

BRET HARTE

UNDER THE
REDWOODS

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JIMMY'S BIG BROTHER FROM CALIFORNIA

As night crept up from the valley that stormy afternoon, Sawyer's Ledge was at first quite blotted out by wind and rain, but presently reappeared in little nebulous star-like points along the mountain side, as the straggling cabins of the settlement were one by one lit up by the miners returning from tunnel and claim. These stars were of varying brilliancy that evening, two notably so—one that eventually resolved itself into a many-candled illumination of a cabin of evident festivity; the other into a glimmering taper in the window of a silent one. They might have represented the extreme mutations of fortune in the settlement that night: the celebration of a strike by Robert Falloner, a lucky miner; and the sick-bed of Dick Lasham, an unlucky one.

The latter was, however, not quite alone. He was ministered to by Daddy Folsom, a weak but emotional and aggressively hopeful neighbor, who was sitting beside the wooden bunk whereon the invalid lay. Yet there was something perfunctory in his attitude: his eyes were continually straying to the window, whence the illuminated Falloner festivities could be seen between the trees, and his ears were more intent on the songs and laughter that came faintly from the distance than on the feverish breathing and unintelligible moans of the sufferer.

Nevertheless he looked troubled equally by the condition of his charge and by his own enforced absence from the revels. A more impatient moan from the sick man, however, brought a change to his abstracted face, and he turned to him with an exaggerated expression of sympathy.

"In course! Lordy! I know jest what those pains are: kinder ez ef you was havin' a tooth pulled that had roots branchin' all over ye! My! I've jest had 'em so bad I couldn't keep from yellin'! That's hot rheumatics! Yes, sir, I oughter know! And" (confidentially) "the sing'ler thing about 'em is that they get worse jest as they're going off—sorter wringin' yer hand and punchin' ye in the back to say 'Good-by.' There!" he continued, as the man sank exhaustedly back on his rude pillow of flour-sacks. "There! didn't I tell ye? Ye'll be all right in a minit, and ez chipper ez a jay bird in the mornin'. Oh, don't tell me about rheumatics—I've bin thar! On'y mine was the cold kind—that hangs on longest—yours is the hot, that burns itself up in no time!"

If the flushed face and bright eyes of Lasham were not enough to corroborate this symptom of high fever, the quick, wandering laugh he gave would have indicated the point of delirium. But the too optimistic Daddy Folsom referred this act to improvement, and went on cheerfully: "Yes, sir, you're better now, and"—here he assumed an air of cautious deliberation, extravagant, as all his assumptions were—"I ain't sayin' that—ef—you—was—to—rise—up" (very slowly) "and heave a blanket or two over your shoulders—jest by way o' caution, you know—and leanin' on me, kinder meander over to Bob Falloner's cabin and the boys, it wouldn't do you a heap o' good. Changes o' this kind is often prescribed by the faculty." Another moan from the sufferer, however, here apparently corrected Daddy's too favorable prognosis. "Oh, all right! Well, perhaps ye know best; and I'll jest run over to Bob's and say how as ye ain't comin', and will be back in a jiffy!"

"The letter," said the sick man hurriedly, "the letter, the letter!"

Daddy leaned suddenly over the bed. It was impossible for even his hopefulness to avoid the fact that Lasham was delirious. It was a strong factor in the case—one that would certainly justify his going over to Falloner's with the news. For the present moment, however, this aberration was to be accepted cheerfully and humored after Daddy's own fashion. "Of course—the letter, the letter," he said convincingly; "that's what the boys hev bin singin' jest now—"

‘Good-by, Charley; when you are away,
Write me a letter, love; send me a letter, love!’

“That’s what you heard, and a mighty purty song it is too, and kinder clings to you. It’s wonderful how these things gets in your head.”

“The letter—write—send money—money—money, and the photograph—the photograph—photograph—money,” continued the sick man, in the rapid reiteration of delirium.

“In course you will—to-morrow—when the mail goes,” returned Daddy soothingly; “plenty of them. Jest now you try to get a snooze, will ye? Hol’ on!—take some o’ this.”

There was an anodyne mixture on the rude shelf, which the doctor had left on his morning visit. Daddy had a comfortable belief that what would relieve pain would also check delirium, and he accordingly measured out a dose with a liberal margin to allow of waste by the patient in swallowing in his semi-conscious state. As he lay more quiet, muttering still, but now unintelligibly, Daddy, waiting for a more complete unconsciousness and the opportunity to slip away to Falloner’s, cast his eyes around the cabin. He noticed now for the first time since his entrance that a crumpled envelope bearing a Western post-mark was lying at the foot of the bed. Daddy knew that the tri-weekly post had arrived an hour before he came, and that Lasham had evidently received a letter. Sure enough the letter itself was lying against the wall beside him. It was open. Daddy felt justified in reading it.

It was curt and businesslike, stating that unless Lasham at once sent a remittance for the support of his brother and sister—two children in charge of the writer—they must find a home elsewhere. That the arrears were long standing, and the repeated promises of Lasham to send money had been unfulfilled. That the writer could stand it no longer. This would be his last communication unless the money were sent forthwith.

It was by no means a novel or, under the circumstances, a shocking disclosure to Daddy. He had seen similar missives from daughters, and even wives, consequent on the varying fortunes of his neighbors; no one knew better than he the uncertainties of a miner’s prospects, and yet the inevitable hopefulness that buoyed him up. He tossed it aside impatiently, when his eye caught a strip of paper he had overlooked lying upon the blanket near the envelope. It contained a few lines in an unformed boyish hand addressed to “my brother,” and evidently slipped into the letter after it was written. By the uncertain candlelight Daddy read as follows:—

Dear Brother, Rite to me and Cissy rite off. Why aint you done it? It’s so long since you rote any. Mister Recketts ses you dont care any more. Wen you rite send your fotograff. Folks here ses I aint got no big bruther any way, as I disremember his looks, and cant say wots like him. Cissy’s kryin’ all along of it. I’ve got a hedake. William Walker make it ake by a blo. So no more at present from your loving little bruther Jim.

The quick, hysteric laugh with which Daddy read this was quite consistent with his responsive, emotional nature; so, too, were the ready tears that sprang to his eyes. He put the candle down unsteadily, with a casual glance at the sick man. It was notable, however, that this look contained less sympathy for the ailing “big brother” than his emotion might have suggested. For Daddy was carried quite away by his own mental picture of the helpless children, and eager only to relate his impressions of the incident. He cast another glance at the invalid, thrust the papers into his pocket, and clapping on his hat slipped from the cabin and ran to the house of festivity. Yet it was characteristic of the man, and so engrossed was he by his one idea, that to the usual inquiries regarding his patient he answered, “he’s all right,” and plunged at once into the incident of the dunning letter, reserving—with the instinct of an emotional artist—the child’s missive until the last. As he expected, the money demand was received with indignant criticisms of the writer.

“That’s just like ‘em in the States,” said Captain Fletcher; “darned if they don’t believe we’ve only got to bore a hole in the ground and snake out a hundred dollars. Why, there’s my wife—with

a heap of hoss sense in everything else—is allus wonderin’ why I can’t rake in a cool fifty betwixt one steamer day and another.”

“That’s nothin’ to my old dad,” interrupted Gus Houston, the “infant” of the camp, a bright-eyed young fellow of twenty; “why, he wrote to me yesterday that if I’d only pick up a single piece of gold every day and just put it aside, sayin’ ‘That’s for popper and mommer,’ and not fool it away—it would be all they’d ask of me.”

“That’s so,” added another; “these ignorant relations is just the ruin o’ the mining industry. Bob Falloner hez bin lucky in his strike to-day, but he’s a darned sight luckier in being without kith or kin that he knows of.”

Daddy waited until the momentary irritation had subsided, and then drew the other letter from his pocket. “That ain’t all, boys,” he began in a faltering voice, but gradually working himself up to a pitch of pathos; “just as I was thinking all them very things, I kinder noticed this yer poor little bit o’ paper lyin’ thar lonesome like and forgotten, and I—read it—and well—gentlemen—it just choked me right up!” He stopped, and his voice faltered.

“Go slow, Daddy, go slow!” said an auditor smilingly. It was evident that Daddy’s sympathetic weakness was well known.

Daddy read the child’s letter. But, unfortunately, what with his real emotion and the intoxication of an audience, he read it extravagantly, and interpolated a child’s lisp (on no authority whatever), and a simulated infantile delivery, which, I fear, at first provoked the smiles rather than the tears of his audience. Nevertheless, at its conclusion the little note was handed round the party, and then there was a moment of thoughtful silence.

“Tell you what it is, boys,” said Fletcher, looking around the table, “we ought to be doin’ suthin’ for them kids right off! Did you,” turning to Daddy, “say anythin’ about this to Dick?”

“Nary—why, he’s clean off his head with fever—don’t understand a word—and just babbles,” returned Daddy, forgetful of his roseate diagnosis a moment ago, “and hasn’t got a cent.”

“We must make up what we can amongst us afore the mail goes to-night,” said the “infant,” feeling hurriedly in his pockets. “Come, ante up, gentlemen,” he added, laying the contents of his buckskin purse upon the table.

