

BRET HARTE

A PROTEGEE OF JACK
HAMLIN'S, AND OTHER
STORIES

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A PROTEGEE OF JACK HAMLIN'S

I

The steamer Silveropolis was sharply and steadily cleaving the broad, placid shallows of the Sacramento River. A large wave like an eagle, diverging from its bow, was extending to either bank, swamping the tules and threatening to submerge the lower levees. The great boat itself—a vast but delicate structure of airy stories, hanging galleries, fragile colonnades, gilded cornices, and resplendent frescoes—was throbbing throughout its whole perilous length with the pulse of high pressure and the strong monotonous beat of a powerful piston. Floods of foam pouring from the high paddle-boxes on either side and reuniting in the wake of the boat left behind a track of dazzling whiteness, over which trailed two dense black banners flung from its lofty smokestacks.

Mr. Jack Hamlin had quietly emerged from his stateroom on

deck and was looking over the guards. His hands were resting lightly on his hips over the delicate curves of his white waistcoat, and he was whistling softly, possibly some air to which he had made certain card-playing passengers dance the night before. He was in comfortable case, and his soft brown eyes under their long lashes were veiled with gentle tolerance of all things. He glanced lazily along the empty hurricane deck forward; he glanced lazily down to the saloon deck below him. Far out against the guards below him leaned a young girl. Mr. Hamlin knitted his brows slightly.

He remembered her at once. She had come on board that morning with one Ned Stratton, a brother gambler, but neither a favorite nor intimate of Jack's. From certain indications in the pair, Jack had inferred that she was some foolish or reckless creature whom "Ed" had "got on a string," and was spiriting away from her friends and family. With the abstract morality of this situation Jack was not in the least concerned. For himself he did not indulge in that sort of game; the inexperience and vacillations of innocence were apt to be bothersome, and besides, a certain modest doubt of his own competency to make an original selection had always made him prefer to confine his gallantries to the wives of men of greater judgment than himself who had. But it suddenly occurred to him that he had seen Stratton quickly slip off the boat at the last landing stage. Ah! that was it; he had cast away and deserted her. It was an old story. Jack smiled. But he was not greatly amused with Stratton.

She was very pale, and seemed to be clinging to the network railing, as if to support herself, although she was gazing fixedly at the yellow glancing current below, which seemed to be sucked down and swallowed in the paddle-box as the boat swept on. It certainly was a fascinating sight—this sloping rapid, hurrying on to bury itself under the crushing wheels. For a brief moment Jack saw how they would seize anything floating on that ghastly incline, whirl it round in one awful revolution of the beating paddles, and then bury it, broken and shattered out of all recognition, deep in the muddy undercurrent of the stream behind them.

She moved away presently with an odd, stiff step, chafing her gloved hands together as if they had become stiffened too in her rigid grasp of the railing. Jack leisurely watched her as she moved along the narrow strip of deck. She was not at all to his taste,—a rather plump girl with a rustic manner and a great deal of brown hair under her straw hat. She might have looked better had she not been so haggard. When she reached the door of the saloon she paused, and then, turning suddenly, began to walk quickly back again. As she neared the spot where she had been standing her pace slackened, and when she reached the railing she seemed to relapse against it in her former helpless fashion. Jack became lazily interested. Suddenly she lifted her head and cast a quick glance around and above her. In that momentary lifting of her face Jack saw her expression. Whatever it was, his own changed instantly; the next moment there was a crash on the lower deck.

It was Jack who had swung himself over the rail and dropped ten feet, to her side. But not before she had placed one foot in the meshes of the netting and had gripped the railing for a spring.

The noise of Jack's fall might have seemed to her bewildered fancy as a part of her frantic act, for she fell forward vacantly on the railing. But by this time Jack had grasped her arm as if to help himself to his feet.

"I might have killed myself by that foolin', mightn't I?" he said cheerfully.

The sound of a voice so near her seemed to recall to her dazed sense the uncompleted action his fall had arrested. She made a convulsive bound towards the railing, but Jack held her fast.

"Don't," he said in a low voice, "don't, it won't pay. It's the sickest game that ever was played by man or woman. Come here!"

He drew her towards an empty stateroom whose door was swinging on its hinges a few feet from them. She was trembling violently; he half led, half pushed her into the room, closed the door and stood with his back against it as she dropped into a chair. She looked at him vacantly; the agitation she was undergoing inwardly had left her no sense of outward perception.

"You know Stratton would be awfully riled," continued Jack easily. "He's just stepped out to see a friend and got left by the fool boat. He'll be along by the next steamer, and you're bound to meet him in Sacramento."

Her staring eyes seemed suddenly to grasp his meaning. But

to his surprise she burst out with a certain hysterical desperation, "No! no! Never! NEVER again! Let me pass! I must go," and struggled to regain the door. Jack, albeit singularly relieved to know that she shared his private sentiments regarding Stratton, nevertheless resisted her. Whereat she suddenly turned white, reeled back, and sank in a dead faint in the chair.

The gambler turned, drew the key from the inside of the door, passed out, locking it behind him, and walked leisurely into the main saloon. "Mrs. Johnson," he said gravely, addressing the stewardess, a tall mulatto, with his usual winsome supremacy over dependents and children, "you'll oblige me if you'll corral a few smelling salts, vinaigrettes, hairpins, and violet powder, and unload them in deck stateroom No. 257. There's a lady"—

"A lady, Marse Hamlin?" interrupted the mulatto, with an archly significant flash of her white teeth.

"A lady," continued Jack with unabashed gravity, "in a sort of conniption fit. A relative of mine; in fact a niece, my only sister's child. Hadn't seen each other for ten years, and it was too much for her."

The woman glanced at him with a mingling of incredulous belief, but delighted obedience, hurriedly gathered a few articles from her cabin, and followed him to No. 257. The young girl was still unconscious. The stewardess applied a few restoratives with the skill of long experience, and the young girl opened her eyes. They turned vacantly from the stewardess to Jack with a look of half recognition and half frightened inquiry. "Yes," said Jack,

addressing the eyes, although ostentatiously speaking to Mrs. Johnson, “she’d only just come by steamer to ‘Frisco and wasn’t expecting to see me, and we dropped right into each other here on the boat. And I haven’t seen her since she was so high. Sister Mary ought to have warned me by letter; but she was always a slouch at letter writing. There, that’ll do, Mrs. Johnson. She’s coming round; I reckon I can manage the rest. But you go now and tell the purser I want one of those inside staterooms for my niece,—MY NIECE, you hear,—so that you can be near her and look after her.”

As the stewardess turned obediently away the young girl attempted to rise, but Jack checked her. “No,” he said, almost brusquely; “you and I have some talking to do before she gets back, and we’ve no time for foolin’. You heard what I told her just now! Well, it’s got to be as I said, you sabe. As long as you’re on this boat you’re my niece, and my sister Mary’s child. As I haven’t got any sister Mary, you don’t run any risk of falling foul of her, and you ain’t taking any one’s place. That settles that. Now, do you or do you not want to see that man again? Say yes, and if he’s anywhere above ground I’ll yank him over to you as soon as we touch shore.” He had no idea of interfering with his colleague’s amours, but he had determined to make Stratton pay for the bother their slovenly sequence had caused him. Yet he was relieved and astonished by her frantic gesture of indignation and abhorrence. “No?” he repeated grimly. “Well, that settles that. Now, look here; quick, before she comes—do you want to

go back home to your friends?"

But here occurred what he had dreaded most and probably thought he had escaped. She had stared at him, at the stewardess, at the walls, with abstracted, vacant, and bewildered, but always undimmed and unmoistened eyes. A sudden convulsion shook her whole frame, her blank expression broke like a shattered mirror, she threw her hands over her eyes and fell forward with her face to the back of her chair in an outburst of tears.

