BRET HARTE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

It may be remembered that it was the habit of that gallant "war-horse" of the Calaveras democracy, Colonel Starbottle, at the close of a political campaign, to return to his original profession of the Law. Perhaps it could not be called a peaceful retirement. The same fiery-tongued eloquence and full-breasted chivalry which had in turns thrilled and overawed freemen at the polls were no less fervid and embattled before a jury. Yet the Colonel was counsel for two or three pastoral Ditch companies and certain bucolic corporations, and although he managed to import into the simplest question of contract more or less abuse of opposing counsel, and occasionally mingled precedents of law with antecedents of his adversary, his legal victories were seldom complicated by bloodshed. He was only once shot at by a free-handed judge, and twice assaulted by an over-sensitive litigant.

Nevertheless, it was thought merely prudent, while preparing the papers in the well known case of "The Arcadian Shepherds' Association of Tuolumne versus the Kedron Vine and Fig Tree Growers of Calaveras," that the Colonel should seek with a shotgun the seclusion of his partner's law office in the sylvan outskirts of Rough and Ready for that complete rest and serious preoccupation which Marysville could not afford.

It was an exceptionally hot day. The painted shingles of the plain wooden one-storied building in which the Colonel sat were warped and blistering in the direct rays of the fierce, untempered sun. The tin sign bearing the dazzling legend, "Starbottle and Bungstarter, Attorneys and Counselors," glowed with an insufferable light; the two pine-trees still left in the clearing around the house, ineffective as shade, seemed only to have absorbed the day-long heat through every scorched and crisp twig and fibre, to radiate it again with the pungent smell of a slowly smouldering fire; the air was motionless yet vibrating in the sunlight; on distant shallows the half-dried river was flashing and intolerable.

Seated in a wooden armchair before a table covered with books and papers, yet with that apparently haughty attitude towards it affected by gentlemen of abdominal fullness, Colonel Starbottle supported himself with one hand grasping the arm of his chair and the other vigorously plying a huge palm-leaf fan. He was perspiring freely. He had taken off his characteristic blue frock-coat, waistcoat, cravat, and collar, and, stripped only to his

ruffled shirt and white drill trousers, presented the appearance from the opposite side of the table of having hastily risen to work in his nightgown. A glass with a thin sediment of sugar and lemon-peel remaining in it stood near his elbow. Suddenly a black shadow fell on the staring, uncarpeted hall. It was that of a stranger who had just entered from the noiseless dust of the deserted road. The Colonel cast a rapid glance at his sword-cane, which lay on the table.

But the stranger, although sallow and morose-looking, was evidently of pacific intent. He paused on the threshold in a kind of surly embarrassment.

"I reckon this is Colonel Starbottle," he said at last, glancing gloomily round him, as if the interview was not entirely of his own seeking. "Well, I've seen you often enough, though you don't know me. My name's Jo Corbin. I guess," he added, still discontentedly, "I have to consult you about something."

"Corbin?" repeated the Colonel in his jauntiest manner. "Ah! Any relation to old Maje Corbin of Nashville, sir?"

"No," said the stranger briefly. "I'm from Shelbyville."

"The Major," continued the Colonel, half closing his eyes as if to follow the Major into the dreamy past, "the old Major, sir, a matter of five or six years ago, was one of my most intimate political friends,—in fact, sir, my most intimate friend. Take a chyar!"

But the stranger had already taken one, and during the Colonel's reminiscence had leaned forward, with his eyes on the

ground, discontentedly swinging his soft hat between his legs. "Did you know Tom Frisbee, of Yolo?" he asked abruptly.

"Er—no."

"Nor even heard anything about Frisbee, nor what happened to him?" continued the man, with aggrieved melancholy.

In point of fact the Colonel did not think that he had.

"Nor anything about his being killed over at Fresno?" said the stranger, with a desponding implication that the interview after all was a failure.

"If—er—if you could—er—give me a hint or two," suggested the Colonel blandly.

"There wasn't much," said the stranger, "if you don't remember." He paused, then rising, he gloomily dragged his chair slowly beside the table, and taking up a paperweight examined it with heavy dissatisfaction. "You see," he went on slowly, "I killed him—it was a quo'll. He was my pardner, but I reckon he must have drove me hard. Yes, sir," he added with aggrieved reflection, "I reckon he drove me hard."

The Colonel smiled courteously, slightly expanding his chest under the homicidal relation, as if, having taken it in and made it a part of himself, he was ready, if necessary, to become personally responsible for it. Then lifting his empty glass to the light, he looked at it with half closed eyes, in polite imitation of his companion's examination of the paper-weight, and set it down again. A casual spectator from the window might have imagined that the two were engaged in an amicable inventory of

the furniture.

"And the—er—actual circumstances?" asked the Colonel.

"Oh, it was fair enough fight. THEY'LL tell you that. And so would HE, I reckon—if he could. He was ugly and bedev'lin', but I didn't care to quo'll, and give him the go-by all the time. He kept on, followed me out of the shanty, drew, and fired twice. I"—he stopped and regarded his hat a moment as if it was a corroborating witness—"I—I closed with him—I had to—it was my only chance, and that ended it—and with his own revolver. I never drew mine."

"I see," said the Colonel, nodding, "clearly justifiable and honorable as regards the code. And you wish me to defend you?"

The stranger's gloomy expression of astonishment now turned to blank hopelessness.

"I knew you didn't understand," he said, despairingly. "Why, all THAT was TWO YEARS AGO. It's all settled and done and gone. The jury found for me at the inquest. It ain't THAT I want to see you about. It's something arising out of it."

"Ah," said the Colonel, affably, "a vendetta, perhaps. Some friend or relation of his taken up the quarrel?"

The stranger looked abstractedly at Starbottle. "You think a relation might; or would feel in that sort of way?"

"Why, blank it all, sir," said the Colonel, "nothing is more common. Why, in '52 one of my oldest friends, Doctor Byrne, of St. Jo, the seventh in a line from old General Byrne, of St. Louis, was killed, sir, by Pinkey Riggs, seventh in a line from Senator

Riggs, of Kentucky. Original cause, sir, something about a d–d roasting ear, or a blank persimmon in 1832; forty-seven men wiped out in twenty years. Fact, sir."

"It ain't that," said the stranger, moving hesitatingly in his chair. "If it was anything of that sort I wouldn't mind,—it might bring matters to a wind-up, and I shouldn't have to come here and have this cursed talk with you."

It was so evident that this frank and unaffected expression of some obscure disgust with his own present position had no other implication, that the Colonel did not except to it. Yet the man did not go on. He stopped and seemed lost in sombre contemplation of his hat.

The Colonel leaned back in his chair, fanned himself elegantly, wiped his forehead with a large pongee handkerchief, and looking at his companion, whose shadowed abstraction seemed to render him impervious to the heat, said:—

"My dear Mr. Corbin, I perfectly understand you. Blank it all, sir, the temperature in this infernal hole is quite enough to render any confidential conversation between gentlemen upon delicate matters utterly impossible. It's almost as near Hades, sir, as they make it,—as I trust you and I, Mr. Corbin, will ever experience. I propose," continued the Colonel, with airy geniality, "some light change and refreshment. The bar-keeper of the Magnolia is—er —I may say, sir, facile princeps in the concoction of mint juleps, and there is a back room where I have occasionally conferred with political leaders at election time. It is but a step, sir—in fact,

on Main Street—round the corner."

The stranger looked up and then rose mechanically as the Colonel resumed his coat and waistcoat, but not his collar and cravat, which lay limp and dejected among his papers. Then, sheltering himself beneath a large-brimmed Panama hat, and hooking his cane on his arm, he led the way, fan in hand, into the road, tiptoeing in his tight, polished boots through the red, impalpable dust with his usual jaunty manner, yet not without a profane suggestion of burning ploughshares. The stranger strode in silence by his side in the burning sun, impenetrable in his own morose shadow.