“Hold on, boys,” said a quiet voice. It was their host Falloner, who had just risen and was slipping on his oilskin coat. “You’ve got enough to do, I reckon, to look after your own folks. I’ve none! Let this be my affair. I’ve got to go to the Express Office anyhow to see about my passage home, and I’ll just get a draft for a hundred dollars for that old skeesicks—what’s his blamed name? Oh, Ricketts”—he made a memorandum from the letter—“and I’ll send it by express. Meantime, you fellows sit down there and write something—you know what—saying that Dick’s hurt his hand and can’t write—you know; but asked you to send a draft, which you’re doing. Sabe? That’s all! I’ll skip over to the express now and get the draft off, and you can mail the letter an hour later. So put your dust back in your pockets and help yourselves to the whiskey while I’m gone.” He clapped his hat on his head and disappeared.

“There goes a white man, you bet!” said Fletcher admiringly, as the door closed behind their host. “Now, boys,” he added, drawing a chair to the table, “let’s get this yer letter off, and then go back to our game.”

Pens and ink were produced, and an animated discussion ensued as to the matter to be conveyed. Daddy’s plea for an extended explanatory and sympathetic communication was overruled, and the letter was written to Ricketts on the simple lines suggested by Falloner.

“But what about poor little Jim’s letter? That ought to be answered,” said Daddy pathetically.

“If Dick hurt his hand so he can’t write to Ricketts, how in thunder is he goin’ to write to Jim?” was the reply.

“But suthin’ oughter be said to the poor kid,” urged Daddy piteously.

“Well, write it yourself—you and Gus Houston make up somethin’ together. I’m going to win some money,” retorted Fletcher, returning to the card-table, where he was presently followed by all but Daddy and Houston.

“Ye can’t write it in Dick’s name, because that little brother knows Dick’s handwriting, even if he don’t remember his face. See?” suggested Houston.

“That’s so,” said Daddy dubiously; “but,” he added, with elastic cheerfulness, “we can write that Dick ‘says.’ See?”

“Your head’s level, old man! Just you waded in on that.”

Daddy seized the pen and “waded in.” Into somewhat deep and difficult water, I fancy, for some of it splashed into his eyes, and he sniffled once or twice as he wrote. “Suthin’ like this,” he said, after a pause:—

DEAR LITTLE JIMMIE,—Your big brother havin’ hurt his hand, wants me to tell you that otherways he is all hunky and A1. He says he don’t forget you and little Cissy, you bet! and he’s sendin’ money to old Ricketts straight off. He says don’t you and Cissy mind whether school keeps or not as long as big Brother Dick holds the lines. He says he’d have written before, but he’s bin follerin’ up a lead mighty close, and expects to strike it rich in a few days.

“You ain’t got no sabe about kids,” said Daddy imperturbably; “they’ve got to be humored like sick folks. And they want everythin’ big—they don’t take no stock in things ez they are—even ef they hev ‘em worse than they are. ‘So,’” continued Daddy, reading to prevent further interruption, “‘he says you’re just to keep your eyes skinned lookin’ out for him comin’ home any time—day or night. All you’ve got to do is to sit up and wait. He might come and even snake you out of your beds! He might come with four white horses and a nigger driver, or he might come disguised as an ornary tramp. Only you’ve got to be keen on watchin’.’ (Ye see,” interrupted Daddy explanatorily, “that’ll jest keep them kids lively.) ‘He says Cissy’s to stop cryin’ right off, and if Willie Walker hits yer on the right cheek you just slug out with your left fist, ‘cordin’ to Scriptor.’ Gosh,” ejaculated Daddy, stopping suddenly and gazing anxiously at Houston, “there’s that blamed photograph—I clean forgot that.”

“And Dick hasn’t got one in the shop, and never had,” returned Houston emphatically. “Golly! that stumps us! Unless,” he added, with diabolical thoughtfulness, “we take Bob’s? The kids don’t remember Dick’s face, and Bob’s about the same age. And it’s a regular star picture—you bet! Bob had it taken in Sacramento—in all his war paint. See!” He indicated a photograph pinned against the wall—a really striking likeness which did full justice to Bob’s long silken mustache and large, brown determined eyes. “I’ll snake it off while they ain’t lookin’, and you jam it in the letter. Bob won’t miss it, and we can fix it up with Dick after he’s well, and send another.”

Daddy silently grasped the “infant’s” hand, who presently secured the photograph without attracting attention from the card-players. It was promptly inclosed in the letter, addressed to Master James Lasham. The “infant” started with it to the post-office, and Daddy Folsom returned to Lasham’s cabin to relieve the watcher that had been detached from Falloner’s to take his place beside the sick man.

Meanwhile the rain fell steadily and the shadows crept higher and higher up the mountain. Towards midnight the star points faded out one by one over Sawyer’s Ledge even as they had come, with the difference that the illumination of Falloner’s cabin was extinguished first, while the dim light of Lasham’s increased in number. Later, two stars seemed to shoot from the centre of the ledge, trailing along the descent, until they were lost in the obscurity of the slope—the lights of the stage-coach to Sacramento carrying the mail and Robert Falloner. They met and passed two fainter lights toiling up the road—the buggy lights of the doctor, hastily summoned from Carterville to the bedside of the dying Dick Lasham.

The slowing up of his train caused Bob Falloner to start from a half doze in a Western Pullman car. As he glanced from his window he could see that the blinding snowstorm which had followed him for the past six hours had at last hopelessly blocked the line. There was no prospect beyond the

interminable snowy level, the whirling flakes, and the monotonous palisades of leafless trees seen through it to the distant banks of the Missouri. It was a prospect that the mountain-bred Fallonier was beginning to loathe, and although it was scarcely six weeks since he left California, he was already looking back regretfully to the deep slopes and the free song of the serried ranks of pines.

The intense cold had chilled his temperate blood, even as the rigors and conventions of Eastern life had checked his sincerity and spontaneous flow of animal spirits begotten in the frank intercourse and brotherhood of camps. He had just fled from the artificialities of the great Atlantic cities to seek out some Western farming lands in which he might put his capital and energies. The unlooked-for interruption of his progress by a long-forgotten climate only deepened his discontent. And now—that train was actually backing! It appeared they must return to the last station to wait for a snow-plough to clear the line. It was, explained the conductor, barely a mile from Shepherdstown, where there was a good hotel and a chance of breaking the journey for the night.

Shepherdstown! The name touched some dim chord in Bob Fallonier's memory and conscience—yet one that was vague. Then he suddenly remembered that before leaving New York he had received a letter from Houston informing him of Lasham's death, reminding him of his previous bounty, and begging him—if he went West—to break the news to the Lasham family. There was also some allusion to a joke about his (Bob's) photograph, which he had dismissed as unimportant, and even now could not remember clearly. For a few moments his conscience pricked him that he should have forgotten it all, but now he could make amends by this providential delay. It was not a task to his liking; in any other circumstances he would have written, but he would not shirk it now.

Shepherdstown was on the main line of the Kansas Pacific Road, and as he alighted at its station, the big through trains from San Francisco swept out of the stormy distance and stopped also. He remembered, as he mingled with the passengers, hearing a childish voice ask if this was the Californian train. He remembered hearing the amused and patient reply of the station-master: "Yes, sonny—here she is again, and here's her passengers," as he got into the omnibus and drove to the hotel. Here he resolved to perform his disagreeable duty as quickly as possible, and on his way to his room stopped for a moment at the office to ask for Ricketts' address. The clerk, after a quick glance of curiosity at his new guest, gave it to him readily, with a somewhat familiar smile. It struck Fallonier also as being odd that he had not been asked to write his name on the hotel register, but this was a saving of time he was not disposed to question, as he had already determined to make his visit to Ricketts at once, before dinner. It was still early evening.

He was washing his hands in his bedroom when there came a light tap at his sitting-room door. Fallonier quickly resumed his coat and entered the sitting-room as the porter ushered in a young lady holding a small boy by the hand. But, to Fallonier's utter consternation, no sooner had the door closed on the servant than the boy, with a half-apologetic glance at the young lady, uttered a childish cry, broke from her, and calling, "Dick! Dick!" ran forward and leaped into Fallonier's arms.

The mere shock of the onset and his own amazement left Bob without breath for words. The boy, with arms convulsively clasping his body, was imprinting kisses on Bob's waistcoat in default of reaching his face. At last Fallonier managed gently but firmly to free himself, and turned a half-appealing, half-embarrassed look upon the young lady, whose own face, however, suddenly flushed pink. To add to the confusion, the boy, in some reaction of instinct, suddenly ran back to her, frantically clutched at her skirts, and tried to bury his head in their folds.

"He don't love me," he sobbed. "He don't care for me any more."

The face of the young girl changed. It was a pretty face in its flushing; in the paleness and thoughtfulness that overcast it it was a striking face, and Bob's attention was for a moment distracted from the grotesqueness of the situation. Leaning over the boy she said in a caressing yet authoritative voice, "Run away for a moment, dear, until I call you," opening the door for him in a maternal way so inconsistent with the youthfulness of her figure that it struck him even in his confusion. There was

something also in her dress and carriage that equally affected him: her garments were somewhat old-fashioned in style, yet of good material, with an odd incongruity to the climate and season.

