

BRET HARTE

CRESSY

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CHAPTER I

As the master of the Indian Spring school emerged from the pine woods into the little clearing before the schoolhouse, he stopped whistling, put his hat less jauntily on his head, threw away some wild flowers he had gathered on his way, and otherwise assumed the severe demeanor of his profession and his mature age—which was at least twenty. Not that he usually felt this an assumption; it was a firm conviction of his serious nature that he impressed others, as he did himself, with the blended austerity and ennui of deep and exhausted experience.

The building which was assigned to him and his flock by the Board of Education of Tuolumne County, California, had been originally a church. It still bore a faded odor of sanctity, mingled, however, with a later and slightly alcoholic breath of political discussion, the result of its weekly occupation under the authority of the Board as a Tribune for the enunciation of party principles and devotion to the Liberties of the People. There were a few dog-eared hymn-books on the teacher's desk, and the blackboard but imperfectly hid an impassioned appeal to the citizens of Indian Spring to "Rally" for Stebbins as Supervisor. The master had been struck with the size of the black type in which this placard was printed, and with a shrewd perception of its value to the round wandering eyes of his smaller pupils, allowed it to remain as a pleasing example of orthography. Unfortunately, although subdivided and spelt by them in its separate letters with painful and perfect accuracy, it was collectively known as "Wally," and its general import productive of vague hilarity.

Taking a large key from his pocket, the master unlocked the door and threw it open, stepping back with a certain precaution begotten of his experience in once finding a small but sociable rattlesnake coiled up near the threshold. A slight disturbance which followed his intrusion showed the value of that precaution, and the fact that the room had been already used for various private and peaceful gatherings of animated nature. An irregular attendance of yellow-birds and squirrels dismissed themselves hurriedly through the broken floor and windows, but a golden lizard, stiffened suddenly into stony fright on the edge of an open arithmetic, touched the heart of the master so strongly by its resemblance to some kept-in and forgotten scholar who had succumbed over the task he could not accomplish, that he was seized with compunction.

Recovering himself, and re-establishing, as it were, the decorous discipline of the room by clapping his hands and saying "Sho!" he passed up the narrow aisle of benches, replacing the forgotten arithmetic, and picking up from the desks here and there certain fragmentary pieces of plaster and crumbling wood that had fallen from the ceiling, as if this grove of Academus had been shedding its leaves overnight. When he reached his own desk he lifted the lid and remained for some moments motionless, gazing into it. His apparent meditation however was simply the combined reflection of his own features in a small pocket-mirror in its recesses and a perplexing doubt in his mind whether the sacrifice of his budding moustache was not essential to the professional austerity of his countenance. But he was presently aware of the sound of small voices, light cries, and brief laughter scattered at vague and remote distances from the schoolhouse—not unlike the birds and squirrels he had just dispossessed. He recognized by these signs that it was nine o'clock, and his scholars were assembling.

They came in their usual desultory fashion—the fashion of country school-children the world over—irregularly, spasmodically, and always as if accidentally; a few hand-in-hand, others driven ahead of or dropped behind their elders; some in straggling groups more or less coherent and at times only connected by far-off intermediate voices scattered on a space of half a mile, but never quite alone; always preoccupied by something else than the actual business on hand; appearing suddenly

from ditches, behind trunks, and between fence-rails; cropping up in unexpected places along the road after vague and purposeless detours—seemingly going anywhere and everywhere but to school! So unlooked-for, in fact, was their final arrival that the master, who had a few moments before failed to descry a single torn straw hat or ruined sun-bonnet above his visible horizon, was always startled to find them suddenly under his windows, as if, like the birds, they had alighted from the trees. Nor was their moral attitude towards their duty any the more varied; they always arrived as if tired and reluctant, with a doubting sulkiness that perhaps afterwards beamed into a charming hypocrisy, but invariably temporizing with their instincts until the last moment, and only relinquishing possible truancy on the very threshold. Even after they were marshalled on their usual benches they gazed at each other every morning with a perfectly fresh astonishment and a daily recurring enjoyment of some hidden joke in this tremendous rencontre.

It had been the habit of the master to utilize these preliminary vagrancies of his little flock by inviting them on assembling to recount any interesting incident of their journey hither; or failing this, from their not infrequent shyness in expressing what had secretly interested them, any event that had occurred within their knowledge since they last met. He had done this, partly to give them time to recover themselves in that more formal atmosphere, and partly, I fear, because, notwithstanding his conscientious gravity, it greatly amused him. It also diverted them from their usual round-eyed, breathless contemplation of himself—a regular morning inspection which generally embraced every detail of his dress and appearance, and made every change or deviation the subject of whispered comment or stony astonishment. He knew that they knew him more thoroughly than he did himself, and shrank from the intuitive vision of these small clairvoyants.

“Well?” said the master gravely.

There was the usual interval of bashful hesitation, verging on nervous hilarity or hypocritical attention. For the last six months this question by the master had been invariably received each morning as a veiled pleasantry which might lead to baleful information or conceal some query out of the dreadful books before him. Yet this very element of danger had its fascinations. Johnny Filgee, a small boy, blushed violently, and, without getting up, began hurriedly in a high key, “Tige ith got,” and then suddenly subsided into a whisper.

“Speak up, Johnny,” said the master encouragingly.

“Please, sir, it ain’t anythin’ he’s seed—nor any real news,” said Rupert Filgee, his elder brother, rising with family concern and frowning openly upon Johnny; “it’s jest his foolishness; he oughter be licked.” Finding himself unexpectedly on his feet, and apparently at the end of a long speech, he colored also, and then said hurriedly, “Jimmy Snyder—HE seed suthin’. Ask HIM!” and sat down—a recognized hero.

Every eye, including the master’s, was turned on Jimmy Snyder. But that youthful observer, instantly diving his head and shoulders into his desk, remained there gurgling as if under water. Two or three nearest him endeavored with some struggling to bring him to an intelligible surface again. The master waited patiently. Johnny Filgee took advantage of the diversion to begin again in a high key, “Tige ith got thix,” and subsided.

“Come, Jimmy,” said the master, with a touch of peremptoriness. Thus adjured, Jimmy Snyder came up glowingly, and bristling with full stops and exclamation points. “Seed a black b’ar comin’ outer Daves’ woods,” he said excitedly. “Nigh to me ez you be. ‘N big ez a hoss; ‘n snarlin’! ‘n snappin’!—like gosh! Kem along—ker—clump torords me. Reckoned he’d skeer me! Didn’t skeer me worth a cent. I heaved a rock at him—I did now!” (in defiance of murmurs of derisive comment)—“‘n he slid. Ef he’d kem up funder I’d hev up with my slate and swotted him over the snoot—bet your boots!”

The master here thought fit to interfere, and gravely point out that the habit of striking bears as large as a horse with a school-slate was equally dangerous to the slate (which was also the property of Tuolumne County) and to the striker; and that the verb “to swot” and the noun substantive “snoot”

were likewise indefensible, and not to be tolerated. Thus admonished Jimmy Snyder, albeit unshaken in his faith in his own courage, sat down.

A slight pause ensued. The youthful Filgee, taking advantage of it, opened in a higher key, “Tige ith”—but the master’s attention was here diverted by the searching eyes of Octavia Dean, a girl of eleven, who after the fashion of her sex preferred a personal recognition of her presence before she spoke. Succeeding in catching his eye, she threw back her long hair from her shoulders with an easy habitual gesture, rose, and with a faint accession of color said:

“Cressy McKinstry came home from Sacramento. Mrs. McKinstry told mother she’s comin’ back here to school.”

The master looked up with an alacrity perhaps inconsistent with his cynical austerity. Seeing the young girl curiously watching him with an expectant smile, he regretted it. Cressy McKinstry, who was sixteen years old, had been one of the pupils he had found at the school when he first came. But as he had also found that she was there in the extraordinary attitude of being “engaged” to one Seth Davis, a fellow-pupil of nineteen, and as most of the courtship was carried on freely and unceremoniously during school-hours with the full permission of the master’s predecessor, the master had been obliged to point out to the parents of the devoted couple the embarrassing effects of this association on the discipline of the school. The result had been the withdrawal of the lovers, and possibly the good-will of the parents. The return of the young lady was consequently a matter of some significance. Had the master’s protest been accepted, or had the engagement itself been broken off?

