

BRET HARTE

IN THE

CARQUINEZ

WOODS

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CHAPTER I

The sun was going down on the Carquinez Woods. The few shafts of sunlight that had pierced their pillared gloom were lost in unfathomable depths, or splintered their ineffectual lances on the enormous trunks of the redwoods. For a time the dull red of their vast columns, and the dull red of their cast-off bark which matted the echoless aisles, still seemed to hold a faint glow of the dying day. But even this soon passed. Light and color fled upwards. The dark interlaced treetops, that had all day made an impenetrable shade, broke into fire here and there; their lost spires glittered, faded, and went utterly out. A weird twilight that did not come from the outer world, but seemed born of the wood itself, slowly filled and possessed the aisles. The straight, tall, colossal trunks rose dimly like columns of upward smoke. The few fallen trees stretched their huge length into obscurity, and seemed to lie on shadowy trestles. The strange breath that filled these mysterious vaults had neither coldness nor moisture; a dry, fragrant dust arose from the noiseless foot that trod their bark-strewn floor; the aisles might have been tombs, the fallen trees enormous mummies; the silence the solitude of a forgotten past.

And yet this silence was presently broken by a recurring sound like breathing, interrupted occasionally by inarticulate and stertorous gasps. It was not the quick, panting, listening breath of some stealthy feline or canine animal, but indicated a larger, slower, and more powerful organization, whose progress was less watchful and guarded, or as if a fragment of one of the fallen monsters had become animate. At times this life seemed to take visible form, but as vaguely, as misshapenly, as the phantom of a nightmare. Now it was a square object moving sideways, endways, with neither head nor tail and scarcely visible feet; then an arched bulk rolling against the trunks of the trees and recoiling again, or an upright cylindrical mass, but always oscillating and unsteady, and striking the trees on either hand. The frequent occurrence of the movement suggested the figures of some weird rhythmic dance to music heard by the shape alone. Suddenly it either became motionless or faded away.

There was the frightened neighing of a horse, the sudden jingling of spurs, a shout and outcry, and the swift apparition of three dancing torches in one of the dark aisles; but so intense was the obscurity that they shed no light on surrounding objects, and seemed to advance of their own volition without human guidance, until they disappeared suddenly behind the interposing bulk of one of the largest trees. Beyond its eighty feet of circumference the light could not reach, and the gloom remained inscrutable. But the voices and jingling spurs were heard distinctly.

“Blast the mare! She’s shied off that cursed trail again.”

“Ye ain’t lost it again, hev ye?” growled a second voice.

“That’s jist what I hev. And these blasted pine-knots don’t give light an inch beyond ‘em. D—d if I don’t think they make this cursed hole blacker.”

There was a laugh—a woman’s laugh—hysterical, bitter, sarcastic, exasperating. The second speaker, without heeding it, went on:—

“What in thunder skeert the hosses? Did you see or hear anything?”

“Nothin’. The wood is like a graveyard.”

The woman’s voice again broke into a hoarse, contemptuous laugh. The man resumed angrily:

—
“If you know anything, why in h-ll don’t you say so, instead of cackling like a d—d squaw there? P’raps you reckon you ken find the trail too.”

“Take this rope off my wrist,” said the woman’s voice, “untie my hands, let me down, and I’ll find it.” She spoke quickly and with a Spanish accent.

It was the men’s turn to laugh. “And give you a show to snatch that six-shooter and blow a hole through me, as you did to the Sheriff of Calaveras, eh? Not if this court understands itself,” said the first speaker dryly.

“Go to the devil, then,” she said curtly.

“Not before a lady,” responded the other. There was another laugh from the men, the spurs jingled again, the three torches reappeared from behind the tree, and then passed away in the darkness.

For a time silence and immutability possessed the woods; the great trunks loomed upwards, their fallen brothers stretched their slow length into obscurity. The sound of breathing again became audible; the shape reappeared in the aisle, and recommenced its mystic dance. Presently it was lost in the shadow of the largest tree, and to the sound of breathing succeeded a grating and scratching of bark. Suddenly, as if riven by lightning, a flash broke from the center of the tree-trunk, lit up the woods, and a sharp report rang through it. After a pause the jingling of spurs and the dancing of torches were revived from the distance.

“Hallo?”

No answer.

“Who fired that shot?”

But there was no reply. A slight veil of smoke passed away to the right, there was the spice of gunpowder in the air, but nothing more.

The torches came forward again, but this time it could be seen they were held in the hands of two men and a woman. The woman’s hands were tied at the wrist to the horse-hair reins of her mule, while a riata, passed around her waist and under the mule’s girth, was held by one of the men, who were both armed with rifles and revolvers. Their frightened horses curveted, and it was with difficulty they could be made to advance.

“Ho! stranger, what are you shooting at?”

The woman laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Look yonder at the roots of the tree. You’re a d—d smart man for a sheriff, ain’t you?”

The man uttered an exclamation and spurred his horse forward, but the animal reared in terror. He then sprang to the ground and approached the tree. The shape lay there, a scarcely distinguishable bulk.

“A grizzly, by the living Jingo! Shot through the heart.”

It was true. The strange shape lit up by the flaring torches seemed more vague, unearthly, and awkward in its dying throes, yet the small shut eyes, the feeble nose, the ponderous shoulders, and half-human foot armed with powerful claws were unmistakable. The men turned by a common impulse and peered into the remote recesses of the wood again.

“Hi, Mister! come and pick up your game. Hallo there!”