Under her rough outer cloak she wore a polka jacket and the thinnest of summer blouses; and her hat, though dark, was of rough straw, plainly trimmed. Nevertheless, these peculiarities were carried off with an air of breeding and self-possession that was unmistakable. It was possible that her cool self-possession might have been due to some instinctive antagonism, for as she came a step forward with coldly and clearly-opened gray eyes, he was vaguely conscious that she didn't like him. Nevertheless, her manner was formally polite, even, as he fancied, to the point of irony, as she began, in a voice that occasionally dropped into the lazy Southern intonation, and a speech that easily slipped at times into Southern dialect:—

“I sent the child out of the room, as I could see that his advances were annoying to you, and a good deal, I reckon, because I knew your reception of them was still more painful to him. It is quite natural, I dare say, you should feel as you do, and I reckon consistent with your attitude towards him. But you must make some allowance for the depth of his feelings, and how he has looked forward to this meeting. When I tell you that ever since he received your last letter, he and his sister—until her illness kept her home—have gone every day when the Pacific train was due to the station to meet you; that they have taken literally as Gospel truth every word of your letter”—

“My letter?” interrupted Falloner.

The young girl's scarlet lip curled slightly. “I beg your pardon—I should have said the letter you dictated. Of course it wasn't in your handwriting—you had hurt your hand, you know,” she added ironically. “At all events, they believed it all—that you were coming at any moment; they lived in that belief, and the poor things went to the station with your photograph in their hands so that they might be the first to recognize and greet you.”

“With my photograph?” interrupted Falloner again.

The young girl's clear eyes darkened ominously. “I reckon,” she said deliberately, as she slowly drew from her pocket the photograph Daddy Folsom had sent, “that that is your photograph. It certainly seems an excellent likeness,” she added, regarding him with a slight suggestion of contemptuous triumph.

In an instant the revelation of the whole mystery flashed upon him! The forgotten passage in Houston's letter about the stolen photograph stood clearly before him; the coincidence of his appearance in Shepherdstown, and the natural mistake of the children and their fair protector, were made perfectly plain. But with this relief and the certainty that he could confound her with an explanation came a certain mischievous desire to prolong the situation and increase his triumph. She certainly had not shown him any favor.

“Have you got the letter also?” he asked quietly.

She whisked it impatiently from her pocket and handed it to him. As he read Daddy's characteristic extravagance and recognized the familiar idiosyncrasies of his old companions, he was unable to restrain a smile. He raised his eyes, to meet with surprise the fair stranger's leveled eyebrows and brightly indignant eyes, in which, however, the rain was fast gathering with the lightning.

“It may be amusing to you, and I reckon likely it was all a California joke,” she said with slightly trembling lips; “I don't know No'thern gentlemen and their ways, and you seem to have forgotten our ways as you have your kindred. Perhaps all this may seem so funny to them: it may not seem funny to that boy who is now crying his heart out in the hall; it may not be very amusing to that poor Cissy in her sick-bed longing to see her brother. It may be so far from amusing to her, that I should hesitate to bring you there in her excited condition and subject her to the pain that you have caused him. But I have promised her; she is already expecting us, and the disappointment may be dangerous, and I can only implore you—for a few moments at least—to show a little more affection than you feel.” As he made an impulsive, deprecating gesture, yet without changing his look of restrained amusement, she stopped him hopelessly. “Oh, of course, yes, yes, I know it is years since you have seen them;

they have no right to expect more; only—only—feeling as you do,” she burst impulsively, “why—oh, why did you come?”

Here was Bob’s chance. He turned to her politely; began gravely, “I simply came to”—when suddenly his face changed; he stopped as if struck by a blow. His cheek flushed, and then paled! Good God! What had he come for? To tell them that this brother they were longing for—living for—perhaps even dying for—was dead! In his crass stupidity, his wounded vanity over the scorn of the young girl, his anticipation of triumph, he had forgotten—totally forgotten—what that triumph meant! Perhaps if he had felt more keenly the death of Lasham the thought of it would have been uppermost in his mind; but Lasham was not his partner or associate, only a brother miner, and his single act of generosity was in the ordinary routine of camp life. If she could think him cold and heartless before, what would she think of him now? The absurdity of her mistake had vanished in the grim tragedy he had seemed to have cruelly prepared for her. The thought struck him so keenly that he stammered, faltered, and sank helplessly into a chair.

The shock that he had received was so plain to her that her own indignation went out in the breath of it. Her lip quivered. “Don’t you mind,” she said hurriedly, dropping into her Southern speech; “I didn’t go to hurt you, but I was just that mad with the thought of those pickaninnies, and the easy way you took it, that I clean forgot I’d no call to catechise you! And you don’t know me from the Queen of Sheba. Well,” she went on, still more rapidly, and in odd distinction to her previous formal slow Southern delivery, “I’m the daughter of Colonel Boutelle, of Bayou Sara, Louisiana; and his paw, and his paw before him, had a plantation there since the time of Adam, but he lost it and six hundred niggers during the Wah! We were pooh as pohverty—paw and maw and we four girls—and no more idea of work than a baby. But I had an education at the convent at New Orleans, and could play, and speak French, and I got a place as school-teacher here; I reckon the first Southern woman that has taught school in the No’th! Ricketts, who used to be our steward at Bayou Sara, told me about the pickaninnies, and how helpless they were, with only a brother who occasionally sent them money from California. I suppose I cottoned to the pooh little things at first because I knew what it was to be alone amongst strangers, Mr. Lasham; I used to teach them at odd times, and look after them, and go with them to the train to look for you. Perhaps Ricketts made me think you didn’t care for them; perhaps I was wrong in thinking it was true, from the way you met Jimmy just now. But I’ve spoken my mind and you know why.” She ceased and walked to the window.

Falloner rose. The storm that had swept through him was over. The quick determination, resolute purpose, and infinite patience which had made him what he was were all there, and with it a conscientiousness which his selfish independence had hitherto kept dormant. He accepted the situation, not passively—it was not in his nature—but threw himself into it with all his energy.

“You were quite right,” he said, halting a moment beside her; “I don’t blame you, and let me hope that later you may think me less to blame than you do now. Now, what’s to be done? Clearly, I’ve first to make it right with Tommy—I mean Jimmy—and then we must make a straight dash over to the girl! Whoop!” Before she could understand from his face the strange change in his voice, he had dashed out of the room. In a moment he reappeared with the boy struggling in his arms. “Think of the little scamp not knowing his own brother!” he laughed, giving the boy a really affectionate, if slightly exaggerated hug, “and expecting me to open my arms to the first little boy who jumps into them! I’ve a great mind not to give him the present I fetched all the way from California. Wait a moment.” He dashed into the bedroom, opened his valise—where he providentially remembered he had kept, with a miner’s superstition, the first little nugget of gold he had ever found—seized the tiny bit of quartz of gold, and dashed out again to display it before Jimmy’s eager eyes.

If the heartiness, sympathy, and charming kindness of the man’s whole manner and face convinced, even while it slightly startled, the young girl, it was still more effective with the boy. Children are quick to detect the false ring of affected emotion, and Bob’s was so genuine—whatever its cause—that it might have easily passed for a fraternal expression with harder critics. The child

trustfully nestled against him and would have grasped the gold, but the young man whisked it into his pocket. "Not until we've shown it to our little sister—where we're going now! I'm off to order a sleigh." He dashed out again to the office as if he found some relief in action, or, as it seemed to Miss Boutelle, to avoid embarrassing conversation. When he came back again he was carrying an immense bearskin from his luggage. He cast a critical look at the girl's unseasonable attire.

"I shall wrap you and Jimmy in this—you know it's snowing frightfully."

Miss Boutelle flushed a little. "I'm warm enough when walking," she said coldly. Bob glanced at her smart little French shoes, and thought otherwise. He said nothing, but hastily bundled his two guests downstairs and into the street. The whirlwind dance of the snow made the sleigh an indistinct bulk in the glittering darkness, and as the young girl for an instant stood dazedly still, Bob incontinently lifted her from her feet, deposited her in the vehicle, dropped Jimmy in her lap, and wrapped them both tightly in the bearskin. Her weight, which was scarcely more than a child's, struck him in that moment as being tantalizingly incongruous to the matronly severity of her manner and its strange effect upon him. He then jumped in himself, taking the direction from his companion, and drove off through the storm.

The wind and darkness were not favorable to conversation, and only once did he break the silence. "Is there any one who would be likely to remember—me—where we are going?" he asked, in a lull of the storm.

Miss Boutelle uncovered enough of her face to glance at him curiously. "Hardly! You know the children came here from the No'th after your mother's death, while you were in California."

"Of course," returned Bob hurriedly; "I was only thinking—you know that some of my old friends might have called," and then collapsed into silence.

After a pause a voice came icily, although under the furs: "Perhaps you'd prefer that your arrival be kept secret from the public? But they seem to have already recognized you at the hotel from your inquiry about Ricketts, and the photograph Jimmy had already shown them two weeks ago." Bob remembered the clerk's familiar manner and the omission to ask him to register. "But it need go no further, if you like," she added, with a slight return of her previous scorn.

