BRET HARTE

A FIRST FAMILY OF TASAJARA

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CHAPTER I

"It blows," said Joe Wingate.

As if to accent the words of the speaker a heavy gust of wind at that moment shook the long light wooden structure which served as the general store of Sidon settlement, in Contra Costa. Even after it had passed a prolonged whistle came through the keyhole, sides, and openings of the closed glass front doors, that served equally for windows, and filled the canvas ceiling which hid the roof above like a bellying sail. A wave of enthusiastic emotion seemed to be communicated to a line of straw hats and sou-westers suspended from a cross-beam, and swung them with every appearance of festive rejoicing, while a few dusters, overcoats, and "hickory" shirts hanging on the side walls exhibited such marked though idiotic animation that it had the effect of a satirical comment on the lazy, purposeless figures of the four living inmates of the store.

Ned Billings momentarily raised his head and shoulders depressed in the back of his wooden armchair, glanced wearily around, said, "You bet, it's no slouch of a storm," and then lapsed again with further extended legs and an added sense of comfort.

Here the third figure, which had been leaning listlessly against the shelves, putting aside the arm of a swaying overcoat that seemed to be emptily embracing him, walked slowly from behind the counter to the door, examined its fastenings, and gazed at the prospect. He was the owner of the store, and the view was a familiar one,—a long stretch of treeless waste before him meeting an equal stretch of dreary sky above, and night hovering somewhere between the two. This was indicated by splashes of darker shadow as if washed in with india ink, and a lighter low-lying streak that might have been the horizon, but was not. To the right, on a line with the front door of the store, were several scattered, widely dispersed objects, that, although vague in outline, were rigid enough in angles to suggest sheds or barns, but certainly not trees.

"There's a heap more wet to come afore the wind goes down," he said, glancing at the sky. "Hark to that, now!"

They listened lazily. There was a faint murmur from the shingles above; then suddenly the whole window was filmed and blurred as if the entire prospect had been wiped out with a damp sponge. The man turned listlessly away.

"That's the kind that soaks in; thar won't be much teamin' over Tasajara for the next two weeks, I reckon," said the fourth lounger, who, seated on a high barrel, was nibbling—albeit critically and fastidiously—biscuits and dried apples alternately from open boxes on the counter. "It's lucky you've got in your winter stock, Harkutt."

The shrewd eyes of Mr. Harkutt, proprietor, glanced at the occupation of the speaker as if even his foresight might have its possible drawbacks, but he said nothing.

"There'll be no show for Sidon until you've got a wagon road from here to the creek," said Billings languidly, from the depths of his chair. "But what's the use o' talkin'? Thar ain't energy enough in all Tasajara to build it. A God-forsaken place, that two months of the year can only be reached by a mail-rider once a week, don't look ez if it was goin' to break its back haulin' in goods and settlers. I tell ye what, gentlemen, it makes me sick!" And apparently it had enfeebled him to the extent of interfering with his aim in that expectoration of disgust against the stove with which he concluded his sentence.

"Why don't YOU build it?" asked Wingate, carelessly.

"I wouldn't on principle," said Billings. "It's gov'ment work. What did we whoop up things here last spring to elect Kennedy to the legislation for? What did I rig up my shed and a thousand feet of lumber for benches at the barbecue for? Why, to get Kennedy elected and make him get a bill passed for the road! That's MY share of building it, if it comes to that. And I only wish some folks, that blow enough about what oughter be done to bulge out that ceiling, would only do as much as I have done for Sidon."

As this remark seemed to have a personal as well as local application, the storekeeper diplomatically turned it. "There's a good many as DON'T believe that a road from here to the creek is going to do any good to Sidon. It's very well to say the creek is

an embarcadero, but callin' it so don't put anough water into it to float a steamboat from the bay, nor clear out the reeds and tules in it. Even if the State builds you roads, it ain't got no call to make Tasajara Creek navigable for ye; and as that will cost as much as the road, I don't see where the money's comin' from for both."

"There's water enough in front of 'Lige Curtis's shanty, and his location is only a mile along the bank," returned Billings.

"Water enough for him to laze away his time fishin' when he's sober, and deep enough to drown him when he's drunk," said Wingate. "If you call that an embarcadero, you kin buy it any day from 'Lige,—title, possession, and shanty thrown in,—for a demijohn o' whiskey."

The fourth man here distastefully threw back a half-nibbled biscuit into the box, and languidly slipped from the barrel to the floor, fastidiously flicking the crumbs from his clothes as he did so. "I reckon somebody'll get it for nothing, if 'Lige don't pull up mighty soon. He'll either go off his head with jim-jams or jump into the creek. He's about as near desp'rit as they make 'em, and havin' no partner to look after him, and him alone in the tules, ther' 's no tellin' WHAT he may do."

Billings, stretched at full length in his chair, here gurgled derisively. "Desp'rit!—ketch him! Why, that's his little game! He's jist playin' off his desp'rit condition to frighten Sidon. Whenever any one asks him why he don't go to work, whenever he's hard up for a drink, whenever he's had too much or too little, he's workin' that desp'rit dodge, and even talkin' o' killin'

himself! Why, look here," he continued, momentarily raising himself to a sitting posture in his disgust, "it was only last week he was over at Rawlett's trying to raise provisions and whiskey outer his water rights on the creek! Fact, sir,—had it all written down lawyer-like on paper. Rawlett didn't exactly see it in that light, and told him so. Then he up with the desp'rit dodge and began to work that. Said if he had to starve in a swamp like a dog he might as well kill himself at once, and would too if he could afford the weppins. Johnson said it was not a bad idea, and offered to lend him his revolver; Bilson handed up his shot-gun, and left it alongside of him, and turned his head away considerate-like and thoughtful while Rawlett handed him a box of rat pizon over the counter, in case he preferred suthin' more quiet. Well, what did 'Lige do? Nothin'! Smiled kinder sickly, looked sorter wild, and shut up. He didn't suicide much. No, sir! He didn't kill himself,—not he. Why, old Bixby—and he's a deacon in good standin'—allowed, in 'Lige's hearin' and for 'Lige's benefit, that self-destruction was better nor bad example, and proved it by Scripture too. And yet 'Lige did nothin'! Desp'rit! He's only desp'rit to laze around and fish all day off a log in the tules, and soak up with whiskey, until, betwixt fever an' ague and the jumps, he kinder shakes hisself free o' responsibility."

A long silence followed; it was somehow felt that the subject was incongruously exciting; Billings allowed himself to lapse again behind the back of his chair. Meantime it had grown so dark that the dull glow of the stove was beginning to outline a

faint halo on the ceiling even while it plunged the further lines of shelves behind the counter into greater obscurity.

"Time to light up, Harkutt, ain't it?" said Wingate, tentatively.

"Well, I was reckoning ez it's such a wild night there wouldn't be any use keepin' open, and when you fellows left I'd just shut up for good and make things fast," said Harkutt, dubiously. Before his guests had time to fully weigh this delicate hint, another gust of wind shook the tenement, and even forced the unbolted upper part of the door to yield far enough to admit an eager current of humid air that seemed to justify the wisdom of Harkutt's suggestion. Billings slowly and with a sigh assumed a sitting posture in the chair. The biscuit-nibbler selected a fresh dainty from the counter, and Wingate abstractedly walked to the window and rubbed the glass. Sky and water had already disappeared behind a curtain of darkness that was illuminated by a single point of light—the lamp in the window of some invisible but nearer house—which threw its rays across the glistening shallows in the road. "Well," said Wingate, buttoning up his coat in slow dejection, "I reckon I oughter be travelin' to help the old woman do the chores before supper." He had just recognized the light in his own dining-room, and knew by that sign that his long-waiting helpmeet had finally done the chores herself.

"Some folks have it mighty easy," said Billings, with long-drawn discontent, as he struggled to his feet. "You've only a step to go, and yer's me and Peters there"—indicating the biscuit-nibbler, who was beginning to show alarming signs of returning

to the barrel again—"hev got to trapse five times that distance."

"More'n half a mile, if it comes to that," said Peters, gloomily. He paused in putting on his overcoat as if thinking better of it, while even the more fortunate and contiguous Wingate languidly lapsed against the counter again.

The moment was a critical one. Billings was evidently also regretfully eying the chair he had just quitted. Harkutt resolved on a heroic effort.

