

BRET HARTE

THE BELL-RINGER OF
ANGEL'S, AND OTHER
STORIES

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The Bell-Ringer of Angel's

CHAPTER I

Where the North Fork of the Stanislaus River begins to lose its youthful grace, vigor, and agility, and broadens more maturely into the plain, there is a little promontory which at certain high stages of water lies like a small island in the stream. To the strongly-marked heroics of Sierran landscape it contrasts a singular, pastoral calm. White and gray mosses from the overhanging rocks and feathery alders trail their filaments in its slow current, and between the woodland openings there are glimpses of vivid velvet sward, even at times when the wild oats and “wire-grasses” of the plains are already yellowing. The placid river, unstained at this point by mining sluices or mill drift, runs clear under its contemplative shadows. Originally the camping-ground of a Digger Chief, it passed from his tenancy with the American rifle bullet that terminated his career. The pioneer who thus succeeded to its attractive calm gave way in turn to a well-directed shot from the revolver of a quartz-pro prospector, equally impressed with the charm of its restful tranquillity. How long he might have enjoyed its riparian seclusion is not known. A sudden rise of the river one March night quietly removed him, together with the overhanging post oak beneath which he was profoundly but unconsciously meditating. The demijohn of whiskey was picked up further down. But no other suggestion of these successive evictions was ever visible in the reposeful serenity of the spot.

It was later occupied, and a cabin built upon the spot, by one Alexander McGee, better known as “the Bell-ringer of Angel’s.” This euphonious title, which might have suggested a consistently peaceful occupation, however, referred to his accuracy of aim at a mechanical target, where the piercing of the bull’s eye was celebrated by the stroke of a bell. It is probable that this singular proficiency kept his investment of that gentle seclusion unchallenged. At all events it was uninvaded. He shared it only with the birds. Perhaps some suggestion of nest building may have been in his mind, for one pleasant spring morning he brought hither a wife. It was his OWN; and in this way he may be said to have introduced that morality which is supposed to be the accompaniment and reflection of pastoral life. Mrs. McGee’s red petticoat was sometimes seen through the trees—a cheerful bit of color. Mrs. McGee’s red cheeks, plump little figure, beribboned hat and brown, still-girlish braids were often seen at sunset on the river bank, in company with her husband, who seemed to be pleased with the discreet and distant admiration that followed them. Strolling under the bland shadows of the cottonwoods, by the fading gold of the river, he doubtless felt that peace which the mere world cannot give, and which fades not away before the clear, accurate eye of the perfect marksman.

Their nearest neighbors were the two brothers Wayne, who took up a claim, and built themselves a cabin on the river bank near the promontory. Quiet, simple men, suspected somewhat of psalm-singing, and undue retirement on Sundays, they attracted but little attention. But when, through some original conception or painstaking deliberation, they turned the current of the river so as to restrict the overflow between the promontory and the river bank, disclosing an auriferous “bar” of inconceivable richness, and establishing their theory that it was really the former channel of the river, choked and diverted though ages of alluvial drift, they may be said to have changed, also, the fortunes of the little settlement. Popular feeling and the new prosperity which dawned upon the miners recognized the two brothers by giving the name of Wayne’s Bar to the infant settlement and its post-office. The peaceful promontory, although made easier of access, still preserved its calm seclusion, and pretty Mrs. McGee could contemplate through the leaves of her bower the work going on at its base, herself unseen. Nevertheless, this Arcadian retreat was being slowly and surely invested; more than that, the character of its surroundings was altered, and the complexion of the river had changed. The Wayne

engines on the point above had turned the drift and debris into the current that now thickened and ran yellow around the wooded shore. The fringes of this Eden were already tainted with the color of gold.

It is doubtful, however, if Mrs. McGee was much affected by this sentimental reflection, and her husband, in a manner, lent himself to the desecration of his exclusive domain by accepting a claim along the shore—tendered by the conscientious Waynes in compensation for restricting the approach to the promontory—and thus participated in the fortunes of the Bar. Mrs. McGee amused herself by watching from her eyrie, with a presumably childish interest, the operations of the red-shirted brothers on the Bar; her husband, however, always accompanying her when she crossed the Bar to the bank. Some two or three other women—wives of miners—had joined the camp, but it was evident that McGee was as little inclined to intrust his wife to their companionship as to that of their husbands. An opinion obtained that McGee, being an old resident, with alleged high connections in Angel's, was inclined to be aristocratic and exclusive.

Meantime, the two brothers who had founded the fortunes of the Bar were accorded an equally high position, with an equal amount of reserve. Their ways were decidedly not those of the other miners, and were as efficacious in keeping them from familiar advances as the reputation of Mr. McGee was in isolating his wife. Madison Wayne, the elder, was tall, well-knit and spare, reticent in speech and slow in deduction; his brother, Arthur, was of rounder outline, but smaller and of a more delicate and perhaps a more impressible nature. It was believed by some that it was within the range of possibility that Arthur would yet be seen “taking his cocktail like a white man,” or “dropping his scads” at draw poker. At present, however, they seemed content to spend their evenings in their own cabin, and their Sundays at a grim Presbyterian tabernacle in the next town, to which they walked ten miles, where, it was currently believed, “hell fire was ladled out free,” and “infants damned for nothing.” When they did not go to meeting it was also believed that the minister came to them, until it was ascertained that the sound of sacred recitation overheard in their cabin was simply Madison Wayne reading the Bible to his younger brother. McGee is said to have stopped on one of these occasions—unaccompanied by his wife—before their cabin, moving away afterwards with more than his usual placid contentment.

It was about eleven o'clock one morning, and Madison Wayne was at work alone on the Bar. Clad in a dark gray jersey and white duck trousers rolled up over high india-rubber boots, he looked not unlike a peaceful fisherman digging stakes for his nets, as he labored in the ooze and gravel of the still half-reclaimed river bed. He was far out on the Bar, within a stone's throw of the promontory. Suddenly his quick ear caught an unfamiliar cry and splash. Looking up hastily, he saw Mrs. McGee's red petticoat in the water under the singularly agitated boughs of an overhanging tree. Madison Wayne ran to the bank, threw off his heavy boots, and sprang into the stream. A few strokes brought him to Mrs. McGee's petticoat, which, as he had wisely surmised, contained Mrs. McGee, who was still clinging to a branch of the tree. Grasping her waist with one hand and the branch with the other, he obtained a foothold on the bank, and dragged her ashore. A moment later they both stood erect and dripping at the foot of the tree.

“Well?” said the lady.

Wayne glanced around their seclusion with his habitual caution, slightly knit his brows perplexedly, and said: “You fell in?”

“I didn't do nothin' of the sort. I JUMPED in.”

Wayne again looked around him, as if expecting her companion, and squeezed the water out of his thick hair. “Jumped in?” he repeated slowly. “What for?”

“To make you come over here, Mad Wayne,” she said, with a quick laugh, putting her arms akimbo.

They stood looking at each other, dripping like two river gods. Like them, also, Wayne had apparently ignored the fact that his trousers were rolled up above his bare knees, and Mrs. McGee

that her red petticoat clung closely to her rather pretty figure. But he quickly recovered himself. "You had better go in and change your clothes," he said, with grave concern. "You'll take cold."

She only shook herself disdainfully. "I'm all right," she said; "but YOU, Mad Wayne, what do you mean by not speaking to me—not knowing me? You can't say that I've changed like that." She passed her hand down her long dripping braids as if to press the water from them, and yet with a half-coquettish suggestion in the act.

Something struggled up into the man's face which was not there before. There was a new light in his grave eyes. "You look the same," he said slowly; "but you are married—you have a husband."

"You think that changes a girl?" she said, with a laugh "That's where all you men slip up! You're afraid of his rifle—THAT'S the change that bothers you, Mad."

"You know I care little for carnal weapons," he said quietly. She DID know it; but it is the privilege of the sex to invent its facts and then to graciously abandon them as if they were only arguments. "Then why do you keep off from me? Why do you look the other way when I pass?" she said quickly.

"Because you are married," he said slowly.

She again shook the water from her like a Newfoundland dog. "That's it. You're mad because I got married. You're mad because I wouldn't marry you and your church over on the cross roads, and sing hymns with you and become SISTER Wayne. You wanted me to give up dancing and buggy ridin' Sundays—and you're just mad because I didn't. Yes, mad—just mean, baby mad, Mr. Maddy Wayne, for all your CHRISTIAN resignation! That's what's the matter with you." Yet she looked very pretty and piquant in her small spitefulness, which was still so general and superficial that she seemed to shake it out of her wet petticoats in a vicious flap that disclosed her neat ankles.

"You preferred McGee to me," he said grimly. "I didn't blame you."

"Who said I PREFERRED him?" she retorted quickly. "Much you know!" Then, with swift feminine abandonment of her position, she added, with a little laugh, "It's all the same whether you're guarded with a rifle or a Church Presbytery, only"—

"Only what?" said Madison earnestly.

"There's men who'd risk being SHOT for a girl, that couldn't stand psalm-singin' palaver."

The quick expression of pain that passed over his hard, dark face seemed only to heighten her pretty mischievousness. But he simply glanced again around the solitude, passed his hand over his wet sleeve, and said, "I must go now; your husband wouldn't like me being here."

