

BRET HARTE

A SAPPHO OF
GREEN
SPRINGS

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CHAPTER I

“Come in,” said the editor.

The door of the editorial room of the “Excelsior Magazine” began to creak painfully under the hesitating pressure of an uncertain and unfamiliar hand. This continued until with a start of irritation the editor faced directly about, throwing his leg over the arm of his chair with a certain youthful dexterity. With one hand gripping its back, the other still grasping a proof-slip, and his pencil in his mouth, he stared at the intruder.

The stranger, despite his hesitating entrance, did not seem in the least disconcerted. He was a tall man, looking even taller by reason of the long formless overcoat he wore, known as a “duster,” and by a long straight beard that depended from his chin, which he combed with two reflective fingers as he contemplated the editor. The red dust which still lay in the creases of his garment and in the curves of his soft felt hat, and left a dusty circle like a precipitated halo around his feet, proclaimed him, if not a countryman, a recent inland importation by coach. “Busy?” he said, in a grave but pleasant voice. “I kin wait. Don’t mind ME. Go on.”

The editor indicated a chair with his disengaged hand and plunged again into his proof-slips. The stranger surveyed the scant furniture and appointments of the office with a look of grave curiosity, and then, taking a chair, fixed an earnest, penetrating gaze on the editor’s profile. The editor felt it, and, without looking up, said—

“Well, go on.”

“But you’re busy. I kin wait.”

“I shall not be less busy this morning. I can listen.”

“I want you to give me the name of a certain person who writes in your magazine.”

The editor’s eye glanced at the second right-hand drawer of his desk. It did not contain the names of his contributors, but what in the traditions of his office was accepted as an equivalent,—a revolver. He had never yet presented either to an inquirer. But he laid aside his proofs, and, with a slight darkening of his youthful, discontented face, said, “What do you want to know for?”

The question was so evidently unexpected that the stranger’s face colored slightly, and he hesitated. The editor meanwhile, without taking his eyes from the man, mentally ran over the contents of the last magazine. They had been of a singularly peaceful character. There seemed to be nothing to justify homicide on his part or the stranger’s. Yet there was no knowing, and his questioner’s bucolic appearance by no means precluded an assault. Indeed, it had been a legend of the office that a predecessor had suffered vicariously from a geological hammer covertly introduced into a scientific controversy by an irate professor.

“As we make ourselves responsible for the conduct of the magazine,” continued the young editor, with mature severity, “we do not give up the names of our contributors. If you do not agree with their opinions”—

“But I DO,” said the stranger, with his former composure, “and I reckon that’s why I want to know who wrote those verses called ‘Underbrush,’ signed ‘White Violet,’ in your last number. They’re pow’ful pretty.”

The editor flushed slightly, and glanced instinctively around for any unexpected witness of his ludicrous mistake. The fear of ridicule was uppermost in his mind, and he was more relieved at his mistake not being overheard than at its groundlessness.

"The verses ARE pretty," he said, recovering himself, with a critical air, "and I am glad you like them. But even then, you know, I could not give you the lady's name without her permission. I will write to her and ask it, if you like."

The actual fact was that the verses had been sent to him anonymously from a remote village in the Coast Range,—the address being the post-office and the signature initials.

The stranger looked disturbed. "Then she ain't about here anywhere?" he said, with a vague gesture. "She don't belong to the office?"

The young editor beamed with tolerant superiority: "No, I am sorry to say."

"I should like to have got to see her and kinder asked her a few questions," continued the stranger, with the same reflective seriousness. "You see, it wasn't just the rhymin' o' them verses,—and they kinder sing themselves to ye, don't they?—it wasn't the chyce o' words,—and I reckon they allus hit the idee in the centre shot every time,—it wasn't the idees and moral she sort o' drew out o' what she was tellin',—but it was the straight thing itself,—the truth!"

"The truth?" repeated the editor.

"Yes, sir. I've bin there. I've seen all that she's seen in the brush—the little flicks and checkers o' light and shadder down in the brown dust that you wonder how it ever got through the dark of the woods, and that allus seems to slip away like a snake or a lizard if you grope. I've heard all that she's heard there—the creepin', the sighin', and the whisperin' through the bracken and the ground-vines of all that lives there."

"You seem to be a poet yourself," said the editor, with a patronizing smile.

"I'm a lumberman, up in Mendocino," returned the stranger, with sublime naivete. "Got a mill there. You see, sightin' standin' timber and selectin' from the gen'ral show of the trees in the ground and the lay of roots hez sorter made me take notice." He paused. "Then," he added, somewhat despondingly, "you don't know who she is?"

"No," said the editor, reflectively; "not even if it is really a WOMAN who writes."

"Eh?"

"Well, you see, 'White Violet' may as well be the nom de plume of a man as of a woman, especially if adopted for the purpose of mystification. The handwriting, I remember, WAS more boyish than feminine."

"No," returned the stranger doggedly, "it wasn't no MAN. There's ideas and words there that only come from a woman: baby-talk to the birds, you know, and a kind of fearsome keer of bugs and creepin' things that don't come to a man who wears boots and trousers. Well," he added, with a return to his previous air of resigned disappointment, "I suppose you don't even know what she's like?"

"No," responded the editor, cheerfully. Then, following an idea suggested by the odd mingling of sentiment and shrewd perception in the man before him, he added: "Probably not at all like anything you imagine. She may be a mother with three or four children; or an old maid who keeps a boarding-house; or a wrinkled school-mistress; or a chit of a school-girl. I've had some fair verses from a red-haired girl of fourteen at the Seminary," he concluded with professional coolness.

The stranger regarded him with the naive wonder of an inexperienced man. Having paid this tribute to his superior knowledge, he regained his previous air of grave perception. "I reckon she ain't none of them. But I'm keepin' you from your work. Good-by. My name's Bowers—Jim Bowers, of Mendocino. If you're up my way, give me a call. And if you do write to this yer 'White Violet,' and she's willin', send me her address."

He shook the editor's hand warmly—even in its literal significance of imparting a good deal of his own earnest caloric to the editor's fingers—and left the room. His footfall echoed along the

passage and died out, and with it, I fear, all impression of his visit from the editor's mind, as he plunged again into the silent task before him.

Presently he was conscious of a melodious humming and a light leisurely step at the entrance of the hall. They continued on in an easy harmony and unaffected as the passage of a bird. Both were pleasant and both familiar to the editor. They belonged to Jack Hamlin, by vocation a gambler, by taste a musician, on his way from his apartments on the upper floor, where he had just risen, to drop into his friend's editorial room and glance over the exchanges, as was his habit before breakfast.

The door opened lightly. The editor was conscious of a faint odor of scented soap, a sensation of freshness and cleanliness, the impression of a soft hand like a woman's on his shoulder and, like a woman's, momentarily and playfully caressing, the passage of a graceful shadow across his desk, and the next moment Jack Hamlin was ostentatiously dusting a chair with an open newspaper preparatory to sitting down.

"You ought to ship that office-boy of yours, if he can't keep things cleaner," he said, suspending his melody to eye grimly the dust which Mr. Bowers had shaken from his departing feet.

The editor did not look up until he had finished revising a difficult paragraph. By that time Mr. Hamlin had comfortably settled himself on a cane sofa, and, possibly out of deference to his surroundings, had subdued his song to a peculiarly low, soft, and heartbreaking whistle as he unfolded a newspaper. Clean and faultless in his appearance, he had the rare gift of being able to get up at two in the afternoon with much of the dewy freshness and all of the moral superiority of an early riser.

"You ought to have been here just now, Jack," said the editor.

"Not a row, old man, eh?" inquired Jack, with a faint accession of interest.

"No," said the editor, smiling. Then he related the incidents of the previous interview, with a certain humorous exaggeration which was part of his nature. But Jack did not smile.

"You ought to have booted him out of the ranch on sight," he said. "What right had he to come here prying into a lady's affairs?—at least a lady as far as HE knows. Of course she's some old blowzy with frumpled hair trying to rope in a greenhorn with a string of words and phrases," concluded Jack, carelessly, who had an equally cynical distrust of the sex and of literature.