"Come, boys," he said, with brisk conviviality, "take a parting drink with me before you go." Producing a black bottle from some obscurity beneath the counter that smelt strongly of india-rubber boots, he placed it with four glasses before his guests. Each made a feint of holding his glass against the opaque window while filling it, although nothing could be seen. A sudden tumult of wind and rain again shook the building, but even after it had passed the glass door still rattled violently.

"Just see what's loose, Peters," said Billings; "you're nearest it."

Peters, still holding the undrained glass in his hand, walked slowly towards it.

"It's suthin'—or somebody outside," he said, hesitatingly.

The three others came eagerly to his side. Through the glass, clouded from within by their breath, and filmed from without by the rain, some vague object was moving, and what seemed to be a mop of tangled hair was apparently brushing against the pane. The door shook again, but less strongly. Billings pressed

his face against the glass. “Hol’ on,” he said in a quick whisper, —“it’s ‘Lige!” But it was too late. Harkutt had already drawn the lower bolt, and a man stumbled from the outer obscurity into the darker room.

The inmates drew away as he leaned back for a moment against the door that closed behind him. Then dimly, but instinctively, discerning the glass of liquor which Wingate still mechanically held in his hand, he reached forward eagerly, took it from Wingate’s surprised and unresisting fingers, and drained it at a gulp. The four men laughed vaguely, but not as cheerfully as they might.

“I was just shutting up,” began Harkutt, dubiously.

“I won’t keep you a minit,” said the intruder, nervously fumbling in the breast pocket of his hickory shirt. “It’s a matter of business—Harkutt—I”—But he was obliged to stop here to wipe his face and forehead with the ends of a loose handkerchief tied round his throat. From the action, and what could be seen of his pale, exhausted face, it was evident that the moisture upon it was beads of perspiration, and not the rain which some abnormal heat of his body was converting into vapor from his sodden garments as he stood there.

“I’ve got a document here,” he began again, producing a roll of paper tremblingly from his pocket, “that I’d like you to glance over, and perhaps you’d”—His voice, which had been feverishly exalted, here broke and rattled with a cough.

Billings, Wingate, and Peters fell apart and looked out of the

window. “It’s too dark to read anything now, ‘Lige,” said Harkutt, with evasive good humor, “and I ain’t lightin’ up to-night.”

“But I can tell you the substance of it,” said the man, with a faintness that however had all the distinctness of a whisper, “if you’ll just step inside a minute. It’s a matter of importance and a bargain”—

“I reckon we must be goin’,” said Billings to the others, with marked emphasis. “We’re keepin’ Harkutt from shuttin’ up.” “Good-night!” “Good-night!” added Peters and Wingate, ostentatiously following Billings hurriedly through the door. “So long!”

The door closed behind them, leaving Harkutt alone with his importunate intruder. Possibly his resentment at his customers’ selfish abandonment of him at this moment developed a vague spirit of opposition to them and mitigated his feeling towards ‘Lige. He groped his way to the counter, struck a match, and lit a candle. Its feeble rays faintly illuminated the pale, drawn face of the applicant, set in a tangle of wet, unkempt, party-colored hair. It was not the face of an ordinary drunkard; although tremulous and sensitive from some artificial excitement, there was no ENGORGEMENT or congestion in the features or complexion, albeit they were morbid and unhealthy. The expression was of a suffering that was as much mental as physical, and yet in some vague way appeared unmeaning—and unheroic.

“I want to see you about selling my place on the creek. I want you to take it off my hands for a bargain. I want to get quit of

it, at once, for just enough to take me out o' this. I don't want any profit; only money enough to get away." His utterance, which had a certain kind of cultivation, here grew thick and harsh again, and he looked eagerly at the bottle which stood on the counter.

"Look here, 'Lige," said Harkutt, not unkindly. "It's too late to do anythin' tonight. You come in to-morrow." He would have added "when you're sober," but for a trader's sense of politeness to a possible customer, and probably some doubt of the man's actual condition.

"God knows where or what I may be tomorrow! It would kill me to go back and spend another night as the last, if I don't kill myself on the way to do it."

Harkutt's face darkened grimly. It was indeed as Billings had said. The pitiable weakness of the man's manner not only made his desperation inadequate and ineffective, but even lent it all the cheapness of acting. And, as if to accent his simulation of a part, his fingers, feebly groping in his shirt bosom, slipped aimlessly and helplessly from the shining handle of a pistol in his pocket to wander hesitatingly towards the bottle on the counter.

Harkutt took the bottle, poured out a glass of the liquor, and pushed it before his companion, who drank it eagerly. Whether it gave him more confidence, or his attention was no longer diverted, he went on more collectedly and cheerfully, and with no trace of his previous desperation in his manner. "Come, Harkutt, buy my place. It's a bargain, I tell you. I'll sell it cheap. I only want enough to get away with. Give me twenty-five dollars and

it's yours. See, there's the papers—the quitclaim—all drawn up and signed." He drew the roll of paper from his pocket again, apparently forgetful of the adjacent weapon.

"Look here, 'Lige," said Harkutt, with a business-like straightening of his lips, "I ain't buyin' any land in Tasajara,—least of all yours on the creek. I've got more invested here already than I'll ever get back again. But I tell you what I'll do. You say you can't go back to your shanty. Well, seein' how rough it is outside, and that the waters of the creek are probably all over the trail by this time, I reckon you're about right. Now, there's five dollars!" He laid down a coin sharply on the counter. "Take that and go over to Rawlett's and get a bed and some supper. In the mornin' you may be able to strike up a trade with somebody else—or change your mind. How did you get here? On your hoss?"

"Yes."

"He ain't starved yet?"

"No; he can eat grass. I can't."

Either the liquor or Harkutt's practical unsentimental treatment of the situation seemed to give him confidence. He met Harkutt's eye more steadily as the latter went on. "You kin turn your hoss for the night into my stock corral next to Rawlett's. It'll save you payin' for fodder and stablin'."

The man took up the coin with a certain slow gravity which was almost like dignity. "Thank you," he said, laying the paper on the counter. "I'll leave that as security."

"Don't want it, 'Lige," said Harkutt, pushing it back.

"I'd rather leave it."

"But suppose you have a chance to sell it to somebody at Rawlett's?" continued Harkutt, with a precaution that seemed ironical.

"I don't think there's much chance of that."

He remained quiet, looking at Harkutt with an odd expression as he rubbed the edge of the coin that he held between his fingers abstractedly on the counter. Something in his gaze—rather perhaps the apparent absence of anything in it approximate to the present occasion—was beginning to affect Harkutt with a vague uneasiness. Providentially a resumed onslaught of wind and rain against the panes effected a diversion. "Come," he said, with brisk practicality, "you'd better hurry on to Rawlett's before it gets worse. Have your clothes dried by his fire, take suthin' to eat, and you'll be all right." He rubbed his hands cheerfully, as if summarily disposing of the situation, and incidentally of all 'Lige's troubles, and walked with him to the door. Nevertheless, as the man's look remained unchanged, he hesitated a moment with his hand on the handle, in the hope that he would say something, even if only to repeat his appeal, but he did not. Then Harkutt opened the door; the man moved mechanically out, and at the distance of a few feet seemed to melt into the rain and darkness. Harkutt remained for a moment with his face pressed against the glass. After an interval he thought he heard the faint splash of hoofs in the shallows of the road; he opened the door softly and looked out.

The light had disappeared from the nearest house; only an uncertain bulk of shapeless shadows remained. Other remoter and more vague outlines near the horizon seemed to have a funereal suggestion of tombs and grave mounds, and one—a low shed near the road—looked not unlike a halted bier. He hurriedly put up the shutters in a momentary lulling of the wind, and re-entering the store began to fasten them from within.

While thus engaged an inner door behind the counter opened softly and cautiously, projecting a brighter light into the deserted apartment from some sacred domestic interior with the warm and wholesome incense of cooking. It served to introduce also the equally agreeable presence of a young girl, who, after assuring herself of the absence of every one but the proprietor, idly slipped into the store, and placing her rounded elbows, from which her sleeves were uprolled, upon the counter, leaned lazily upon them, with both hands supporting her dimpled chin, and gazed indolently at him; so indolently that, with her pretty face once fixed in this comfortable attitude, she was constrained to follow his movements with her eyes alone, and often at an uncomfortable angle. It was evident that she offered the final but charming illustration of the enfeebling listlessness of Sidon.

