

BRET HARTE

BY SHORE AND
SEDGE

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AN APOSTLE OF THE TULE

I

On October 10, 1856, about four hundred people were camped in Tasajara Valley, California. It could not have been for the prospect, since a more barren, dreary, monotonous, and uninviting landscape never stretched before human eye; it could not have been for convenience or contiguity, as the nearest settlement was thirty miles away; it could not have been for health or salubrity, as the breath of the ague-haunted tules in the outlying Stockton marshes swept through the valley; it could not have been for space or comfort, for, encamped on an unlimited plain, men and women were huddled together as closely as in an urban tenement-house, without the freedom or decency of rural isolation; it could not have been for pleasant companionship, as dejection, mental anxiety, tears, and lamentation were the dominant expression; it was not a hurried flight from present or impending calamity, for the camp had been deliberately planned, and for a week pioneer wagons had been slowly arriving; it was not an irrevocable exodus, for some had already returned to their homes that others might take their places. It was simply a religious revival of one or two denominational sects, known as a "camp-meeting."

A large central tent served for the assembling of the principal congregation; smaller tents served for prayer-meetings and class-rooms, known to the few unbelievers as "side-shows"; while the actual dwellings of the worshipers were rudely extemporized shanties of boards and canvas, sometimes mere corrals or inclosures open to the cloudless sky, or more often the unhitched covered wagon which had brought them there. The singular resemblance to a circus, already profanely suggested, was carried out by a straggling fringe of boys and half-grown men on the outskirts of the encampment, acrimonious with disappointed curiosity, lazy without the careless ease of vagrancy, and vicious without the excitement of dissipation. For the coarse poverty and brutal economy of the larger arrangements, the dreary panorama of unlovely and unwholesome domestic details always before the eyes, were hardly exciting to the senses. The circus might have been more dangerous, but scarcely more brutalizing. The actors themselves, hard and aggressive through practical struggles, often warped and twisted with chronic forms of smaller diseases, or malformed and crippled through carelessness and neglect, and restless and uneasy through some vague mental distress and inquietude that they had added to their burdens, were scarcely amusing performers. The rheumatic Parkinsons, from Green Springs; the ophthalmic Filgees, from Alder Creek; the ague-stricken Harneys, from Martinez Bend; and the feeble-limbed Steptons, from Sugar Mill, might, in their combined families, have suggested a hospital, rather than any other social assemblage. Even their companionship, which had little of cheerful fellowship in it, would have been grotesque but for the pathetic instinct of some mutual vague appeal from the hardness of their lives and the helplessness of their conditions that had brought them together. Nor was this appeal to a Higher Power any the less pathetic that it bore no reference whatever to their respective needs or deficiencies, but was always an invocation for a light which, when they believed they had found it, to unregenerate eyes scarcely seemed to illumine the rugged path in which their feet were continually stumbling. One might have smiled at the idea of the vendetta-following Ferguses praying for "justification by Faith," but the actual spectacle of old Simon Fergus, whose shot-gun was still in his wagon, offering up that appeal with streaming eyes and agonized features

was painful beyond a doubt. To seek and obtain an exaltation of feeling vaguely known as "It," or less vaguely veiling a sacred name, was the burden of the general appeal.

The large tent had been filled, and between the exhortations a certain gloomy enthusiasm had been kept up by singing, which had the effect of continuing in an easy, rhythmical, impersonal, and irresponsible way the sympathies of the meeting. This was interrupted by a young man who rose suddenly, with that spontaneity of impulse which characterized the speakers, but unlike his predecessors, he remained for a moment mute, trembling and irresolute. The fatal hesitation seemed to check the unreasoning, monotonous flow of emotion, and to recall to some extent the reason and even the criticism of the worshipers. He stammered a prayer whose earnestness was undoubted, whose humility was but too apparent, but his words fell on faculties already benumbed by repetition and rhythm. A slight movement of curiosity in the rear benches, and a whisper that it was the maiden effort of a new preacher, helped to prolong the interruption. A heavy man of strong physical expression sprang to the rescue with a hysterical cry of "Glory!" and a tumultuous fluency of epithet and sacred adjuration. Still the meeting wavered. With one final paroxysmal cry, the powerful man threw his arms around his nearest neighbor and burst into silent tears. An anxious hush followed; the speaker still continued to sob on his neighbor's shoulder. Almost before the fact could be commented upon, it was noticed that the entire rank of worshipers on the bench beside him were crying also; the second and third rows were speedily dissolved in tears, until even the very youthful scoffers in the last benches suddenly found their half-hysterical laughter turned to sobs. The danger was averted, the reaction was complete; the singing commenced, and in a few moments the hapless cause of the interruption and the man who had retrieved the disaster stood together outside the tent. A horse was picketed near them.

The victor was still panting from his late exertions, and was more or less diluvial in eye and nostril, but neither eye nor nostril bore the slightest tremor of other expression. His face was stolid and perfectly in keeping with his physique,—heavy, animal, and unintelligent.

"Ye oughter trusted in the Lord," he said to the young preacher.

"But I did," responded the young man, earnestly.

"That's it. Justifyin' yourself by works instead o' leanin' onto Him! Find Him, sez you! Git Him, sez you! Works is vain. Glory! glory!" he continued, with fluent vacuity and wandering, dull, observant eyes.

"But if I had a little more practice in class, Brother Silas, more education?"

"The letter killeth," interrupted Brother Silas. Here his wandering eyes took dull cognizance of two female faces peering through the opening of the tent. "No, yer mishun, Brother Gideon, is to seek Him in the by-ways, in the wilderness,—where the foxes hev holes and the ravens hev their young,—but not in the Temples of the people. Wot sez Sister Parsons?"

One of the female faces detached itself from the tent flaps, which it nearly resembled in color, and brought forward an angular figure clothed in faded fustian that had taken the various shades and odors of household service.

