BRET HARTE

OPENINGS IN THE OLD TRAIL

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Содержание

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A MERCURY OF THE FOOT-HILLS

It was high hot noon on the Casket Ridge. Its very scant shade was restricted to a few dwarf Scotch firs, and was so perpendicularly cast that Leonidas Boone, seeking shelter from the heat, was obliged to draw himself up under one of them, as if it were an umbrella. Occasionally, with a boy's perversity, he permitted one bared foot to protrude beyond the sharply marked shadow until the burning sun forced him to draw it in again with a thrill of satisfaction. There was no earthly reason why he had not sought the larger shadows of the pine-trees which reared themselves against the Ridge on the slope below him, except that he was a boy, and perhaps even more superstitious and opinionated than most boys. Having got under this tree with infinite care, he had made up his mind that he would not move from it until its line of shade reached and touched a certain stone on the trail near him! WHY he did this he did not know, but he clung to his sublime purpose with the courage and tenacity of a youthful Casabianca. He was cramped, tickled by dust and

fir sprays; he was supremely uncomfortable—but he stayed! A woodpecker was monotonously tapping in an adjacent pine, with measured intervals of silence, which he always firmly believed was a certain telegraphy of the bird's own making; a green-and-gold lizard flashed by his foot to stiffen itself suddenly with a rigidity equal to his own. Still HE stirred not. The shadow gradually crept nearer the mystic stone—and touched it. He sprang up, shook himself, and prepared to go about his business. This was simply an errand to the post-office at the cross-roads, scarcely a mile from his father's house. He was already halfway there. He had taken only the better part of one hour for this desultory journey!

However, he now proceeded on his way, diverging only to follow a fresh rabbit-track a few hundred yards, to note that the animal had doubled twice against the wind, and then, naturally, he was obliged to look closely for other tracks to determine its pursuers. He paused also, but only for a moment, to rap thrice on the trunk of the pine where the woodpecker was at work, which he knew would make it cease work for a time—as it did. Having thus renewed his relations with nature, he discovered that one of the letters he was taking to the post-office had slipped in some mysterious way from the bosom of his shirt, where he carried them, past his waist-band into his trouser-leg, and was about to make a casual delivery of itself on the trail. This caused him to take out his letters and count them, when he found one missing. He had been given four letters to post—he had only three. There

was a big one in his father's handwriting, two indistinctive ones of his mother's, and a smaller one of his sister's—THAT was gone! Not at all disconcerted, he calmly retraced his steps, following his own tracks minutely, with a grim face and a distinct delight in the process, while looking—perfunctorily—for the letter. In the midst of this slow progress a bright idea struck him. He walked back to the fir-tree where he had rested, and found the lost missive. It had slipped out of his shirt when he shook himself. He was not particularly pleased. He knew that nobody would give him credit for his trouble in going back for it, or his astuteness in guessing where it was. He heaved the sigh of misunderstood genius, and again started for the post-office. This time he carried the letters openly and ostentatiously in his hand.

Presently he heard a voice say, "Hey!" It was a gentle, musical voice,—a stranger's voice, for it evidently did not know how to call him, and did not say, "Oh, Leonidas!" or "You—look here!" He was abreast of a little clearing, guarded by a low stockade of bark palings, and beyond it was a small white dwelling-house. Leonidas knew the place perfectly well. It belonged to the superintendent of a mining tunnel, who had lately rented it to some strangers from San Francisco. Thus much he had heard from his family. He had a mountain boy's contempt for city folks, and was not himself interested in them. Yet as he heard the call, he was conscious of a slightly guilty feeling. He might have been trespassing in following the rabbit's track; he might have been seen by some one when he lost the letter and had to go back

for it—all grown-up people had a way of offering themselves as witnesses against him! He scowled a little as he glanced around him. Then his eye fell on the caller on the other side of the stockade.

To his surprise it was a woman: a pretty, gentle, fragile creature, all soft muslin and laces, with her fingers interlocked, and leaning both elbows on the top of the stockade as she stood under the checkered shadow of a buckeye.

"Come here—please—won't you?" she said pleasantly.

It would have been impossible to resist her voice if Leonidas had wanted to, which he didn't. He walked confidently up to the fence. She really was very pretty, with eyes like his setter's, and as caressing. And there were little puckers and satiny creases around her delicate nostrils and mouth when she spoke, which Leonidas knew were "expression."

"I—I"—she began, with charming hesitation; then suddenly, "What's your name?"

"Leonidas."

"Leonidas! That's a pretty name!" He thought it DID sound pretty. "Well, Leonidas, I want you to be a good boy and do a great favor for me,—a very great favor."

Leonidas's face fell. This kind of prelude and formula was familiar to him. It was usually followed by, "Promise me that you will never swear again," or, "that you will go straight home and wash your face," or some other irrelevant personality. But nobody with that sort of eyes had ever said it. So he said, a little

shyly but sincerely, "Yes, ma'am."

"You are going to the post-office?"

This seemed a very foolish, womanish question, seeing that he was holding letters in his hand; but he said, "Yes."

"I want you to put a letter of mine among yours and post them all together," she said, putting one little hand to her bosom and drawing out a letter. He noticed that she purposely held the addressed side so that he could not see it, but he also noticed that her hand was small, thin, and white, even to a faint tint of blue in it, unlike his sister's, the baby's, or any other hand he had ever seen. "Can you read?" she said suddenly, withdrawing the letter.

The boy flushed slightly at the question. "Of course I can," he said proudly.

"Of course, certainly," she repeated quickly; "but," she added, with a mischievous smile, "you mustn't NOW! Promise me! Promise me that you won't read this address, but just post the letter, like one of your own, in the letter-box with the others."

Leonidas promised readily; it seemed to him a great fuss about nothing; perhaps it was some kind of game or a bet. He opened his sunburnt hand, holding his own letters, and she slipped hers, face downward, between them. Her soft fingers touched his in the operation, and seemed to leave a pleasant warmth behind them.

"Promise me another thing," she added; "promise me you won't say a word of this to any one."

"Of course!" said Leonidas.

"That's a good boy, and I know you will keep your word." She

hesitated a moment, smilingly and tentatively, and then held out a bright half-dollar. Leonidas backed from the fence. "I'd rather not," he said shyly.

"But as a present from ME?"

Leonidas colored—he was really proud; and he was also bright enough to understand that the possession of such unbounded wealth would provoke dangerous inquiry at home. But he didn't like to say it, and only replied, "I can't."

She looked at him curiously. "Then—thank you," she said, offering her white hand, which felt like a bird in his. "Now run on, and don't let me keep you any longer." She drew back from the fence as she spoke, and waved him a pretty farewell. Leonidas, half sorry, half relieved, darted away.

He ran to the post-office, which he never had done before. Loyally he never looked at her letter, nor, indeed, at his own again, swinging the hand that held them far from his side. He entered the post-office directly, going at once to the letter-box and depositing the precious missive with the others. The post-office was also the "country store," and Leonidas was in the habit of still further protracting his errands there by lingering in that stimulating atmosphere of sugar, cheese, and coffee. But to-day his stay was brief, so transitory that the postmaster himself inferred audibly that "old man Boone must have been tanning Lee with a hickory switch." But the simple reason was that Leonidas wished to go back to the stockade fence and the fair stranger, if haply she was still there. His heart sank as, breathless

with unwonted haste, he reached the clearing and the empty buckeye shade. He walked slowly and with sad diffidence by the deserted stockade fence. But presently his quick eye discerned a glint of white among the laurels near the house. It was SHE, walking with apparent indifference away from him towards the corner of the clearing and the road. But this he knew would bring her to the end of the stockade fence, where he must pass—and it did. She turned to him with a bright smile of affected surprise. "Why, you're as swift-footed as Mercury!"

Leonidas understood her perfectly. Mercury was the other name for quicksilver—and that was lively, you bet! He had often spilt some on the floor to see it move. She must be awfully cute to have noticed it too—cuter than his sisters. He was quite breathless with pleasure.

"I put your letter in the box all right," he burst out at last.

"Without any one seeing it?" she asked.

"Sure pop! nary one! The postmaster stuck out his hand to grab it, but I just let on that I didn't see him, and shoved it in myself."

"You're as sharp as you're good," she said smilingly. "Now, there's just ONE thing more I want you to do. Forget all about this—won't you?"

Her voice was very caressing. Perhaps that was why he said boldly: "Yes, ma'am, all except YOU."

"Dear me, what a compliment! How old are you?"

"Goin' on fifteen," said Leonidas confidently.

"And going very fast," said the lady mischievously. "Well, then, you needn't forget ME. On the contrary," she added, after looking at him curiously, "I would rather you'd remember me. Good-by—or, rather, good-afternoon—if I'm to be remembered, Leon."

"Good-afternoon, ma'am."

She moved away, and presently disappeared among the laurels. But her last words were ringing in his ears. "Leon"—everybody else called him "Lee" for brevity; "Leon"—it was pretty as she said it.

He turned away. But it so chanced that their parting was not to pass unnoticed, for, looking up the hill, Leonidas perceived his elder sister and little brother coming down the road, and knew that they must have seen him from the hilltop. It was like their "snoopin'"!