Either was not improbable. His momentary loss of attention was Johnny Filgee’s great gain.

“Tige,” said Johnny, with sudden and alarming distinctness, “ith got thix pupths—mothly yaller.”

In the laugh which followed this long withheld announcement of an increase in the family of Johnny’s yellow and disreputable setter “Tiger,” who usually accompanied him to school and howled outside, the master joined with marked distinctness. Then he said, with equally marked severity, “Books!” The little levee was ended, and school began.

It continued for two hours with short sighs, corrugations of small foreheads, the complaining cries and scratchings of slate pencils over slates, and other signs of minor anguish among the more youthful of the flock; and with more or less whisperings, movements of the lips, and unconscious soliloquy among the older pupils. The master moved slowly up and down the aisle with a word of encouragement or explanation here and there, stopping with his hands behind him to gaze abstractedly out of the windows to the wondering envy of the little ones. A faint hum, as of invisible insects, gradually pervaded the school; the more persistent droning of a large bee had become dangerously soporific. The hot breath of the pines without had invaded the doors and windows; the warped shingles and weather-boarding at times creaked and snapped under the rays of the vertical and unclouded sun. A gentle perspiration broke out like a mild epidemic in the infant class; little curls became damp, brief lashes limp, round eyes moist, and small eyelids heavy. The master himself started, and awoke out of a perilous dream of other eyes and hair to collect himself severely. For the irresolute, half-embarrassed, half-lazy figure of a man had halted doubtfully before the porch and open door. Luckily the children, who were facing the master with their backs to the entrance, did not see it.

Yet the figure was neither alarming nor unfamiliar. The master at once recognized it as Ben Dabney, otherwise known as “Uncle Ben,” a good-humored but not over-bright miner, who occupied a small cabin on an unambitious claim in the outskirts of Indian Spring. His avuncular title was evidently only an ironical tribute to his amiable incompetency and heavy good-nature, for he was still a young man with no family ties, and by reason of his singular shyness not even a visitor in the few families of the neighborhood. As the master looked up, he had an irritating recollection that Ben had been already haunting him for the last two days, alternately appearing and disappearing in his path to and from school as a more than usually reserved and bashful ghost. This, to the master’s cynical mind, clearly indicated that, like most ghosts, he had something of essentially selfish import to communicate.

Catching the apparition's half-appealing eye, he proceeded to exorcise it with a portentous frown and shake of the head, that caused it to timidly wane and fall away from the porch, only however to reappear and wax larger a few minutes later at one of the side windows. The infant class hailing his appearance as a heaven-sent boon, the master was obliged to walk to the door and command him sternly away, when, retreating to the fence, he mounted the uppermost rail, and drawing a knife from his pocket, cut a long splinter from the rail, and began to whittle it in patient and meditative silence. But when recess was declared, and the relieved feelings of the little flock had vent in the clearing around the schoolhouse, the few who rushed to the spot found that Uncle Ben had already disappeared. Whether the appearance of the children was too inconsistent with his ghostly mission, or whether his heart failed him at the last moment, the master could not determine. Yet, distasteful as the impending interview promised to be, the master was vaguely and irritatingly disappointed.

A few hours later, when school was being dismissed, the master found Octavia Dean lingering near his desk. Looking into the girl's mischievous eyes, he good-humoredly answered their expectation by referring to her morning's news. "I thought Miss McKinstry had been married by this time," he said carelessly.

Octavia, swinging her satchel like a censer, as if she were performing some act of purification over her completed tasks, replied demurely: "Oh no! dear no—not THAT."

"So it would seem," said the master.

"I reckon she never kalkilated to, either," continued Octavia, slyly looking up from the corner of her lashes.

"Indeed!"

"No—she was just funning with Seth Davis—that's all."

"Funning with him?"

"Yes, sir. Kinder foolin' him, you know."

"Kinder foolin' him!"

For an instant the master felt it his professional duty to protest against this most unmaidenly and frivolous treatment of the matrimonial engagement, but a second glance at the significant face of his youthful auditor made him conclude that her instinctive knowledge of her own sex could be better trusted than his imperfect theories. He turned towards his desk without speaking. Octavia gave an extra swing to her satchel, tossing it over her shoulder with a certain small coquettishness and moved towards the door. As she did so the infant Filgee from the safe vantage of the porch where he had lingered was suddenly impelled to a crowning audacity! As if struck with an original idea, but apparently addressing himself to space, he cried out, "Crethy M'Kinthry likth teacher," and instantly vanished.

Putting these incidents sternly aside, the master addressed himself to the task of setting a few copies for the next day as the voices of his departing flock faded from the porch. Presently a silence fell upon the little school-house. Through the open door a cool, restful breath stole gently as if nature were again stealthily taking possession of her own. A squirrel boldly came across the porch, a few twittering birds charging in stopped, beat the air hesitatingly for a moment with their wings, and fell back with bashfully protesting breasts aslant against the open door and the unlooked-for spectacle of the silent occupant. Then there was another movement of intrusion, but this time human, and the master looked up angrily to behold Uncle Ben.

He entered with a slow exasperating step, lifting his large boots very high and putting them down again softly as if he were afraid of some insecurity in the floor, or figuratively recognized the fact that the pathways of knowledge were thorny and difficult. Reaching the master's desk and the ministering presence above it, he stopped awkwardly, and with the rim of his soft felt hat endeavored to wipe from his face the meek smile it had worn when he entered. It chanced also that he had halted before the minute stool of the infant Filgee, and his large figure instantly assumed such Brobdingnagian

proportions in contrast that he became more embarrassed than ever. The master made no attempt to relieve him, but regarded him with cold interrogation.

“I reckoned,” he began, leaning one hand on the master’s desk with affected ease, as he dusted his leg with his hat with the other, “I reckoned—that is—I allowed—I orter say—that I’d find ye alone at this time. Ye gin’rally are, ye know. It’s a nice, soothin’, restful, stoodious time, when a man kin, so to speak, run back on his eddication and think of all he ever knowed. Ye’re jist like me, and ye see I sorter spotted your ways to onct.”

“Then why did you come here this morning and disturb the school?” demanded the master sharply.

“That’s so, I sorter slipped up thar, didn’t I?” said Uncle Ben with a smile of rueful assent. “You see I didn’t allow to COME IN then, but on’y to hang round a leetle and kinder get used to it, and it to me.”

“Used to what?” said the master impatiently, albeit with a slight softening at his intruder’s penitent expression.

Uncle Ben did not reply immediately, but looked around as if for a seat, tried one or two benches and a desk with his large hand as if testing their security, and finally abandoning the idea as dangerous, seated himself on the raised platform beside the master’s chair, having previously dusted it with the flap of his hat. Finding, however, that the attitude was not conducive to explanation, he presently rose again, and picking up one of the school-books from the master’s desk eyed it unskilfully upside down, and then said hesitatingly,—

“I reckon ye ain’t usin’ Dobell’s ‘Rithmetic here?”

“No,” said the master.

“That’s bad. ‘Pears to be played out—that Dobell feller. I was brought up on Dobell. And Parsings’ Grammar? Ye don’t seem to be a using Parsings’ Grammar either?”

“No,” said the master, relenting still more as he glanced at Uncle Ben’s perplexed face with a faint smile.

“And I reckon you’d be saying the same of Jones’ ‘Stronomy and Algebray? Things hev changed. You’ve got all the new style here,” he continued, with affected carelessness, but studiously avoiding the master’s eye. “For a man ez wos brought up on Parsings, Dobell, and Jones, thar don’t appear to be much show nowadays.”

The master did not reply. Observing several shades of color chase each other on Uncle Ben’s face, he bent his own gravely over his books. The act appeared to relieve his companion, who with his eyes still turned towards the window went on:

“Ef you’d had them books—which you haven’t—I had it in my mind to ask you suthen’. I had an idea of—of—sort of reviewing my eddication. Kinder going over the old books agin—jist to pass the time. Sorter running in yer arter school hours and doin’ a little practisin’, eh? You looking on me as an extry scholar—and I payin’ ye as sich—but keepin’ it ‘twixt ourselves, you know—just for a pastime, eh?”