"I've no reason for keeping it secret," said Bob stoutly.

No other words were exchanged until the sleigh drew up before a plain wooden house in the suburbs of the town. Bob could see at a glance that it represented the income of some careful artisan or small shopkeeper, and that it promised little for an invalid's luxurious comfort. They were ushered into a chilly sitting-room and Miss Boutelle ran upstairs with Jimmy to prepare the invalid for Bob's appearance. He noticed that a word dropped by the woman who opened the door made the young girl's face grave again, and paled the color that the storm had buffeted to her cheek. He noticed also that these plain surroundings seemed only to enhance her own superiority, and that the woman treated her with a deference in odd contrast to the ill-concealed disfavor with which she regarded him. Strangely enough, this latter fact was a relief to his conscience. It would have been terrible to have received their kindness under false pretenses; to take their just blame of the man he personated seemed to mitigate the deceit.

The young girl rejoined him presently with troubled eyes. Cissy was worse, and only intermittently conscious, but had asked to see him. It was a short flight of stairs to the bedroom, but before he reached it Bob's heart beat faster than it had in any mountain climb. In one corner of the plainly furnished room stood a small truckle bed, and in it lay the invalid. It needed but a single glance at her flushed face in its aureole of yellow hair to recognize the likeness to Jimmy, although, added to that strange refinement produced by suffering, there was a spiritual exaltation in the child's look—possibly from delirium—that awed and frightened him; an awful feeling that he could not lie to this hopeless creature took possession of him, and his step faltered. But she lifted her small arms pathetically towards him as if she divined his trouble, and he sank on his knees beside her. With a

tiny finger curled around his long mustache, she lay there silent. Her face was full of trustfulness, happiness, and consciousness—but she spoke no word.

There was a pause, and Falloner, slightly lifting his head without disturbing that faintly clasping finger, beckoned Miss Boutelle to his side. “Can you drive?” he said, in a low voice.

“Yes.”

“Take my sleigh and get the best doctor in town to come here at once. Bring him with you if you can; if he can’t come at once, drive home yourself. I will stay here.”

“But”—hesitated Miss Boutelle.

“I will stay here,” he repeated.

The door closed on the young girl, and Falloner, still bending over the child, presently heard the sleigh-bells pass away in the storm. He still sat with his bent head, held by the tiny clasp of those thin fingers. But the child’s eyes were fixed so intently upon him that Mrs. Ricketts leaned over the strangely-assorted pair and said—

“It’s your brother Dick, dearie. Don’t you know him?”

The child’s lips moved faintly. “Dick’s dead,” she whispered.

“She’s wandering,” said Mrs. Ricketts. “Speak to her.” But Bob, with his eyes on the child’s, lifted a protesting hand. The little sufferer’s lips moved again. “It isn’t Dick—it’s the angel God sent to tell me.”

She spoke no more. And when Miss Boutelle returned with the doctor she was beyond the reach of finite voices. Falloner would have remained all night with them, but he could see that his presence in the contracted household was not desired. Even his offer to take Jimmy with him to the hotel was declined, and at midnight he returned alone.

What his thoughts were that night may be easily imagined. Cissy’s death had removed the only cause he had for concealing his real identity. There was nothing more to prevent his revealing all to Miss Boutelle and to offer to adopt the boy. But he reflected this could not be done until after the funeral, for it was only due to Cissy’s memory that he should still keep up the role of Dick Lasham as chief mourner. If it seems strange that Bob did not at this crucial moment take Miss Boutelle into his confidence, I fear it was because he dreaded the personal effect of the deceit he had practiced upon her more than any ethical consideration; she had softened considerably in her attitude towards him that night; he was human, after all, and while he felt his conduct had been unselfish in the main, he dared not confess to himself how much her opinion had influenced him. He resolved that after the funeral he would continue his journey, and write to her, en route, a full explanation of his conduct, inclosing Daddy’s letter as corroborative evidence. But on searching his letter-case he found that he had lost even that evidence, and he must trust solely to present to her faith in his improbable story.

It seemed as if his greatest sacrifice was demanded at the funeral! For it could not be disguised that the neighbors were strongly prejudiced against him. Even the preacher improved the occasion to warn the congregation against the dangers of putting off duty until too late. And when Robert Falloner, pale, but self-restrained, left the church with Miss Boutelle, equally pale and reserved, on his arm, he could with difficulty restrain his fury at the passing of a significant smile across the faces of a few curious bystanders. “It was Amy Boutelle, that was the ‘penitence’ that fetched him, you bet!” he overheard, a barely concealed whisper; and the reply, “And it’s a good thing she’s made out of it too, for he’s mighty rich!”

At the church door he took her cold hand into his. “I am leaving to-morrow morning with Jimmy,” he said, with a white face. “Good-by.”

“You are quite right; good-by,” she replied as briefly, but with the faintest color. He wondered if she had heard it too.

Whether she had heard it or not, she went home with Mrs. Ricketts in some righteous indignation, which found—after the young lady’s habit—free expression. Whatever were Mr. Lasham’s faults of omission it was most un-Christian to allude to them there, and an insult to the poor

little dear's memory who had forgiven them. Were she in his shoes she would shake the dust of the town off her feet; and she hoped he would. She was a little softened on arriving to find Jimmy in tears. He had lost Dick's photograph—or Dick had forgotten to give it back at the hotel, for this was all he had in his pocket. And he produced a letter—the missing letter of Daddy, which by mistake Falloner had handed back instead of the photograph. Miss Boutelle saw the superscription and Californian postmark with a vague curiosity.

“Did you look inside, dear? Perhaps it slipped in.”

Jimmy had not. Miss Boutelle did—and I grieve to say, ended by reading the whole letter.

Bob Falloner had finished packing his things the next morning, and was waiting for Mr. Ricketts and Jimmy. But when a tap came at the door, he opened it to find Miss Boutelle standing there. “I have sent Jimmy into the bedroom,” she said with a faint smile, “to look for the photograph which you gave him in mistake for this. I think for the present he prefers his brother's picture to this letter, which I have not explained to him or any one.” She stopped, and raising her eyes to his, said gently: “I think it would have only been a part of your goodness to have trusted me, Mr. Falloner.”

“Then you will forgive me?” he said eagerly.

She looked at him frankly, yet with a faint trace of coquetry that the angels might have pardoned. “Do you want me to say to you what Mrs. Ricketts says were the last words of poor Cissy?”

A year later, when the darkness and rain were creeping up Sawyer's Ledge, and Houston and Daddy Folsom were sitting before their brushwood fire in the old Lasham cabin, the latter delivered himself oracularly.

“It's a mighty queer thing, that news about Bob! It's not that he's married, for that might happen to any one; but this yer account in the paper of his wedding being attended by his 'little brother.' That gets me! To think all the while he was here he was lettin' on to us that he hadn't kith or kin! Well, sir, that accounts to me for one thing,—the sing'ler way he tumbled to that letter of poor Dick Lasham's little brother and sent him that draft! Don't ye see? It was a feller feelin'! Knew how it was himself! I reckon ye all thought I was kinder soft reading that letter o' Dick Lasham's little brother to him, but ye see what it did.”

THE YOUNGEST MISS PIPER

I do not think that any of us who enjoyed the acquaintance of the Piper girls or the hospitality of Judge Piper, their father, ever cared for the youngest sister. Not on account of her extreme youth, for the eldest Miss Piper confessed to twenty-six—and the youth of the youngest sister was established solely, I think, by one big braid down her back. Neither was it because she was the plainest, for the beauty of the Piper girls was a recognized general distinction, and the youngest Miss Piper was not entirely devoid of the family charms. Nor was it from any lack of intelligence, nor from any defective social quality; for her precocity was astounding, and her good-humored frankness alarming. Neither do I think it could be said that a slight deafness, which might impart an embarrassing publicity to any statement—the reverse of our general feeling—that might be confided by any one to her private ear, was a sufficient reason; for it was pointed out that she always understood everything that Tom Sparrell told her in his ordinary tone of voice. Briefly, it was very possible that Delaware—the youngest Miss Piper—did not like us. Yet it was fondly believed by us that the other sisters failed to show that indifference to our existence shown by Miss Delaware, although the heartburnings, misunderstandings, jealousies, hopes and fears, and finally the chivalrous resignation with which we at last accepted the long foregone conclusion that they were not for us, and far beyond our reach, is not a part of this veracious chronicle. Enough that none of the flirtations of her elder sisters affected or were shared by the youngest Miss Piper. She moved in this heart-breaking atmosphere with sublime indifference, treating her sisters' affairs with what we considered rank simplicity or appalling frankness. Their few admirers who were weak enough to attempt to gain her mediation or confidence had reason to regret it.