"So those loafers have gone at last," she said, meditatively. "They'll take root here some day, pop. The idea of three strong men like that lazing round for two mortal hours doin' nothin'. Well!" As if to emphasize her disgust she threw her whole weight upon the counter by swinging her feet from the floor to touch

the shelves behind her.

Mr. Harkutt only replied by a slight grunt as he continued to screw on the shutters.

"Want me to help you, dad?" she said, without moving.

Mr. Harkutt muttered something unintelligible, which, however, seemed to imply a negative, and her attention here feebly wandered to the roll of paper, and she began slowly and lazily to read it aloud.

"'For value received, I hereby sell, assign, and transfer to Daniel D. Harkutt all my right, titles and interest in, and to the undivided half of, Quarter Section 4, Range 5, Tasajara Township'—hum—hum," she murmured, running her eyes to the bottom of the page. "Why, Lord! It's that 'Lige Curtis!" she laughed. "The idea of HIM having property! Why, dad, you ain't been THAT silly!"

"Put down that paper, miss," he said, aggrievedly; "bring the candle here, and help me to find one of these infernal screws that's dropped."

The girl indolently disengaged herself from the counter and Elijah Curtis's transfer, and brought the candle to her father. The screw was presently found and the last fastening secured. "Supper gettin' cold, dad," she said, with a slight yawn. Her father sympathetically responded by stretching himself from his stooping position, and the two passed through the private door into inner domesticity, leaving the already forgotten paper lying with other articles of barter on the counter.

CHAPER II

With the closing of the little door behind them they seemed to have shut out the turmoil and vibration of the storm. The reason became apparent when, after a few paces, they descended half a dozen steps to a lower landing. This disclosed the fact that the dwelling part of the Sidon General Store was quite below the level of the shop and the road, and on the slope of the solitary undulation of the Tasajara plain,—a little ravine that fell away to a brawling stream below. The only arboreous growth of Tasajara clothed its banks in the shape of willows and alders that set compactly around the quaint, irregular dwelling which straggled down the ravine and looked upon a slope of bracken and foliage on either side. The transition from the black, treeless, storm-swept plain to this sheltered declivity was striking and suggestive. From the opposite bank one might fancy that the youthful and original dwelling had ambitiously mounted the crest, but, appalled at the dreary prospect beyond, had gone no further; while from the road it seemed as if the fastidious proprietor had tried to draw a line between the vulgar trading-post, with which he was obliged to face the coarser civilization of the place, and the privacy of his domestic life. The real fact, however, was that the ravine furnished wood and water; and as Nature also provided one wall of the house,—as in the well-known example of aboriginal cave dwellings,—its peculiar construction

commended itself to Sidon on the ground of involving little labor.

Howbeit, from the two open windows of the sitting-room which they had entered only the faint pattering of dripping boughs and a slight murmur from the swollen brook indicated the storm that shook the upper plain, and the cool breath of laurel, syringa, and alder was wafted through the neat apartment. Passing through that pleasant rural atmosphere they entered the kitchen, a much larger room, which appeared to serve occasionally as a dining-room, and where supper was already laid out. A stout, comfortable-looking woman—who had, however, a singularly permanent expression of pained sympathy upon her face—welcomed them in tones of gentle commiseration.

"Ah, there you be, you two! Now sit ye right down, dears; DO. You must be tired out; and you, Phemie, love, draw up by your poor father. There—that's right. You'll be better soon."

There was certainly no visible sign of suffering or exhaustion on the part of either father or daughter, nor the slightest apparent earthly reason why they should be expected to exhibit any. But, as already intimated, it was part of Mrs. Harkutt's generous idiosyncrasy to look upon all humanity as suffering and toiling; to be petted, humored, condoled with, and fed. It had, in the course of years, imparted a singularly caressing sadness to her voice, and given her the habit of ending her sentences with a melancholy cooing and an unintelligible murmur of agreement. It was undoubtedly sincere and sympathetic, but at times inappropriate and distressing. It had lost her the friendship of the one humorist

of Tasajara, whose best jokes she had received with such heartfelt commiseration and such pained appreciation of the evident labor involved as to reduce him to silence.

Accustomed as Mr. Harkutt was to his wife's peculiarity, he was not above assuming a certain slightly fatigued attitude befitting it. "Yes," he said, with a vague sigh, "where's Clemmie?"

"Lyin' down since dinner; she reckoned she wouldn't get up to supper," she returned soothingly. "Phemie's goin' to take her up some sass and tea. The poor dear child wants a change."

"She wants to go to 'Frisco, and so do I, pop," said Phemie, leaning her elbow half over her father's plate. "Come, pop, say do,—just for a week."

"Only for a week," murmured the commiserating Mrs. Harkutt.

"Perhaps," responded Harkutt, with gloomy sarcasm, "ye wouldn't mind tellin' me how you're goin' to get there, and where the money's comin' from to take you? There's no teamin' over Tasajara till the rain stops, and no money comin' in till the ranchmen can move their stuff. There ain't a hundred dollars in all Tasajara; at least there ain't been the first red cent of it paid across my counter for a fortnit! Perhaps if you do go you wouldn't mind takin' me and the store along with ye, and leavin' us there."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Harkutt, with sympathetic but shameless tergiversation. "Don't bother your poor father, Phemie, love; don't you see he's just tired out? And you're not

eatin' anything, dad."

As Mr. Harkutt was uneasily conscious that he had been eating heartily in spite of his financial difficulties, he turned the subject abruptly. "Where's John Milton?"

Mrs. Harkutt shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed meditatively on the floor before the fire and in the chimney corner for her only son, baptized under that historic title. "He was here a minit ago," she said doubtfully. "I really can't think where he's gone. But," assuringly, "it ain't far."

"He's skipped with one o' those story-books he's borrowed," said Phemie. "He's always doin' it. Like as not he's reading with a candle in the wood-shed. We'll all be burnt up some night."

"But he's got through his chores," interposed Mrs. Harkutt deprecatingly.

"Yes," continued Harkutt, aggrievedly, "but instead of goin' to bed, or addin' up bills, or takin' count o' stock, or even doin' sums or suthin' useful, he's ruinin' his eyes and wastin' his time over trash." He rose and walked slowly into the sitting-room, followed by his daughter and a murmur of commiseration from his wife. But Mrs. Harkutt's ministration for the present did not pass beyond her domain, the kitchen.

"I reckon ye ain't expectin' anybody tonight, Phemie?" said Mr. Harkutt, sinking into a chair, and placing his slippered feet against the wall.

"No," said Phemie, "unless something possesses that sappy little Parmlee to make one of his visitations. John Milton says

that out on the road it blows so you can't stand up. It's just like that idiot Parmlee to be blown in here, and not have strength of mind enough to get away again."

Mr. Harkutt smiled. It was that arch yet approving, severe yet satisfied smile with which the deceived male parent usually receives any depreciation of the ordinary young man by his daughters. Euphemia was no giddy thing to be carried away by young men's attentions,—not she! Sitting back comfortably in his rocking-chair, he said, "Play something."

The young girl went to the closet and took from the top shelf an excessively ornamented accordion,—the opulent gift of a reckless admirer. It was so inordinately decorated, so gorgeous in the blaze of papier mache, mother-of-pearl, and tortoise-shell on keys and keyboard, and so ostentatiously radiant in the pink silk of its bellows that it seemed to overawe the plainly furnished room with its splendors. "You ought to keep it on the table in a glass vase, Phemie," said her father admiringly.

"And have HIM think I worshiped it! Not me, indeed! He's conceited enough already," she returned, saucily.

Mr. Harkutt again smiled his approbation, then deliberately closed his eyes and threw his head back in comfortable anticipation of the coming strains.

It is to be regretted that in brilliancy, finish, and even cheerfulness of quality they were not up to the suggestions of the keys and keyboard. The most discreet and cautious effort on the part of the young performer seemed only to produce

startlingly unexpected, but instantly suppressed complaints from the instrument, accompanied by impatient interjections of "No, no," from the girl herself. Nevertheless, with her pretty eyebrows knitted in some charming distress of memory, her little mouth half open between an apologetic smile and the exertion of working the bellows, with her white, rounded arms partly lifted up and waving before her, she was pleasantly distracting to the eye. Gradually, as the scattered strains were marshaled into something like an air, she began to sing also, glossing over the instrumental weaknesses, filling in certain dropped notes and omissions, and otherwise assisting the ineffectual accordion with a youthful but not unmusical voice. The song was a lugubrious religious chant; under its influence the house seemed to sink into greater quiet, permitting in the intervals the murmur of the swollen creek to appear more distinct, and even the far moaning of the wind on the plain to become faintly audible. At last, having fairly mastered the instrument, Phemie got into the full swing of the chant. Unconstrained by any criticism, carried away by the sound of her own voice, and perhaps a youthful love for mere uproar, or possibly desirous to drown her father's voice, which had unexpectedly joined in with a discomposing bass, the conjoined utterances seemed to threaten the frail structure of their dwelling, even as the gale had distended the store behind them. When they ceased at last it was in an accession of dripping from the apparently stirred leaves outside. And then a voice, evidently from the moist depths of the abyss below, called out,—

"Hullo, there!"