As the master smilingly raised his head, he became suddenly and ostentatiously attracted to the window.

“Them jay birds out there is mighty peart, coming right up to the school-house! I reckon they think it sort o’ restful too.”

“But if you really mean it, couldn’t you use these books, Uncle Ben?” said the master cheerfully. “I dare say there’s little difference—the principle is the same, you know.”

Uncle Ben’s face, which had suddenly brightened, as suddenly fell. He took the book from the master’s hand without meeting his eyes, held it at arm’s length, turned it over and then laid it softly down upon the desk as if it were some excessively fragile article. “Certingly,” he murmured, with assumed reflective ease. “Certingly. The principle’s all there.” Nevertheless he was quite breathless and a few beads of perspiration stood out upon his smooth, blank forehead.

“And as to writing, for instance,” continued the master with increasing heartiness as he took notice of these phenomena, “you know ANY copy-book will do.”

He handed his pen carelessly to Uncle Ben. The large hand that took it timidly not only trembled but grasped it with such fatal and hopeless unfamiliarity that the master was fain to walk to the window and observe the birds also.

“They’re mighty bold—them jays,” said Uncle Ben, laying down the pen with scrupulous exactitude beside the book and gazing at his fingers as if he had achieved a miracle of delicate manipulation. “They don’t seem to be afeared of nothing, do they?”

There was another pause. The master suddenly turned from the window. “I tell you what, Uncle Ben,” he said with prompt decision and unshaken gravity, “the only thing for you to do is to just throw over Dobell and Parsons and Jones and the old quill pen that I see you’re accustomed to, and start in fresh as if you’d never known them. Forget ‘em all, you know. It will be mighty hard of course to do that,” he continued, looking out of the window, “but you must do it.”

He turned back, the brightness that transfigured Uncle Ben’s face at that moment brought a slight moisture into his own eyes. The humble seeker of knowledge said hurriedly that he would try.

“And begin again at the beginning,” continued the master cheerfully. “Exactly like one of those—in fact, as if you REALLY were a child again.”

“That’s so,” said Uncle Ben, rubbing his hands delightedly, “that’s me! Why, that’s jest what I was sayin’ to Roop”—

“Then you’ve already been talking about it?” intercepted the master in some surprise. “I thought you wanted it kept secret?”

“Well, yes,” responded Uncle Ben dubiously. “But you see I sorter agreed with Roop Filgee that if you took to my ideas and didn’t object, I’d give him two bits¹ every time he’d kem here and help me of an arternoon when you was away and kinder stand guard around the school-house, you know, so as to keep the fellows off. And Roop’s mighty sharp for a boy, ye know.”

The master reflected a moment and concluded that Uncle Ben was probably right. Rupert Filgee, who was a handsome boy of fourteen, was also a strongly original character whose youthful cynicism and blunt, honest temper had always attracted him. He was a fair scholar, with a possibility of being a better one, and the proposed arrangement with Uncle Ben would not interfere with the discipline of school hours and might help them both. Nevertheless he asked good-humoredly, “But couldn’t you do this more securely and easily in your own house? I might lend you the books, you know, and come to you twice a week.”

Uncle Ben’s radiant face suddenly clouded. “It wouldn’t be exactly the same kind o’ game to me an’ Roop,” he said hesitatingly. “You see thar’s the idea o’ the school-house, ye know, and the restfulness and the quiet, and the gen’ral air o’ study. And the boys around town ez wouldn’t think nothin’ o’ trapsen’ into my cabin if they spotted what I was up to thar, would never dream o’ hunting me here.”

“Very well,” said the master, “let it be here then.” Observing that his companion seemed to be struggling with an inarticulate gratitude and an apparently inextricable buckskin purse in his pocket, he added quietly, “I’ll set you a few copies to commence with,” and began to lay out a few unfinished examples of Master Johnny Filgee’s scholastic achievements.

“After thanking YOU, Mr. Ford,” said Uncle Ben, faintly, “ef you’ll jest kinder signify, you know, what you consider a fair”—

Mr. Ford turned quickly and dexterously offered his hand to his companion in such a manner that he was obliged to withdraw his own from his pocket to grasp it in return. “You’re very welcome,” said the master, “and as I can only permit this sort of thing gratuitously, you’d better NOT let me know that you propose giving anything even to Rupert.” He shook Uncle Ben’s perplexed hand again,

¹ Two bits, i. e., twenty-five cents.

briefly explained what he had to do, and saying that he would now leave him alone a few minutes, he took his hat and walked towards the door.

“Then you reckon,” said Uncle Ben slowly, regarding the work before him, “that I’d better jest chuck them Dobell fellers overboard?”

“I certainly should,” responded the master with infinite gravity.

“And sorter waltz in fresh, like one them children?”

“Like a child,” nodded the master as he left the porch.

A few moments later, as he was finishing his cigar in the clearing, he paused to glance in at the school-room window. Uncle Ben, stripped of his coat and waistcoat, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up on his powerful arms, had evidently cast Dobell and all misleading extraneous aid aside, and with the perspiration standing out on his foolish forehead, and his perplexed face close to the master’s desk, was painfully groping along towards the light in the tottering and devious tracks of Master Johnny Filgee, like a very child indeed!

CHAPTER II

As the children were slowly straggling to their places the next morning, the master waited for an opportunity to speak to Rupert. That beautiful but scarcely amiable youth was, as usual, surrounded and impeded by a group of his small female admirers, for whom, it is but just to add, he had a supreme contempt. Possibly it was this healthy quality that inclined the master towards him, and it was consequently with some satisfaction that he overheard fragments of his openly disparaging comments upon his worshippers.

“There!” to Clarinda Jones, “don’t flop! And don’t YOU,” to Octavia Dean, “go on breathing over my head like that. If there’s anything I hate it’s having a girl breathing round me. Yes, you were! I felt it in my hair. And YOU too—you’re always snoopin’ and snoodgin’. Oh, yes, you want to know WHY I’ve got an extry copy-book and another ‘Rithmetic, Miss Curiosity. Well, what would you give to know? Want to see if they’re PRETTY” (with infinite scorn at the adjective). “No, they ain’t PRETTY. That’s all you girls think about—what’s PRETTY and what’s curious! Quit now! Come! Don’t ye see teacher lookin’ at you? Ain’t you ashamed?”

He caught the master’s beckoning eye and came forward, slightly abashed, with a flush of irritation still on his handsome face, and his chestnut curls slightly ruffled. One, which Octavia had covertly accented by twisting round her forefinger, stood up like a crest on his head.

“I’ve told Uncle Ben that you might help him here after school hours,” said the master, taking him aside. “You may therefore omit your writing exercise in the morning and do it in the afternoon.”

The boy’s dark eyes sparkled. “And if it would be all the same to you, sir,” he added earnestly, “you might sorter give out in school that I was to be kept in.”

“I’m afraid that would hardly do,” said the master, much amused. “But why?”

Rupert’s color deepened. “So ez to keep them darned girls from foolin’ round me and followin’ me back here.”

“We will attend to that,” said the master smiling; a moment after he added more seriously, “I suppose your father knows that you are to receive money for this? And he doesn’t object?”

“He! Oh no!” returned Rupert with a slight look of astonishment, and the same general suggestion of patronizing his progenitor that he had previously shown to his younger brother. “You needn’t mind HIM.” In reality Filgee pere, a widower of two years’ standing, had tacitly allowed the discipline of his family to devolve upon Rupert. Remembering this, the master could only say, “Very well,” and good-naturedly dismiss the pupil to his seat and the subject from his mind. The last laggard had just slipped in, the master had glanced over the occupied benches with his hand upon his warning bell, when there was a quick step on the gravel, a flutter of skirts like the sound of alighting birds, and a young woman lightly entered.