"He's workin' in the claim,—the claim YOU gave him," said Mrs. McGee, with cheerful malice. "Wonder what he'd say if he knew it was given to him by the man who used to spark his wife only two years ago? How does that suit your Christian conscience, Mad?"

"I should have told him, had I not believed that everything was over between us, or that it was possible that you and me should ever meet again," he returned, in a tone so measured that the girl seemed to hear the ring of the conventicle in it.

"Should you, BROTHER Wayne?" she said, imitating him. "Well, let me tell you that you are the one man on the Bar that Sandy has taken a fancy to."

Madison's sallow cheek colored a little, but he did not speak.

"Well!" continued Mrs. McGee impatiently. "I don't believe he'd object to your comin' here to see me—if you cared."

"But I wouldn't care to come, unless he first knew that I had been once engaged to you," said Madison gravely.

"Perhaps he might not think as much of that as you do," retorted the woman pertly. "Every one isn't as straitlaced as you, and every girl has had one or two engagements. But do as you like—stay at home if you want to, and sing psalms and read the Scriptures to that younger brother of yours! All the same, I'm thinkin' he'd rather be out with the boys."

“My brother is God-fearing and conscientious,” said Madison quickly. “You do not know him. You have never seen him.”

“No,” said Mrs. McGee shortly. She then gave a little shiver (that was, however, half simulated) in her wet garments, and added: “ONE saint was enough for me; I couldn’t stand the whole church, Mad.”

“You are catching cold,” he said quickly, his whole face brightening with a sudden tenderness that seemed to transfigure the dark features. “I am keeping you here when you should be changing your clothes. Go, I beg you, at once.”

She stood still provokingly, with an affectation of wiping her arms and shoulders and sopping her wet dress with clusters of moss.

“Go, please do—Safie, please!”

“Ah!”—she drew a quick, triumphant breath. “Then you’ll come again to see me, Mad?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, and even more gravely than before.

“But you must let me show you the way out—round under those trees—where no one can see you come.” She held out her hand.

“I’ll go the way I came,” he said quietly, swinging himself silently from the nearest bough into the stream. And before she could utter a protest he was striking out as silently, hand over hand, across the current.

CHAPTER II

A week later Madison Wayne was seated alone in his cabin. His supper table had just been cleared by his Chinese coolie, as it was getting late, and the setting sun, which for half an hour had been persistently making a vivid beacon of his windows for the benefit of wayfarers along the river bank, had at last sunk behind the cottonwoods. His head was resting on his hand; the book he had been reading when the light faded was lying open on the table before him. In this attitude he became aware of a hesitating step on the gravel outside his open door. He had been so absorbed that the approach of any figure along the only highway—the river bank—had escaped his observation. Looking up, he discovered that Mr. Alexander McGee was standing in the doorway, his hand resting lightly on the jamb. A sudden color suffused Wayne's cheek; his hand reached for his book, which he drew towards him hurriedly, yet half automatically, as he might have grasped some defensive weapon.

The Bell-ringer of Angel's noticed the act, but not the blush, and nodded approvingly. "Don't let me disturb ye. I was only meanderin' by and reckoned I'd say 'How do?' in passin'." He leaned gently back against the door-post, to do which comfortably he was first obliged to shift the revolver on his hip. The sight of the weapon brought a slight contraction to the brows of Wayne, but he gravely said: "Won't you come in?"

"It ain't your prayin' time?" said McGee politely.

"No."

"Nor you ain't gettin' up lessons outer the Book?" he continued thoughtfully.

"No."

"Cos it don't seem, so to speak, you see, the square thing to be botherin' a man when he might be doin' suthin' else, don't you see? You understand what I mean?"

It was his known peculiarity that he always seemed to be suffering from an inability to lucid expression, and the fear of being misunderstood in regard to the most patent or equally the most unimportant details of his speech. All of which, however, was in very remarkable contrast to his perfectly clear and penetrating eyes.

Wayne gravely assured him that he was not interrupting him in any way.

"I often thought—that is, I had an idea, you understand what I mean—of stoppin' in passing. You and me, you see, are sorter alike; we don't seem to jibe in with the gin'ral gait o' the camp. You understand what I mean? We ain't in the game, eh? You see what I'm after?"

Madison Wayne glanced half mechanically at McGee's revolver. McGee's clear eyes at once took in the glance.

"That's it! You understand? You with them books of yours, and me with my shootin' iron—we're sort o' different from the rest, and ought to be kinder like partners. You understand what I mean? We keep this camp in check. We hold a full hand, and don't stand no bluffing."

"If you mean there is some effect in Christian example and the life of a God-fearing man"—began Madison gravely.

"That's it! God-fearin' or revolver-fearin', it amounts to the same when you come down to the hard pan and bed-rock," interrupted McGee. "I ain't expectin' you to think much of my style, but I go a heap on yours, even if I can't play your game. And I sez to my wife, 'Safie'—her that trots around with me sometimes—I sez, 'Safie, I oughter know that man, and shall. And I WANT YOU to know him.' Hol' on," he added quickly, as Madison rose with a flushed face and a perturbed gesture. "Ye don't understand! I see wot's in your mind—don't you see? When I married my wife and brought her down here, knowin' this yer camp, I sez: 'No flirtin', no foolin', no philanderin' here, my dear! You're young and don't know the ways o' men. The first man I see you talking with, I shoot. You needn't fear, my dear, for accidents. I kin shoot all round you, under your arm, across your shoulders, over your head and between your fingers, my dear, and never start skin or fringe or ruffle. But I don't miss

HIM. You sorter understand what I mean,' sez I,so don't!' Ye noticed how my wife is respected, Mr. Wayne? Queen Victoria sittin' on her throne ain't in it with my Safie. But when I see YOU not herdin' with that cattle, never liftin' your eyes to me or Safie as we pass, never hangin' round the saloons and jokin', nor winkin', nor slingin' muddy stories about women, but prayin' and readin' Scripeter stories, here along with your brother, I sez to myself, I sez, 'Sandy, ye kin take off your revolver and hang up your shot gun when HE'S around. For 'twixt HIM and your wife ain't no revolver, but the fear of God and hell and damnation and the world to come!' You understand what I mean, don't ye? Ye sorter follow my lead, eh? Ye can see what I'm shootin' round, don't ye? So I want you to come up neighborly like, and drop in to see my wife."

Madison Wayne's face became set and hard again, but he advanced towards McGee with the book against his breast, and his finger between the leaves. "I already know your wife, Mr. McGee! I saw her before YOU ever met her. I was engaged to her; I loved her, and—as far as man may love the wife of another and keep the commands of this book—I love her still!"

To his surprise, McGee, whose calm eyes had never dimmed or blenched, after regarding him curiously, took the volume from him, laid it on the table, opened it, turned its leaves critically, said earnestly, "That's the law here, is it?" and then held out his hand.

"Shake!"

Madison Wayne hesitated—and then grasped his hand.

"Ef I had known this," continued McGee, "I reckon I wouldn't have been so hard on Safie and so partikler. She's better than I took her for—havin' had you for a beau! You understand what I mean. You follow me—don't ye? I allus kinder wondered why she took me, but sens you've told me that YOU used to spark her, in your God-fearin' way, I reckon it kinder prepared her for ME. You understand? Now you come up, won't ye?"

"I will call some evening with my brother," said Wayne embarrassedly.

"With which?" demanded McGee.

"My brother Arthur. We usually spend the evenings together."

McGee paused, leaned against the doorpost, and, fixing his clear eyes on Wayne, said: "Ef it's all the same to you, I'd rather you did not bring him. You understand what I mean? You follow me; no other man but you and me. I ain't sayin' anything agin' your brother, but you see how it is, don't you? Just me and you."

"Very well, I will come," said Wayne gloomily. But as McGee backed out of the door, he followed him, hesitatingly. Then, with an effort he seemed to recover himself, and said almost harshly: "I ought to tell you another thing—that I have seen and spoken to Mrs. McGee since she came to the Bar. She fell into the water last week, and I swam out and dragged her ashore. We talked and spoke of the past."

"She fell in," echoed McGee.

Wayne hesitated; then a murky blush came into his face as he slowly repeated, "She FELL in."

McGee's eyes only brightened. "I have been too hard on her. She might have drowned ef you hadn't took risks. You see? You understand what I mean? And she never let out anything about it—and never boasted o' YOU helpin' her out. All right—you'll come along and see her agin'." He turned and walked cheerfully away.

Wayne re-entered the cabin. He sat for a long time by the window until the stars came out above the river, and another star, with which he had been long familiar, took its place apparently in the heart of the wooded crest of the little promontory. Then the fringing woods on the opposite shore became a dark level line across the landscape, and the color seemed to fade out of the moist shining gravel before his cabin. Presently the silhouette of his dark face disappeared from the window, and Mr. McGee might have been gratified to know that he had slipped to his knees before the chair whereon he had been sitting, and that his head was bowed before it on his clasped hands. In a little while he rose again, and, dragging a battened old portmanteau from the corner, took out a number of letters

tied up in a package, with which, from time to time, he slowly fed the flame that flickered on his hearth. In this way the windows of the cabin at times sprang into light, making a somewhat confusing beacon for the somewhat confused Arthur Wayne, who was returning from a visit to Angel's, and who had fallen into that slightly morose and irritated state which follows excessive hilarity, and is also apt to indicate moral misgivings.