But the Magnolia was fragrant, like its namesake, with mint and herbal odors, cool with sprinkled floors, and sparkling with broken ice on its counters, like dewdrops on white, unfolded petals—and slightly soporific with the subdued murmur of droning loungers, who were heavy with its sweets. The gallant Colonel nodded with confidential affability to the spotless-shirted bar-keeper, and then taking Corbin by the arm fraternally conducted him into a small apartment in the rear of the bar-room. It was evidently used as the office of the proprietor, and contained a plain desk, table, and chairs. At the rear window, Nature, not entirely evicted, looked in with a few straggling buckeyes and a dusty myrtle, over the body of a lately-felled pine-tree, that flaunted from an upflung branch a still green spray as if it were a drooping banner lifted by a dead but rigid arm. From the adjoining room the faint, monotonous click of billiard balls,

languidly played, came at intervals like the dry notes of cicale in the bushes.

The bar-keeper brought two glasses crowned with mint and diademed with broken ice. The Colonel took a long pull at his portion, and leaned back in his chair with a bland gulp of satisfaction and dreamily patient eyes. The stranger mechanically sipped the contents of his glass, and then, without having altered his reluctant expression, drew from his breast-pocket a number of old letters. Holding them displayed in his fingers like a difficult hand of cards, and with something of the air of a dispirited player, he began:—

"You see, about six months after this yer trouble I got this letter." He picked out a well worn, badly written missive, and put it into Colonel Starbottle's hands, rising at the same time and leaning over him as he read. "You see, she that writ it says as how she hadn't heard from her son for a long time, but owing to his having spoken once about ME, she was emboldened to write and ask me if I knew what had gone of him." He was pointing his finger at each line of the letter as he read it, or rather seemed to translate it from memory with a sad familiarity. "Now," he continued in parenthesis, "you see this kind o' got me. I knew he had got relatives in Kentucky. I knew that all this trouble had been put in the paper with his name and mine, but this here name of Martha Jeffcourt at the bottom didn't seem to jibe with it. Then I remembered that he had left a lot of letters in his trunk in the shanty, and I looked 'em over. And I found that his name

WAS Tom Jeffcourt, and that he'd been passin' under the name of Frisbee all this time."

"Perfectly natural and a frequent occurrence," interposed the Colonel cheerfully. "Only last year I met an old friend whom we'll call Stidger, of New Orleans, at the Union Club, 'Frisco. 'How are you, Stidger?' I said; 'I haven't seen you since we used to meet —driving over the Shell Road in '53.' 'Excuse me, sir,' said he, 'my name is not Stidger, it's Brown.' I looked him in the eye, sir, and saw him quiver. 'Then I must apologize to Stidger,' I said, 'for supposing him capable of changing his name.' He came to me an hour after, all in a tremble. 'For God's sake, Star,' he said, —always called me Star,—'don't go back on me, but you know family affairs—another woman, beautiful creature,' etc., etc.,— yes, sir, perfectly common, but a blank mistake. When a man once funks his own name he'll turn tail on anything. Sorry for this man, Friezecoat, or Turncoat, or whatever's his d–d name; but it's so."

The suggestion did not, however, seem to raise the stranger's spirits or alter his manner. "His name was Jeffcourt, and this here was his mother," he went on drearily; "and you see here she says"—pointing to the letter again—"she's been expecting money from him and it don't come, and she's mighty hard up. And that gave me an idea. I don't know," he went on, regarding the Colonel with gloomy doubt, "as you'll think it was much; I don't know as you wouldn't call it a d–d fool idea, but I got it all the same." He stopped, hesitated, and went on. "You see

this man, Frisbee or Jeffcourt, was my pardner. We were good friends up to the killing, and then he drove me hard. I think I told you he drove me hard,—didn't I? Well, he did. But the idea I got was this. Considerin' I killed him after all, and so to speak disappointed them, I reckoned I'd take upon myself the care of that family and send 'em money every month."

The Colonel slightly straitened his clean-shaven mouth. "A kind of expiation or amercement by fine, known to the Mosaic, Roman, and old English law. Gad, sir, the Jews might have made you MARRY his widow or sister. An old custom, and I think superseded—sir, properly superseded—by the alternative of ordeal by battle in the mediaeval times. I don't myself fancy these pecuniary fashions of settling wrongs,—but go on."

"I wrote her," continued Corbin, "that her son was dead, but that he and me had some interests together in a claim, and that I was very glad to know where to send her what would be his share every month. I thought it no use to tell her I killed him,—may be she might refuse to take it. I sent her a hundred dollars every month since. Sometimes it's been pretty hard sleddin' to do it, for I ain't rich; sometimes I've had to borrow the money, but I reckoned that I was only paying for my share in this here business of his bein' dead, and I did it."

"And I understand you that this Jeffcourt really had no interest in your claim?"

Corbin looked at him in dull astonishment. "Not a cent, of course; I thought I told you that. But that weren't his fault, for

he never had anything, and owed me money. In fact," he added gloomily, "it was because I hadn't any more to give him—havin' sold my watch for grub—that he quo'lled with me that day, and up and called me a 'sneakin' Yankee hound.' I told you he drove me hard."

The Colonel coughed slightly and resumed his jaunty manner. "And the—er—mother was, of course, grateful and satisfied?"

"Well, no,—not exactly." He stopped again and took up his letters once more, sorted and arranged them as if to play out his unfinished but hopeless hand, and drawing out another, laid it before the Colonel. "You see, this Mrs. Jeffcourt, after a time, reckoned she ought to have MORE money than I sent her, and wrote saying that she had always understood from her son (he that never wrote but once a year, remember) that this claim of ours (that she never knew of, you know) was paying much more than I sent her—and she wanted a return of accounts and papers, or she'd write to some lawyer, mighty quick. Well, I reckoned that all this was naturally in the line of my trouble, and I DID manage to scrape together fifty dollars more for two months and sent it. But that didn't seem to satisfy her—as you see." He dealt Colonel Starbottle another letter from his baleful hand with an unchanged face. "When I got that,—well, I just up and told her the whole thing. I sent her the account of the fight from the newspapers, and told her as how her son was the Frisbee that was my pardner, and how he never had a cent in the world—but how I'd got that idea to help her, and was willing to carry it out as long as I could."

"Did you keep a copy of that letter?" asked the Colonel, straitening his mask-like mouth.

"No," said Corbin moodily. "What was the good? I know'd she'd got the letter,—and she did,—for that is what she wrote back." He laid another letter before the Colonel, who hastily read a few lines and then brought his fat white hand violently on the desk.

"Why, d—n it all, sir, this is BLACKMAIL! As infamous a case of threatening and chantage as I ever heard of."

"Well," said Corbin, dejectedly, "I don't know. You see she allows that I murdered Frisbee to get hold of his claim, and that I'm trying to buy her off, and that if I don't come down with twenty thousand dollars on the nail, and notes for the rest, she'll prosecute me. Well, mebbe the thing looks to her like that—mebbe you know I've got to shoulder that too. Perhaps it's all in the same line."

Colonel Starbottle for a moment regarded Corbin critically. In spite of his chivalrous attitude towards the homicidal faculty, the Colonel was not optimistic in regard to the baser pecuniary interests of his fellow-man. It was quite on the cards that his companion might have murdered his partner to get possession of the claim. It was true that Corbin had voluntarily assumed an unrecorded and hitherto unknown responsibility that had never been even suspected, and was virtually self-imposed. But that might have been the usual one unerring blunder of criminal sagacity and forethought. It was equally true that he did not look

or act like a mean murderer; but that was nothing. However, there was no evidence of these reflections in the Colonel's face. Rather he suddenly beamed with an excess of politeness. "Would you—er—mind, Mr. Corbin, whilst I am going over those letters again, to—er—step across to my office—and—er—bring me the copy of 'Wood's Digest' that lies on my table? It will save some time."