In the rounded, untouched, and untroubled freshness of her cheek and chin, and the forward droop of her slender neck, she appeared a girl of fifteen; in her developed figure and the maturer drapery of her full skirts she seemed a woman; in her combination of naive recklessness and perfect understanding of her person she was both. In spite of a few school-books that jauntily swung from a strap in her gloved hand, she bore no resemblance to a pupil; in her pretty gown of dotted muslin with bows of blue ribbon on the skirt and corsage, and a cluster of roses in her belt, she was as inconsistent and incongruous to the others as a fashion-plate would have been in the dry and dog-eared pages before them. Yet she carried it off with a demure mingling of the naivete of youth and the aplomb of a woman, and as she swept down the narrow aisle, burying a few small wondering heads in the overflow of her flounces, there was no doubt of her reception in the arch smile that dimpled her cheek. Dropping a half curtsy to the master, the only suggestion of her equality with the others, she took her place at one of the larger desks, and resting her elbow on the lid began to quietly remove her gloves. It was Cressy McKinstry.

Irritated and disturbed at the girl's unceremonious entrance, the master for the moment recognized her salutation coldly, and affected to ignore her elaborate appearance. The situation was embarrassing. He could not decline to receive her as she was no longer accompanied by her lover, nor could he plead entire ignorance of her broken engagement; while to point out the glaring inappropriateness of costume would be a fresh interference he knew Indian Spring would scarcely tolerate. He could only accept such explanation as she might choose to give. He rang his bell as much to avert the directed eyes of the children as to bring the scene to a climax.

She had removed her gloves and was standing up.

"I reckon I can go on where I left off?" she said lazily, pointing to the books she had brought with her.

"For the present," said the master dryly.

The first class was called. Later, when his duty brought him to her side, he was surprised to find that she was evidently already prepared with consecutive lessons, as if she were serenely unconscious of any doubt of her return, and as coolly as if she had only left school the day before. Her studies were still quite elementary, for Cressy McKinstry had never been a brilliant scholar, but he perceived, with a cynical doubt of its permanency, that she had bestowed unusual care upon her present performance. There was moreover a certain defiance in it, as if she had resolved to stop any objection to her return on the score of deficiencies. He was obliged in self-defence to take particular note of some rings she wore, and a large bracelet that ostentatiously glittered on her white arm—which had already attracted the attention of her companions, and prompted the audible comment from Johnny Filgee that it was "truly gold." Without meeting her eyes he contented himself with severely restraining the glances of the children that wandered in her direction. She had never been quite popular with the school in her previous role of fiancée, and only Octavia Dean and one or two older girls appreciated its mysterious fascination; while the beautiful Rupert, secure in his avowed predilection for the middle-aged wife of the proprietor of the Indian Spring hotel, looked upon her as a precocious chit with more than the usual propensity to objectionable "breathing." Nevertheless the master was irritatingly conscious of her presence—a presence which now had all the absurdity of her ridiculous love-experiences superadded to it. He tried to reason with himself that it was only a phase of frontier life, which ought to have amused him. But it did not. The intrusion of this preposterous girl seemed to disarrange the discipline of his life as well as of his school. The usual vague, far-off dreams in which he was in the habit of indulging during school-hours, dreams that were perhaps superinduced by the remoteness of his retreat and a certain restful sympathy in his little auditors, which had made him—the grown-up dreamer—acceptable to them in his gentle understanding of their needs and weaknesses, now seemed to have vanished forever.

At recess, Octavia Dean, who had drawn near Cressy and reached up to place her arm round the older girl's waist, glanced at her with a patronizing smile born of some rapid free-masonry, and laughingly retired with the others. The master at his desk, and Cressy who had halted in the aisle were left alone.

"I have had no intimation yet from your father or mother that you were coming back to school again," he began. "But I suppose THEY have decided upon your return?"

An uneasy suspicion of some arrangement with her former lover had prompted the emphasis.

The young girl looked at him with languid astonishment. "I reckon paw and maw ain't no objection," she said with the same easy ignoring of parental authority that had characterized Rupert Filgee, and which seemed to be a local peculiarity. "Maw DID offer to come yer and see you, but I told her she needn't bother."

She rested her two hands behind her on the edge of a desk, and leaned against it, looking down upon the toe of her smart little shoe which was describing a small semicircle beyond the hem of her gown. Her attitude, which was half-defiant, half-indolent, brought out the pretty curves of her waist and shoulders. The master noticed it and became a trifle more austere.

“Then I am to understand that this is a permanent thing?” he asked coldly.

“What’s that?” said Cressy interrogatively.

“Am I to understand that you intend coming regularly to school?” repeated the master curtly, “or is this merely an arrangement for a few days—until”—

“Oh,” said Cressy comprehendingly, lifting her unabashed blue eyes to his, “you mean THAT. Oh, THAT’S broke off. Yes,” she added contemptuously, making a larger semicircle with her foot, “that’s over—three weeks ago.”

“And Seth Davis—does HE intend returning too?”

“He!” She broke into a light girlish laugh. “I reckon not much! S’long’s I’m here, at least.” She had just lifted herself to a sitting posture on the desk, so that her little feet swung clear of the floor in their saucy dance. Suddenly she brought her heels together and alighted. “So that’s all?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Kin I go now?”

“Yes.”

She laid her books one on the top of the other and lingered an instant.

“Been quite well?” she asked with indolent politeness.

“Yes—thank you.”

“You’re lookin’ right peart.”

She walked with a Southern girl’s undulating languor to the door, opened it, then charged suddenly upon Octavia Dean, twirled her round in a wild waltz and bore her away; appearing a moment after on the playground demurely walking with her arm around her companion’s waist in an ostentatious confidence at once lofty, exclusive, and exasperating to the smaller children.

When school was dismissed that afternoon and the master had remained to show Rupert Filgee how to prepare Uncle Ben’s tasks, and had given his final instructions to his youthful vicegerent, that irascible Adonis unburdened himself querulously:

“Is Cressy McKinstry comin’ reg’lar, Mr. Ford?”

“She is,” said the master dryly. After a pause he asked, “Why?”

Rupert’s curls had descended on his eyebrows in heavy discontent. “It’s mighty rough, jest ez a feller reckons he’s got quit of her and her jackass bo’, to hev her prancin’ back inter school agin, and rigged out like ez if she’d been to a fire in a milliner’s shop.”

“You shouldn’t allow your personal dislikes, Rupert, to provoke you to speak of a fellow-scholar in that way—and a young lady, too,” corrected the master dryly.

“The woods is full o’ sich feller-scholars and sich young ladies, if yer keer to go a gunning for ‘em,” said Rupert with dark and slangy significance. “Ef I’d known she was comin’ back I’d”—he stopped and brought his sunburnt fist against the seam of his trousers with a boyish gesture, “I’d hev jist”—

“What?” said the master sharply.

“I’d hev played hookey till she left school agin! It moun’t hev bin so long, neither,” he added with a mysterious chuckle.

“That will do,” said the master peremptorily. “For the present you’ll attend to your duty and try to make Uncle Ben see you’re something more than a foolish, prejudiced school-boy, or,” he added significantly, “he and I may both repent our agreement. Let me have a good account of you both when I return.”

He took his hat from its peg on the wall, and in obedience to a suddenly formed resolution left the school-room to call upon the parents of Cressy McKinstry. He was not quite certain what he should say, but, after his habit, would trust to the inspiration of the moment. At the worst he could resign a situation that now appeared to require more tact and delicacy than seemed consistent with his position, and he was obliged to confess to himself that he had lately suspected that his present occupation—the temporary expedient of a poor but clever young man of twenty—was scarcely bringing him nearer a

realization of his daily dreams. For Mr. Jack Ford was a youthful pilgrim who had sought his fortune in California so lightly equipped that even in the matter of kin and advisers he was deficient. That prospective fortune had already eluded him in San Francisco, had apparently not waited for him in Sacramento, and now seemed never to have been at Indian Spring. Nevertheless, when he was once out of sight of the school-house he lit a cigar, put his hands in his pockets, and strode on with the cheerfulness of that youth to which all things are possible.