"That's about what I told him," said the editor.

"That's just what you **SHOULDN'T** have told him," returned Jack. "You ought to have stuck up for that woman as if she'd been your own mother. Lord! you fellows don't know how to run a magazine. You ought to let **ME** sit on that chair and tackle your customers."

"What would you have done, Jack?" asked the editor, much amused to find that his hitherto invincible hero was not above the ordinary human weakness of offering advice as to editorial conduct.

"Done?" reflected Jack. "Well, first, sonny, I shouldn't keep a revolver in a drawer that I had to **OPEN** to get at."

"But what would you have said?"

"I should simply have asked him what was the price of lumber at Mendocino," said Jack, sweetly, "and when he told me, I should have said that the samples he was offering out of his own head wouldn't suit. You see, you don't want any trifling in such matters. You write well enough, my boy," continued he, turning over his paper, "but what you're lacking in is editorial dignity. But go on with your work. Don't mind me."

Thus admonished, the editor again bent over his desk, and his friend softly took up his suspended song. The editor had not proceeded far in his corrections when Jack's voice again broke the silence.

"Where are those d-d verses, anyway?"

Without looking up, the editor waved his pencil towards an uncut copy of the "Excelsior Magazine" lying on the table.

"You don't suppose I'm going to **READ** them, do you?" said Jack, aggrievedly. "Why don't you say what they're about? That's your business as editor."

But that functionary, now wholly lost and wandering in the non-sequitur of an involved passage in the proof before him, only waved an impatient remonstrance with his pencil and knit his brows. Jack, with a sigh, took up the magazine.

A long silence followed, broken only by the hurried rustling of sheets of copy and an occasional exasperated start from the editor. The sun was already beginning to slant a dusty beam across his desk; Jack's whistling had long since ceased. Presently, with an exclamation of relief, the editor laid aside the last proof-sheet and looked up.

Jack Hamlin had closed the magazine, but with one hand thrown over the back of the sofa he was still holding it, his slim forefinger between its leaves to keep the place, and his handsome profile and dark lashes lifted towards the window. The editor, smiling at this unwonted abstraction, said quietly,—

“Well, what do you think of them?”

Jack rose, laid the magazine down, settled his white waistcoat with both hands, and lounged towards his friend with audacious but slightly veiled and shining eyes. “They sort of sing themselves to you,” he said, quietly, leaning beside the editor's desk, and looking down upon him. After a pause he said, “Then you don't know what she's like?”

“That's what Mr. Bowers asked me,” remarked the editor.

“D—n Bowers!”

“I suppose you also wish me to write and ask for permission to give you her address?” said the editor, with great gravity.

“No,” said Jack, coolly. “I propose to give it to YOU within a week, and you will pay me with a breakfast. I should like to have it said that I was once a paid contributor to literature. If I don't give it to you, I'll stand you a dinner, that's all.”

“Done!” said the editor. “And you know nothing of her now?”

“No,” said Jack, promptly. “Nor you?”

“No more than I have told you.”

“That'll do. So long!” And Jack, carefully adjusting his glossy hat over his curls at an ominously wicked angle, sauntered lightly from the room. The editor, glancing after his handsome figure and hearing him take up his pretermitted whistle as he passed out, began to think that the contingent dinner was by no means an inevitable prospect.

Howbeit, he plunged once more into his monotonous duties. But the freshness of the day seemed to have departed with Jack, and the later interruptions of foreman and publisher were of a more practical character. It was not until the post arrived that the superscription on one of the letters caught his eye, and revived his former interest. It was the same hand as that of his unknown contributor's manuscript—ill-formed and boyish. He opened the envelope. It contained another poem with the same signature, but also a note—much longer than the brief lines that accompanied the first contribution—was scrawled upon a separate piece of paper. This the editor opened first, and read the following, with an amazement that for the moment dominated all other sense:—

MR. EDITOR,—I see you have got my poetry in. But I don't see the spondulix that oughter follow. Perhaps you don't know where to send it. Then I'll tell you. Send the money to Lock Box 47, Green Springs P. O., per Wells Fargo's Express, and I'll get it there, on account of my parents not knowing. We're very high-toned, and they would think it's low making poetry for papers. Send amount usually paid for poetry in your papers. Or may be you think I make poetry for nothing? That's where you slip up!

Yours truly,

WHITE VIOLET.

P. S.—If you don't pay for poetry, send this back. It's as good as what you did put in, and is just as hard to make. You hear me? that's me—all the time.

WHITE VIOLET.

The editor turned quickly to the new contribution for some corroboration of what he felt must be an extraordinary blunder. But no! The few lines that he hurriedly read breathed the same atmosphere of intellectual repose, gentleness, and imagination as the first contribution. And yet they were in the same handwriting as the singular missive, and both were identical with the previous manuscript.

Had he been the victim of a hoax, and were the verses not original? No; they were distinctly original, local in color, and even local in the use of certain old English words that were common in the Southwest. He had before noticed the apparent incongruity of the handwriting and the text, and it was possible that for the purposes of disguise the poet might have employed an amanuensis. But how could he reconcile the incongruity of the mercenary and slangy purport of the missive itself with the mental habit of its author? Was it possible that these inconsistent qualities existed in the one individual? He smiled grimly as he thought of his visitor Bowers and his friend Jack. He was startled as he remembered the purely imaginative picture he had himself given to the seriously interested Bowers of the possible incongruous personality of the poetess.

Was he quite fair in keeping this from Jack? Was it really honorable, in view of their wager? It is to be feared that a very human enjoyment of Jack's possible discomfiture quite as much as any chivalrous friendship impelled the editor to ring eventually for the office-boy.

"See if Mr. Hamlin is in his rooms."

The editor then sat down, and wrote rapidly as follows:—

DEAR MADAM,—You are as right as you are generous in supposing that only ignorance of your address prevented the manager from previously remitting the honorarium for your beautiful verses. He now begs to send it to you in the manner you have indicated. As the verses have attracted deserved attention, I have been applied to for your address. Should you care to submit it to me to be used at my discretion, I shall feel honored by your confidence. But this is a matter left entirely to your own kindness and better judgment. Meantime, I take pleasure in accepting "White Violet's" present contribution, and remain, dear madam, your obedient servant,

THE EDITOR.

The boy returned as he was folding the letter. Mr. Hamlin was not only NOT in his rooms, but, according to his negro servant Pete, had left town an hour ago for a few days in the country.

"Did he say where?" asked the editor, quickly.

"No, sir: he didn't know."

"Very well. Take this to the manager." He addressed the letter, and, scrawling a few hieroglyphics on a memorandum-tag, tore it off, and handed it with the letter to the boy.

An hour later he stood in the manager's office. "The next number is pretty well made up," he said, carelessly, "and I think of taking a day or two off."

"Certainly," said the manager. "It will do you good. Where do you think you'll go?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind."

CHAPTER II

“Hullo!” said Jack Hamlin.

He had halted his mare at the edge of an abrupt chasm. It did not appear to be fifty feet across, yet its depth must have been nearly two hundred to where the hidden mountain-stream, of which it was the banks, alternately slipped, tumbled, and fell with murmuring and monotonous regularity. One or two pine-trees growing on the opposite edge, loosened at the roots, had tilted their straight shafts like spears over the abyss, and the top of one, resting on the upper branches of a sycamore a few yards from him, served as an aerial bridge for the passage of a boy of fourteen to whom Mr. Hamlin’s challenge was addressed.

The boy stopped midway in his perilous transit, and, looking down upon the horseman, responded, coolly, “Hullo, yourself!”

“Is that the only way across this infernal hole, or the one you prefer for exercise?” continued Hamlin, gravely.

The boy sat down on a bough, allowing his bare feet to dangle over the dizzy depths, and critically examined his questioner. Jack had on this occasion modified his usual correct conventional attire by a tasteful combination of a vaquero’s costume, and, in loose white bullion-fringed trousers, red sash, jacket, and sombrero, looked infinitely more dashing and picturesque than his original. Nevertheless, the boy did not reply. Mr. Hamlin’s pride in his usual ascendancy over women, children, horses, and all unreasoning animals was deeply nettled. He smiled, however, and said, quietly,—

“Come here, George Washington. I want to talk to you.”