"It's no kind o' use givin' me goodies," she said to a helpless suitor of Louisiana Piper's who had offered to bring her some sweets, "for I ain't got no influence with Lu, and if I don't give 'em up to her when she hears of it, she'll nag me and hate you like pizen. Unless," she added thoughtfully, "it was wintergreen lozenges; Lu can't stand them, or anybody who eats them within a mile." It is needless to add that the miserable man, thus put upon his gallantry, was obliged in honor to provide Del with the wintergreen lozenges that kept him in disfavor and at a distance. Unfortunately, too, any predilection or pity for any particular suitor of her sister's was attended by even more disastrous consequences. It was reported that while acting as "gooseberry"—a role usually assigned to her—between Virginia Piper and an exceptionally timid young surveyor, during a ramble she conceived a rare sentiment of humanity towards the unhappy man. After once or twice lingering behind in the ostentatious picking of a wayside flower, or "running on ahead" to look at a mountain view, without any apparent effect on the shy and speechless youth, she decoyed him aside while her elder sister rambled indifferently and somewhat scornfully on. The youngest Miss Piper leaped upon the rail of a fence, and with the stalk of a thimbleberry in her mouth swung her small feet to and fro and surveyed him dispassionately.

"Ye don't seem to be ketchin' on?" she said tentatively.

The young man smiled feebly and interrogatively.

"Don't seem to be either follering suit nor trumpin'," continued Del bluntly.

"I suppose so—that is, I fear that Miss Virginia"—he stammered.

"Speak up! I'm a little deaf. Say it again!" said Del, screwing up her eyes and eyebrows.

The young man was obliged to admit in stentorian tones that his progress had been scarcely satisfactory.

"You're goin' on too slow—that's it," said Del critically. "Why, when Captain Savage meandered along here with Jinny" (Virginia) "last week, afore we got as far as this he'd reeled off a heap of Byron and Jamieson" (Tennyson), "and sich; and only yesterday Jinny and Doctor Beveridge was blowin' thistletops to know which was a flirt all along the trail past the crossroads. Why, ye ain't picked ez much as a single berry for Jinny, let alone Lad's Love or Johnny Jumpups and Kissme's, and ye

keep talkin' across me, you two, till I'm tired. Now look here," she burst out with sudden decision, "Jinny's gone on ahead in a kind o' huff; but I reckon she's done that afore too, and you'll find her, jest as Spinner did, on the rise of the hill, sittin' on a pine stump and lookin' like this." (Here the youngest Miss Piper locked her fingers over her left knee, and drew it slightly up,—with a sublime indifference to the exposure of considerable small-ankled red stocking,—and with a far-off, plaintive stare, achieved a colorable imitation of her elder sister's probable attitude.) "Then you jest go up softly, like as you was a bear, and clap your hands on her eyes, and say in a disguised voice like this" (here Del turned on a high falsetto beyond any masculine compass), "'Who's who?' jest like in forfeits."

"But she'll be sure to know me," said the surveyor timidly.

"She won't," said Del in scornful skepticism.

"I hardly think"—stammered the young man, with an awkward smile, "that I—in fact—she'll discover me—before I can get beside her."

"Not if you go softly, for she'll be sittin' back to the road, so—gazing away, so"—the youngest Miss Piper again stared dreamily in the distance, "and you'll creep up just behind, like this."

"But won't she be angry? I haven't known her long—that is—don't you see?" He stopped embarrassedly.

"Can't hear a word you say," said Del, shaking her head decisively. "You've got my deaf ear. Speak louder, or come closer."

But here the instruction suddenly ended, once and for all time! For whether the young man was seriously anxious to perfect himself; whether he was truly grateful to the young girl and tried to show it; whether he was emboldened by the childish appeal of the long brown distinguishing braid down her back, or whether he suddenly found something peculiarly provocative in the reddish brown eyes between their thickset hedge of lashes, and with the trim figure and piquant pose, and was seized with that hysteric desperation which sometimes attacks timidity itself, I cannot say! Enough that he suddenly put his arm around her waist and his lips to her soft satin cheek, peppered and salted as it was by sun-freckles and mountain air, and received a sound box on the ear for his pains. The incident was closed. He did not repeat the experiment on either sister. The disclosure of his rebuff seemed, however, to give a singular satisfaction to Red Gulch.

While it may be gathered from this that the youngest Miss Piper was impervious to general masculine advances, it was not until later that Red Gulch was thrown into skeptical astonishment by the rumors that all this time she really had a lover! Allusion has been made to the charge that her deafness did not prevent her from perfectly understanding the ordinary tone of voice of a certain Mr. Thomas Sparrell.

No undue significance was attached to this fact through the very insignificance and "impossibility" of that individual;—a lanky, red-haired youth, incapacitated for manual labor through lameness,—a clerk in a general store at the Cross Roads! He had never been the recipient of Judge Piper's hospitality; he had never visited the house even with parcels; apparently his only interviews with her or any of the family had been over the counter. To do him justice he certainly had never seemed to seek any nearer acquaintance; he was not at the church door when her sisters, beautiful in their Sunday gowns, filed into the aisle, with little Delaware bringing up the rear; he was not at the Democratic barbecue, that we attended without reference to our personal politics, and solely for the sake of Judge Piper and the girls; nor did he go to the Agricultural Fair Ball—open to all. His abstention we believed to be owing to his lameness; to a wholesome consciousness of his own social defects; or an inordinate passion for reading cheap scientific textbooks, which did not, however, add fluency nor conviction to his speech. Neither had he the abstraction of a student, for his accounts were kept with an accuracy which struck us, who dealt at the store, as ignobly practical, and even malignant. Possibly we might have expressed this opinion more strongly but for a certain rude vigor of repartee which he possessed, and a suggestion that he might have a temper on occasion. "Them red-

haired chaps is like to be tetchy and to kinder see blood through their eyelashes,” had been suggested by an observing customer.

In short, little as we knew of the youngest Miss Piper, he was the last man we should have suspected her to select as an admirer. What we did know of their public relations, purely commercial ones, implied the reverse of any cordial understanding. The provisioning of the Piper household was entrusted to Del, with other practical odds and ends of housekeeping, not ornamental, and the following is said to be a truthful record of one of their overheard interviews at the store:—

The youngest Miss Piper, entering, displacing a quantity of goods in the centre to make a sideways seat for herself, and looking around loftily as she took a memorandum-book and pencil from her pocket.

“Ahem! If I ain’t taking you away from your studies, Mr. Sparrell, maybe you’ll be good enough to look here a minit;—but” (in affected politeness) “if I’m disturbing you I can come another time.”

Sparrell, placing the book he had been reading carefully under the counter, and advancing to Miss Delaware with a complete ignoring of her irony: “What can we do for you to-day, Miss Piper?”

Miss Delaware, with great suavity of manner, examining her memorandum-book: “I suppose it wouldn’t be shocking your delicate feelings too much to inform you that the canned lobster and oysters you sent us yesterday wasn’t fit for hogs?”

Sparrell (blandly): “They weren’t intended for them, Miss Piper. If we had known you were having company over from Red Gulch to dinner, we might have provided something more suitable for them. We have a fair quality of oil-cake and corn-cobs in stock, at reduced figures. But the canned provisions were for your own family.”

Miss Delaware (secretly pleased at this sarcastic allusion to her sister’s friends, but concealing her delight): “I admire to hear you talk that way, Mr. Sparrell; it’s better than minstrels or a circus. I suppose you get it out of that book,” indicating the concealed volume. “What do you call it?”

Sparrell (politely): “The First Principles of Geology.”

Miss Delaware, leaning sideways and curling her little fingers around her pink ear: “Did you say the first principles of ‘geology’ or ‘politeness’? You know I am so deaf; but, of course, it couldn’t be that.”

Sparrell (easily): “Oh no, you seem to have that in your hand”—pointing to Miss Delaware’s memorandum-book—“you were quoting from it when you came in.”

Miss Delaware, after an affected silence of deep resignation: “Well! it’s too bad folks can’t just spend their lives listenin’ to such elegant talk; I’d admire to do nothing else! But there’s my family up at Cottonwood—and they must eat. They’re that low that they expect me to waste my time getting food for ‘em here, instead of drinking in the First Principles of the Grocery.”

“Geology,” suggested Sparrell blandly. “The history of rock formation.”

“Geology,” accepted Miss Delaware apologetically; “the history of rocks, which is so necessary for knowing just how much sand you can put in the sugar. So I reckon I’ll leave my list here, and you can have the things toted to Cottonwood when you’ve got through with your First Principles.”

She tore out a list of her commissions from a page of her memorandum-book, leaped lightly from the counter, threw her brown braid from her left shoulder to its proper place down her back, shook out her skirts deliberately, and saying, “Thank you for a most improvin’ afternoon, Mr. Sparrell,” sailed demurely out of the store.

A few auditors of this narrative thought it inconsistent that a daughter of Judge Piper and a sister of the angelic host should put up with a mere clerk’s familiarity, but it was pointed out that “she gave him as good as he sent,” and the story was generally credited. But certainly no one ever dreamed that it pointed to any more precious confidences between them.

I think the secret burst upon the family, with other things, at the big picnic at Reservoir Canyon. This festivity had been arranged for weeks previously, and was undertaken chiefly by the “Red Gulch Contingent,” as we were called, as a slight return to the Piper family for their frequent hospitality.

The Piper sisters were expected to bring nothing but their own personal graces and attend to the ministration of such viands and delicacies as the boys had profusely supplied.