But the last letter was burnt and the cabin quite dark when he entered. His brother was sitting by the slowly dying fire, and he trusted that in that uncertain light any observation of his expression or manner—of which he himself was uneasily conscious—would pass unheeded.

“You are late,” said Madison gravely.

At which his brother rashly assumed the aggressive. He was no later than the others, and if the Rogers boys were good enough to walk with him for company he couldn't run ahead of them just because his brother was waiting! He didn't want any supper, he had something at the Cross Roads with the others. Yes! WHISKEY, if he wanted to know. People couldn't keep coffee and temperance drinks just to please him and his brother, and he wasn't goin' to insult the others by standing aloof. Anyhow, he had never taken the pledge, and as long as he hadn't he couldn't see why he should refuse a single glass. As it was, everybody said he was a milksop, and a tender-foot, and he was just sick of it.

Madison rose and lit a candle and held it up before his brother's face. It was a handsome, youthful face that looked into his, flushed with the excitement of novel experiences and perhaps a more material stimulation. The little silken moustache was ostentatiously curled, the brown curls were redolent of bear's grease. Yet there was a certain boyish timidity and nervousness in the defiance of his blue eyes that momentarily touched the elder brother.

“I've been too hand with him,” he said to himself, half consciously recalling what McGee had said of Safie. He put the candle down, laid his hand gently on Arthur's shoulder, and said, with a certain cautious tenderness, “Come, Arty, sit down and tell me all about it.”

Whereupon the mercurial Arthur, not only relieved of his nervousness but of his previous ethical doubts and remorse, became gay and voluble. He had finished his purchases at Angel's, and the storekeeper had introduced him to Colonel Starbottle, of Kentucky, as one of “the Waynes who had made Wayne's Bar famous.” Colonel Starbottle had said in his pompous fashion—yet he was not such a bad fellow, after all—that the Waynes ought to be represented in the Councils of the State, and that he, Starbottle, would be proud to nominate Madison for the next Legislature and run him, too. “And you know, really, Mad, if you mixed a little more with folks, and they weren't—well, sorter AFRAID of you—you could do it. Why, I've made a heap o' friends over there, just by goin' round a little, and one of old Selvedge's girls—the storekeeper, you know—said from what she'd heard of us, she always thought I was about fifty, and turned up the whites of my eyes instead of the ends of my moustache! She's mighty smart! Then the Postmaster has got his wife and three daughters out from the States, and they've asked me to come over to their church festival next week. It isn't our church, of course, but I suppose it's all right.”

This and much more with the volubility of relieved feelings. When he stopped, out of breath, Madison said, “I have had a visitor since you left—Mr. McGee.”

“And his wife?” asked Arthur quickly. Madison flushed slightly. “No; but he asked me to go and see her.”

“That's HER doin', then,” returned Arthur, with a laugh. “She's always lookin' round the corners of her eyes at me when she passes. Why, John Rogers was joking me about her only yesterday, and said McGee would blow a hole through me some of these days if I didn't look out! Of course,” he added, affectedly curling his moustache, “that's nonsense! But you know how they talk, and she's too pretty for that fellow McGee.”

“She has found a careful helpmeet in her husband,” said Madison sternly, “and it's neither seemly nor Christian in you, Arthur, to repeat the idle, profane gossip of the Bar. I knew her before

her marriage, and if she was not a professing Christian, she was, and is, a pure, good woman! Let us have no more of this.”

Whether impressed by the tone of his brother's voice, or only affected by his own mercurial nature, Arthur changed the subject to further voluble reminiscences of his trip to Angel's. Yet he did not seem embarrassed nor disconcerted when his brother, in the midst of his speech, placed the candle and the Bible on the table, with two chairs before it. He listened to Madison's monotonous reading of the evening exercise with equally monotonous respect. Then they both arose, without looking at each other, but with equally set and stolid faces, and knelt down before their respective chairs, clasping the back with both hands, and occasionally drawing the hard, wooden frames against their breasts convulsively, as if it were a penitential act. It was the elder brother who that night prayed aloud. It was his voice that rose higher by degrees above the low roof and encompassing walls, the level river camp lights that trembled through the window, the dark belt of riverside trees, and the light on the promontory's crest—up to the tranquil, passionless stars themselves.

With those confidences to his Maker this chronicle does not lie—obtrusive and ostentatious though they were in tone and attitude. Enough that they were a general arraignment of humanity, the Bar, himself, and his brother, and indeed much that the same Maker had created and permitted. That through this hopeless denunciation still lingered some human feeling and tenderness might have been shown by the fact that at its close his hands trembled and his face was bedewed by tears. And his brother was so deeply affected that he resolved hereafter to avoid all evening prayers.

CHAPTER III

It was a week later that Madison Wayne and Mr. McGee were seen, to the astonishment of the Bar, leisurely walking together in the direction of the promontory. Here they disappeared, entering a damp fringe of willows and laurels that seemed to mark its limits, and gradually ascending some thickly-wooded trail, until they reached its crest, which, to Madison's surprise, was cleared and open, and showed an acre or two of rude cultivation. Here, too, stood the McGees' conjugal home—a small, four-roomed house, but so peculiar and foreign in aspect that it at once challenged even Madison's abstracted attention. It was a tiny Swiss chalet, built in sections, and originally packed in cases, one of the early importations from Europe to California after the gold discovery, when the country was supposed to be a woodless wilderness. Mr. McGee explained, with his usual laborious care, how he had bought it at Marysville, not only for its picturesqueness, but because in its unsuggestive packing-cases it offered no indication to the curious miners, and could be put up by himself and a single uncommunicative Chinaman, without any one else being aware of its existence. There was, indeed, something quaint in this fragment of Old World handicraft, with its smooth-jointed paneling, in two colors, its little lozenge fretwork, its lapped roof, overhanging eaves, and miniature gallery. Inartistic as Madison was—like most men of rigidly rectangular mind and principle—and accustomed to the bleak and economic sufficiency of the Californian miner's cabin, he was touched strangely by its novel grace and freshness. It reminded him of HER; he had a new respect for this rough, sinful man who had thus idealized his wife in her dwelling. Already a few Madeira vines and a Cherokee rose clambered up the gallery. And here Mrs. McGee was sitting.

In the face that she turned upon the two men Madison could see that she was not expecting them, and even in the slight curiosity with which she glanced at her husband, that evidently he had said nothing of his previous visit or invitation. And this conviction became certainty at Mr. McGee's first words.

"I've brought you an ole friend, Safie. He used to spark ye once at Angel's afore my time—he told me so; he picked ye outer the water here—he told me that, too. Ye mind that I said afore that he was the only man I wanted ter know; I reckon now it seems the square thing that he should be the one man YOU wanted ter know, too. You understand what I mean—you follow me, don't you?"

Whether or not Mrs. McGee DID follow him, she exhibited neither concern, solicitude, nor the least embarrassment. An experienced lover might have augured ill from this total absence of self-consciousness. But Madison was not an experienced lover. He accepted her amused smile as a recognition of his feelings, trembled at the touch of her cool hands, as if it had been a warm pressure, and scarcely dared to meet her maliciously laughing eyes. When he had followed Mr. McGee to the little gallery, the previous occupation of Mrs. McGee when they arrived was explained. From that slight elevation there was a perfect view over the whole landscape and river below; the Bar stretched out as a map at her feet; in that clear, transparent air she could see every movement and gesture of Wayne's brother, all unconscious of that surveillance, at work on the Bar. For an instant Madison's sallow cheek reddened, he knew not why; a remorseful feeling that he ought to be there with Arthur came over him. Mrs. McGee's voice seemed to answer his thought. "You can see everything that's going on down there without being seen yourself. It's good fun for me sometimes. The other day I saw that young Carpenter hanging round Mrs. Rogers's cabin in the bush when old Rogers was away. And I saw her creep out and join him, never thinking any one could see her!"

She laughed, seeking Madison's averted eyes, yet scarcely noticing his suddenly contracted brows. Mr. McGee alone responded.

"That's why," he said, explanatorily, to Madison, "I don't allow to have my Safie go round with those women. Not as I ever see anything o' that sort goin' on, or keer to look, but on gin'ral principles. You understand what I mean."

“That’s your brother over there, isn’t it?” said Mrs. McGee, turning to Madison and calmly ignoring her husband’s explanation, as she indicated the distant Arthur. “Why didn’t you bring him along with you?”

Madison hesitated, and looked at McGee. “He wasn’t asked,” said that gentleman cheerfully. “One’s company, two’s none! You don’t know him, my dear; and this yer ain’t a gin’ral invitation to the Bar. You follow me?”

To this Mrs. McGee made no comment, but proceeded to show Madison over the little cottage. Yet in a narrow passage she managed to touch his hand, lingered to let her husband precede them from one room to another, and once or twice looked meaningly into his eyes over McGee’s shoulder. Disconcerted and embarrassed, he tried to utter a few commonplaces, but so constrainedly that even McGee presently noticed it. And the result was still more embarrassing.