Without rejecting this august yet impossible title, the boy presently lifted his feet, and carelessly resumed his passage across the chasm until, reaching the sycamore, he began to let himself down squirrel-wise, leap by leap, with an occasional trapeze swinging from bough to bough, dropping at last easily to the ground. Here he appeared to be rather good-looking, albeit the sun and air had worked a miracle of brown tan and freckles on his exposed surfaces, until the mottling of his oval cheeks looked like a polished bird’s egg. Indeed, it struck Mr. Hamlin that he was as intensely a part of that sylvan seclusion as the hidden brook that murmured, the brown velvet shadows that lay like trappings on the white flanks of his horse, the quivering heat, and the stinging spice of bay. Mr. Hamlin had vague ideas of dryads and fauns, but at that moment would have bet something on the chances of their survival.

“I did not hear what you said just now, general,” he remarked, with great elegance of manner, “but I know from your reputation that it could not be a lie. I therefore gather that there IS another way across.”

The boy smiled; rather, his very short upper lip apparently vanished completely over his white teeth, and his very black eyes, which showed a great deal of the white around them, danced in their orbits.

“But YOU couldn’t find it,” he said, slyly.

“No more could you find the half-dollar I dropped just now, unless I helped you.”

Mr. Hamlin, by way of illustration, leaned deeply over his left stirrup, and pointed to the ground. At the same moment a bright half-dollar absolutely appeared to glitter in the herbage at the point of his finger. It was a trick that had always brought great pleasure and profit to his young friends, and some loss and discomfiture of wager to his older ones.

The boy picked up the coin: “There’s a dip and a level crossing about a mile over yer,”—he pointed,—“but it’s through the woods, and they’re that high with thick bresh.”

“With what?”

“Bresh,” repeated the boy; “THAT,”—pointing to a few fronds of bracken growing in the shadow of the sycamore.

“Oh! underbrush?”

“Yes; I said ‘bresh,’” returned the boy, doggedly. “YOU might get through, ef you war spry, but not your hoss. Where do you want to go, anyway?”

“Do you know, George,” said Mr. Hamlin, lazily throwing his right leg over the horn of his saddle for greater ease and deliberation in replying, “it’s very odd, but that’s just what I’d like to know. Now, what would YOU, in your broad statesmanlike views of things generally, advise?”

Quite convinced of the stranger’s mental unsoundness, the boy glanced again at his half-dollar, as if to make sure of its integrity, pocketed it doubtfully, and turned away.

“Where are you going?” said Hamlin, resuming his seat with the agility of a circus-rider, and spurring forward.

“To Green Springs, where I live, two miles over the ridge on the far slope,”—indicating the direction.

“Ah!” said Jack, with thoughtful gravity. “Well, kindly give my love to your sister, will you?”

“George Washington didn’t have no sister,” said the boy, cunningly.

“Can I have been mistaken?” said Hamlin, lifting his hand to his forehead with grieved accents. “Then it seems YOU have. Kindly give her my love.”

“Which one?” asked the boy, with a swift glance of mischief. “I’ve got four.”

“The one that’s like you,” returned Hamlin, with prompt exactitude. “Now, where’s the ‘bresh’ you spoke of?”

“Keep along the edge until you come to the log-slide. Foller that, and it’ll lead you into the woods. But ye won’t go far, I tell ye. When you have to turn back, instead o’ comin’ back here, you kin take the trail that goes round the woods, and that’ll bring ye out into the stage road ag’in near the post-office at the Green Springs crossin’ and the new hotel. That’ll be war ye’ll turn up, I reckon,” he added, reflectively. “Fellers that come yer gunnin’ and fishin’ gin’rally do,” he concluded, with a half-inquisitive air.

“Ah?” said Mr. Hamlin, quietly shedding the inquiry. “Green Springs Hotel is where the stage stops, eh?”

“Yes, and at the post-office,” said the boy. “She’ll be along here soon,” he added.

“If you mean the Santa Cruz stage,” said Hamlin, “she’s here already. I passed her on the ridge half an hour ago.”

The boy gave a sudden start, and a quick uneasy expression passed over his face. “Go ‘long with ye!” he said, with a forced smile: “it ain’t her time yet.”

“But I SAW her,” repeated Hamlin, much amused. “Are you expecting company? Hullo! Where are you off to? Come back.”

But his companion had already vanished in the thicket with the undeliberate and impulsive act of an animal. There was a momentary rustle in the alders fifty feet away, and then all was silent. The hidden brook took up its monotonous murmur, the tapping of a distant woodpecker became suddenly audible, and Mr. Hamlin was again alone.

“Wonder whether he’s got parents in the stage, and has been playing truant here,” he mused, lazily. “Looked as if he’d been up to some devilment, or more like as if he was primed for it. If he’d been a little older, I’d have bet he was in league with some road-agents to watch the coach. Just my luck to have him light out as I was beginning to get some talk out of him.” He paused, looked at his watch, and straightened himself in his stirrups. “Four o’clock. I reckon I might as well try the woods and what that imp calls the ‘bresh;’ I may strike a shanty or a native by the way.”

With this determination, Mr. Hamlin urged his horse along the faint trail by the brink of the watercourse which the boy had just indicated. He had no definite end in view beyond the one that had brought him the day before to that locality—his quest of the unknown poetess. His clue would have seemed to ordinary humanity the faintest. He had merely noted the provincial name of a certain plant mentioned in the poem, and learned that its habitat was limited to the southern local range;

while its peculiar nomenclature was clearly of French Creole or Gulf State origin. This gave him a large though sparsely-populated area for locality, while it suggested a settlement of Louisianians or Mississippians near the Summit, of whom, through their native gambling proclivities, he was professionally cognizant. But he mainly trusted Fortune. Secure in his faith in the feminine character of that goddess, he relied a great deal on her well-known weakness for scamps of his quality.

It was not long before he came to the "slide"—a lightly-cut or shallow ditch. It descended slightly in a course that was far from straight, at times diverging to avoid the obstacles of trees or boulders, at times shaving them so closely as to leave smooth abrasions along their sides made by the grinding passage of long logs down the incline. The track itself was slippery from this, and preoccupied all Hamlin's skill as a horseman, even to the point of stopping his usual careless whistle. At the end of half an hour the track became level again, and he was confronted with a singular phenomenon.

He had entered the wood, and the trail seemed to cleave through a far-stretching, motionless sea of ferns that flowed on either side to the height of his horse's flanks. The straight shafts of the trees rose like columns from their hidden bases and were lost again in a roof of impenetrable leafage, leaving a clear space of fifty feet between, through which the surrounding horizon of sky was perfectly visible. All the light that entered this vast sylvan hall came from the sides; nothing permeated from above; nothing radiated from below; the height of the crest on which the wood was placed gave it this lateral illumination, but gave it also the profound isolation of some temple raised by long-forgotten hands. In spite of the height of these clear shafts, they seemed dwarfed by the expanse of the wood, and in the farthest perspective the base of ferns and the capital of foliage appeared almost to meet. As the boy had warned him, the slide had turned aside, skirting the wood to follow the incline, and presently the little trail he now followed vanished utterly, leaving him and his horse adrift breast-high in this green and yellow sea of fronds. But Mr. Hamlin, imperious of obstacles, and touched by some curiosity, continued to advance lazily, taking the bearings of a larger red-wood in the centre of the grove for his objective point. The elastic mass gave way before him, brushing his knees or combing his horse's flanks with wide-spread elfin fingers, and closing up behind him as he passed, as if to obliterate any track by which he might return. Yet his usual luck did not desert him here. Being on horseback, he found that he could detect what had been invisible to the boy and probably to all pedestrians, namely, that the growth was not equally dense, that there were certain thinner and more open spaces that he could take advantage of by more circuitous progression, always, however, keeping the bearings of the central tree. This he at last reached, and halted his panting horse. Here a new idea which had been haunting him since he entered the wood took fuller possession of him. He had seen or known all this before! There was a strange familiarity either in these objects or in the impression or spell they left upon him. He remembered the verses! Yes, this was the "underbrush" which the poetess had described: the gloom above and below, the light that seemed blown through it like the wind, the suggestion of hidden life beneath this tangled luxuriance, which she alone had penetrated,—all this was here. But, more than that, here was the atmosphere that she had breathed into the plaintive melody of her verse. It did not necessarily follow that Mr. Hamlin's translation of her sentiment was the correct one, or that the ideas her verses had provoked in his mind were at all what had been hers: in his easy susceptibility he was simply thrown into a corresponding mood of emotion and relieved himself with song. One of the verses he had already associated in his mind with the rhythm of an old plantation melody, and it struck his fancy to take advantage of the solitude to try its effect. Humming to himself, at first softly, he at last grew bolder, and let his voice drift away through the stark pillars of the sylvan colonnade till it seemed to suffuse and fill it with no more effort than the light which strayed in on either side. Sitting thus, his hat thrown a little back from his clustering curls, the white neck and shoulders of his horse uplifting him above the crested mass of fern, his red sash the one fleck of color in their olive depths, I am afraid he looked much more like the real minstrel of the grove than the unknown poetess who transfigured it. But this, as has been already indicated, was Jack Hamlin's peculiar gift. Even as he had previously outshone the vaquero