Phemie put down the accordion, said, "Who's that now?" went to the window, lazily leaned her elbows on the sill, and peered into the darkness. Nothing was to be seen; the open space of dimly outlined landscape had that blank, uncommunicative impenetrability with which Nature always confronts and surprises us at such moments. It seemed to Phemie that she was the only human being present. Yet after the feeling had passed she fancied she heard the wash of the current against some object in the stream, half stationary and half resisting.

"Is any one down there? Is that you, Mr. Parmlee?" she called.

There was a pause. Some invisible auditor said to another, "It's a young lady." Then the first voice rose again in a more deferential tone: "Are we anywhere near Sidon?"

"This is Sidon," answered Harkutt, who had risen, and was now quite obliterating his daughter's outline at the window.

"Thank you," said the voice. "Can we land anywhere here, on this bank?"

"Run down, pop; they're strangers," said the girl, with excited, almost childish eagerness.

"Hold on," called out Harkutt, "I'll be thar in a moment!" He hastily thrust his feet into a pair of huge boots, clapped on an oilskin hat and waterproof, and disappeared through a door that led to a lower staircase. Phemie, still at the window, albeit with a newly added sense of self-consciousness, hung out breathlessly. Presently a beam of light from the lower depths of the house shot

out into the darkness. It was her father with a bull's-eye lantern. As he held it up and clambered cautiously down the bank, its rays fell upon the turbid rushing stream, and what appeared to be a rough raft of logs held with difficulty against the bank by two men with long poles. In its centre was a roll of blankets, a valise and saddle-bags, and the shining brasses of some odd-looking instruments.

As Mr. Harkutt, supporting himself by a willow branch that overhung the current, held up the lantern, the two men rapidly transferred their freight from the raft to the bank, and leaped ashore. The action gave an impulse to the raft, which, no longer held in position by the poles, swung broadside to the current and was instantly swept into the darkness.

Not a word had been spoken, but now the voices of the men rose freely together. Phemie listened with intense expectation. The explanation was simple. They were surveyors who had been caught by the overflow on Tasajara plain, had abandoned their horses on the bank of Tasajara Creek, and with a hastily constructed raft had intrusted themselves and their instruments to the current. "But," said Harkutt quickly, "there is no connection between Tasajara Creek and this stream."

The two men laughed. "There is NOW," said one of them.

"But Tasajara Creek is a part of the bay," said the astonished Harkutt, "and this stream rises inland and only runs into the bay four miles lower down. And I don't see how—

"You're almost twelve feet lower here than Tasajara Creek,"

said the first man, with a certain professional authority, "and that's WHY. There's more water than Tasajara Creek can carry, and it's seeking the bay this way. Look," he continued, taking the lantern from Harkutt's hand and casting its rays on the stream, "that's salt drift from the upper bay, and part of Tasajara Creek's running by your house now! Don't be alarmed," he added reassuringly, glancing at the staring storekeeper. "You're all right here; this is only the overflow and will find its level soon."

But Mr. Harkutt remained gazing abstractedly at the smiling speaker. From the window above the impatient Phemie was wondering why he kept the strangers waiting in the rain while he talked about things that were perfectly plain. It was so like a man!

"Then there's a waterway straight to Tasajara Creek?" he said slowly.

"There is, as long as this flood lasts," returned the first speaker promptly; "and a cutting through the bank of two or three hundred yards would make it permanent. Well, what's the matter with that?"

"Nothin'," said Harkutt hurriedly. "I am only considerin'! But come in, dry yourselves, and take suthin'."

The light over the rushing water was withdrawn, and the whole prospect sank back into profound darkness. Mr. Harkutt had disappeared with his guests. Then there was the familiar shuffle of his feet on the staircase, followed by other more cautious footsteps that grew delicately and even courteously deliberate as they approached. At which the young girl, in some new sense

of decorum, drew in her pretty head, glanced around the room quickly, reset the tidy on her father's chair, placed the resplendent accordion like an ornament in the exact centre of the table, and then vanished into the hall as Mr. Harkutt entered with the strangers.

They were both of the same age and appearance, but the principal speaker was evidently the superior of his companion, and although their attitude to each other was equal and familiar, it could be easily seen that he was the leader. He had a smooth, beardless face, with a critical expression of eye and mouth that might have been fastidious and supercilious but for the kindly, humorous perception that tempered it. His quick eye swept the apartment and then fixed itself upon the accordion, but a smile lit up his face as he said quietly,—

"I hope we haven't frightened the musician away. It was bad enough to have interrupted the young lady."

"No, no," said Mr. Harkutt, who seemed to have lost his abstraction in the nervousness of hospitality. "I reckon she's only lookin' after her sick sister. But come into the kitchen, both of you, straight off, and while you're dryin' your clothes, mother'll fix you suthin' hot."

"We only need to change our boots and stockings; we've some dry ones in our pack downstairs," said the first speaker hesitatingly.

"I'll fetch 'em up and you can change in the kitchen. The old woman won't mind," said Harkutt reassuringly. "Come along."

He led the way to the kitchen; the two strangers exchanged a glance of humorous perplexity and followed.

The quiet of the little room was once more unbroken. A far-off commiserating murmur indicated that Mrs. Harkutt was receiving her guests. The cool breath of the wet leaves without slightly stirred the white dimity curtains, and somewhere from the darkened eaves there was a still, somnolent drip. Presently a hurried whisper and a half-laugh appeared to be suppressed in the outer passage or hall. There was another moment of hesitation and the door opened suddenly and ostentatiously, disclosing Phemie, with a taller and slighter young woman, her elder sister, at her side. Perceiving that the room was empty, they both said "Oh!" yet with a certain artificiality of manner that was evidently a lingering trace of some previous formal attitude they had assumed. Then without further speech they each selected a chair and a position, having first shaken out their dresses, and gazed silently at each other.

It may be said briefly that sitting thus—in spite of their unnatural attitude, or perhaps rather because of its suggestion of a photographic pose—they made a striking picture, and strongly accented their separate peculiarities. They were both pretty, but the taller girl, apparently the elder, had an ideal refinement and regularity of feature which was not only unlike Phemie, but gratuitously unlike the rest of her family, and as hopelessly and even wantonly inconsistent with her surroundings as was the elaborately ornamented accordion on the centre-table. She

was one of those occasional creatures, episodical in the South and West, who might have been stamped with some vague ante-natal impression of a mother given to over-sentimental contemplation of books of beauty and albums rather than the family features; offspring of typical men and women, and yet themselves incongruous to any known local or even general type. The long swan-like neck, tendriled hair, swimming eyes, and small patrician head, had never lived or moved before in Tasajara or the West, nor perhaps even existed except as a personified "Constancy," "Meditation," or the "Baron's Bride," in mezzotint or copperplate. Even the girl's common pink print dress with its high sleeves and shoulders could not conventionalize these original outlines; and the hand that rested stiffly on the back of her chair, albeit neither over-white nor well kept, looked as if it had never held anything but a lyre, a rose, or a good book. Even the few sprays of wild jessamine which she had placed in the coils of her waving hair, although a local fashion, became her as a special ornament.

The two girls kept their constrained and artificially elaborated attitude for a few moments, accompanied by the murmur of voices in the kitchen, the monotonous drip of the eaves before the window, and the far-off sough of the wind. Then Phemie suddenly broke into a constrained giggle, which she however quickly smothered as she had the accordion, and with the same look of mischievous distress.

"I'm astonished at you, Phemie," said Clementina in a deep

contralto voice, which seemed even deeper from its restraint. "You don't seem to have any sense. Anybody'd think you never had seen a stranger before."