The challenge fell unheeded on the empty woods.

“And yet,” said he whom the woman had called the sheriff, “he can’t be far off. It was a close shot, and the bear hez dropped in his tracks. Why, wot’s this sticking in his claws?”

The two men bent over the animal. “Why, it’s sugar, brown sugar—look!” There was no mistake. The huge beast’s fore paws and muzzle were streaked with the unromantic household provision, and heightened the absurd contrast of its incongruous members. The woman, apparently indifferent, had taken that opportunity to partly free one of her wrists.

“If we hadn’t been cavorting round this yer spot for the last half hour, I’d swear there was a shanty not a hundred yards away,” said the sheriff.

The other man, without replying, remounted his horse instantly.

“If there is, and it’s inhabited by a gentleman that kin make centre shots like that in the dark, and don’t care to explain how, I reckon I won’t disturb him.”

The sheriff was apparently of the same opinion, for he followed his companion's example, and once more led the way. The spurs tinkled, the torches danced, and the cavalcade slowly reentered the gloom. In another moment it had disappeared.

The wood sank again into repose, this time disturbed by neither shape nor sound. What lower forms of life might have crept close to its roots were hidden in the ferns, or passed with deadened tread over the bark-strewn floor. Towards morning a coolness like dew fell from above, with here and there a dropping twig or nut, or the crepitant awakening and stretching-out of cramped and weary branches. Later a dull, lurid dawn, not unlike the last evening's sunset, filled the aisles. This faded again, and a clear gray light, in which every object stood out in sharp distinctness, took its place. Morning was waiting outside in all its brilliant, youthful coloring, but only entered as the matured and sobered day.

Seen in that stronger light, the monstrous tree near which the dead bear lay revealed its age in its denuded and scarred trunk, and showed in its base a deep cavity, a foot or two from the ground, partly hidden by hanging strips of bark which had fallen across it. Suddenly one of these strips was pushed aside, and a young man leaped lightly down.

But for the rifle he carried and some modern peculiarities of dress, he was of a grace so unusual and unconventional that he might have passed for a faun who was quitting his ancestral home. He stepped to the side of the bear with a light elastic movement that was as unlike customary progression as his face and figure were unlike the ordinary types of humanity. Even as he leaned upon his rifle, looking down at the prostrate animal, he unconsciously fell into an attitude that in any other mortal would have been a pose, but with him was the picturesque and unstudied relaxation of perfect symmetry.

"Hallo, Mister!"

He raised his head so carelessly and listlessly that he did not otherwise change his attitude. Stepping from behind the tree, the woman of the preceding night stood before him. Her hands were free except for a thong of the riata, which was still knotted around one wrist, the end of the thong having been torn or burnt away. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her hair hung over her shoulders in one long black braid.

"I reckoned all along it was YOU who shot the bear," she said; "at least some one hiding yer," and she indicated the hollow tree with her hand. "It wasn't no chance shot." Observing that the young man, either from misconception or indifference, did not seem to comprehend her, she added, "We came by here, last night, a minute after you fired."

"Oh, that was YOU kicked up such a row, was it?" said the young man, with a shade of interest.

"I reckon," said the woman, nodding her head, "and them that was with me."

"And who are they?"

"Sheriff Dunn, of Yolo, and his deputy."

"And where are they now?"

"The deputy—in h-ll, I reckon; I don't know about the sheriff."

"I see," said the young man quietly; "and you?"

"I—got away," she said savagely. But she was taken with a sudden nervous shiver, which she at once repressed by tightly dragging her shawl over her shoulders and elbows, and folding her arms defiantly.

"And you're going?"

"To follow the deputy, may be," she said gloomily. "But come, I say, ain't you going to treat? It's cursed cold here."

"Wait a moment." The young man was looking at her, with his arched brows slightly knit and a half smile of curiosity. "Ain't you Teresa?"

She was prepared for the question, but evidently was not certain whether she would reply defiantly or confidently. After an exhaustive scrutiny of his face she chose the latter, and said, "You can bet your life on it, Johnny."

"I don't bet, and my name isn't Johnny. Then you're the woman who stabbed Dick Curson over at Lagrange's?"

She became defiant again.

"That's me, all the time. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. And you used to dance at the Alhambra?" She whisked the shawl from her shoulders, held it up like a scarf, and made one or two steps of the *sembicucua*. There was not the least gayety, recklessness, or spontaneity in the action; it was simply mechanical bravado. It was so ineffective, even upon her own feelings, that her arms presently dropped to her side, and she coughed embarrassedly. "Where's that whiskey, pardner?" she asked.

The young man turned toward the tree he had just quitted, and without further words assisted her to mount to the cavity. It was an irregular-shaped vaulted chamber, pierced fifty feet above by a shaft or cylindrical opening in the decayed trunk, which was blackened by smoke, as if it had served the purpose of a chimney. In one corner lay a bearskin and blanket; at the side were two alcoves or indentations, one of which was evidently used as a table, and the other as a cupboard. In another hollow, near the entrance, lay a few small sacks of flour, coffee, and sugar, the sticky contents of the latter still strewing the floor. From this storehouse the young man drew a wicker flask of whiskey, and handed it, with a tin cup of water, to the woman. She waved the cup aside, placed the flask to her lips, and drank the undiluted spirit. Yet even this was evidently bravado, for the water started to her eyes, and she could not restrain the paroxysm of coughing that followed.

