

BRET HARTE

SUSY, A
STORY OF THE
PLAINS

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CHAPTER I

Where the San Leandro turnpike stretches its dusty, hot, and interminable length along the valley, at a point where the heat and dust have become intolerable, the monotonous expanse of wild oats on either side illimitable, and the distant horizon apparently remoter than ever, it suddenly slips between a stunted thicket or hedge of “scrub oaks,” which until that moment had been undistinguishable above the long, misty, quivering level of the grain. The thicket rising gradually in height, but with a regular slope whose gradient had been determined by centuries of western trade winds, presently becomes a fair wood of live-oak, and a few hundred yards further at last assumes the aspect of a primeval forest. A delicious coolness fills the air; the long, shadowy aisles greet the aching eye with a soothing twilight; the murmur of unseen brooks is heard, and, by a strange irony, the enormous, widely-spaced stacks of wild oats are replaced by a carpet of tiny-leaved mosses and chickweed at the roots of trees, and the minutest clover in more open spaces. The baked and cracked adobe soil of the now vanished plains is exchanged for a heavy red mineral dust and gravel, rocks and boulders make their appearance, and at times the road is crossed by the white veins of quartz. It is still the San Leandro turnpike,—a few miles later to rise from this canada into the upper plains again,—but it is also the actual gateway and avenue to the Robles Rancho. When the departing visitors of Judge Peyton, now owner of the rancho, reach the outer plains again, after twenty minutes’ drive from the house, the canada, rancho, and avenue have as completely disappeared from view as if they had been swallowed up in the plain.

A cross road from the turnpike is the usual approach to the casa or mansion,—a long, low quadrangle of brown adobe wall in a bare but gently sloping eminence. And here a second surprise meets the stranger. He seems to have emerged from the forest upon another illimitable plain, but one utterly trackless, wild, and desolate. It is, however, only a lower terrace of the same valley, and, in fact, comprises the three square leagues of the Robles Rancho. Uncultivated and savage as it appears, given over to wild cattle and horses that sometimes sweep in frightened bands around the very casa itself, the long south wall of the corral embraces an orchard of gnarled pear-trees, an old vineyard, and a venerable garden of olives and oranges. A manor, formerly granted by Charles V. to Don Vincente Robles, of Andalusia, of pious and ascetic memory, it had commended itself to Judge Peyton, of Kentucky, a modern heretic pioneer of bookish tastes and secluded habits, who had bought it of Don Vincente’s descendants. Here Judge Peyton seemed to have realized his idea of a perfect climate, and a retirement, half-studious, half-active, with something of the seignioralty of the old slaveholder that he had been. Here, too, he had seen the hope of restoring his wife’s health—for which he had undertaken the overland emigration—more than fulfilled in Mrs. Peyton’s improved physical condition, albeit at the expense, perhaps, of some of the languorous graces of ailing American wifehood.

It was with a curious recognition of this latter fact that Judge Peyton watched his wife crossing the patio or courtyard with her arm around the neck of her adopted daughter “Suzette.” A sudden memory crossed his mind of the first day that he had seen them together,—the day that he had brought the child and her boy-companion—two estrays from an emigrant train on the plains—to his wife in camp. Certainly Mrs. Peyton was stouter and stronger fibred; the wonderful Californian climate had materialized her figure, as it had their Eastern fruits and flowers, but it was stranger that “Susy”—the child of homelier frontier blood and parentage, whose wholesome peasant plumpness had at first attracted them—should have grown thinner and more graceful, and even seemed to have gained the delicacy his wife had lost. Six years had imperceptibly wrought this change; it had never

struck him before so forcibly as on this day of Susy's return from the convent school at Santa Clara for the holidays.

The woman and child had reached the broad veranda which, on one side of the patio, replaced the old Spanish corridor. It was the single modern innovation that Peyton had allowed himself when he had broken the quadrangular symmetry of the old house with a wooden "annexe" or addition beyond the walls. It made a pleasant lounging-place, shadowed from the hot midday sun by sloping roofs and awnings, and sheltered from the boisterous afternoon trade winds by the opposite side of the court. But Susy did not seem inclined to linger there long that morning, in spite of Mrs. Peyton's evident desire for a maternal tete-a-tete. The nervous preoccupation and capricious ennui of an indulged child showed in her pretty but discontented face, and knit her curved eyebrows, and Peyton saw a look of pain pass over his wife's face as the young girl suddenly and half-laughingly broke away and fluttered off towards the old garden.

Mrs. Peyton looked up and caught her husband's eye.

"I am afraid Susy finds it more dull here every time she returns," she said, with an apologetic smile. "I am glad she has invited one of her school friends to come for a visit to-morrow. You know, yourself, John," she added, with a slight partisan attitude, "that the lonely old house and wild plain are not particularly lively for young people, however much they may suit YOUR ways."

"It certainly must be dull if she can't stand it for three weeks in the year," said her husband dryly. "But we really cannot open the San Francisco house for her summer vacation, nor can we move from the rancho to a more fashionable locality. Besides, it will do her good to run wild here. I can remember when she wasn't so fastidious. In fact, I was thinking just now how changed she was from the day when we picked her up"—

"How often am I to remind you, John," interrupted the lady, with some impatience, "that we agreed never to speak of her past, or even to think of her as anything but our own child. You know how it pains me! And the poor dear herself has forgotten it, and thinks of us only as her own parents. I really believe that if that wretched father and mother of hers had not been killed by the Indians, or were to come to life again, she would neither know them nor care for them. I mean, of course, John," she said, averting her eyes from a slightly cynical smile on her husband's face, "that it's only natural for young children to be forgetful, and ready to take new impressions."

"And as long, dear, as WE are not the subjects of this youthful forgetfulness, and she isn't really finding US as stupid as the rancho," replied her husband cheerfully, "I suppose we mustn't complain."

"John, how can you talk such nonsense?" said Mrs. Peyton impatiently. "But I have no fear of that," she added, with a slightly ostentatious confidence. "I only wish I was as sure"—

"Of what?"

"Of nothing happening that could take her from us. I do not mean death, John,—like our first little one. That does not happen to one twice; but I sometimes dread"—

"What? She's only fifteen, and it's rather early to think about the only other inevitable separation,—marriage. Come, Ally, this is mere fancy. She has been given up to us by her family,—at least, by all that we know are left of them. I have legally adopted her. If I have not made her my heiress, it is because I prefer to leave everything to YOU, and I would rather she should know that she was dependent upon you for the future than upon me."

"And I can make a will in her favor if I want to?" said Mrs. Peyton quickly.

"Always," responded her husband smilingly; "but you have ample time to think of that, I trust. Meanwhile I have some news for you which may make Susy's visit to the rancho this time less dull to her. You remember Clarence Brant, the boy who was with her when we picked her up, and who really saved her life?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Peyton pettishly, "nor do I want to! You know, John, how distasteful and unpleasant it is for me to have those dreary, petty, and vulgar details of the poor child's past life recalled, and, thank Heaven, I have forgotten them except when you choose to drag them before me.

You agreed, long ago, that we were never to talk of the Indian massacre of her parents, so that we could also ignore it before her; then why do you talk of her vulgar friends, who are just as unpleasant? Please let us drop the past.”