in his borrowed dress, he now silenced and supplanted a few fluttering blue-jays—rightful tenants of the wood—with a more graceful and airy presence and a far sweeter voice.

The open horizon towards the west had taken a warmer color from the already slanting sun when Mr. Hamlin, having rested his horse, turned to that direction. He had noticed that the wood was thinner there, and, pushing forward, he was presently rewarded by the sound of far-off wheels, and knew he must be near the high-road that the boy had spoken of. Having given up his previous intention of crossing the stream, there seemed nothing better for him to do than to follow the truant's advice and take the road back to Green Springs. Yet he was loath to leave the wood, halting on its verge, and turning to look back into its charmed recesses. Once or twice—perhaps because he recalled the words of the poem—that yellowish sea of ferns had seemed instinct with hidden life, and he had even fancied, here and there, a swaying of its plumed crests. Howbeit, he still lingered long enough for the open sunlight into which he had obtruded to point out the bravery of his handsome figure. Then he wheeled his horse, the light glanced from polished double bit and bridle-fripperies, caught his red sash and bullion buttons, struck a parting flash from his silver spurs, and he was gone!

For a moment the light streamed unbrokenly through the wood. And then it could be seen that the yellow mass of undergrowth HAD moved with the passage of another figure than his own. For ever since he had entered the shade, a woman, shawled in a vague, shapeless fashion, had watched him wonderingly, eagerly, excitedly, gliding from tree to tree as he advanced, or else dropping breathlessly below the fronds of fern whence she gazed at him as between parted fingers. When he wheeled she had run openly to the west, albeit with hidden face and still clinging shawl, and taken a last look at his retreating figure. And then, with a faint but lingering sigh, she drew back into the shadow of the wood again and vanished also.

CHAPTER III

At the end of twenty minutes Mr. Hamlin reined in his mare. He had just observed in the distant shadows of a by-lane that intersected his road the vanishing flutter of two light print dresses. Without a moment's hesitation he lightly swerved out of the high-road and followed the retreating figures.

As he neared them, they seemed to be two slim young girls, evidently so preoccupied with the rustic amusement of edging each other off the grassy border into the dust of the track that they did not perceive his approach. Little shrieks, slight scufflings, and interjections of "Cynthy! you limb!" "Quit that, Eunice, now!" and "I just call that real mean!" apparently drowned the sound of his canter in the soft dust. Checking his speed to a gentle trot, and pressing his horse close beside the opposite fence, he passed them with gravely uplifted hat and a serious, preoccupied air. But in that single, seemingly conventional glance, Mr. Hamlin had seen that they were both pretty, and that one had the short upper lip of his errant little guide. A hundred yards farther on he halted, as if irresolutely, gazed doubtfully ahead of him, and then turned back. An expression of innocent—almost childlike—concern was clouding the rascal's face. It was well, as the two girls had drawn closely together, having been apparently surprised in the midst of a glowing eulogium of this glorious passing vision by its sudden return. At his nearer approach, the one with the short upper lip hid that piquant feature and the rest of her rosy face behind the other's shoulder, which was suddenly and significantly opposed to the advance of this handsome intruder, with a certain dignity, half real, half affected, but wholly charming. The protectress appeared—possibly from her defensive attitude—the superior of her companion.

Audacious as Jack was to his own sex, he had early learned that such rare but discomposing graces as he possessed required a certain apologetic attitude when presented to women, and that it was only a plain man who could be always complacently self-confident in their presence. There was, consequently, a hesitating lowering of this hypocrite's brown eyelashes as he said, in almost pained accents,—

"Excuse me, but I fear I've taken the wrong road. I'm going to Green Springs."

"I reckon you've taken the wrong road, wherever you're going," returned the young lady, having apparently made up her mind to resent each of Jack's perfections as a separate impertinence: "this is a PRIVATE road." She drew herself fairly up here, although gurgled at in the ear and pinched in the arm by her companion.

"I beg your pardon," said Jack, meekly. "I see I'm trespassing on your grounds. I'm very sorry. Thank you for telling me. I should have gone on a mile or two farther, I suppose, until I came to your house," he added, innocently.

"A mile or two! You'd have run chock ag'in' our gate in another minit," said the short-lipped one, eagerly. But a sharp nudge from her companion sent her back again into cover, where she waited expectantly for another crushing retort from her protector.

But, alas! it did not come. One cannot be always witty, and Jack looked distressed. Nevertheless, he took advantage of the pause.

"It was so stupid in me, as I think your brother"—looking at Short-lip—"very carefully told me the road."

The two girls darted quick glances at each other. "Oh, Bawb!" said the first speaker, in wearied accents,—*"THAT limb! He don't keer."*

"But he DID care," said Hamlin, quietly, "and gave me a good deal of information. Thanks to him, I was able to see that ferny wood that's so famous—about two miles up the road. You know—the one that there's a poem written about!"

The shot told! Short-lip burst into a display of dazzling little teeth and caught the other girl convulsively by the shoulders. The superior girl bent her pretty brows, and said, "Eunice, what's gone of ye? Quit that!" but, as Hamlin thought, paled slightly.

"Of course," said Hamlin, quickly, "you know—the poem everybody's talking about. Dear me! let me see! how does it go?" The rascal knit his brows, said, "Ah, yes," and then murmured the verse he had lately sung quite as musically.

Short-lip was shamelessly exalted and excited. Really she could scarcely believe it! She already heard herself relating the whole occurrence. Here was the most beautiful young man she had ever seen—an entire stranger—talking to them in the most beautiful and natural way, right in the lane, and reciting poetry to her sister! It was like a novel—only more so. She thought that Cynthia, on the other hand, looked distressed, and—she must say it—"silly."

All of which Jack noted, and was wise. He had got all he wanted—at present. He gathered up his reins.

"Thank you so much, and your brother, too, Miss Cynthia," he said, without looking up. Then, adding, with a parting glance and smile, "But don't tell Bob how stupid I was," he swiftly departed.

In half an hour he was at the Green Springs Hotel. As he rode into the stable yard, he noticed that the coach had only just arrived, having been detained by a land-slip on the Summit road. With the recollection of Bob fresh in his mind, he glanced at the loungers at the stage office. The boy was not there, but a moment later Jack detected him among the waiting crowd at the post-office opposite. With a view of following up his inquiries, he crossed the road as the boy entered the vestibule of the post-office. He arrived in time to see him unlock one of a row of numbered letter-boxes rented by subscribers, which occupied a partition by the window, and take out a small package and a letter. But in that brief glance Mr. Hamlin detected the printed address of the "Excelsior Magazine" on the wrapper. It was enough. Luck was certainly with him.

