last seen lying on a boulder on the river-bank by outside passengers of the Wingdam night coach, and when Finn of Robinson's Ferry admitted to have fired three shots from a revolver at a dark object struggling in the water near the ferry, which he "suspicioned" to be a bear, the question seemed to be settled. Whatever might have been the fallibility of his judgment, of the accuracy of his aim there could be no doubt. The general belief that Johnson, after possessing himself of the muleteer's pistol, could have run amuck, gave a certain retributive justice to this story, which rendered it acceptable to the camp.

It was also characteristic of Angel's that no feeling of envy or opposition to the good fortune of Tommy Islington prevailed there. That he was thoroughly cognizant, from the first, of Johnson's discovery, that his attentions to him were interested, calculating, and speculative was, however, the general belief of the majority,—a belief that, singularly enough, awakened the first feelings of genuine respect for Tommy ever shown by the camp. "He ain't no fool; Yuba Bill seed thet from the first," said the barkeeper. It was Yuba Bill who applied for the guardianship of Tommy after his accession to Johnson's claim, and on whose bonds the richest men of Calaveras were represented. It was Yuba Bill, also, when Tommy was sent East to finish his education, accompanied him to San Francisco, and, before parting with his charge on the steamer's deck, drew him aside, and said, "Ef at enny time you want enny money, Tommy, over and 'bove your 'lowance, you kin write; but ef you'll take my advice," he added, with a sudden huskiness mitigating the severity of his voice, "you'll forget every derned ole spavined, string-halted bummer as you ever met or knew at Angel's,—ev'ry one, Tommy,—ev'ry one! And so—boy—take care of yourself—and—and God bless ye, and pertikerly d—n me for a first-class A 1 fool." It was Yuba Bill, also, after this speech, glared savagely around, walked down the crowded gang-plank with a rigid and aggressive shoulder, picked a quarrel with his cabman, and, after bundling that functionary into his own vehicle, took the reins himself, and drove furiously to his hotel. "It cost me,"

said Bill, recounting the occurrence somewhat later at Angel's,—"it cost me a matter o' twenty dollars afore the jedge the next mornin'; but you kin bet high thet I taught them 'Frisco chaps suthin new about drivin'. I didn't make it lively in Montgomery Street for about ten minutes,—O no!"

And so by degrees the two original locaters of the great Cinnabar lode faded from the memory of Angel's, and Calaveras knew them no more. In five years their very names had been forgotten; in seven the name of the town was changed; in ten the town itself was transported bodily to the hillside, and the chimney of the Union Smelting Works by night flickered like a corpse-light over the site of Johnson's cabin, and by day poisoned the pure spices of the pines. Even the Mansion House was dismantled, and the Wingdam stage deserted the highway for a shorter cut by Quicksilver City. Only the bared crest of Deadwood Hill, as of old, sharply cut the clear blue sky, and at its base, as of old, the Stanislaus River, unwearied and unresting, babbled, whispered, and hurried away to the sea.

A midsummer's day was breaking lazily on the Atlantic. There was not wind enough to move the vapors in the foggy offing, but where the vague distance heaved against a violet sky there were dull red streaks that, growing brighter, presently painted out the stars. Soon the brown rocks of Greypoint appeared faintly suffused, and then the whole ashen line of dead coast was kindled, and the lighthouse beacons went out one by one. And then a hundred sail, before invisible, started out of the vapory

horizon, and pressed toward the shore. It was morning, indeed, and some of the best society in Greypoint, having been up all night, were thinking it was time to go to bed.

For as the sky flashed brighter it fired the clustering red roofs of a picturesque house by the sands that had all that night, from open lattice and illuminated balcony, given light and music to the shore. It glittered on the broad crystal spaces of a great conservatory that looked upon an exquisite lawn, where all night long the blended odors of sea and shore had swooned under the summer moon. But it wrought confusion among the colored lamps on the long veranda, and startled a group of ladies and gentlemen who had stepped from the drawing-room window to gaze upon it. It was so searching and sincere in its way, that, as the carriage of the fairest Miss Gillyflower rolled away, that peerless young woman, catching sight of her face in the oval mirror, instantly pulled down the blinds, and, nestling the whitest shoulders in Greypoint against the crimson cushions, went to sleep.

“How haggard everybody is! Rose, dear, you look almost intellectual,” said Blanche Masterman.

“I hope not,” said Rose, simply. “Sunrises are very trying. Look how that pink regularly puts out Mrs. Brown-Robinson, hair and all!”

“The angels,” said the Count de Nugat, with a polite gesture toward the sky, “must have find these celestial combinations very bad for the toilette.”