"Saw him before you did," retorted Phemie pertly. But here a pushing of chairs and shuffling of feet in the kitchen checked her. Clementina fixed an abstracted gaze on the ceiling; Phemie regarded a leaf on the window sill with photographic rigidity as the door opened to the strangers and her father.

The look of undisguised satisfaction which lit the young men's faces relieved Mr. Harkutt's awkward introduction of any embarrassment, and almost before Phemie was fully aware of it, she found herself talking rapidly and in a high key with Mr. Lawrence Grant, the surveyor, while her sister was equally, although more sedately, occupied with Mr. Stephen Rice, his assistant. But the enthusiasm of the strangers, and the desire to please and be pleased was so genuine and contagious that presently the accordion was brought into requisition, and Mr. Grant exhibited a surprising faculty of accompaniment to Mr. Rice's tenor, in which both the girls joined.

Then a game of cards with partners followed, into which the rival parties introduced such delightful and shameless obviousness of cheating, and displayed such fascinating and exaggerated partisanship that the game resolved itself into a hilarious melee, to which peace was restored only by an exhibition of tricks of legerdemain with the cards by the young surveyor. All of which Mr. Harkutt supervised patronizingly,

with occasional fits of abstraction, from his rocking-chair; and later Mrs. Harkutt from her kitchen threshold, wiping her arms on her apron and commiseratingly observing that she "declared, the young folks looked better already."

But it was here a more dangerous element of mystery and suggestion was added by Mr. Lawrence Grant in the telling of Miss Euphemia's fortune from the cards before him, and that young lady, pink with excitement, fluttered her little hands not unlike timid birds over the cards to be drawn, taking them from him with an audible twitter of anxiety and great doubts whether a certain "fair-haired gentleman" was in hearts or diamonds.

"Here are two strangers," said Mr. Grant, with extraordinary gravity laying down the cards, "and here is a 'journey;' this is 'unexpected news,' and this ten of diamonds means 'great wealth' to you, which you see follows the advent of the two strangers and is some way connected with them."

"Oh, indeed," said the young lady with great pertness and a toss of her head. "I suppose they've got the money with them."

"No, though it reaches you through them," he answered with unflinching solemnity. "Wait a bit, I have it! I see, I've made a mistake with this card. It signifies a journey or a road. Queer! isn't it, Steve? It's THE ROAD."

"It is queer," said Rice with equal gravity; "but it's so. The road, sure!" Nevertheless he looked up into the large eyes of Clementina with a certain confidential air of truthfulness.

"You see, ladies," continued the surveyor, appealing to them

with unabashed rigidity of feature, “the cards don’t lie! Luckily we are in a position to corroborate them. The road in question is a secret known only to us and some capitalists in San Francisco. In fact even THEY don’t know that it is feasible until WE report to them. But I don’t mind telling you now, as a slight return for your charming hospitality, that the road is a RAILROAD from Oakland to Tasajara Creek of which we’ve just made the preliminary survey. So you see what the cards mean is this: You’re not far from Tasajara Creek; in fact with a very little expense your father could connect this stream with the creek, and have a WATERWAY STRAIGHT TO THE RAILROAD TERMINUS. That’s the wealth the cards promise; and if your father knows how to take a hint he can make his fortune!”

It was impossible to say which was the most dominant in the face of the speaker, the expression of assumed gravity or the twinkling of humor in his eyes. The two girls with superior feminine perception divined that there was much truth in what he said, albeit they didn’t entirely understand it, and what they did understand—except the man’s good-humored motive—was not particularly interesting. In fact they were slightly disappointed. What had promised to be an audaciously flirtatious declaration, and even a mischievous suggestion of marriage, had resolved itself into something absurdly practical and business-like.

Not so Mr. Harkutt. He quickly rose from his chair, and, leaning over the table, with his eyes fixed on the card as if it really signified the railroad, repeated quickly: “Railroad, eh! What’s

that? A railroad to Tasajara Creek? Ye don't mean it!—That is—it ain't a SURE thing?"

"Perfectly sure. The money is ready in San Francisco now, and by this time next year—"

"A railroad to Tasajara Creek!" continued Harkutt hurriedly. "What part of it? Where?"

"At the embarcadero naturally," responded Grant. "There isn't but the one place for the terminus. There's an old shanty there now belongs to somebody."

"Why, pop!" said Phemie with sudden recollection, "ain't it 'Lige Curtis's house? The land he offered"—

"Hush!" said her father.

"You know, the one written in that bit of paper," continued the innocent Phemie.

"Hush! will you? God A'mighty! are you goin' to mind me? Are you goin' to keep up your jabber when I'm speakin' to the gentlemen? Is that your manners? What next, I wonder!"

The sudden and unexpected passion of the speaker, the incomprehensible change in his voice, and the utterly disproportionate exaggeration of his attitude towards his daughters, enforced an instantaneous silence. The rain began to drip audibly at the window, the rush of the river sounded distinctly from without, even the shaking of the front part of the dwelling by the distant gale became perceptible. An angry flash sprang for an instant to the young assistant's eye, but it met the cautious glance of his friend, and together both discreetly sought

the table. The two girls alone remained white and collected. “Will you go on with my fortune, Mr. Grant?” said Phemie quietly.

A certain respect, perhaps not before observable, was suggested in the surveyor’s tone as he smilingly replied, “Certainly, I was only waiting for you to show your confidence in me,” and took up the cards.

Mr. Harkutt coughed. “It looks as if that blamed wind had blown suthin’ loose in the store,” he said affectedly. “I reckon I’ll go and see.” He hesitated a moment and then disappeared in the passage. Yet even here he stood irresolute, looking at the closed door behind him, and passing his hand over his still flushed face. Presently he slowly and abstractedly ascended the flight of steps, entered the smaller passage that led to the back door of the shop and opened it.

He was at first a little startled at the halo of light from the still glowing stove, which the greater obscurity of the long room had heightened rather than diminished. Then he passed behind the counter, but here the box of biscuits which occupied the centre and cast a shadow over it compelled him to grope vaguely for what he sought. Then he stopped suddenly, the paper he had just found dropping from his fingers, and said sharply,—

“Who’s there?”

“Me, pop.”

“John Milton?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What the devil are you doin’ there, sir?”

"Readin'."

It was true. The boy was half reclining in a most distorted posture on two chairs, his figure in deep shadow, but his book was raised above his head so as to catch the red glow of the stove on the printed page. Even then his father's angry interruption scarcely diverted his preoccupation; he raised himself in his chair mechanically, with his eyes still fixed on his book. Seeing which his father quickly regained the paper, but continued his objurgation.

"How dare you? Clear off to bed, will you! Do you hear me? Pretty goin's on," he added as if to justify his indignation. "Sneakin' in here and—and lyin' 'round at this time o' night! Why, if I hadn't come in here to"—

"What?" asked the boy mechanically, catching vaguely at the unfinished sentence and staring automatically at the paper in his father's hand.

"Nothin', sir! Go to bed, I tell you! Will you? What are you standin' gawpin' at?" continued Harkutt furiously.

The boy regained his feet slowly and passed his father, but not without noticing with the same listless yet ineffaceable perception of childhood that he was hurriedly concealing the paper in his pocket. With the same youthful inconsequence, wondering at this more than at the interruption, which was no novel event, he went slowly out of the room.

Harkutt listened to the retreating tread of his bare feet in the passage and then carefully locked the door. Taking the paper

from his pocket, and borrowing the idea he had just objurgated in his son, he turned it towards the dull glow of the stove and attempted to read it. But perhaps lacking the patience as well as the keener sight of youth, he was forced to relight the candle which he had left on the counter, and reperused the paper. Yes! there was certainly no mistake! Here was the actual description of the property which the surveyor had just indicated as the future terminus of the new railroad, and here it was conveyed to him—Daniel Harkutt! What was that? Somebody knocking? What did this continual interruption mean? An odd superstitious fear now mingled with his irritation.

The sound appeared to come from the front shutters. It suddenly occurred to him that the light might be visible through the crevices. He hurriedly extinguished it, and went to the door.

"Who's there?"

"Me,—Peters. Want to speak to you."

Mr. Harkutt with evident reluctance drew the bolts. The wind, still boisterous and besieging, did the rest, and precipitately propelled Peters through the carefully guarded opening. But his surprise at finding himself in the darkness seemed to forestall any explanation of his visit.

"Well," he said with an odd mingling of reproach and suspicion. "I declare I saw a light here just this minit! That's queer."

"Yes, I put it out just now. I was goin' away," replied Harkutt, with ill-disguised impatience.