The site selected was Reservoir Canyon, a beautiful, triangular valley with very steep sides, one of which was crowned by the immense reservoir of the Pioneer Ditch Company. The sheer flanks of the canyon descended in furrowed lines of vines and clinging bushes, like folds of falling skirts, until they broke again into flounces of spangled shrubbery over a broad level carpet of monkshood, mariposas, lupines, poppies, and daisies. Tempered and secluded from the sun's rays by its lofty shadows, the delicious obscurity of the canyon was in sharp contrast to the fiery mountain trail that in the full glare of the noonday sky made its tortuous way down the hillside, like a stream of lava, to plunge suddenly into the valley and extinguish itself in its coolness as in a lake. The heavy odors of wild honeysuckle, syringa, and ceanothus that hung over it were lightened and freshened by the sharp spicing of pine and bay. The mountain breeze which sometimes shook the serrated tops of the large redwoods above with a chill from the remote snow peaks even in the heart of summer, never reached the little valley.

It seemed an ideal place for a picnic. Everybody was therefore astonished to hear that an objection was suddenly raised to this perfect site. They were still more astonished to know that the objector was the youngest Miss Piper! Pressed to give her reasons, she had replied that the locality was dangerous; that the reservoir placed upon the mountain, notoriously old and worn out, had been rendered more unsafe by false economy in unskillful and hasty repairs to satisfy speculating stockbrokers, and that it had lately shown signs of leakage and sapping of its outer walls; that, in the event of an outbreak, the little triangular valley, from which there was no outlet, would be instantly flooded. Asked still more pressingly to give her authority for these details, she at first hesitated, and then gave the name of Tom Sparrell.

The derision with which this statement was received by us all, as the opinion of a sedentary clerk, was quite natural and obvious, but not the anger which it excited in the breast of Judge Piper; for it was not generally known that the judge was the holder of a considerable number of shares in the Pioneer Ditch Company, and that large dividends had been lately kept up by a false economy of expenditure, to expedite a "sharp deal" in the stock, by which the judge and others could sell out of a failing company. Rather, it was believed, that the judge's anger was due only to the discovery of Sparrell's influence over his daughter and his interference with the social affairs of Cottonwood. It was said that there was a sharp scene between the youngest Miss Piper and the combined forces of the judge and the elder sisters, which ended in the former's resolute refusal to attend the picnic at all if that site was selected.

As Delaware was known to be fearless even to the point of recklessness, and fond of gayety, her refusal only intensified the belief that she was merely "stickin' up for Sparrell's judgment" without any reference to her own personal safety or that of her sisters. The warning was laughed away; the opinion of Sparrell treated with ridicule as the dyspeptic and envious expression of an impractical man. It was pointed out that the reservoir had lasted a long time even in its alleged ruinous state; that only a miracle of coincidence could make it break down that particular afternoon of the picnic; that even if it did happen, there was no direct proof that it would seriously flood the valley, or at best add more than a spice of excitement to the affair. The "Red Gulch Contingent," who WOULD be there, was quite as capable of taking care of the ladies, in case of any accident, as any lame crank who wouldn't, but could only croak a warning to them from a distance. A few even wished something might happen that they might have an opportunity of showing their superior devotion; indeed, the prospect of carrying the half-submerged sisters, in a condition of helpless loveliness, in their arms to a place of safety was a fascinating possibility. The warning was conspicuously ineffective; everybody looked eagerly forward to the day and the unchanged locality; to the greatest hopefulness and anticipation was added the stirring of defiance, and when at last the appointed hour had arrived, the picnic party passed down the twisting mountain trail through the heat and glare in a fever of enthusiasm.

It was a pretty sight to view this sparkling procession—the girls cool and radiant in their white, blue, and yellow muslins and flying ribbons, the “Contingent” in its cleanest ducks, and blue and red flannel shirts, the judge white-waistcoated and panama-hatted, with a new dignity borrowed from the previous circumstances, and three or four impressive Chinamen bringing up the rear with hampers—as it at last debouched into Reservoir Canyon.

Here they dispersed themselves over the limited area, scarcely half an acre, with the freedom of escaped school children. They were secure in their woodland privacy. They were overlooked by no high road and its passing teams; they were safe from accidental intrusion from the settlement; indeed they went so far as to effect the exclusiveness of “clique.” At first they amused themselves by casting humorously defiant eyes at the long low Ditch Reservoir, which peeped over the green wall of the ridge, six hundred feet above them; at times they even simulated an exaggerated terror of it, and one recognized humorist declaimed a grotesque appeal to its forbearance, with delightful local allusions. Others pretended to discover near a woodman’s hut, among the belt of pines at the top of the descending trail, the peeping figure of the ridiculous and envious Sparrell. But all this was presently forgotten in the actual festivity. Small as was the range of the valley, it still allowed retreats during the dances for waiting couples among the convenient laurel and manzanita bushes which flounced the mountain side. After the dancing, old-fashioned children’s games were revived with great laughter and half-hearted and coy protests from the ladies; notably one pastime known as “I’m a-pinin’,” in which ingenious performance the victim was obliged to stand in the centre of a circle and publicly “pine” for a member of the opposite sex. Some hilarity was occasioned by the mischievous Miss “Georgy” Piper declaring, when it came to her turn, that she was “pinin’” for a look at the face of Tom Sparrell just now!

In this local trifling two hours passed, until the party sat down to the long-looked for repast. It was here that the health of Judge Piper was neatly proposed by the editor of the “Argus.” The judge responded with great dignity and some emotion. He reminded them that it had been his humble endeavor to promote harmony—that harmony so characteristic of American principles—in social as he had in political circles, and particularly among the strangely constituted yet purely American elements of frontier life. He accepted the present festivity with its overflowing hospitalities, not in recognition of himself—(“yes! yes!”)—nor of his family—(enthusiastic protests)—but of that American principle! If at one time it seemed probable that these festivities might be marred by the machinations of envy—(groans)—or that harmony interrupted by the importation of low-toned material interests—(groans)—he could say that, looking around him, he had never before felt—er—that—Here the judge stopped short, reeled slightly forward, caught at a camp-stool, recovered himself with an apologetic smile, and turned inquiringly to his neighbor.

A light laugh—instantly suppressed—at what was at first supposed to be the effect of the “overflowing hospitality” upon the speaker himself, went around the male circle until it suddenly appeared that half a dozen others had started to their feet at the same time, with white faces, and that one of the ladies had screamed.

“What is it?” everybody was asking with interrogatory smiles.

It was Judge Piper who replied:—

“A little shock of earthquake,” he said blandly; “a mere thrill! I think,” he added with a faint smile, “we may say that Nature herself has applauded our efforts in good old Californian fashion, and signified her assent. What are you saying, Fludder?”

“I was thinking, sir,” said Fludder deferentially, in a lower voice, “that if anything was wrong in the reservoir, this shock, you know, might”—

He was interrupted by a faint crashing and crackling sound, and looking up, beheld a good-sized boulder, evidently detached from some greater height, strike the upland plateau at the left of the trail and bound into the fringe of forest beside it. A slight cloud of dust marked its course, and then lazily floated away in mid air. But it had been watched agitatedly, and it was evident that that singular loss

of nervous balance which is apt to affect all those who go through the slightest earthquake experience was felt by all. But some sense of humor, however, remained.

“Looks as if the water risks we took ain’t goin’ to cover earthquakes,” drawled Dick Frisney; “still that wasn’t a bad shot, if we only knew what they were aiming at.”

“Do be quiet,” said Virginia Piper, her cheeks pink with excitement. “Listen, can’t you? What’s that funny murmuring you hear now and then up there?”

“It’s only the snow-wind playin’ with the pines on the summit. You girls won’t allow anybody any fun but yourselves.”

But here a scream from “Georgy,” who, assisted by Captain Fairfax, had mounted a camp-stool at the mouth of the valley, attracted everybody’s attention. She was standing upright, with dilated eyes, staring at the top of the trail. “Look!” she said excitedly, “if the trail isn’t moving!”

Everybody faced in that direction. At the first glance it seemed indeed as if the trail was actually moving; wriggling and undulating its tortuous way down the mountain like a huge snake, only swollen to twice its usual size. But the second glance showed it to be no longer a trail but a channel of water, whose stream, lifted in a bore-like wall four or five feet high, was plunging down into the devoted valley.

For an instant they were unable to comprehend even the nature of the catastrophe. The reservoir was directly over their heads; the bursting of its wall they had imagined would naturally bring down the water in a dozen trickling streams or falls over the cliff above them and along the flanks of the mountain. But that its suddenly liberated volume should overflow the upland beyond and then descend in a pent-up flood by their own trail and their only avenue of escape, had been beyond their wildest fancy.