“Look yer,” he said, suddenly turning to them both. “I reckon as how you two wanter talk over old times, and I’ll just meander over to the claim, and do a spell o’ work. Don’t mind ME. And if HE”—indicating Madison with his finger—“gets on ter religion, don’t you mind him. It won’t hurt you, Safie,—no more nor my revolver,—but it’s pow’ful persuadin’, and you understand me? You follow me? Well, so long!”

He turned away quickly, and was presently lost among the trees. For an instant the embarrassed Madison thought of following him; but he was confronted by Mrs. McGee’s wicked eyes and smiling face between him and the door. Composing herself, however, with a simulation of perfect gravity she pointed to a chair.

“Sit down, Brother Wayne. If you’re going to convert me, it may take some time, you know, and you might as well make yourself comfortable. As for me, I’ll take the anxious bench.” She laughed with a certain girlishness, which he well remembered, and leaped to a sitting posture on the table with her hands on her knees, swinging her smart shoes backwards and forwards below it.

Madison looked at her in hopeless silence, with a pale, disturbed face and shining eyes.

“Or, if you want to talk as we used to talk, Mad, when we sat on the front steps at Angel’s and pa and ma went inside to give us a show, ye can hop up alongside o’ me.” She made a feint of gathering her skirts beside her.

“Safie!” broke out the unfortunate man, in a tone that seemed to increase in formal solemnity with his manifest agitation, “this is impossible. The laws of God that have joined you and this man”—

“Oh, it’s the prayer-meeting, is it?” said Safie, settling her skirts again, with affected resignation. “Go on.”

“Listen, Safie,” said Madison, turning despairingly towards her. “Let us for His sake, let us for the sake of our dear blessed past, talk together earnestly and prayerfully. Let us take this time to root out of our feeble hearts all yearnings that are not prompted by Him—yearnings that your union with this man makes impossible and sinful. Let us for the sake of the past take counsel of each other, even as brother and sister.”

“Sister McGee!” she interrupted mockingly. “It wasn’t as brother and sister you made love to me at Angel’s.”

“No! I loved you then, and would have made you my wife.”

“And you don’t love me any more,” she said, audaciously darting a wicked look into his eyes, “only because I didn’t marry you? And you think that Christian?”

“You know I love you as I have loved you always,” he said passionately.

“Hush!” she said mockingly; “suppose he should hear you.”

“He knows it!” said Madison bitterly. “I told him all!”

She stared at him fixedly.

“You have—told—him—that—you STILL love me?” she repeated slowly.

“Yes, or I wouldn’t be here now. It was due to him—to my own conscience.”

“And what did he say?”

“He insisted upon my coming, and, as God is my Judge and witness—he seemed satisfied and content.”

She drew her pretty lips together with a long whistle, and then leaped from the table. Her face was hard and her eyes were bright as she went to the window and looked out. He followed her timidly.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, sharply striking away his proffered hand. He turned with a flushed cheek and walked slowly towards the door. Her laugh stopped him.

“Come! I reckon that squeezin’ hands ain’t no part of your contract with Sandy?” she said, glancing down at her own. “Well, so you’re goin’?”

“I only wished to talk seriously and prayerfully with you for a few moments, Safie, and then—to see you no more.”

“And how would that suit him,” she said dryly, “if he wants your company here? Then, just because you can’t convert me and bring me to your ways of thinkin’ in one visit, I suppose you think it is Christian-like to run away like this! Or do you suppose that, if you turn tail now, he won’t believe that your Christian strength and Christian resignation is all humbug?”

Madison dropped into the chair, put his elbows on the table, and buried his face in his hands. She came a little nearer, and laid her hand lightly on his arm. He made a movement as if to take it, but she withdrew it impatiently.

“Come,” she said brusquely; “now you’re in for it you must play the game out. He trusts you; if he sees you can’t trust yourself, he’ll shoot you on sight. That don’t frighten you? Well, perhaps this will then! He’ll SAY your religion is a sham and you a hypocrite—and everybody will believe him. How do you like that, Brother Wayne? How will that help the Church? Come! You’re a pair of cranks together; but he’s got the whip-hand of you this time. All you can do is to keep up to his idea of you. Put a bold face on it, and come here as often as you can—the oftener the better; the sooner you’ll both get sick of each other—and of ME. That’s what you’re both after, ain’t it? Well! I can tell you now, you needn’t either of you be the least afraid of me.”

She walked away to the window again, not angrily, but smoothing down the folds of her bright print dress as if she were wiping her hands of her husband and his guest. Something like a very material and man-like sense of shame struggled up through his crust of religion. He stammered, “You don’t understand me, Safie.”

“Then talk of something I do understand,” she said pertly. “Tell me some news of Angel’s. Your brother was over there the other day. He made himself quite popular with the young ladies—so I hear from Mrs. Selvedge. You can tell me as we walk along the bank towards Sandy’s claim. It’s just as well that you should move on now, as it’s your FIRST call, and next time you can stop longer.” She went to the corner of the room, removed her smart slippers, and put on a pair of walking-shoes, tying them, with her foot on a chair, in a quiet disregard of her visitor’s presence; took a brown holland sunbonnet from the wall, clapped it over her browner hair and hanging braids, and tied it under her chin with apparently no sense of coquetry in the act—becoming though it was—and without glancing at him. Alas for Madison’s ethics! The torment of her worldly speech and youthful contempt was nothing to this tacit ignoring of the manhood of her lover—this silent acceptance of him as something even lower than her husband. He followed her with a burning cheek and a curious revolting of his whole nature that it is to be feared were scarcely Christian. The willows opened to let them pass and closed behind them.

An hour later Mrs. McGee returned to her leafy bower alone. She took off her sunbonnet, hung it on its nail on the wall, shook down her braids, took off her shoes, stained with the mud of her husband’s claim, and put on her slippers. Then she ascended to her eyrie in the little gallery, and gazed smilingly across the sunlit Bar. The two gaunt shadows of her husband and lover, linked like twins, were slowly passing along the river bank on their way to the eclipsing obscurity of the cottonwoods. Below her—almost at her very feet—the unconscious Arthur Wayne was pushing his work on the river bed, far out to the promontory. The sunlight fell upon his vivid scarlet shirt, his bared throat,

and head clustering with perspiring curls. The same sunlight fell upon Mrs. McGee's brown head too, and apparently put a wicked fancy inside it. She ran to her bedroom, and returned with a mirror from its wall, and, after some trials in getting the right angle, sent a searching reflection upon the spot where Arthur was at work.

For an instant a diamond flash played around him. Then he lifted his head and turned it curiously towards the crest above him. But the next moment he clapped his hands over his dazzled but now smiling eyes, as Mrs. McGee, secure in her leafy obscurity, fell back and laughed to herself, like a very schoolgirl.

It was three weeks later, and Madison Wayne was again sitting alone in his cabin. This solitude had become of more frequent occurrence lately, since Arthur had revolted and openly absented himself from his religious devotions for lighter diversions of the Bar. Keenly as Madison felt his defection, he was too much preoccupied with other things to lay much stress upon it, and the sting of Arthur's relapse to worldliness and folly lay in his own consciousness that it was partly his fault. He could not chide his brother when he felt that his own heart was absorbed in his neighbor's wife, and although he had rigidly adhered to his own crude ideas of self-effacement and loyalty to McGee, he had been again and again a visitor at his house. It was true that Mrs. McGee had made this easier by tacitly accepting his conditions of their acquaintanceship, by seeming more natural, by exhibiting a gayety, and at times even a certain gentleness and thoughtfulness of conduct that delighted her husband and astonished her lover. Whether this wonderful change had really been effected by the latter's gloomy theology and still more hopeless ethics, he could not say. She certainly showed no disposition to imitate their formalities, nor seemed to be impressed by them on the rare occasions when he now offered them. Yet she appeared to link the two men together—even physically—as on these occasions when, taking an arm of each, she walked affectionately between them along the river bank promenade, to the great marveling and admiration of the Bar. It was said, however, that Mr. Jack Hamlin, a gambler, at that moment professionally visiting Wayne's Bar, and a great connoisseur of feminine charms and weaknesses, had glanced at them under his handsome lashes, and asked a single question, evidently so amusing to the younger members of the Bar that Madison Wayne knit his brow and Arthur Wayne blushed. Mr. Hamlin took no heed of the elder brother's frown, but paid some slight attention to the color of the younger brother, and even more to a slightly coquettish glance from the pretty Mrs. McGee. Whether or not—as has been ingeniously alleged by some moralists—the light and trifling of either sex are prone to recognize each other by some mysterious instinct, is not a necessary consideration of this chronicle; enough that the fact is recorded.

And yet Madison Wayne should have been satisfied with his work! His sacrifice was accepted; his happy issue from a dangerous situation, and his happy triumph over a more dangerous temptation, was complete and perfect, and even achieved according to his own gloomy theories of redemption and regeneration. Yet he was not happy. The human heart is at times strangely unappeasable. And as he sat that evening in the gathering shadows, the Book which should have yielded him balm and comfort lay unopened in his lap.