They ran to him eagerly.

"You were talking to the stranger," said his sister breathlessly.

"She spoke to me first," said Leonidas, on the defensive.

"What did she say?"

"Wanted to know the eleckshun news," said Leonidas with cool mendacity, "and I told her."

This improbable fiction nevertheless satisfied them. "What was she like? Oh, do tell us, Lee!" continued his sister.

Nothing would have delighted him more than to expatiate upon her loveliness, the soft white beauty of her hands, the "cunning" little puckers around her lips, her bright tender eyes,

the angelic texture of her robes, and the musical tinkle of her voice. But Leonidas had no confidant, and what healthy boy ever trusted his sister in such matter! "YOU saw what she was like," he said, with evasive bluntness.

"But, Lee"—

But Lee was adamant. "Go and ask her," he said.

"Like as not you were sassy to her, and she shut you up," said his sister artfully. But even this cruel suggestion, which he could have so easily flouted, did not draw him, and his ingenious relations flounced disgustedly away.

But Leonidas was not spared any further allusion to the fair stranger; for the fact of her having spoken to him was duly reported at home, and at dinner his reticence was again sorely attacked. "Just like her, in spite of all her airs and graces, to hang out along the fence like any ordinary hired girl, jabberin' with anybody that went along the road," said his mother incisively. He knew that she didn't like her new neighbors, so this did not surprise nor greatly pain him. Neither did the prosaic facts that were now first made plain to him. His divinity was a Mrs. Burroughs, whose husband was conducting a series of mining operations, and prospecting with a gang of men on the Casket Ridge. As his duty required his continual presence there, Mrs. Burroughs was forced to forego the civilized pleasures of San Francisco for a frontier life, for which she was ill fitted, and in which she had no interest. All this was a vague irrelevance to Leonidas, who knew her only as a goddess in white who had

been familiar to him, and kind, and to whom he was tied by the delicious joy of having a secret in common, and having done her a special favor. Healthy youth clings to its own impressions, let reason, experience, and even facts argue ever to the contrary.

So he kept her secret and his intact, and was rewarded a few days afterwards by a distant view of her walking in the garden, with a man whom he recognized as her husband. It is needless to say that, without any extraneous thought, the man suffered in Leonidas's estimation by his propinquity to the goddess, and that he deemed him vastly inferior.

It was a still greater reward to his fidelity that she seized an opportunity when her husband's head was turned to wave her hand to him. Leonidas did not approach the fence, partly through shyness and partly through a more subtle instinct that this man was not in the secret. He was right, for only the next day, as he passed to the post-office, she called him to the fence.

"Did you see me wave my hand to you yesterday?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes, ma'am; but"—he hesitated—"I didn't come up, for I didn't think you wanted me when any one else was there."

She laughed merrily, and lifting his straw hat from his head, ran the fingers of the other hand through his damp curls. "You're the brightest, dearest boy I ever knew, Leon," she said, dropping her pretty face to the level of his own, "and I ought to have remembered it. But I don't mind telling you I was dreadfully frightened lest you might misunderstand me and come and

ask for another letter—before HIM." As she emphasized the personal pronoun, her whole face seemed to change: the light of her blue eyes became mere glittering points, her nostrils grew white and contracted, and her pretty little mouth seemed to narrow into a straight cruel line, like a cat's. "Not a word ever to HIM, of all men! Do you hear?" she said almost brusquely. Then, seeing the concern in the boy's face, she laughed, and added explanatorily: "He's a bad, bad man, Leon, remember that."

The fact that she was speaking of her husband did not shock the boy's moral sense in the least. The sacredness of those relations, and even of blood kinship, is, I fear, not always so clear to the youthful mind as we fondly imagine. That Mr. Burroughs was a bad man to have excited this change in this lovely woman was Leonidas's only conclusion. He remembered how his sister's soft, pretty little kitten, purring on her lap, used to get its back up and spit at the postmaster's yellow hound.

"I never wished to come unless you called me first," he said frankly.

"What?" she said, in her half playful, half reproachful, but wholly caressing way. "You mean to say you would never come to see me unless I sent for you? Oh, Leon! and you'd abandon me in that way?"

But Leonidas was set in his own boyish superstition. "I'd just delight in being sent for by you any time, Mrs. Burroughs, and you kin always find me," he said shyly, but doggedly; "but"—He stopped.

"What an opinionated young gentleman! Well, I see I must do all the courting. So consider that I sent for you this morning. I've got another letter for you to mail." She put her hand to her breast, and out of the pretty frillings of her frock produced, as before, with the same faint perfume of violets, a letter like the first. But it was unsealed. "Now, listen, Leon; we are going to be great friends—you and I." Leonidas felt his cheeks glowing. "You are going to do me another great favor, and we are going to have a little fun and a great secret all by our own selves. Now, first, have you any correspondent—you know—any one who writes to you—any boy or girl—from San Francisco?"

Leonidas's cheeks grew redder—alas! from a less happy consciousness. He never received any letters; nobody ever wrote to him. He was obliged to make this shameful admission.

Mrs. Burroughs looked thoughtful. "But you have some friend in San Francisco—some one who MIGHT write to you?" she suggested pleasantly.

"I knew a boy once who went to San Francisco," said Leonidas doubtfully. "At least, he allowed he was goin' there."

"That will do," said Mrs. Burroughs. "I suppose your parents know him or of him?"

"Why," said Leonidas, "he used to live here."

"Better still. For, you see, it wouldn't be strange if he DID write. What was the gentleman's name?"

"Jim Belcher," returned Leonidas hesitatingly, by no means sure that the absent Belcher knew how to write. Mrs. Burroughs

took a tiny pencil from her belt, opened the letter she was holding in her hand, and apparently wrote the name in it. Then she folded it and sealed it, smiling charmingly at Leonidas's puzzled face.

"Now, Leon, listen; for here is the favor I am asking. Mr. Jim Belcher"—she pronounced the name with great gravity—"will write to you in a few days. But inside of YOUR letter will be a little note to me, which you will bring me. You can show your letter to your family, if they want to know who it is from; but no one must see MINE. Can you manage that?"

"Yes," said Leonidas. Then, as the whole idea flashed upon his quick intelligence, he smiled until he showed his dimples. Mrs. Burroughs leaned forward over the fence, lifted his torn straw hat, and dropped a fluttering little kiss on his forehead. It seemed to the boy, flushed and rosy as a maid, as if she had left a shining star there for every one to see.

"Don't smile like that, Leon, you're positively irresistible! It will be a nice little game, won't it? Nobody in it but you and me —and Belcher! We'll outwit them yet. And, you see, you'll be obliged to come to me, after all, without my asking."

They both laughed; indeed, quite a dimpled, bright-eyed, rosy, innocent pair, though I think Leonidas was the more maidenly.

"And," added Leonidas, with breathless eagerness, "I can sometimes write to—to—Jim, and inclose your letter."

"Angel of wisdom! certainly. Well, now, let's see—have you got any letters for the post to-day?" He colored again, for in anticipation of meeting her he had hurried up the family post that

morning. He held out his letters: she thrust her own among them. "Now," she said, laying her cool, soft hand against his hot cheek, "run along, dear; you must not be seen loitering here."

Leonidas ran off, buoyed up on ambient air. It seemed just like a fairy-book. Here he was, the confidant of the most beautiful creature he had seen, and there was a mysterious letter coming to him—Leonidas—and no one to know why. And now he had a "call" to see her often; she would not forget him—he needn't loiter by the fencepost to see if she wanted him—and his boyish pride and shyness were appeased. There was no question of moral ethics raised in Leonidas's mind; he knew that it would not be the real Jim Belcher who would write to him, but that made the prospect the more attractive. Nor did another circumstance trouble his conscience. When he reached the post-office, he was surprised to see the man whom he knew to be Mr. Burroughs talking with the postmaster. Leonidas brushed by him and deposited his letters in the box in discreet triumph. The postmaster was evidently officially resenting some imputation on his carelessness, and, concluding his defense, "No, sir," he said, "you kin bet your boots that ef any letter hez gone astray for you or your wife—Ye said your wife, didn't ye?"

"Yes," said Burroughs hastily, with a glance around the shop.

"Well, for you or anybody at your house—it ain't here that's the fault. You hear me! I know every letter that comes in and goes outer this office, I reckon, and handle 'em all,"—Leonidas pricked up his ears,—"and if anybody oughter know, it's me. Ye

kin paste that in your hat, Mr. Burroughs." Burroughs, apparently disconcerted by the intrusion of a third party—Leonidas—upon what was evidently a private inquiry, murmured something surlily, and passed out.

Leonidas was puzzled. That big man seemed to be "snoopin'" around for something! He knew that he dared not touch the letter-bag,—Leonidas had heard somewhere that it was a deadly crime to touch any letters after the Government had got hold of them once, and he had no fears for the safety of hers. But ought he not go back at once and tell her about her husband's visit, and the alarming fact that the postmaster was personally acquainted with all the letters? He instantly saw, too, the wisdom of her inclosing her letter hereafter in another address. Yet he finally resolved not to tell her to-day,—it would look like "hanging round" again; and—another secret reason—he was afraid that any allusion to her husband's interference would bring back that change in her beautiful face which he did not like. The better to resist temptation, he went back another way.