"I reckon that's the kind that kills at forty rods," she said, with a hysterical laugh. "But I say, pardner, you look as if you were fixed here to stay," and she stared ostentatiously around the chamber. But she had already taken in its minutest details, even to observing that the hanging strips of bark could be disposed so as to completely hide the entrance.

"Well, yes," he replied; "it wouldn't be very easy to pull up the stakes and move the shanty further on."

Seeing that either from indifference or caution he had not accepted her meaning, she looked at him fixedly, and said,—

"What is your little game?"

"Eh?"

"What are you hiding for—here, in this tree?"

"But I'm not hiding."

"Then why didn't you come out when they hailed you last night?"

"Because I didn't care to."

Teresa whistled incredulously. "All right—then if you're not hiding, I'm going to." As he did not reply, she went on: "If I can keep out of sight for a couple of weeks, this thing will blow over here, and I can get across into Yolo. I could get a fair show there, where the boys know me. Just now the trails are all watched, but no one would think of lookin' here."

"Then how did you come to think of it?" he asked carelessly.

"Because I knew that bear hadn't gone far for that sugar; because I know he hadn't stole it from a cache—it was too fresh, and we'd have seen the torn-up earth; because we had passed no camp; and because I knew there was no shanty here. And, besides," she added in a low voice, "maybe I was huntin' a hole myself to die in—and spotted it by instinct."

There was something in this suggestion of a hunted animal that, unlike anything she had previously said or suggested, was not exaggerated, and caused the young man to look at her again. She was standing under the chimney-like opening, and the light from above illuminated her head and shoulders. The pupils of her eyes had lost their feverish prominence, and were slightly suffused

and softened as she gazed abstractedly before her. The only vestige of her previous excitement was in her left-hand fingers, which were incessantly twisting and turning a diamond ring upon her right hand, but without imparting the least animation to her rigid attitude. Suddenly, as if conscious of his scrutiny, she stepped aside out of the revealing light and by a swift feminine instinct raised her hand to her head as if to adjust her straggling hair. It was only for a moment, however, for, as if aware of the weakness, she struggled to resume her aggressive pose.

“Well,” she said. “Speak up. Am I goin’ to stop here, or have I got to get up and get?”

“You can stay,” said the young man quietly; “but as I’ve got my provisions and ammunition here, and haven’t any other place to go to just now, I suppose we’ll have to share it together.”

She glanced at him under her eyelids, and a half-bitter, half-contemptuous smile passed across her face. “All right, old man,” she said, holding out her hand, “it’s a go. We’ll start in housekeeping at once, if you like.”

“I’ll have to come here once or twice a day,” he said, quite composedly, “to look after my things, and get something to eat; but I’ll be away most of the time, and what with camping out under the trees every night I reckon my share won’t incommode you.”

She opened her black eyes upon him, at this original proposition. Then she looked down at her torn dress. “I suppose this style of thing ain’t very fancy, is it?” she said, with a forced laugh.

“I think I know where to beg or borrow a change for you, if you can’t get any,” he replied simply.

She stared at him again. “Are you a family man?”

“No.”

She was silent for a moment. “Well,” she said, “you can tell your girl I’m not particular about its being in the latest fashion.”

There was a slight flush on his forehead as he turned toward the little cupboard, but no tremor in his voice as he went on: “You’ll find tea and coffee here, and, if you’re bored, there’s a book or two. You read, don’t you—I mean English?”

She nodded, but cast a look of undisguised contempt upon the two worn, coverless novels he held out to her. “You haven’t got last week’s ‘Sacramento Union,’ have you? I hear they have my case all in; only them lying reporters made it out against me all the time.”

“I don’t see the papers,” he replied curtly.

“They say there’s a picture of me in the ‘Police Gazette,’ taken in the act,” and she laughed.

He looked a little abstracted, and turned as if to go. “I think you’ll do well to rest a while just now, and keep as close hid as possible until afternoon. The trail is a mile away at the nearest point, but some one might miss it and stray over here. You’re quite safe if you’re careful, and stand by the tree. You can build a fire here,” he stepped under the chimney-like opening, “without its being noticed. Even the smoke is lost and cannot be seen so high.”

The light from above was falling on his head and shoulders, as it had on hers. She looked at him intently.

“You travel a good deal on your figure, pardner, don’t you?” she said, with a certain admiration that was quite sexless in its quality; “but I don’t see how you pick up a living by it in the Carquinez Woods. So you’re going, are you? You might be more sociable. Good-by.”

“Good-by!” He leaped from the opening.

“I say pardner!”

He turned a little impatiently. She had knelt down at the entrance, so as to be nearer his level, and was holding out her hand. But he did not notice it, and she quietly withdrew it.

“If anybody dropped in and asked for you, what name will they say?”

He smiled. “Don’t wait to hear.”

“But suppose I wanted to sing out for you, what will I call you?”

He hesitated. “Call me—Lo.”

“Lo, the poor Indian?”¹

“Exactly.”

It suddenly occurred to the woman, Teresa, that in the young man’s height, supple, yet erect carriage, color, and singular gravity of demeanor there was a refined, aboriginal suggestion. He did not look like any Indian she had ever seen, but rather as a youthful chief might have looked. There was a further suggestion in his fringed buckskin shirt and moccasins; but before she could utter the half-sarcastic comment that rose to her lips he had glided noiselessly away, even as an Indian might have done.