Alas for Jack! with the breaking up of those sealed fountains came her speech also, at first disconnected and incoherent, and then despairing and passionate. No! she had no longer friends or home! She had lost and disgraced them! She had disgraced HERSELF! There was no home for her but the grave. Why had Jack snatched her from it? Then, bit by bit, she yielded up her story,—a story decidedly commonplace to Jack, uninteresting, and even irritating to his fastidiousness. She was a schoolgirl (not even a convent girl, but the inmate of a Presbyterian female academy at Napa. Jack shuddered as he remembered to have once seen certain of the pupils walking with a teacher), and she lived with her married sister. She had seen Stratton while going to and fro on the San Francisco boat; she had exchanged notes with him, had met him secretly, and finally consented to elope with him to Sacramento, only to discover when the boat had left the wharf the real nature of his intentions. Jack listened with infinite weariness and inward chafing. He had read all this before in cheap novelettes, in the police reports, in the

Sunday papers; he had heard a street preacher declaim against it, and warn young women of the serpent-like wiles of tempters of the Stratton variety. But even now Jack failed to recognize Stratton as a serpent, or indeed anything but a blundering cheat and clown, who had left his dirty 'prentice work on his (Jack's) hands. But the girl was helpless and, it seemed, homeless, all through a certain desperation of feeling which, in spite of her tears, he could not but respect. That momentary shadow of death had exalted her. He stroked his mustache, pulled down his white waistcoat and her cry, without saying anything. He did not know that this most objectionable phase of her misery was her salvation and his own.

But the stewardess would return in a moment. "You'd better tell me what to call you," he said quietly. "I ought to know my niece's first name."

The girl caught her breath, and, between two sobs, said, "Sophonisba."

Jack winced. It seemed only to need this last sentimental touch to complete the idiotic situation. "I'll call you Sophy," he said hurriedly and with an effort.

"And now look here! You are going in that cabin with Mrs. Johnson where she can look after you, but I can't. So I'll have to take your word, for I'm not going to give you away before Mrs. Johnson, that you won't try that foolishness—you know what I mean—before I see you again. Can I trust you?"

With her head still bowed over the chair back, she murmured

slowly somewhere from under her disheveled hair:—

“Yes.”

“Honest Injin?” adjured Jack gravely.

“Yes.”

The shuffling step of the stewardess was heard slowly approaching. “Yes,” continued Jack abruptly, lightly lifting his voice as Mrs. Johnson opened the door,—“yes, if you’d only had some of those spearmint drops of your aunt Rachel’s that she always gave you when these fits came on you’d have been all right inside of five minutes. Aunty was no slouch of a doctor, was she? Dear me, it only seems yesterday since I saw her. You were just playing round her knee like a kitten on the back porch. How time does fly! But here’s Mrs. Johnson coming to take you in. Now rouse up, Sophy, and just hook yourself on to Mrs. Johnson on that side, and we’ll toddle along.”

The young girl put back her heavy hair, and with her face still averted submitted to be helped to her feet by the kindly stewardess. Perhaps something homely sympathetic and nurse-like in the touch of the mulatto gave her assurance and confidence, for her head lapsed quite naturally against the woman’s shoulder, and her face was partly hidden as she moved slowly along the deck. Jack accompanied them to the saloon and the inner stateroom door. A few passengers gathered curiously near, as much attracted by the unusual presence of Jack Hamlin in such a procession as by the girl herself. “You’ll look after her specially, Mrs. Johnson,” said Jack, in unusually deliberate

terms. "She's been a good deal petted at home, and my sister perhaps has rather spoilt her. She's pretty much of a child still, and you'll have to humor her. Sophy," he continued, with ostentatious playfulness, directing his voice into the dim recesses of the stateroom, "you'll just think Mrs. Johnson's your old nurse, won't you? Think it's old Katy, hey?"

To his great consternation the girl approached tremblingly from the inner shadow. The faintest and saddest of smiles for a moment played around the corners of her drawn mouth and tear-dimmed eyes as she held out her hand and said:—

"God bless you for being so kind."

Jack shuddered and glanced quickly round. But luckily no one heard this crushing sentimentalism, and the next moment the door closed upon her and Mrs. Johnson.

It was past midnight, and the moon was riding high over the narrowing yellow river, when Jack again stepped out on deck. He had just left the captain's cabin, and a small social game with the officers, which had served to some extent to vaguely relieve his irritation and their pockets. He had presumably quite forgotten the incident of the afternoon, as he looked about him, and complacently took in the quiet beauty of the night.

The low banks on either side offered no break to the uninterrupted level of the landscape, through which the river seemed to wind only as a race track for the rushing boat. Every fibre of her vast but fragile bulk quivered under the goad of her powerful engines. There was no other movement but hers,

no other sound but this monstrous beat and panting; the whole tranquil landscape seemed to breathe and pulsate with her; dwellers in the tules, miles away, heard and felt her as she passed, and it seemed to Jack, leaning over the railing, as if the whole river swept like a sluice through her paddle-boxes.

Jack had quite unconsciously lounged before that part of the railing where the young girl had leaned a few hours ago. As he looked down upon the streaming yellow mill-race below him, he noticed—what neither he nor the girl had probably noticed before—that a space of the top bar of the railing was hinged, and could be lifted by withdrawing a small bolt, thus giving easy access to the guards. He was still looking at it, whistling softly, when footsteps approached.

“Jack,” said a lazy voice, “how’s sister Mary?”

“It’s a long time since you’ve seen her only child, Jack, ain’t it?” said a second voice; “and yet it sort o’ seems to me somehow that I’ve seen her before.”

Jack recognized the voice of two of his late companions at the card-table. His whistling ceased; so also dropped every trace of color and expression from his handsome face. But he did not turn, and remained quietly gazing at the water.

“Aunt Rachel, too, must be getting on in years, Jack,” continued the first speaker, halting behind Jack.

“And Mrs. Johnson does not look so much like Sophy’s old nurse as she used to,” remarked the second, following his example. Still Jack remained unmoved.

“You don’t seem to be interested, Jack,” continued the first speaker. “What are you looking at?”

Without turning his head the gambler replied, “Looking at the boat; she’s booming along, just chawing up and spitting out the river, ain’t she? Look at that sweep of water going under her paddle-wheels,” he continued, unbolting the rail and lifting it to allow the two men to peer curiously over the guards as he pointed to the murderous incline beneath them; “a man wouldn’t stand much show who got dropped into it. How these paddles would just snatch him bald-headed, pick him up and slosh him round and round, and then sling him out down there in such a shape that his own father wouldn’t know him.”

“Yes,” said the first speaker, with an ostentatious little laugh, “but all that ain’t telling us how sister Mary is.”

“No,” said the gambler slipping into the opening with a white and rigid face in which nothing seemed living but the eyes, “no, but it’s telling you how two d-d fools who didn’t know when to shut their mouths might get them shut once and forever. It’s telling you what might happen to two men who tried to ‘play’ a man who didn’t care to be ‘played,’—a man who didn’t care much what he did, when he did it, or how he did it, but would do what he’d set out to do—even if in doing it he went to hell with the men he sent there.”

He had stepped out on the guards, beside the two men, closing the rail behind him. He had placed his hands on their shoulders; they had both gripped his arms; yet, viewed from the deck above,

they seemed at that moment an amicable, even fraternal group, albeit the faces of the three were dead white in the moonlight.

“I don’t think I’m so very much interested in sister Mary,” said the first speaker quietly, after a pause.

“And I don’t seem to think so much of aunt Rachel as I did,” said his companion.

“I thought you wouldn’t,” said Jack, coolly reopening the rail and stepping back again. “It all depends upon the way you look at those things. Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

The three men paused, shook each other’s hands silently, and separated, Jack sauntering slowly back to his stateroom.