The children had already dispersed as mysteriously and completely as they had arrived. Between him and the straggling hamlet of Indian Spring the landscape seemed to be without sound or motion. The wooded upland or ridge on which the schoolhouse stood, half a mile further on, began to slope gradually towards the river, on whose banks, seen from that distance, the town appeared to have been scattered irregularly or thrown together hastily, as if cast ashore by some overflow—the Cosmopolitan Hotel drifting into the Baptist church, and dragging in its tail of wreckage two saloons and a blacksmith's shop; while the County Court-house was stranded in solitary grandeur in a waste of gravel half a mile away. The intervening flat was still gashed and furrowed by the remorseless engines of earlier gold-seekers.

Mr. Ford was in little sympathy with this unsuccessful record of frontier endeavor—the fortune HE had sought did not seem to lie in that direction—and his eye glanced quickly beyond it to the pine-crested hills across the river, whose primeval security was so near and yet so inviolable, or back again to the trail he was pursuing along the ridge. The latter prospect still retained its semi-savage character in spite of the occasional suburban cottages of residents, and the few outlying farms or ranches of the locality. The grounds of the cottages were yet uncleared of underbrush; bear and catamount still prowled around the rude fences of the ranches; the late alleged experience of the infant Snyder was by no means improbable or unprecedented.

A light breeze was seeking the heated flat and river, and thrilling the leaves around him with the strong vitality of the forest. The vibrating cross-lights and tremulous chequers of shade cast by the stirred foliage seemed to weave a fantastic net around him as he walked. The quaint odors of certain woodland herbs known to his scholars, and religiously kept in their desks, or left like votive offerings on the threshold of the school-house, recalled all the primitive simplicity and delicious wildness of the little temple he had left. Even in the mischievous glances of evasive squirrels and the moist eyes of the contemplative rabbits there were faint suggestions of some of his own truants. The woods were trembling with gentle memories of the independence he had always known here—of that sweet and grave retreat now so ridiculously invaded.

He began to hesitate, with one of those revulsions of sentiment characteristic of his nature: Why should he bother himself about this girl after all? Why not make up his mind to accept her as his predecessor had done? Why was it necessary for him to find her inconsistent with his ideas of duty to his little flock and his mission to them? Was he not assuming a sense of decorum that was open to misconception? The absurdity of her school costume, and any responsibility it incurred, rested not with him but with her parents. What right had he to point it out to them, and above all how was he to do it? He halted irresolutely at what he believed was his sober second thought, but which, like most reflections that take that flattering title, was only a reaction as impulsive and illogical as the emotion that preceded it.

Mr. McKinstry's "snake rail" fence was already discernible in the lighter opening of the woods, not far from where he had halted. As he stood there in hesitation, the pretty figure and bright gown of Cressy McKinstry suddenly emerged from a more secluded trail that intersected his own at an acute angle a few rods ahead of him. She was not alone, but was accompanied by a male figure whose arm she had evidently just dislodged from her waist. He was still trying to resume his lost vantage; she was as resolutely evading him with a certain nymph-like agility, while the sound of her half-laughing, half-irate protest could be faintly heard. Without being able to identify the face or figure of her companion at that distance, he could see that it was NOT her former betrothed, Seth Davis.

A superior smile crossed his face; he no longer hesitated, but at once resumed his former path. For some time Cressy and her companion moved on quietly before him. Then on reaching the rail-fence they turned abruptly to the right, were lost for an instant in the intervening thicket, and the next moment Cressy appeared alone, crossing the meadow in a shorter cut towards the house, having either scaled the fence or slipped through some familiar gap. Her companion had disappeared. Whether they had noticed that they were observed he could not determine. He kept steadily along the trail that followed the line of fence to the lane that led directly to the farm-building, and pushed open the front gate as Cressy's light dress vanished round an angle at the rear of the house.

The house of the McKinstry's rose, or rather stretched, itself before him, in all the lazy ugliness of Southwestern architecture. A collection of temporary make-shifts of boards, of logs, of canvas, prematurely decayed, and in some instances abandoned for a newer erection, or degraded to mere outhouses—it presented with singular frankness the nomadic and tentative disposition of its founder. It had been repaired without being improved; its additions had seemed only to extend its primitive ugliness over a larger space. Its roofs were roughly shingled or rudely boarded and battened, and the rafters of some of its “lean-to's” were simply covered with tarred canvas. As if to settle any doubt of the impossibility of this heterogeneous mass ever taking upon itself any picturesque combination, a small building of corrugated iron, transported in sections from some remoter locality, had been set up in its centre. The McKinstry ranch had long been an eyesore to the master: even that morning he had been mutely wondering from what convulsion of that hideous chrysalis the bright butterfly Cressy had emerged. It was with a renewal of this curiosity that he had just seen her flutter back to it again.

A yellow dog who had observed him hesitating in doubt where he should enter, here yawned, rose from the sunlight where he had been blinking, approached the master with languid politeness, and then turned towards the iron building as if showing him the way. Mr. Ford followed him cautiously, painfully conscious that his hypocritical canine introducer was only availing himself of an opportunity to gain ingress into the house, and was leading him as a responsible accomplice to probable exposure and disgrace. His expectation was quickly realized: a lazily querulous, feminine outcry, with the words, “Yer's that darned hound agin!” came from an adjacent room, and his exposed and abashed companion swiftly retreated past him into the road again. Mr. Ford found himself alone in a plainly-furnished sitting-room confronting the open door leading to another apartment at which the figure of a woman, preceded hastily by a thrown dishcloth, had just appeared. It was Mrs. McKinstry; her sleeves were rolled up over her red but still shapely arms, and as she stood there wiping them on her apron, with her elbows advanced, and her closed hands raised alternately in the air, there was an odd pugilistic suggestion in her attitude. It was not lessened on her sudden discovery of the master by her retreating backwards with her hands up and her elbows still well forward as if warily retiring to an imaginary “corner.”

Mr. Ford at once tactfully stepped back from the doorway. “I beg your pardon,” he said, delicately addressing the opposite wall, “but I found the door open and I followed the dog.”

“That's just one of his pizenous tricks,” responded Mrs. McKinstry dolefully from within. “On'y last week he let in a Chinaman, and in the nat'ral hustlin' that follered he managed to help himself outer the pork bar'l. There ain't no shade o' cussedness that or'nary hound ain't up to.” Yet notwithstanding this ominous comparison she presently made her appearance with her sleeves turned down, her black woollen dress “tidied,” and a smile of fatigued but not unkindly welcome and protection on her face. Dusting a chair with her apron and placing it before the master, she continued maternally, “Now that you're here, set ye right down and make yourself to home. My men folks are all out o' door, but some of 'em's sure to happen in soon for suthin'; that day ain't yet created that they don't come huntin' up Mammy McKinstry every five minutes for this thing or that.”

The glow of a certain hard pride burned through the careworn languor of her brown cheek. What she had said was strangely true. This raw-boned woman before him, although scarcely middle-

aged, had for years occupied a self-imposed maternal and protecting relation, not only to her husband and brothers, but to the three or four men, who as partners, or hired hands, lived at the ranch. An inherited and trained sympathy with what she called her “boys’s” and her “men folk,” and their needs had partly unsexed her. She was a fair type of a class not uncommon on the Southwestern frontier; women who were ruder helpmeets of their rude husbands and brothers, who had shared their privations and sufferings with surly, masculine endurance, rather than feminine patience; women who had sent their loved ones to hopeless adventure or terrible vendetta as a matter of course, or with partisan fury; who had devotedly nursed the wounded to keep alive the feud, or had received back their dead dry-eyed and revengeful. Small wonder that Cressy McKinstry had developed strangely under this sexless relationship. Looking at the mother, albeit not without a certain respect, Mr. Ford found himself contrasting her with the daughter’s graceful femininity, and wondering where in Cressy’s youthful contour the possibility of the grim figure before him was even now hidden.

“Hiram allowed to go over to the schoolhouse and see you this mornin’,” said Mrs. McKinstry, after a pause; “but I reckon ez how he had to look up stock on the river. The cattle are that wild this time o’ year, huntin’ water, and hangin’ round the tules, that my men are nigh worried out o’ their butes with ‘em. Hank and Jim ain’t been off their mustangs since sun up, and Hiram, what with partrollen’ the West Boundary all night, watchin’ stakes whar them low down Harrisons hev been trespassin’—hasn’t put his feet to the ground in fourteen hours. Mebbe you noticed Hiram ez you kem along? Ef so, ye didn’t remember what kind o’ shootin’ irons he had with him? I see his rifle over yon. Like ez not he’z only got his six-shooter, and them Harrisons are mean enough to lay for him at long range. But,” she added, returning to the less important topic, “I s’pose Cressy came all right.”