“Willingly, my dear; but, unfortunately, we cannot make others do it. And this is a case in point. It appears that this boy, whom we brought to Sacramento to deliver to a relative”—

“And who was a wicked little impostor,—you remember that yourself, John, for he said that he was the son of Colonel Brant, and that he was dead; and you know, and my brother Harry knew, that Colonel Brant was alive all the time, and that he was lying, and Colonel Brant was not his father,” broke in Mrs. Peyton impatiently.

“As it seems you do remember that much,” said Peyton dryly, “it is only just to him that I should tell you that it appears that he was not an impostor. His story was TRUE. I have just learned that Colonel Brant WAS actually his father, but had concealed his lawless life here, as well as his identity, from the boy. He was really that vague relative to whom Clarence was confided, and under that disguise he afterwards protected the boy, had him carefully educated at the Jesuit College of San Jose, and, dying two years ago in that filibuster raid in Mexico, left him a considerable fortune.”

“And what has he to do with Susy’s holidays?” said Mrs. Peyton, with uneasy quickness. “John, you surely cannot expect her ever to meet this common creature again, with his vulgar ways. His wretched associates like that Jim Hooker, and, as you yourself admit, the blood of an assassin, duelist, and—Heaven knows what kind of a pirate his father wasn’t at the last—in his veins! You don’t believe that a lad of this type, however much of his father’s ill-gotten money he may have, can be fit company for your daughter? You never could have thought of inviting him here?”

“I’m afraid that’s exactly what I have done, Ally,” said the smiling but unmoved Peyton; “but I’m still more afraid that your conception of his present condition is an unfair one, like your remembrance of his past. Father Sobriente, whom I met at San Jose yesterday, says he is very intelligent, and thoroughly educated, with charming manners and refined tastes. His father’s money, which they say was an investment for him in Carson’s Bank five years ago, is as good as any one’s, and his father’s blood won’t hurt him in California or the Southwest. At least, he is received everywhere, and Don Juan Robinson was his guardian. Indeed, as far as social status goes, it might be a serious question if the actual daughter of the late John Silsbee, of Pike County, and the adopted child of John Peyton was in the least his superior. As Father Sobriente evidently knew Clarence’s former companionship with Susy and her parents, it would be hardly politic for us to ignore it or seem to be ashamed of it. So I intrusted Sobriente with an invitation to young Brant on the spot.”

Mrs. Peyton’s impatience, indignation, and opposition, which had successively given way before her husband’s quiet, masterful good humor, here took the form of a neurotic fatalism. She shook her head with superstitious resignation.

“Didn’t I tell you, John, that I always had a dread of something coming”—

“But if it comes in the shape of a shy young lad, I see nothing singularly portentous in it. They have not met since they were quite small; their tastes have changed; if they don’t quarrel and fight they may be equally bored with each other. Yet until then, in one way or another, Clarence will occupy the young lady’s vacant caprice, and her school friend, Mary Rogers, will be here, you know, to divide his attentions, and,” added Peyton, with mock solemnity, “preserve the interest of strict propriety. Shall I break it to her,—or will you?”

“No,—yes,” hesitated Mrs. Peyton; “perhaps I had better.”

“Very well, I leave his character in your hands; only don’t prejudice her into a romantic fancy for him.” And Judge Peyton lounged smilingly away.

Then two little tears forced themselves from Mrs. Peyton’s eyes. Again she saw that prospect of uninterrupted companionship with Susy, upon which each successive year she had built so many maternal hopes and confidences, fade away before her. She dreaded the coming of Susy’s school friend, who shared her daughter’s present thoughts and intimacy, although she had herself invited her

in a more desperate dread of the child's abstracted, discontented eyes; she dreaded the advent of the boy who had shared Susy's early life before she knew her; she dreaded the ordeal of breaking the news and perhaps seeing that pretty animation spring into her eyes, which she had begun to believe no solicitude or tenderness of her own ever again awakened,—and yet she dreaded still more that her husband should see it too. For the love of this recreated woman, although not entirely materialized with her changed fibre, had nevertheless become a coarser selfishness fostered by her loneliness and limited experience. The maternal yearning left unsatisfied by the loss of her first-born had never been filled by Susy's thoughtless acceptance of it; she had been led astray by the child's easy transference of dependence and the forgetfulness of youth, and was only now dimly conscious of finding herself face to face with an alien nature.

She started to her feet and followed the direction that Susy had taken. For a moment she had to front the afternoon trade wind which chilled her as it swept the plain beyond the gateway, but was stopped by the adobe wall, above whose shelter the stunted treetops—through years of exposure—slanted as if trimmed by gigantic shears. At first, looking down the venerable alley of fantastic, knotted shapes, she saw no trace of Susy. But half way down the gleam of a white skirt against a thicket of dark olives showed her the young girl sitting on a bench in a neglected arbor. In the midst of this formal and faded pageantry she looked charmingly fresh, youthful, and pretty; and yet the unfortunate woman thought that her attitude and expression at that moment suggested more than her fifteen years of girlhood. Her golden hair still hung unfettered over her straight, boy-like back and shoulders; her short skirt still showed her childish feet and ankles; yet there seemed to be some undefined maturity or a vague womanliness about her that stung Mrs. Peyton's heart. The child was growing away from her, too!

“Susy!”

The young girl raised her head quickly; her deep violet eyes seemed also to leap with a sudden suspicion, and with a half-mechanical, secretive movement, that might have been only a schoolgirl's instinct, her right hand had slipped a paper on which she was scribbling between the leaves of her book. Yet the next moment, even while looking interrogatively at her mother, she withdrew the paper quietly, tore it up into small pieces, and threw them on the ground.

But Mrs. Peyton was too preoccupied with her news to notice the circumstance, and too nervous in her haste to be tactful. “Susy, your father has invited that boy, Clarence Brant,—you know that creature we picked up and assisted on the plains, when you were a mere baby,—to come down here and make us a visit.”

Her heart seemed to stop beating as she gazed breathlessly at the girl. But Susy's face, unchanged except for the alert, questioning eyes, remained fixed for a moment; then a childish smile of wonder opened her small red mouth, expanded it slightly as she said simply:—

“Lor, mar! He hasn't, really!”

Inexpressibly, yet unreasonably reassured, Mrs. Peyton hurriedly recounted her husband's story of Clarence's fortune, and was even joyfully surprised into some fairness of statement.

“But you don't remember him much, do you, dear? It was so long ago, and—you are quite a young lady now,” she added eagerly.

The open mouth was still fixed; the wondering smile would have been idiotic in any face less dimpled, rosy, and piquant than Susy's. After a slight gasp, as if in still incredulous and partly reminiscent preoccupation, she said without replying:—

“How funny! When is he coming?”

“Day after to-morrow,” returned Mrs. Peyton, with a contented smile.

“And Mary Rogers will be here, too. It will be real fun for her.”

Mrs. Peyton was more than reassured. Half ashamed of her jealous fears, she drew Susy's golden head towards her and kissed it. And the young girl, still reminiscent, with smilingly abstracted toleration, returned the caress.

CHAPTER II

It was not thought inconsistent with Susy's capriciousness that she should declare her intention the next morning of driving her pony buggy to Santa Inez to anticipate the stage-coach and fetch Mary Rogers from the station. Mrs. Peyton, as usual, supported the young lady's whim and opposed her husband's objections.