The stranger rose, as if the service was part of his self-imposed trouble, and as equally hopeless with the rest, and taking his hat departed to execute the commission. As soon as he had left the building Colonel Starbottle opened the door and mysteriously beckoned the bar-keeper within.

"Do you remember anything of the killing of a man named Frisbee over in Fresno three years ago?"

The bar-keeper whistled meditatively. "Three years ago—Frisbee?—Fresno?—no? Yes—but that was only one of his names. He was Jack Walker over here. Yes—and by Jove! that feller that was here with you killed him. Darn my skin, but I thought I recognized him."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," said the Colonel, impatiently. "But did Frisbee have any PROPERTY? Did he have any means of his own?"

"Property?" echoed the bar-keeper with scornful incredulity. "Property? Means? The only property and means he ever had was the free lunches or drinks he took in at somebody else's expense. Why, the only chance he ever had of earning a square meal was when that fellow that was with you just now took him up and

made him his partner. And the only way HE could get rid of him was to kill him! And I didn't think he had it in him. Rather a queer kind o' chap,—good deal of hayseed about him. Showed up at the inquest so glum and orkerd that if the boys hadn't made up their minds this yer Frisbee ORTER BEEN killed—it might have gone hard with him."

"Mr. Corbin," said Colonel Starbottle, with a pained but unmistakable hauteur and a singular elevation of his shirt frill, as if it had become of its own accord erectile, "Mr. Corbin—er—er—is the distant relative of old Major Corbin, of Nashville—er—one of my oldest political friends. When Mr. Corbin—er—returns, you can conduct him to me. And, if you please, replenish the glasses."

When the bar-keeper respectfully showed Mr. Corbin and "Wood's Digest" into the room again, the Colonel was still beaming and apologetic.

"A thousand thanks, sir, but except to SHOW you the law if you require it—hardly necessary. I have—er—glanced over the woman's letters again; it would be better, perhaps, if you had kept copies of your own—but still these tell the whole story and YOUR OWN. The claim is preposterous! You have simply to drop the whole thing. Stop your remittances, stop your correspondence,—pay no heed to any further letters and wait results. You need fear nothing further, sir; I stake my professional reputation on it."

The gloom of the stranger seemed only to increase as the

Colonel reached his triumphant conclusion.

"I reckoned you'd say that," he said slowly, "but it won't do. I shall go on paying as far as I can. It's my trouble and I'll see it through."

"But, my dear sir, consider," gasped the Colonel. "You are in the hands of an infamous harpy, who is using her son's blood to extract money from you. You have already paid a dozen times more than the life of that d–d sneak was worth; and more than that—the longer you keep on paying you are helping to give color to their claim and estopping your own defense. And Gad, sir, you're making a precedent for this sort of thing! you are offering a premium to widows and orphans. A gentleman won't be able to exchange shots with another without making himself liable for damages. I am willing to admit that your feelings—though, in my opinion—er—exaggerated—do you credit; but I am satisfied that they are utterly misunderstood—sir."

"Not by all of them," said Corbin darkly.

"Eh?" returned the Colonel quickly.

"There was another letter here which I didn't particularly point out to you," said Corbin, taking up the letters again, "for I reckoned it wasn't evidence, so to speak, being from HIS COUSIN, a girl,—and calculated you'd read it when I was out."

The Colonel coughed hastily. "I was in fact—er—just about to glance over it when you came in."

"It was written," continued Corbin, selecting a letter more bethumbed than the others, "after the old woman had threatened

me. This here young woman allows that she is sorry that her aunt has to take money of me on account of her cousin being killed, and she is still sorrier that she is so bitter against me. She says she hadn't seen her cousin since he was a boy, and used to play with her, and that she finds it hard to believe that he should ever grow up to change his name and act so as to provoke anybody to lift a hand against him. She says she supposed it must be something in that dreadful California that alters people and makes everybody so reckless. I reckon her head's level there, ain't it?"

There was such a sudden and unexpected lightening of the man's face as he said it, such a momentary relief to his persistent gloom, that the Colonel, albeit inwardly dissenting from both letter and comment, smiled condescendingly.

"She's no slouch of a scribe neither," continued Corbin animatedly. "Read that."

He handed his companion the letter, pointing to a passage with his finger. The Colonel took it with, I fear, a somewhat lowered opinion of his client, and a new theory of the case. It was evident that this weak submission to the aunt's conspiracy was only the result of a greater weakness for the niece. Colonel Starbottle had a wholesome distrust of the sex as a business or political factor. He began to look over the letter, but was evidently slurring it with superficial politeness, when Corbin said:—

"Read it out loud."

The Colonel slightly lifted his shoulders, fortified himself with another sip of the julep, and, leaning back, oratorically began to

read,—the stranger leaning over him and following line by line with shining eyes.

"'When I say I am sorry for you, it is because I think it must be dreadful for you to be going round with the blood of a fellow-creature on your hands. It must be awful for you in the stillness of the night season to hear the voice of the Lord saying, "Cain, where is thy brother?" and you saying, "Lord, I have slayed him dead." It must be awful for you when the pride of your wrath was surfitted, and his dum senseless corps was before you, not to know that it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," saith the Lord. . . . It was no use for you to say, "I never heard that before," remembering your teacher and parents. Yet verily I say unto you, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be washed whiter than snow," saith the Lord—Isaiah i. 18; and "Heart hath no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal."—My hymn book, 1st Presbyterian Church, page 79. Mr. Corbin, I pity your feelins at the grave of my pore dear cousin, knowing he is before his Maker, and you can't bring him back.' Umph!—er—er—very good—very good indeed," said the Colonel, hastily refolding the letter. "Very well meaning and—er"—

"Go on," said Corbin over his shoulder, "you haven't read all."

"Ah, true. I perceive I overlooked something. Um—um. 'May God forgive you, Mr. Corbin, as I do, and make aunty think better of you, for it was good what you tried to do for her and the fammely, and I've always said it when she was raging round and wanting money of you. I don't believe you meant to do it

anyway, owin' to your kindness of heart to the ophanless and the widow since you did it. Anser this letter, and don't mind what aunty says. So no more at present from—Yours very respectfully, SALLY DOWS.

"'P. S.—There's been some troubel in our township, and some fitin'. May the Lord change ther hearts and make them as a little child, for if you are still young you may grow up different. I have writ a short prayer for you to say every night. You can coppy it out and put it at the head of your bed. It is this: O Lord make me sorry for having killed Sarah Dows' cousin. Give me, O Lord, that peace that the world cannot give, and which fadeth not away; for my yoke is heavy, and my burden is harder than I can bear.'"

The Colonel's deliberate voice stopped. There was a silence in the room, and the air seemed stifling. The click of the billiard balls came distinctly through the partition from the other room. Then there was another click, a stamp on the floor, and a voice crying coarsely: "Curse it all—missed again!"

To the stranger's astonishment, the Colonel was on his feet in an instant, gasping with inarticulate rage. Flinging the door open, he confronted the startled bar-keeper empurpled and stertorous.

"Blank it all, sir, do you call this a saloon for gentlemen, or a corral for swearing cattle? Or do you mean to say that the conversation of two gentlemen upon delicate professional—and—er—domestic affairs—is to be broken upon by the blank profanity of low-bred hounds over their picayune gambling! Take them my kyard, sir," choked the Colonel, who was always

Southern and dialectic in his excited as in his softest moments, "and tell them that Colonel Starbottle will nevah dyarken these doahs again."