“Yes,” said the master hopelessly.

“I reckon she looked so,” continued Mrs. McKinstry, with tolerant abstraction. “She allowed to do herself credit in one of them new store gownds that she got at Sacramento. At least that’s what some of our men said. Late years, I ain’t kept tech with the fashions myself.” She passed her fingers explanatorily down the folds of her own coarse gown, but without regret or apology.

“She seemed well prepared in her lessons,” said the master, abandoning for the moment that criticism of his pupil’s dress, which he saw was utterly futile, “but am I to understand that she is coming regularly to school—that she is now perfectly free to give her entire attention to her studies—that—that—her—engagement is broken off?”

“Why, didn’t she tell ye?” echoed Mrs. McKinstry in languid surprise.

“SHE certainly did,” said the master with slight embarrassment, “but”—

“Ef SHE said so,” interrupted Mrs. McKinstry abstractedly, “she oughter know, and you kin tie to what she says.”

“But as I’m responsible to PARENTS and not to scholars for the discipline of my school,” returned the young man a little stiffly, “I thought it my duty to hear it from YOU.”

“That’s so,” said Mrs. McKinstry meditatively; “then I reckon you’d better see Hiram. That ar’ Seth Davis engagement was a matter of hern and her father’s, and not in MY line. I s’pose that Hiram nat’rally allows to set the thing square to you and inquirin’ friends.”

“I hope you understand,” said the master, slightly resenting the classification, “that my reason for inquiring about the permanency of your daughter’s attendance was simply because it might be necessary to arrange her studies in a way more suitable to her years; perhaps even to suggest to you that a young ladies’ seminary might be more satisfactory”—

“Sartain, sartain,” interrupted Mrs. McKinstry hurriedly, but whether from evasion of annoying suggestion or weariness of the topic, the master could not determine. “You’d better speak to Hiram about it. On’y,” she hesitated slightly, “ez he’s got now sorter set and pinte towards your school, and is a trifle worried with stock and them Harrisons, ye might tech it lightly. He oughter be along yer now. I can’t think what keeps him.” Her eye wandered again with troubled preoccupation to the

corner where her husband's Sharps' rifle stood. Suddenly she raised her voice as if forgetful of Mr. Ford's presence.

"O Cressy!"

"O Maw!"

The response came from the inner room. The next moment Cressy appeared at the door with an odd half-lazy defiance in her manner, which the master could not understand except upon the hypothesis that she had been listening. She had already changed her elaborate toilet for a long clinging, coarse blue gown, that accented the graceful curves of her slight, petticoat-less figure. Nodding her head towards the master, she said, "Howdy?" and turned to her mother, who practically ignored their personal acquaintance. "Cressy," she said, "Dad's gone and left his Sharps' yer, d'ye mind takin' it along to meet him, afore he passes the Boundary corner. Ye might tell him the teacher's yer, wantin' to see him."

"One moment," said the master, as the young girl carelessly stepped to the corner and lifted the weapon. "Let ME take it. It's all on my way back to school and I'll meet him."

Mrs. McKinstry looked perturbed. Cressy opened her clear eyes on the master with evident surprise. "No, Mr. Ford," said Mrs. McKinstry, with her former maternal manner. "Ye'd better not mix yourself up with these yer doin's. Ye've no call to do it, and Cressy has; it's all in the family. But it's outer YOUR line, and them Harrison whelps go to your school. Fancy the teacher takin' weppins betwixt and between!"

"It's fitter work for the teacher than for one of his scholars, and a young lady at that," said Mr. Ford gravely, as he took the rifle from the hands of the half-amused, half-reluctant girl. "It's quite safe with me, and I promise I shall deliver it into Mr. McKinstry's hands and none other."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be ez likely to be gin'rally noticed ez it would if one of US carried it," murmured Mrs. McKinstry in confidential abstraction, gazing at her daughter sublimely unconscious of the presence of a third party.

"You're quite right," said the master composedly, throwing the rifle over his shoulder and turning towards the door. "So I'll say good-afternoon, and try and find your husband."

Mrs. McKinstry constrainedly plucked at the folds of her coarse gown. "Ye'll like a drink afore ye go," she said, in an ill-concealed tone of relief. "I clean forgot my manners. Cressy, fetch out that demijohn."

"Not for me, thank you," returned Mr. Ford smiling.

"Oh, I see—you're temperance, nat'rally," said Mrs. McKinstry with a tolerant sigh.

"Hardly that," returned the master, "I follow no rule, I drink sometimes—but not to-day."

Mrs. McKinstry's dark face contracted. "Don't you see, Maw," struck in Cressy quickly. "Teacher drinks sometimes, but he don't USE whiskey. That's all."

Her mother's face relaxed. Cressy slipped out of the door before the master, and preceded him to the gate. When she had reached it she turned and looked into his face.

"What did Maw say to yer about seein' me just now?"

"I don't understand you."

"To your seein' me and Joe Masters on the trail?"

"She said nothing."

"Humph," said Cressy meditatively. "What was it you told her about it?"

"Nothing."

"Then you DIDN'T see us?"

"I saw you with some one—I don't know whom."

"And you didn't tell Maw?"

"I did not. It was none of my business."

He instantly saw the utter inconsistency of this speech in connection with the reason he believed he had in coming. But it was too late to recall it, and she was looking at him with a bright but singular expression.

“That Joe Masters is the conceitedest fellow goin’. I told him you could see his foolishness.”

“Ah, indeed.”

Mr. Ford pushed open the gate. As the girl still lingered he was obliged to hold it a moment before passing through.

“Maw couldn’t quite hitch on to your not drinkin’. She reckons you’re like everybody else about yer. That’s where she slips up on you. And everybody else, I kalkilate.”

“I suppose she’s somewhat anxious about your father, and I dare say is expecting me to hurry,” returned the master pointedly.

“Oh, dad’s all right,” said Cressy mischievously. “You’ll come across him over yon, in the clearing. But you’re looking right purty with that gun. It kinder sets you off. You oughter wear one.”

The master smiled slightly, said “Good-by,” and took leave of the girl, but not of her eyes, which were still following him. Even when he had reached the end of the lane and glanced back at the rambling dwelling, she was still leaning on the gate with one foot on the lower rail and her chin cupped in the hollow of her hand. She made a slight gesture, not clearly intelligible at that distance; it might have been a mischievous imitation of the way he had thrown the gun over his shoulder, it might have been a wafted kiss.

The master however continued his way in no very self-satisfied mood. Although he did not regret having taken the place of Cressy as the purveyor of lethal weapons between the belligerent parties, he knew he was tacitly mingling in the feud between people for whom he cared little or nothing. It was true that the Harrisons sent their children to his school, and that in the fierce partisanship of the locality this simple courtesy was open to misconstruction. But he was more uneasily conscious that this mission, so far as Mrs. McKinstry was concerned, was a miserable failure. The strange relations of the mother and daughter perhaps explained much of the girl’s conduct, but it offered no hope of future amelioration. Would the father, “worrited by stock” and boundary quarrels—a man in the habit of cutting Gordian knots with a bowie knife—prove more reasonable? Was there any nearer sympathy between father and daughter? But she had said he would meet McKinstry in the clearing: she was right, for here he was coming forward at a gallop!

CHAPTER III

When within a dozen paces of the master, McKinstry, scarcely checking his mustang, threw himself from the saddle, and with a sharp cut of his riata on the animal's haunches sent him still galloping towards the distant house. Then, with both hands deeply thrust in the side pockets of his long, loose linen coat, he slowly lounged with clanking spurs towards the young man. He was thick-set, of medium height, densely and reddishly bearded, with heavy-lidded pale blue eyes that wore a look of drowsy pain, and after their first wearied glance at the master, seemed to rest anywhere but on him.