"Because the stage-coach happens to pass our gate, John, it is no reason why Susy shouldn't drive her friend from Santa Inez if she prefers it. It's only seven miles, and you can send Pedro to follow her on horseback to see that she comes to no harm."

"But that isn't Pedro's business," said Peyton.

"He ought to be proud of the privilege," returned the lady, with a toss of her head.

Peyton smiled grimly, but yielded; and when the stage-coach drew up the next afternoon at the Santa Inez Hotel, Susy was already waiting in her pony carriage before it. Although the susceptible driver, expressman, and passengers generally, charmed with this golden-haired vision, would have gladly protracted the meeting of the two young friends, the transfer of Mary Rogers from the coach to the carriage was effected with considerable hauteur and youthful dignity by Susy. Even Mary Rogers, two years Susy's senior, a serious brunette, whose good-humor did not, however, impair her capacity for sentiment, was impressed and even embarrassed by her demeanor; but only for a moment. When they had driven from the hotel and were fairly hidden again in the dust of the outlying plain, with the discreet Pedro hovering in the distance, Susy dropped the reins, and, grasping her companion's arm, gasped, in tones of dramatic intensity:—

"He's been heard from, and is coming HERE!"

"Who?"

A sickening sense that her old confidante had already lost touch with her—they had been separated for nearly two weeks—might have passed through Susy's mind.

"Who?" she repeated, with a vicious shake of Mary's arm, "why, Clarence Brant, of course."

"No!" said Mary, vaguely.

Nevertheless, Susy went on rapidly, as if to neutralize the effect of her comrade's vacuity.

"You never could have imagined it! Never! Even I, when mother told me, I thought I should have fainted, and ALL would have been revealed!"

"But," hesitated the still wondering confidante, "I thought that was all over long ago. You haven't seen him nor heard from him since that day you met accidentally at Santa Clara, two years ago, have you?"

Susy's eyes shot a blue ray of dark but unutterable significance into Mary's, and then were carefully averted. Mary Rogers, although perfectly satisfied that Susy had never seen Clarence since, nevertheless instantly accepted and was even thrilled with this artful suggestion of a clandestine correspondence. Such was the simple faith of youthful friendship.

"Mother knows nothing of it, of course, and a word from you or him would ruin everything," continued the breathless Susy. "That's why I came to fetch you and warn you. You must see him first, and warn him at any cost. If I hadn't run every risk to come here to-day, Heaven knows what might have happened! What do you think of the ponies, dear? They're my own, and the sweetest! This one's Susy, that one Clarence,—but privately, you know. Before the world and in the stables he's only Birdie."

"But I thought you wrote to me that you called them 'Paul and Virginie,'" said Mary doubtfully.

"I do, sometimes," said Susy calmly. "But one has to learn to suppress one's feelings, dear!" Then quickly, "I do so hate deceit, don't you? Tell me, don't you think deceit perfectly hateful?"

Without waiting for her friend's loyal assent, she continued rapidly: "And he's just rolling in wealth! and educated, papa says, to the highest degree!"

“Then,” began Mary, “if he’s coming with your mother’s consent, and if you haven’t quarreled, and it is not broken off, I should think you’d be just delighted.”

But another quick flash from Susy’s eyes dispersed these beatific visions of the future. “Hush!” she said, with suppressed dramatic intensity. “You know not what you say! There’s an awful mystery hangs over him. Mary Rogers,” continued the young girl, approaching her small mouth to her confidante’s ear in an appalling whisper. “His father was—a PIRATE! Yes—lived a pirate and was killed a pirate!”

The statement, however, seemed to be partly ineffective. Mary Rogers was startled but not alarmed, and even protested feebly. “But,” she said, “if the father’s dead, what’s that to do with Clarence? He was always with your papa—so you told me, dear—or other people, and couldn’t catch anything from his own father. And I’m sure, dearest, he always seemed nice and quiet.”

“Yes, SEEMED,” returned Susy darkly, “but that’s all you know! It was in his BLOOD. You know it always is,—you read it in the books,—you could see it in his eye. There were times, my dear, when he was thwarted,—when the slightest attention from another person to me revealed it! I have kept it to myself,—but think, dearest, of the effects of jealousy on that passionate nature! Sometimes I tremble to look back upon it.”

Nevertheless, she raised her hands and threw back her lovely golden mane from her childish shoulders with an easy, untroubled gesture. It was singular that Mary Rogers, leaning back comfortably in the buggy, also accepted these heart-rending revelations with comfortably knitted brows and luxuriously contented concern. If she found it difficult to recognize in the picture just drawn by Susy the quiet, gentle, and sadly reserved youth she had known, she said nothing. After a silence, lazily watching the distant wheeling vacquero, she said:—

“And your father always sends an outrider like that with you? How nice! So picturesque—and like the old Spanish days.”

“Hush!” said Susy, with another unutterable glance.

But this time Mary was in full sympathetic communion with her friend, and equal to any incoherent hiatus of revelation.

“No!” she said promptly, “you don’t mean it!”

“Don’t ask me, I daren’t say anything to papa, for he’d be simply furious. But there are times when we’re alone, and Pedro wheels down so near with SUCH a look in his black eyes, that I’m all in a tremble. It’s dreadful! They say he’s a real Briones,—and he sometimes says something in Spanish, ending with ‘senorita,’ but I pretend I don’t understand.”

“And I suppose that if anything should happen to the ponies, he’d just risk his life to save you.”

“Yes,—and it would be so awful,—for I just hate him!”

“But if I was with you, dear, he couldn’t expect you to be as grateful as if you were alone. Susy!” she continued after a pause, “if you just stirred up the ponies a little so as to make ‘em go fast, perhaps he might think they’d got away from you, and come dashing down here. It would be so funny to see him,—wouldn’t it?”

The two girls looked at each other; their eyes sparkled already with a fearful joy,—they drew a long breath of guilty anticipation. For a moment Susy even believed in her imaginary sketch of Pedro’s devotion.

“Papa said I wasn’t to use the whip except in a case of necessity,” she said, reaching for the slender silver-handled toy, and setting her pretty lips together with the added determination of disobedience. “G’long!”—and she laid the lash smartly on the shining backs of the animals.

They were wiry, slender brutes of Mojave Indian blood, only lately broken to harness, and still undisciplined in temper. The lash sent them rearing into the air, where, forgetting themselves in the slackened traces and loose reins, they came down with a succession of bounds that brought the light buggy leaping after them with its wheels scarcely touching the ground. That unlucky lash had knocked

away the bonds of a few months' servitude and sent the half-broken brutes instinctively careering with arched backs and kicking heels into the field towards the nearest cover.

Mary Rogers cast a hurried glance over her shoulder. Alas, they had not calculated on the insidious levels of the terraced plain, and the faithful Pedro had suddenly disappeared; the intervention of six inches of rising wild oats had wiped him out of the prospect and their possible salvation as completely as if he had been miles away. Nevertheless, the girls were not frightened; perhaps they had not time. There was, however, the briefest interval for the most dominant of feminine emotions, and it was taken advantage of by Susy.

"It was all YOUR fault, dear!" she gasped, as the forewheels of the buggy, dropping into a gopher rut, suddenly tilted up the back of the vehicle and shot its fair occupants into the yielding palisades of dusty grain. The shock detached the whiffletree from the splinter-bar, snapped the light pole, and, turning the now thoroughly frightened animals again from their course, sent them, goaded by the clattering fragments, flying down the turnpike. Half a mile farther on they overtook the gleaming white canvas hood of a slowly moving wagon drawn by two oxen, and, swerving again, the nearer pony stepped upon a trailing trace and ingloriously ended their career by rolling himself and his companion in the dust at the very feet of the peacefully plodding team.