II

The educational establishment of Mrs. Mix and Madame Bance, situated in the best quarter of Sacramento and patronized by the highest state officials and members of the clergy, was a pretty if not an imposing edifice. Although surrounded by a high white picket fence and entered through a heavily boarded gate, its balconies festooned with jasmine and roses, and its spotlessly draped windows as often graced with fresh, flower-like faces, were still plainly and provokingly visible above the ostentatious spikes of the pickets. Nevertheless, Mr. Jack Hamlin, who had six months before placed his niece, Miss Sophonisba Brown, under its protecting care, felt a degree of uneasiness, even bordering on timidity, which was new to that usually self-confident man. Remembering how his first appearance had fluttered this dovecote and awakened a severe suspicion in the minds of the two principals, he had discarded his usual fashionable attire and elegantly fitting garments for a rough, homespun suit, supposed to represent a homely agriculturist, but which had the effect of transforming him into an adorable Strephon, infinitely more dangerous in his rustic shepherd-like simplicity. He had also shaved off his silken mustache for the same prudential reasons, but had only succeeded in uncovering the delicate lines of his handsome mouth, and so absurdly reducing his apparent years that his avuncular pretensions

seemed more preposterous than ever; and when he had rung the bell and was admitted by a severe Irish waiting-maid, his momentary hesitation and half humorous diffidence had such an unexpected effect upon her, that it seemed doubtful if he would be allowed to pass beyond the vestibule. "Shure, miss," she said in a whisper to an under teacher, "there's wan at the dhure who calls himself, 'Mister' Hamlin, but av it is not a young lady maskeradin' in her brother's clothes Oim very much mistaken; and av it's a boy, one of the pupil's brothers, shure ye might put a dhress on him when you take the others out for a walk, and he'd pass for the beauty of the whole school."

Meantime, the unconscious subject of this criticism was pacing somewhat uneasily up and down the formal reception room into which he had been finally ushered. Its farther end was filled by an enormous parlor organ, a number of music books, and a cheerfully variegated globe. A large presentation Bible, an equally massive illustrated volume on the Holy Land, a few landscapes in cold, bluish milk and water colors, and rigid heads in crayons—the work of pupils—were presumably ornamental. An imposing mahogany sofa and what seemed to be a disproportionate excess of chairs somewhat coldly furnished the room. Jack had reluctantly made up his mind that, if Sophy was accompanied by any one, he would be obliged to kiss her to keep up his assumed relationship. As she entered the room with Miss Mix, Jack advanced and soberly saluted her on the cheek. But so positive and apparent was the gallantry of his presence,

and perhaps so suggestive of some pastoral flirtation, that Miss Mix, to Jack's surprise, winced perceptibly and became stony. But he was still more surprised that the young lady herself shrank half uneasily from his lips, and uttered a slight exclamation. It was a new experience to Mr. Hamlin.

But this somewhat mollified Miss Mix, and she slightly relaxed her austerity. She was glad to be able to give the best accounts of Miss Brown, not only as regarded her studies, but as to her conduct and deportment. Really, with the present freedom of manners and laxity of home discipline in California, it was gratifying to meet a young lady who seemed to value the importance of a proper decorum and behavior, especially towards the opposite sex. Mr. Hamlin, although her guardian, was perhaps too young to understand and appreciate this. To this inexperience she must also attribute the indiscretion of his calling during school hours and without preliminary warning. She trusted, however, that this informality could be overlooked after consultation with Madame Bance, but in the mean time, perhaps for half an hour, she must withdraw Miss Brown and return with her to the class. Mr. Hamlin could wait in this public room, reserved especially for visitors, until they returned. Or, if he cared to accompany one of the teachers in a formal inspection of the school, she added, doubtfully, with a glance at Jack's distracting attractions, she would submit this also to Madame Bance.

"Thank you, thank you," returned Jack hurriedly, as a

depressing vision of the fifty or sixty scholars rose before his eyes, "but I'd rather not. I mean, you know, I'd just as lief stay here ALONE. I wouldn't have called anyway, don't you see, only I had a day off,—and—and—I wanted to talk with my niece on family matters." He did not say that he had received a somewhat distressful letter from her asking him to come; a new instinct made him cautious.

Considerably relieved by Jack's unexpected abstention, which seemed to spare her pupils the distraction of his graces, Miss Mix smiled more amicably and retired with her charge. In the single glance he had exchanged with Sophy he saw that, although resigned and apparently self-controlled, she still appeared thoughtful and melancholy. She had improved in appearance and seemed more refined and less rustic in her school dress, but he was conscious of the same distinct separation of her personality (which was uninteresting to him) from the sentiment that had impelled him to visit her. She was possibly still hankering after that fellow Stratton, in spite of her protestations to the contrary; perhaps she wanted to go back to her sister, although she had declared she would die first, and had always refused to disclose her real name or give any clue by which he could have traced her relations. She would cry, of course; he almost hoped that she would not return alone; he half regretted he had come. She still held him only by a single quality of her nature,—the desperation she had shown on the boat; that was something he understood and respected.

He walked discontentedly to the window and looked out; he walked discontentedly to the end of the room and stopped before the organ. It was a fine instrument; he could see that with an admiring and experienced eye. He was alone in the room; in fact, quite alone in that part of the house which was separated from the class-rooms. He would disturb no one by trying it. And if he did, what then? He smiled a little recklessly, slowly pulled off his gloves, and sat down before it.

He played cautiously at first, with the soft pedal down. The instrument had never known a strong masculine hand before, having been fumbled and friveled over by softly incompetent, feminine fingers. But presently it began to thrill under the passionate hand of its lover, and carried away by his one innocent weakness, Jack was launched upon a sea of musical reminiscences. Scraps of church music, Puritan psalms of his boyhood; dying strains from sad, forgotten operas, fragments of oratorios and symphonies, but chiefly phases from old masses heard at the missions of San Pedro and Santa Isabel, swelled up from his loving and masterful fingers. He had finished an Agnus Dei; the formal room was pulsating with divine aspiration; the rascal's hands were resting listlessly on the keys, his brown lashes lifted, in an effort of memory, tenderly towards the ceiling.

Suddenly, a subdued murmur of applause and a slight rustle behind him recalled him to himself again. He wheeled his chair quickly round. The two principals of the school and half a dozen teachers were standing gravely behind him, and at the open door

a dozen curled and frizzled youthful heads peered in eagerly, but half restrained by their teachers. The relaxed features and apologetic attitude of Madame Bance and Miss Mix showed that Mr. Hamlin had unconsciously achieved a triumph.

He might not have been as pleased to know that his extraordinary performance had solved a difficulty, effaced his other graces, and enabled them to place him on the moral pedestal of a mere musician, to whom these eccentricities were allowable and privileged. He shared the admiration extended by the young ladies to their music teacher, which was always understood to be a sexless enthusiasm and a contagious juvenile disorder. It was also a fine advertisement for the organ. Madame Bance smiled blandly, improved the occasion by thanking Mr. Hamlin for having given the scholars a gratuitous lesson on the capabilities of the instrument, and was glad to be able to give Miss Brown a half-holiday to spend with her accomplished relative. Miss Brown was even now upstairs, putting on her hat and mantle. Jack was relieved. Sophy would not attempt to cry on the street.

Nevertheless, when they reached it and the gate closed behind them, he again became uneasy. The girl's clouded face and melancholy manner were not promising. It also occurred to him that he might meet some one who knew him and thus compromise her. This was to be avoided at all hazards. He began with forced gayety:—

“Well, now, where shall we go?”

She slightly raised her tear-dimmed eyes. "Where you please—I don't care."

"There isn't any show going on here, is there?" He had a vague idea of a circus or menagerie—himself behind her in the shadow of the box.

"I don't know of any."

"Or any restaurant—or cake shop?"

"There's a place where the girls go to get candy on Main Street. Some of them are there now."

Jack shuddered; this was not to be thought of. "But where do you walk?"

"Up and down Main Street."

"Where everybody can see you?" said Jack, scandalized.

The girl nodded.