"They're safe in white,—except when they sit for their pictures in Venice," said Blanche. "How fresh Mr. Islington looks! It's really uncomplimentary to us."

"I suppose the sun recognizes in me no rival," said the young man, demurely. "But," he added, "I have lived much in the open air, and require very little sleep."

"How delightful!" said Mrs. Brown-Robinson, in a low, enthusiastic voice and a manner that held the glowing sentiment of sixteen and the practical experiences of thirty-two in dangerous combination;—"how perfectly delightful! What sunrises you must have seen, and in such wild, romantic places! How I envy you! My nephew was a classmate of yours, and has often repeated to me those charming stories you tell of your adventures. Won't you tell some now? Do! How you must tire of us and this artificial life here, so frightfully artificial, you know" (in a confidential whisper); "and then to think of the days when you roamed the great West with the Indians, and the bison, and the grizzly bears! Of course, you have seen grizzly bears and bison?"

"Of course he has, dear," said Blanche, a little pettishly, throwing a cloak over her shoulders, and seizing her chaperon by the arm; "his earliest infancy was soothed by bison, and he proudly points to the grizzly bear as the playmate of his youth. Come with me, and I'll tell you all about it. How good it is of you," she added, sotto voce, to Islington, as he stood by the carriage,—“how perfectly good it is of you to be like those

animals you tell us of, and not know your full power. Think, with your experiences and our credulity, what stories you MIGHT tell! And you are going to walk? Good night, then.” A slim, gloved hand was frankly extended from the window, and the next moment the carriage rolled away.

“Isn’t Islington throwing away a chance there?” said Captain Merwin, on the veranda.

“Perhaps he couldn’t stand my lovely aunt’s superadded presence. But then, he’s the guest of Blanche’s father, and I dare say they see enough of each other as it is.”

“But isn’t it a rather dangerous situation?”

“For him, perhaps; although he’s awfully old, and very queer. For her, with an experience that takes in all the available men in both hemispheres, ending with Nugat over there, I should say a man more or less wouldn’t affect her much, anyway. Of course,” he laughed, “these are the accents of bitterness. But that was last year.”

Perhaps Islington did not overhear the speaker; perhaps, if he did, the criticism was not new. He turned carelessly away, and sauntered out on the road to the sea. Thence he strolled along the sands toward the cliffs, where, meeting an impediment in the shape of a garden wall, he leaped it with a certain agile, boyish ease and experience, and struck across an open lawn toward the rocks again. The best society of Greypoint were not early risers, and the spectacle of a trespasser in an evening dress excited only the criticism of grooms hanging about the stables,

or cleanly housemaids on the broad verandas that in Greypoint architecture dutifully gave upon the sea. Only once, as he entered the boundaries of Cliffwood Lodge, the famous seat of Renwyck Masterman, was he aware of suspicious scrutiny; but a slouching figure that vanished quickly in the lodge offered no opposition to his progress. Avoiding the pathway to the lodge, Islington kept along the rocks until, reaching a little promontory and rustic pavilion, he sat down and gazed upon the sea.

And presently an infinite peace stole upon him. Except where the waves lapped lazily the crags below, the vast expanse beyond seemed unbroken by ripple, heaving only in broad ponderable sheets, and rhythmically, as if still in sleep. The air was filled with a luminous haze that caught and held the direct sunbeams. In the deep calm that lay upon the sea, it seemed to Islington that all the tenderness of culture, magic of wealth, and spell of refinement that for years had wrought upon that favored shore had extended its gracious influence even here. What a pampered and caressed old ocean it was; cajoled, flattered, and feted where it lay! An odd recollection of the turbid Stanislaus hurrying by the ascetic pines, of the grim outlines of Deadwood Hill, swam before his eyes, and made the yellow green of the velvet lawn and graceful foliage seem almost tropical by contrast. And, looking up, a few yards distant he beheld a tall slip of a girl gazing upon the sea,—Blanche Masterman.

She had plucked somewhere a large fan-shaped leaf, which she held parasol-wise, shading the blond masses of her hair,

and hiding her gray eyes. She had changed her festal dress, with its amplitude of flounce and train, for a closely fitting half-antique habit whose scant outlines would have been trying to limbs less shapely, but which prettily accented the graceful curves and sweeping lines of this Greypont goddess. As Islington rose, she came toward him with a frankly outstretched hand and unconstrained manner. Had she observed him first? I don't know.

They sat down together on a rustic seat, Miss Blanche facing the sea, and shading her eyes with the leaf.

"I don't really know how long I have been sitting here," said Islington, "or whether I have not been actually asleep and dreaming. It seemed too lovely a morning to go to bed. But you?"