"Your wife was sending you your rifle by Cressy," said the master, "but I offered to bring it myself, as I thought it scarcely a proper errand for a young lady. Here it is. I hope you didn't miss it before and don't require it now," he added quietly.

Mr. McKinstry took it in one hand with an air of slightly embarrassed surprise, rested it against his shoulder, and then with the same hand and without removing the other from his pocket, took off his soft felt hat, showed a bullet-hole in its rim, and returned lazily, "It's about half an hour late, but them Harrisons reckoned I was fixed for 'em and war too narvous to draw a clear bead on me."

The moment was evidently not a felicitous one for the master's purpose, but he was determined to go on. He hesitated an instant, when his companion, who seemed to be equally but more sluggishly embarrassed, in a moment of preoccupied perplexity withdrew from his pocket his right hand swathed in a blood-stained bandage, and following some instinctive habit, attempted, as if reflectively, to scratch his head with two stiffened fingers.

"You are hurt," said the master, genuinely shocked, "and here I am detaining you."

"I had my hand up—so," explained McKinstry, with heavy deliberation, "and the ball raked off my little finger after it went through my hat. But that ain't what I wanted to say when I stopped ye. I ain't just kam enough yet," he apologized in the calmest manner, "and I clean forgit myself," he added with perfect self-possession. "But I was kalkilatin' to ask you"—he laid his bandaged hand familiarly on the master's shoulder—"if Cressy kem all right?"

"Perfectly," said the master. "But shan't I walk on home with you, and we can talk together after your wound is attended to?"

"And she looked purty?" continued McKinstry without moving.

"Very."

"And you thought them new store gownds of hers right peart?"

"Yes," said the master. "Perhaps a little too fine for the school, you know," he added insinuatingly, "and"—

"Not for her—not for her," interrupted McKinstry. "I reckon thar's more whar that cam from! Ye needn't fear but that she kin keep up that gait ez long ez Hiram McKinstry hez the runnin' of her."

Mr. Ford gazed hopelessly at the hideous ranch in the distance, at the sky, and the trail before him; then his glance fell upon the hand still upon his shoulder, and he struggled with a final effort. "At another time I'd like to have a long talk with you about your daughter, Mr. McKinstry."

"Talk on," said McKinstry, putting his wounded hand through the master's arm. "I admire to hear you. You're that kam, it does me good."

Nevertheless the master was conscious that his own arm was scarcely as firm as his companion's. It was however useless to draw back now, and with as much tact as he could command he relieved his mind of its purpose. Addressing the obtruding bandage before him, he dwelt upon Cressy's previous attitude in the school, the danger of any relapse, the necessity of her having a more clearly defined position as a scholar, and even the advisability of her being transferred to a more advanced school with a more mature teacher of her own sex. "This is what I wished to say to Mrs. McKinstry to-day," he concluded, "but she referred me to you."

“In course, in course,” said McKinstry, nodding complacently. “She’s a good woman in and around the ranch, and in any doin’s o’ this kind,” he lightly waved his wounded arm in the air, “there ain’t a better, tho’ I say it. She was Blair Rawlins’ darter; she and her brother Clay bein’ the only ones that kem out safe arter their twenty years’ fight with the McEntees in West Kaintuck. But she don’t understand gals ez you and me do. Not that I’m much, ez I orter be more kam. And the old woman jest sized the hull thing when she said SHE hadn’t any hand in Cressy’s engagement. No more she had! And ez far ez that goes, no more did me, nor Seth Davis, nor Cressy.” He paused, and lifting his heavy-lidded eyes to the master for the second time, said reflectively, “Ye mustn’t mind my tellin’ ye—ez betwixt man and man—that THE one ez is most responsible for the makin’ and breakin’ o’ that engagement is YOU!”

“Me!” said the master in utter bewilderment.

“You!” repeated McKinstry quietly, reinstalling the hand Ford had attempted to withdraw. “I ain’t sayin’ ye either know’d it or kalkilated on it. But it war so. Ef ye’d hark to me, and meander on a little, I’ll tell ye HOW it war. I don’t mind walkin’ a piece YOUR way, for if we go towards the ranch, and the hounds see me, they’ll set up a racket and bring out the old woman, and then good-by to any confidential talk betwixt you and me. And I’m, somehow, kammer out yer.”

He moved slowly down the trail, still holding Ford’s arm confidentially, although, owing to his large protecting manner, he seemed to offer a ridiculous suggestion of supporting HIM with his wounded member.

“When you first kem to Injin Spring,” he began, “Seth and Cressy was goin’ to school, boy and girl like, and nothin’ more. They’d known each other from babies—the Davises bein’ our neighbors in Kaintuck, and emigraten’ with us from St. Joe. Seth mout hev cottoned to Cress, and Cress to him, in course o’ time, and there wasn’t anythin’ betwixt the families to hev kept ‘em from marryin’ when they wanted. But there never war any words passed, and no engagement.”

“But,” interrupted Ford hastily, “my predecessor, Mr. Martin, distinctly told me that there was, and that it was with YOUR permission.”

“That’s only because you noticed suthin’ the first day you looked over the school with Martin. ‘Dad,’ sez Cress to me, ‘that new teacher’s very peart; and he’s that keen about noticin’ me and Seth that I reckon you’d better giv out that we’re engaged.’ ‘But are you?’ sez I. ‘It’ll come to that in the end,’ sez Cress, ‘and if that yer teacher hez come here with Northern ideas o’ society, it’s just ez well to let him see Injin Spring ain’t entirely in the woods about them things either.’ So I agreed, and Martin told you it was all right; Cress and Seth was an engaged couple, and you was to take no notice. And then YOU ups and objects to the hull thing, and allows that courtin’ in school, even among engaged pupils, ain’t proper.”

The master turned his eyes with some uneasiness to the face of Cressy’s father. It was heavy but impassive.

“I don’t mind tellin’ you, now that it’s over, what happened. The trouble with me, Mr. Ford, is—I ain’t kam! and YOU air, and that’s what got me. For when I heard what you’d said, I got on that mustang and started for the school-house to clean you out and giv’ you five minutes to leave Injin Spring. I don’t know ez you remember that day. I’d kalkilated my time so ez to ketch ye comin’ out o’ school, but I was too airy. I hung around out o’ sight, and then hitched my hoss to a buckeye and peeped inter the winder to hev a good look at ye. It was very quiet and kam. There was squirrels over the roof, yellow-jackets and bees dronin’ away, and kinder sleeping-like all around in the air, and jay-birds twitterin’ in the shingles, and they never minded me. You were movin’ up and down among them little gals and boys, liftin’ up their heads and talkin’ to ‘em softly and quiet like, ez if you was one of them yourself. And they looked contented and kam. And onct—I don’t know if YOU remember it—you kem close up to the winder with your hands behind you, and looked out so kam and quiet and so far off, ez if everybody else outside the school was miles away from you. It kem to me then that I’d given a heap to hev had the old woman see you thar. It kem to me, Mr. Ford, that

there wasn't any place for ME thar; and it kem to me, too—and a little rough like—that mebbe there wasn't any place there for MY Cress either! So I rode away without disturbin' you nor the birds nor the squirrels. Talkin' with Cress that night, she said ez how it was a fair sample of what happened every day, and that you'd always treated her fair like the others. So she allowed that she'd go down to Sacramento, and get some things agin her and Seth bein' married next month, and she reckoned she wouldn't trouble you nor the school agin. Hark till I've done, Mr. Ford," he continued, as the young man made a slight movement of deprecation. "Well, I agreed. But arter she got to Sacramento and bought some fancy fixin's, she wrote to me and sez ez how she'd been thinkin' the hull thing over, and she reckoned that she and Seth were too young to marry, and the engagement had better be broke. And I broke it for her."

"But how?" asked the bewildered master.

"Gin'rally with this gun," returned McKinstry with slow gravity, indicating the rifle he was carrying, "for I ain't kam. I let on to Seth's father that if I ever found Seth and Cressy together again, I'd shoot him. It made a sort o' coolness betwixt the families, and hez given some comfort to them low-down Harrisons; but even the law, I reckon, recognizes a father's rights. And ez Cress sez, now ez Seth's out o' the way, thar ain't no reason why she can't go back to school and finish her eddication. And I reckoned she was right. And we both agreed that ez she'd left school to git them store clothes, it was only fair that she'd give the school the benefit of 'em."