"What! been here ever since?"

"No," said Harkutt curtly.

"Well, I want to speak to ye about 'Lige. Seein' the candle shinin' through the chinks I thought he might be still with ye. If he ain't, it looks bad. Light up, can't ye! I want to show you something."

There was a peremptoriness in his tone that struck Harkutt disagreeably, but observing that he was carrying something in his hand, he somewhat nervously re-lit the candle and faced him. Peters had a hat in his hand. It was 'Lige's!

"'Bout an hour after we fellers left here," said Peters, "I heard the rattlin' of hoofs on the road, and then it seemed to stop just by my house. I went out with a lantern, and, darn my skin! if there warn't 'Lige's hoss, the saddle empty, and 'Lige nowhere! I looked round and called him—but nothing were to be seen. Thinkin' he might have slipped off—tho' ez a general rule drunken men don't, and he is a good rider—I followed down the road, lookin' for him. I kept on follerin' it down to your run, half a mile below."

"But," began Harkutt, with a quick nervous laugh, "you don't reckon that because of that he"—

"Hold on!" said Peters, grimly producing a revolver from his side-pocket with the stock and barrel clogged and streaked with mud. "I found THAT too,—and look! one barrel discharged! And," he added hurriedly, as approaching a climax, "look ye,—what I nat'rally took for wet from the rain—inside that hat—was

—blood!"

"Nonsense!" said Harkutt, putting the hat aside with a new fastidiousness. "You don't think"—

"I think," said Peters, lowering his voice, "I think, by God! HE'S BIN AND DONE IT!"

"No!"

"Sure! Oh, it's all very well for Billings and the rest of that conceited crowd to sneer and sling their ideas of 'Lige gen'rally as they did jess now here,—but I'd like 'em to see THAT." It was difficult to tell if Mr. Peters' triumphant delight in confuting his late companions' theories had not even usurped in his mind the importance of the news he brought, as it had of any human sympathy with it.

"Look here," returned Harkutt earnestly, yet with a singularly cleared brow and a more natural manner. "You ought to take them things over to Squire Kerby's, right off, and show 'em to him. You kin tell him how you left 'Lige here, and say that I can prove by my daughter that he went away about ten minutes after,—at least, not more than fifteen." Like all unprofessional humanity, Mr. Harkutt had an exaggerated conception of the majesty of unimportant detail in the eye of the law. "I'd go with you myself," he added quickly, "but I've got company—strangers —here."

"How did he look when he left,—kinder wild?" suggested Peters.

Harkutt had begun to feel the prudence of present reticence.

"Well," he said, cautiously, "YOU saw how he looked."

"You wasn't rough with him?—that might have sent him off, you know," said Peters.

"No," said Harkutt, forgetting himself in a quick indignation, "no, I not only treated him to another drink, but gave him"—he stopped suddenly and awkwardly.

"Eh?" said Peters.

"Some good advice,—you know," said Harkutt, hastily. "But come, you'd better hurry over to the squire's. You know YOU'VE made the discovery; YOUR evidence is important, and there's a law that obliges you to give information at once."

The excitement of discovery and the triumph over his disputants being spent, Peters, after the Sidon fashion, evidently did not relish activity as a duty. "You know," he said dubiously, "he mightn't be dead, after all."

Harkutt became a trifle distant. "You know your own opinion of the thing," he replied after a pause. "You've circumstantial evidence enough to see the squire, and set others to work on it; and," he added significantly, "you've done your share then, and can wipe your hands of it, eh?"

"That's so," said Peters, eagerly. "I'll just run over to the squire."

"And on account of the women folks, you know, and the strangers here, I'll say nothin' about it to-night," added Harkutt.

Peters nodded his head, and taking up the hat of the unfortunate Elijah with a certain hesitation, as if he feared it

had already lost its dramatic intensity as a witness, disappeared into the storm and darkness again. A lurking gust of wind lying in ambush somewhere seemed to swoop down on him as if to prevent further indecision and whirl him away in the direction of the justice's house; and Mr. Harkutt shut the door, bolted it, and walked aimlessly back to the counter.

From a slow, deliberate and cautious man, he seemed to have changed within an hour to an irresolute and capricious one. He took the paper from his pocket, and, unlocking the money drawer of his counter, folded into a small compass that which now seemed to be the last testament of Elijah Curtis, and placed it in a recess. Then he went to the back door and paused, then returned, reopened the money drawer, took out the paper and again buttoned it in his hip pocket, standing by the stove and staring abstractedly at the dull glow of the fire. He even went through the mechanical process of raking down the ashes,—solely to gain time and as an excuse for delaying some other necessary action.

He was thinking what he should do. Had the question of his right to retain and make use of that paper been squarely offered to him an hour ago, he would without doubt have decided that he ought not to keep it. Even now, looking at it as an abstract principle, he did not deceive himself in the least. But Nature has the reprehensible habit of not presenting these questions to us squarely and fairly, and it is remarkable that in most of our offending the abstract principle is never the direct issue. Mr.

Harkutt was conscious of having been unwillingly led step by step into a difficult, not to say dishonest, situation, and against his own seeking. He had never asked Elijah to sell him the property; he had distinctly declined it; it had even been forced upon him as security for the pittance he so freely gave him. This proved (to himself) that he himself was honest; it was only the circumstances that were queer. Of course if Elijah had lived, he, Harkutt, might have tried to drive some bargain with him before the news of the railroad survey came out—for THAT was only business. But now that Elijah was dead, who would be a penny the worse or better but himself if he chose to consider the whole thing as a lucky speculation, and his gift of five dollars as the price he paid for it? Nobody could think that he had calculated upon 'Lige's suicide, any more than that the property would become valuable. In fact if it came to that, if 'Lige had really contemplated killing himself as a hopeless bankrupt after taking Harkutt's money as a loan, it was a swindle on his—Harkutt's—good-nature. He worked himself into a rage, which he felt was innately virtuous, at this tyranny of cold principle over his own warm-hearted instincts, but if it came to the LAW, he'd stand by law and not sentiment. He'd just let them—by which he vaguely meant the world, Tasajara, and possibly his own conscience—see that he wasn't a sentimental fool, and he'd freeze on to that paper and that property!

Only he ought to have spoken out before. He ought to have told the surveyor at once that he owned the land. He ought to

have said: "Why, that's my land. I bought it of that drunken 'Lige Curtis for a song and out of charity." Yes, that was the only real trouble, and that came from his own goodness, his own extravagant sense of justice and right,—his own cursed good-nature. Yet, on second thoughts, he didn't know why he was obliged to tell the surveyor. Time enough when the company wanted to buy the land. As soon as it was settled that 'Lige was dead he'd openly claim the property. But what if he wasn't dead? or they couldn't find his body? or he had only disappeared? His plain, matter-of-fact face contracted and darkened. Of course he couldn't ask the company to wait for him to settle that point. He had the power to dispose of the property under that paper, and—he should do it. If 'Lige turned up, that was another matter, and he and 'Lige could arrange it between them. He was quite firm here, and oddly enough quite relieved in getting rid of what appeared only a simple question of detail. He never suspected that he was contemplating the one irretrievable step, and summarily dismissing the whole ethical question.

He turned away from the stove, opened the back door, and walked with a more determined step through the passage to the sitting-room. But here he halted again on the threshold with a quick return of his old habits of caution. The door was slightly open; apparently his angry outbreak of an hour ago had not affected the spirits of his daughters, for he could hear their hilarious voices mingling with those of the strangers. They were evidently still fortune-telling, but this time it was the prophetic

and divining accents of Mr. Rice addressed to Clementina which were now plainly audible.

"I see heaps of money and a great many friends in the change that is coming to you. Dear me! how many suitors! But I cannot promise you any marriage as brilliant as my friend has just offered your sister. You may be certain, however, that you'll have your own choice in this, as you have in all things."

"Thank you for nothing," said Clementina's voice. "But what are those horrid black cards beside them?—that's trouble, I'm sure."

"Not for you, though near you. Perhaps some one you don't care much for and don't understand will have a heap of trouble on your account,—yes, on account of these very riches; see, he follows the ten of diamonds. It may be a suitor; it may be some one now in the house, perhaps."

"He means himself, Miss Clementina," struck in Grant's voice laughingly.

"You're not listening, Miss Harkutt," said Rice with half-serious reproach. "Perhaps you know who it is?"