He had time to get rid of the wicked sparkle that had lit his dark eyes, and to lounge carelessly towards the boy as the latter broke open the package, and then hurriedly concealed it in his jacket-pocket, and started for the door. Mr. Hamlin quickly followed him, unperceived, and, as he stepped into the street, gently tapped him on the shoulder. The boy turned and faced him quickly. But Mr. Hamlin's eyes showed nothing but lazy good-humor.

"Hullo, Bob. Where are you going?"

The boy again looked up suspiciously at this revelation of his name.

"Home," he said, briefly.

"Oh, over yonder," said Hamlin, calmly. "I don't mind walking with you as far as the lane."

He saw the boy's eyes glance furtively towards an alley that ran beside the blacksmith's shop a few rods ahead, and was convinced that he intended to evade him there. Slipping his arm carelessly in the youth's, he concluded to open fire at once.

"Bob," he said, with irresistible gravity, "I did not know when I met you this morning that I had the honor of addressing a poet—none other than the famous author of 'Underbrush.'"

The boy started back, and endeavored to withdraw his arm, but Mr. Hamlin tightened his hold, without, however, changing his careless expression.

"You see," he continued, "the editor is a friend of mine, and, being afraid this package might not get into the right hands—as you didn't give your name—he deputed me to come here and see that it was all square. As you're rather young, for all you're so gifted, I reckon I'd better go home with you, and take a receipt from your parents. That's about square, I think?"

The consternation of the boy was so evident and so far beyond Mr. Hamlin's expectation that he instantly halted him, gazed into his shifting eyes, and gave a long whistle.

"Who said it was for ME? Wot you talkin' about? Lemme go!" gasped the boy, with the short intermittent breath of mingled fear and passion.

“Bob,” said Mr. Hamlin, in a singularly colorless voice which was very rare with him, and an expression quite unlike his own, “what is your little game?”

The boy looked down in dogged silence.

“Out with it! Who are you playing this on?”

“It’s all among my own folks; it’s nothin’ to YOU,” said the boy, suddenly beginning to struggle violently, as if inspired by this extenuating fact.

“Among your own folks, eh? White Violet and the rest, eh? But SHE’S not in it?”

No reply.

“Hand me over that package. I’ll give it back to you again.”

The boy handed it to Mr. Hamlin. He read the letter, and found the inclosure contained a twenty-dollar gold-piece. A half-supercilious smile passed over his face at this revelation of the inadequate emoluments of literature and the trifling inducements to crime. Indeed, I fear the affair began to take a less serious moral complexion in his eyes.

“Then White Violet—your sister Cynthia, you know,” continued Mr. Hamlin, in easy parenthesis—“wrote for this?” holding the coin contemplatively in his fingers, “and you calculated to nab it yourself?”

The quick searching glance with which Bob received the name of his sister, Mr. Hamlin attributed only to his natural surprise that this stranger should be on such familiar terms with her; but the boy responded immediately and bluntly:—

“No! SHE didn’t write for it. She didn’t want nobody to know who she was. Nobody wrote for it but me. Nobody KNEW FOLKS WAS PAID FOR PO’TRY BUT ME. I found it out from a feller. I wrote for it. I wasn’t goin’ to let that skunk of an editor have it himself!”

“And you thought YOU would take it,” said Hamlin, his voice resuming its old tone. “Well, George—I mean Bob, your conduct was praiseworthy, although your intentions were bad. Still, twenty dollars is rather too much for your trouble. Suppose we say five and call it square?” He handed the astonished boy five dollars. “Now, George Washington,” he continued, taking four other twenty-dollar pieces from his pocket, and adding them to the inclosure, which he carefully refolded, “I’m going to give you another chance to live up to your reputation. You’ll take that package, and hand it to White Violet, and say you found it, just as it is, in the lock-box. I’ll keep the letter, for it would knock you endways if it was seen, and I’ll make it all right with the editor. But, as I’ve got to tell him that I’ve seen White Violet myself, and know she’s got it, I expect YOU to manage in some way to have me see her. I’ll manage the rest of it; and I won’t blow on you, either. You’ll come back to the hotel, and tell me what you’ve done. And now, George,” concluded Mr. Hamlin, succeeding at last in fixing the boy’s evasive eye with a peculiar look, “it may be just as well for you to understand that I know every nook and corner of this place, that I’ve already been through that underbrush you spoke of once this morning, and that I’ve got a mare that can go wherever YOU can, and a d–d sight quicker!”

“I’ll give the package to White Violet,” said the boy, doggedly.

“And you’ll come back to the hotel?”

The boy hesitated, and then said, “I’ll come back.”

“All right, then. Adios, general.”

Bob disappeared around the corner of a cross-road at a rapid trot, and Mr. Hamlin turned into the hotel.

“Smart little chap that!” he said to the barkeeper.

“You bet!” returned the man, who, having recognized Mr. Hamlin, was delighted at the prospect of conversing with a gentleman of such decidedly dangerous reputation. “But he’s been allowed to run a little wild since old man Delatour died, and the widder’s got enough to do, I reckon, lookin’ arter her four gals, and takin’ keer of old Delatour’s ranch over yonder. I guess it’s pretty hard sleddin’ for her sometimes to get clo’es and grub for the famerly, without follerin’ Bob around.”

“Sharp girls, too, I reckon; one of them writes things for the magazines, doesn’t she?—Cynthia, eh?” said Mr. Hamlin, carelessly.

Evidently this fact was not a notorious one to the barkeeper. He, however, said, “Dunno; mabbee; her father was eddicated, and the widder Delatour, too, though she’s sorter queer, I’ve heard tell. Lord! Mr. Hamlin, YOU oughter remember old man Delatour! From Opelousas, Louisiany, you know! High old sport French style, frilled bosom—open-handed, and us’ter buck ag’in’ faro awful! Why, he dropped a heap o’ money to YOU over in San Jose two years ago at poker! You must remember him!”

The slightest possible flush passed over Mr. Hamlin’s brow under the shadow of his hat, but did not get lower than his eyes. He suddenly HAD recalled the spendthrift Delatour perfectly, and as quickly regretted now that he had not doubled the honorarium he had just sent to his portionless daughter. But he only said, coolly, “No,” and then, raising his pale face and audacious eyes, continued in his laziest and most insulting manner, “no: the fact is, my mind is just now preoccupied in wondering if the gas is leaking anywhere, and if anything is ever served over this bar except elegant conversation. When the gentleman who mixes drinks comes back, perhaps you’ll be good enough to tell him to send a whisky sour to Mr. Jack Hamlin in the parlor. Meantime, you can turn off your soda fountain: I don’t want any fizz in mine.”

Having thus quite recovered himself, Mr. Hamlin lounged gracefully across the hall into the parlor. As he did so, a darkish young man, with a slim boyish figure, a thin face, and a discontented expression, rose from an armchair, held out his hand, and, with a saturnine smile, said:—

“Jack!”

“Fred!”

The two men remained gazing at each other with a half-amused, half-guarded expression. Mr. Hamlin was first to begin. “I didn’t think YOU’D be such a fool as to try on this kind of thing, Fred,” he said, half seriously.

“Yes, but it was to keep you from being a much bigger one that I hunted you up,” said the editor, mischievously. “Read that. I got it an hour after you left.” And he placed a little triumphantly in Jack’s hand the letter he had received from White Violet.

Mr. Hamlin read it with an unmoved face, and then laid his two hands on the editor’s shoulders. “Yes, my young friend, and you sat down and wrote her a pretty letter and sent her twenty dollars—which, permit me to say, was d–d poor pay! But that isn’t your fault, I reckon: it’s the meanness of your proprietors.”

“But it isn’t the question, either, just now, Jack, however you have been able to answer it. Do you mean to say seriously that you want to know anything more of a woman who could write such a letter?”

“I don’t know,” said Jack, cheerfully. “She might be a devilish sight funnier than if she hadn’t written it—which is the fact.”

“You mean to say SHE didn’t write it?”

“Yes.”

“Who did, then?”

“Her brother Bob.”