They walked on in silence for a few moments. Then a bright idea struck Mr. Hamlin. He suddenly remembered that in one of his many fits of impulsive generosity and largesse he had given to an old negro retainer—whose wife had nursed him through a dangerous illness—a house and lot on the river bank. He had been told that they had opened a small laundry or wash-house. It occurred to him that a stroll there and a call upon "Uncle Hannibal and Aunt Chloe" combined the propriety and respectability due to the young person he was with, and the requisite secrecy and absence of publicity due to himself. He at once suggested it.

"You see she was a mighty good woman and you ought to

know her, for she was my old nurse”—

The girl glanced at him with a sudden impatience.

“Honest Injin,” said Jack solemnly; “she did nurse me through my last cough. I ain’t playing old family gags on you now.”

“Oh, dear,” burst out the girl impulsively, “I do wish you wouldn’t ever play them again. I wish you wouldn’t pretend to be my uncle; I wish you wouldn’t make me pass for your niece. It isn’t right. It’s all wrong. Oh, don’t you know it’s all wrong, and can’t come right any way? It’s just killing me. I can’t stand it. I’d rather you’d say what I am and how I came to you and how you pitied me.”

They had luckily entered a narrow side street, and the sobs which shook the young girl’s frame were unnoticed. For a few moments Jack felt a horrible conviction stealing over him, that in his present attitude towards her he was not unlike that hound Stratton, and that, however innocent his own intent, there was a sickening resemblance to the situation on the boat in the base advantage he had taken of her friendlessness. He had never told her that he was a gambler like Stratton, and that his peculiarly infelix reputation among women made it impossible for him to assist her, except by a stealth or the deception he had practiced, without compromising her. He who had for years faced the sneers and half-frightened opposition of the world dared not tell the truth to this girl, from whom he expected nothing and who did not interest him. He felt he was almost slinking at her side. At last he said desperately:—

“But I snatched them bald-headed at the organ, Sophy, didn’t I?”

“Oh yes,” said the girl, “you played beautifully and grandly. It was so good of you, too. For I think, somehow, Madame Bance had been a little suspicious of you, but that settled it. Everybody thought it was fine, and some thought it was your profession. Perhaps,” she added timidly, “it is?”

“I play a good deal, I reckon,” said Jack, with a grim humor which did not, however, amuse him.

“I wish I could, and make money by it,” said the girl eagerly. Jack winced, but she did not notice it as she went on hurriedly: “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to leave the school and make my own living. Anywhere where people won’t know me and where I can be alone and work. I shall die here among these girls—with all their talk of their friends and their—sisters,—and their questions about you.”

“Tell ‘em to dry up,” said Jack indignantly. “Take ‘em to the cake shop and load ‘em up with candy and ice cream. That’ll stop their mouths. You’ve got money, you got my last remittance, didn’t you?” he repeated quickly. “If you didn’t, here’s”—his hand was already in his pocket when she stopped him with a despairing gesture.

“Yes, yes, I got it all. I haven’t touched it. I don’t want it. For I can’t live on you. Don’t you understand,—I want to work. Listen,—I can draw and paint. Madame Bance says I do it well; my drawing-master says I might in time take portraits and get paid

for it. And even now I can retouch photographs and make colored miniatures from them. And," she stopped and glanced at Jack half-timidly, "I've—done some already."

A glow of surprised relief suffused the gambler. Not so much at this astonishing revelation as at the change it seemed to effect in her. Her pale blue eyes, made paler by tears, cleared and brightened under their swollen lids like wiped steel; the lines of her depressed mouth straightened and became firm. Her voice had lost its hopeless monotone.

"There's a shop in the next street,—a photographer's,—where they have one of mine in their windows," she went on, reassured by Jack's unaffected interest. "It's only round the corner, if you care to see."

Jack assented; a few paces farther brought them to the corner of a narrow street, where they presently turned into a broader thoroughfare and stopped before the window of a photographer. Sophy pointed to an oval frame, containing a portrait painted on porcelain. Mr. Hamlin was startled. Inexperienced as he was, a certain artistic inclination told him it was good, although it is to be feared he would have been astonished even if it had been worse. The mere fact that this headstrong country girl, who had run away with a cur like Stratton, should be able to do anything else took him by surprise.

"I got ten dollars for that," she said hesitatingly, "and I could have got more for a larger one, but I had to do that in my room, during recreation hours. If I had more time and a place

where I could work”—she stopped timidly and looked tentatively at Jack. But he was already indulging in a characteristically reckless idea of coming back after he had left Sophy, buying the miniature at an extravagant price, and ordering half a dozen more at extraordinary figures. Here, however, two passers-by, stopping ostensibly to look in the window, but really attracted by the picturesque spectacle of the handsome young rustic and his schoolgirl companion, gave Jack such a fright that he hurried Sophy away again into the side street. “There’s nothing mean about that picture business,” he said cheerfully; “it looks like a square kind of game,” and relapsed into thoughtful silence.

At which, Sophy, the ice of restraint broken, again burst into passionate appeal. If she could only go away somewhere—where she saw no one but the people who would buy her work, who knew nothing of her past nor cared to know who were her relations! She would work hard; she knew she could support herself in time. She would keep the name he had given her,—it was not distinctive enough to challenge any inquiry,—but nothing more. She need not assume to be his niece; he would always be her kind friend, to whom she owed everything, even her miserable life. She trusted still to his honor never to seek to know her real name, nor ever to speak to her of that man if he ever met him. It would do no good to her or to them; it might drive her, for she was not yet quite sure of herself, to do that which she had promised him never to do again.

There was no threat, impatience, or acting in her voice, but

he recognized the same dull desperation he had once heard in it, and her eyes, which a moment before were quick and mobile, had become fixed and set. He had no idea of trying to penetrate the foolish secret of her name and relations; he had never had the slightest curiosity, but it struck him now that Stratton might at any time force it upon him. The only way that he could prevent it was to let it be known that, for unexpressed reasons, he would shoot Stratton "on sight." This would naturally restrict any verbal communication between them. Jack's ideas of morality were vague, but his convictions on points of honor were singularly direct and positive.

III

Meantime Hamlin and Sophy were passing the outskirts of the town; the open lots and cleared spaces were giving way to grassy stretches, willow copses, and groups of cottonwood and sycamore; and beyond the level of yellowing tules appeared the fringed and raised banks of the river. Half tropical looking cottages with deep verandas—the homes of early Southern pioneers—took the place of incomplete blocks of modern houses, monotonously alike. In these sylvan surroundings Mr. Hamlin's picturesque rusticity looked less incongruous and more Arcadian; the young girl had lost some of her restraint with her confidences, and lounging together side by side, without the least consciousness of any sentiment in their words or actions, they nevertheless contrived to impress the spectator with the idea that they were a charming pair of pastoral lovers. So strong was this impression that, as they approached Aunt Chloe's laundry, a pretty rose-covered cottage with an enormous whitewashed barn-like extension in the rear, the black proprietress herself, standing at the door, called her husband to come and look at them, and flashed her white teeth in such unqualified commendation and patronage that Mr. Hamlin, withdrawing himself from Sophy's side, instantly charged down upon them.

“If you don't slide the lid back over that grinning box of dominoes of yours and take it inside, I'll just carry Hannibal off

with me,” he said in a quick whisper, with a half-wicked, half-mischievous glitter in his brown eyes. “That young lady’s—A LADY—do you understand? No riffraff friend of mine, but a regular NUN—a saint—do you hear? So you just stand back and let her take a good look round, and rest herself, until she wants you.” “Two black idiots, Miss Brown,” he continued cheerfully in a higher voice of explanation, as Sophy approached, “who think because one of ‘em used to shave me and the other saved my life they’ve got a right to stand at their humble cottage door and frighten horses!”