Equally harmless and inglorious was the catastrophe of Susy and her friend. The strong, elastic stalks of the tall grain broke their fall and enabled them to scramble to their feet, dusty, disheveled, but unhurt, and even unstunned by the shock. Their first instinctive cries over a damaged hat or ripped skirt were followed by the quick reaction of childish laughter. They were alone; the very defection of Pedro consoled them, in its absence of any witness to their disaster; even their previous slight attitude to each other was forgotten. They groped their way, pushing and panting, to the road again, where, beholding the overset buggy with its wheels ludicrously in the air, they suddenly seized and shook each other, and in an outburst of hilarious ecstasy, fairly laughed until the tears came into their eyes.

Then there was a breathless silence.

"The stage will be coming by in a moment," composedly said Susy. "Fix me, dear."

Mary Rogers calmly walked around her friend, bestowing a practical shake there, a pluck here, completely retying one bow and restoring an engaging fullness to another, yet critically examining, with her head on one side, the fascinating result. Then Susy performed the same function for Mary with equal deliberation and deftness. Suddenly Mary started and looked up.

"It's coming," she said quickly, "and they've SEEN US."

The expression of the faces of the two girls instantly changed. A pained dignity and resignation, apparently born of the most harrowing experiences and controlled only by perfect good breeding, was distinctly suggested in their features and attitude as they stood patiently by the wreck of their overturned buggy awaiting the oncoming coach. In sharp contrast was the evident excitement among the passengers. A few rose from their seats in their eagerness; as the stage pulled up in the road beside the buggy four or five of the younger men leaped to the ground.

"Are you hurt, miss?" they gasped sympathetically.

Susy did not immediately reply, but ominously knitted her pretty eyebrows as if repressing a spasm of pain. Then she said, "Not at all," coldly, with the suggestion of stoically concealing some lasting or perhaps fatal injury, and took the arm of Mary Rogers, who had, in the mean time, established a touching yet graceful limp.

Declining the proffered assistance of the passengers, they helped each other into the coach, and freezingly requesting the driver to stop at Mr. Peyton's gate, maintained a statuesque and impressive silence. At the gates they got down, followed by the sympathetic glances of the others.

To all appearance their escapade, albeit fraught with dangerous possibilities, had happily ended. But in the economy of human affairs, as in nature, forces are not suddenly let loose without more or less sympathetic disturbance which is apt to linger after the impelling cause is harmlessly spent. The fright which the girls had unsuccessfully attempted to produce in the heart of their escort had passed

him to become a panic elsewhere. Judge Peyton, riding near the gateway of his rancho, was suddenly confronted by the spectacle of one of his vacqueros driving on before him the two lassoed and dusty ponies, with a face that broke into violent gesticulating at his master's quick interrogation.

"Ah! Mother of God! It was an evil day! For the bronchos had run away, upset the buggy, and had only been stopped by a brave Americano of an ox-team, whose lasso was even now around their necks, to prove it, and who had been dragged a matter of a hundred varas, like a calf, at their heels. The señoritas,—ah! had he not already said they were safe, by the mercy of Jesus!—picked up by the coach, and would be here at this moment."

"But where was Pedro all the time? What was he doing?" demanded Peyton, with a darkened face and gathering anger.

The vacquero looked at his master, and shrugged his shoulders significantly. At any other time Peyton would have remembered that Pedro, as the reputed scion of a decayed Spanish family, and claiming superiority, was not a favorite with his fellow-retainers. But the gesture, half of suggestion, half of depreciation, irritated Peyton still more.

"Well, where is this American who DID something when there wasn't a man among you all able to stop a child's runaway ponies?" he said sarcastically. "Let me see him."

The vacquero became still more deprecatory.

"Ah! He had driven on with his team towards San Antonio. He would not stop to be thanked. But that was the whole truth. He, Incarnacion, could swear to it as to the Creed. There was nothing more."

"Take those beasts around the back way to the corral," said Peyton, thoroughly enraged, "and not a word of this to any one at the casa, do you hear? Not a word to Mrs. Peyton or the servants, or, by Heaven, I'll clear the rancho of the whole lazy crew of you at once. Out of the way there, and be off!"

He spurred his horse past the frightened menial, and dashed down the narrow lane that led to the gate. But, as Incarnacion had truly said, "It was an evil day," for at the bottom of the lane, ambling slowly along as he lazily puffed a yellow cigarette, appeared the figure of the erring Pedro. Utterly unconscious of the accident, attributing the disappearance of his charges to the inequalities of the plain, and, in truth, little interested in what he firmly believed was his purely artificial function, he had even made a larger circuit to stop at a wayside fonda for refreshments.

Unfortunately, there is no more illogical sequence of human emotion than the exasperation produced by the bland manner of the unfortunate object who has excited it, although that very unconcern may be the convincing proof of innocence of intention. Judge Peyton, already influenced, was furious at the comfortable obliviousness of his careless henchman, and rode angrily towards him. Only a quick turn of Pedro's wrist kept the two men from coming into collision.

"Is this the way you attend to your duty?" demanded Peyton, in a thick, suppressed voice, "Where is the buggy? Where is my daughter?"

There was no mistaking Judge Peyton's manner, even if the reason of it was not so clear to Pedro's mind, and his hot Latin blood flew instinctively to his face. But for that, he might have shown some concern or asked an explanation. As it was, he at once retorted with the national shrug and the national half-scornful, half-lazy "Quien sabe?"

"Who knows?" repeated Peyton, hotly. "I do! She was thrown out of her buggy through your negligence and infernal laziness! The ponies ran away, and were stopped by a stranger who wasn't afraid of risking his bones, while you were limping around somewhere like a slouching, cowardly coyote."

The vacquero struggled a moment between blank astonishment and inarticulate rage. At last he burst out:—

"I am no coyote! I was there! I saw no runaway!"

"Don't lie to me, sir!" roared Peyton. "I tell you the buggy was smashed, the girls were thrown out and nearly killed"—He stopped suddenly. The sound of youthful laughter had come from the

bottom of the lane, where Susy Peyton and Mary Rogers, just alighted from the coach, in the reaction of their previous constrained attitude, were flying hilariously into view. A slight embarrassment crossed Peyton's face; a still deeper flush of anger overspread Pedro's sullen cheek.

Then Pedro found tongue again, his native one, rapidly, violently, half incoherently. "Ah, yes! It had come to this. It seems he was not a vacquero, a companion of the padrone on lands that had been his own before the Americanos robbed him of it, but a servant, a lackey of muchachas, an attendant on children to amuse them, or—why not?—an appendage to his daughter's state! Ah, Jesus Maria! such a state! such a muchacha! A picked-up foundling—a swineherd's daughter—to be ennobled by his, Pedro's, attendance, and for whose vulgar, clownish tricks,—tricks of a swineherd's daughter,—he, Pedro, was to be brought to book and insulted as if she were of Hidalgo blood! Ah, Caramba! Don Juan Peyton would find he could no more make a servant of him than he could make a lady of her!"