But Miss Clementina's reply was simply a hurried recognition of her father's pale face that here suddenly confronted her with the opening door.

"Why, it's father!"

CHAPER III

In his strange mental condition even the change from Harkutt's feeble candle to the outer darkness for a moment blinded Elijah Curtis, yet it was part of that mental condition that he kept moving steadily forward as in a trance or dream, though at first purposelessly. Then it occurred to him that he was really looking for his horse, and that the animal was not there. This for a moment confused and frightened him, first with the supposition that he had not brought him at all, but that it was part of his delusion; secondly, with the conviction that without his horse he could neither proceed on the course suggested by Harkutt, nor take another more vague one that was dimly in his mind. Yet in his hopeless vacillation it seemed a relief that now neither was practicable, and that he need do nothing. Perhaps it was a mysterious providence!

The explanation, however, was much simpler. The horse had been taken by the luxurious and indolent Billings unknown to his companions. Overcome at the dreadful prospect of walking home in that weather, this perfect product of lethargic Sidon had artfully allowed Peters and Wingate to precede him, and, cautiously unloosing the tethered animal, had safely passed them in the darkness. When he gained his own inclosure he had lazily dismounted, and, with a sharp cut on the mustang's haunches, sent him galloping back to rejoin his master, with what result

has been already told by the unsuspecting Peters in the preceding chapter.

Yet no conception of this possibility entered 'Lige Curtis's alcoholized consciousness, part of whose morbid phantasy it was to distort or exaggerate all natural phenomena. He had a vague idea that he could not go back to Harkutt's; already his visit seemed to have happened long, long ago, and could not be repeated. He would walk on, enwrapped in this uncompromising darkness which concealed everything, suggested everything, and was responsible for everything.

It was very dark, for the wind, having lulled, no longer thinned the veil of clouds above, nor dissipated a steaming mist that appeared to rise from the sodden plain. Yet he moved easily through the darkness, seeming to be upheld by it as something tangible, upon which he might lean. At times he thought he heard voices,—not a particular voice he was thinking of, but strange voices—of course unreal to his present fancy. And then he heard one of these voices, unlike any voice in Sidon, and very faint and far off, asking if it "was anywhere near Sidon?"—evidently some one lost like himself. He answered in a voice that seemed quite as unreal and as faint, and turned in the direction from which it came. There was a light moving like a will-o'-the-wisp far before him, yet below him as if coming out of the depths of the earth. It must be fancy, but he would see—ah!

He had fallen violently forward, and at the same moment felt his revolver leap from his breast pocket like a living thing, and

an instant after explode upon the rock where it struck, blindingly illuminating the declivity down which he was plunging. The sulphurous sting of burning powder was in his eyes and nose, yet in that swift revealing flash he had time to clutch the stems of a trailing vine beside him, but not to save his head from sharp contact with the same rocky ledge that had caught his pistol. The pain and shock gave way to a sickening sense of warmth at the roots of his hair. Giddy and faint, his fingers relaxed, he felt himself sinking, with a languor that was half acquiescence, down, down,—until, with another shock, a wild gasping for air, and a swift reaction, he awoke in the cold, rushing water!

Clear and perfectly conscious now, though frantically fighting for existence with the current, he could dimly see a floating black object shooting by the shore, at times striking the projections of the bank, until in its recoil it swung half round and drifted broadside on towards him. He was near enough to catch the frayed ends of a trailing rope that fastened the structure, which seemed to be a few logs, together. With a convulsive effort he at last gained a footing upon it, and then fell fainting along its length. It was the raft which the surveyors from the embarcadero had just abandoned.

He did not know this, nor would he have thought it otherwise strange that a raft might be a part of the drift of the overflow, even had he been entirely conscious; but his senses were failing, though he was still able to keep a secure position on the raft, and to vaguely believe that it would carry him to some relief and

succor. How long he lay unconscious he never knew; in his after-recollections of that night, it seemed to have been haunted by dreams of passing dim banks and strange places; of a face and voice that had been pleasant to him; of a terror coming upon him as he appeared to be nearing a place like that home that he had abandoned in the lonely tules. He was roused at last by a violent headache, as if his soft felt hat had been changed into a tightening crown of iron. Lifting his hand to his head to tear off its covering, he was surprised to find that he was wearing no hat, but that his matted hair, stiffened and dried with blood and ooze, was clinging like a cap to his skull in the hot morning sunlight. His eyelids and lashes were glued together and weighted down by the same sanguinary plaster. He crawled to the edge of his frail raft, not without difficulty, for it oscillated and rocked strangely, and dipped his hand in the current. When he had cleared his eyes he lifted them with a shock of amazement. Creeks, banks, and plain had disappeared; he was alone on a bend of the tossing bay of San Francisco!

His first and only sense—cleared by fasting and quickened by reaction—was one of infinite relief. He was not only free from the vague terrors of the preceding days and nights, but his whole past seemed to be lost and sunk forever in this illimitable expanse. The low plain of Tasajara, with its steadfast monotony of light and shadow, had sunk beneath another level, but one that glistened, sparkled, was instinct with varying life, and moved and even danced below him. The low palisades of regularly

recurring tules that had fenced in, impeded, but never relieved the blankness of his horizon, were forever swallowed up behind him. All trail of past degradation, all record of pain and suffering, all footprints of his wandering and misguided feet were smoothly wiped out in that obliterating sea. He was physically helpless, and he felt it; he was in danger, and he knew it,—but he was free!

Happily there was but little wind and the sea was slight. The raft was still intact so far as he could judge, but even in his ignorance he knew it would scarcely stand the surges of the lower bay. Like most Californians who had passed the straits of Carquinez at night in a steamer, he did not recognize the locality, nor even the distant peak of Tamalpais. There were a few dotting sails that seemed as remote, as uncertain, and as unfriendly as sea birds. The raft was motionless, almost as motionless as he was in his cramped limbs and sun-dried, stiffened clothes. Too weak to keep an upright position, without mast, stick, or oar to lift a signal above that vast expanse, it seemed impossible for him to attract attention. Even his pistol was gone.

Suddenly, in an attempt to raise himself, he was struck by a flash so blinding that it seemed to pierce his aching eyes and brain and turned him sick. It appeared to come from a crevice between the logs at the further end of the raft. Creeping painfully towards it he saw that it was a triangular slip of highly polished metal that he had hitherto overlooked. He did not know that it was a "flashing" mirror used in topographical observation, which had slipped from the surveyors' instruments when they

abandoned the raft, but his excited faculties instinctively detected its value to him. He lifted it, and, facing the sun, raised it at different angles with his feeble arms. But the effort was too much for him; the raft presently seemed to be whirling with his movement, and he again fell.

"Ahoy there!"

The voice was close upon—in his very ears. He opened his eyes. The sea still stretched emptily before him; the dotting sails still unchanged and distant. Yet a strange shadow lay upon the raft. He turned his head with difficulty. On the opposite side—so close upon him as to be almost over his head—the great white sails of a schooner hovered above him like the wings of some enormous sea bird. Then a heavy boom swung across the raft, so low that it would have swept him away had he been in an upright position; the sides of the vessel grazed the raft and she fell slowly off. A terrible fear of abandonment took possession of him; he tried to speak, but could not. The vessel moved further away, but the raft followed! He could see now it was being held by a boat-hook,—could see the odd, eager curiosity on two faces that were raised above the taffrail, and with that sense of relief his eyes again closed in unconsciousness.

A feeling of chilliness, followed by a grateful sensation of drawing closer under some warm covering, a stinging taste in his mouth of fiery liquor and the aromatic steam of hot coffee, were his first returning sensations. His head and neck were swathed in coarse bandages, and his skin stiffened and smarting with soap.

He was lying in a rude berth under a half-deck from which he could see the sky and the bellying sail, and presently a bearded face filled with rough and practical concern that peered down upon him.

"Hulloo! comin' round, eh? Hold on!" The next moment the stranger had leaped down beside Elijah. He seemed to be an odd mingling of the sailor and ranchero with the shrewdness of a seaport trader.

"Hulloo, boss! What was it? A free fight, or a wash-out?"

"A wash-out!"[1] Elijah grasped the idea as an inspiration. Yes, his cabin had been inundated, he had taken to a raft, had been knocked off twice or thrice, and had lost everything—even his revolver!

The man looked relieved. "Then it ain't a free fight, nor havin' your crust busted and bein' robbed by beach combers, eh?"