She readjusted the slips of hanging bark with feminine ingenuity, dispersing them so as to completely hide the entrance. Yet this did not darken the chamber, which seemed to draw a purer and more vigorous light through the soaring shaft that pierced the roof than that which came from the dim woodland aisles below. Nevertheless, she shivered, and drawing her shawl closely around her began to collect some half-burnt fragments of wood in the chimney to make a fire. But the preoccupation of her thoughts rendered this a tedious process, as she would from time to time stop in the middle of an action and fall into an attitude of rapt abstraction, with far-off eyes and rigid mouth. When she had at last succeeded in kindling a fire and raising a film of pale blue smoke, that seemed to fade and dissipate entirely before it reached the top of the chimney shaft, she crouched beside it, fixed her eyes on the darkest corner of the cavern, and became motionless.

What did she see through that shadow?

Nothing at first but a confused medley of figures and incidents of the preceding night; things to be put away and forgotten; things that would not have happened but for another thing—the thing before which everything faded! A ball-room; the sounds of music; the one man she had cared for insulting her with the flaunting ostentation of his unfaithfulness; herself despised, put aside, laughed at, or worse, jilted. And then the moment of delirium, when the light danced; the one wild act that lifted her, the despised one, above them all—made her the supreme figure, to be glanced at by frightened women, stared at by half-startled, half-admiring men! “Yes,” she laughed; but struck by the sound of her own voice, moved twice round the cavern nervously, and then dropped again into her old position.

As they carried him away he had laughed at her—like a hound that he was; he who had praised her for her spirit, and incited her revenge against others; he who had taught her to strike when she was insulted; and it was only fit he should reap what he had sown. She was what he, what other men, had made her. And what was she now? What had she been once?

She tried to recall her childhood: the man and woman who might have been her father and mother; who fought and wrangled over her precocious little life; abused or caressed her as she sided with either; and then left her with a circus troupe, where she first tasted the power of her courage, her beauty, and her recklessness. She remembered those flashes of triumph that left a fever in her veins—a fever that when it failed must be stimulated by dissipation, by anything, by everything that would keep her name a wonder in men’s mouths, an envious fear to women. She recalled her transfer to the strolling players; her cheap pleasures, and cheaper rivalries and hatred—but always Teresa! the daring Teresa! the reckless Teresa! audacious as a woman, invincible as a boy; dancing, flirting, fencing, shooting, swearing, drinking, smoking, fighting Teresa! “Oh, yes; she had been loved, perhaps—who knows?—but always feared. Why should she change now? Ha, he should see.”

She had lashed herself in a frenzy, as was her wont, with gestures, ejaculations, oaths, adjurations, and passionate apostrophes, but with this strange and unexpected result. Heretofore she had always been sustained and kept up by an audience of some kind or quality, if only perhaps a humble companion; there had always been some one she could fascinate or horrify, and she could read her power mirrored in their eyes. Even the half-abstracted indifference of her strange host had been

¹ The first word of Pope’s familiar apostrophe is humorously used in the Far West as a distinguishing title for the Indian.

something. But she was alone now. Her words fell on apathetic solitude; she was acting to viewless space. She rushed to the opening, dashed the hanging bark aside, and leaped to the ground.

She ran forward wildly a few steps, and stopped.

“Hallo!” she cried. “Look, ‘tis I, Teresa!”

The profound silence remained unbroken. Her shrillest tones were lost in an echoless space, even as the smoke of her fire had faded into pure ether. She stretched out her clenched fists as if to defy the pillared austerities of the vaults around her.

“Come and take me if you dare!”

The challenge was unheeded. If she had thrown herself violently against the nearest tree-trunk, she could not have been stricken more breathless than she was by the compact, embattled solitude that encompassed her. The hopelessness of impressing these cold and passive vaults with her selfish passion filled her with a vague fear. In her rage of the previous night she had not seen the wood in its profound immobility. Left alone with the majesty of those enormous columns, she trembled and turned faint. The silence of the hollow tree she had just quitted seemed to her less awful than the crushing presence of these mute and monstrous witnesses of her weakness. Like a wounded quail with lowered crest and trailing wing, she crept back to her hiding place.

Even then the influence of the wood was still upon her. She picked up the novel she had contemptuously thrown aside, only to let it fall again in utter weariness. For a moment her feminine curiosity was excited by the discovery of an old book, in whose blank leaves were pressed a variety of flowers and woodland grasses. As she could not conceive that these had been kept for any but a sentimental purpose, she was disappointed to find that underneath each was a sentence in an unknown tongue, that even to her untutored eye did not appear to be the language of passion. Finally she rearranged the couch of skins and blankets, and, imparting to it in three clever shakes an entirely different character, lay down to pursue her reveries. But nature asserted herself, and ere she knew it she was asleep.

So intense and prolonged had been her previous excitement that, the tension once relieved, she passed into a slumber of exhaustion so deep that she seemed scarce to breathe. High noon succeeded morning, the central shaft received a single ray of upper sunlight, the afternoon came and went, the shadows gathered below, the sunset fires began to eat their way through the groined roof, and she still slept. She slept even when the bark hangings of the chamber were put aside, and the young man reentered.

He laid down a bundle he was carrying and softly approached the sleeper. For a moment he was startled from his indifference; she lay so still and motionless. But this was not all that struck him; the face before him was no longer the passionate, haggard visage that confronted him that morning; the feverish air, the burning color, the strained muscles of mouth and brow, and the staring eyes were gone; wiped away, perhaps, by the tears that still left their traces on cheek and dark eyelash. It was the face of a handsome woman of thirty, with even a suggestion of softness in the contour of the cheek and arching of her upper lip, no longer rigidly drawn down in anger, but relaxed by sleep on her white teeth.