From behind the leaf, it appeared that Miss Blanche, on retiring, had been pursued by a hideous winged bug which defied the efforts of herself and maid to dislodge. Odin, the Spitz dog, had insisted upon scratching at the door. And it made her eyes red to sleep in the morning. And she had an early call to make. And the sea looked lovely.

"I'm glad to find you here, whatever be the cause," said Islington, with his old directness. "To-day, as you know, is my last day in Greypont, and it is much pleasanter to say good by under this blue sky than even beneath your father's wonderful frescos yonder. I want to remember you, too, as part of this pleasant prospect which belongs to us all, rather than recall you in anybody's particular setting."

"I know," said Blanche, with equal directness, "that houses

are one of the defects of our civilization; but I don't think I ever heard the idea as elegantly expressed before. Where do you go?"

"I don't know yet. I have several plans. I may go to South America and become president of one of the republics,—I am not particular which. I am rich, but in that part of America which lies outside of Greyport it is necessary for every man to have some work. My friends think I should have some great aim in life, with a capital A. But I was born a vagabond, and a vagabond I shall probably die."

"I don't know anybody in South America," said Blanche, languidly. "There were two girls here last season, but they didn't wear stays in the house, and their white frocks never were properly done up. If you go to South America, you must write to me."

"I will. Can you tell me the name of this flower which I found in your greenhouse. It looks much like a California blossom."

"Perhaps it is. Father bought it of a half-crazy old man who came here one day. Do you know him?"

Islington laughed. "I am afraid not. But let me present this in a less business-like fashion."

"Thank you. Remind me to give you one in return before you go,—or will you choose yourself?"

They had both risen as by a common instinct.

"Good by."

The cool flower-like hand lay in his for an instant.

"Will you oblige me by putting aside that leaf a moment before

I go?"

"But my eyes are red, and I look like a perfect fright."

Yet, after a long pause, the leaf fluttered down, and a pair of very beautiful but withal very clear and critical eyes met his. Islington was constrained to look away. When he turned again, she was gone.

"Mister Hislington,—sir!"

It was Chalker, the English groom, out of breath with running.

"Seein' you alone, sir,—beg your pardon, sir,—but there's a person—"

"A person! what the devil do you mean? Speak English—no, damn it, I mean don't," said Islington, snappishly.

"I sed a person, sir. Beg pardon—no offence—but not a gent, sir. In the lib'ry."

A little amused even through the utter dissatisfaction with himself and vague loneliness that had suddenly come upon him, Islington, as he walked toward the lodge, asked, "Why isn't he a gent?"

"No gent—beggin' your pardin, sir—'ud guy a man in sarvis, sir. Takes me 'ands so, sir, as I sits in the rumble at the gate, and puts 'em downd so, sir, and sez, 'Put 'em in your pocket, young man,—or is it a road agint you expects to see, that you 'olds hup your 'ands, hand crosses 'em like to that,' sez he. "Old 'ard,' sez he, 'on the short curves, or you'll bust your precious crust,' sez he. And hasks for you, sir. This way, sir."

They entered the lodge. Islington hurried down the long

Gothic hall, and opened the library door.

In an arm-chair, in the centre of the room, a man sat apparently contemplating a large, stiff, yellow hat with an enormous brim, that was placed on the floor before him. His hands rested lightly between his knees, but one foot was drawn up at the side of his chair in a peculiar manner. In the first glance that Islington gave, the attitude in some odd, irreconcilable way suggested a brake. In another moment he dashed across the room, and, holding out both hands, cried, "Yuba Bill!"

The man rose, caught Islington by the shoulders, wheeled him round, hugged him, felt of his ribs like a good-natured ogre, shook his hands violently, laughed, and then said, somewhat ruefully, "And how ever did you know me?"

Seeing that Yuba Bill evidently regarded himself as in some elaborate disguise, Islington laughed, and suggested that it must have been instinct.

"And you?" said Bill, holding him at arm's length, and surveying him critically,—“you!—toe think—toe think—a little cuss no higher nor a trace, a boy as I've flicked outer the road with a whip time in agin, a boy ez never hed much clothes to speak of, turned into a sport!"

Islington remembered, with a thrill of ludicrous terror, that he still wore his evening dress.

"Turned," continued Yuba Bill, severely,—“turned into a restyourant waiter,—a garson! Eh, Alfonse, bring me a patty de foy grass and an omelette, demme!"

“Dear old chap!” said Islington, laughing, and trying to put his hand over Bill’s bearded mouth, “but you—YOU don’t look exactly like yourself! You’re not well, Bill.” And indeed, as he turned toward the light, Bill’s eyes appeared cavernous, and his hair and beard thickly streaked with gray.