Before the astonished bar-keeper could reply, the Colonel had dashed back into the room, clapped his hat on his head, and seized his book, letters, and cane. "Mr. Corbin," he said with gasping dignity, "I will take these papahs, and consult them again in my own office—where, if you will do me the honor, sir, to call at ten o'clock to-morrow, I will give you my opinion." He strode out of the saloon beside the half awe-stricken, half-amused, yet all discreetly silent loungers, followed by his wondering but gloomy client. At the door they parted,—the Colonel tiptoeing towards his office as if dancing with rage, the stranger darkly plodding through the stifling dust in the opposite direction, with what might have been a faint suggestion to his counselor, that the paths of the homicide did not lie beside the still cool waters.

CHAPTER II

The house of Captain Masterton Dows, at Pineville, Kentucky, was a fine specimen of Southern classical architecture, being an exact copy of Major Fauquier's house in Virginia, which was in turn only a slight variation from a well-known statesman's historical villa in Alabama, that everybody knew was designed from a famous Greek temple on the Piraeus. Not but that it shared this resemblance with the County Court House and the Odd Fellows' Hall, but the addition of training jessamine and Cherokee rose to the columns of the portico, and over the colonnade leading to its offices, showed a certain domestic distinction. And the sky line of its incongruously high roof was pleasantly broken against adjacent green pines, butternut, and darker cypress.

A nearer approach showed the stuccoed gateposts—whose red brick core was revealed through the dropping plaster—opening in a wall of half-rough stone, half-wooden palisade, equally covered with shining moss and parasitical vines, which hid a tangled garden left to its own unkempt luxuriance. Yet there was a reminiscence of past formality and even pretentiousness in a wide box-bordered terrace and one or two stuccoed vases prematurely worn and time-stained; while several rare exotics had, however, thriven so unwisely and well in that stimulating soil as to lose their exclusive refinement and acquire a certain

temporary vulgarity. A few, with the not uncommon enthusiasm of aliens, had adopted certain native peculiarities with a zeal that far exceeded any indigenous performance. But dominant through all was the continual suggestion of precocious fruition and premature decay that lingered like a sad perfume in the garden, but made itself persistent if less poetical in the house.

Here the fluted wooden columns of the portico and colonnade seemed to have taken upon themselves a sodden and unwholesome age unknown to stone and mortar. Moss and creeper clung to paint that time had neither dried nor mellowed, but left still glairy in its white consistency. There were rusty red blotches around inflamed nail-holes in the swollen wood, as of punctures in living flesh; along the entablature and cornices and in the dank gutters decay had taken the form of a mild deliquescence; and the pillars were spotted as if Nature had dropped over the too early ruin a few unclean tears. The house itself was lifted upon a broad wooden foundation painted to imitate marble with such hopeless mendacity that the architect at the last moment had added a green border, and the owner permitted a fallen board to remain off so as to allow a few privileged fowls to openly explore the interior. When Miss Sally Dows played the piano in the drawing-room she was at times accompanied by the uplifted voice of the sympathetic hounds who sought its quiet retreat in ill-health or low spirits, and from whom she was separated only by an imperfectly carpeted floor of yawning seams. The infant progeny of “Mammy Judy,”

an old nurse, made this a hiding-place from domestic justice, where they were eventually betrayed by subterranean giggling that had once or twice brought bashful confusion to the hearts of Miss Sally's admirers, and mischievous security to that finished coquette herself.

It was a pleasant September afternoon, on possibly one of these occasions, that Miss Sally, sitting before the piano, alternately striking a few notes with three pink fingers and glancing at her reflection in the polished rosewood surface of the lifted keyboard case, was heard to utter this languid protest:—

"Quit that kind of talk, Chet, unless you just admire to have every word of it repeated all over the county. Those little niggers of Mammy Judy's are lying round somewhere and are mighty 'cute, and sassy, I tell you. It's nothin' to ME, sure, but Miss Hilda mightn't like to hear of it. So soon after your particular attention to her at last night's pawty too."

Here a fresh-looking young fellow of six-and-twenty, leaning uneasily over the piano from the opposite side, was heard to murmur that he didn't care what Miss Hilda heard, nor the whole world, for the matter of that. "But," he added, with a faint smile, "folks allow that you know how to PLAY UP sometimes, and put on the loud pedal, when you don't want Mammy's niggers to hear."

"Indeed," said the young lady demurely. "Like this?"

She put out a distracting little foot, clothed in the white stocking and cool black prunella slipper then de rigueur in the

State, and, pressing it on the pedal, began to drum vigorously on the keys. In vain the amorous Chet protested in a voice which the instrument drowned. Perceiving which the artful young lady opened her blue eyes mildly and said:—

"I reckon it IS so; it DOES kind of prevent you hearing what you don't want to hear."

"You know well enough what I mean," said the youth gloomily. "And that ain't all that folks say. They allow that you're doin' a heap too much correspondence with that Californian rough that killed Tom Jeffcourt over there."

"Do they?" said the young lady, with a slight curl of her pretty lip. "Then perhaps they allow that if it wasn't for me he wouldn't be sending a hundred dollars a month to Aunt Martha?"

"Yes," said the fatuous youth; "but they allow he killed Tom for his money. And they do say it's mighty queer doin's in yo' writin' religious letters to him, and Tom your own cousin."

"Oh, they tell those lies HERE, do they? But do they say anything about how, when the same lies were told over in California, the lawyer they've got over there, called Colonel Starbottle,—a Southern man too,—got up and just wrote to Aunt Martha that she'd better quit that afore she got prosecuted? They didn't tell you that, did they, Mister Chester Brooks?"

But here the unfortunate Brooks, after the fashion of all jealous lovers, deserted his allies for his fair enemy. "I don't cotton to what THEY say, Sally, but you DO write to him, and I don't see what you've got to write about—you and him. Jule

Jeffcourt says that when you got religion at Louisville during the revival, you felt you had a call to write and save sinners, and you did that as your trial and probation, but that since you backslided and are worldly again, and go to parties, you just keep it up for foolin' and flirtin'! SHE ain't goin' to weaken on the man that shot her brother, just because he's got a gold mine and—a mustache!"

"She takes his MONEY all the same," said Miss Sally.

"SHE don't,—her mother does. SHE says if she was a man she'd have blood for blood!"

"My!" said Miss Sally, in affected consternation. "It's a wonder she don't apply to you to act for her."

"If it was MY brother he killed, I'd challenge him quick enough," said Chet, flushing through his thin pink skin and light hair.

"Marry her, then, and that'll make you one of the family. I reckon Miss Hilda can bear it," rejoined the young lady pertly.

"Look here, Miss Sally," said the young fellow with a boyish despair that was not without a certain pathos in its implied inferiority, "I ain't gifted like you—I ain't on yo' level no how; I can't pass yo' on the road, and so I reckon I must take yo' dust as yo' make it. But there is one thing, Miss Sally, I want to tell you. You know what's going on in this country, you've heard your father say what the opinion of the best men is, and what's likely to happen if the Yanks force that nigger worshiper, Lincoln, on the South. You know that we're drawing the line closer every day, and spottin' the men that ain't sound. Take care, Miss Sally,

you ain't sellin' us cheap to some Northern Abolitionist who'd like to set Marm Judy's little niggers to something worse than eavesdropping down there, and mebbe teach 'em to kindle a fire underneath yo' own flo'."

He had become quite dialectic in his appeal, as if youthfully reverting to some accent of the nursery, or as if he were exhorting her in some recognized shibboleth of a section. Miss Sally rose and shut down the piano. Then leaning over it on her elbows, her rounded little chin slightly elevated with languid impertinence, and one saucy foot kicked backwards beyond the hem of her white cotton frock, she said: "And let me tell you, Mister Chester Brooks, that it's just such God-forsaken, infant phenomenons as you who want to run the whole country that make all this fuss, when you ain't no more fit to be trusted with matches than Judy's children. What do YOU know of Mr. Jo Corbin, when you don't even know that he's from Shelbyville, and as good a Suth'ner as you, and if he hasn't got niggers it's because they don't use them in his parts? Yo'r for all the world like one o' Mrs. Johnson's fancy bantams that ain't quit of the shell afore they square off at their own mother. My goodness! Sho! Sho-o-o!" And suiting the action to the word the young lady, still indolently, even in her simulation, swirled around, caught her skirts at the side with each hand, and lazily shaking them before her in the accepted feminine method of frightening chickens as she retreated backwards, dropped them suddenly in a profound curtsey and swept out of the parlor.