So great was Mr. Hamlin’s ascendancy over his former servants that even this ingenious pleasantry was received with every sign of affection and appreciation of the humorist, and of the profound respect for his companion. Aunt Chloe showed them effusively into her parlor, a small but scrupulously neat and sweet-smelling apartment, inordinately furnished with a huge mahogany centre-table and chairs, and the most fragile and meretricious china and glass ornaments on the mantel. But the three jasmine-edged lattice windows opened upon a homely garden of old-fashioned herbs and flowers, and their fragrance filled the room. The cleanest and starchiest of curtains, the most dazzling and whitest of tidies and chair-covers, bespoke the adjacent laundry; indeed, the whole cottage seemed to exhale the odors of lavender soap and freshly ironed linen. Yet the cottage was large for the couple and their assistants. “Dar was two front rooms on de next flo’ dat dey never used,” explained Aunt Chloe;

“friends allowed dat dey could let ‘em to white folks, but dey had always been done kep’ for Marse Hamlin, ef he ever wanted to be wid his old niggers again.” Jack looked up quickly with a brightened face, made a sign to Hannibal, and the two left the room together.

When he came through the passage a few moments later, there was a sound of laughter in the parlor. He recognized the full, round lazy chuckle of Aunt Chloe, but there was a higher girlish ripple that he did not know. He had never heard Sophy laugh before. Nor, when he entered, had he ever seen her so animated. She was helping Chloe set the table, to that lady’s intense delight at “Missy’s” girlish housewifery. She was picking the berries fresh from the garden, buttering the Sally Lunn, making the tea, and arranging the details of the repast with apparently no trace of her former discontent and unhappiness in either face or manner. He dropped quietly into a chair by the window, and, with the homely scents of the garden mixing with the honest odors of Aunt Chloe’s cookery, watched her with an amusement that was as pleasant and grateful as it was strange and unprecedented.

“Now den,” said Aunt Chloe to her husband, as she put the finishing touch to the repast in a plate of doughnuts as exquisitely brown and shining as Jack’s eyes were at that moment, “Hannibal, you just come away, and let dem two white quality chillens have dey tea. Dey’s done starved, shuah.” And with an approving nod to Jack, she bundled her husband from the room.

The door closed; the young girl began to pour out the tea,

but Jack remained in his seat by the window. It was a singular sensation which he did not care to disturb. It was no new thing for Mr. Hamlin to find himself at a tete-a-tete repast with the admiring and complaisant fair; there was a 'cabinet particulier' in a certain San Francisco restaurant which had listened to their various vanities and professions of undying faith; he might have recalled certain festal rendezvous with a widow whose piety and impeccable reputation made it a moral duty for her to come to him only in disguise; it was but a few days ago that he had been let privately into the palatial mansion of a high official for a midnight supper with a foolish wife. It was not strange, therefore, that he should be alone here, secretly, with a member of that indiscreet, loving sex. But that he should be sitting there in a cheap negro laundry with absolutely no sentiment of any kind towards the heavy-haired, freckle-faced country schoolgirl opposite him, from whom he sought and expected nothing, and ENJOYING it without scorn of himself or his companion, to use his own expression, "got him." Presently he rose and sauntered to the table with shining eyes.

"Well, what do you think of Aunt Chloe's shebang?" he asked smilingly.

"Oh, it's so sweet and clean and homelike," said the girl quickly. At any other time he would have winced at the last adjective. It struck him now as exactly the word.

"Would you like to live here, if you could?"

Her face brightened. She put the teapot down and gazed

fixedly at Jack.

“Because you can. Look here. I spoke to Hannibal about it. You can have the two front rooms if you want to. One of ‘em is big enough and light enough for a studio to do your work in. You tell that nigger what you want to put in ‘em, and he’s got my orders to do it. I told him about your painting; said you were the daughter of an old friend, you know. Hold on, Sophy; d—n it all, I’ve got to do a little gilt-edged lying; but I let you out of the niece business this time. Yes, from this moment I’m no longer your uncle. I renounce the relationship. It’s hard,” continued the rascal, “after all these years and considering sister Mary’s feelings; but, as you seem to wish it, it must be done.”

Sophy’s steel-blue eyes softened. She slid her long brown hand across the table and grasped Jack’s. He returned the pressure quickly and fraternally, even to that half-shamed, half-hurried evasion of emotion peculiar to all brothers. This was also a new sensation; but he liked it.

“You are too—too good, Mr. Hamlin,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” said Jack cheerfully, “that’s what’s the matter with me. It isn’t natural, and if I keep it up too long it brings on my cough.”

Nevertheless, they were happy in a boy and girl fashion, eating heartily, and, I fear, not always decorously; scrambling somewhat for the strawberries, and smacking their lips over the Sally Lunn. Meantime, it was arranged that Mr. Hamlin should inform Miss Mix that Sophy would leave school at the end of the term, only a few days hence, and then transfer herself to lodgings with

some old family servants, where she could more easily pursue her studies in her own profession. She need not make her place of abode a secret, neither need she court publicity. She would write to Jack regularly, informing him of her progress, and he would visit her whenever he could. Jack assented gravely to the further proposition that he was to keep a strict account of all the moneys he advanced her, and that she was to repay him out of the proceeds of her first pictures. He had promised also, with a slight mental reservation, not to buy them all himself, but to trust to her success with the public. They were never to talk of what had happened before; she was to begin life anew. Of such were their confidences, spoken often together at the same moment, and with their mouths full. Only one thing troubled Jack; he had not yet told her frankly who he was and what was his reputation; he had hitherto carelessly supposed she would learn it, and in truth had cared little if she did; but it was evident from her conversation that day that by some miracle she was still in ignorance. Unable now to tell her himself, he had charged Hannibal to break it to her casually after he was gone. "You can let me down easy if you like, but you'd better make a square deal of it while you're about it. And," Jack had added cheerfully, "if she thinks after that she'd better drop me entirely, you just say that if she wishes to STAY, you'll see that I don't ever come here again. And you keep your word about it too, you black nigger, or I'll be the first to thrash you."

Nevertheless, when Hannibal and Aunt Chloe returned to

clear away the repast, they were a harmonious party; albeit, Mr. Hamlin seemed more content to watch them silently from his chair by the window, a cigar between his lips, and the pleasant distraction of the homely scents and sounds of the garden in his senses. Allusion having been made again to the morning performance of the organ, he was implored by Hannibal to diversify his talent by exercising it on an old guitar which had passed into that retainer's possession with certain clothes of his master's when they separated. Mr. Hamlin accepted it dubiously; it had twanged under his volatile fingers in more pretentious but less innocent halls. But presently he raised his tenor voice and soft brown lashes to the humble ceiling and sang.

“Way down upon the Swanee River,”

Discoursed Jack plaintively,—

“Far, far away,
Thar's whar my heart is turning ever,
Thar's whar the old folks stay.”

The two dusky scions of an emotional race, that had been wont to sweeten its toil and condone its wrongs with music, sat wrapt and silent, swaying with Jack's voice until they could burst in upon the chorus. The jasmine vines trilled softly with the afternoon breeze; a slender yellow-hammer, perhaps emulous of Jack, swung himself from an outer spray and peered curiously

into the room; and a few neighbors, gathering at their doors and windows, remarked that “after all, when it came to real singing, no one could beat those d—d niggers.”

The sun was slowly sinking in the rolling gold of the river when Jack and Sophy started leisurely back through the broken shafts of light, and across the far-stretching shadows of the cottonwoods. In the midst of a lazy silence they were presently conscious of a distant monotonous throb, the booming of the up boat on the river. The sound came nearer—passed them, the boat itself hidden by the trees; but a trailing cloud of smoke above cast a momentary shadow upon their path. The girl looked up at Jack with a troubled face. Mr. Hamlin smiled reassuringly; but in that instant he had made up his mind that it was his moral duty to kill Mr. Edward Stratton.