The two young girls were rapidly approaching. Judge Peyton spurred his horse beside the vacquero's, and, swinging the long thong of his bridle ominously in his clenched fingers, said, with a white face:—

"Vamos!"

Pedro's hand slid towards his sash. Peyton only looked at him with a rigid smile of scorn.

"Or I'll lash you here before them both," he added in a lower voice.

The vacquero met Peyton's relentless eyes with a yellow flash of hate, drew his reins sharply, until his mustang, galled by the cruel bit, reared suddenly as if to strike at the immovable American, then, apparently with the same action, he swung it around on its hind legs, as on a pivot, and dashed towards the corral at a furious gallop.

CHAPTER III

Meantime the heroic proprietor of the peaceful ox-team, whose valor Incarnacion had so infelicitously celebrated, was walking listlessly in the dust beside his wagon. At a first glance his slouching figure, taken in connection with his bucolic conveyance, did not immediately suggest a hero. As he emerged from the dusty cloud it could be seen that he was wearing a belt from which a large dragoon revolver and hunting knife were slung, and placed somewhat ostentatiously across the wagon seat was a rifle. Yet the other contents of the wagon were of a singularly inoffensive character, and even suggested articles of homely barter. Culinary utensils of all sizes, tubs, scullery brushes, and clocks, with several rolls of cheap carpeting and calico, might have been the wares of some traveling vender. Yet, as they were only visible through a flap of the drawn curtains of the canvas hood, they did not mitigate the general aggressive effect of their owner's appearance. A red bandanna handkerchief knotted and thrown loosely over his shoulders, a slouched hat pulled darkly over a head of long tangled hair, which, however, shadowed a round, comfortable face, scantily and youthfully bearded, were part of these confusing inconsistencies.

The shadows of the team wagon were already lengthening grotesquely over the flat, cultivated fields, which for some time had taken the place of the plains of wild oats in the branch road into which they had turned. The gigantic shadow of the proprietor, occasionally projected before it, was in characteristic exaggeration, and was often obliterated by a puff of dust, stirred by the plodding hoofs of the peaceful oxen, and swept across the field by the strong afternoon trades. The sun sank lower, although a still potent presence above the horizon line; the creaking wagon lumbered still heavily along. Yet at intervals its belligerent proprietor would start up from his slouching, silent march, break out into violent, disproportionate, but utterly ineffective objurgation of his cattle, jump into the air and kick his heels together in some paroxysm of indignation against them,—an act, however, which was received always with heavy bovine indifference, the dogged scorn of swaying, repudiating heads, or the dull contempt of lazily flicking tails.

Towards sunset one or two straggling barns and cottages indicated their approach to the outskirts of a country town or settlement. Here the team halted, as if the belligerent-looking teamster had felt his appearance was inconsistent with an effeminate civilization, and the oxen were turned into an open waste opposite a nondescript wooden tenement, half farmhouse and half cabin, evidently of the rudest Western origin. He may have recognized the fact that these "shanties" were not, as the ordinary traveler might infer, the first rude shelter of the original pioneers or settlers, but the later makeshifts of some recent Western immigrants who, like himself, probably found themselves unequal to the settled habits of the village, and who still retained their nomadic instincts. It chanced, however, that the cabin at present was occupied by a New England mechanic and his family, who had emigrated by ship around Cape Horn, and who had no experience of the West, the plains, or its people. It was therefore with some curiosity and a certain amount of fascinated awe that the mechanic's only daughter regarded from the open door of her dwelling the arrival of this wild and lawless-looking stranger.

Meantime he had opened the curtains of the wagon and taken from its interior a number of pots, pans, and culinary utensils, which he proceeded to hang upon certain hooks that were placed on the outer ribs of the board and the sides of the vehicle. To this he added a roll of rag carpet, the end of which hung from the tailboard, and a roll of pink calico temptingly displayed on the seat. The mystification and curiosity of the young girl grew more intense at these proceedings. It looked like the ordinary exhibition of a traveling peddler, but the gloomy and embattled appearance of the man himself scouted so peaceful and commonplace a suggestion. Under the pretense of chasing away a marauding hen, she sallied out upon the waste near the wagon. It then became evident that the traveler had seen her, and was not averse to her interest in his movements, although he had not changed his

attitude of savage retrospection. An occasional ejaculation of suppressed passion, as if the memory of some past conflict was too much for him, escaped him even in this peaceful occupation. As this possibly caused the young girl to still hover timidly in the distance, he suddenly entered the wagon and reappeared carrying a tin bucket, with which he somewhat ostentatiously crossed her path, his eyes darkly wandering as if seeking something.

“If you’re lookin’ for the spring, it’s a spell further on—by the willows.”

It was a pleasant voice, the teamster thought, albeit with a dry, crisp, New England accent unfamiliar to his ears. He looked into the depths of an unlovely blue-check sunbonnet, and saw certain small, irregular features and a sallow check, lit up by a pair of perfectly innocent, trustful, and wondering brown eyes. Their timid possessor seemed to be a girl of seventeen, whose figure, although apparently clad in one of her mother’s gowns, was still undeveloped and repressed by rustic hardship and innutrition. As her eyes met his she saw that the face of this gloomy stranger was still youthful, by no means implacable, and, even at that moment, was actually suffused by a brick-colored blush! In matters of mere intuition, the sex, even in its most rustic phase, is still our superior; and this unsophisticated girl, as the trespasser stammered, “Thank ye, miss,” was instinctively emboldened to greater freedom.

“Dad ain’t tu hum, but ye kin have a drink o’ milk if ye keer for it.”

She motioned shyly towards the cabin, and then led the way. The stranger, with an inarticulate murmur, afterwards disguised as a cough, followed her meekly. Nevertheless, by the time they had reached the cabin he had shaken his long hair over his eyes again, and a dark abstraction gathered chiefly in his eyebrows. But it did not efface from the girl’s mind the previous concession of a blush, and, although it added to her curiosity, did not alarm her. He drank the milk awkwardly. But by the laws of courtesy, even among the most savage tribes, she felt he was, at that moment at least, harmless. A timid smile fluttered around her mouth as she said:—

“When ye hung up them things I thought ye might be havin’ suthing to swap or sell. That is,”—with tactful politeness,—“mother was wantin’ a new skillet, and it would have been handy if you’d had one. But”—with an apologetic glance at his equipments—“if it ain’t your business, it’s all right, and no offense.”

“I’ve got a lot o’ skilletts,” said the strange teamster, with marked condescension, “and she can have one. They’re all that’s left outer a heap o’ trader’s stuff captured by Injuns t’other side of Laramie. We had a big fight to get ‘em back. Lost two of our best men,—scalped at Bloody Creek,—and had to drop a dozen redskins in their tracks,—me and another man,—lyin’ flat in er wagon and firin’ under the flaps o’ the canvas. I don’t know ez they waz wuth it,” he added in gloomy retrospect; “but I’ve got to get rid of ‘em, I reckon, somehow, afore I work over to Deadman’s Gulch again.”

The young girl’s eyes brightened timidly with a feminine mingling of imaginative awe and personal, pitying interest. He was, after all, so young and amiable looking for such hardships and adventures. And with all this, he—this Indian fighter—was a little afraid of HER!

“Then that’s why you carry that knife and six-shooter?” she said. “But you won’t want ‘em now, here in the settlement.”