With the lithe, soft tread that was habitual to him, the young man moved about, examining the condition of the little chamber and its stock of provisions and necessaries, and withdrew presently, to reappear as noiselessly with a tin bucket of water. This done, he replenished the little pile of fuel with an armful of bark and pine cones, cast an approving glance about him, which included the sleeper, and silently departed.

It was night when she awoke. She was surrounded by a profound darkness, except where the shaft-like opening made a nebulous mist in the corner of her wooden cavern. Providentially she struggled back to consciousness slowly, so that the solitude and silence came upon her gradually, with a growing realization of the events of the past twenty-four hours, but without a shock. She was alone here, but safe still, and every hour added to her chances of ultimate escape. She remembered to have

seen a candle among the articles on the shelf, and she began to grope her way towards the matches. Suddenly she stopped. What was that panting?

Was it her own breathing, quickened with a sudden nameless terror? or was there something outside? Her heart seemed to stop beating while she listened. Yes! it was a panting outside—a panting now increased, multiplied, redoubled, mixed with the sounds of rustling, tearing, crouching, and occasionally a quick, impatient snarl. She crept on her hands and knees to the opening and looked out. At first the ground seemed to be undulating between her and the opposite tree. But a second glance showed her the black and gray, bristling, tossing backs of tumbling beasts of prey, charging the carcass of the bear that lay at its roots, or contesting for the prize with gluttonous, choked breath, sidelong snarls, arched spines, and recurved tails. One of the boldest had leaped upon a buttressing root of her tree within a foot of the opening. The excitement, awe, and terror she had undergone culminated in one wild, maddened scream, that seemed to pierce even the cold depths of the forest, as she dropped on her face, with her hands clasped over her eyes in an agony of fear.

Her scream was answered, after a pause, by a sudden volley of firebrands and sparks into the midst of the panting, crowding pack; a few smothered howls and snaps, and a sudden dispersion of the concourse. In another moment the young man, with a blazing brand in either hand, leaped upon the body of the bear.

Teresa raised her head, uttered a hysterical cry, slid down the tree, flew wildly to his side, caught convulsively at his sleeve, and fell on her knees beside him.

“Save me! save me!” she gasped, in a voice broken by terror. “Save me from those hideous creatures. No, no!” she implored, as he endeavored to lift her to her feet. “No—let me stay here close beside you. So,” clutching the fringe of his leather hunting-shirt, and dragging herself on her knees nearer him—“so—don’t leave me, for God’s sake!”

“They are gone,” he replied, gazing down curiously at her, as she wound the fringe around her hand to strengthen her hold; “they’re only a lot of cowardly coyotes and wolves, that dare not attack anything that lives and can move.”

The young woman responded with a nervous shudder. “Yes, that’s it,” she whispered, in a broken voice; “it’s only the dead they want. Promise me—swear to me, if I’m caught, or hung, or shot, you won’t let me be left here to be torn and—ah! my God! what’s that?”

She had thrown her arms around his knees, completely pinioning him to her frantic breast. Something like a smile of disdain passed across his face as he answered, “It’s nothing. They will not return. Get up!”

Even in her terror she saw the change in his face. “I know, I know!” she cried. “I’m frightened—but I cannot bear it any longer. Hear me! Listen! Listen—but don’t move! I didn’t mean to kill Curson—no! I swear to God, no! I didn’t mean to kill the sheriff—and I didn’t. I was only bragging—do you hear? I lied! I lied—don’t move, I swear to God I lied. I’ve made myself out worse than I was. I have. Only don’t leave me now—and if I die—and it’s not far off, may be—get me away from here—and from THEM. Swear it!”

“All right,” said the young man, with a scarcely concealed movement of irritation. “But get up now, and go back to the cabin.”

“No; not THERE alone.” Nevertheless, he quietly but firmly released himself.

“I will stay here,” he replied. “I would have been nearer to you, but I thought it better for your safety that my camp-fire should be further off. But I can build it here, and that will keep the coyotes off.”

“Let me stay with you—beside you,” she said imploringly.

She looked so broken, crushed, and spiritless, so unlike the woman of the morning that, albeit with an ill grace, he tacitly consented, and turned away to bring his blankets. But in the next moment she was at his side, following him like a dog, silent and wistful, and even offering to carry his burden.

When he had built the fire, for which she had collected the pine-cones and broken branches near them, he sat down, folded his arms, and leaned back against the tree in reserved and deliberate silence.

Humble and submissive, she did not attempt to break in upon a reverie she could not help but feel had little kindness to herself. As the fire snapped and sparkled, she pillowed her head upon a root, and lay still to watch it.

It rose and fell, and dying away at times to a mere lurid glow, and again, agitated by some breath scarcely perceptible to them, quickening into a roaring flame. When only the embers remained, a dead silence filled the wood. Then the first breath of morning moved the tangled canopy above, and a dozen tiny sprays and needles detached from the interlocked boughs winged their soft way noiselessly to the earth. A few fell upon the prostrate woman like a gentle benediction, and she slept. But even then, the young man, looking down, saw that the slender fingers were still aimlessly but rigidly twisted in the leather fringe of his hunting-shirt.