"Brother Silas speaks well," said Sister Parsons, with stridulous fluency. "It's fore-ordained. Fore-ordinashun is better nor ordinashun, saith the Lord. He shall go forth, turnin' neither to the right hand nor the left hand, and seek Him among the lost tribes and the ungodly. He shall put aside the temptashun of Mammon and the flesh." Her eyes and those of Brother Silas here both sought the other female face, which was that of a young girl of seventeen.

"Wot sez little Sister Meely,—wot sez Meely Parsons?" continued Brother Silas, as if repeating an unctuous formula.

The young girl came hesitatingly forward, and with a nervous cry of "Oh, Gideon!" threw herself on the breast of the young man.

For a moment they remained locked in each other's arms. In the promiscuous and fraternal embracings which were a part of the devotional exercises of the hour, the act passed without

significance. The young man gently raised her face. She was young and comely, albeit marked with a half-frightened, half-vacant sorrow. "Amen," said Brother Gideon, gravely.

He mounted his horse and turned to go. Brother Silas had clasped his powerful arms around both women and was holding them in a ponderous embrace.

"Go forth, young man, into the wilderness."

The young man bowed his head, and urged his horse forward in the bleak and barren plain. In half an hour every vestige of the camp and its unwholesome surroundings was lost in the distance. It was as if the strong desiccating wind, which seemed to spring up at his horse's feet, had cleanly erased the flimsy structures from the face of the plain, swept away the lighter breath of praise and plaint, and dried up the easy-flowing tears. The air was harsh but pure; the grim economy of form and shade and color in the level plain was coarse but not vulgar; the sky above him was cold and distant but not repellent; the moisture that had been denied his eyes at the prayer-meeting overflowed them here; the words that had choked his utterance an hour ago now rose to his lips. He threw himself from his horse, and kneeling in the withered grass—a mere atom in the boundless plain—lifted his pale face against the irresponsive blue and prayed.

He prayed that the unselfish dream of his bitter boyhood, his disappointed youth, might come to pass. He prayed that he might in higher hands become the humble instrument of good to his fellow-man. He prayed that the deficiencies of his scant education, his self-taught learning, his helpless isolation, and his inexperience might be overlooked or reinforced by grace. He prayed that the Infinite Compassion might enlighten his ignorance and solitude with a manifestation of the Spirit; in his very weakness he prayed for some special revelation, some sign or token, some visitation or gracious unbending from that coldly lifting sky. The low sun burned the black edge of the distant tules with dull eating fires as he prayed, lit the dwarfed hills with a brief but ineffectual radiance, and then died out. The lingering trade winds fired a few volleys over its grave and then lapsed into a chilly silence. The young man staggered to his feet; it was quite dark now, but the coming night had advanced a few starry vedettes so near the plain they looked like human watch-fires. For an instant he could not remember where he was. Then a light trembled far down at the entrance of the valley. Brother Gideon recognized it. It was in the lonely farmhouse of the widow of the last Circuit preacher.

II

The abode of the late Reverend Marvin Hiler remained in the disorganized condition he had left it when removed from his sphere of earthly uselessness and continuous accident. The straggling fence that only half inclosed the house and barn had stopped at that point where the two deacons who had each volunteered to do a day's work on it had completed their allotted time. The building of the barn had been arrested when the half load of timber contributed by Sugar Mill brethren was exhausted, and three windows given by "Christian Seekers" at Martinez painfully accented the boarded spaces for the other three that "Unknown Friends" in Tasajara had promised but not yet supplied. In the clearing some trees that had been felled but not taken away added to the general incompleteness.

Something of this unfinished character clung to the Widow Hiler and asserted itself in her three children, one of whom was consistently posthumous. Prematurely old and prematurely disappointed, she had all the inexperience of girlhood with the cares of maternity, and kept in her family circle the freshness of an old maid's misogynistic antipathies with a certain guilty and remorseful consciousness of widowhood. She supported the meagre household to which her husband had contributed only the extra mouths to feed with reproachful astonishment and weary incapacity. She had long since grown tired of trying to make both ends meet, of which she declared "the Lord had taken one." During her two years' widowhood she had waited on Providence, who by a pleasing local fiction had been made responsible for the disused and cast-off furniture and clothing which, accompanied with scriptural texts, found their way mysteriously into her few habitable rooms. The providential manna was not always fresh; the ravens who fed her and her little ones with flour from the Sugar Mills did not always select the best quality. Small wonder that, sitting by her lonely hearthstone,—a borrowed stove that supplemented the unfinished fireplace,—surrounded by her mismatched furniture and clad in misfitting garments, she had contracted a habit of sniffing during her dreary watches. In her weaker moments she attributed it to grief; in her stronger intervals she knew that it sprang from damp and draught.

In her apathy the sound of horses' hoofs at her unprotected door even at that hour neither surprised nor alarmed her. She lifted her head as the door opened and the pale face of Gideon Deane looked into the room. She moved aside the cradle she was rocking, and, taking a saucepan and tea-cup from a chair beside her, absently dusted it with her apron, and pointing to the vacant seat said, "Take a chair," as quietly as if he had stepped from the next room instead of the outer darkness.

"I'll put up my horse first," said Gideon gently.

"So do," responded the widow briefly.

Gideon led his horse across the inclosure, stumbling over the heaps of rubbish, dried chips, and weather-beaten shavings with which it was strewn, until he reached the unfinished barn, where he temporarily bestowed his beast. Then taking a rusty axe, by the faint light of the stars, he attacked one of the fallen trees with such energy that at the end of ten minutes he reappeared at the door with an armful of cut boughs and chips, which he quietly deposited behind the stove. Observing that he was still standing as if looking for something, the widow lifted her eyes and said, "Ef it's the bucket, I reckon ye'll find it at the spring, where one of them foolish Filgee boys left it. I've been that tuckered out sens sundown, I ain't had the ambition to go and tote it back." Without a word Gideon repaired to the spring, filled the missing bucket, replaced the hoop on the loosened staves of another he found lying useless beside it, and again returned to the house. The widow once more pointed to the chair, and Gideon sat down. "It's quite a spell sens you wos here," said the Widow Hiler, returning her foot to the cradle-rocker; "not sens yer was ordained. Be'n practicin', I reckon, at the meetin'."