“That’s ez mebbe,” said the stranger darkly. He paused, and then suddenly, as if recklessly accepting a dangerous risk, unbuckled his revolver and handed it abstractedly to the young girl. But the sheath of the bowie-knife was a fixture in his body-belt, and he was obliged to withdraw the glittering blade by itself, and to hand it to her in all its naked terrors. The young girl received the weapons with a smiling complacency. Upon such altars as these the skeptical reader will remember that Mars had once hung his “battered shield,” his lance, and “uncontrolled crest.”

Nevertheless, the warlike teamster was not without embarrassment. Muttering something about the necessity of “looking after his stock,” he achieved a hesitating bow, backed awkwardly out of the door, and receiving from the conquering hands of the young girl his weapons again, was obliged to carry them somewhat ingloriously in his hands across the road, and put them on the wagon seat, where,

in company with the culinary articles, they seemed to lose their distinctively aggressive character. Here, although his cheek was still flushed from his peaceful encounter, his voice regained some of its hoarse severity as he drove the oxen from the muddy pool into which they had luxuriantly wandered, and brought their fodder from the wagon. Later, as the sun was setting, he lit a corn-cob pipe, and somewhat ostentatiously strolled down the road, with a furtive eye lingering upon the still open door of the farmhouse. Presently two angular figures appeared from it, the farmer and his wife, intent on barter.

These he received with his previous gloomy preoccupation, and a slight variation of the story he had told their daughter. It is possible that his suggestive indifference piqued and heightened the bargaining instincts of the woman, for she not only bought the skillet, but purchased a clock and a roll of carpeting. Still more, in some effusion of rustic courtesy, she extended an invitation to him to sup with them, which he declined and accepted in the same embarrassed breath, returning the proffered hospitality by confidentially showing them a couple of dried scalps, presumably of Indian origin. It was in the same moment of human weakness that he answered their polite query as to “what they might call him,” by intimating that his name was “Red Jim,”—a title of achievement by which he was generally known, which for the present must suffice them. But during the repast that followed this was shortened to “Mister Jim,” and even familiarly by the elders to plain “Jim.” Only the young girl habitually used the formal prefix in return for the “Miss Phoebe” that he called her.

With three such sympathetic and unexperienced auditors the gloomy embarrassment of Red Jim was soon dissipated, although it could hardly be said that he was generally communicative. Dark tales of Indian warfare, of night attacks and wild stampedes, in which he had always taken a prominent part, flowed freely from his lips, but little else of his past history or present prospects. And even his narratives of adventure were more or less fragmentary and imperfect in detail.

“You woz saying,” said the farmer, with slow, matter of fact, New England deliberation, “ez how you guessed you woz beguiled amongst the Injins by your Mexican partner, a pow’ful influential man, and yet you woz the only one escaped the gen’ral slarterin’. How came the Injins to kill HIM, —their friend?”

“They didn’t,” returned Jim, with ominously averted eyes.

“What became of him?” continued the farmer.

Red Jim shadowed his eyes with his hand, and cast a dark glance of scrutiny out of the doors and windows. The young girl perceived it with timid, fascinated concern, and said hurriedly:—

“Don’t ask him, father! Don’t you see he mustn’t tell?”

“Not when spies may be hangin’ round, and doggin’ me at every step,” said Red Jim, as if reflecting, with another furtive glance towards the already fading prospect without. “They’ve sworn to revenge him,” he added moodily.

A momentary silence followed. The farmer coughed slightly, and looked dubiously at his wife. But the two women had already exchanged feminine glances of sympathy for this evident slayer of traitors, and were apparently inclined to stop any adverse criticism.

In the midst of which a shout was heard from the road. The farmer and his family instinctively started. Red Jim alone remained unmoved,—a fact which did not lessen the admiration of his feminine audience. The host rose quickly, and went out. The figure of a horseman had halted in the road, but after a few moments’ conversation with the farmer they both moved towards the house and disappeared. When the farmer returned, it was to say that “one of them ‘Frisco dandies, who didn’t keer about stoppin’ at the hotel in the settlement,” had halted to give his “critter” a feed and drink that he might continue his journey. He had asked him to come in while the horse was feeding, but the stranger had “guessed he’d stretch his legs outside and smoke his cigar;” he might have thought the company “not fine enough for him,” but he was “civil spoken enough, and had an all-fired smart hoss, and seemed to know how to run him.” To the anxious inquiries of his wife and daughter he

added that the stranger didn't seem like a spy or a Mexican; was "as young as HIM," pointing to the moody Red Jim, "and a darned sight more peaceful-like in style."

Perhaps owing to the criticism of the farmer, perhaps from some still lurking suspicion of being overheard by eavesdroppers, or possibly from a humane desire to relieve the strained apprehension of the women, Red Jim, as the farmer disappeared to rejoin the stranger, again dropped into a lighter and gentler vein of reminiscence. He told them how, when a mere boy, he had been lost from an emigrant train in company with a little girl some years his junior. How, when they found themselves alone on the desolate plain, with the vanished train beyond their reach, he endeavored to keep the child from a knowledge of the real danger of their position, and to soothe and comfort her. How he carried her on his back, until, exhausted, he sank in a heap of sage-brush. How he was surrounded by Indians, who, however, never suspected his hiding-place; and how he remained motionless and breathless with the sleeping child for three hours, until they departed. How, at the last moment, he had perceived a train in the distance, and had staggered with her thither, although shot at and wounded by the trainmen in the belief that he was an Indian. How it was afterwards discovered that the child was the long-lost daughter of a millionaire; how he had resolutely refused any gratuity for saving her, and she was now a peerless young heiress, famous in California. Whether this lighter tone of narrative suited him better, or whether the active feminine sympathy of his auditors helped him along, certain it was that his story was more coherent and intelligible and his voice less hoarse and constrained than in his previous belligerent reminiscences; his expression changed, and even his features worked into something like gentler emotion. The bright eyes of Phoebe, fastened upon him, turned dim with a faint moisture, and her pale cheek took upon itself a little color. The mother, after interjecting "Du tell," and "I wanter know," remained open-mouthed, staring at her visitor. And in the silence that followed, a pleasant, but somewhat melancholy voice came from the open door.

"I beg your pardon, but I thought I couldn't be mistaken. It IS my old friend, Jim Hooker!"

Everybody started. Red Jim stumbled to his feet with an inarticulate and hysteric exclamation. Yet the apparition that now stood in the doorway was far from being terrifying or discomposing. It was evidently the stranger,—a slender, elegantly-knit figure, whose upper lip was faintly shadowed by a soft, dark mustache indicating early manhood, and whose unstudied ease in his well-fitting garments bespoke the dweller of cities. Good-looking and well-dressed, without the consciousness of being either; self-possessed through easy circumstances, yet without self-assertion; courteous by nature and instinct as well as from an experience of granting favors, he might have been a welcome addition to even a more critical company. But Red Jim, hurriedly seizing his outstretched hand, instantly dragged him away from the doorway into the road and out of hearing of his audience.

"Did you hear what I was saying?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, yes,—I think so," returned the stranger, with a quiet smile.

"Ye ain't goin' back on me, Clarence, are ye,—ain't goin' to gimme away afore them, old pard, are ye?" said Jim, with a sudden change to almost pathetic pleading.

"No," returned the stranger, smiling. "And certainly not before that interested young lady, Jim. But stop. Let me look at you."