IV

For the next two months Mr. Hamlin was professionally engaged in San Francisco and Marysville, and the transfer of Sophy from the school to her new home was effected without his supervision. From letters received by him during that interval, it seemed that the young girl had entered energetically upon her new career, and that her artistic efforts were crowned with success. There were a few Indian-ink sketches, studies made at school and expanded in her own "studio," which were eagerly bought as soon as exhibited in the photographer's window,—notably by a florid and inartistic bookkeeper, an old negro woman, a slangy stable boy, a gorgeously dressed and painted female, and the bearded second officer of a river steamboat, without hesitation and without comment. This, as Mr. Hamlin intelligently pointed out in a letter to Sophy, showed a general and diversified appreciation on the part of the public. Indeed, it emboldened her, in the retouching of photographs, to offer sittings to the subjects, and to undertake even large crayon copies, which had resulted in her getting so many orders that she was no longer obliged to sell her drawings, but restricted herself solely to profitable portraiture. The studio became known; even its quaint surroundings added to the popular interest, and the originality and independence of the young painter helped her to a genuine success. All this she wrote to Jack. Meantime Hannibal had

assured him that he had carried out his instructions by informing "Missy" of his old master's real occupation and reputation, but that the young lady hadn't "took no notice." Certainly there was no allusion to it in her letters, nor any indication in her manner. Mr. Hamlin was greatly, and it seemed to him properly, relieved. And he looked forward with considerable satisfaction to an early visit to old Hannibal's laundry.

It must be confessed, also, that another matter, a simple affair of gallantry, was giving him an equally unusual, unexpected, and absurd annoyance, which he had never before permitted to such trivialities. In a recent visit to a fashionable watering-place, he had attracted the attention of what appeared to be a respectable, matter of fact woman, the wife of a recently elected rural Senator. She was, however, singularly beautiful, and as singularly cold. It was perhaps this quality, and her evident annoyance at some unreasoning prepossession which Jack's fascinations exercised upon her, that heightened that reckless desire for risk and excitement which really made up the greater part of his gallantry. Nevertheless, as was his habit, he had treated her always with a charming unconsciousness of his own attentions, and a frankness that seemed inconsistent with any insidious approach. In fact, Mr. Hamlin seldom made love to anybody, but permitted it to be made to him with good-humored deprecation and cheerful skepticism. He had once, quite accidentally, while riding, come upon her when she had strayed from her own riding party, and had behaved with such unexpected circumspection

and propriety, not to mention a certain thoughtful abstraction,—it was the day he had received Sophy's letter,—that she was constrained to make the first advances. This led to a later innocent rendezvous, in which Mrs. Camperly was impelled to confide to Mr. Hamlin the fact that her husband had really never understood her. Jack listened with an understanding and sympathy quickened by long experience of such confessions. If anything had ever kept him from marriage it was this evident incompatibility of the conjugal relations with a just conception of the feminine soul and its aspirations.

And so eventually this yearning for sympathy dragged Mrs. Camperly's clean skirts and rustic purity after Jack's heels into various places and various situations not so clean, rural, or innocent; made her miserably unhappy in his absence, and still more miserably happy in his presence; impelled her to lie, cheat, and bear false witness; forced her to listen with mingled shame and admiration to narrow criticism of his faults, from natures so palpably inferior to his own that her moral sense was confused and shaken; gave her two distinct lives, but so unreal and feverish that, with a recklessness equal to his own, she was at last ready to merge them both into his. For the first time in his life Mr. Hamlin found himself bored at the beginning of an affair, actually hesitated, and suddenly disappeared from San Francisco.

He turned up a few days later at Aunt Chloe's door, with various packages of presents and quite the air of a returning father of a family, to the intense delight of that lady and to

Sophy's proud gratification. For he was lost in a profuse, boyish admiration of her pretty studio, and in wholesome reverence for her art and her astounding progress. They were also amused at his awe and evident alarm at the portraits of two ladies, her latest sitters, that were still on the easels, and, in consideration of his half-assumed, half-real bashfulness, they turned their faces to the wall. Then his quick, observant eye detected a photograph of himself on the mantel.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

Sophy and Aunt Chloe exchanged meaning glances. Sophy had, as a surprise to Jack, just completed a handsome crayon portrait of himself from an old photograph furnished by Hannibal, and the picture was at that moment in the window of her former patron,—the photographer.

"Oh, dat! Miss Sophy jus' put it dar fo' de lady sitters to look at to gib 'em a pleasant 'spresshion," said Aunt Chloe, chuckling.

Mr. Hamlin did not laugh, but quietly slipped the photograph into his pocket. Yet, perhaps, it had not been recognized.

Then Sophy proposed to have luncheon in the studio; it was quite "Bohemian" and fashionable, and many artists did it. But to her great surprise Jack gravely objected, preferring the little parlor of Aunt Chloe, the vine-fringed windows, and the heavy respectable furniture. He thought it was profaning the studio, and then—anybody might come in. This unusual circumspection amused them, and was believed to be part of the boyish awe with which Jack regarded the models, the draperies, and the studies

on the walls. Certain it was that he was much more at his ease in the parlor, and when he and Sophy were once more alone at their meal, although he ate nothing, he had regained all his old naivete. Presently he leaned forward and placed his hand fraternally on her arm. Sophy looked up with an equally frank smile.

“You know I promised to let bygones be bygones, eh? Well, I intended it, and more,—I intended to make ‘em so. I told you I’d never speak to you again of that man who tried to run you off, and I intended that no one else should. Well, as he was the only one who could talk—that meant him. But the cards are out of my hands; the game’s been played without me. For he’s dead!”

The girl started. Mr. Hamlin’s hand passed caressingly twice or thrice along her sleeve with a peculiar gentleness that seemed to magnetize her.

“Dead,” he repeated slowly. “Shot in San Diego by another man, but not by me. I had him tracked as far as that, and had my eyes on him, but it wasn’t my deal. But there,” he added, giving her magnetized arm a gentle and final tap as if to awaken it, “he’s dead, and so is the whole story. And now we’ll drop it forever.”

The girl’s downcast eyes were fixed on the table. “But there’s my sister,” she murmured.

“Did she know you went with him?” asked Jack.

“No; but she knows I ran away.”

“Well, you ran away from home to study how to be an artist, don’t you see? Some day she’ll find out you ARE ONE; that settles the whole thing.”

They were both quite cheerful again when Aunt Chloe returned to clear the table, especially Jack, who was in the best spirits, with preternaturally bright eyes and a somewhat rare color on his cheeks. Aunt Chloe, who had noticed that his breathing was hurried at times, watched him narrowly, and when later he slipped from the room, followed him into the passage. He was leaning against the wall. In an instant the negress was at his side.

“De Lawdy Gawd, Marse Jack, not AGIN?”

He took his handkerchief, slightly streaked with blood, from his lips and said faintly, “Yes, it came on—on the boat; but I thought the d—d thing was over. Get me out of this, quick, to some hotel, before she knows it. You can tell her I was called away. Say that”—but his breath failed him, and when Aunt Chloe caught him like a child in her strong arms he could make no resistance.

In another hour he was unconscious, with two doctors at his bedside, in the little room that had been occupied by Sophy. It was a sharp attack, but prompt attendance and skillful nursing availed; he rallied the next day, but it would be weeks, the doctors said, before he could be removed in safety. Sophy was transferred to the parlor, but spent most of her time at Jack’s bedside with Aunt Chloe, or in the studio with the door open between it and the bedroom. In spite of his enforced idleness and weakness, it was again a singularly pleasant experience to Jack; it amused him to sometimes see Sophy at her work through the open door, and when sitters came,—for he had insisted on her continuing her duties as before, keeping his invalid presence in

the house a secret,—he had all the satisfaction of a mischievous boy in rehearsing to Sophy such of the conversation as could be overheard through the closed door, and speculating on the possible wonder and chagrin of the sitters had they discovered him. Even when he was convalescent and strong enough to be helped into the parlor and garden, he preferred to remain propped up in Sophy's little bedroom. It was evident, however, that this predilection was connected with no suggestion nor reminiscence of Sophy herself. It was true that he had once asked her if it didn't make her "feel like home." The decided negative from Sophy seemed to mildly surprise him. "That's odd," he said; "now all these fixings and things," pointing to the flowers in a vase, the little hanging shelf of books, the knickknacks on the mantel-shelf, and the few feminine ornaments that still remained, "look rather like home to me."