A slight color came into his cheek. "My place is not there, Sister Hiler," he said gently; "it's for those with the gift o' tongues. I go forth only a common laborer in the vineyard." He stopped and

hesitated; he might have said more, but the widow, who was familiar with that kind of humility as the ordinary perfunctory expression of her class, suggested no sympathetic interest in his mission.

"Thar's a deal o' talk over there," she said dryly, "and thar's folks ez thinks thar's a deal o' money spent in picnicking the Gospel that might be given to them ez wish to spread it, or to their widows and children. But that don't consarn you, Brother Gideon. Sister Parsons hez money enough to settle her darter Meely comfortably on her own land; and I've heard tell that you and Meely was only waitin' till you was ordained to be jined together. You'll hev an easier time of it, Brother Gideon, than poor Marvin Hiler had," she continued, suppressing her tears with a certain astringency that took the place of her lost pride; "but the Lord wills that some should be tried and some not."

"But I am not going to marry Meely Parsons," said Gideon quietly.

The widow took her foot from the rocker. "Not marry Meely!" she repeated vaguely. But relapsing into her despondent mood she continued: "Then I reckon it's true what other folks sez of Brother Silas Braggley makin' up to her and his powerful exhortin' influence over her ma. Folks sez ez Sister Parsons hez just resigned her soul inter his keepin'."

"Brother Silas hez a heavenly gift," said the young man, with gentle enthusiasm; "and perhaps it may be so. If it is, it is the Lord's will. But I do not marry Meely because my life and my ways henceforth must lie far beyond her sphere of strength. I oughtn't to drag a young inexperienced soul with me to battle and struggle in the thorny paths that I must tread."

"I reckon you know your own mind," said Sister Hiler grimly. "But thar's folks ez might allow that Meely Parsons ain't any better than others, that she shouldn't have her share o' trials and keers and crosses. Riches and bringin' up don't exempt folks from the shadder. I married Marvin Hiler outer a house ez good ez Sister Parsons', and at a time when old Cyrus Parsons hadn't a roof to his head but the cover of the emigrant wagon he kem across the plains in. I might say ez Marvin knowed pretty well wot it was to have a helpmeet in his ministration, if it wasn't vanity of sperit to say it now. But the flesh is weak, Brother Gideon." Her influenza here resolved itself into unmistakable tears, which she wiped away with the first article that was accessible in the work-bag before her. As it chanced to be a black silk neckerchief of the deceased Hiler, the result was funereal, suggestive, but practically ineffective.

"You were a good wife to Brother Hiler," said the young man gently. "Everybody knows that."

"It's suthin' to think of since he's gone," continued the widow, bringing her work nearer to her eyes to adjust it to their tear-dimmed focus. "It's suthin' to lay to heart in the lonely days and nights when thar's no man round to fetch water and wood and lend a hand to doin' chores; it's suthin' to remember, with his three children to feed, and little Selby, the eldest, that vain and useless that he can't even tote the baby round while I do the work of a hired man."

"It's a hard trial, Sister Hiler," said Gideon, "but the Lord has His appointed time."

Familiar as consolation by vague quotation was to Sister Hiler, there was an occult sympathy in the tone in which this was offered that lifted her for an instant out of her narrower self. She raised her eyes to his. The personal abstraction of the devotee had no place in the deep dark eyes that were lifted from the cradle to hers with a sad, discriminating, and almost womanly sympathy. Surprised out of her selfish preoccupation, she was reminded of her apparent callousness to what might be his present disappointment. Perhaps it seemed strange to her, too, that those tender eyes should go a-begging.

"Yer takin' a Christian view of yer own disappointment, Brother Gideon," she said, with less astringency of manner; "but every heart knoweth its own sorrer. I'll be gettin' supper now that the baby's sleepin' sound, and ye'll sit by and eat."

"If you let me help you, Sister Hiler," said the young man with a cheerfulness that belied any overwhelming heart affection, and awakened in the widow a feminine curiosity as to his real feelings to Meely. But her further questioning was met with a frank, amiable, and simple brevity that was as puzzling as the most artful periphrase of tact. Accustomed as she was to the loquacity of grief and the confiding prolixity of disappointed lovers, she could not understand her guest's quiescent attitude.

Her curiosity, however, soon gave way to the habitual contemplation of her own sorrows, and she could not forego the opportune presence of a sympathizing auditor to whom she could relieve her feelings. The preparations for the evening meal were therefore accompanied by a dreary monotone of lamentation. She bewailed her lost youth, her brief courtship, the struggles of her early married life, her premature widowhood, her penurious and helpless existence, the disruption of all her present ties, the hopelessness of the future. She rehearsed the unending plaint of those long evenings, set to the music of the restless wind around her bleak dwelling, with something of its stridulous reiteration. The young man listened, and replied with softly assenting eyes, but without pausing in the material aid that he was quietly giving her. He had removed the cradle of the sleeping child to the bedroom, quieted the sudden wakefulness of "Pinkey," rearranged the straggling furniture of the sitting-room with much order and tidiness, repaired the hinges of a rebellious shutter and the lock of an unyielding door, and yet had apparently retained an unabated interest in her spoken woes. Surprised once more into recognizing this devotion, Sister Hiler abruptly arrested her monologue.

"Well, if you ain't the handiest man I ever seed about a house!"

"Am I?" said Gideon, with suddenly sparkling eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"Then you don't know how glad I am." His frank face so unmistakably showed his simple gratification that the widow, after gazing at him for a moment, was suddenly seized with a bewildering fancy. The first effect of it was the abrupt withdrawal of her eyes, then a sudden effusion of blood to her forehead that finally extended to her cheekbones, and then an interval of forgetfulness where she remained with a plate held vaguely in her hand. When she succeeded at last in putting it on the table instead of the young man's lap, she said in a voice quite unlike her own,—

"Sho!"