After a moment’s scrutiny of his friend’s bewildered face, Mr. Hamlin briefly related his adventures, from the moment of his meeting Bob at the mountain-stream to the barkeeper’s gossiping comment and sequel. “Therefore,” he concluded, “the author of ‘Underbrush’ is Miss Cynthia Delatour, one of four daughters of a widow who lives two miles from here at the crossing. I shall see her this evening and make sure; but to-morrow morning you will pay me the breakfast you owe me. She’s good-looking, but I can’t say I fancy the poetic style: it’s a little too high-toned for me. However, I love my love with a C, because she is your Contributor; I hate her with a C, because of

her Connections; I met her by Chance and treated her with Civility; her name is Cynthia, and she lives on a Cross-road.”

“But you surely don’t expect you will ever see Bob, again!” said the editor, impatiently. “You have trusted him with enough to start him for the Sandwich Islands, to say nothing of the ruinous precedent you have established in his mind of the value of poetry. I am surprised that a man of your knowledge of the world would have faith in that imp the second time.”

“My knowledge of the world,” returned Mr. Hamlin, sententiously, “tells me that’s the only way you can trust anybody. ONCE doesn’t make a habit, nor show a character. I could see by his bungling that he had never tried this on before. Just now the temptation to wipe out his punishment by doing the square thing, and coming back a sort of hero, is stronger than any other. ‘Tisn’t everybody that gets that chance,” he added, with an odd laugh.

Nevertheless, three hours passed without bringing Bob. The two men had gone to the billiard-room, when a waiter brought a note, which he handed to Mr. Hamlin with some apologetic hesitation. It bore no superscription, but had been brought by a boy who described Mr. Hamlin perfectly, and requested that the note should be handed to him with the remark that “Bob had come back.”

“And is he there now?” asked Mr. Hamlin, holding the letter unopened in his hand.

“No, sir; he run right off.”

The editor laughed, but Mr. Hamlin, having perused the note, put away his cue. “Come into my room,” he said.

The editor followed, and Mr. Hamlin laid the note before him on the table. “Bob’s all right,” he said, “for I’ll bet a thousand dollars that note is genuine.”

It was delicately written, in a cultivated feminine hand, utterly unlike the scrawl that had first excited the editor’s curiosity, and ran as follows:—

He who brought me the bounty of your friend—for I cannot call a recompense so far above my deserts by any other name—gives me also to understand that you wished for an interview. I cannot believe that this is mere idle curiosity, or that you have any motive that is not kindly and honorable, but I feel that I must beg and pray you not to seek to remove the veil behind which I have chosen to hide myself and my poor efforts from identification. I THINK I know you—I KNOW I know myself—well enough to believe it would give neither of us any happiness. You will say to your generous friend that he has already given the Unknown more comfort and hope than could come from any personal compliment or publicity, and you will yourself believe that you have all unconsciously brightened a sad woman’s fancy with a Dream and a Vision that before today had been unknown to WHITE VIOLET.

“Have you read it?” asked Mr. Hamlin.

“Yes.”

“Then you don’t want to see it any more, or even remember you ever saw it,” said Mr. Hamlin, carefully tearing the note into small pieces and letting them drift from the windows like blown blossoms.

“But, I say, Jack! look here; I don’t understand! You say you have already seen this woman, and yet”—

“I HAVEN’T seen her,” said Jack, composedly, turning from the window.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you and I, Fred, are going to drop this fooling right here and leave this place for Frisco by first stage to-morrow, and—that I owe you that dinner.”

CHAPTER IV

When the stage for San Francisco rolled away the next morning with Mr. Hamlin and the editor, the latter might have recognized in the occupant of a dust-covered buggy that was coming leisurely towards them the tall figure, long beard, and straight duster of his late visitor, Mr. James Bowers. For Mr. Bowers was on the same quest that the others had just abandoned. Like Mr. Hamlin, he had been left to his own resources, but Mr. Bowers's resources were a life-long experience and technical skill; he too had noted the topographical indications of the poem, and his knowledge of the sylva of Upper California pointed as unerringly as Mr. Hamlin's luck to the cryptogamous haunts of the Summit. Such abnormal growths were indicative of certain localities only, but, as they were not remunerative from a pecuniary point of view, were to be avoided by the sagacious woodman. It was clear, therefore, that Mr. Bowers's visit to Green Springs was not professional, and that he did not even figuratively accept the omen.

He baited and rested his horse at the hotel, where his bucolic exterior, however, did not elicit that attention which had been accorded to Mr. Hamlin's charming insolence or the editor's cultivated manner. But he glanced over a township map on the walls of the reading-room, and took note of the names of the owners of different lots, farms, and ranches, passing that of Delatour with the others. Then he drove leisurely in the direction of the woods, and, reaching them, tied his horse to a young sapling in the shade, and entered their domain with a shambling but familiar woodman's step.

It is not the purpose of this brief chronicle to follow Mr. Bowers in his professional diagnosis of the locality. He recognized Nature in one of her moods of wasteful extravagance,—a waste that his experienced eye could tell was also sapping the vitality of those outwardly robust shafts that rose around him. He knew, without testing them, that half of these fair-seeming columns were hollow and rotten at the core; he could detect the chill odor of decay through the hot balsamic spices stirred by the wind that streamed through their long aisles,—like incense mingling with the exhalations of a crypt. He stopped now and then to part the heavy fronds down to their roots in the dank moss, seeing again, as he had told the editor, the weird SECOND twilight through their miniature stems, and the microcosm of life that filled it. But, even while paying this tribute to the accuracy of the unknown poetess, he was, like his predecessor, haunted more strongly by the atmosphere and melody of her verse. Its spell was upon him, too. Unlike Mr. Hamlin, he did not sing. He only halted once or twice, silently combing his straight narrow beard with his three fingers, until the action seemed to draw down the lines of his face into limitless dejection, and an inscrutable melancholy filled his small gray eyes. The few birds which had hailed Mr. Hamlin as their successful rival fled away before the grotesque and angular half-length of Mr. Bowers, as if the wind had blown in a scarecrow from the distant farms.

Suddenly he observed the figure of a woman, with her back towards him, leaning motionless against a tree, and apparently gazing intently in the direction of Green Springs. He had approached so near to her that it was singular she had not heard him. Mr. Bowers was a bashful man in the presence of the other sex. He felt exceedingly embarrassed; if he could have gone away without attracting her attention he would have done so. Neither could he remain silent, a tacit spy of her meditation. He had recourse to a polite but singularly artificial cough.

To his surprise, she gave a faint cry, turned quickly towards him, and then shrank back and lapsed quite helpless against the tree. Her evident distress overcame his bashfulness. He ran towards her.

"I'm sorry I frightened ye, ma'am, but I was afraid I might skeer ye more if I lay low, and said nothin'."

Even then, if she had been some fair young country girl, he would have relapsed after this speech into his former bashfulness. But the face and figure she turned towards him were neither young nor

fair: a woman past forty, with gray threads and splashes in her brushed-back hair, which was turned over her ears in two curls like frayed strands of rope. Her forehead was rather high than broad, her nose large but well-shaped, and her eyes full but so singularly light in color as to seem almost sightless. The short upper lip of her large mouth displayed her teeth in an habitual smile, which was in turn so flatly contradicted by every other line of her careworn face that it seemed gratuitously artificial. Her figure was hidden by a shapeless garment that partook equally of the shawl, cloak, and wrapper.

"I am very foolish," she began, in a voice and accent that at once asserted a cultivated woman, "but I so seldom meet anybody here that a voice quite startled me. That, and the heat," she went on, wiping her face, into which the color was returning violently—"for I seldom go out as early as this—I suppose affected me."

Mr. Bowers had that innate Far-Western reverence for womanhood which I fancy challenges the most polished politeness. He remained patient, undemonstrative, self-effacing, and respectful before her, his angular arm slightly but not obtrusively advanced, the offer of protection being in the act rather than in any spoken word, and requiring no response.

"Like as not, ma'am," he said, cheerfully looking everywhere but in her burning face. "The sun IS pow'ful hot at this time o' day; I felt it myself comin' yer, and, though the damp of this timber kinder sets it back, it's likely to come out ag'in. Ye can't check it no more than the sap in that choked limb thar"—he pointed ostentatiously where a fallen pine had been caught in the bent and twisted arm of another, but which still put out a few green tassels beyond the point of impact. "Do you live far from here, ma'am?" he added.