A step upon the gravel outside had become too familiar to startle him. It was Mr. McGee lounging into the cabin like a gaunt shadow. It must be admitted that the friendship of these strangely contrasted men, however sincere and sympathetic, was not cheerful. A belief in the thorough wickedness of humanity, kept under only through fear of extreme penalty and punishment, material and spiritual, was not conducive to light and amusing conversation. Their talk was mainly a gloomy chronicle of life at the Bar, which was in itself half an indictment. To-night, Mr. McGee spoke of the advent of Mr. Jack Hamlin, and together they deplored the diversion of the hard-earned gains and valuable time of the Bar through the efforts of that ingenious gentleman. "Not," added McGee cautiously, "but what he can shoot straight enough, and I've heard tell that he don't LIE. That mout and it moun't be good for your brother who goes around with him considerable, there's different ways of lookin' at that; you understand what I mean? You follow me?" For all that, the conversation

seemed to languish this evening, partly through some abstraction on the part of Wayne and partly some hesitation in McGee, who appeared to have a greater fear than usual of not expressing himself plainly. It was quite dark in the cabin when at last, detaching himself from his usual lounging place, the door-post, he walked to the window and leaned, more shadowy than ever, over Wayne's chair. "I want to tell you suthin'," he said slowly, "that I don't want you to misunderstand—you follow me? and that ain't no ways carpin' or criticisin' nor reflectin' on YOU—you understand what I mean? Ever sens you and me had that talk here about you and Safie, and ever sens I got the hang of your ways and your style o' thinkin', I've been as sure of you and her as if I'd been myself trottin' round with you and a revolver. And I'm as sure of you now—you sabe what I mean? you understand? You've done me and her a heap o' good; she's almost another woman sens you took hold of her, and ef you ever want me to stand up and 'testify,' as you call it, in church, Sandy McGee is ready. What I'm tryin' to say to ye is this. Tho' I understand you and your work and your ways—there's other folks ez moutn't—you follow? You understand what I mean? And it's just that I'm coming to. Now las' night, when you and Safie was meanderin' along the lower path by the water, and I kem across you"—

"But," interrupted Madison quickly, "you're mistaken. I wasn't"—

"Hol' on," said McGee, quietly; "I know you got out o' the way without you seein' me or me you, because you didn't know it was me, don't you see? don't you follow? and that's just it! It mout have bin some one from the Bar as seed you instead o' ME. See? That's why you lit out before I could recognize you, and that's why poor Safie was so mighty flustered at first and was for runnin' away until she kem to herself agin. When, of course, she laughed, and agreed you must have mistook me."

"But," gasped Madison quickly, "I WASN'T THERE AT ALL LAST NIGHT."

"What?"

The two men had risen simultaneously and were facing each other. McGee, with a good-natured, half-critical expression, laid his hand on Wayne's shoulder and slightly turned him towards the window, that he might see his face. It seemed to him white and dazed.

"You—wasn't there—last night?" he repeated, with a slow tolerance.

Scarcely a moment elapsed, but the agony of an hour may have thrilled through Wayne's consciousness before he spoke. Then all the blood of his body rushed to his face with his first lie as he stammered, "No! Yes! Of course. I have made a mistake—it WAS I."

"I see—you thought I was riled?" said McGee quietly.

"No; I was thinking it was NIGHT BEFORE LAST! Of course it was last night. I must be getting silly." He essayed a laugh—rare at any time with him—and so forced now that it affected McGee more than his embarrassment. He looked at Wayne thoughtfully, and then said slowly: "I reckon I did come upon you a little too sudden last night, but, you see, I was thinkin' of suthin' else and disremembered you might be there. But I wasn't mad—no! no! and I only spoke about it now that you might be more keerful before folks. You follow me? You understand what I mean?"

He turned and walked to the door, when he halted. "You follow me, don't you? It ain't no cussedness o' mine, or want o' trustin', don't you see? Mebbe I oughtened have spoken. I oughter remembered that times this sort o' thing must be rather rough on you and her. You follow me? You understand what I mean? Good-night."

He walked slowly down the path towards the river. Had Madison Wayne been watching him, he would have noticed that his head was bent and his step less free. But Madison Wayne was at that moment sitting rigidly in his chair, nursing, with all the gloomy concentration of a monastic nature, a single terrible suspicion.

CHAPTER IV

Howbeit the sun shone cheerfully over the Bar the next morning and the next; the breath of life and activity was in the air; the settlement never had been more prosperous, and the yield from the opened placers on the drained river-bed that week was enormous. The Brothers Wayne were said to be “rolling in gold.” It was thought to be consistent with Madison Wayne’s nature that there was no trace of good fortune in his face or manner—rather that he had become more nervous, restless, and gloomy. This was attributed to the joylessness of avarice as contrasted with the spendthrift gayety of the more liberal Arthur, and he was feared and RESPECTED as a miser. His long, solitary walks around the promontory, his incessant watchfulness, his reticence when questioned, were all recognized as the indications of a man whose soul was absorbed in money-getting. The reverence they failed to yield to his religious isolation they were willing to freely accord to his financial abstraction. But Mr. McGee was not so deceived. Overtaking him one day under the fringe of willows, he characteristically chided him with absenting himself from Mrs. McGee and her house since their last interview.

“I reckon you did not harbor malice in your Christianity,” he said; “but it looks mighty like ez if ye was throwing off on Safie and me on account of what I said.”

In vain Madison gloomily and almost sternly protested.

McGee looked him all over with his clear measuring eye, and for some minutes was singularly silent. At last he said slowly: “I’ve been thinkin’ suthin’ o’ goin’ down to ‘Frisco, and I’d be a heap easier in my mind ef you’d promise to look arter Safie now and then.”

“You surely are not going to leave her here ALONE?” said Wayne roughly.

“Why not?”

For an instant Wayne hesitated. Then he burst out. “For a hundred reasons! If she ever wanted your protection, before, she surely does now. Do you suppose the Bar is any less heathen or more regenerated than it was when you thought it necessary to guard her with your revolver? Man! It is a hundred times worse than then! The new claims have filled it with spying adventurers—with wolves like Hamlin and his friends—idolaters who would set up Baal and Ashteroth here—and fill your tents with the curses of Sodom!”

Perhaps it was owing to the Scriptural phrasing, perhaps it was from some unusual authority of the man’s manner, but a look of approving relief and admiration came into McGee’s clear eyes.

“And YOU’RE just the man to tackle ‘em,” he said, clapping his hand on Wayne’s shoulder. “That’s your gait—keep it up! But,” he added, in a lower voice, “me and my revolver are played out.” There was a strangeness in the tone that arrested Wayne’s attention. “Yes,” continued McGee, stroking his beard slowly, “men like me has their day, and revolvers has theirs; the world turns round and the Bar fills up, and this yer river changes its course—and it’s all in the day’s work. You understand what I mean—you follow me? And if anything should happen to me—not that it’s like to; but it’s in the way o’ men—I want you to look arter Safie. It ain’t every woman ez has two men, ez like and unlike, to guard her. You follow me—you understand what I mean, don’t you?” With these words he parted somewhat abruptly from Wayne, turning into the steep path to the promontory crest and leaving his companion lost in gloomy abstraction. The next day Alexander McGee had departed on a business trip to San Francisco.

In his present frame of mind, with his new responsibility and the carrying out of a plan which he had vaguely conceived might remove the terrible idea that had taken possession of him, Madison Wayne was even relieved when his brother also announced his intention of going to Angel’s for a few days.

For since his memorable interview with McGee he had been convinced that Safie had been clandestinely visited by some one. Whether it was the thoughtless and momentary indiscretion of a willful woman, or the sequel to some deliberately planned intrigue, did not concern him so much as

the falsity of his own position, and the conniving lie by which he had saved her and her lover. That at this crucial moment he had failed to “testify” to guilt and wickedness; that he firmly believed—such is the inordinate vanity of the religious zealot—that he had denied Him in his effort to shield HER; and that he had broken faith with the husband who had entrusted to him the custody of his wife’s honor, seemed to him more terrible than her faithlessness. In his first horror he had dreaded to see her, lest her very confession—he knew her reckless frankness towards himself—should reveal to him the extent of his complicity. But since then, and during her husband’s absence, he had convinced himself that it was his duty to wrestle and strive with her weak spirit, to implore her to reveal her new intrigue to her husband, and then he would help her to sue for his forgiveness. It was a part of the inconsistency of his religious convictions; in his human passion he was perfectly unselfish, and had already forgiven her the offense against himself. He would see her at once!

But it happened to be a quiet, intense night, with the tremulous opulence of a full moon that threw quivering shafts of light like summer lightning over the blue river, and laid a wonderful carpet of intricate lace along the path that wound through the willows to the crest. There was the dry, stimulating dust and spice of heated pines from below; the languorous odors of syringa; the faint, feminine smell of southernwood, and the infinite mystery of silence. This silence was at times softly broken with the tender inarticulate whisper of falling leaves, broken sighs from the tree-tops, and the languid stretching of wakened and unclasping boughs. Madison Wayne had not, alas! taken into account this subtle conspiracy of Night and Nature, and as he climbed higher, his steps began to falter with new and strange sensations. The rigidity of purpose which had guided the hard religious convictions that always sustained him, began to relax. A tender sympathy stole over him; a loving mercy to himself as well as others stole into his heart. He thought of HER as she had nestled at his side, hand in hand, upon the moonlit veranda of her father’s house, before his hard convictions had chilled and affrighted her. He thought of her fresh simplicity, and what had seemed to him her wonderful girlish beauty, and lo! in a quick turn of the path he stood breathless and tremulous before the house. The moonbeams lay tenderly upon the peaceful eaves; the long blossoms of the Madeira vine seemed sleeping also. The pink flush of the Cherokee rose in the unreal light had become chastely white.