"I mean it," said Gideon, cheerfully. After a pause, in which he unostentatiously rearranged the table which the widow was abstractedly disorganizing, he said gently, "After tea, when you're not so much flustered with work and worry, and more composed in spirit, we'll have a little talk, Sister Hiler. I'm in no hurry to-night, and if you don't mind I'll make myself comfortable in the barn with my blanket until sun-up to-morrow. I can get up early enough to do some odd chores round the lot before I go."

"You know best, Brother Gideon," said the widow, faintly, "and if you think it's the Lord's will, and no speshal trouble to you, so do. But sakes alive! it's time I tidied myself a little," she continued, lifting one hand to her hair, while with the other she endeavored to fasten a buttonless collar; "leavin' alone the vanities o' dress, it's ez much as one can do to keep a clean rag on with the children climbin' over ye. Sit by, and I'll be back in a minit." She retired to the back room, and in a few moments returned with smoothed hair and a palm-leaf broche shawl thrown over her shoulders, which not only concealed the ravages made by time and maternity on the gown beneath, but to some extent gave her the suggestion of being a casual visitor in her own household. It must be confessed that for the rest of the evening Sister Hiler rather lent herself to this idea, possibly from the fact that it temporarily obliterated the children, and quite removed her from any responsibility in the unpicturesque household. This effect was only marred by the absence of any impression upon Gideon, who scarcely appeared to notice the change, and whose soft eyes seemed rather to identify the miserable woman under her forced disguise. He prefaced the meal with a fervent grace, to which the widow listened with something of the conscious attitude she had adopted at church during her late husband's ministration, and during the meal she ate with a like consciousness of "company manners."

Later that evening Selby Hiler woke up in his little truckle bed, listening to the rising midnight wind, which in his childish fancy he confounded with the sound of voices that came through the open door of the living-room. He recognized the deep voice of the young minister, Gideon, and the occasional tearful responses of his mother, and he was fancying himself again at church when he heard a step, and the young preacher seemed to enter the room, and going to the bed leaned over it

and kissed him on the forehead, and then bent over his little brother and sister and kissed them too. Then he slowly re-entered the living-room. Lifting himself softly on his elbow, Selby saw him go up towards his mother, who was crying, with her head on the table, and kiss her also on the forehead. Then he said "Good-night," and the front door closed, and Selby heard his footsteps crossing the lot towards the barn. His mother was still sitting with her face buried in her hands when he fell asleep.

She sat by the dying embers of the fire until the house was still again; then she rose and wiped her eyes. "Et's a good thing," she said, going to the bedroom door, and looking in upon her sleeping children; "et's a mercy and a blessing for them and—for—me. But—but—he might—hev—said—he—loved me!"

III

Although Gideon Deane contrived to find a nest for his blanket in the mouldy straw of the unfinished barn loft, he could not sleep. He restlessly watched the stars through the cracks of the boarded roof, and listened to the wind that made the half-open structure as vocal as a sea-shell, until past midnight. Once or twice he had fancied he heard the tramp of horse-hoofs on the far-off trail, and now it seemed to approach nearer, mingled with the sound of voices. Gideon raised his head and looked through the doorway of the loft. He was not mistaken: two men had halted in the road before the house, and were examining it as if uncertain if it were the dwelling they were seeking, and were hesitating if they should rouse the inmates. Thinking he might spare the widow this disturbance to her slumbers, and possibly some alarm, he rose quickly, and descending to the inclosure walked towards the house. As he approached the men advanced to meet him, and by accident or design ranged themselves on either side. A glance showed him they were strangers to the locality.

"We're lookin' fer the preacher that lives here," said one, who seemed to be the elder. "A man by the name o' Hiler, I reckon!"

"Brother Hiler has been dead two years," responded Gideon. "His widow and children live here."

The two men looked at each other. The younger one laughed; the elder mumbled something about its being "three years ago," and then turning suddenly on Gideon, said:

"P'r'aps YOU'RE a preacher?"

"I am."

"Can you come to a dying man?"

"I will."

The two men again looked at each other. "But," continued Gideon, softly, "you'll please keep quiet so as not to disturb the widow and her children, while I get my horse." He turned away; the younger man made a movement as if to stop him, but the elder quickly restrained his hand. "He isn't goin' to run away," he whispered. "Look," he added, as Gideon a moment later reappeared mounted and equipped.

"Do you think we'll be in time?" asked the young preacher as they rode quickly away in the direction of the tules.

The younger repressed a laugh; the other answered grimly, "I reckon."

"And is he conscious of his danger?"

"I reckon."

Gideon did not speak again. But as the onus of that silence seemed to rest upon the other two, the last speaker, after a few moments' silent and rapid riding, continued abruptly, "You don't seem curious?"

"Of what?" said Gideon, lifting his soft eyes to the speaker. "You tell me of a brother at the point of death, who seeks the Lord through an humble vessel like myself. HE will tell me the rest."

A silence still more constrained on the part of the two strangers followed, which they endeavored to escape from by furious riding; so that in half an hour the party had reached a point where the tules began to sap the arid plain, while beyond them broadened the lagoons of the distant river. In the foreground, near a clump of dwarfed willows, a camp-fire was burning, around which fifteen or twenty armed men were collected, their horses picketed in an outer circle guarded by two mounted sentries. A blasted cotton-wood with a single black arm extended over the tules stood ominously against the dark sky.

The circle opened to receive them and closed again. The elder man dismounted and leading Gideon to the blasted cotton-wood, pointed to a pinioned man seated at its foot with an armed guard over him. He looked up at Gideon with an amused smile.

"You said it was a dying man," said Gideon, recoiling.

"He will be a dead man in half an hour," returned the stranger.

"And you?"

"We are the Vigilantes from Alamo. This man," pointing to the prisoner, "is a gambler who killed a man yesterday. We hunted him here, tried him an hour ago, and found him guilty. The last man we hung here, three years ago, asked for a parson. We brought him the man who used to live where we found you. So we thought we'd give this man the same show, and brought you."