CHAPTER II

It was a peculiarity of the Carquinez Wood that it stood apart and distinct in its gigantic individuality. Even where the integrity of its own singular species was not entirely preserved, it admitted no inferior trees. Nor was there any diminishing fringe on its outskirts; the sentinels that guarded the few gateways of the dim trails were as monstrous as the serried ranks drawn up in the heart of the forest. Consequently, the red highway that skirted the eastern angle was bare and shadeless, until it slipped a league off into a watered valley and refreshed itself under lesser sycamores and willows. It was here the newly born city of Excelsior, still in its cradle, had, like an infant Hercules, strangled the serpentine North Fork of the American river, and turned its life current into the ditches and flumes of the Excelsior mines.

Newest of the new houses that seemed to have accidentally formed its single, straggling street was the residence of the Rev. Winslow Wynn, not unfrequently known as "Father Wynn," pastor of the First Baptist church. The "pastorage," as it was cheerfully called, had the glaring distinction of being built of brick, and was, as had been wickedly pointed out by idle scoffers, the only "fireproof" structure in town. This sarcasm was not, however, supposed to be particularly distasteful to "Father Wynn," who enjoyed the reputation of being "hail fellow, well met" with the rough mining element, who called them by their Christian names, had been known to drink at the bar of the Polka Saloon while engaged in the conversion of a prominent citizen, and was popularly said to have no "gospel starch" about him. Certain conscious outcasts and transgressors were touched at this apparent unbending of the spiritual authority. The rigid tenets of Father Wynn's faith were lost in the supposed catholicity of his humanity. "A preacher that can jine a man when he's histin' liquor into him, without jawin' about it, ought to be allowed to wrestle with sinners and splash about in as much cold water as he likes," was the criticism of one of his converts. Nevertheless, it was true that Father Wynn was somewhat loud and intolerant in his tolerance. It was true that he was a little more rough, a little more frank, a little more hearty, a little more impulsive than his disciples. It was true that often the proclamation of his extreme liberality and brotherly equality partook somewhat of an apology. It is true that a few who might have been most benefited by this kind of gospel regarded him with a singular disdain. It is true that his liberality was of an ornamental, insinuating quality, accompanied with but little sacrifice; his acceptance of a collection taken up in a gambling saloon for the rebuilding of his church, destroyed by fire, gave him a popularity large enough, it must be confessed, to cover the sins of the gamblers themselves, but it was not proven that HE had ever organized any form of relief. But it was true that local history somehow accepted him as an exponent of mining Christianity, without the least reference to the opinions of the Christian miners themselves.

The Rev. Mr. Wynn's liberal habits and opinions were not, however, shared by his only daughter, a motherless young lady of eighteen. Nellie Wynn was in the eye of Excelsior an unapproachable divinity, as inaccessible and cold as her father was impulsive and familiar. An atmosphere of chaste and proud virginity made itself felt even in the starched integrity of her spotless skirts, in her neatly gloved finger-tips, in her clear amber eyes, in her imperious red lips, in her sensitive nostrils. Need it be said that the youth and middle age of Excelsior were madly, because apparently hopelessly, in love with her? For the rest, she had been expensively educated, was profoundly ignorant in two languages, with a trained misunderstanding of music and painting, and a natural and faultless taste in dress.

The Rev. Mr. Wynn was engaged in a characteristic hearty parting with one of his latest converts, upon his own doorstep, with admirable al fresco effect. He had just clapped him on the shoulder. "Good-by, good-by, Charley, my boy, and keep in the right path; not up, or down, or round the gulch, you know—ha, ha!—but straight across lots to the shining gate." He had raised his voice under the stimulus of a few admiring spectators, and backed his convert playfully against the wall.

“You see! we’re goin’ in to win, you bet. Good-by! I’d ask you to step in and have a chat, but I’ve got my work to do, and so have you. The gospel mustn’t keep us from that, must it, Charley? Ha, ha!”

The convert (who elsewhere was a profane expressman, and had become quite imbecile under Mr. Wynn’s active heartiness and brotherly horse-play before spectators) managed, however, to feebly stammer with a blush something about “Miss Nellie.”

“Ah, Nellie. She, too, is at her tasks—trimming her lamp—you know, the parable of the wise virgins,” continued Father Wynn hastily, fearing that the convert might take the illustration literally. “There, there—good-by. Keep in the right path.” And with a parting shove he dismissed Charley and entered his own house.

That “wise virgin,” Nellie, had evidently finished with the lamp, and was now going out to meet the bridegroom, as she was fully dressed and gloved, and had a pink parasol in her hand, as her father entered the sitting-room. His bluff heartiness seemed to fade away as he removed his soft, broad-brimmed hat and glanced across the too fresh-looking apartment. There was a smell of mortar still in the air, and a faint suggestion that at any moment green grass might appear between the interstices of the red-brick hearth. The room, yielding a little in the point of coldness, seemed to share Miss Nellie’s fresh virginity, and, barring the pink parasol, set her off as in a vestal’s cell.

“I supposed you wouldn’t care to see Brace, the expressman, so I got rid of him at the door,” said her father, drawing one of the new chairs towards him slowly, and sitting down carefully, as if it were a hitherto untried experiment.

Miss Nellie’s face took a tint of interest. “Then he doesn’t go with the coach to Indian Spring to-day?”

“No; why?”

“I thought of going over myself to get the Burnham girls to come to choir-meeting,” replied Miss Nellie carelessly, “and he might have been company.”