It must not be supposed that, while Leonidas indulged in this secret passion for the beautiful stranger, it was to the exclusion of his boyish habits. It merely took the place of his intellectual visions and his romantic reading. He no longer carried books in his pocket on his lazy rambles. What were mediaeval legends of high-born ladies and their pages to this real romance of himself and Mrs. Burroughs? What were the exploits of boy captains and juvenile trappers and the Indian maidens and Spanish senoritas

to what was now possible to himself and his divinity here—upon Casket Ridge! The very ground around her was now consecrated to romance and adventure. Consequently, he visited a few traps on his way back which he had set for "jackass-rabbits" and wildcats,—the latter a vindictive reprisal for aggression upon an orphan brood of mountain quail which he had taken under his protection. For, while he nourished a keen love of sport, it was controlled by a boy's larger understanding of nature: a pantheistic sympathy with man and beast and plant, which made him keenly alive to the strange cruelties of creation, revealed to him some queer animal feuds, and made him a chivalrous partisan of the weaker. He had even gone out of his way to defend, by ingenious contrivances of his own, the hoard of a golden squirrel and the treasures of some wild bees from a predatory bear, although it did not prevent him later from capturing the squirrel by an equally ingenious contrivance, and from eventually eating some of the honey.

He was late home that evening. But this was "vacation,"—the district school was closed, and but for the household "chores," which occupied his early mornings, each long summer day was a holiday. So two or three passed; and then one morning, on his going to the post-office, the postmaster threw down upon the counter a real and rather bulky letter, duly stamped, and addressed to Mr. Leonidas Boone! Leonidas was too discreet to open it before witnesses, but in the solitude of the trail home broke the seal. It contained another letter with no address—

clearly the one SHE expected—and, more marvelous still, a sheaf of trout-hooks, with delicate gut-snells such as Leonidas had only dared to dream of. The letter to himself was written in a clear, distinct hand, and ran as follows:—

> DEAR LEE,—How are you getting on on old Casket Ridge? It seems a coon's age since you and me was together, and times I get to think I must just run up and see you! We're having bully times in 'Frisco, you bet! though there ain't anything wild worth shucks to go to see—'cept the sea lions at the Cliff House. They're just stunning—big as a grizzly, and bigger—climbing over a big rock or swimming in the sea like an otter or muskrat. I'm sending you some snells and hooks, such as you can't get at Casket. Use the fine ones for pot-holes and the bigger ones for running water or falls. Let me know when you've got 'em. Write to Lock Box No. 1290. That's where dad's letters come. So no more at present.
>
> *From yours truly,*
> *JIM BELCHER.*

Not only did Leonidas know that this was not from the real Jim, but he felt the vague contact of a new, charming, and original personality that fascinated him. Of course, it was only natural that one of HER friends—as he must be—should be equally delightful. There was no jealousy in Leonidas's devotion; he knew only a joy in this fellowship of admiration for her which he was satisfied that the other boy must feel. And only the right kind of boy could know the importance of his ravishing gift, and this

Jim was evidently "no slouch"! Yet, in Leonidas's new joy he did not forget HER! He ran back to the stockade fence and lounged upon the road in view of the house, but she did not appear.

Leonidas lingered on the top of the hill, ostentatiously examining a young hickory for a green switch, but to no effect. Then it suddenly occurred to him that she might be staying in purposely, and, perhaps a little piqued by her indifference, he ran off. There was a mountain stream hard by, now dwindled in the summer drouth to a mere trickling thread among the boulders, and there was a certain "pot-hole" that he had long known. It was the lurking-place of a phenomenal trout,—an almost historic fish in the district, which had long resisted the attempt of such rude sportsmen as miners, or even experts like himself. Few had seen it, except as a vague, shadowy bulk in the four feet of depth and gloom in which it hid; only once had Leonidas's quick eye feasted on its fair proportions. On that memorable occasion Leonidas, having exhausted every kind of lure of painted fly and living bait, was rising from his knees behind the bank, when a pink five-cent stamp dislodged from his pocket fluttered in the air, and descended slowly upon the still pool. Horrified at his loss, Leonidas leaned over to recover it, when there was a flash like lightning in the black depths, a dozen changes of light and shadow on the surface, a little whirling wave splashing against the side of the rock, and the postage stamp was gone. More than that—for one instant the trout remained visible, stationary and expectant! Whether it was the instinct of sport, or whether the

fish had detected a new, subtle, and original flavor in the gum and paper, Leonidas never knew. Alas! he had not another stamp; he was obliged to leave the fish, but carried a brilliant idea away with him. Ever since then he had cherished it—and another extra stamp in his pocket. And now, with this strong but gossamer-like snell, this new hook, and this freshly cut hickory rod, he would make the trial!

But fate was against him! He had scarcely descended the narrow trail to the pine-fringed margin of the stream before his quick ear detected an unusual rustling through the adjacent underbrush, and then a voice that startled him! It was HERS! In an instant all thought of sport had fled. With a beating heart, half opened lips, and uplifted lashes, Leonidas awaited the coming of his divinity like a timorous virgin at her first tryst.

But Mrs. Burroughs was clearly not in an equally responsive mood. With her fair face reddened by the sun, the damp tendrils of her unwound hair clinging to her forehead, and her smart little slippers red with dust, there was also a querulous light in her eyes, and a still more querulous pinch in her nostrils, as she stood panting before him.

"You tiresome boy!" she gasped, holding one little hand to her side as she gripped her brambled skirt around her ankles with the other. "Why didn't you wait? Why did you make me run all this distance after you?"

Leonidas timidly and poignantly protested. He had waited before the house and on the hill; he thought she didn't want him.

"Couldn't you see that THAT MAN kept me in?" she went on peevishly. "Haven't you sense enough to know that he suspects something, and follows me everywhere, dogging my footsteps every time the post comes in, and even going to the post-office himself, to make sure that he sees all my letters? Well," she added impatiently, "have you anything for me? Why don't you speak?"

Crushed and remorseful, Leonidas produced her letter. She almost snatched it from his hand, opened it, read a few lines, and her face changed. A smile strayed from her eyes to her lips, and back again. Leonidas's heart was lifted; she was so forgiving and so beautiful!

"Is he a boy, Mrs. Burroughs?" asked Leonidas shyly.

"Well—not exactly," she said, her charming face all radiant again. "He's older than you. What has he written to you?"

Leonidas put his letter in her hand for reply.

"I wish I could see him, you know," he said shyly. "That letter's bully—it's just rats! I like him pow'ful."

Mrs. Burroughs had skimmed through the letter, but not interestedly.

"You mustn't like him more than you like me," she said laughingly, caressing him with her voice and eyes, and even her straying hand.

"I couldn't do that! I never could like anybody as I like you," said. Leonidas gravely. There was such appalling truthfulness in the boy's voice and frankly opened eyes that the woman could not evade it, and was slightly disconcerted. But she presently

started up with a vexatious cry. “There’s that wretch following me again, I do believe,” she said, staring at the hilltop. “Yes! Look, Leon, he’s turning to come down this trail. What’s to be done? He mustn’t see me here!”

Leonidas looked. It was indeed Mr. Burroughs; but he was evidently only taking a short cut towards the Ridge, where his men were working. Leonidas had seen him take it before. But it was the principal trail on the steep hillside, and they must eventually meet. A man might evade it by scrambling through the brush to a lower and rougher trail; but a woman, never! But an idea had seized Leonidas. “I can stop him,” he said confidently to her. “You just lie low here behind that rock till I come back. He hasn’t seen you yet.”

She had barely time to draw back before Leonidas darted down the trail towards her husband. Yet, in her intense curiosity, she leaned out the next moment to watch him. He paused at last, not far from the approaching figure, and seemed to kneel down on the trail. What was he doing? Her husband was still slowly advancing. Suddenly he stopped. At the same moment she heard their two voices in excited parley, and then, to her amazement, she saw her husband scramble hurriedly down the trail to the lower level, and with an occasional backward glance, hasten away until he had passed beyond her view.

She could scarcely realize her narrow escape when Leonidas stood by her side. “How did you do it?” she said eagerly.

“With a rattler!” said the boy gravely.

"With a what?"

"A rattlesnake—pizen snake, you know."

"A rattlesnake?" she said, staring at Leonidas with a quick snatching away of her skirts.

The boy, who seemed to have forgotten her in his other abstraction of adventure, now turned quickly, with devoted eyes and a reassuring smile.

"Yes; but I wouldn't let him hurt you," he said gently.

"But what did you DO?"

He looked at her curiously. "You won't be frightened if I show you?" he said doubtfully. "There's nothin' to be afeerd of s'long as you're with me," he added proudly.

"Yes—that is"—she stammered, and then, her curiosity getting the better of her fear, she added in a whisper: "Show me quick!"

He led the way up the narrow trail until he stopped where he had knelt before. It was a narrow, sunny ledge of rock, scarcely wide enough for a single person to pass. He silently pointed to a cleft in the rock, and kneeling down again, began to whistle in a soft, fluttering way. There was a moment of suspense, and then she was conscious of an awful gliding something,—a movement so measured yet so exquisitely graceful that she stood enthralled. A narrow, flattened, expressionless head was followed by a footlong strip of yellow-barred scales; then there was a pause, and the head turned, in a beautifully symmetrical half-circle, towards the whistler. The whistling ceased; the snake,

with half its body out of the cleft, remained poised in air as if stiffened to stone.