But he was evidently too late for an interview. The windows were blank in the white light; only one—her bedroom—showed a light behind the lowered muslin blind. Her draped shadow once or twice passed across it. He was turning away with soft steps and even bated breath when suddenly he stopped. The exaggerated but unmistakable shadow of a man stood beside her on the blind.

With a fierce leap as of a maniac, he was at the door, pounding, rattling, and uttering hoarse and furious outcries. Even through his fury he heard quickened footsteps—her light, reckless, half-hysterical laugh—a bound upon the staircase—the hurried unbolting and opening of distant doors, as the lighter one with which he was struggling at last yielded to his blind rage, and threw him crashing into the sitting-room. The back door was wide open. He could hear the rustling and crackling of twigs and branches in different directions down the hillside, where the fugitives had separated as they escaped. And yet he stood there for an instant, dazed and wondering, “What next?”

His eyes fell upon McGee’s rifle standing upright in the corner. It was a clean, beautiful, precise weapon, even to the unprofessional eye, its long, laminated hexagonal barrel taking a tenderer blue in the moonlight. He snatched it up. It was capped and loaded. Without a pause he dashed down the hill.

Only one thought was in his mind now—the crudest, simplest duty. He was there in McGee’s place; he should do what McGee would do. God had abandoned him, but McGee’s rifle remained.

In a few minutes’ downward plunging he had reached the river bank. The tranquil silver surface quivered and glittered before him. He saw what he knew he would see, the black target of a man’s head above it, making for the Bar. He took deliberate aim and fired. There was no echo to that sharp detonation; a distant dog barked, there was a slight whisper in the trees beside him, that was all! But the head of the man was no longer visible, and the liquid silver filmed over again, without a speck or stain.

He shouldered the rifle, and with the automatic action of men in great crises returned slowly and deliberately to the house and carefully replaced the rifle in its old position. He had no concern for the miserable woman who had fled; had she appeared before him at the moment, he would not have noticed her. Yet a strange instinct—it seemed to him the vaguest curiosity—made him ascend the stairs and enter her chamber. The candle was still burning on the table with that awful unconsciousness and simplicity of detail which makes the scene of real tragedy so terrible. Beside it lay a belt and leather pouch. Madison Wayne suddenly dashed forward and seized it, with a wild, inarticulate cry; staggered, fell over the chair, rose to his feet, blindly groped his way down the staircase, burst into the road, and, hugging the pouch to his bosom, fled like a madman down the hill.

The body of Arthur Wayne was picked up two days later a dozen miles down the river. Nothing could be more evident and prosaic than the manner in which he had met his fate. His body was only partly clothed, and the money pouch and belt, which had been securely locked next his skin, after the fashion of all miners, was gone. He was known to have left the Bar with a considerable sum of money; he was undoubtedly dogged, robbed, and murdered during his journey on the river bank by the desperadoes who were beginning to infest the vicinity. The grief and agony of his only brother, sole survivor of that fraternal and religious partnership so well known to the camp, although shown only by a grim and speechless melancholy,—broken by unintelligible outbursts of religious raving,—was so real, that it affected even the callous camp. But scarcely had it regained its feverish distraction, before it was thrilled by another sensation. Alexander McGee had fallen from the deck of a Sacramento steamboat in the Straits of Carquinez, and his body had been swept out to sea. The news had apparently been first to reach the ears of his devoted wife, for when the camp—at this lapse of the old prohibition—climbed to her bower with their rude consolations, the house was found locked and deserted. The fateful influence of the promontory had again prevailed, the grim record of its seclusion was once more unbroken.

For with it, too, drooped and faded the fortunes of the Bar. Madison Wayne sold out his claim, endowed the church at the Cross Roads with the proceeds, and the pulpit with his grim, hopeless, denunciatory presence. The first rains brought a freshet to the Bar. The river leaped the light barriers that had taken the place of Wayne's peaceful engines, and regained the old channel. The curse that the Rev. Madison Wayne had launched on this riverside Sodom seemed to have been fulfilled. But even this brought no satisfaction to the gloomy prophet, for it was presently known that he had abandoned his terror-stricken flock to take the circuit as revivalist preacher and camp-meeting exhorter, in the rudest and most lawless of gatherings. Desperate ruffians writhed at his feet in impotent terror or more impotent rage; murderers and thieves listened to him with blanched faces and set teeth, restrained only by a more awful fear. Over and over again he took his life with his Bible into his own hands when he rose above the excited multitude; he was shot at, he was rail-ridden, he was deported, but never silenced. And so, sweeping over the country, carrying fear and frenzy with him, scouting life and mercy, and crushing alike the guilty and innocent, he came one Sabbath to a rocky crest of the Sierras—the last tattered and frayed and soiled fringe of civilization on the opened tract of a great highway. And here he was to “testify,” as was his wont.

But not as he expected. For as he stood up on a boulder above the thirty or forty men sitting or lying upon other rocks and boulders around him, on the craggy mountain shelf where they had gathered, a man also rose, elbowed past them, and with a hurried impulse tried to descend the declivity. But a cry was suddenly heard from others, quick and clamoring, which called the whole assembly to its feet, and it was seen that the fugitive had in some blundering way fallen from the precipice.

He was brought up cruelly maimed and mangled, his ribs crushed, and one lung perforated, but still breathing and conscious. He had asked to see the preacher. Death impending, and even then struggling with his breath, made this request imperative. Madison Wayne stopped the service, and stalked grimly and inflexibly to where the dying man lay. But there he started.

“McGee!” he said breathlessly.

“Send these men away,” said McGee faintly. “I’ve got suthin’ to tell you.”

The men drew back without a word. “You thought I was dead,” said McGee, with eyes still undimmed and marvelously clear. “I orter bin, but it don’t need no doctor to say it ain’t far off now. I left the Bar to get killed; I tried to in a row, but the fellows were skeert to close with me, thinkin’ I’d shoot. My reputation was agin me, there! You follow me? You understand what I mean?”

Kneeling beside him now and grasping both his hands, the changed and horror-stricken Wayne gasped, “But”—

“Hold on! I jumped off the Sacramento boat—I was goin’ down the third time—they thought on the boat I was gone—they think so now! But a passin’ fisherman dived for me. I grappled him—he was clear grit and would have gone down with me, but I couldn’t let him die too—havin’ so to speak no cause. You follow me—you understand me? I let him save me. But it was all the same, for when I got to ‘Frisco I read as how I was drowned. And then I reckoned it was all right, and I wandered HERE, where I wasn’t known—until I saw you.”

“But why should you want to die?” said Wayne, almost fiercely. “What right have you to die while others—double-dyed and blood-stained, are condemned to live, ‘testify,’ and suffer?”

The dying man feebly waved a deprecation with his maimed hand, and even smiled faintly. “I knew you’d say that. I knew what you’d think about it, but it’s all the same now. I did it for you and Safie! I knew I was in the way; I knew you was the man she orter had; I knew you was the man who had dragged her out the mire and clay where I was leavin’ her, as you did when she fell in the water. I knew that every day I lived I was makin’ YOU suffer and breakin’ HER heart—for all she tried to be gentle and gay.”

“Great God in heaven! Will you stop!” said Wayne, springing to his feet in agony. A frightened look—the first that any one had ever seen in the clear eyes of the Bell-ringer of Angel’s—passed over them, and he murmured tremulously: “All right—I’m stoppin’!”

So, too, was his heart, for the wonderful eyes were now slowly glazing. Yet he rallied once more—coming up again the third time as it seemed to Wayne—and his lips moved slowly. The preacher threw himself despairingly on the ground beside him.

“Speak, brother! For God’s sake, speak!”

It was his last whisper—so faint it might have been the first of his freed soul. But he only said:—

“You’re—followin’—me? You—understand—what—I—mean?”

JOHNNYBOY

The vast dining-room of the Crustacean Hotel at Greypoint, U. S., was empty and desolate. It was so early in the morning that there was a bedroom deshabelle in the tucked-up skirts and bare legs of the little oval breakfast-tables as they had just been left by the dusting servants. The most stirring of travelers was yet abed, the most enterprising of first-train catchers had not yet come down; there was a breath of midsummer sleep still in the air; through the half-opened windows that seemed to be yawning, the pinkish blue Atlantic beyond heaved gently and slumberously, and drowsy early bathers crept into it as to bed. Yet as I entered the room I saw that one of the little tables in the corner was in reality occupied by a very small and very extraordinary child. Seated in a high chair, attended by a dreamily abstracted nurse on one side, an utterly perfunctory negro waiter on the other, and an incongruous assortment of disregarded viands before him, he was taking—or, rather, declining—his solitary breakfast. He appeared to be a pale, frail, but rather pretty boy, with a singularly pathetic combination of infant delicacy of outline and maturity of expression. His heavily fringed eyes expressed an already weary and discontented intelligence, and his willful, resolute little mouth was, I fancied, marked with lines of pain at either corner. He struck me as not only being physically dyspeptic, but as morally loathing his attendants and surroundings.