"Only as far as the first turning below the hill."

"I've got my buggy here, and I'm goin' that way, and I can jist set ye down thar cool and comfortable. Ef," he continued, in the same assuring tone, without waiting for a reply, "ye'll jist take a good grip of my arm thar," curving his wrist and hand behind him like a shepherd's crook, "I'll go first, and break away the brush for ye."

She obeyed mechanically, and they fared on through the thick ferns in this fashion for some moments, he looking ahead, occasionally dropping a word of caution or encouragement, but never glancing at her face. When they reached the buggy he lifted her into it carefully,—and perpendicularly, it struck her afterwards, very much as if she had been a transplanted sapling with bared and sensitive roots,—and then gravely took his place beside her.

"Bein' in the timber trade myself, ma'am," he said, gathering up the reins, "I chanced to sight these woods, and took a look around. My name is Bowers, of Mendocino; I reckon there ain't much that grows in the way o' standin' timber on the Pacific Slope that I don't know and can't locate, though I DO say it. I've got ez big a mill, and ez big a run in my district, ez there is anywhere. Ef you're ever up my way, you ask for Bowers—Jim Bowers—and that's ME."

There is probably nothing more conducive to conversation between strangers than a wholesome and early recognition of each other's foibles. Mr. Bowers, believing his chance acquaintance a superior woman, naively spoke of himself in a way that he hoped would reassure her that she was not compromising herself in accepting his civility, and so satisfy what must be her inevitable pride. On the other hand, the woman regained her self-possession by this exhibition of Mr. Bowers's vanity, and, revived by the refreshing breeze caused by the rapid motion of the buggy along the road, thanked him graciously.

"I suppose there are many strangers at the Green Springs Hotel," she said, after a pause.

"I didn't get to see 'em, as I only put up my hoss there," he replied. "But I know the stage took some away this mornin': it seemed pretty well loaded up when I passed it."

The woman drew a deep sigh. The act struck Mr. Bowers as a possible return of her former nervous weakness. Her attention must at once be distracted at any cost—even conversation.

"Perhaps," he began, with sudden and appalling lightness, "I'm a-talkin' to Mrs. McFadden?"

"No," said the woman, abstractedly.

“Then it must be Mrs. Delatour? There are only two township lots on that crossroad.”

“My name IS Delatour,” she said, somewhat wearily.

Mr. Bowers was conversationally stranded. He was not at all anxious to know her name, yet, knowing it now, it seemed to suggest that there was nothing more to say. He would, of course, have preferred to ask her if she had read the poetry about the Underbrush, and if she knew the poetess, and what she thought of it; but the fact that she appeared to be an “edicated” woman made him sensitive of displaying technical ignorance in his manner of talking about it. She might ask him if it was “subjective” or “objective”—two words he had heard used at the Debating Society at Mendocino on the question, “Is poetry morally beneficial?” For a few moments he was silent. But presently she took the initiative in conversation, at first slowly and abstractedly, and then, as if appreciating his sympathetic reticence, or mayhap finding some relief in monotonous expression, talked mechanically, deliberately, but unostentatiously about herself. So colorless was her intonation that at times it did not seem as if she was talking to him, but repeating some conversation she had held with another.

She had lived there ever since she had been in California. Her husband had bought the Spanish title to the property when they first married. The property at his death was found to be greatly involved; she had been obliged to part with much of it to support her children—four girls and a boy. She had been compelled to withdraw the girls from the convent at Santa Clara to help about the house; the boy was too young—she feared, too shiftless—to do anything. The farm did not pay; the land was poor; she knew nothing about farming; she had been brought up in New Orleans, where her father had been a judge, and she didn’t understand country life. Of course she had been married too young—as all girls were. Lately she had thought of selling off and moving to San Francisco, where she would open a boarding-house or a school for young ladies. He could advise her, perhaps, of some good opportunity. Her own girls were far enough advanced to assist her in teaching; one particularly, Cynthia, was quite clever, and spoke French and Spanish fluently.

As Mr. Bowers was familiar with many of these counts in the feminine American indictment of life generally, he was not perhaps greatly moved. But in the last sentence he thought he saw an opening to return to his main object, and, looking up cautiously, said:—

“And mebbe write po’try now and then?” To his great discomfiture, the only effect of this suggestion was to check his companion’s speech for some moments and apparently throw her back into her former abstraction. Yet, after a long pause, as they were turning into the lane, she said, as if continuing the subject:—

“I only hope that, whatever my daughters may do, they won’t marry young.”

The yawning breaches in the Delatour gates and fences presently came in view. They were supposed to be reinforced by half a dozen dogs, who, however, did their duty with what would seem to be the prevailing inefficiency, retiring after a single perfunctory yelp to shameless stretching, scratching, and slumber. Their places were taken on the veranda by two negro servants, two girls respectively of eight and eleven, and a boy of fourteen, who remained silently staring. As Mr. Bowers had accepted the widow’s polite invitation to enter, she was compelled, albeit in an equally dazed and helpless way, to issue some preliminary orders:—

“Now, Chloe—I mean aunt Dinah—do take Eunice—I mean Victorine and Una—away, and—you know—tidy them; and you, Sarah—it’s Sarah, isn’t it?—lay some refreshment in the parlor for this gentleman. And, Bob, tell your sister Cynthia to come here with Eunice.” As Bob still remained staring at Mr. Bowers, she added, in weary explanation, “Mr. Bowers brought me over from the Summit woods in his buggy—it was so hot. There—shake hands and thank him, and run away—do!”

They crossed a broad but scantily-furnished hall. Everywhere the same look of hopeless incompleteness, temporary utility, and premature decay; most of the furniture was mismatched and misplaced; many of the rooms had changed their original functions or doubled them; a smell of cooking came from the library, on whose shelves, mingled with books, were dresses and household linen, and through the door of a room into which Mrs. Delatour retired to remove her duster Mr.

Bowers caught a glimpse of a bed, and of a table covered with books and papers, at which a tall, fair girl was writing. In a few moments Mrs. Delatour returned, accompanied by this girl, and Eunice, her short-lipped sister. Bob, who joined the party seated around Mr. Bowers and a table set with cake, a decanter, and glasses, completed the group. Emboldened by the presence of the tall Cynthia and his glimpse of her previous literary attitude, Mr. Bowers resolved to make one more attempt.

"I suppose these yer young ladies sometimes go to the wood, too?" As his eye rested on Cynthia, she replied:—

"Oh, yes."

"I reckon on account of the purty shadows down in the brush, and the soft light, eh? and all that?" he continued, with a playful manner but a serious accession of color.

"Why, the woods belong to us. It's mar's property!" broke in Eunice with a flash of teeth.

"Well, Lordy, I wanter know!" said Mr. Bowers, in some astonishment. "Why, that's right in my line, too! I've been sightin' timber all along here, and that's how I dropped in on yer mar." Then, seeing a look of eagerness light up the faces of Bob and Eunice, he was encouraged to make the most of his opportunity. "Why, ma'am," he went on, cheerfully, "I reckon you're holdin' that wood at a pretty stiff figger, now."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Delatour, simply.

Mr. Bowers delivered a wink at Bob and Eunice, who were still watching him with anxiety. "Well, not on account of the actool timber, for the best of it ain't sound," he said, "but on account of its bein' famous! Everybody that reads that pow'ful pretty poem about it in the 'Excelsior Magazine' wants to see it. Why, it would pay the Green Springs hotel-keeper to buy it up for his customers. But I s'pose you reckon to keep it—along with the poetess—in your famerly?"

Although Mr. Bowers long considered this speech as the happiest and most brilliant effort of his life, its immediate effect was not, perhaps, all that could be desired. The widow turned upon him a restrained and darkening face. Cynthia half rose with an appealing "Oh, mar!" and Bob and Eunice, having apparently pinched each other to the last stage of endurance, retired precipitately from the room in a prolonged giggle.