He held out both hands, took Jim's, spread them apart for a moment with a boyish gesture, and, looking in his face, said half mischievously, half sadly, "Yes, it's the same old Jim Hooker,—unchanged."

"But YOU'RE changed,—reg'lar war paint, Big Injin style!" said Hooker, looking up at him with an awkward mingling of admiration and envy. "Heard you struck it rich with the old man, and was Mister Brant now!"

"Yes," said Clarence gently, yet with a smile that had not only a tinge of weariness but even of sadness in it.

Unfortunately, the act, which was quite natural to Clarence's sensitiveness, and indeed partly sprang from some concern in his old companion's fortunes, translated itself by a very human process

to Hooker's consciousness as a piece of rank affectation. HE would have been exalted and exultant in Clarence's place, consequently any other exhibition was only "airs." Nevertheless, at the present moment Clarence was to be placated.

"You didn't mind my telling that story about your savin' Susy as my own, did ye?" he said, with a hasty glance over his shoulder. "I only did it to fool the old man and women-folks, and make talk. You won't blow on me? Ye ain't mad about it?"

It had crossed Clarence's memory that when they were both younger Jim Hooker had once not only borrowed his story, but his name and personality as well. Yet in his loyalty to old memories there was mingled no resentment for past injury. "Of course not," he said, with a smile that was, however, still thoughtful. "Why should I? Only I ought to tell you that Susy Peyton is living with her adopted parents not ten miles from here, and it might reach their ears. She's quite a young lady now, and if I wouldn't tell her story to strangers, I don't think YOU ought to, Jim."

He said this so pleasantly that even the skeptical Jim forgot what he believed were the "airs and graces" of self-abnegation, and said, "Let's go inside, and I'll introduce you," and turned to the house. But Clarence Brant drew back. "I'm going on as soon as my horse is fed, for I'm on a visit to Peyton, and I intend to push as far as Santa Inez still to-night. I want to talk with you about yourself, Jim," he added gently; "your prospects and your future. I heard," he went on hesitatingly, "that you were—at work—in a restaurant in San Francisco. I'm glad to see that you are at least your own master here,"—he glanced at the wagon. "You are selling things, I suppose? For yourself, or another? Is that team yours? Come," he added, still pleasantly, but in an older and graver voice, with perhaps the least touch of experienced authority, "be frank, Jim. Which is it? Never mind what things you've told IN THERE, tell ME the truth about yourself. Can I help you in any way? Believe me, I should like to. We have been old friends, whatever difference in our luck, I am yours still."

Thus adjured, the redoubtable Jim, in a hoarse whisper, with a furtive eye on the house, admitted that he was traveling for an itinerant peddler, whom he expected to join later in the settlement; that he had his own methods of disposing of his wares, and (darkly) that his proprietor and the world generally had better not interfere with him; that (with a return to more confidential lightness) he had already "worked the Wild West Injin" business so successfully as to dispose of his wares, particularly in yonder house, and might do even more if not prematurely and wantonly "blown upon," "gone back on," or "given away."

"But wouldn't you like to settle down on some bit of land like this, and improve it for yourself?" said Clarence. "All these valley terraces are bound to rise in value, and meantime you would be independent. It could be managed, Jim. I think I could arrange it for you," he went on, with a slight glow of youthful enthusiasm. "Write to me at Peyton's ranch, and I'll see you when I come back, and we'll hunt up something for you together." As Jim received the proposition with a kind of gloomy embarrassment, he added lightly, with a glance at the farmhouse, "It might be near HERE, you know; and you'd have pleasant neighbors, and even eager listeners to your old adventures."

"You'd better come in a minit before you go," said Jim, clumsily evading a direct reply. Clarence hesitated a moment, and then yielded. For an equal moment Jim Hooker was torn between secret jealousy of his old comrade's graces and a desire to present them as familiar associations of his own. But his vanity was quickly appeased.

Need it be said that the two women received this fleck and foam of a super-civilization they knew little of as almost an impertinence compared to the rugged, gloomy, pathetic, and equally youthful hero of an adventurous wilderness of which they knew still less? What availed the courtesy and gentle melancholy of Clarence Brant beside the mysterious gloom and dark savagery of Red Jim? Yet they received him patronizingly, as one who was, like themselves, an admirer of manly grace and power, and the recipient of Jim's friendship. The farmer alone seemed to prefer Clarence, and yet the latter's tacit indorsement of Red Jim, through his evident previous intimacy with him, impressed the man in Jim's favor. All of which Clarence saw with that sensitive perception which had given him

an early insight into human weakness, yet still had never shaken his youthful optimism. He smiled a little thoughtfully, but was openly fraternal to Jim, courteous to his host and family, and, as he rode away in the faint moonlight, magnificently opulent in his largess to the farmer,—his first and only assertion of his position.

The farmhouse, straggling barn, and fringe of dusty willows, the white dome of the motionless wagon, with the hanging frying pans and kettles showing in the moonlight like black silhouettes against the staring canvas, all presently sank behind Clarence like the details of a dream, and he was alone with the moon, the hazy mystery of the level, grassy plain, and the monotony of the unending road. As he rode slowly along he thought of that other dreary plain, white with alkali patches and brown with rings of deserted camp-fires, known to his boyhood of deprivation, dependency, danger, and adventure, oddly enough, with a strange delight; and his later years of study, monastic seclusion, and final ease and independence, with an easy sense of wasted existence and useless waiting. He remembered his homeless childhood in the South, where servants and slaves took the place of the father he had never known, and the mother that he rarely saw; he remembered his abandonment to a mysterious female relation, where his natural guardians seemed to have overlooked and forgotten him, until he was sent, an all too young adventurer, to work his passage on an overland emigrant train across the plains; he remembered, as yesterday, the fears, the hopes, the dreams and dangers of that momentous journey. He recalled his little playmate, Susy, and their strange adventures—the whole incident that the imaginative Jim Hooker had translated and rehearsed as his own—rose vividly before him. He thought of the cruel end of that pilgrimage, which again left him homeless and forgotten by even the relative he was seeking in a strange land. He remembered his solitary journey to the gold mines, taken with a boy's trust and a boy's fearlessness, and the strange protector he had found there, who had news of his missing kinsman; he remembered how this protector—whom he had at once instinctively loved—transferred him to the house of this new-found relation, who treated him kindly and sent him to the Jesuit school, but who never awakened in him a feeling of kinship. He dreamed again of his life at school, his accidental meeting with Susy at Santa Clara, the keen revival of his boyish love for his old playmate, now a pretty schoolgirl, the petted adopted child of wealthy parents. He recalled the terrible shock that interrupted this boyish episode: the news of the death of his protector, and the revelation that this hard, silent, and mysterious man was his own father, whose reckless life and desperate reputation had impelled him to assume a disguise.

He remembered how his sudden accession to wealth and independence had half frightened him, and had always left a lurking sensitiveness that he was unfairly favored, by some mere accident, above his less lucky companions. The rude vices of his old associates had made him impatient of the feebler sensual indulgences of the later companions of his luxury, and exposed their hollow fascinations; his sensitive fastidiousness kept him clean among vulgar temptations; his clear perceptions were never blinded by selfish sophistry. Meantime his feeling for Susy remained unchanged. Pride had kept him from seeking the Peytons. His present visit was as unpremeditated as Peyton's invitation had been unlooked for by him. Yet he had not allowed himself to be deceived. He knew that this courtesy was probably due to the change in his fortune, although he had hoped it might have been some change in their opinion brought about by Susy. But he would at least see her again, not in the pretty, half-clandestine way she had thought necessary, but openly and as her equal.