"There," said Leonidas quietly, "that's what Mr. Burroughs saw, and that's WHY he scooted off the trail. I just called out William Henry,—I call him William Henry, and he knows his name,—and then I sang out to Mr. Burroughs what was up; and it was lucky I did, for the next moment he'd have been on top of him and have been struck, for rattlers don't give way to any one."

"Oh, why didn't you let"—She stopped herself quickly, but could not stop the fierce glint in her eye nor the sharp curve in her nostril. Luckily, Leonidas did not see this, being preoccupied with his other graceful charmer, William Henry.

"But how did you know it was here?" said Mrs. Burroughs, recovering herself.

"Fetched him here," said Leonidas briefly.

"What in your hands?" she said, drawing back.

"No! made him follow! I HAVE handled him, but it was after I'd first made him strike his pizen out upon a stick. Ye know, after he strikes four times he ain't got any pizen left. Then ye kin do anythin' with him, and he knows it. He knows me, you bet! I've bin three months trainin' him. Look! Don't be frightened," he said, as Mrs. Burroughs drew hurriedly back; "see him mind me. Now scoot home, William Henry."

He accompanied the command with a slow, dominant movement of the hickory rod he was carrying. The snake dropped its head, and slid noiselessly out of the cleft across the

trail and down the hill.

"Thinks my rod is witch-hazel, which rattlers can't abide," continued Leonidas, dropping into a boy's breathless abbreviated speech. "Lives down your way—just back of your farm. Show ye some day. Suns himself on a flat stone every day—always cold—never can get warm. Eh?"

She had not spoken, but was gazing into space with a breathless rigidity of attitude and a fixed look in her eye, not unlike the motionless orbs of the reptile that had glided away.

"Does anybody else know you keep him?" she asked.

"Nary one. I never showed him to anybody but you," replied the boy.

"Don't! You must show me where he hides to-morrow," she said, in her old laughing way. "And now, Leon, I must go back to the house."

"May I write to him—to Jim Belcher, Mrs. Burroughs?" said the boy timidly.

"Certainly. And come to me to-morrow with your letter—I will have mine ready. Good-by." She stopped and glanced at the trail. "And you say that if that man had kept on, the snake would have bitten him?"

"Sure pop!—if he'd trod on him—as he was sure to. The snake wouldn't have known he didn't mean it. It's only natural," continued Leonidas, with glowing partisanship for the gentle and absent William Henry. "YOU wouldn't like to be trodden upon, Mrs. Burroughs!"

"No! I'd strike out!" she said quickly. She made a rapid motion forward with her low forehead and level head, leaving it rigid the next moment, so that it reminded him of the snake, and he laughed. At which she laughed too, and tripped away.

Leonidas went back and caught his trout. But even this triumph did not remove a vague sense of disappointment which had come over him. He had often pictured to himself a Heaven-sent meeting with her in the woods, a walk with her, alone, where he could pick her the rarest flowers and herbs and show her his woodland friends; and it had only ended in this, and an exhibition of William Henry! He ought to have saved HER from something, and not her husband. Yet he had no ill-feeling for Burroughs, only a desire to circumvent him, on behalf of the unprotected, as he would have baffled a hawk or a wildcat. He went home in dismal spirits, but later that evening constructed a boyish letter of thanks to the apocryphal Belcher and told him all about—the trout!

He brought her his letter the next day, and received hers to inclose. She was pleasant, her own charming self again, but she seemed more interested in other things than himself, as, for instance, the docile William Henry, whose hiding-place he showed, and whose few tricks she made him exhibit to her, and which the gratified Leonidas accepted as a delicate form of flattery to himself. But his yearning, innocent spirit detected a something lacking, which he was too proud to admit even to himself. It was his own fault; he ought to have waited for her, and not gone for the trout!

So a fortnight passed with an interchange of the vicarious letters, and brief, hopeful, and disappointing meetings to Leonidas. To add to his unhappiness, he was obliged to listen to sneering disparagement of his goddess from his family, and criticisms which, happily, his innocence did not comprehend. It was his own mother who accused her of shamefully "making up" to the good-looking expressman at church last Sunday, and declared that Burroughs ought to "look after that wife of his,"—two statements which the simple Leonidas could not reconcile. He had seen the incident, and only thought her more lovely than ever. Why should not the expressman think so too? And yet the boy was not happy; something intruded upon his sports, upon his books, making them dull and vapid, and yet that something was she! He grew pale and preoccupied. If he had only some one in whom to confide—some one who could explain his hopes and fears. That one was nearer than he thought!

It was quite three weeks since the rattlesnake incident, and he was wandering moodily over Casket Ridge. He was near the Casket, that abrupt upheaval of quartz and gneiss, shaped like a coffer, from which the mountain took its name. It was a favorite haunt of Leonidas, one of whose boyish superstitions was that it contained a treasure of gold, and one of whose brightest dreams had been that he should yet discover it. This he did not do to-day, but looking up from the rocks that he was listlessly examining, he made the almost as thrilling discovery that near him on the trail was a distinguished-looking stranger.

He was bestriding a shapely mustang, which well became his handsome face and slight, elegant figure, and he was looking at Leonidas with an amused curiosity and a certain easy assurance that were difficult to withstand. It was with the same fascinating self-confidence of smile, voice, and manner that he rode up to the boy, and leaning lightly over his saddle, said with exaggerated politeness: "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Leonidas Boone?"

The rising color in Leonidas's face was apparently a sufficient answer to the stranger, for he continued smilingly, "Then permit me to introduce myself as Mr. James Belcher. As you perceive, I have grown considerably since you last saw me. In fact, I've done nothing else. It's surprising what a fellow can do when he sets his mind on one thing. And then, you know, they're always telling you that San Francisco is a 'growing place.' That accounts for it!"

Leonidas, dazed, dazzled, but delighted, showed all his white teeth in a shy laugh. At which the enchanting stranger leaped from his horse like a very boy, drew his arm through the rein, and going up to Leonidas, lifted the boy's straw hat from his head and ran his fingers through his curls. There was nothing original in that—everybody did that to him as a preliminary to conversation. But when this ingenuous fine gentleman put his own Panama hat on Leonidas's head, and clapped Leonidas's torn straw on his own, and, passing his arm through the boy's, began to walk on with him, Leonidas's simple heart went out to him at once.

"And now, Leon," said the delightful stranger, "let's you and

me have a talk. There's a nice cool spot under these laurels; I'll stake out Pepita, and we'll just lie off there and gab, and not care if school keeps or not."

"But you know you ain't really Jim Belcher," said the boy shyly.

"I'm as good a man as he is any day, whoever I am," said the stranger, with humorous defiance, "and can lick him out of his boots, whoever HE is. That ought to satisfy you. But if you want my certificate, here's your own letter, old man," he said, producing Leonidas's last scrawl from his pocket.

"And HERS?" said the boy cautiously.

The stranger's face changed a little. "And HERS," he repeated gravely, showing a little pink note which Leonidas recognized as one of Mrs. Burroughs's inclosures. The boy was silent until they reached the laurels, where the stranger tethered his horse and then threw himself in an easy attitude beneath the tree, with the back of his head upon his clasped hands. Leonidas could see his curved brown mustaches and silky lashes that were almost as long, and thought him the handsomest man he had ever beheld.

"Well, Leon," said the stranger, stretching himself out comfortably and pulling the boy down beside him, "how are things going on the Casket? All serene, eh?"

The inquiry so dismally recalled Leonidas's late feelings that his face clouded, and he involuntarily sighed. The stranger instantly shifted his head and gazed curiously at him. Then he took the boy's sunburnt hand in his own, and held it a moment.

"Well, go on," he said.

"Well, Mr.—Mr.—I can't go on—I won't!" said Leonidas, with a sudden fit of obstinacy. "I don't know what to call you."

"Call me 'Jack'—'Jack Hamlin' when you're not in a hurry. Ever heard of me before?" he added, suddenly turning his head towards Leonidas.

The boy shook his head. "No."

Mr. Jack Hamlin lifted his lashes in affected expostulation to the skies. "And this is Fame!" he murmured audibly.

But this Leonidas did not comprehend. Nor could he understand why the stranger, who clearly must have come to see HER, should not ask about her, should not rush to seek her, but should lie back there all the while so contentedly on the grass. HE wouldn't. He half resented it, and then it occurred to him that this fine gentleman was like himself—shy. Who could help being so before such an angel? HE would help him on.

And so, shyly at first, but bit by bit emboldened by a word or two from Jack, he began to talk of her—of her beauty—of her kindness—of his own unworthiness—of what she had said and done—until, finding in this gracious stranger the vent his pent-up feelings so long had sought, he sang then and there the little idyl of his boyish life. He told of his decline in her affections after his unpardonable sin in keeping her waiting while he went for the trout, and added the miserable mistake of the rattlesnake episode. "For it was a mistake, Mr. Hamlin. I oughtn't to have let a lady like that know anything about snakes—just because I

happen to know them."