Nevertheless, as she entered the sitting-room she paused to listen, then, going to the window, peeped through the slits of the Venetian blind and saw her youthful admirer, more dejected in the consciousness of his wasted efforts and useless attire, mount his showy young horse, as aimlessly spirited as himself, and ride away. Miss Sally did not regret this; neither had she been entirely sincere in her defense of her mysterious correspondent. But, like many of her sex, she was trying to keep up by the active stimulus of opposition an interest that she had begun to think if left to itself might wane. She was conscious that her cousin Julia, although impertinent and illogical, was right in considering her first epistolary advances to Corbin as a youthful convert's religious zeal. But now that her girlish enthusiasm was spent, and the revival itself had proved as fleeting an excitement as the old "Tournament of Love and Beauty," which it had supplanted, she preferred to believe that she enjoyed the fascinating impropriety because it was the actual result of her religious freedom. Perhaps she had a vague idea that Corbin's conversion would expiate her present preference for dress and dancing. She had certainly never flirted with him; they had never exchanged photographs; there was not a passage in his letters that might not have been perused by her parents,—which, I fear, was probably one reason why she had never shown her correspondence; and beyond the fact that this letter-writing gave her a certain importance in her own eyes and those of her companions, it might really be stopped. She even thought of writing at once to him that her parents objected to

its further continuance, but remembering that his usual monthly letter was now nearly due, she concluded to wait until it came.

It is to be feared that Miss Sally had little help in the way of family advice, and that the moral administration of the Dows household was as prematurely developed and as precociously exhausted as the estate and mansion themselves. Captain Dows' marriage with Josephine Jeffcourt, the daughter of a "poor white," had been considered a mesalliance by his family, and his own sister, Miranda Dows, had abandoned her brother's roof and refused to associate with the Jeffcourts, only returning to the house and an armed neutrality at the death of Mrs. Dows a few years later. She had taken charge of Miss Sally, sending her to school at Nashville until she was recalled by her father two years ago. It may be imagined that Miss Sally's correspondence with Jeffcourt's murderer had afforded her a mixed satisfaction; it was at first asserted that Miss Sally's forgiveness was really prompted by "Miss Mirandy," as a subtle sarcasm upon the family. When, however, that forgiveness seemed to become a source of revenue to the impoverished Jeffcourts, her Christian interference had declined.

For this reason, possibly, the young girl did not seek her aunt in the bedroom, the dining-room, or the business-room, where Miss Miranda frequently assisted Captain Dows in the fatuous and prejudiced mismanagement of the house and property, nor in any of the vacant guest-rooms, which, in their early wreck of latter-day mahogany and rosewood, seemed to have been

unoccupied for ages, but went directly to her own room. This was in the "L," a lately added wing that had escaped the gloomy architectural tyranny of the main building, and gave Miss Sally light, ventilation, the freshness and spice of new pine boards and clean paper, and a separate entrance and windows on a cool veranda all to herself. Intended as a concession to the young lady's traveled taste, it was really a reversion to the finer simplicity of the pioneer.

New as the apartment appeared to be, it was old enough to contain the brief little records of her maidenhood: the childish samplers and pictures; the sporting epoch with its fox-heads, opossum and wild-cat skins, riding-whip, and the goshawk in a cage, which Miss Sally believed could be trained as a falcon; the religious interval of illustrated texts, "Rock of Ages," cardboard crosses, and the certificate of her membership with "The Daughters of Sion" at the head of her little bed, down to the last decadence of frivolity shown in the be-ribboned guitar in the corner, and the dance cards, favors, and rosettes, military buttons, dried bouquets, and other love gages on the mantelpiece.

The young girl opened a drawer of her table and took out a small packet of letters tied up with a green ribbon. As she did so she heard the sound of hoofs in the rear courtyard. This was presently followed by a step on the veranda, and she opened the door to her father with the letters still in her hand. There was neither the least embarrassment nor self-consciousness in her manner.

Captain Dows, superficially remarkable only for a certain odd combination of high military stock and turned-over planter's collar, was slightly exalted by a sympathetic mingling of politics and mint julep at Pineville Court House. "I was passing by the post-office at the Cross Roads last week, dear," he began, cheerfully, "and I thought of you, and reckoned it was about time that my Pussy got one of her letters from her rich Californian friend—and sure enough there was one. I clean forgot to give it to you then, and only remembered it passing there to-day. I didn't get to see if there was any gold-dust in it," he continued, with great archness, and a fatherly pinch of her cheek; "though I suspect that isn't the kind of currency he sends to you."

"It IS from Mr. Corbin," said Miss Sally, taking it with a languid kind of doubt; "and only now, paw, I was just thinking that I'd sort of drop writing any more; it makes a good deal of buzzing amongst the neighbors, and I don't see much honey nor comb in it."

"Eh," said the Captain, apparently more astonished than delighted at his daughter's prudence. "Well, child, suit yourself! It's mighty mean, though, for I was just thinking of telling you that Judge Read is an old friend of this Colonel Starbottle, who is your friend's friend and lawyer, and he says that Colonel Starbottle is WITH US, and working for the cause out there, and has got a list of all the So'thern men in California that are sound and solid for the South. Read says he shouldn't wonder if he'd make California wheel into line too."

"I don't see what that's got to do with Mr. Corbin," said the young girl, impatiently, flicking the still unopened letter against the packet in her hand.

"Well," said the Captain, with cheerful vagueness, "I thought it might interest you,—that's all," and lounged judicially away.

"Paw thinks," said Miss Sally, still standing in the doorway, ostentatiously addressing her pet goshawk, but with one eye following her retreating parent, "Paw thinks that everybody is as keen bent on politics as he is. There's where paw slips up, Jim."

Re-entering the room, scratching her little nose thoughtfully with the edge of Mr. Corbin's letter, she went to the mantelpiece and picked up a small ivory-handled dagger, the gift of Joyce Masterton, aged eighteen, presented with certain verses addressed to a "Daughter of the South," and cut open the envelope. The first glance was at her own name, and then at the signature. There was no change in the formality; it was "Dear Miss Sarah," and "Yours respectfully, Jo Corbin," as usual. She was still secure. But her pretty brows contracted slightly as she read as follows:—

"I've always allowed I should feel easier in my mind if I could ever get to see Mrs. Jeffcourt, and that may be she might feel easier in hers if I stood before her, face to face. Even if she didn't forgive me at once, it might do her good to get off what she had on her mind against me. But as there wasn't any chance of her coming to me, and it was out of the question my coming to her and still keeping up enough work in the mines to send her the

regular money, it couldn't be done. But at last I've got a partner to run the machine when I'm away. I shall be at Shelbyville by the time this reaches you, where I shall stay a day or two to give you time to break the news to Mrs. Jeffcourt, and then come on. You will do this for me in your Christian kindness, Miss Dows —won't you? and if you could soften her mind so as to make it less hard for me I shall be grateful.

"P. S.—I forgot to say I have had HIM exhumed—you know who I mean—and am bringing him with me in a patent metallic burial casket,—the best that could be got in 'Frisco, and will see that he is properly buried in your own graveyard. It seemed to me that it would be the best thing I could do, and might work upon her feelings—as it has on mine. Don't you?

"J. C."