"No," said Elijah, with his first faint smile.

"Glad o' that," said the man bluntly. "Then thar ain't no police business to tie up to in 'Frisco? We were stuck thar a week once, just because we chanced to pick up a feller who'd been found gagged and then thrown overboard by wharf thieves. Had to dance attendance at court thar and lost our trip." He stopped and looked half-pathetically at the prostrate Elijah. "Look yer! ye ain't just dyin' to go ashore NOW and see yer friends and send messages, are ye?"

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[1] A mining term for the temporary inundation of a claim by flood; also used for the sterilizing effect of flood on fertile soil.

Elijah shuddered inwardly, but outwardly smiled faintly as he replied, "No!"

"And the tide and wind jest servin' us now, ye wouldn't mind keepin' straight on with us this trip?"

"Where to?" asked Elijah.

"Santy Barbara."

"No," said Elijah, after a moment's pause. "I'll go with you."

The man leaped to his feet, lifted his head above the upper deck, shouted "Let her go free, Jerry!" and then turned gratefully to his passenger. "Look yer! A wash-out is a wash-out, I reckon, put it any way you like; it don't put anything back into the land, or anything back into your pocket afterwards, eh? No! And yer well out of it, pardner! Now there's a right smart chance for locatin' jest back of Santy Barbara, where thar ain't no God-forsaken tules to overflow; and ez far ez the land and licker lies ye 'needn't take any water in yours' ef ye don't want it. You kin start fresh thar, pardner, and brail up. What's the matter with you, old man, is only fever 'n' agur ketched in them tules! I kin see it in your eyes. Now you hold on whar you be till I go forrard and see everything taut, and then I'll come back and we'll have a talk."

And they did. The result of which was that at the end of a week's tossing and seasickness, Elijah Curtis was landed at Santa Barbara, pale, thin, but self-contained and resolute. And having found favor in the eyes of the skipper of the Kitty Hawk, general trader, lumber-dealer, and ranch-man, a week later he was located on the skipper's land and installed in the skipper's

service. And from that day, for five years Sidon and Tasajara knew him no more.

CHAPER IV

It was part of the functions of John Milton Harkutt to take down the early morning shutters and sweep out the store for his father each day before going to school. It was a peculiarity of this performance that he was apt to linger over it, partly from the fact that it put off the evil hour of lessons, partly that he imparted into the process a purely imaginative and romantic element gathered from his latest novel-reading. In this he was usually assisted by one or two school-fellows on their way to school, who always envied him his superior menial occupation. To go to school, it was felt, was a common calamity of boyhood that called into play only the simplest forms of evasion, whereas to take down actual shutters in a bona fide store, and wield a real broom that raised a palpable cloud of dust, was something that really taxed the noblest exertions. And it was the morning after the arrival of the strangers that John Milton stood on the veranda of the store ostentatiously examining the horizon, with his hand shading his eyes, as one of his companions appeared.

"Hollo, Milt! wot yer doin'?"

John Milton started dramatically, and then violently dashed at one of the shutters and began to detach it. "Ha!" he said hoarsely. "Clear the ship for action! Open the ports! On deck there! Steady, you lubbers!" In an instant his enthusiastic school-fellow was at his side attacking another shutter. "A long, low

schooner bearing down upon us! Lively, lads, lively!" continued John Milton, desisting a moment to take another dramatic look at the distant plain. "How does she head now?" he demanded fiercely.

"Sou' by sou'east, sir," responded the other boy, frantically dancing before the window. "But she'll weather it."

They each then wrested another shutter away, violently depositing them, as they ran to and fro, in a rack at the corner of the veranda. Added to an extraordinary and unnecessary clattering with their feet, they accompanied their movements with a singular hissing sound, supposed to indicate in one breath the fury of the elements, the bustle of the eager crew, and the wild excitement of the coming conflict. When the last shutter was cleared away, John Milton, with the cry "Man the starboard guns!" dashed into the store, whose floor was marked by the muddy footprints of yesterday's buyers, seized a broom and began to sweep violently. A cloud of dust arose, into which his companion at once precipitated himself with another broom and a loud BANG! to indicate the somewhat belated sound of cannon. For a few seconds the two boys plied their brooms desperately in that stifling atmosphere, accompanying each long sweep and puff of dust out of the open door with the report of explosions and loud HA'S! of defiance, until not only the store, but the veranda was obscured with a cloud which the morning sun struggled vainly to pierce. In the midst of this tumult and dusty confusion—happily unheard and unsuspected in the secluded

domestic interior of the building—a shrill little voice arose from the road.

"Think you're mighty smart, don't ye?"

The two naval heroes stopped in their imaginary fury, and, as the dust of conflict cleared away, recognized little Johnny Peters gazing at them with mingled inquisitiveness and envy.

"Guess ye don't know what happened down the run last night," he continued impatiently. "'Lige Curtis got killed, or killed hisself! Blood all over the rock down thar. Seed it, myseff. Dad picked up his six-shooter,—one barrel gone off. My dad was the first to find it out, and he's bin to Squire Kerby tellin' him."

The two companions, albeit burning with curiosity, affected indifference and pre-knowledge.

"Dad sez your father druv 'Lige outer the store lass night! Dad sez your father's 'sponsible. Dad sez your father ez good ez killed him. Dad sez the squire'll set the constable on your father. Yah!" But here the small insulter incontinently fled, pursued by both the boys. Nevertheless, when he had made good his escape, John Milton showed neither a disposition to take up his former nautical role, nor to follow his companion to visit the sanguinary scene of Elijah's disappearance. He walked slowly back to the store and continued his work of sweeping and putting in order with an abstracted regularity, and no trace of his former exuberant spirits.

The first one of those instinctive fears which are common to imaginative children, and often assume the functions of

premonition, had taken possession of him. The oddity of his father's manner the evening before, which had only half consciously made its indelible impression on his sensitive fancy, had recurred to him with Johnny Peters's speech. He had no idea of literally accepting the boy's charges; he scarcely understood their gravity; but he had a miserable feeling that his father's anger and excitement last night was because he had been discovered hunting in the dark for that paper of 'Lige Curtis's. It WAS 'Lige Curtis's paper, for he had seen it lying there. A sudden dreadful conviction came over him that he must never, never let any one know that he had seen his father take up that paper; that he must never admit it, even to HIM. It was not the boy's first knowledge of that attitude of hypocrisy which the grownup world assumes towards childhood, and in which the innocent victims eventually acquiesce with a Machiavellian subtlety that at last avenges them, —but it was his first knowledge that that hypocrisy might not be so innocent. His father had concealed something from him, because it was not right.

But if childhood does not forget, it seldom broods and is not above being diverted. And the two surveyors—of whose heroic advent in a raft John Milton had only heard that morning with their traveled ways, their strange instruments and stranger talk, captured his fancy. Kept in the background by his sisters when visitors came, as an unpresentable feature in the household, he however managed to linger near the strangers when, in company with Euphemia and Clementina, after breakfast they strolled

beneath the sparkling sunlight in the rude garden inclosure along the sloping banks of the creek. It was with the average brother's supreme contempt that he listened to his sisters' "practicin'" upon the goodness of these superior beings; it was with an exceptional pity that he regarded the evident admiration of the strangers in return. He felt that in the case of Euphemia, who sometimes evinced a laudable curiosity in his pleasures, and a flattering ignorance of his reading, this might be pardonable; but what any one could find in the useless statuesque Clementina passed his comprehension. Could they not see at once that she was "just that kind of person" who would lie abed in the morning, pretending she was sick, in order to make Phemie do the housework, and make him, John Milton, clean her boots and fetch things for her? Was it not perfectly plain to them that her present sickening politeness was solely with a view to extract from them caramels, rock-candy, and gum drops, which she would meanly keep herself, and perhaps some "buggy-riding" later? Alas, John Milton, it was not! For standing there with her tall, perfectly-proportioned figure outlined against a willow, an elastic branch of which she had drawn down by one curved arm above her head, and on which she leaned—as everybody leaned against something in Sidon—the two young men saw only a straying goddess in a glorified rosebud print. Whether the clearly-cut profile presented to Rice, or the full face that captivated Grant, each suggested possibilities of position, pride, poetry, and passion that astonished while it fascinated them. By

one of those instincts known only to the freemasonry of the sex, Euphemia lent herself to this advertisement of her sister's charms by subtle comparison with her own prettinesses, and thus combined against their common enemy, man.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.