So the days slipped by, and although Mr. Hamlin was soon able to walk short distances, leaning on Sophy's arm, in the evening twilight, along the river bank, he was still missed from the haunts of dissipated men. A good many people wondered, and others, chiefly of the more irrepressible sex, were singularly concerned. Apparently one of these, one sultry afternoon, stopped before the shadowed window of a photographer's; she was a handsome, well-dressed woman, yet bearing a certain countrylike simplicity that was unlike the restless smartness of the more urban promenaders who passed her. Nevertheless she had halted before Mr. Hamlin's picture, which Sophy had not yet

dared to bring home and present to him, and was gazing at it with rapt and breathless attention. Suddenly she shook down her veil and entered the shop. Could the proprietor kindly tell her if that portrait was the work of a local artist?

The proprietor was both proud and pleased to say that IT WAS! It was the work of a Miss Brown, a young girl student; in fact, a mere schoolgirl one might say. He could show her others of her pictures.

Thanks. But could he tell her if this portrait was from life?

No doubt; the young lady had a studio, and he himself had sent her sitters.

And perhaps this was the portrait of one that he had sent her?

No; but she was very popular and becoming quite the fashion. Very probably this gentleman, who, he understood, was quite a public character, had heard of her, and selected her on that account.

The lady's face flushed slightly. The photographer continued. The picture was not for sale; it was only there on exhibition; in fact it was to be returned to-morrow.

To the sitter?

He couldn't say. It was to go back to the studio. Perhaps the sitter would be there.

And this studio? Could she have its address?

The man wrote a few lines on his card. Perhaps the lady would be kind enough to say that he had sent her. The lady, thanking him, partly lifted her veil to show a charming smile, and

gracefully withdrew. The photographer was pleased. Miss Brown had evidently got another sitter, and, from that momentary glimpse of her face, it would be a picture as beautiful and attractive as the man's. But what was the odd idea that struck him? She certainly reminded him of some one! There was the same heavy hair, only this lady's was golden, and she was older and more mature. And he remained for a moment with knitted brows musing over his counter.

Meantime the fair stranger was making her way towards the river suburb. When she reached Aunt Chloe's cottage, she paused, with the unfamiliar curiosity of a newcomer, over its quaint and incongruous exterior. She hesitated a moment also when Aunt Chloe appeared in the doorway, and, with a puzzled survey of her features, went upstairs to announce a visitor. There was the sound of hurried shutting of doors, of the moving of furniture, quick footsteps across the floor, and then a girlish laugh that startled her. She ascended the stairs breathlessly to Aunt Chloe's summons, found the negress on the landing, and knocked at a door which bore a card marked "Studio." The door opened; she entered; there were two sudden outcries that might have come from one voice.

"Sophonisba!"

"Marianne!"

"Hush."

The woman had seized Sophy by the wrist and dragged her to the window. There was a haggard look of desperation in her face

akin to that which Hamlin had once seen in her sister's eyes on the boat, as she said huskily: "I did not know YOU were here. I came to see the woman who had painted Mr. Hamlin's portrait. I did not know it was YOU. Listen! Quick! answer me one question. Tell me—I implore you—for the sake of the mother who bore us both!—tell me—is this the man for whom you left home?"

"No! No! A hundred times no!"

Then there was a silence. Mr. Hamlin from the bedroom heard no more.

An hour later, when the two women opened the studio door, pale but composed, they were met by the anxious and tearful face of Aunt Chloe.

"Lawdy Gawd, Missy,—but dey done gone!—bofe of 'em!"

"Who is gone?" demanded Sophy, as the woman beside her trembled and grew paler still.

"Marse Jack and dat fool nigger, Hannibal."

"Mr. Hamlin gone?" repeated Sophy incredulously. "When? Where?"

"Jess now—on de down boat. Sudden business. Didn't like to disturb yo' and yo' friend. Said he'd write."

"But he was ill—almost helpless," gasped Sophy.

"Dat's why he took dat old nigger. Lawdy, Missy, bress yo' heart. Dey both knows aich udder, shuah! It's all right. Dar now, dar dey are; listen."

She held up her hand. A slow pulsation, that might have been the dull, labored beating of their own hearts, was making

itself felt throughout the little cottage. It came nearer,—a deep regular inspiration that seemed slowly to fill and possess the whole tranquil summer twilight. It was nearer still—was abreast of the house—passed—grew fainter and at last died away like a deep-drawn sigh. It was the down boat, that was now separating Mr. Hamlin and his protegee, even as it had once brought them together.

AN INGENUE OF THE SIERRAS

I

We all held our breath as the coach rushed through the semi-darkness of Galloper's Ridge. The vehicle itself was only a huge lumbering shadow; its side-lights were carefully extinguished, and Yuba Bill had just politely removed from the lips of an outside passenger even the cigar with which he had been ostentatiously exhibiting his coolness. For it had been rumored that the Ramon Martinez gang of "road agents" were "laying" for us on the second grade, and would time the passage of our lights across Galloper's in order to intercept us in the "brush" beyond. If we could cross the ridge without being seen, and so get through the brush before they reached it, we were safe. If they followed, it would only be a stern chase with the odds in our favor.

The huge vehicle swayed from side to side, rolled, dipped, and plunged, but Bill kept the track, as if, in the whispered words of the Expressman, he could "feel and smell" the road he could no longer see. We knew that at times we hung perilously over the edge of slopes that eventually dropped a thousand feet sheer to the tops of the sugar-pines below, but we knew that Bill knew it also. The half visible heads of the horses, drawn wedge-wise together by the tightened reins, appeared to cleave the darkness

like a ploughshare, held between his rigid hands. Even the hoof-beats of the six horses had fallen into a vague, monotonous, distant roll. Then the ridge was crossed, and we plunged into the still blacker obscurity of the brush. Rather we no longer seemed to move—it was only the phantom night that rushed by us. The horses might have been submerged in some swift Lethean stream; nothing but the top of the coach and the rigid bulk of Yuba Bill arose above them. Yet even in that awful moment our speed was unslackened; it was as if Bill cared no longer to GUIDE but only to drive, or as if the direction of his huge machine was determined by other hands than his. An incautious whisperer hazarded the paralyzing suggestion of our “meeting another team.” To our great astonishment Bill overheard it; to our greater astonishment he replied. “It ‘ud be only a neck and neck race which would get to h-ll first,” he said quietly. But we were relieved—for he had SPOKEN! Almost simultaneously the wider turnpike began to glimmer faintly as a visible track before us; the wayside trees fell out of line, opened up, and dropped off one after another; we were on the broader table-land, out of danger, and apparently unperceived and unpursued.

Nevertheless in the conversation that broke out again with the relighting of the lamps, and the comments, congratulations, and reminiscences that were freely exchanged, Yuba Bill preserved a dissatisfied and even resentful silence. The most generous praise of his skill and courage awoke no response. “I reckon the old man waz just spilin’ for a fight, and is feelin’ disappointed,”

said a passenger. But those who knew that Bill had the true fighter's scorn for any purely purposeless conflict were more or less concerned and watchful of him. He would drive steadily for four or five minutes with thoughtfully knitted brows, but eyes still keenly observant under his slouched hat, and then, relaxing his strained attitude, would give way to a movement of impatience. "You ain't uneasy about anything, Bill, are you?" asked the Expressman confidentially. Bill lifted his eyes with a slightly contemptuous surprise. "Not about anything ter COME. It's what HEZ happened that I don't exackly sabe. I don't see no signs of Ramon's gang ever havin' been out at all, and ef they were out I don't see why they didn't go for us."

"The simple fact is that our ruse was successful," said an outside passenger. "They waited to see our lights on the ridge, and, not seeing them, missed us until we had passed. That's my opinion."

"You ain't puttin' any price on that opinion, air ye?" inquired Bill politely.

"No."

"Cos thar's a comic paper in 'Frisco pays for them things, and I've seen worse things in it."