In his rapid ride he seemed to have suddenly penetrated the peaceful calm of the night. The restless irritation of the afternoon trade winds had subsided; the tender moonlight had hushed and tranquilly possessed the worried plain; the unending files of wild oats, far spaced and distinct, stood erect and motionless as trees; something of the sedate solemnity of a great forest seemed to have fallen upon their giant stalks. There was no dew. In that light, dry air, the heavier dust no longer rose beneath the heels of his horse, whose flying shadow passed over the field like a cloud, leaving no trail or track behind it. In the preoccupation of his thought and his breathless retrospect, the young man had ridden faster than he intended, and he now checked his panting horse. The influence of the night

and the hushed landscape stole over him; his thoughts took a gentler turn; in that dim, mysterious horizon line before him, his future seemed to be dreamily peopled with airy, graceful shapes that more or less took the likeness of Susy. She was bright, coquettish, romantic, as he had last seen her; she was older, graver, and thoughtfully welcome of him; or she was cold, distant, and severely forgetful of the past. How would her adopted father and mother receive him? Would they ever look upon him in the light of a suitor to the young girl? He had no fear of Peyton,—he understood his own sex, and, young as he was, knew already how to make himself respected; but how could he overcome that instinctive aversion which Mrs. Peyton had so often made him feel he had provoked? Yet in this dreamy hush of earth and sky, what was not possible? His boyish heart beat high with daring visions.

He saw Mrs. Peyton in the porch, welcoming him with that maternal smile which his childish longing had so often craved to share with Susy. Peyton would be there, too,—Peyton, who had once pushed back his torn straw hat to look approvingly in his boyish eyes; and Peyton, perhaps, might be proud of him.

Suddenly he started. A voice in his very ear!

“Bah! A yoke of vulgar cattle grazing on lands that were thine by right and law. Neither more nor less than that. And I tell thee, Pancho, like cattle, to be driven off or caught and branded for one’s own. Ha! There are those who could swear to the truth of this on the Creed. Ay! and bring papers stamped and signed by the governor’s rubric to prove it. And not that I hate them,—bah! what are those heretic swine to me? But thou dost comprehend me? It galls and pricks me to see them swelling themselves with stolen husks, and men like thee, Pancho, ousted from their own land.”

Clarence had halted in utter bewilderment. No one was visible before him, behind him, on either side. The words, in Spanish, came from the air, the sky, the distant horizon, he knew not which. Was he still dreaming? A strange shiver crept over his skin as if the air had grown suddenly chill. Then another mysterious voice arose, incredulous, half mocking, but equally distinct and clear.

“Caramba! What is this? You are wandering, friend Pancho. You are still smarting from his tongue. He has the grant confirmed by his brigand government; he has the POSSESSION, stolen by a thief like himself; and he has the Corregidores with him. For is he not one of them himself, this Judge Peyton?”

Peyton! Clarence felt the blood rush back to his face in astonishment and indignation. His heels mechanically pressed his horse’s flanks, and the animal sprang forward.

“Guarda! Mira!” said the voice again in a quicker, lower tone. But this time it was evidently in the field beside him, and the heads and shoulders of two horsemen emerged at the same moment from the tall ranks of wild oats. The mystery was solved. The strangers had been making their way along a lower level of the terraced plain, hidden by the grain, not twenty yards away, and parallel with the road they were now ascending to join. Their figures were alike formless in long striped serapes, and their features undistinguishable under stiff black sombreros.

“Buenas noches, señor,” said the second voice, in formal and cautious deliberation.

A sudden inspiration made Clarence respond in English, as if he had not comprehended the stranger’s words, “Eh?”

“Gooda-nighta,” repeated the stranger.

“Oh, good-night,” returned Clarence. They passed him. Their spurs tinkled twice or thrice, their mustangs sprang forward, and the next moment the loose folds of their serapes were fluttering at their sides like wings in their flight.

CHAPTER IV

After the chill of a dewless night the morning sun was apt to look ardently upon the Robles Rancho, if so strong an expression could describe the dry, oven-like heat of a Californian coast-range valley. Before ten o'clock the adobe wall of the patio was warm enough to permit lingering vacqueros and idle peons to lean against it, and the exposed annexe was filled with sharp, resinous odors from the oozing sap of unseasoned "redwood" boards, warped and drying in the hot sunshine. Even at that early hour the climbing Castilian roses were drooping against the wooden columns of the new veranda, scarcely older than themselves, and mingling an already faded spice with the aroma of baking wood and the more material fragrance of steaming coffee, that seemed dominant everywhere.

In fact, the pretty breakfast-room, whose three broad windows, always open to the veranda, gave an *al fresco* effect to every meal, was a pathetic endeavor of the Southern-bred Peyton to emulate the soft, luxurious, and open-air indolence of his native South, in a climate that was not only not tropical, but even austere in its most fervid moments. Yet, although cold draughts invaded it from the rear that morning, Judge Peyton sat alone, between the open doors and windows, awaiting the slow coming of his wife and the young ladies. He was not in an entirely comfortable mood that morning. Things were not going on well at Robles. That truculent vagabond, Pedro, had, the night before, taken himself off with a curse that had frightened even the vacqueros, who most hated him as a companion, but who now seemed inclined to regard his absence as an injury done to their race. Peyton, uneasily conscious that his own anger had been excited by an exaggerated conception of the accident, was now, like most obstinate men, inclined to exaggerate the importance of Pedro's insolence. He was well out of it to get rid of this quarrelsome hanger-on, whose presumption and ill-humor threatened the discipline of the rancho, yet he could not entirely forget that he had employed him on account of his family claims, and from a desire to placate racial jealousy and settle local differences. For the inferior Mexicans and Indian half-breeds still regarded their old masters with affection; were, in fact, more concerned for the integrity of their caste than the masters were themselves, and the old Spanish families who had made alliances with Americans, and shared their land with them, had rarely succeeded in alienating their retainers with their lands. Certain experiences in the proving of his grant before the Land Commission had taught Peyton that they were not to be depended upon. And lately there had been unpleasant rumors of the discovery of some unlooked-for claimants to a division of the grant itself, which might affect his own title.

He looked up quickly as voices and light steps on the veranda at last heralded the approach of his tardy household from the corridor. But, in spite of his preoccupation, he was startled and even awkwardly impressed with a change in Susy's appearance. She was wearing, for the first time, a long skirt, and this sudden maturing of her figure struck him, as a man, much more forcibly than it would probably have impressed a woman, more familiar with details. He had not noticed certain indications of womanhood, as significant, perhaps, in her carriage as her outlines, which had been lately perfectly apparent to her mother and Mary, but which were to him now, for the first time, indicated by a few inches of skirt. She not only looked taller to his masculine eyes, but these few inches had added to the mystery as well as the drapery of the goddess; they were not so much the revelation of maturity as the suggestion that it was HIDDEN. So impressed was he, that a half-serious lecture on her yesterday's childishness, the outcome of his irritated reflections that morning, died upon his lips. He felt he was no longer dealing with a child.

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