“He’d go now, if he knew you were going,” said her father; “but it’s just as well he shouldn’t be needlessly encouraged. I rather think that Sheriff Dunn is a little jealous of him. By the way, the sheriff is much better. I called to cheer him up to-day” (Mr. Wynn had in fact tumultuously accelerated the sick man’s pulse), “and he talked of you, as usual. In fact, he said he had only two things to get well for. One was to catch and hang that woman Teresa, who shot him; the other—can’t you guess the other?” he added archly, with a faint suggestion of his other manner.

Miss Nellie coldly could not.

The Rev. Mr. Wynn’s archness vanished. “Don’t be a fool,” he said dryly. “He wants to marry you, and you know it.”

“Most of the men here do,” responded Miss Nellie, without the least trace of coquetry. “Is the wedding or the hanging to take place first, or together, so he can officiate at both?”

“His share in the Union Ditch is worth a hundred thousand dollars,” continued her father; “and if he isn’t nominated for district judge this fall, he’s bound to go to the legislature, anyway. I don’t think a girl with your advantages and education can afford to throw away the chance of shining in Sacramento, San Francisco, or, in good time, perhaps even Washington.”

Miss Nellie’s eyes did not reflect entire disapproval of this suggestion, although she replied with something of her father’s practical quality.

“Mr. Dunn is not out of his bed yet, and they say Teresa’s got away to Arizona, so there isn’t any particular hurry.”

“Perhaps not; but see here, Nellie, I’ve some important news for you. You know your young friend of the Carquinez Woods—Dorman, the botanist, eh? Well, Brace knows all about him. And what do you think he is?”

Miss Nellie took upon herself a few extra degrees of cold, and didn’t know.

“An Injin! Yes, an out-and-out Cherokee. You see he calls himself Dorman—Low Dorman. That’s only French for ‘Sleeping Water,’ his Injin name!—‘Low Dorman.’”

“You mean ‘L’Eau Dormante,’” said Nellie.

“That’s what I said. The chief called him ‘Sleeping Water’ when he was a boy, and one of them French Canadian trappers translated it into French when he brought him to California to school. But he’s an Injin, sure. No wonder he prefers to live in the woods.”

“Well?” said Nellie.

“Well,” echoed her father impatiently, “he’s an Injin, I tell you, and you can’t of course have anything to do with him. He mustn’t come here again.”

“But you forget,” said Nellie imperturbably, “that it was you who invited him here, and were so much exercised over him. You remember you introduced him to the Bishop and those Eastern clergymen as a magnificent specimen of a young Californian. You forget what an occasion you made of his coming to church on Sunday, and how you made him come in his buckskin shirt and walk down the street with you after service!”

“Yes, yes,” said the Rev. Mr. Wynn, hurriedly.

“And,” continued Nellie carelessly, “how you made us sing out of the same book ‘Children of our Father’s Fold,’ and how you preached at him until he actually got a color!”

“Yes,” said her father; “but it wasn’t known then he was an Injin, and they are frightfully unpopular with those Southwestern men among whom we labor. Indeed, I am quite convinced that when Brace said ‘the only good Indian was a dead one’ his expression, though extravagant, perhaps, really voiced the sentiments of the majority. It would be only kindness to the unfortunate creature to warn him from exposing himself to their rude but conscientious antagonism.”

“Perhaps you’d better tell him, then, in your own popular way, which they all seem to understand so well,” responded the daughter. Mr. Wynn cast a quick glance at her, but there was no trace of irony in her face—nothing but a half-bored indifference as she walked toward the window.

“I will go with you to the coach-office,” said her father, who generally gave these simple paternal duties the pronounced character of a public Christian example.

“It’s hardly worth while,” replied Miss Nellie. “I’ve to stop at the Watsons’, at the foot of the hill, and ask after the baby; so I shall go on to the Crossing and pick up the coach when it passes. Good-by.”

Nevertheless, as soon as Nellie had departed, the Rev. Mr. Wynn proceeded to the coach-office, and publicly grasping the hand of Yuba Bill, the driver, commended his daughter to his care in the name of the universal brotherhood of man and the Christian fraternity. Carried away by his heartiness, he forgot his previous caution, and confided to the expressman Miss Nellie’s regrets that she was not to have that gentleman’s company. The result was that Miss Nellie found the coach with its passengers awaiting her with uplifted hats and wreathed smiles at the Crossing, and the box seat (from which an unfortunate stranger, who had expensively paid for it, had been summarily ejected) at her service beside Yuba Bill, who had thrown away his cigar and donned a new pair of buckskin gloves to do her honor. But a more serious result to the young beauty was the effect of the Rev. Mr. Wynn’s confidences upon the impulsive heart of Jack Brace, the expressman. It has been already intimated that it was his “day off.” Unable to summarily reassume his usual functions beside the driver without some practical reason, and ashamed to go so palpably as a mere passenger, he was forced to let the coach proceed without him. Discomfited for the moment, he was not, however, beaten. He had lost the blissful journey by her side, which would have been his professional right, but—she was going to Indian Spring! could he not anticipate her there? Might they not meet in the most accidental manner? And what might not come from that meeting away from the prying eyes of their own town? Mr. Brace did not hesitate, but saddling his fleet Buckskin, by the time the stage-coach had passed the Crossing in the high-road he had mounted the hill and was dashing along the “cutoff” in the same direction, a full mile in advance. Arriving at Indian Spring, he left his horse at a Mexican posada on the confines of the settlement, and from the piled debris of a tunnel excavation awaited the slow arrival of the coach. On mature reflection he could give no reason why he had not boldly awaited