My entrance did not disturb the waiter, with whom I had no financial relations; he simply concealed an exaggerated yawn professionally behind his napkin until my own servitor should appear. The nurse slightly awoke from her abstraction, shoved the child mechanically,—as if starting up some clogged machinery,—said, “Eat your breakfast, Johnnyboy,” and subsided into her dream. I think the child had at first some faint hope of me, and when my waiter appeared with my breakfast he betrayed some interest in my selection, with a view of possible later appropriation, but, as my repast was simple, that hope died out of his infant mind. Then there was a silence, broken at last by the languid voice of the nurse:—

“Try some milk then—nice milk.”

“No! No mik! Mik makes me sick—mik does!”

In spite of the hurried infantine accent the protest was so emphatic, and, above all, fraught with such pent-up reproach and disgust, that I turned about sympathetically. But Johnnyboy had already thrown down his spoon, slipped from his high chair, and was marching out of the room as fast as his little sandals would carry him, with indignation bristling in every line of the crisp bows of his sash.

I, however, gathered from Mr. Johnson, my waiter, that the unfortunate child owned a fashionable father and mother, one or two blocks of houses in New York, and a villa at Greypoint, which he consistently and intelligently despised. That he had imperiously brought his parents here on account of his health, and had demanded that he should breakfast alone in the big dining-room. That, however, he was not happy. “Nuffin peahs to agree wid him, Sah, but he doan’ cry, and he speaks his mind, Sah; he speaks his mind.”

Unfortunately, I did not keep Johnnyboy’s secret, but related the scene I had witnessed to some of the lighter-hearted Crustaceans of either sex, with the result that his alliterative protest became a sort of catchword among them, and that for the next few mornings he had a large audience of early breakfasters, who fondly hoped for a repetition of his performance. I think that Johnnyboy for the time enjoyed this companionship, yet without the least affectation or self-consciousness—so long as it was unobtrusive. It so chanced, however, that the Rev. Mr. Belcher, a gentleman with bovine lightness of touch, and a singular misunderstanding of childhood, chose to presume upon his paternal functions. Approaching the high chair in which Johnnyboy was dyspeptically reflecting, with a ponderous wink at the other guests, and a fat thumb and forefinger on Johnnyboy’s table, he leaned over him, and with slow, elephantine playfulness said:—

“And so, my dear young friend, I understand that ‘mik makes you sick—mik does.’”

Anything approaching to the absolute likeness of this imitation of Johnnyboy's accents it is impossible to conceive. Possibly Johnnyboy felt it. But he simply lifted his lovely lashes, and said with great distinctness:—

“Mik don't—you devil!”

After this, closely as it had knitted us together, Johnnyboy's morning presence was mysteriously withdrawn. It was later pointed out to us by Mr. Belcher, upon the veranda, that, although Wealth had its privileges, it was held in trust for the welfare of Mankind, and that the children of the Rich could not too early learn the advantages of Self-restraint and the vanity of a mere gratification of the Senses. Early and frequent morning ablutions, brisk morning toweling, half of a Graham biscuit in a teacup of milk, exercise with the dumb-bells, and a little rough-and-tumble play in a straw hat, check apron, and overalls would eventually improve that stamina necessary for his future Position, and repress a dangerous cerebral activity and tendency to give way to—He suddenly stopped, coughed, and absolutely looked embarrassed. Johnnyboy, a moving cloud of white pique, silk, and embroidery, had just turned the corner of the veranda. He did not speak, but as he passed raised his blue-veined lids to the orator. The look of ineffable scorn and superiority in those beautiful eyes surpassed anything I had ever seen. At the next veranda column he paused, and, with his baby thumbs inserted in his silk sash, again regarded him under his half-dropped lashes as if he were some curious animal, and then passed on. But Belcher was silenced for the second time.

I think I have said enough to show that Johnnyboy was hopelessly worshiped by an impressible and illogical sex. I say HOPELESSLY, for he slipped equally from the proudest silken lap and the humblest one of calico, and carried his eyelashes and small aches elsewhere. I think that a secret fear of his alarming frankness, and his steady rejection of the various tempting cates they offered him, had much to do with their passion. “It won't hurt you, dear,” said Miss Circe, “and it's so awfully nice. See!” she continued, putting one of the delicacies in her own pretty mouth with every assumption of delight. “It's SO good!” Johnnyboy rested his elbows on her knees, and watched her with a grieved and commiserating superiority. “Bimeby, you'll have pains in youse tommick, and you'll be tookt to bed,” he said sadly, “and then you'll—have to dit up and”—But as it was found necessary here to repress further details, he escaped other temptation.

Two hours later, as Miss Circe was seated in the drawing-room with her usual circle of enthusiastic admirers around her, Johnnyboy—who was issued from his room for circulation, two or three times a day, as a genteel advertisement of his parents—floated into the apartment in a new dress and a serious demeanor. Sidling up to Miss Circe he laid a phial—evidently his own pet medicine—on her lap, said, “For youse tommikake to-night,” and vanished. Yet I have reason to believe that this slight evidence of unusual remembrance on Johnnyboy's part more than compensated for its publicity, and for a few days Miss Circe was quite “set up” by it.

It was through some sympathy of this kind that I first gained Johnnyboy's good graces. I had been presented with a small pocket case of homoeopathic medicines, and one day on the beach I took out one of the tiny phials and, dropping two or three of the still tinier pellets in my hand, swallowed them. To my embarrassment, a small hand presently grasped my trouser-leg. I looked down; it was Johnnyboy, in a new and ravishing smuggler suit, with his questioning eyes fixed on mine.

“Howjer do dat?”

“Eh?”

“Wajer do dat for?”

“That?—Oh, that's medicine. I've got a headache.”

He searched the inmost depths of my soul with his wonderful eyes. Then, after a pause, he held out his baby palm.

“You kin give Johnny some.”

“But you haven't got headache—have you?”

“Me alluz has.”

“Not ALWAYS.”

He nodded his head rapidly. Then added slowly, and with great elaboration, “Et mo’nins, et affernoons, et nights, ‘nd mo’nins adain. ‘N et becker” (i. e., breakfast).

There was no doubt it was the truth. Those eyes did not seem to be in the habit of lying. After all, the medicine could not hurt him. His nurse was at a little distance gazing absently at the sea. I sat down on a bench, and dropped a few of the pellets into his palm. He ate them seriously, and then turned around and backed—after the well-known appealing fashion of childhood—against my knees. I understood the movement—although it was unlike my idea of Johnnyboy. However, I raised him to my lap—with the sensation of lifting a dozen lace-edged handkerchiefs, and with very little more effort—where he sat silently for a moment, with his sandals crossed pensively before him.

“Wouldn’t you like to go and play with those children?” I asked, pointing to a group of noisy sand levelers not far away.

“No!” After a pause, “You wouldn’t neither.”

“Why?”

“Hediks.”

“But,” I said, “perhaps if you went and played with them and ran up and down as they do, you wouldn’t have headache.”

Johnnyboy did not answer for a moment; then there was a perceptible gentle movement of his small frame. I confess I felt brutally like Belcher. He was getting down.

Once down he faced me, lifted his frank eyes, said, “Do way and play den,” smoothed down his smuggler frock, and rejoined his nurse.

But although Johnnyboy afterwards forgave my moral defection, he did not seem to have forgotten my practical medical ministrations, and our brief interview had a surprising result. From that moment he confounded his parents and doctors by resolutely and positively refusing to take any more of their pills, tonics, or drops. Whether from a sense of loyalty to me, or whether he was not yet convinced of the efficacy of homoeopathy, he did not suggest a substitute, declare his preferences, or even give his reasons, but firmly and peremptorily declined his present treatment. And, to everybody’s astonishment, he did not seem a bit the worse for it.

Still he was not strong, and his continual aversion to childish sports and youthful exercise provoked the easy criticism of that large part of humanity who are ready to confound cause and effect, and such brief moments as the Sluysdaels could spare him from their fashionable duties were made miserable to them by gratuitous suggestions and plans for their child’s improvement. It was noticeable, however, that few of them were ever offered to Johnnyboy personally. He had a singularly direct way of dealing with them, and a precision of statement that was embarrassing.

One afternoon, Jack Bracy drove up to the veranda of the Crustacean with a smart buggy and spirited thoroughbred for Miss Circe’s especial driving, and his own saddle-horse on which he was to accompany her. Jack had dismounted, a groom held his saddle-horse until the young lady should appear, and he himself stood at the head of the thoroughbred. As Johnnyboy, leaning against the railing, was regarding the turnout with ill-concealed disdain, Jack, in the pride of his triumph over his rivals, good-humoredly offered to put him in the buggy, and allow him to take the reins. Johnnyboy did not reply.

“Come along!” continued Jack, “it will do you a heap of good! It’s better than lazing there like a girl! Rouse up, old man!”

“Me don’t like that geegee,” said Johnnyboy calmly. “He’s a silly fool.”