"It WAS an awful slump, Lee," said Hamlin gravely. "Get a woman and a snake together—and where are you? Think of Adam and Eve and the serpent, you know."

"But it wasn't that way," said the boy earnestly. "And I want to tell you something else that's just makin' me sick, Mr. Hamlin. You know I told you William Henry lives down at the bottom of Burroughs's garden, and how I showed Mrs. Burroughs his tricks! Well, only two days ago I was down there looking for him, and couldn't find him anywhere. There's a sort of narrow trail from the garden to the hill, a short cut up to the Ridge, instead o' going by their gate. It's just the trail any one would take in a hurry, or if they didn't want to be seen from the road. Well! I was looking this way and that for William Henry, and whistlin' for him, when I slipped on to the trail. There, in the middle of it, was an old bucket turned upside down—just the thing a man would kick away or a woman lift up. Well, Mr. Hamlin, I kicked it away, and"—the boy stopped, with rounded eyes and bated breath, and added—"I just had time to give one jump and save myself! For under that pail, cramped down so he couldn't get out, and just bilin' over with rage, and chockful of pizen, was William Henry! If it had been anybody else less spry, they'd have got bitten,—and that's just what the sneak who put it there knew."

Mr. Hamlin uttered an exclamation under his breath, and rose to his feet.

"What did you say?" asked the boy quickly.

"Nothing," said Mr. Hamlin.

But it had sounded to Leonidas like an oath.

Mr. Hamlin walked a few steps, as if stretching his limbs, and then said: "And you think Burroughs would have been bitten?"

"Why, no!" said Leonidas in astonished indignation; "of course not—not BURROUGHS. It would have been poor MRS. Burroughs. For, of course, HE set that trap for her—don't you see? Who else would do it?"

"Of course, of course! Certainly," said Mr. Hamlin coolly. "Of course, as you say, HE set the trap—yes—you just hang on to that idea."

But something in Mr. Hamlin's manner, and a peculiar look in his eye, did not satisfy Leonidas. "Are you going to see her now?" he said eagerly. "I can show you the house, and then run in and tell her you're outside in the laurels."

"Not just yet," said Mr. Hamlin, laying his hand on the boy's head after having restored his own hat. "You see, I thought of giving her a surprise. A big surprise!" he added slowly. After a pause, he went on: "Did you tell her what you had seen?"

"Of course I did," said Leonidas reproachfully. "Did you think I was going to let her get bit? It might have killed her."

"And it might not have been an unmixed pleasure for William Henry. I mean," said Mr. Hamlin gravely, correcting himself, "YOU would never have forgiven him. But what did she say?"

The boy's face clouded. "She thanked me and said it was very thoughtful—and kind—though it might have been only an

accident"—he stammered—"and then she said perhaps I was hanging round and coming there a little too much lately, and that as Burroughs was very watchful, I'd better quit for two or three days." The tears were rising to his eyes, but by putting his two clenched fists into his pockets, he managed to hold them down. Perhaps Mr. Hamlin's soft hand on his head assisted him. Mr. Hamlin took from his pocket a notebook, and tearing out a leaf, sat down again and began to write on his knee. After a pause, Leonidas said,—

"Was you ever in love, Mr. Hamlin?"

"Never," said Mr. Hamlin, quietly continuing to write. "But, now you speak of it, it's a long-felt want in my nature that I intend to supply some day. But not until I've made my pile. And don't YOU either." He continued writing, for it was this gentleman's peculiarity to talk without apparently the slightest concern whether anybody else spoke, whether he was listened to, or whether his remarks were at all relevant to the case. Yet he was always listened to for that reason. When he had finished writing, he folded up the paper, put it in an envelope, and addressed it.

"Shall I take it to her?" said Leonidas eagerly.

"It's not for HER; it's for him—Mr. Burroughs," said Mr. Hamlin quietly.

The boy drew back. "To get him out of the way," added Hamlin explanatorily. "When he gets it, lightning wouldn't keep him here. Now, how to send it," he said thoughtfully.

"You might leave it at the post-office," said Leonidas timidly.

"He always goes there to watch his wife's letters."

For the first time in their interview Mr. Hamlin distinctly laughed.

"Your head is level, Leo, and I'll do it. Now the best thing you can do is to follow Mrs. Burroughs's advice. Quit going to the house for a day or two." He walked towards his horse. The boy's face sank, but he kept up bravely. "And will I see you again?" he said wistfully.

Mr. Hamlin lowered his face so near the boy's that Leonidas could see himself in the brown depths of Mr. Hamlin's eyes. "I hope you will," he said gravely. He mounted, shook the boy's hand, and rode away in the lengthening shadows. Then Leonidas walked sadly home.

There was no need for him to keep his promise; for the next morning the family were stirred by the announcement that Mr. and Mrs. Burroughs had left Casket Ridge that night by the down stage for Sacramento, and that the house was closed. There were various rumors concerning the reason of this sudden departure, but only one was persistent, and borne out by the postmaster. It was that Mr. Burroughs had received that afternoon an anonymous note that his wife was about to elope with the notorious San Francisco gambler, Jack Hamlin.

But Leonidas Boone, albeit half understanding, kept his miserable secret with a still hopeful and trustful heart. It grieved him a little that William Henry was found a few days later dead, with his head crushed. Yet it was not until years later, when he

had made a successful “prospect” on Casket Ridge, that he met Mr. Hamlin in San Francisco, and knew how he had played the part of Mercury upon that “heaven-kissing hill.”

COLONEL STARBOTTLE FOR THE PLAINTIFF

It had been a day of triumph for Colonel Starbottle. First, for his personality, as it would have been difficult to separate the Colonel's achievements from his individuality; second, for his oratorical abilities as a sympathetic pleader; and third, for his functions as the leading legal counsel for the Eureka Ditch Company versus the State of California. On his strictly legal performances in this issue I prefer not to speak; there were those who denied them, although the jury had accepted them in the face of the ruling of the half amused, half cynical Judge himself. For an hour they had laughed with the Colonel, wept with him, been stirred to personal indignation or patriotic exaltation by his passionate and lofty periods,—what else could they do than give him their verdict? If it was alleged by some that the American eagle, Thomas Jefferson, and the Resolutions of '98 had nothing whatever to do with the contest of a ditch company over a doubtfully worded legislative document; that wholesale abuse of the State Attorney and his political motives had not the slightest connection with the legal question raised—it was, nevertheless, generally accepted that the losing party would have been only too glad to have the Colonel on their side. And Colonel Starbottle knew this, as, perspiring, florid, and panting, he rebuttoned the

lower buttons of his blue frock-coat, which had become loosed in an oratorical spasm, and readjusted his old-fashioned, spotless shirt frill above it as he strutted from the court-room amidst the handshakings and acclamations of his friends.

And here an unprecedented thing occurred. The Colonel absolutely declined spirituous refreshment at the neighboring Palmetto Saloon, and declared his intention of proceeding directly to his office in the adjoining square. Nevertheless, the Colonel quitted the building alone, and apparently unarmed, except for his faithful gold-headed stick, which hung as usual from his forearm. The crowd gazed after him with undisguised admiration of this new evidence of his pluck. It was remembered also that a mysterious note had been handed to him at the conclusion of his speech,—evidently a challenge from the State Attorney. It was quite plain that the Colonel—a practiced duelist—was hastening home to answer it.

But herein they were wrong. The note was in a female hand, and simply requested the Colonel to accord an interview with the writer at the Colonel's office as soon as he left the court. But it was an engagement that the Colonel—as devoted to the fair sex as he was to the "code"—was no less prompt in accepting. He flicked away the dust from his spotless white trousers and varnished boots with his handkerchief, and settled his black cravat under his Byron collar as he neared his office. He was surprised, however, on opening the door of his private office, to find his visitor already there; he was still more startled to

find her somewhat past middle age and plainly attired. But the Colonel was brought up in a school of Southern politeness, already antique in the republic, and his bow of courtesy belonged to the epoch of his shirt frill and strapped trousers. No one could have detected his disappointment in his manner, albeit his sentences were short and incomplete. But the Colonel's colloquial speech was apt to be fragmentary incoherencies of his larger oratorical utterances.

"A thousand pardons—for—er—having kept a lady waiting—er! But—er—congratulations of friends—and—er—courtesy due to them—er—interfered with—though perhaps only heightened—by procrastination—the pleasure of—ha!" And the Colonel completed his sentence with a gallant wave of his fat but white and well-kept hand.

"Yes! I came to see you along o' that speech of yours. I was in court. When I heard you gettin' it off on that jury, I says to myself, 'That's the kind o' lawyer I want. A man that's flowery and convincin'! Just the man to take up our case."

"Ah! It's a matter of business, I see," said the Colonel, inwardly relieved, but externally careless. "And—er—may I ask the nature of the case?"

"Well! it's a breach-o'-promise suit," said the visitor calmly.