"And if I refuse?" said Gideon.

The leader shrugged his shoulders.

"That's HIS lookout, not ours. We've given him the chance. Drive ahead, boys," he added, turning to the others; "the parson allows he won't take a hand."

"One moment," said Gideon, in desperation, "one moment, for the sake of that God you have brought me here to invoke in behalf of this wretched man. One moment, for the sake of Him in whose presence you must stand one day as he does now." With passionate earnestness he pointed out the vindictive impulse they were mistaking for Divine justice; with pathetic fervency he fell upon his knees and implored their mercy for the culprit. But in vain. As at the camp-meeting of the day before, he was chilled to find his words seemed to fall on unheeding and unsympathetic ears. He looked around on their abstracted faces; in their gloomy savage enthusiasm for expiatory sacrifice, he was horrified to find the same unreasoning exaltation that had checked his exhortations then. Only one face looked upon his, half mischievously, half compassionately. It was the prisoner's.

"Yer wastin' time on us," said the leader, dryly; "wastin' HIS time. Hadn't you better talk to him?"

Gideon rose to his feet, pale and cold. "He may have something to confess. May I speak with him alone?" he said gently.

The leader motioned to the sentry to fall back. Gideon placed himself before the prisoner so that in the faint light of the camp-fire the man's figure was partly hidden by his own. "You meant well with your little bluff, pardner," said the prisoner, not unkindly, "but they've got the cards to win."

"Kneel down with your back to me," said Gideon, in a low voice. The prisoner fell on his knees. At the same time he felt Gideon's hand and the gliding of steel behind his back, and the severed cords hung loosely on his arms and legs.

"When I lift my voice to God, brother," said Gideon, softly, "drop on your face and crawl as far as you can in a straight line in my shadow, then break for the tules. I will stand between you and their first fire."

"Are you mad?" said the prisoner. "Do you think they won't fire lest they should hurt you? Man! they'll kill YOU, the first thing."

"So be it—if your chance is better."

Still on his knees, the man grasped Gideon's two hands in his own and devoured him with his eyes.

"You mean it?"

"I do."

"Then," said the prisoner, quietly, "I reckon I'll stop and hear what you've got to say about God until they're ready."

"You refuse to fly?"

"I reckon I was never better fitted to die than now," said the prisoner, still grasping his hand. After a pause he added in a lower tone, "I can't pray—but—I think," he hesitated, "I think I could manage to ring in a hymn."

"Will you try, brother?"

"Yes."

With their hands tightly clasped together, Gideon lifted his gentle voice. The air was a common one, familiar in the local religious gatherings, and after the first verse one or two of the sullen lookers-on joined unkindly in the refrain. But, as he went on, the air and words seemed to offer a vague expression to the dull lowering animal emotion of the savage concourse, and at the end of the second verse the refrain, augmented in volume and swelled by every voice in the camp, swept out over the hollow plain.

It was met in the distance by a far-off cry. With an oath taking the place of his supplication, the leader sprang to his feet. But too late! The cry was repeated as a nearer slogan of defiance—the plain shook—there was the tempestuous onset of furious hoofs—a dozen shots—the scattering of the embers of the camp-fire into a thousand vanishing sparks even as the lurid gathering of savage humanity was dispersed and dissipated over the plain, and Gideon and the prisoner stood alone. But as the sheriff of Contra Costa with his rescuing posse swept by, the man they had come to save fell forward in Gideon's arms with a bullet in his breast—the Parthian shot of the flying Vigilante leader.

The eager crowd that surged around him with outstretched helping hands would have hustled Gideon aside. But the wounded man roused himself, and throwing an arm around the young preacher's neck, warned them back with the other. "Stand back!" he gasped. "He risked his life for mine! Look at him, boys! Wanted ter stand up 'twixt them hounds and me and draw their fire on himself! Ain't he just hell?" he stopped; an apologetic smile crossed his lips. "I clean forgot, pardner; but it's all right. I said I was ready to go; and I am." His arm slipped from Gideon's neck; he slid to the ground; he had fainted.

A dark, military-looking man pushed his way through the crowd—the surgeon, one of the posse, accompanied by a younger man fastidiously dressed. The former bent over the unconscious prisoner, and tore open his shirt; the latter followed his movements with a flush of anxious inquiry in his handsome, careless face. After a moment's pause the surgeon, without looking up, answered the young man's mute questioning. "Better send the sheriff here at once, Jack."

"He is here," responded the official, joining the group.

The surgeon looked up at him. "I am afraid they've put the case out of your jurisdiction, Sheriff," he said grimly. "It's only a matter of a day or two at best—perhaps only a few hours. But he won't live to be taken back to jail."

"Will he live to go as far as Martinez?" asked the young man addressed as Jack.

"With care, perhaps."

"Will you be responsible for him, Jack Hamlin?" said the sheriff, suddenly.

"I will."

"Then take him. Stay, he's coming to."

The wounded man slowly opened his eyes. They fell upon Jack Hamlin with a pleased look of recognition, but almost instantly and anxiously glanced around as if seeking another. Leaning over him, Jack said gayly, "They've passed you over to me, old man; are you willing?"

The wounded man's eyes assented, but still moved restlessly from side to side.

"Is there any one you want to go with you?"

"Yes," said the eyes.

"The doctor, of course?"

The eyes did not answer. Gideon dropped on his knees beside him. A ray of light flashed in the helpless man's eyes and transfigured his whole face.

"You want HIM?" said Jack incredulously.

"Yes," said the eyes.

"What—the preacher?"

The lips struggled to speak. Everybody bent down to hear his reply.

"You bet," he said faintly.