“You’re afraid,” said Jack.

Johnnyboy lifted his proud lashes, and toddled to the steps. Jack received him in his arms, swung him into the seat, and placed the slim yellow reins in his baby hands.

“Now you feel like a man, and not like a girl!” said Jack. “Eh, what? Oh, I beg your pardon.”

For Miss Circe had appeared—had absolutely been obliged to wait a whole half-minute unobserved—and now stood there a dazzling but pouting apparition. In eagerly turning to receive her, Jack's foot slipped on the step, and he fell. The thoroughbred started, gave a sickening plunge forward, and was off! But so, too, was Jack, the next moment, on his own horse, and before Miss Circe's screams had died away.

For two blocks on Ocean Avenue, passersby that afternoon saw a strange vision. A galloping horse careering before a light buggy, in which a small child, seated upright, was grasping the tightened reins. But so erect and composed was the little face and figure—albeit as white as its own frock—that for an instant they did not grasp its awful significance. Those further along, however, read the whole awful story in the drawn face and blazing eyes of Jack Bracy as he, at last, swung into the Avenue. For Jack had the brains as well as the nerve of your true hero, and, knowing the dangerous stimulus of a stern chase to a frightened horse, had kept a side road until it branched into the Avenue. So furious had been his pace, and so correct his calculation, that he ranged alongside of the runaway even as it passed, grasped the reins, and, in half a block, pulled up on even wheels.

"I never saw such pluck in a mite like that," he whispered afterwards to his anxious auditory. "He never dropped those ribbons, by G—, until I got alongside, and then he just hopped down and said, as short and cool as you please, 'Dank you!'"

"Me didn't," uttered a small voice reproachfully.

"Didn't you, dear! What DID you say then, darling?" exclaimed a sympathizing chorus.

"Me said: 'Damn you!' Me don't like silly fool geegees. Silly fool geegees make me sick—silly fool geegees do!"

Nevertheless, in spite of this incident, the attempts at Johnnyboy's physical reformation still went on. More than that, it was argued by some complacent casuists that the pluck displayed by the child was the actual result of this somewhat heroic method of taking exercise, and NOT an inherent manliness distinct from his physical tastes. So he was made to run when he didn't want to—to dance when he frankly loathed his partners—to play at games that he despised. His books and pictures were taken away; he was hurried past hoardings and theatrical posters that engaged his fancy; the public was warned against telling him fairy tales, except those constructed on strictly hygienic principles. His fastidious cleanliness was rebuked, and his best frocks taken away—albeit at a terrible sacrifice of his parents' vanity—to suit the theories of his critics. How long this might have continued is not known—for the theory and practice were suddenly arrested by another sensation.

One morning a children's picnic party was given on a rocky point only accessible at certain states of the tide, whither they were taken in a small boat under the charge of a few hotel servants, and, possibly as part of his heroic treatment, Johnnyboy, who was included in the party, was not allowed to be attended by his regular nurse.

Whether this circumstance added to his general disgust of the whole affair, and his unwillingness to go, I cannot say, but it is to be regretted, since the omission deprived Johnnyboy of any impartial witness to what subsequently occurred. That he was somewhat roughly handled by several of the larger children appeared to be beyond doubt, although there was conflicting evidence as to the sequel. Enough that at noon screams were heard in the direction of certain detached rocks on the point, and the whole party proceeding thither found three of the larger boys on the rocks, alone and cut off by the tide, having been left there, as they alleged, by Johnnyboy, WHO HAD RUN AWAY WITH THE BOAT. They subsequently admitted that THEY had first taken the boat and brought Johnnyboy with them, "just to frighten him," but they adhered to the rest. And certainly Johnnyboy and the boat were nowhere to be found. The shore was communicated with, the alarm was given, the telegraph, up and down the coast trilled with excitement, other boats were manned—consternation prevailed.

But that afternoon the captain of the "Saucy Jane," mackerel fisher, lying off the point, perceived a derelict "Whitehall" boat drifting lazily towards the Gulf Stream. On boarding it he was

chagrined to find the expected flotsam already in the possession of a very small child, who received him with a scornful reticence as regarded himself and his intentions, and some objurgation of a person or persons unknown. It was Johnnyboy. But whether he had attempted the destruction of the three other boys by “marooning” them upon the rocks—as their parents firmly believed—or whether he had himself withdrawn from their company simply because he did not like them, was never known. Any further attempt to improve his education by the roughing gregarious process was, however, abandoned. The very critics who had counseled it now clamored for restraint and perfect isolation. It was ably pointed out by the Rev. Mr. Belcher that the autocratic habits begotten by wealth and pampering should be restricted, and all intercourse with their possessor promptly withheld.

But the season presently passed with much of this and other criticism, and the Sluysdaels passed too, carrying Johnnyboy and his small aches and long eyelashes beyond these Crustacean voices, where it was to be hoped there was peace. I did not hear of him again for five years, and then, oddly enough, from the lips of Mr. Belcher on the deck of a transatlantic steamer, as he was being wafted to Europe for his recreation by the prayers and purses of a grateful and enduring flock. “Master John Jacob Astor Sluysdael,” said Mr. Belcher, speaking slowly, with great precision of retrospect, “was taken from his private governess—I may say by my advice—and sent to an admirable school in New York, fashioned upon the English system of Eton and Harrow, and conducted by English masters from Oxford and Cambridge. Here—I may also say at my suggestion—he was subjected to the wholesome discipline equally of his schoolmates and his masters; in fact, sir, as you are probably aware, the most perfect democracy that we have yet known, in which the mere accidents of wealth, position, luxury, effeminacy, physical degeneration, and over-civilized stimulation, are not recognized. He was put into compulsory cricket, football, and rounders. As an undersized boy he was subjected to that ingenious preparation for future mastership by the pupillary state of servitude known, I think, as ‘fagging.’ His physical inertia was stimulated and quickened, and his intellectual precocity repressed, from time to time, by the exuberant playfulness of his fellow-students, which occasionally took the form of forced ablutions and corporal discomfort, and was called, I am told, ‘hazing.’ It is but fair to state that our young friend had some singular mental endowments, which, however, were promptly checked to repress the vanity and presumption that would follow.” The Rev. Mr. Belcher paused, closed his eyes resignedly, and added, “Of course, you know the rest.”

“Indeed, I do not,” I said anxiously.

“A most deplorable affair—indeed, a most shocking incident! It was hushed up, I believe, on account of the position of his parents.” He glanced furtively around, and in a lower and more impressive voice said, “I am not myself a believer in heredity, and I am not personally aware that there was a MURDERER among the Sluysdael ancestry, but it seems that this monstrous child, in some clandestine way, possessed himself of a huge bowie-knife, sir, and on one of those occasions actually rushed furiously at the larger boys—his innocent play-fellows—and absolutely forced them to flee in fear of their lives. More than that, sir, a LOADED REVOLVER was found in his desk, and he boldly and shamelessly avowed his intention to eviscerate, or—to use his own revolting language—‘to cut the heart out’ of the first one who again ‘laid a finger on him.’” He paused again, and, joining his two hands together with the fingers pointing to the deck, breathed hard and said, “His instantaneous withdrawal from the school was a matter of public necessity. He was afterwards taken, in the charge of a private tutor, to Europe, where, I trust, we shall NOT meet.”

I could not resist saying cheerfully that, at least, Johnnyboy had for a short time made it lively for the big boys.

The Rev. Mr. Belcher rose slowly, but painfully, said with a deeply grieved expression, “I don’t think that I entirely follow you,” and moved gently away.

The changes of youth are apt to be more bewildering than those of age, and a decade scarcely perceptible in an old civilization often means utter revolution to the new. It did not seem strange to me, therefore, on meeting Jack Bracy twelve years after, to find that he had forgotten Miss Circe, or

that SHE had married, and was living unhappily with a middle-aged adventurer by the name of Jason, who was reputed to have had domestic relations elsewhere. But although subjugated and exorcised, she at least was reminiscent. To my inquiries about the Sluysdaels, she answered with a slight return of her old vivacity:—

“Ah, yes, dear fellow, he was one of my greatest admirers.”

“He was about four years old when you knew him, wasn't he?” suggested Jason meanly. “Yes, they usually WERE young, but so kind of you to recollect them. Young Sluysdael,” he continued, turning to me, “is—but of course you know that disgraceful story.”

I felt that I could stand this no longer. “Yes,” I said indignantly, “I know all about the school, and I don't call his conduct disgraceful either.”

Jason stared. “I don't know what you mean about the school,” he returned. “I am speaking of his stepfather.”

“His STEPFATHER!”

“Yes; his father, Van Buren Sluysdael, died, you know—a year after they left Greyport. The widow was left all the money in trust for Johnny, except about twenty-five hundred a year which he was in receipt of as a separate income, even as a boy. Well, a glib-tongued parson, a fellow by the name of Belcher, got round the widow—she was a desperate fool—and, by Jove! made her marry him. He made ducks and drakes of not only her money, but Johnny's too, and had to skip to Spain to avoid the trustees. And Johnny—for the Sluysdaels are all fools or lunatics—made over his whole separate income to that wretched, fashionable fool of a mother, and went into a stockbroker's office as a clerk.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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