If the Colonel had been surprised before, he was now really startled, and with an added horror that required all his politeness to conceal. Breach-of-promise cases were his peculiar aversion. He had always held them to be a kind of litigation which could

have been obviated by the prompt killing of the masculine offender—in which case he would have gladly defended the killer. But a suit for damages,—DAMAGES!—with the reading of love-letters before a hilarious jury and court, was against all his instincts. His chivalry was outraged; his sense of humor was small, and in the course of his career he had lost one or two important cases through an unexpected development of this quality in a jury.

The woman had evidently noticed his hesitation, but mistook its cause. "It ain't me—but my darter."

The Colonel recovered his politeness. "Ah! I am relieved, my dear madam! I could hardly conceive a man ignorant enough to—er—er—throw away such evident good fortune—or base enough to deceive the trustfulness of womanhood—matured and experienced only in the chivalry of our sex, ha!"

The woman smiled grimly. "Yes!—it's my darter, Zaidee Hooker—so ye might spare some of them pretty speeches for HER—before the jury."

The Colonel winced slightly before this doubtful prospect, but smiled. "Ha! Yes!—certainly—the jury. But—er—my dear lady, need we go as far as that? Can not this affair be settled—er—out of court? Could not this—er—individual—be admonished—told that he must give satisfaction—personal satisfaction—for his dastardly conduct—to—er—near relative—or even valued personal friend? The—er—arrangements necessary for that purpose I myself would undertake."

He was quite sincere; indeed, his small black eyes shone with that fire which a pretty woman or an "affair of honor" could alone kindle. The visitor stared vacantly at him, and said slowly, "And what good is that goin' to do US?"

"Compel him to—er—perform his promise," said the Colonel, leaning back in his chair.

"Ketch him doin' it!" she exclaimed scornfully. "No—that ain't wot we're after. We must make him PAY! Damages—and nothin' short o' THAT."

The Colonel bit his lip. "I suppose," he said gloomily, "you have documentary evidence—written promises and protestations —er—er love-letters, in fact?"

"No—nary a letter! Ye see, that's jest it—and that's where YOU come in. You've got to convince that jury yourself. You've got to show what it is—tell the whole story your own way. Lord! to a man like you that's nothin'."

Startling as this admission might have been to any other lawyer, Starbottle was absolutely relieved by it. The absence of any mirth-provoking correspondence, and the appeal solely to his own powers of persuasion, actually struck his fancy. He lightly put aside the compliment with a wave of his white hand.

"Of course," he said confidently, "there is strongly presumptive and corroborative evidence? Perhaps you can give me—er—a brief outline of the affair?"

"Zaidee kin do that straight enough, I reckon," said the woman; "what I want to know first is, kin you take the case?"

The Colonel did not hesitate; his curiosity was piqued. "I certainly can. I have no doubt your daughter will put me in possession of sufficient facts and details—to constitute what we call—er—a brief."

"She kin be brief enough—or long enough—for the matter of that," said the woman, rising. The Colonel accepted this implied witticism with a smile.

"And when may I have the pleasure of seeing her?" he asked politely.

"Well, I reckon as soon as I can trot out and call her. She's just outside, meanderin' in the road—kinder shy, ye know, at first."

She walked to the door. The astounded Colonel nevertheless gallantly accompanied her as she stepped out into the street and called shrilly, "You Zaidee!"

A young girl here apparently detached herself from a tree and the ostentatious perusal of an old election poster, and sauntered down towards the office door. Like her mother, she was plainly dressed; unlike her, she had a pale, rather refined face, with a demure mouth and downcast eyes. This was all the Colonel saw as he bowed profoundly and led the way into his office, for she accepted his salutations without lifting her head. He helped her gallantly to a chair, on which she seated herself sideways, somewhat ceremoniously, with her eyes following the point of her parasol as she traced a pattern on the carpet. A second chair offered to the mother that lady, however, declined. "I reckon to leave you and Zaidee together to talk it out," she said; turning

to her daughter, she added, “Jest you tell him all, Zaidee,” and before the Colonel could rise again, disappeared from the room. In spite of his professional experience, Starbottle was for a moment embarrassed. The young girl, however, broke the silence without looking up.

“Adoniram K. Hotchkiss,” she began, in a monotonous voice, as if it were a recitation addressed to the public, “first began to take notice of me a year ago. Arter that—off and on”—

“One moment,” interrupted the astounded Colonel; “do you mean Hotchkiss the President of the Ditch Company?” He had recognized the name of a prominent citizen—a rigid, ascetic, taciturn, middle-aged man—a deacon—and more than that, the head of the company he had just defended. It seemed inconceivable.

“That’s him,” she continued, with eyes still fixed on the parasol and without changing her monotonous tone—“off and on ever since. Most of the time at the Free-Will Baptist Church—at morning service, prayer-meetings, and such. And at home—outside—er—in the road.”

“Is it this gentleman—Mr. Adoniram K. Hotchkiss—who—er—promised marriage?” stammered the Colonel.

“Yes.”

The Colonel shifted uneasily in his chair. “Most extraordinary! for—you see—my dear young lady—this becomes—a—er—most delicate affair.”

“That’s what maw said,” returned the young woman simply,

yet with the faintest smile playing around her demure lips and downcast cheek.

"I mean," said the Colonel, with a pained yet courteous smile, "that this—er—gentleman—is in fact—er—one of my clients."

"That's what maw said too, and of course your knowing him will make it all the easier for you."

A slight flush crossed the Colonel's cheek as he returned quickly and a little stiffly, "On the contrary—er—it may make it impossible for me to—er—act in this matter."

The girl lifted her eyes. The Colonel held his breath as the long lashes were raised to his level. Even to an ordinary observer that sudden revelation of her eyes seemed to transform her face with subtle witchery. They were large, brown, and soft, yet filled with an extraordinary penetration and prescience. They were the eyes of an experienced woman of thirty fixed in the face of a child. What else the Colonel saw there Heaven only knows! He felt his inmost secrets plucked from him—his whole soul laid bare—his vanity, belligerency, gallantry—even his mediaeval chivalry, penetrated, and yet illuminated, in that single glance. And when the eyelids fell again, he felt that a greater part of himself had been swallowed up in them.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly. "I mean—this matter may be arranged—er—amicably. My interest with—and as you wisely say—my—er—knowledge of my client—er—Mr. Hotchkiss—may effect—a compromise."

"And DAMAGES," said the young girl, readdressing her

parasol, as if she had never looked up.

The Colonel winced. "And—er—undoubtedly COMPENSATION—if you do not press a fulfillment of the promise. Unless," he said, with an attempted return to his former easy gallantry, which, however, the recollection of her eyes made difficult, "it is a question of—er—the affections."

"Which?" asked his fair client softly.

"If you still love him?" explained the Colonel, actually blushing.

Zaidee again looked up; again taking the Colonel's breath away with eyes that expressed not only the fullest perception of what he had SAID, but of what he thought and had not said, and with an added subtle suggestion of what he might have thought. "That's tellin'," she said, dropping her long lashes again.

The Colonel laughed vacantly. Then feeling himself growing imbecile, he forced an equally weak gravity. "Pardon me—I understand there are no letters; may I know the way in which he formulated his declaration and promises?"

"Hymn-books."

"I beg your pardon," said the mystified lawyer.

"Hymn-books—marked words in them with pencil—and passed 'em on to me," repeated Zaidee. "Like 'love,' 'dear,' 'precious,' 'sweet,' and 'blessed,'" she added, accenting each word with a push of her parasol on the carpet. "Sometimes a whole line outer Tate and Brady—and Solomon's Song, you know, and sich."

"I believe," said the Colonel loftily, "that the—er—phrases of sacred psalmody lend themselves to the language of the affections. But in regard to the distinct promise of marriage—was there—er—no OTHER expression?"

"Marriage Service in the prayer-book—lines and words outer that—all marked," Zaidee replied.

The Colonel nodded naturally and approvingly. "Very good. Were others cognizant of this? Were there any witnesses?"

"Of course not," said the girl. "Only me and him. It was generally at church-time—or prayer-meeting. Once, in passing the plate, he slipped one o' them peppermint lozenges with the letters stamped on it 'I love you' for me to take."

The Colonel coughed slightly. "And you have the lozenge?"

"I ate it."

"Ah," said the Colonel. After a pause he added delicately, "But were these attentions—er—confined to—er—sacred precincts? Did he meet you elsewhere?"

"Useter pass our house on the road," returned the girl, dropping into her monotonous recital, "and useter signal."

"Ah, signal?" repeated the Colonel approvingly.

"Yes! He'd say 'Keerow,' and I'd say 'Keeree.' Suthing like a bird, you know."

Indeed, as she lifted her voice in imitation of the call, the Colonel thought it certainly very sweet and birdlike. At least as SHE gave it. With his remembrance of the grim deacon he had doubts as to the melodiousness of HIS utterance. He gravely

made her repeat it.

"And after that signal?" he added suggestively.

"He'd pass on."

The Colonel again coughed slightly, and tapped his desk with his penholder.

"Were there any endearments—er—caresses—er—such as taking your hand—er—clasping your waist?" he suggested, with a gallant yet respectful sweep of his white hand and bowing of his head; "er—slight pressure of your fingers in the changes of a dance—I mean," he corrected himself, with an apologetic cough —"in the passing of the plate?"

"No; he was not what you'd call 'fond,'" returned the girl.