IV

It was early morning when the wagon containing the wounded man, Gideon, Jack Hamlin, and the surgeon crept slowly through the streets of Martinez and stopped before the door of the "Palmetto Shades." The upper floor of this saloon and hostelry was occupied by Mr. Hamlin as his private lodgings, and was fitted up with the usual luxury and more than the usual fastidiousness of his extravagant class. As the dusty and travel-worn party trod the soft carpets and brushed aside their silken hangings in their slow progress with their helpless burden to the lace-canopied and snowy couch of the young gambler, it seemed almost a profanation of some feminine seclusion. Gideon, to whom such luxury was unknown, was profoundly troubled. The voluptuous ease and sensuousness, the refinements of a life of irresponsible indulgence, affected him with a physical terror to which in his late moment of real peril he had been a stranger; the gilding and mirrors blinded his eyes; even the faint perfume seemed to him an unhallowed incense, and turned him sick and giddy. Accustomed as he had been to disease and misery in its humblest places and meanest surroundings, the wounded desperado lying in laces and fine linen seemed to him monstrous and unnatural. It required all his self-abnegation, all his sense of duty, all his deep pity, and all the instinctive tact which was born of his gentle thoughtfulness for others, to repress a shrinking. But when the miserable cause of all again opened his eyes and sought Gideon's hand, he forgot it all. Happily, Hamlin, who had been watching him with wondering but critical eyes, mistook his concern. "Don't you worry about that gin-mill and hash-gymnasium downstairs," he said. "I've given the proprietor a thousand dollars to shut up shop as long as this thing lasts." That this was done from some delicate sense of respect to the preacher's domiciliary presence, and not entirely to secure complete quiet and seclusion for the invalid, was evident from the fact that Mr. Hamlin's drawing and dining rooms, and even the hall, were filled with eager friends and inquirers. It was discomposing to Gideon to find himself almost an equal subject of interest and curiosity to the visitors. The story of his simple devotion had lost nothing by report; hats were doffed in his presence that might have grown to their wearers' heads; the boldest eyes dropped as he passed by; he had only to put his pale face out of the bedroom door and the loudest discussion, heated by drink or affection, fell to a whisper. The surgeon, who had recognized the one dominant wish of the hopelessly sinking man, gravely retired, leaving Gideon a few simple instructions and directions for their use. "He'll last as long as he has need of you," he said respectfully. "My art is only second here. God help you both! When he wakes, make the most of your time."

In a few moments he did waken, and as before turned his fading look almost instinctively on the faithful, gentle eyes that were watching him. How Gideon made the most of his time did not transpire, but at the end of an hour, when the dying man had again lapsed into unconsciousness, he softly opened the door of the sitting-room.

Hamlin started hastily to his feet. He had cleared the room of his visitors, and was alone. He turned a moment towards the window before he faced Gideon with inquiring but curiously-shining eyes.

"Well?" he said, hesitatingly.

"Do you know Kate Somers?" asked Gideon.

Hamlin opened his brown eyes. "Yes."

"Can you send for her?"

"What, HERE?"

"Yes, here."

"What for?"

"To marry him," said Gideon, gently. "There's no time to lose."

"To MARRY him?"

"He wishes it."

"But say—oh, come, now," said Hamlin confidentially, leaning back with his hands on the top of a chair. "Ain't this playing it a little—just a LITTLE—too low down? Of course you mean well, and all that; but come, now, say—couldn't you just let up on him there? Why, she"—Hamlin softly closed the door—"she's got no character."

"The more reason he should give her one."

A cynical knowledge of matrimony imparted to him by the wives of others evidently colored Mr. Hamlin's views. "Well, perhaps it's all the same if he's going to die. But isn't it rather rough on HER? I don't know," he added, reflectively; "she was sniveling round here a little while ago, until I sent her away."

"You sent her away!" echoed Gideon.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because YOU were here."

Nevertheless Mr. Hamlin departed, and in half an hour reappeared with two brilliantly dressed women. One, hysterical, tearful, frightened, and pallid, was the destined bride; the other, highly colored, excited, and pleasedly observant, was her friend. Two men hastily summoned from the anteroom as witnesses completed the group that moved into the bedroom and gathered round the bed.

The ceremony was simple and brief. It was well, for of all who took part in it none was more shaken by emotion than the officiating priest. The brilliant dresses of the women, the contrast of their painted faces with the waxen pallor of the dying man; the terrible incongruity of their voices, inflections, expressions, and familiarity; the mingled perfume of cosmetics and the faint odor of wine; the eyes of the younger woman following his movements with strange absorption, so affected him that he was glad when he could fall on his knees at last and bury his face in the pillow of the sufferer. The hand that had been placed in the bride's cold fingers slipped from them and mechanically sought Gideon's again. The significance of the unconscious act brought the first spontaneous tears into the woman's eyes. It was his last act, for when Gideon's voice was again lifted in prayer, the spirit for whom it was offered had risen with it, as it were, still lovingly hand in hand, from the earth forever.

The funeral was arranged for two days later, and Gideon found that his services had been so seriously yet so humbly counted upon by the friends of the dead man that he could scarce find it in his heart to tell them that it was the function of the local preacher—an older and more experienced man than himself. "If it is," said Jack Hamlin, coolly, "I'm afraid he won't get a yaller dog to come to his church; but if you say you'll preach at the grave, there ain't a man, woman, or child that will be kept away. Don't you go back on your luck, now; it's something awful and nigger-like. You've got this crowd where the hair is short; excuse me, but it's so. Talk of revivals! You could give that one-horse show in Tasajara a hundred points, and skunk them easily." Indeed, had Gideon been accessible to vanity, the spontaneous homage he met with everywhere would have touched him more sympathetically and kindly than it did; but in the utter unconsciousness of his own power and the quality they worshiped in him, he felt alarmed and impatient of what he believed to be their weak sympathy with his own human weakness. In the depth of his unselfish heart, lit, it must be confessed, only by the scant, inefficient lamp of his youthful experience, he really believed he had failed in his apostolic mission because he had been unable to touch the hearts of the Vigilantes by oral appeal and argument. Feeling thus the reverence of these irreligious people that surrounded him, the facile yielding of their habits and prejudices to his half-uttered wish, appeared to him only a temptation of the flesh. No one had sought him after the manner of the camp-meeting; he had converted the wounded man through a common weakness of their humanity. More than that, he was conscious of a growing fascination for the truthfulness and sincerity of that class; particularly of Mr. Jack Hamlin, whose conversion he felt he could never attempt, yet whose strange friendship alternately thrilled and frightened him.