"Come off, Bill," retorted the passenger, slightly nettled by the tittering of his companions. "Then what did you put out the lights for?"

"Well," returned Bill grimly, "it mout have been because I didn't keer to hev you chaps blazin' away at the first bush you

THOUGHT you saw move in your skeer, and bringin' down their fire on us."

The explanation, though unsatisfactory, was by no means an improbable one, and we thought it better to accept it with a laugh. Bill, however, resumed his abstracted manner.

"Who got in at the Summit?" he at last asked abruptly of the Expressman.

"Derrick and Simpson of Cold Spring, and one of the 'Excelsior' boys," responded the Expressman.

"And that Pike County girl from Dow's Flat, with her bundles. Don't forget her," added the outside passenger ironically.

"Does anybody here know her?" continued Bill, ignoring the irony.

"You'd better ask Judge Thompson; he was mighty attentive to her; gettin' her a seat by the off window, and lookin' after her bundles and things."

"Gettin' her a seat by the WINDOW?" repeated Bill.

"Yes, she wanted to see everything, and wasn't afraid of the shooting."

"Yes," broke in a third passenger, "and he was so d-d civil that when she dropped her ring in the straw, he struck a match agin all your rules, you know, and held it for her to find it. And it was just as we were crossin' through the brush, too. I saw the hull thing through the window, for I was hanging over the wheels with my gun ready for action. And it wasn't no fault of Judge Thompson's if his d-d foolishness hadn't shown us up, and got

us a shot from the gang.”

Bill gave a short grunt, but drove steadily on without further comment or even turning his eyes to the speaker.

We were now not more than a mile from the station at the crossroads where we were to change horses. The lights already glimmered in the distance, and there was a faint suggestion of the coming dawn on the summits of the ridge to the west. We had plunged into a belt of timber, when suddenly a horseman emerged at a sharp canter from a trail that seemed to be parallel with our own. We were all slightly startled; Yuba Bill alone preserving his moody calm.

“Hullo!” he said.

The stranger wheeled to our side as Bill slackened his speed. He seemed to be a “packer” or freight muleteer.

“Ye didn’t get ‘held up’ on the Divide?” continued Bill cheerfully.

“No,” returned the packer, with a laugh; “I don’t carry treasure. But I see you’re all right, too. I saw you crossin’ over Galloper’s.”

“SAW us?” said Bill sharply. “We had our lights out.”

“Yes, but there was suthin’ white—a handkerchief or woman’s veil, I reckon—hangin’ from the window. It was only a movin’ spot agin the hillside, but ez I was lookin’ out for ye I knew it was you by that. Good-night!”

He cantered away. We tried to look at each other’s faces, and at Bill’s expression in the darkness, but he neither spoke nor

stirred until he threw down the reins when we stopped before the station. The passengers quickly descended from the roof; the Expressman was about to follow, but Bill plucked his sleeve.

“I’m goin’ to take a look over this yer stage and these yer passengers with ye, afore we start.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“Well,” said Bill, slowly disengaging himself from one of his enormous gloves, “when we waltzed down into the brush up there I saw a man, ez plain ez I see you, rise up from it. I thought our time had come and the band was goin’ to play, when he sorter drew back, made a sign, and we just scooted past him.”

“Well?”

“Well,” said Bill, “it means that this yer coach was PASSED THROUGH FREE to-night.”

“You don’t object to THAT—surely? I think we were deucedly lucky.”

Bill slowly drew off his other glove. “I’ve been riskin’ my everlastin’ life on this d–d line three times a week,” he said with mock humility, “and I’m allus thankful for small mercies. BUT,” he added grimly, “when it comes down to being passed free by some pal of a hoss thief, and thet called a speshal Providence, I AIN’T IN IT! No, sir, I ain’t in it!”

II

It was with mixed emotions that the passengers heard that a delay of fifteen minutes to tighten certain screw-bolts had been ordered by the autocratic Bill. Some were anxious to get their breakfast at Sugar Pine, but others were not averse to linger for the daylight that promised greater safety on the road. The Expressman, knowing the real cause of Bill's delay, was nevertheless at a loss to understand the object of it. The passengers were all well known; any idea of complicity with the road agents was wild and impossible, and, even if there was a confederate of the gang among them, he would have been more likely to precipitate a robbery than to check it. Again, the discovery of such a confederate—to whom they clearly owed their safety—and his arrest would have been quite against the Californian sense of justice, if not actually illegal. It seemed evident that Bill's quixotic sense of honor was leading him astray.

The station consisted of a stable, a wagon shed, and a building containing three rooms. The first was fitted up with "bunks" or sleeping berths for the employees; the second was the kitchen; and the third and larger apartment was dining-room or sitting-room, and was used as general waiting-room for the passengers. It was not a refreshment station, and there was no "bar." But a mysterious command from the omnipotent Bill produced a demijohn of whiskey, with which he hospitably treated the

company. The seductive influence of the liquor loosened the tongue of the gallant Judge Thompson. He admitted to having struck a match to enable the fair Pike Countian to find her ring, which, however, proved to have fallen in her lap. She was “a fine, healthy young woman—a type of the Far West, sir; in fact, quite a prairie blossom! yet simple and guileless as a child.” She was on her way to Marysville, he believed, “although she expected to meet friends—a friend, in fact—later on.” It was her first visit to a large town—in fact, any civilized centre—since she crossed the plains three years ago. Her girlish curiosity was quite touching, and her innocence irresistible. In fact, in a country whose tendency was to produce “frivolity and forwardness in young girls, he found her a most interesting young person.” She was even then out in the stable-yard watching the horses being harnessed, “preferring to indulge a pardonable healthy young curiosity than to listen to the empty compliments of the younger passengers.”

The figure which Bill saw thus engaged, without being otherwise distinguished, certainly seemed to justify the Judge’s opinion. She appeared to be a well-matured country girl, whose frank gray eyes and large laughing mouth expressed a wholesome and abiding gratification in her life and surroundings. She was watching the replacing of luggage in the boot. A little feminine start, as one of her own parcels was thrown somewhat roughly on the roof, gave Bill his opportunity. “Now there,” he growled to the helper, “ye ain’t carting stone! Look out, will yer! Some

of your things, miss?" he added, with gruff courtesy, turning to her. "These yer trunks, for instance?"

She smiled a pleasant assent, and Bill, pushing aside the helper, seized a large square trunk in his arms. But from excess of zeal, or some other mischance, his foot slipped, and he came down heavily, striking the corner of the trunk on the ground and loosening its hinges and fastenings. It was a cheap, common-looking affair, but the accident discovered in its yawning lid a quantity of white, lace-edged feminine apparel of an apparently superior quality. The young lady uttered another cry and came quickly forward, but Bill was profuse in his apologies, himself girded the broken box with a strap, and declared his intention of having the company "make it good" to her with a new one. Then he casually accompanied her to the door of the waiting-room, entered, made a place for her before the fire by simply lifting the nearest and most youthful passenger by the coat collar from the stool that he was occupying, and, having installed the lady in it, displaced another man who was standing before the chimney, and, drawing himself up to his full six feet of height in front of her, glanced down upon his fair passenger as he took his waybill from his pocket.

"Your name is down here as Miss Mullins?" he said.

She looked up, became suddenly aware that she and her questioner were the centre of interest to the whole circle of passengers, and, with a slight rise of color, returned, "Yes."

"Well, Miss Mullins, I've got a question or two to ask ye. I ask

it straight out afore this crowd. It's in my rights to take ye aside and ask it—but that ain't my style; I'm no detective. I needn't ask it at all, but act as ef I knowed the answer, or I might leave it to be asked by others. Ye needn't answer it ef ye don't like; ye've got a friend over ther—Judge Thompson—who is a friend to ye, right or wrong, jest as any other man here is—as though ye'd packed your own jury. Well, the simple question I've got to ask ye is THIS: Did you signal to anybody from the coach when we passed Galloper's an hour ago?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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