"Ah! Adoniram K. Hotchkiss was not 'fond' in the ordinary acceptance of the word," noted the Colonel, with professional gravity.

She lifted her disturbing eyes, and again absorbed his in her own. She also said "Yes," although her eyes in their mysterious prescience of all he was thinking disclaimed the necessity of any answer at all. He smiled vacantly. There was a long pause. On which she slowly disengaged her parasol from the carpet pattern, and stood up.

"I reckon that's about all," she said.

"Er—yes—but one moment," began the Colonel vaguely. He would have liked to keep her longer, but with her strange premonition of him he felt powerless to detain her, or explain his reason for doing so. He instinctively knew she had told him

all; his professional judgment told him that a more hopeless case had never come to his knowledge. Yet he was not daunted, only embarrassed. “No matter,” he said. “Of course I shall have to consult with you again.”

Her eyes again answered that she expected he would, and she added simply, “When?”

“In the course of a day or two;” he replied quickly. “I will send you word.”

She turned to go. In his eagerness to open the door for her, he upset his chair, and with some confusion, that was actually youthful, he almost impeded her movements in the hall, and knocked his broad-brimmed Panama hat from his bowing hand in a final gallant sweep. Yet as her small, trim, youthful figure, with its simple Leghorn straw hat confined by a blue bow under her round chin, passed away before him, she looked more like a child than ever.

The Colonel spent that afternoon in making diplomatic inquiries. He found his youthful client was the daughter of a widow who had a small ranch on the cross-roads, near the new Free-Will Baptist Church—the evident theatre of this pastoral. They led a secluded life, the girl being little known in the town, and her beauty and fascination apparently not yet being a recognized fact. The Colonel felt a pleasurable relief at this, and a general satisfaction he could not account for. His few inquiries concerning Mr. Hotchkiss only confirmed his own impressions of the alleged lover,—a serious-minded, practically abstracted

man, abstentive of youthful society, and the last man apparently capable of levity of the affections or serious flirtation. The Colonel was mystified, but determined of purpose, whatever that purpose might have been.

The next day he was at his office at the same hour. He was alone—as usual—the Colonel's office being really his private lodgings, disposed in connecting rooms, a single apartment reserved for consultation. He had no clerk, his papers and briefs being taken by his faithful body-servant and ex-slave "Jim" to another firm who did his office work since the death of Major Stryker, the Colonel's only law partner, who fell in a duel some years previous. With a fine constancy the Colonel still retained his partner's name on his doorplate, and, it was alleged by the superstitious, kept a certain invincibility also through the 'manes' of that lamented and somewhat feared man.

The Colonel consulted his watch, whose heavy gold case still showed the marks of a providential interference with a bullet destined for its owner, and replaced it with some difficulty and shortness of breath in his fob. At the same moment he heard a step in the passage, and the door opened to Adoniram K. Hotchkiss. The Colonel was impressed; he had a duelist's respect for punctuality.

The man entered with a nod and the expectant inquiring look of a busy man. As his feet crossed that sacred threshold the Colonel became all courtesy; he placed a chair for his visitor, and took his hat from his half reluctant hand. He then opened a

cupboard and brought out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

"A—er—slight refreshment, Mr. Hotchkiss," he suggested politely.

"I never drink," replied Hotchkiss, with the severe attitude of a total abstainer.

"Ah—er—not the finest Bourbon whiskey, selected by a Kentucky friend? No? Pardon me! A cigar, then—the mildest Havana."

"I do not use tobacco nor alcohol in any form," repeated Hotchkiss ascetically. "I have no foolish weaknesses."

The Colonel's moist, beady eyes swept silently over his client's sallow face. He leaned back comfortably in his chair, and half closing his eyes as in dreamy reminiscence, said slowly: "Your reply, Mr. Hotchkiss, reminds me of—er—sing'lar circumstance that—er—occurred, in point of fact—at the St. Charles Hotel, New Orleans. Pinkey Hornblower—personal friend—invited Senator Doolittle to join him in social glass. Received, sing'larly enough, reply similar to yours. 'Don't drink nor smoke?' said Pinkey. 'Gad, sir, you must be mighty sweet on the ladies.' Ha!" The Colonel paused long enough to allow the faint flush to pass from Hotchkiss's cheek, and went on, half closing his eyes: "'I allow no man, sir, to discuss my personal habits,' declared Doolittle, over his shirt collar. 'Then I reckon shootin' must be one of those habits,' said Pinkey coolly. Both men drove out on the Shell Road back of cemetery next morning. Pinkey put bullet at twelve paces through Doolittle's temple. Poor Doo never spoke

again. Left three wives and seven children, they say—two of 'em black."

"I got a note from you this morning," said Hotchkiss, with badly concealed impatience. "I suppose in reference to our case. You have taken judgment, I believe."

The Colonel, without replying, slowly filled a glass of whiskey and water. For a moment he held it dreamily before him, as if still engaged in gentle reminiscences called up by the act. Then tossing it off, he wiped his lips with a large white handkerchief, and leaning back comfortably in his chair, said, with a wave of his hand, "The interview I requested, Mr. Hotchkiss, concerns a subject—which I may say is—er—er—at present NOT of a public or business nature—although LATER it might become—er—er—both. It is an affair of some—er—delicacy."

The Colonel paused, and Mr. Hotchkiss regarded him with increased impatience. The Colonel, however, continued, with unchanged deliberation: "It concerns—er—er—a young lady—a beautiful, high-souled creature, sir, who, apart from her personal loveliness—er—er—I may say is of one of the first families of Missouri, and—er—not remotely connected by marriage with one of—er—er—my boyhood's dearest friends." The latter, I grieve to say, was a pure invention of the Colonel's—an oratorical addition to the scanty information he had obtained the previous day. "The young lady," he continued blandly, "enjoys the further distinction of being the object of such attention from you as would make this interview—really—a confidential matter—

er—er among friends and—er—er—relations in present and future. I need not say that the lady I refer to is Miss Zaidee Juno Hooker, only daughter of Almira Ann Hooker, relict of Jefferson Brown Hooker, formerly of Boone County, Kentucky, and latterly of—er—Pike County, Missouri."

The sallow, ascetic hue of Mr. Hotchkiss's face had passed through a livid and then a greenish shade, and finally settled into a sullen red. "What's all this about?" he demanded roughly.

The least touch of belligerent fire came into Starbottle's eye, but his bland courtesy did not change. "I believe," he said politely, "I have made myself clear as between—er—gentlemen, though perhaps not as clear as I should to—er—er—jury."

Mr. Hotchkiss was apparently struck with some significance in the lawyer's reply. "I don't know," he said, in a lower and more cautious voice, "what you mean by what you call 'my attentions' to—any one—or how it concerns you. I have not exchanged half a dozen words with—the person you name—have never written her a line—nor even called at her house."

He rose with an assumption of ease, pulled down his waistcoat, buttoned his coat, and took up his hat. The Colonel did not move.

"I believe I have already indicated my meaning in what I have called 'your attentions,'" said the Colonel blandly, "and given you my 'concern' for speaking as—er—er—mutual friend. As to YOUR statement of your relations with Miss Hooker, I may state that it is fully corroborated by the statement of the young lady

herself in this very office yesterday."

"Then what does this impertinent nonsense mean? Why am I summoned here?" demanded Hotchkiss furiously.

"Because," said the Colonel deliberately, "that statement is infamously—yes, damnably to your discredit, sir!"

Mr. Hotchkiss was here seized by one of those impotent and inconsistent rages which occasionally betray the habitually cautious and timid man. He caught up the Colonel's stick, which was lying on the table. At the same moment the Colonel, without any apparent effort, grasped it by the handle. To Mr. Hotchkiss's astonishment, the stick separated in two pieces, leaving the handle and about two feet of narrow glittering steel in the Colonel's hand. The man recoiled, dropping the useless fragment. The Colonel picked it up, fitted the shining blade in it, clicked the spring, and then rising with a face of courtesy yet of unmistakably genuine pain, and with even a slight tremor in his voice, said gravely,—

"Mr. Hotchkiss, I owe you a thousand apologies, sir, that—er—a weapon should be drawn by me—even through your own inadvertence—under the sacred protection of my roof, and upon an unarmed man. I beg your pardon, sir, and I even withdraw the expressions which provoked that inadvertence. Nor does this apology prevent you from holding me responsible—personally responsible—ELSEWHERE for an indiscretion committed in behalf of a lady—my—er—client."

"Your client? Do you mean you have taken her case? You,

the counsel for the Ditch Company?" asked Mr. Hotchkiss, in trembling indignation.

"Having won YOUR case, sir," replied the Colonel coolly, "the—er—usages of advocacy do not prevent me from espousing the cause of the weak and unprotected."

"We shall see, sir," said Hotchkiss, grasping the handle of the door and backing into the passage. "There are other lawyers who"—

"Permit me to see you out," interrupted the Colonel, rising politely.

–"will be ready to resist the attacks of blackmail," continued Hotchkiss, retreating along the passage.

"And then you will be able to repeat your remarks to me IN THE STREET," continued the Colonel, bowing, as he persisted in following his visitor to the door.