They met this smiting truth with that characteristic short laugh with which the American usually receives the blow of Fate or the unexpected—as if he recognized only the absurdity of the situation. Then they ran to the women, collected them together, and dragged them to vantages of fancied security among the bushes which flounced the long skirts of the mountain walls. But I leave this part of the description to the characteristic language of one of the party:—

“When the flood struck us, it did not seem to take any stock of us in particular, but laid itself out to ‘go for’ that picnic for all it was worth! It wiped it off the face of the earth in about twenty-five seconds! It first made a clean break from stem to stern, carrying everything along with it. The first thing I saw was old Judge Piper, puttin’ on his best licks to get away from a big can of strawberry ice cream that was trundling after him and trying to empty itself on his collar, whenever a bigger wave lifted it. He was followed by what was left of the brass band; the big drum just humpin’ itself to keep abreast o’ the ice cream, mixed up with camp-stools, music-stands, a few Chinamen, and then what they call in them big San Francisco processions ‘citizens generally.’ The hull thing swept up the canyon inside o’ thirty seconds. Then, what Captain Fairfax called ‘the reflex action in the laws o’ motion’ happened, and darned if the hull blamed procession didn’t sweep back again—this time all the heavy artillery, such as camp-kettles, lager beer kegs, bottles, glasses, and crockery that was left behind takin’ the lead now, and Judge Piper and that ice cream can bringin’ up the rear. As the jedge passed us the second time, we noticed that that ice cream can—hevin’ swallowed water—was kinder losing its wind, and we encouraged the old man by shoutin’ out, ‘Five to one on him!’ And then, you wouldn’t believe what followed. Why, darn my skin, when that ‘reflex’ met the current at the other end, it just swirled around again in what Captain Fairfax called the ‘centrifugal curve,’ and just went round and round the canyon like ez when yer washin’ the dirt out o’ a prospectin’ pan—every now and then washin’ some one of the boys that was in it, like scum, up ag’in the banks.

“We managed in this way to snake out the jedge, jest ez he was sailin’ round on the home stretch, passin’ the quarter post two lengths ahead o’ the can. A good deal o’ the ice cream had washed away, but it took us ten minutes to shake the cracked ice and powdered salt out o’ the old man’s clothes, and warm him up again in the laurel bush where he was clinging. This sort o’ ‘Here we go

round the mulberry bush' kep' on until most o' the humans was got out, and only the furniture o' the picnic was left in the race. Then it got kinder mixed up, and went sloshin' round here and there, ez the water kep' comin' down by the trail. Then Lulu Piper, what I was holdin' up all the time in a laurel bush, gets an idea, for all she was wet and dragged; and ez the things went bobbin' round, she calls out the figures o' a cotillon to 'em. 'Two camp-stools forward.' 'Sashay and back to your places.' 'Change partners.' 'Hands all round.'

"She was clear grit, you bet! And the joke caught on and the other girls jined in, and it kinder cheered 'em, for they was wantin' it. Then Fludder allowed to pacify 'em by sayin' he just figured up the size o' the reservoir and the size o' the canyon, and he kalkilated that the cube was about ekal, and the canyon couldn't flood any more. And then Lulu—who was peart as a jay and couldn't be fooled—speaks up and says, 'What's the matter with the ditch, Dick?'

"Lord! then we knew that she knew the worst; for of course all the water in the ditch itself—fifty miles of it!—was drainin' now into that reservoir and was bound to come down to the canyon."

It was at this point that the situation became really desperate, for they had now crawled up the steep sides as far as the bushes afforded foothold, and the water was still rising. The chatter of the girls ceased, there were long silences, in which the men discussed the wildest plans, and proposed to tear their shirts into strips to make ropes to support the girls by sticks driven into the mountain side. It was in one of those intervals that the distinct strokes of a woodman's axe were heard high on the upland at the point where the trail descended to the canyon. Every ear was alert, but only those on one side of the canyon could get a fair view of the spot. This was the good fortune of Captain Fairfax and Georgy Piper, who had climbed to the highest bush on that side, and were now standing up, gazing excitedly in that direction.

"Some one is cutting down a tree at the head of the trail," shouted Fairfax. The response and joyful explanation, "for a dam across the trail," was on everybody's lips at the same time.

But the strokes of the axe were slow and painfully intermittent. Impatience burst out.

"Yell to him to hurry up! Why haven't they brought two men?"

"It's only one man," shouted the captain, "and he seems to be a cripple. By Jiminy!—it is—yes!—it's Tom Sparrell!"

There was a dead silence. Then, I grieve to say, shame and its twin brother rage took possession of their weak humanity. Oh, yes! It was all of a piece! Why in the name of Folly hadn't he sent for an able-bodied man. Were they to be drowned through his cranky obstinacy?

The blows still went on slowly. Presently, however, they seemed to alternate with other blows—but alas! they were slower, and if possible feebler!

"Have they got another cripple to work?" roared the Contingent in one furious voice.

"No—it's a woman—a little one—yes! a girl. Hello! Why, sure as you live, it's Delaware!"

A spontaneous cheer burst from the Contingent, partly as a rebuke to Sparrell, I think, partly from some shame over their previous rage. He could take it as he liked.

Still the blows went on distressingly slow. The girls were hoisted on the men's shoulders; the men were half submerged. Then there was a painful pause; then a crumbling crash. Another cheer went up from the canyon.

"It's down! straight across the trail," shouted Fairfax, "and a part of the bank on the top of it."

There was another moment of suspense. Would it hold or be carried away by the momentum of the flood? It held! In a few moments Fairfax again gave voice to the cheering news that the flow had stopped and the submerged trail was reappearing. In twenty minutes it was clear—a muddy river bed, but possible of ascent! Of course there was no diminution of the water in the canyon, which had no outlet, yet it now was possible for the party to swing from bush to bush along the mountain side until the foot of the trail—no longer an opposing one—was reached. There were some missteps and mishaps,—flounderings in the water, and some dangerous rescues,—but in half an hour the whole concourse stood upon the trail and commenced the ascent. It was a slow, difficult, and lugubrious

procession—I fear not the best-tempered one, now that the stimulus of danger and chivalry was past. When they reached the dam made by the fallen tree, although they were obliged to make a long detour to avoid its steep sides, they could see how successfully it had diverted the current to a declivity on the other side.

But strangely enough they were greeted by nothing else! Sparrell and the youngest Miss Piper were gone; and when they at last reached the highroad, they were astounded to hear from a passing teamster that no one in the settlement knew anything of the disaster!

This was the last drop in their cup of bitterness! They who had expected that the settlement was waiting breathlessly for their rescue, who anticipated that they would be welcomed as heroes, were obliged to meet the ill-concealed amusement of passengers and friends at their dishevelled and bedraggled appearance, which suggested only the blundering mishaps of an ordinary summer outing! “Boatin’ in the reservoir, and fell in?” “Playing at canal-boat in the Ditch?” were some of the cheerful hypotheses. The fleeting sense of gratitude they had felt for their deliverers was dissipated by the time they had reached their homes, and their rancor increased by the information that when the earthquake occurred Mr. Tom Sparrell and Miss Delaware were enjoying a “pasear” in the forest—he having a half-holiday by virtue of the festival—and that the earthquake had revived his fears of a catastrophe. The two had procured axes in the woodman’s hut and did what they thought was necessary to relieve the situation of the picnickers. But the very modesty of this account of their own performance had the effect of belittling the catastrophe itself, and the picnickers’ report of their exceeding peril was received with incredulous laughter.

For the first time in the history of Red Gulch there was a serious division between the Piper family, supported by the Contingent, and the rest of the settlement. Tom Sparrell’s warning was remembered by the latter, and the ingratitude of the picnickers to their rescuers commented upon; the actual calamity to the reservoir was more or less attributed to the imprudent and reckless contiguity of the revelers on that day, and there were not wanting those who referred the accident itself to the machinations of the scheming Ditch Director Piper!

It was said that there was a stormy scene in the Piper household that evening. The judge had demanded that Delaware should break off her acquaintance with Sparrell, and she had refused; the judge had demanded of Sparrell’s employer that he should discharge him, and had been met with the astounding information that Sparrell was already a silent partner in the concern. At this revelation Judge Piper was alarmed; while he might object to a clerk who could not support a wife, as a consistent democrat he could not oppose a fairly prosperous tradesman. A final appeal was made to Delaware; she was implored to consider the situation of her sisters, who had all made more ambitious marriages or were about to make them. Why should she now degrade the family by marrying a country storekeeper?

It is said that here the youngest Miss Piper made a memorable reply, and a revelation the truth of which was never gainsaid:—

“You all wantner know why I’m going to marry Tom Sparrell?” she queried, standing up and facing the whole family circle.

“Yes.”

“Why I prefer him to the hull caboodle that you girls have married or are going to marry?” she continued, meditatively biting the end of her braid.

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s the only man of the whole lot that hasn’t proposed to me first.”

It is presumed that Sparrell made good the omission, or that the family were glad to get rid of her, for they were married that autumn. And really a later comparison of the family records shows that while Captain Fairfax remained “Captain Fairfax,” and the other sons-in-law did not advance proportionately in standing or riches, the lame storekeeper of Red Gulch became the Hon. Senator Tom Sparrell.

A WIDOW OF THE SANTA ANA VALLEY

The Widow Wade was standing at her bedroom window staring out, in that vague instinct which compels humanity in moments of doubt and perplexity to seek this change of observation or superior illumination. Not that Mrs. Wade's disturbance was of a serious character. She had passed the acute stage of widowhood by at least two years, and the slight redness of her soft eyelids as well as the droop of her pretty mouth were merely the recognized outward and visible signs of the grievously minded religious community in which she lived. The mourning she still wore was also partly in conformity with the sad-colored garments of her neighbors, and the necessities of the rainy season. She was in comfortable circumstances, the mistress of a large ranch in the valley, which had lately become more valuable by the extension of a wagon road through its centre. She was simply worrying whether she should go to a "sociable" ending with "a dance"—a daring innovation of some strangers—at the new hotel, or continue to eschew such follies, that were, according to local belief, unsuited to "a vale of tears."