Miss Sally felt the tendrils of her fair hair stir with consternation. The letter had arrived a week ago; perhaps he was in Pineville at that very moment! She must go at once to the Jeffcourts,—it was only a mile distant. Perhaps she might be still in time; but even then it was a terribly short notice for such a meeting. Yet she stopped to select her newest hat from the closet, and to tie it with the largest of bows under her pretty chin; and then skipped from the veranda into a green lane that ran beside the garden boundary. There, hidden by a hedge, she dropped into a long, swinging trot, that even in her haste still kept the languid deliberation characteristic of her people, until she had reached the road. Two or three hounds in the garden started joyously to

follow her, but she drove them back with a portentous frown, and an ill-aimed stone, and a suppressed voice. Yet in that backward glance she could see that her little Eumenides—Mammy Judy's children—were peering at her from below the wooden floor of the portico, which they were grasping with outstretched arms and bowed shoulders, as if they were black caryatides supporting—as indeed their race had done for many a year—the pre-doomed and decaying mansion of their master.

CHAPTER III

Happily Miss Sally thought more of her present mission than of the past errors of her people. The faster she walked the more vividly she pictured the possible complications of this meeting. She knew the dull, mean nature of her aunt, and the utter hopelessness of all appeal to anything but her selfish cupidity, and saw in this fatuous essay of Corbin only an aggravation of her worst instincts. Even the dead body of her son would not only whet her appetite for pecuniary vengeance, but give it plausibility in the eyes of their emotional but ignorant neighbors. She had still less to hope from Julia Jeffcourt's more honest and human indignation but equally bigoted and prejudiced intelligence. It is true they were only women, and she ought to have no fear of that physical revenge which Julia had spoken of, but she reflected that Miss Jeffcourt's unmistakable beauty, and what was believed to be a "truly Southern spirit," had gained her many admirers who might easily take her wrongs upon their shoulders. If her father had only given her that letter before, she might have stopped Corbin's coming at all; she might even have met him in time to hurry him and her cousin's provocative remains out of the country. In the midst of these reflections she had to pass the little hillside cemetery. It was a spot of great natural beauty, cypress-shadowed and luxuriant. It was justly celebrated in Pineville, and, but for its pretentious tombstones, might have been peaceful and

suggestive. Here she recognized a figure just turning from its gate. It was Julia Jeffcourt.

Her first instinct—that she was too late and that her cousin had come to the cemetery to make some arrangements for the impending burial—was, however, quickly dissipated by the young girl's manner.

"Well, Sally Dows, YOU here! who'd have thought of seeing you to-day? Why, Chet Brooks allowed that you danced every set last night and didn't get home till daylight. And you—you that are going to show up at another party to-night too! Well, I reckon I haven't got that much ambition these times. And out with your new bonnet too."

There was a slight curl of her handsome lip as she looked at her cousin. She was certainly a more beautiful girl than Miss Sally; very tall, dark and luminous of eye, with a brunette pallor of complexion, suggesting, it was said, that remote mixture of blood which was one of the unproven counts of Miss Miranda's indictment against her family. Miss Sally smiled sweetly behind her big bow. "If you reckon to tie to everything that Chet Brooks says, you'll want lots of string, and you won't be safe then. You ought to have heard him run on about this one, and that one, and that other one, not an hour ago in our parlor. I had to pack him off, saying he was even making Judy's niggers tired." She stopped and added with polite languor, "I suppose there's no news up at yo' house either? Everything's going on as usual—and—you get yo' California draft regularly?"

A good deal of the white of Julia's beautiful eyes showed as she turned indignantly on the speaker. "I wish, cousin Sally, you'd just let up talking to me about that money. You know as well as I do that I allowed to maw I wouldn't take a cent of it from the first! I might have had all the gowns and bonnets"—with a look at Miss Sally's bows—"I wanted from her; she even offered to take me to St. Louis for a rig-out—if I'd been willing to take blood money. But I'd rather stick to this old sleazy mou'nin' for Tom"—she gave a dramatic pluck at her faded black skirt—"than flaunt round in white muslins and China silks at ten dollars a yard, paid for by his murderer."

"You know black's yo' color always,—taking in your height and complexion, Jule," said Miss Sally demurely, yet not without a feminine consciousness that it really did set off her cousin's graceful figure to perfection. "But you can't keep up this gait always. You know some day you might come upon this Mr. Corbin."

"He'd better not cross my path," she said passionately.

"I've heard girls talk like that about a man and then get just green and yellow after him," said Miss Sally critically. "But goodness me! speaking of meeting people reminds me I clean forgot to stop at the stage office and see about bringing over the new overseer. Lucky I met you, Jule! Good-by, dear. Come in to-night, and we'll all go to the party together." And with a little nod she ran off before her indignant cousin could frame a suitably crushing reply to her Parthian insinuation.

But at the stage office Miss Sally only wrote a few lines on a card, put it in an envelope, which she addressed to Mr. Joseph Corbin, and then seating herself with easy carelessness on a long packing-box, languidly summoned the proprietor.

"You're always on hand yourself at Kirby station when the kyars come in to bring passengers to Pineville, Mr. Sledge?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Yo' haven't brought any strangers over lately?"

"Well, last week Squire Farnham of Green Ridge—if he kin be called a stranger—as used to live in the very house yo father"—

"Yes, I know," said Miss Sally, impatiently, "but if an ENTIRE stranger comes to take a seat for Pineville, you ask him if that's his name," handing the letter, "and give it to him if it is. And—Mr. Sledge—it's nobody's business but—yours and mine."

"I understand, Miss Sally," with a slow, paternal, tolerating wink. "He'll get it, and nobody else, sure."

"Thank you; I hope Mrs. Sledge is getting round again."

"Pow'fully, Miss Sally."

Having thus, as she hoped, stopped the arrival of the unhappy Corbin, Miss Sally returned home to consider the best means of finally disposing of him. She had insisted upon his stopping at Kirby and holding no communication with the Jeffcourts until he heard from her, and had strongly pointed out the hopeless infelicity of his plan. She dare not tell her Aunt Miranda,

knowing that she would be too happy to precipitate an interview that would terminate disastrously to both the Jeffcourts and Corbin. She might have to take her father into her confidence, —a dreadful contingency.

She was dressed for the evening party, which was provincially early; indeed, it was scarcely past nine o'clock when she had finished her toilet, when there came a rap at her door. It was one of Mammy Judy's children.

"Dey is a gemplum, Miss Sally."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Sally, impatiently, thinking only of her escort. "I'll be there in a minute. Run away. He can wait."

"And he said I was to guv yo' dis yer," continued the little negro with portentous gravity, presenting a card.

Miss Sally took it with a smile. It was a plain card on which was written with a pencil in a hand she hurriedly recognized, "Joseph Corbin."

Miss Sally's smile became hysterically rigid, and pushing the boy aside with a little cry, she darted along the veranda and entered the parlor from a side door and vestibule. To her momentary relief she saw that her friends had not yet arrived: a single figure—a stranger's—rose as she entered.

Even in her consternation she had time to feel the added shock of disappointment. She had always present in her mind an ideal picture of this man whom she had never seen or even heard described. Joseph Corbin had been tall, dark, with flowing hair and long mustache. He had flashing fiery eyes which were

capable of being subdued by a single glance of gentleness—her own. He was tempestuous, quick, and passionate, but in quarrel would be led by a smile. He was a combination of an Italian brigand and a poker player whom she had once met on a Mississippi steamboat. He would wear a broad-brimmed soft hat, a red shirt, showing his massive throat and neck—and high boots! Alas! the man before her was of medium height, with light close-cut hair, hollow cheeks that seemed to have been lately scraped with a razor, and light gray troubled eyes. A suit of cheap black, ill fitting, hastily acquired, and provincial even for Pineville, painfully set off these imperfections, to which a white cravat in a hopelessly tied bow was superadded. A terrible idea that this combination of a country undertaker and an ill-paid circuit preacher on probation was his best holiday tribute to her, and not a funeral offering to Mr. Jeffcourt, took possession of her. And when, with feminine quickness, she saw his eyes wander over her own fine clothes and festal figure, and sink again upon the floor in a kind of hopeless disappointment equal to her own, she felt ready to cry. But the more terrible sound of laughter approaching the house from the garden recalled her. Her friends were coming.