But here Mr. Hotchkiss quickly slammed it behind him, and hurried away. The Colonel returned to his office, and sitting down, took a sheet of letter-paper bearing the inscription "Starbottle and Stryker, Attorneys and Counselors," and wrote the following lines:—

HOOKER versus HOTCHKISS.

> DEAR MADAM,—Having had a visit from the defendant in above, we should be pleased to have an interview with you at two P. M. to-morrow.
>
> *Your obedient servants,*
> *STARBOTTLE AND STRYKER.*

This he sealed and dispatched by his trusted servant Jim, and then devoted a few moments to reflection. It was the custom of the Colonel to act first, and justify the action by reason afterwards.

He knew that Hotchkiss would at once lay the matter before rival counsel. He knew that they would advise him that Miss Hooker had "no case"—that she would be nonsuited on her own evidence, and he ought not to compromise, but be ready to stand trial. He believed, however, that Hotchkiss feared such exposure, and although his own instincts had been at first against this remedy, he was now instinctively in favor of it. He remembered his own power with a jury; his vanity and his chivalry alike approved of this heroic method; he was bound by no prosaic facts —he had his own theory of the case, which no mere evidence could gainsay. In fact, Mrs. Hooker's admission that he was to "tell the story in his own way" actually appeared to him an inspiration and a prophecy.

Perhaps there was something else, due possibly to the lady's wonderful eyes, of which he had thought much. Yet it was not her simplicity that affected him solely; on the contrary, it was her apparent intelligent reading of the character of her recreant lover—and of his own! Of all the Colonel's previous "light" or "serious" loves, none had ever before flattered him in that way. And it was this, combined with the respect which he had held for their professional relations, that precluded his having a more familiar knowledge of his client, through serious questioning or

playful gallantry. I am not sure it was not part of the charm to have a rustic femme incomprise as a client.

Nothing could exceed the respect with which he greeted her as she entered his office the next day. He even affected not to notice that she had put on her best clothes, and he made no doubt appeared as when she had first attracted the mature yet faithless attentions of Deacon Hotchkiss at church. A white virginal muslin was belted around her slim figure by a blue ribbon, and her Leghorn hat was drawn around her oval cheek by a bow of the same color. She had a Southern girl's narrow feet, encased in white stockings and kid slippers, which were crossed primly before her as she sat in a chair, supporting her arm by her faithful parasol planted firmly on the floor. A faint odor of southernwood exhaled from her, and, oddly enough, stirred the Colonel with a far-off recollection of a pine-shaded Sunday-school on a Georgia hillside, and of his first love, aged ten, in a short starched frock. Possibly it was the same recollection that revived something of the awkwardness he had felt then.

He, however, smiled vaguely, and sitting down, coughed slightly, and placed his finger-tips together. "I have had an—er—interview with Mr. Hotchkiss, but—I—er—regret to say there seems to be no prospect of—er—compromise."

He paused, and to his surprise her listless "company" face lit up with an adorable smile. "Of course!—ketch him!" she said. "Was he mad when you told him?" She put her knees comfortably together and leaned forward for a reply.

For all that, wild horses could not have torn from the Colonel a word about Hotchkiss's anger. "He expressed his intention of employing counsel—and defending a suit," returned the Colonel, affably basking in her smile.

She dragged her chair nearer his desk. "Then you'll fight him tooth and nail?" she asked eagerly; "you'll show him up? You'll tell the whole story your own way? You'll give him fits?—and you'll make him pay? Sure?" she went on breathlessly.

"I—er—will," said the Colonel, almost as breathlessly.

She caught his fat white hand, which was lying on the table, between her own and lifted it to her lips. He felt her soft young fingers even through the lisle-thread gloves that encased them, and the warm moisture of her lips upon his skin. He felt himself flushing—but was unable to break the silence or change his position. The next moment she had scuttled back with her chair to her old position.

"I—er—certainly shall do my best," stammered the Colonel, in an attempt to recover his dignity and composure.

"That's enough! You'll do it," said she enthusiastically. "Lordy! Just you talk for ME as ye did for HIS old Ditch Company, and you'll fetch it—every time! Why, when you made that jury sit up the other day—when you got that off about the Merrikan flag waving equally over the rights of honest citizens banded together in peaceful commercial pursuits, as well as over the fortress of official proflig—"

"Oligarchy," murmured the Colonel courteously.

–"oligarchy," repeated the girl quickly, "my breath was just took away. I said to maw, 'Ain't he too sweet for anything!' I did, honest Injin! And when you rolled it all off at the end—never missing a word (you didn't need to mark 'em in a lesson-book, but had 'em all ready on your tongue)—and walked out—Well! I didn't know you nor the Ditch Company from Adam, but I could have just run over and kissed you there before the whole court!"

She laughed, with her face glowing, although her strange eyes were cast down. Alack! the Colonel's face was equally flushed, and his own beady eyes were on his desk. To any other woman he would have voiced the banal gallantry that he should now, himself, look forward to that reward, but the words never reached his lips. He laughed, coughed slightly, and when he looked up again she had fallen into the same attitude as on her first visit, with her parasol point on the floor.

"I must ask you to—er—direct your memory to—er—another point: the breaking off of the—er—er—er—engagement. Did he—er—give any reason for it? Or show any cause?"

"No; he never said anything," returned the girl.

"Not in his usual way?—er—no reproaches out of the hymn-book?—or the sacred writings?"

"No; he just QUIT."

"Er—ceased his attentions," said the Colonel gravely. "And naturally you—er—were not conscious of any cause for his doing so."

The girl raised her wonderful eyes so suddenly and so penetratingly without replying in any other way that the Colonel could only hurriedly say: "I see! None, of course!"

At which she rose, the Colonel rising also. "We—shall begin proceedings at once. I must, however, caution you to answer no questions, nor say anything about this case to any one until you are in court."

She answered his request with another intelligent look and a nod. He accompanied her to the door. As he took her proffered hand, he raised the lisle-thread fingers to his lips with old-fashioned gallantry. As if that act had condoned for his first omissions and awkwardness, he became his old-fashioned self again, buttoned his coat, pulled out his shirt frill, and strutted back to his desk.

A day or two later it was known throughout the town that Zaidee Hooker had sued Adoniram Hotchkiss for breach of promise, and that the damages were laid at five thousand dollars. As in those bucolic days the Western press was under the secure censorship of a revolver, a cautious tone of criticism prevailed, and any gossip was confined to personal expression, and even then at the risk of the gossiper. Nevertheless, the situation provoked the intensest curiosity. The Colonel was approached—until his statement that he should consider any attempt to overcome his professional secrecy a personal reflection withheld further advances. The community were left to the more ostentatious information of the defendant's counsel,

Messrs. Kitcham and Bilser, that the case was "ridiculous" and "rotten," that the plaintiff would be nonsuited, and the fire-eating Starbottle would be taught a lesson that he could not "bully" the law, and there were some dark hints of a conspiracy. It was even hinted that the "case" was the revengeful and preposterous outcome of the refusal of Hotchkiss to pay Starbottle an extravagant fee for his late services to the Ditch Company. It is unnecessary to say that these words were not reported to the Colonel. It was, however, an unfortunate circumstance for the calmer, ethical consideration of the subject that the Church sided with Hotchkiss, as this provoked an equal adherence to the plaintiff and Starbottle on the part of the larger body of non-churchgoers, who were delighted at a possible exposure of the weakness of religious rectitude. "I've allus had my suspicions o' them early candle-light meetings down at that gospel shop," said one critic, "and I reckon Deacon Hotchkiss didn't rope in the gals to attend jest for psalm-singing." "Then for him to get up and leave the board afore the game's finished and try to sneak out of it," said an other,—"I suppose that's what they call RELIGIOUS."

It was therefore not remarkable that the court-house three weeks later was crowded with an excited multitude of the curious and sympathizing. The fair plaintiff, with her mother, was early in attendance, and under the Colonel's advice appeared in the same modest garb in which she had first visited his office. This and her downcast, modest demeanor were perhaps

at first disappointing to the crowd, who had evidently expected a paragon of loveliness in this Circe of that grim, ascetic defendant, who sat beside his counsel. But presently all eyes were fixed on the Colonel, who certainly made up in his appearance any deficiency of his fair client. His portly figure was clothed in a blue dress coat with brass buttons, a buff waistcoat which permitted his frilled shirt-front to become erectile above it, a black satin stock which confined a boyish turned-down collar around his full neck, and immaculate drill trousers, strapped over varnished boots. A murmur ran round the court. "Old 'Personally Responsible' has got his war-paint on;" "The Old War-Horse is smelling powder," were whispered comments. Yet for all that, the most irreverent among them recognized vaguely, in this bizarre figure, something of an honored past in their country's history, and possibly felt the spell of old deeds and old names that had once thrilled their boyish pulses. The new District Judge returned Colonel Starbottle's profoundly punctilious bow. The Colonel was followed by his negro servant, carrying a parcel of hymn-books and Bibles, who, with a courtesy evidently imitated from his master, placed one before the opposite counsel. This, after a first curious glance, the lawyer somewhat superciliously tossed aside. But when Jim, proceeding to the jury-box, placed with equal politeness the remaining copies before the jury, the opposite counsel sprang to his feet.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.