It was the evening before the funeral. The coffin, half smothered in wreaths and flowers, stood upon trestles in the anteroom; a large silver plate bearing an inscription on which for the second time Gideon read the name of the man he had converted. It was a name associated on the frontier so often with reckless hardihood, dissipation, and blood, that even now Gideon trembled at his presumption, and was chilled by a momentary doubt of the efficiency of his labor. Drawing unconsciously nearer to the mute subject of his thoughts, he threw his arms across the coffin and buried his face between them.

A stream of soft music, the echo of some forgotten song, seemed to Gideon to suddenly fill and possess the darkened room, and then to slowly die away, like the opening and shutting of a door upon a flood of golden radiance. He listened with hushed breath and a beating heart. He had never heard anything like it before. Again the strain arose, the chords swelled round him, until from their midst a tenor voice broke high and steadfast, like a star in troubled skies. Gideon scarcely breathed. It was a hymn—but such a hymn. He had never conceived there could be such beautiful words, joined to such exquisite melody, and sung with a grace so tender and true. What were all other hymns to this ineffable yearning for light, for love, and for infinite rest? Thrilled and exalted, Gideon felt his doubts pierced and scattered by that illuminating cry. Suddenly he rose, and with a troubled thought pushed open the door to the sitting-room. It was Mr. Jack Hamlin sitting before a parlor organ. The music ceased.

"It was YOU," stammered Gideon.

Jack nodded, struck a few chords by way of finish, and then wheeled round on the music-stool towards Gideon. His face was slightly flushed. "Yes. I used to be the organist and tenor in our church in the States. I used to snatch the sinners bald-headed with that. Do you know I reckon I'll sing that to-morrow, if you like, and maybe afterwards we'll—but"—he stopped—"we'll talk of that after the funeral. It's business." Seeing Gideon still glancing with a troubled air from the organ to himself, he said: "Would you like to try that hymn with me? Come on!"

He again struck the chords. As the whole room seemed to throb with the music, Gideon felt himself again carried away. Glancing over Jack's shoulders, he could read the words but not the notes; yet, having a quick ear for rhythm, he presently joined in with a deep but uncultivated baritone. Together they forgot everything else, and at the end of an hour were only recalled by the presence of a silently admiring concourse of votive-offering friends who had gathered round them.

The funeral took place the next day at the grave dug in the public cemetery—a green area fenced in by the palisading tules. The words of Gideon were brief but humble; the strongest partisan of the dead man could find no fault in a confession of human frailty in which the speaker humbly confessed his share; and when the hymn was started by Hamlin and taken up by Gideon, the vast multitude, drawn by interest and curiosity, joined as in a solemn Amen.

Later, when those two strangely-assorted friends had returned to Mr. Hamlin's rooms previous to Gideon's departure, the former, in a manner more serious than his habitual cynical good-humor, began: "I said I had to talk business with you. The boys about here want to build a church for you, and are ready to plank the money down if you'll say it's a go. You understand they aren't asking you to run in opposition to that Gospel sharp—excuse me—that's here now, nor do they want you to run a side show in connection with it. They want you to be independent. They don't pin you down to any kind of religion, you know; whatever you care to give them—Methodist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian—is mighty good enough for them, if you'll expound it. You might give a little of each, or one on one day and one another—they'll never know the difference if you only mix the drinks yourself. They'll give you a house and guarantee you fifteen hundred dollars the first year."

He stopped and walked towards the window. The sunlight that fell upon his handsome face seemed to call back the careless smile to his lips and the reckless fire to his brown eyes. "I don't suppose there's a man among them that wouldn't tell you all this in a great deal better way than I do. But the darned fools—excuse me—would have ME break it to you. Why, I don't know. I needn't tell you I like you—not only for what you did for George—but I like you for your style—for yourself."

And I want you to accept. You could keep these rooms till they got a house ready for you. Together—you and me—we'd make that organ howl. But because I like it—because it's everything to us—and nothing to you, it don't seem square for me to ask it. Does it?"

Gideon replied by taking Hamlin's hand. His face was perfectly pale, but his look collected. He had not expected this offer, and yet when it was made he felt as if he had known it before—as if he had been warned of it—as if it was the great temptation of his life. Watching him with an earnestness only slightly overlaid by his usual manner, Hamlin went on.

"I know it would be lonely here, and a man like you ought to have a wife for—" he slightly lifted his eyebrows—"for example's sake. I heard there was a young lady in the case over there in Tasajara—but the old people didn't see it on account of your position. They'd jump at it now. Eh? No? Well," continued Jack, with a decent attempt to conceal his cynical relief, "perhaps those boys have been so eager to find out all they could do for you that they've been sold. Perhaps we're making equal fools of ourselves now in asking you to stay. But don't say no just yet—take a day or a week to think of it."

Gideon still pale but calm, cast his eyes around the elegant room, at the magic organ, then upon the slight handsome figure before him. "I WILL think of it," he said, in a low voice, as he pressed Jack's hand. "And if I accept you will find me here to-morrow afternoon at this time; if I do not you will know that I keep with me wherever I go the kindness, the brotherly love, and the grace of God that prompts your offer, even though He withholds from me His blessed light, which alone can make me know His wish." He stopped and hesitated. "If you love me, Jack, don't ask me to stay, but pray for that light which alone can guide my feet back to you, or take me hence for ever."

He once more tightly pressed the hand of the embarrassed man before him and was gone.