Indeed at this moment the prospect she gazed abstractedly upon seemed to justify that lugubrious description. The Santa Ana Valley—a long monotonous level—was dimly visible through moving curtains of rain or veils of mist, to the black mourning edge of the horizon, and had looked like that for months. The valley—in some remote epoch an arm of the San Francisco Bay—every rainy season seemed to be trying to revert to its original condition, and, long after the early spring had laid on its liberal color in strips, bands, and patches of blue and yellow, the blossoms of mustard and lupine glistened like wet paint. Nevertheless on that rich alluvial soil Nature's tears seemed only to fatten the widow's acres and increase her crops. Her neighbors, too, were equally prosperous. Yet for six months of the year the recognized expression of Santa Ana was one of sadness, and for the other six months—of resignation. Mrs. Wade had yielded early to this influence, as she had to others, in the weakness of her gentle nature, and partly as it was more becoming the singular tragedy that had made her a widow.

The late Mr. Wade had been found dead with a bullet through his head in a secluded part of the road over Heavy Tree Hill in Sonora County. Near him lay two other bodies, one afterwards identified as John Stubbs, a resident of the Hill, and probably a traveling companion of Wade's, and the other a noted desperado and highwayman, still masked, as at the moment of the attack. Wade and his companion had probably sold their lives dearly, and against odds, for another mask was found on the ground, indicating that the attack was not single-handed, and as Wade's body had not yet been rifled, it was evident that the remaining highwayman had fled in haste. The hue and cry had been given by apparently the only one of the travelers who escaped, but as he was hastening to take the overland coach to the East at the time, his testimony could not be submitted to the coroner's deliberation. The facts, however, were sufficiently plain for a verdict of willful murder against the highwayman, although it was believed that the absent witness had basely deserted his companion and left him to his fate, or, as was suggested by others, that he might even have been an accomplice. It was this circumstance which protracted comment on the incident, and the sufferings of the widow, far beyond that rapid obliteration which usually overtook such affairs in the feverish haste of the early days. It caused her to remove to Santa Ana, where her old father had feebly ranched a "quarter section" in the valley. He survived her husband only a few months, leaving her the property, and once more in mourning. Perhaps this continuity of woe endeared her to a neighborhood where distinctive ravages of diphtheria or scarlet fever gave a kind of social preeminence to any household, and she was so sympathetically assisted by her neighbors in the management of the ranch that, from an unkempt and wasteful wilderness, it became paying property. The slim, willowy figure, soft red-lidded eyes, and deep crape of "Sister Wade" at church or prayer-meeting was grateful to the soul of these gloomy worshipers, and in time she herself found that the arm of these dyspeptics of mind and body was

nevertheless strong and sustaining. Small wonder that she should hesitate to-night about plunging into inconsistent, even though trifling, frivolities.

But apart from this superficial reason, there was another instinctive one deep down in the recesses of Mrs. Wade's timid heart which she had kept to herself, and indeed would have tearfully resented had it been offered by another. The late Mr. Wade had been, in fact, a singular example of this kind of frivolous existence carried to a man-like excess. Besides being a patron of amusements, Mr. Wade gambled, raced, and drank. He was often home late, and sometimes not at all. Not that this conduct was exceptional in the "roaring days" of Heavy Tree Hill, but it had given Mrs. Wade perhaps an undue preference for a less certain, even if a more serious life. His tragic death was, of course, a kind of martyrdom, which exalted him in the feminine mind to a saintly memory; yet Mrs. Wade was not without a certain relief in that. It was voiced, perhaps crudely, by the widow of Abner Drake in a visit of condolence to the tearful Mrs. Wade a few days after Wade's death. "It's a vale o' sorrow, Mrs. Wade," said the sympathizer, "but it has its ups and downs, and I reckon ye'll be feelin' soon pretty much as I did about Abner when HE was took. It was mighty soothin' and comfortin' to feel that whatever might happen now, I always knew just whar Abner was passin' his nights." Poor slim Mrs. Wade had no disquieting sense of humor to interfere with her reception of this large truth, and she accepted it with a burst of reminiscent tears.

A long volleying shower had just passed down the level landscape, and was followed by a rolling mist from the warm saturated soil like the smoke of the discharge. Through it she could see a faint lightening of the hidden sun, again darkening through a sudden onset of rain, and changing as with her conflicting doubts and resolutions. Thus gazing, she was vaguely conscious of an addition to the landscape in the shape of a man who was passing down the road with a pack on his back like the tramping "prospectors" she had often seen at Heavy Tree Hill. That memory apparently settled her vacillating mind; she determined she would NOT go to the dance. But as she was turning away from the window a second figure, a horseman, appeared in another direction by a cross-road, a shorter cut through her domain. This she had no difficulty in recognizing as one of the strangers who were getting up the dance. She had noticed him at church on the previous Sunday. As he passed the house he appeared to be gazing at it so earnestly that she drew back from the window lest she should be seen. And then, for no reason whatever, she changed her mind once more, and resolved to go to the dance. Gravely announcing this fact to the wife of her superintendent who kept house with her in her loneliness, she thought nothing more about it. She should go in her mourning, with perhaps the addition of a white collar and frill.

It was evident, however, that Santa Ana thought a good deal more than she did of this new idea, which seemed a part of the innovation already begun by the building up of the new hotel. It was argued by some that as the new church and new schoolhouse had been opened by prayer, it was only natural that a lighter festivity should inaugurate the opening of the hotel. "I reckon that dancin' is about the next thing to travelin' for gettin' up an appetite for refreshments, and that's what the landlord is kalkilatin' to sarve," was the remark of a gloomy but practical citizen on the veranda of "The Valley Emporium." "That's so," rejoined a bystander; "and I notice on that last box o' pills I got for chills the directions say that a little 'agreeable exercise'—not too violent—is a great assistance to the working o' the pills."

"I reckon that that Mr. Brooks who's down here lookin' arter mill property, got up the dance. He's bin round town canvassin' all the women folks and drummin' up likely gals for it. They say he actooally sent an invite to the Widder Wade," remarked another loungee. "Gosh! he's got cheek!"

"Well, gentlemen," said the proprietor judicially, "while we don't intend to hev any minin' camp fandangos or 'Frisco falals round Santa Any—(Santa Ana was proud of its simple agricultural virtues)—I ain't so hard-shelled as not to give new things a fair trial. And, after all, it's the women folk that has the say about it. Why, there's old Miss Ford sez she hasn't kicked a fut sence she left Mizoori, but wouldn't mind trying it agin. Ez to Brooks takin' that trouble—well, I suppose it's along o' his

bein' HEALTHY!" He heaved a deep dyspeptic sigh, which was faintly echoed by the others. "Why, look at him now, ridin' round on that black hoss o' his, in the wet since daylight and not carin' for blind chills or rhumatiz!"

He was looking at a serape-draped horseman, the one the widow had seen on the previous night, who was now cantering slowly up the street. Seeing the group on the veranda, he rode up, threw himself lightly from his saddle, and joined them. He was an alert, determined, good-looking fellow of about thirty-five, whose smooth, smiling face hardly commended itself to Santa Ana, though his eyes were distinctly sympathetic. He glanced at the depressed group around him and became ominously serious.

"When did it happen?" he asked gravely.

"What happen?" said the nearest bystander.

"The Funeral, Flood, Fight, or Fire. Which of the four F's was it?"

"What are ye talkin' about?" said the proprietor stiffly, scenting some dangerous humor.

"YOU," said Brooks promptly. "You're all standing here, croaking like crows, this fine morning. I passed YOUR farm, Johnson, not an hour ago; the wheat just climbing out of the black adobe mud as thick as rows of pins on paper—what have YOU to grumble at? I saw YOUR stock, Briggs, over on Two-Mile Bottom, waddling along, fat as the adobe they were sticking in, their coats shining like fresh paint—what's the matter with YOU? And," turning to the proprietor, "there's YOUR shed, Saunders, over on the creek, just bursting with last year's grain that you know has gone up two hundred per cent. since you bought it at a bargain—what are YOU growling at? It's enough to provoke a fire or a famine to hear you groaning—and take care it don't, some day, as a lesson to you."

All this was so perfectly true of the prosperous burghers that they could not for a moment reply. But Briggs had recourse to what he believed to be a retaliatory taunt.

"I heard you've been askin' Widow Wade to come to your dance," he said, with a wink at the others. "Of course she said 'Yes.'"

"Of course she did," returned Brooks coolly. "I've just got her note."

"What?" ejaculated the three men together. "Mrs. Wade comin'?"

"Certainly! Why shouldn't she? And it would do YOU good to come too, and shake the limp dampness out o' you," returned Brooks, as he quietly remounted his horse and cantered away.

"Darned ef I don't think he's got his eye on the widder," said Johnson faintly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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