it at the express office, except a certain bashful consciousness of his own folly, and a belief that it might be glaringly apparent to the bystanders. When the coach arrived and he had overcome this consciousness, it was too late. Yuba Bill had discharged his passengers for Indian Spring and driven away. Miss Nellie was in the settlement, but where? As time passed he became more desperate and bolder. He walked recklessly up and down the main street, glancing in at the open doors of shops, and even in the windows of private dwellings. It might have seemed a poor compliment to Miss Nellie, but it was an evidence of his complete preoccupation, when the sight of a female face at a window, even though it was plain or perhaps painted, caused his heart to bound, or the glancing of a skirt in the distance quickened his feet and his pulses. Had Jack contented himself with remaining at Excelsior he might have vaguely regretted, but as soon become as vaguely accustomed to, Miss Nellie's absence. But it was not until his hitherto quiet and passive love took this first step of action that it fully declared itself. When he had made the tour of the town a dozen times unsuccessfully, he had perfectly made up his mind that marriage with Nellie or the speedy death of several people, including possibly himself, was the only alternative. He regretted he had not accompanied her; he regretted he had not demanded where she was going; he contemplated a course of future action that two hours ago would have filled him with bashful terror. There was clearly but one thing to do—to declare his passion the instant he met her, and return with her to Excelsior an accepted suitor, or not to return at all.

Suddenly he was vexatiously conscious of hearing his name lazily called, and looking up found that he was on the outskirts of the town, and interrogated by two horsemen.

“Got down to walk, and the coach got away from you, Jack, eh?”

A little ashamed of his preoccupation, Brace stammered something about “collections.” He did not recognize the men, but his own face, name, and business were familiar to everybody for fifty miles along the stage-road.

“Well, you can settle a bet for us, I reckon. Bill Dacre thar bet me five dollars and the drinks that a young gal we met at the edge of the Carquinez Woods, dressed in a long brown duster and half muffled up in a hood, was the daughter of Father Wynn of Excelsior. I did not get a fair look at her, but it stands to reason that a high-toned young lady like Nellie Wynn don't go trap'sing along the wood like a Pike County tramp. I took the bet. May be you know if she's here or in Excelsior?”

Mr. Brace felt himself turning pale with eagerness and excitement. But the near prospect of seeing her presently gave him back his caution, and he answered truthfully that he had left her in Excelsior, and that in his two hours' sojourn in Indian Spring he had not met her once. “But,” he added, with a Californian's reverence for the sanctity of a bet, “I reckon you'd better make it a stand-off for twenty-four hours, and I'll find out and let you know.” Which, it is only fair to say, he honestly intended to do.

With a hurried nod of parting, he continued in the direction of the Woods. When he had satisfied himself that the strangers had entered the settlement, and would not follow him for further explanation, he quickened his pace. In half an hour he passed between two of the gigantic sentinels that guarded the entrance to a trail. Here he paused to collect his thoughts. The Woods were vast in extent, the trail dim and uncertain—at times apparently breaking off, or intersecting another trail as faint as itself. Believing that Miss Nellie had diverged from the highway only as a momentary excursion into the shade, and that she would not dare to penetrate its more sombre and unknown recesses, he kept within sight of the skirting plain. By degrees the sedate influence of the silent vaults seemed to depress him. The ardor of the chase began to flag. Under the calm of their dim roof the fever of his veins began to subside; his pace slackened; he reasoned more deliberately. It was by no means probable that the young woman in a brown duster was Nellie; it was not her habitual traveling dress; it was not like her to walk unattended in the road; there was nothing in her tastes and habits to take her into this gloomy forest, allowing that she had even entered it; and on this absolute question of her identity the two witnesses were divided. He stopped irresolutely, and cast a last, long, half-despairing look around him. Hitherto he had given that part of the wood nearest the plain his greatest

attention. His glance now sought its darker recesses. Suddenly he became breathless. Was it a beam of sunlight that had pierced the groined roof above, and now rested against the trunk of one of the dimmer, more secluded giants? No, it was moving; even as he gazed it slipped away, glanced against another tree, passed across one of the vaulted aisles, and then was lost again. Brief as was the glimpse, he was not mistaken—it was the figure of a woman.

In another moment he was on her track, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her reappear at a lesser distance. But the continual intervention of the massive trunks made the chase by no means an easy one, and as he could not keep her always in sight he was unable to follow or understand the one intelligent direction which she seemed to invariably keep. Nevertheless, he gained upon her breathlessly, and, thanks to the bark-strewn floor, noiselessly. He was near enough to distinguish and recognize the dress she wore, a pale yellow, that he had admired when he first saw her. It was Nellie, unmistakably; if it were she of the brown duster, she had discarded it, perhaps for greater freedom. He was near enough to call out now, but a sudden nervous timidity overcame him; his lips grew dry. What should he say to her? How account for his presence? “Miss Nellie, one moment!” he gasped. She darted forward and—vanished.

At this moment he was not more than a dozen yards from her. He rushed to where she had been standing, but her disappearance was perfect and complete. He made a circuit of the group of trees within whose radius she had last appeared, but there was neither trace of her, nor a suggestion of her mode of escape. He called aloud to her; the vacant Woods let his helpless voice die in their unresponsive depths. He gazed into the air and down at the bark-strewn carpet at his feet. Like most of his vocation, he was sparing of speech, and epigrammatic after his fashion. Comprehending in one swift but despairing flash of intelligence the existence of some fateful power beyond his own weak endeavor, he accepted its logical result with characteristic grimness, threw his hat upon the ground, put his hands in his pockets, and said—

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