The case seemed more hopeless than ever. The master knew that the man beside him might hardly prove as lenient to a second objection at his hand. But that very reason, perhaps, impelled him, now that he knew his danger, to consider it more strongly as a duty, and his pride revolted from a possible threat underlying McKinstry's confidences. Nevertheless he began gently:

"But you are quite sure you won't regret that you didn't avail yourself of this broken engagement, and your daughter's outfit—to send her to some larger boarding-school in Sacramento or San Francisco? Don't you think she may find it dull, and soon tire of the company of mere children when she has already known the excitement of"—he was about to say "a lover," but checked himself, and added, "a young girl's freedom?"

"Mr. Ford," returned McKinstry, with the slow and fatuous misconception of a one-ideaed man, "when I said just now that, lookin' inter that kam, peaceful school of yours, I didn't find a place for Cress, it warn't because I didn't think she OUGHTER hev a place thar. Thar was that thar wot she never had ez a little girl with me and the old woman, and that she couldn't find ez a grownd up girl in any boarding-school—the home of a child; that kind o' innocent foolishness that I sometimes reckon must hev slipped out our emigrant wagon comin' across the plains, or got left behind at St. Joe. She was a grownd girl fit to marry afore she was a child. She had young fellers a-sparkin' her afore she ever played with 'em ez boy and girl. I don't mind tellin' you that it wern't in the natur of Blair Rawlins' darter to teach her own darter any better, for all she's been a mighty help to me. So if it's all the same to you, Mr. Ford, we won't talk about a grownd up school; I'd rather Cress be a little girl again among them other children. I should be a powerful sight more kam if I knowed that when I was away huntin' stock or fightin' stakes with them Harrisons, that she was a settin' there with them and the birds and the bees, and listenin' to them and to you. Mebbe there's been a little too many scrimmages goin' on round the ranch sence she's been a child; mebbe she orter know suthin' more of a man than a feller who sparks her and fights for her."

The master was silent. Had this dull, narrow-minded partisan stumbled upon a truth that had never dawned upon his own broader comprehension? Had this selfish savage and literally red-handed frontier brawler been moved by some dumb instinct of the power of gentleness to understand his daughter's needs better than he? For a moment he was staggered. Then he thought of Cressy's later flirtations with Joe Masters, and her concealment of their meeting from her mother. Had she deceived her father also? Or was not the father deceiving him with this alternate suggestion of threat and of kindness—of power and weakness. He had heard of this cruel phase of Southwestern cunning

before. With the feeble sophistry of the cynic he mistrusted the good his scepticism could not understand. Howbeit, glancing sideways at the slumbering savagery of the man beside him, and his wounded hand, he did not care to show his lack of confidence. He contented himself with that equally feeble resource of weak humanity in such cases—good-natured indifference. “All right,” he said carelessly; “I’ll see what can be done. But are you quite sure you are fit to go home alone? Shall I accompany you?” As McKinstry waived the suggestion with a gesture, he added lightly, as if to conclude the interview, “I’ll report progress to you from time to time, if you like.”

“To ME,” emphasized McKinstry; “not over THAR,” indicating the ranch. “But p’rhaps you wouldn’t mind my ridin’ by and lookin’ in at the school-room winder onct in a while? Ah—you WOULD,” he added, with the first deepening of color he had shown. “Well, never mind.”

“You see it might distract the children from their lessons,” explained the master gently, who had however contemplated with some concern the infinite delight which a glimpse of McKinstry’s fiery and fatuous face at the window would awaken in Johnny Filgee’s infant breast.

“Well, no matter!” returned McKinstry slowly. “Ye don’t keer, I s’pose, to come over to the hotel and take suthin’? A julep or a smash?”

“I shouldn’t think of keeping you a moment longer from Mrs. McKinstry,” said the master, looking at his companion’s wounded hand. “Thank you all the same. Good-by.”

They shook hands, McKinstry transferring his rifle to the hollow of his elbow to offer his unwounded left. The master watched him slowly resume his way towards the ranch. Then with a half uneasy and half pleasurable sense that he had taken some step whose consequences were more important than he would at present understand, he turned in the opposite direction to the school-house. He was so preoccupied that it was not until he had nearly reached it that he remembered Uncle Ben. With an odd recollection of McKinstry’s previous performance, he approached the school from the thicket in the rear and slipped noiselessly to the open window with the intention of looking in. But the school-house, far from exhibiting that “kam” and studious abstraction which had so touched the savage breast of McKinstry, was filled with the accents of youthful and unrestrained vituperation. The voice of Rupert Filgee came sharply to the master’s astonished ears.

“You needn’t try to play off Dobell or Mitchell on ME—you hear! Much YOU know of either, don’t you? Look at that copy. If Johnny couldn’t do better than that, I’d lick him. Of course it’s the pen—it ain’t your stodgy fingers—oh, no! P’raps you’d like to hev a few more boxes o’ quills and gold pens and Gillot’s best thrown in, for two bits a lesson? I tell you what! I’ll throw up the contract in another minit! There goes another quill busted! Look here, what YOU want ain’t a pen, but a clothes-pin and a split nail! That’ll about jibe with your dilikit gait.”

The master at once stepped to the window and, unobserved, took a quick survey of the interior. Following some ingenious idea of his own regarding fitness, the beautiful Filgee had induced Uncle Ben to seat himself on the floor before one of the smallest desks, presumably his brother’s, in an attitude which, while it certainly gave him considerable elbow-room for those contortions common to immature penmanship, offered his youthful instructor a superior eminence, from which he hovered, occasionally swooping down upon his grown-up pupil like a mischievous but graceful jay. But Mr. Ford’s most distinct impression was that, far from resenting the derogatory position and the abuse that accompanied it, Uncle Ben not only beamed upon his persecutor with unquenchable good humor, but with undisguised admiration, and showed not the slightest inclination to accept his proposed resignation.

“Go slow, Roop,” he said cheerfully. “You was onct a boy yourself. Nat’rally I kalkilate to stand all the damages. You’ve got ter waste some powder over a blast like this yer, way down to the bed rock. Next time I’ll bring my own pens.”

“Do. Some from the Dobell school you uster go to,” suggested the darkly ironical Rupert. “They was iron-clad injin-rubber, warn’t they?”

“Never you mind wot they were,” said Uncle Ben good-humoredly. “Look at that string of ‘C’s’ in that line. There’s nothing mean about THEM.”

He put his pen between his teeth, raised himself slowly on his legs, and shading his eyes with his hand from the severe perspective of six feet, gazed admiringly down upon his work. Rupert, with his hands in his pockets and his back to the window, cynically assisted at the inspection.

“Wot’s that sick worm at the bottom of the page?” he asked.

“Wot might you think it wos?” said Uncle Ben beamingly.

“Looks like one o’ them snake roots you dig up with a little mud stuck to it,” returned Rupert critically.

“That’s my name.”

They both stood looking at it with their heads very much on one side. “It ain’t so bad as the rest you’ve done. It MIGHT be your name. That ez, it don’t look like anythin’ else,” suggested Rupert, struck with a new idea that it was perhaps more professional occasionally to encourage his pupil. “You might get on in course o’ time. But what are you doin’ all this for?” he asked suddenly.

“Doin’ what?”

“This yer comin’ to school when you ain’t sent, and you ain’t got no call to go—you, a grown-up man!”

The color deepened in Uncle Ben’s face to the back of his ears. “Wot would you giv’ to know, Roop? S’pose I reckoned some day to make a strike and sorter drop inter society easy—eh? S’pose I wanted to be ready to keep up my end with the other fellers, when the time kem? To be able to sling po’try and read novels and sich—eh?”

An expression of infinite and unutterable scorn dawned in the eyes of Rupert. “You do? Well,” he repeated with slow and cutting deliberation, “I’ll tell you what you’re comin’ here for, and the only thing that makes you come.”

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