Passers-by on the Martinez road that night remembered a mute and ghostly rider who, heedless of hail or greeting, moved by them as in a trance or vision. But the Widow Hiler the next morning, coming from the spring, found no abstraction or preoccupation in the soft eyes of Gideon Deane as he suddenly appeared before her, and gently relieved her of the bucket she was carrying. A quick flash of color over her brow and cheek-bone, as if a hot iron had passed there, and a certain astringent coyness, would have embarrassed any other man than him.

"Sho, it's YOU. I reck'ned I'd seen the last of you."

"You don't mean that, Sister Hiler?" said Gideon, with a gentle smile.

"Well, what with the report of your goin's on at Martinez and improvin' the occasion of that sinner's death, and leadin' a revival, I reckoned you'd hev forgotten low folks at Tasajara. And if your goin' to be settled there in a new church, with new hearers, I reckon you'll want new surroundings too. Things change and young folks change with 'em."

They had reached the house. Her breath was quick and short as if she and not Gideon had borne the burden. He placed the bucket in its accustomed place, and then gently took her hand in his. The act precipitated the last drop of feeble coquetry she had retained, and the old tears took its place. Let us hope for the last time. For as Gideon stooped and lifted her ailing babe in his strong arms, he said softly, "Whatever God has wrought for me since we parted, I know now He has called me to but one work."

"And that work?" she asked, tremulously.

"To watch over the widow and fatherless. And with God's blessing, sister, and His holy ordinance, I am here to stay."

SARAH WALKER

It was very hot. Not a breath of air was stirring throughout the western wing of the Greyport Hotel, and the usual feverish life of its four hundred inmates had succumbed to the weather. The great veranda was deserted; the corridors were desolated; no footfall echoed in the passages; the lazy rustle of a wandering skirt, or a passing sigh that was half a pant, seemed to intensify the heated silence. An intoxicated bee, disgracefully unsteady in wing and leg, who had been holding an inebriated conversation with himself in the corner of my window pane, had gone to sleep at last and was snoring. The errant prince might have entered the slumberous halls unchallenged, and walked into any of the darkened rooms whose open doors gaped for more air, without awakening the veriest Greyport flirt with his salutation. At times a drowsy voice, a lazily interjected sentence, an incoherent protest, a long-drawn phrase of saccharine tenuity suddenly broke off with a gasp, came vaguely to the ear, as if indicating a half-suspended, half-articulated existence somewhere, but not definite enough to indicate conversation. In the midst of this, there was the sudden crying of a child.

I looked up from my work. Through the camera of my jealously guarded window I could catch a glimpse of the vivid, quivering blue of the sky, the glittering intensity of the ocean, the long motionless leaves of the horse-chestnut in the road,—all utterly inconsistent with anything as active as this lamentation. I stepped to the open door and into the silent hall.

Apparently the noise had attracted the equal attention of my neighbors. A vague chorus of "Sarah Walker," in querulous recognition, of "O Lord! that child again!" in hopeless protest, rose faintly from the different rooms. As the lamentations seemed to approach nearer, the visitors' doors were successively shut, swift footsteps hurried along the hall; past my open door came a momentary vision of a heated nursemaid carrying a tumultuous chaos of frilled skirts, flying sash, rebellious slippers, and tossing curls; there was a moment's rallying struggle before the room nearly opposite mine, and then a door opened and shut upon the vision. It was Sarah Walker!

Everybody knew her; few had ever seen more of her than this passing vision. In the great hall, in the dining-room, in the vast parlors, in the garden, in the avenue, on the beach, a sound of lamentation had always been followed by this same brief apparition. Was there a sudden pause among the dancers and a subjugation of the loudest bassoons in the early evening "hop," the explanation was given in the words "Sarah Walker." Was there a wild confusion among the morning bathers on the sands, people whispered "Sarah Walker." A panic among the waiters at dinner, an interruption in the Sunday sacred concert, a disorganization of the after-dinner promenade on the veranda, was instantly referred to Sarah Walker. Nor were her efforts confined entirely to public life. In cozy corners and darkened recesses, bearded lips withheld the amorous declaration to mutter "Sarah Walker" between their clenched teeth; coy and bashful tongues found speech at last in the rapid formulation of "Sarah Walker." Nobody ever thought of abbreviating her full name. The two people in the hotel, otherwise individualized, but known only as "Sarah Walker's father" and "Sarah Walker's mother," and never as Mr. and Mrs. Walker, addressed her only as "Sarah Walker"; two animals that were occasionally a part of this passing pageant were known as "Sarah Walker's dog" and "Sarah Walker's cat," and later it was my proud privilege to sink my own individuality under the title of "that friend of Sarah Walker's."

It must not be supposed that she had attained this baleful eminence without some active criticism. Every parent in the Greyport Hotel had held his or her theory of the particular defects of Sarah Walker's education; every virgin and bachelor had openly expressed views of the peculiar discipline that was necessary to her subjugation. It may be roughly estimated that she would have spent the entire nine years of her active life in a dark cupboard on an exclusive diet of bread and water, had this discipline obtained; while, on the other hand, had the educational theories of the parental assembly prevailed, she would have ere this shone an etherealized essence in the angelic host. In either event she would have "ceased from troubling," which was the general Greyport idea

of higher education. A paper read before our Literary Society on "Sarah Walker and other infantile diseases," was referred to in the catalogue as "Walker, Sarah, Prevention and Cure," while the usual burlesque legislation of our summer season culminated in the Act entitled "An Act to amend an Act entitled an Act for the abatement of Sarah Walker." As she was hereafter exclusively to be fed "on the PROVISIONS of this Act," some idea of its general tone may be gathered. It was a singular fact in this point of her history that her natural progenitors not only offered no resistance to the doubtful celebrity of their offspring, but, by hopelessly accepting the situation, to some extent POSED as Sarah Walker's victims. Mr. and Mrs. Walker were known to be rich, respectable, and indulgent to their only child. They themselves had been evolved from a previous generation of promiscuously acquired wealth into the repose of inherited property, but it was currently accepted that Sarah had "cast back" and reincarnated some waif on the deck of an emigrant ship at the beginning of the century.

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