"I have not yet thought of disposing of the Summit woods, Mr. Bowers," said Mrs. Delatour, coldly, "but if I should do so, I will consult you. You must excuse the children, who see so little company, they are quite unmanageable when strangers are present. Cynthia, WILL you see if the servants have looked after Mr. Bowers's horse? You know Bob is not to be trusted."

There was clearly nothing else for Mr. Bowers to do but to take his leave, which he did respectfully, if not altogether hopefully. But when he had reached the lane, his horse shied from the unwonted spectacle of Bob, swinging his hat, and apparently awaiting him, from the fork of a wayside sapling.

"Hol' up, mister. Look here!"

Mr. Bowers pulled up. Bob dropped into the road, and, after a backward glance over his shoulder, said:—

"Drive 'longside the fence in the shadder." As Mr. Bowers obeyed, Bob approached the wheels of the buggy in a manner half shy, half mysterious. "You wanter buy them Summit woods, mister?"

"Well, per'aps, sonny. Why?" smiled Mr. Bowers.

"Coz I'll tell ye suthin'. Don't you be fooled into allowin' that Cynthia wrote that po'try. She didn't—no more'n Eunice nor me. Mar kinder let ye think it, 'cos she don't want folks to think SHE did it. But mar wrote that po'try herself; wrote it out o' them thar woods—all by herself. Thar's a heap more po'try thar, you bet, and jist as good. And she's the one that kin write it—you hear me? That's my mar, every time! You buy that thar wood, and get mar to run it for po'try, and you'll make your pile, sure! I ain't lyin'. You'd better look s pry: thar's another feller snoopin' 'round yere—only he barked up the wrong tree, and thought it was Cynthia, jist as you did."

"Another feller?" repeated the astonished Bowers.

“Yes; a rig’lar sport. He was orful keen on that po’try, too, you bet. So you’d better hump yourself afore somebody else cuts in. Mar got a hundred dollars for that pome, from that editor feller and his pardner. I reckon that’s the rig’lar price, eh?” he added, with a sudden suspicious caution.

“I reckon so,” replied Mr. Bowers, blankly. “But—look here, Bob! Do you mean to say it was your mother—your MOTHER, Bob, who wrote that poem? Are you sure?”

“D’ye think I’m lyin’?” said Bob, scornfully. “Don’t I know? Don’t I copy ‘em out plain for her, so as folks won’t know her handwrite? Go ‘way! you’re loony!” Then, possibly doubting if this latter expression were strictly diplomatic with the business in hand, he added, in half-reproach, half-apology, “Don’t ye see I don’t want ye to be fooled into losin’ yer chance o’ buying up that Summit wood? It’s the cold truth I’m tellin’ ye.”

Mr. Bowers no longer doubted it. Disappointed as he undoubtedly was at first,—and even self-deceived,—he recognized in a flash the grim fact that the boy had stated. He recalled the apparition of the sad-faced woman in the wood—her distressed manner, that to his inexperienced mind now took upon itself the agitated trembling of disturbed mystic inspiration. A sense of sadness and remorse succeeded his first shock of disappointment.

“Well, are ye going to buy the woods?” said Bob, eying him grimly. “Ye’d better say.”

Mr. Bowers started. “I shouldn’t wonder, Bob,” he said, with a smile, gathering up his reins. “Anyhow, I’m comin’ back to see your mother this afternoon. And meantime, Bob, you keep the first chance for me.”

He drove away, leaving the youthful diplomatist standing with his bare feet in the dust. For a minute or two the young gentleman amused himself by a few light saltatory steps in the road. Then a smile of scornful superiority, mingled perhaps with a sense of previous slights and unappreciation, drew back his little upper lip, and brightened his mottled cheek.

“I’d like ter know,” he said, darkly, “what this yer God-forsaken famerly would do without ME!”

CHAPTER V

It is to be presumed that the editor and Mr. Hamlin mutually kept to their tacit agreement to respect the impersonality of the poetess, for during the next three months the subject was seldom alluded to by either. Yet in that period White Violet had sent two other contributions, and on each occasion Mr. Hamlin had insisted upon increasing the honorarium to the amount of his former gift. In vain the editor pointed out the danger of this form of munificence; Mr. Hamlin retorted by saying that if he refused he would appeal to the proprietor, who certainly would not object to taking the credit of this liberality. "As to the risks," concluded Jack, sententiously, "I'll take them; and as far as you're concerned, you certainly get the worth of your money."

Indeed, if popularity was an indiction, this had become suddenly true. For the poetess's third contribution, without changing its strong local color and individuality, had been an unexpected outburst of human passion—a love-song, that touched those to whom the subtler meditative graces of the poetess had been unknown. Many people had listened to this impassioned but despairing cry from some remote and charmed solitude, who had never read poetry before, who translated it into their own limited vocabulary and more limited experience, and were inexpressibly affected to find that they, too, understood it; it was caught up and echoed by the feverish, adventurous, and unsatisfied life that filled that day and time. Even the editor was surprised and frightened. Like most cultivated men, he distrusted popularity: like all men who believe in their own individual judgment, he doubted collective wisdom. Yet now that his protegee had been accepted by others, he questioned that judgment and became her critic. It struck him that her sudden outburst was strained; it seemed to him that in this mere contortion of passion the sibyl's robe had become rudely disarranged. He spoke to Hamlin, and even approached the tabooed subject.

"Did you see anything that suggested this sort of business in—in—that woman—I mean in—your pilgrimage, Jack?"

"No," responded Jack, gravely. "But it's easy to see she's got hold of some hay-footed fellow up there in the mountains with straws in his hair, and is playing him for all he's worth. You won't get much more poetry out of her, I reckon."

It was not long after this conversation that one afternoon, when the editor was alone, Mr. James Bowers entered the editorial room with much of the hesitation and irresolution of his previous visit. As the editor had not only forgotten him, but even, dissociated him with the poetess, Mr. Bowers was fain to meet his unresponsive eye and manner with some explanation.

"Ye disremember my comin' here, Mr. Editor, to ask you the name o' the lady who called herself 'White Violet,' and how you allowed you couldn't give it, but would write and ask for it?"

Mr. Editor, leaning back in his chair, now remembered the occurrence, but was distressed to add that the situation remained unchanged, and that he had received no such permission.

"Never mind THAT, my lad," said Mr. Bowers, gravely, waving his hand. "I understand all that; but, ez I've known the lady ever since, and am now visiting her at her house on the Summit, I reckon it don't make much matter."

It was quite characteristic of Mr. Bowers's smileless earnestness that he made no ostentation of this dramatic retort, nor of the undisguised stupefaction of the editor.

"Do you mean to say that you have met White Violet, the author of these poems?" repeated the editor.

"Which her name is Delatour,—the widder Delatour,—ez she has herself give me permission to tell you," continued Mr. Bowers, with a certain abstracted and automatic precision that dissipated any suggestion of malice in the reversed situation.

"Delatour!—a widow!" repeated the editor.

“With five children,” continued Mr. Bowers. Then, with unalterable gravity, he briefly gave an outline of her condition and the circumstances of his acquaintance with her.

“But I reckoned YOU might have known suthin’ o’ this; though she never let on you did,” he concluded, eying the editor with troubled curiosity.

The editor did not think it necessary to implicate Mr. Hamlin. He said, briefly, “I? Oh, no!”

“Of course, YOU might not have seen her?” said Mr. Bowers, keeping the same grave, troubled gaze on the editor.

“Of course not,” said the editor, somewhat impatient under the singular scrutiny of Mr. Bowers; “and I’m very anxious to know how she looks. Tell me, what is she like?”

“She is a fine, pow’ful, eddicated woman,” said Mr. Bowers, with slow deliberation. “Yes, sir, —a pow’ful woman, havin’ grand ideas of her own, and holdin’ to ‘em.” He had withdrawn his eyes from the editor, and apparently addressed the ceiling in confidence.

“But what does she look like, Mr. Bowers?” said the editor, smiling.

“Well, sir, she looks—LIKE—IT! Yes,”—with deliberate caution,—“I should say, just like it.”

After a pause, apparently to allow the editor to materialize this ravishing description, he said, gently, “Are you busy just now?”

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