"For Heaven's sake," she broke out desperately, "didn't you get my note at the station telling you not to come?"

His face grew darker, and then took up its look of hopeless resignation, as if this last misfortune was only an accepted part of his greater trouble, as he sat down again, and to Miss Sally's

horror, listlessly swung his hat to and fro under his chair.

"No," he said, gloomily, "I didn't go to no station. I walked here all the way from Shelbyville. I thought it might seem more like the square thing to her for me to do. I sent HIM by express ahead in the box. It's been at the stage office all day."

With a sickening conviction that she had been sitting on her cousin's body while she wrote that ill-fated card, the young girl managed to gasp out impatiently: "But you must go—yes—go now, at once! Don't talk now, but go."

"I didn't come here," he said, rising with a kind of slow dignity, "to interfere with things I didn't kalkilate to see," glancing again at her dress, as the voices came nearer, "and that I ain't in touch with,—but to know if you think I'd better bring him—or"—

He did not finish the sentence, for the door had opened suddenly, and a half-dozen laughing girls and their escorts burst into the room. But among them, a little haughty and still irritated from her last interview, was her cousin Julia Jeffcourt, erect and beautiful in a sombre silk.

"Go," repeated Miss Sally, in an agonized whisper. "You must not be known here."

But the attention of Julia had been arrested by her cousin's agitation, and her eye fell on Corbin, where it was fixed with some fatal fascination that seemed in turn to enthrall and possess him also. To Miss Sally's infinite dismay the others fell back and allowed these two black figures to stand out, then to move

towards each other with the same terrible magnetism. They were so near she could not repeat her warning to him without the others hearing it. And all hope died when Corbin, turning deliberately towards her with a grave gesture in the direction of Julia, said quietly:—

"Interduce me."

Miss Sally hesitated, and then gasped hastily, "Miss Jeffcourt."

"Yer don't say MY name. Tell her I'm Joseph Corbin of 'Frisco, California, who killed her brother." He stopped and turned towards her. "I came here to try and fix things again—and I've brought HIM."

In the wondering silence that ensued the others smiled vacantly, breathlessly, and expectantly, until Corbin advanced and held out his hand, when Julia Jeffcourt, drawing hers back to her bosom with the palms outward, uttered an inarticulate cry and—and spat in his face!

With that act she found tongue—reviling him, the house that harbored him, the insolence that presented him, the insult that had been put upon her! "Are you men!" she added passionately, "who stand here with the man before you that killed my brother, and see him offer me his filthy villainous hand—and dare not strike him down!"

And they dared not. Violently, blindly, stupidly moved though all their instincts, though they gathered hysterically around him, there was something in his dull self-containment that was

unassailable and awful. For he wiped his face and breast with his handkerchief without a tremor, and turned to them with even a suggestion of relief.

"She's right, gentlemen," he said gravely. "She's right. It might have been otherwise. I might have allowed that it might be otherwise,—but she's right. I'm a Soth'n man myself, gentlemen, and I reckon to understand what she has done. I killed the only man that had a right to stand up for her, and she has now to stand up for herself. But if she wants—and you see she allows she wants—to pass that on to some of you, or all of you, I'm willing. As many as you like, and in what way you like—I waive any chyce of weapon—I'm ready, gentlemen. I came here—with HIM—for that purpose."

Perhaps it may have been his fateful resignation; perhaps it may have been his exceeding readiness,—but there was no response. He sat down again, and again swung his hat slowly and gloomily to and fro under his chair.

"I've got him in a box at the stage office," he went on, apparently to the carpet. "I had him dug up that I might bring him here, and mebbe bury some of the trouble and difference along with his friends. It might be," he added, with a slightly glowering upward glance, as to an overruling, but occasionally misdirecting Providence,—"it might be from the way things are piling up on me that some one might have rung in another corpse instead o' HIM, but so far as I can judge, allowin' for the space of time and nat'ral wear and tear—it's HIM!"

He rose slowly and moved towards the door in a silence that was as much the result of some conviction that any violent demonstration against him would be as grotesque and monstrous as the situation, as of anything he had said. Even the flashing indignation of Julia Jeffcourt seemed to become suddenly as unnatural and incongruous as her brother's chief mourner himself, and although she shrank from his passing figure she uttered no word. Chester Brooks's youthful emotions, following the expression of Miss Sally's face, lost themselves in a vague hysteric smile, and the other gentlemen looked sheepish. Joseph Corbin halted at the door.

"Whatever," he said, turning to the company, "ye make up your mind to do about me, I reckon ye'd better do it AFTER the funeral. I'M always ready. But HE, what with being in a box and changing climate, had better go FIRST." He paused, and with a suggestion of delicacy in the momentary dropping of his eyelids, added,—"for REASONS."

He passed out through the door, on to the portico and thence into the garden. It was noticed at the time that the half-dozen hounds lingering there rushed after him with their usual noisy demonstrations, but that they as suddenly stopped, retreated violently to the security of the basement, and there gave relief to their feelings in a succession of prolonged howls.

CHAPTER IV

It must not be supposed that Miss Sally did not feel some contrition over the ineffective part she had played in this last episode. But Joseph Corbin had committed the unpardonable sin to a woman of destroying her own illogical ideas of him, which was worse than if he had affronted the preconceived ideas of others, in which case she might still defend him. Then, too, she was no longer religious, and had no "call" to act as peacemaker. Nevertheless she resented Julia Jeffcourt's insinuations bitterly, and the cousins quarreled—not the first time in their intercourse—and it was reserved for the latter to break the news of Corbin's arrival with the body to Mrs. Jeffcourt.

How this was done and what occurred at that interview has not been recorded. But it was known the next day that, while Mrs. Jeffcourt accepted the body at Corbin's hands,—and it is presumed the funeral expenses also,—he was positively forbidden to appear either at the services at the house or at the church. There had been some wild talk among the younger and many of the lower members of the community, notably the "poor" non-slave-holding whites, of tarring and feathering Joseph Corbin, and riding him on a rail out of the town on the day of the funeral, as a propitiatory sacrifice to the manes of Thomas Jeffcourt; but it being pointed out by the undertaker that it might involve some uncertainty in the settlement of his bill,

together with some reasonable doubt of the thorough resignation of Corbin, whose previous momentary aberration in that respect they were celebrating, the project was postponed until AFTER THE FUNERAL. And here an unlooked-for incident occurred.

There was to be a political meeting at Kirby on that day, when certain distinguished Southern leaders had gathered from the remoter Southern States. At the instigation of Captain Dows it was adjourned at the hour of the funeral to enable members to attend, and it was even rumored, to the great delight of Pineville, that a distinguished speaker or two might come over to "improve the occasion" with some slight allusion to the engrossing topic of "Southern Rights." This combined appeal to the domestic and political emotions of Pineville was irresistible. The Second Baptist Church was crowded. After the religious service there was a pause, and Judge Reed, stepping forward amid a breathless silence, said that they were peculiarly honored by the unexpected presence in their midst "of that famous son of the South, Colonel Starbottle," who had lately returned to his native soil from his adopted home in California. Every eye was fixed on the distinguished stranger as he rose.