“Maybe it’s this yer harness,” said Bill, a little anxiously. “When I hitches on this yer curb” (he indicated a massive gold watch-chain with enormous links), “and mounts this ‘morning star,’” (he pointed to a very large solitaire pin which had the appearance of blistering his whole shirt-front), “it kinder weighs heavy on me, Tommy. Otherwise I’m all right, my boy,—all right.” But he evaded Islington’s keen eye, and turned from the light.

“You have something to tell me, Bill,” said Islington, suddenly, and with almost brusque directness; “out with it.”

Bill did not speak, but moved uneasily toward his hat.

“You didn’t come three thousand miles, without a word of warning, to talk to me of old times,” said Islington, more kindly, “glad as I would have been to see you. It isn’t your way, Bill, and you know it. We shall not be disturbed here,” he added, in reply to an inquiring glance that Bill directed to the door, “and I am ready to hear you.”

“Firstly, then,” said Bill, drawing his chair nearer Islington, “answer me one question, Tommy, fair and square, and up and down.”

“Go on,” said Islington, with a slight smile.

"Ef I should say to you, Tommy,—say to you to-day, right here, you must come with me,—you must leave this place for a month, a year, two years maybe, perhaps forever,—is there anything that 'ud keep you,—anything, my boy, ez you couldn't leave?"

"No," said Tommy, quietly; "I am only visiting here. I thought of leaving Greypoint to-day."

"But if I should say to you, Tommy, come with me on a pasear to Chiny, to Japan, to South Ameriky, p'r'aps, could you go?"

"Yes," said Islington, after a slight pause.

"Thar isn't ennything," said Bill, drawing a little closer, and lowering his voice confidentially,— "ennything in the way of a young woman—you understand, Tommy—ez would keep you? They're mighty sweet about here; and whether a man is young or old, Tommy, there's always some woman as is brake or whip to him!"

In a certain excited bitterness that characterized the delivery of this abstract truth, Bill did not see that the young man's face flushed slightly as he answered "No."

"Then listen. It's seven years ago, Tommy, thet I was working one o' the Pioneer coaches over from Gold Hill. Ez I stood in front o' the stage-office, the sheriff o' the county comes to me, and he sez, 'Bill,' sez he, 'I've got a looney chap, as I'm in charge of, taking 'im down to the 'sylum in Stockton. He'z quiet and peaceable, but the insides don't like to ride with him. Hev you enny objection to give him a lift on the box beside you?' I sez,

'No; put him up.' When I came to go and get up on that box beside him, that man, Tommy,—that man sittin' there, quiet and peaceable, was—Johnson!

"He didn't know me, my boy," Yuba Bill continued, rising and putting his hands on Tommy's shoulders,—“he didn't know me. He didn't know nothing about you, nor Angel's, nor the quicksilver lode, nor even his own name. He said his name was Skaggs, but I knowd it was Johnson. Thar was times, Tommy, you might have knocked me off that box with a feather; thar was times when if the twenty-seven passengers o' that stage hed found themselves swimming in the American River five hundred feet below the road, I never could have explained it satisfactorily to the company,—never.

"The sheriff said," Bill continued hastily, as if to preclude any interruption from the young man,—“the sheriff said he had been brought into Murphy's Camp three years before, dripping with water, and sufferin' from perkussion of the brain, and had been cared for generally by the boys 'round. When I told the sheriff I knowed 'im, I got him to leave him in my care; and I took him to 'Frisco, Tommy, to 'Frisco, and I put him in charge o' the best doctors there, and paid his board myself. There was nothin' he didn't have ez he wanted. Don't look that way, my dear boy, for God's sake, don't!"

"O Bill," said Islington, rising and staggering to the window, "why did you keep this from me?"

"Why?" said Bill, turning on him savagely,—“why? because

I warn't a fool. Thar was you, winnin' your way in college; thar was YOU, risin' in the world, and of some account to it; yer was an old bummer, ez good ez dead to it,—a man ez oughter been dead afore! a man ez never denied it! But you allus liked him better nor me," said Bill, bitterly.

"Forgive me, Bill," said the young man, seizing both his hands. "I know you did it for the best; but go on."

"Thar ain't much more to tell, nor much use to tell it, as I can see," said Bill, moodily. "He never could be cured, the doctors said, for he had what they called monomania,—was always talking about his wife and darter that somebody had stole away years ago, and plannin' revenge on that somebody. And six months ago he was missed. I tracked him to Carson, to Salt Lake City, to Omaha, to Chicago, to New York,—and here!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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