Jaunty and gallant as ever, femininely smooth-faced, yet polished and high colored as a youthful mask; pectorally expansive, and unfolding the white petals of his waistcoat through the swollen lapels of his coat, like a bursting magnolia bud, Colonel Starbottle began. The present associations were, he might say, singularly hallowed to him; not only was Pineville—a

Southern centre—the recognized nursery of Southern chivalry, Southern beauty (a stately inclination to the pew in which Miss Sally and Julia Jeffcourt sat), Southern intelligence, and Southern independence, but it was the home of the lamented dead who had been, like himself and another he should refer to later, an adopted citizen of the Golden State, a seeker of the Golden Fleece, a companion of Jason. It was the home, fellow-citizens and friends, of the sorrowing sister of the deceased, a young lady whom he, the speaker, had as yet known only through the chivalrous blazon of her virtues and graces by her attendant knights (a courteous wave towards the gallery where Joyce Masterton, Chester Brooks, Calhoun Bungstarter, and the embattled youth generally of Pineville became empurpled and idiotic); it was the home of the afflicted widowed mother, also personally unknown to him, but with whom he might say he had had—er—er—professional correspondence. But it was not this alone that hallowed the occasion, it was a sentiment that should speak in trumpet-like tones throughout the South in this uprising of an united section. It was the forgetfulness of petty strife, of family feud, of personal wrongs in the claims of party! It might not be known that he, the speaker, was professionally cognizant of one of these regrettable—should he say accidents?—arising from the chivalrous challenge and equally chivalrous response of two fiery Southern spirits, to which they primarily owe their coming here that day. And he should take it as his duty, his solemn duty, in that sacred edifice to proclaim to the world that in his knowledge

as a professional man—as a man of honor, as a Southerner, as a gentleman, that the—er—circumstances which three years ago led to the early demise of our lamented friend and brother, reflected only the highest credit equally on both of the parties. He said this on his own responsibility—in or out of this sacred edifice—and in or out of that sacred edifice he was personally responsible, and prepared to give the fullest satisfaction for it. He was also aware that it might not be known—or understood—that since that boyish episode the survivor had taken the place of the departed in the bereaved family and ministered to their needs with counsel and—er—er—pecuniary aid, and had followed the body afoot across the continent that it might rest with its kindred dust. He was aware that an unchristian—he would say but for that sacred edifice—a DASTARDLY attempt had been made to impugn the survivor's motives—to suggest an unseemly discord between him and the family, but he, the speaker, would never forget the letter breathing with Christian forgiveness and replete with angelic simplicity sent by a member of that family to his client, which came under his professional eye (here the professional eye for a moment lingered on the hysteric face of Miss Sally); he did not envy the head or heart of a man who could peruse these lines—of which the mere recollection—er—er—choked the utterance of even a professional man like—er—himself—without emotion. "And what, my friends and fellow-citizens," suddenly continued the Colonel, replacing his white handkerchief in his coat-tail, "was the reason why my client,

Mr. Joseph Corbin—whose delicacy keeps him from appearing among these mourners—comes here to bury all differences, all animosities, all petty passions? Because he is a son of the South; because as a son of the South, as the representative, and a distant connection, I believe, of my old political friend, Major Corbin, of Nashville, he wishes here and everywhere, at this momentous crisis, to sink everything in the one all-pervading, all-absorbing, one and indivisible UNITY of the South in its resistance to the Northern Usurper! That, my friends, is the great, the solemn, the Christian lesson of this most remarkable occasion in my professional, political, and social experience."

Whatever might have been the calmer opinion, there was no doubt that the gallant Colonel had changed the prevailing illogical emotion of Pineville by the substitution of another equally illogical, and Miss Sally was not surprised when her father, touched by the Colonel's allusion to his daughter's epistolary powers, insisted upon bringing Joseph Corbin home with him, and offering him the hospitality of the Dows mansion. Although the stranger seemed to yield rather from the fact that the Dows were relations of the Jeffcourts than from any personal preference, when he was fairly installed in one of the appropriately gloomy guest chambers, Miss Sally set about the delayed work of reconciliation—theoretically accepted by her father, and cynically tolerated by her Aunt Miranda. But here a difficulty arose which she had not foreseen. Although Corbin had evidently forgiven her defection on that memorable

evening, he had not apparently got over the revelation of her giddy worldliness, and was resignedly apathetic and distrustful of her endeavors. She was at first amused, and then angry. And her patience was exhausted when she discovered that he actually seemed more anxious to conciliate Julia Jeffcourt than her mother.

"But she spat in your face," she said, indignantly.

"That's so," he replied, gloomily; "but I reckoned you said something in one of your letters about turning the other cheek when you were smitten. Of course, as you don't believe it now," he added with his upward glance, "I suppose THAT'S been played on me, too."

But here Miss Sally's spirit lazily rebelled.

"Look here, Mr. Joseph JEREMIAH Corbin," she returned with languid impertinence, "if instead of cavortin' round on yo' knees trying to conciliate an old woman who never had a stroke of luck till you killed her son, and a young girl who won't be above letting on afore you think it that your conciliatin' her means SPARKIN' her; if instead of that foolishness you'd turn your hand to trying to conciliate the folks here and keep 'em from going into that fool's act of breaking up these United States; if instead of digging up second-hand corpses that's already been put out of sight once you'd set to work to try and prevent the folks about here from digging up their old cranks and their old whims, and their old women fancies, you'd be doing something like a Christian and a man! What's yo' blood-guiltiness—I'd like

to know—alongside of the blood-guiltiness of those fools who are just wild to rush into it, led by such turkey-cocks as yo' friend Colonel Starbottle? And you've been five years in California—a free State—and that's all yo' 've toted out of it—a dead body! There now, don't sit there and swing yo' hat under that chyar, but rouse out and come along with me to the pawty if you can shake a foot, and show Miss Pinkney and the gyrls yo' fit for something mo' than to skirmish round as a black japanned spittoon for Julia Jeffcourt!" It is not recorded that Corbin accepted this cheerful invitation, but for a few days afterwards he was more darkly observant of, and respectful to, Miss Sally. Strange indeed if he had not noticed—although always in his resigned fashion—the dull green stagnation of the life around him, or when not accepting it as part of his trouble he had not chafed at the arrested youth and senile childishness of the people. Stranger still if he had not at times been startled to hear the outgrown superstitions and follies of his youth voiced again by grown-up men, and perhaps strangest of all if he had not vaguely accepted it all as the hereditary curse of that barbarism under which he himself had survived and suffered.

The reconciliation between himself and Mrs. Jeffcourt was superficially effected, so far as a daily visit by him to the house indicated it to the community, but it was also known that Julia was invariably absent on these occasions. What happened at those interviews did not transpire, but it may be surmised that Mrs. Jeffcourt, perhaps recognizing the fact that Corbin was

really giving her all that he had to give, or possibly having some lurking fear of Colonel Starbottle, was so far placated as to exhibit only the average ingratitude of her species towards a regular benefactor. She consented to the erection of a small obelisk over her son's grave, and permitted Corbin to plant a few flowering shrubs, which he daily visited and took care of. It is said that on one of these pilgrimages he encountered Miss Julia, apparently on the same errand, who haughtily retired. It was further alleged, on the authority of one of Mammy Judy's little niggers, that those two black mourning figures had been seen at nightfall sitting opposite to each other at the head and foot of the grave, and "glowerin'" at one another "like two hants." But when it was asserted on the same authority that their voices had been later overheard uplifted in some vehement discussion over the grave of the impassive dead, great curiosity was aroused. Being pressed by the eager Miss Sally to repeat some words or any words he had heard them say, the little witness glibly replied, "Marse Linkum" (Lincoln), and "The Souf," and so, for the time, shipwrecked his testimony. But it was recalled six months afterwards. It was then that a pleasant spring day brought madness and enthusiasm to a majority of Pineville, and bated breath and awe to a few, and it was known with the tidings that the South had appealed to arms, that among those who had first responded to the call was Joseph Corbin, an alleged "Union man," who had, however, volunteered to take that place in her ranks which might HAVE BEEN FILLED BY THE MAN HE

HAD KILLED. And then people forgot all about him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.