BRET HARTE

MR. JACK HAMLIN'S MEDIATION

Bret Harte

Mr. Jack Hamlin's Mediation

Harte B.

Mr. Jack Hamlin's Mediation / B. Harte — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Bret Harte
Mr. Jack Hamlin's Mediation

MR. JACK HAMLIN'S MEDIATION

At nightfall it began to rain. The wind arose too, and also began to buffet a small, struggling, nondescript figure, creeping along the trail over the rocky upland meadow towards Rylands's rancho. At times its head was hidden in what appeared to be wings thrown upward from its shoulders; at times its broad-brimmed hat was cocked jauntily on one side, and again the brim was fixed over the face like a visor. At one moment a drifting misshapen mass of drapery, at the next its vague garments, beaten back hard against the figure, revealed outlines far too delicate for that rude enwrapping. For it was Mrs. Rylands herself, in her husband's hat and her "hired man's" old blue army overcoat, returning from the post-office two miles away. The wind continued its aggression until she reached the front door of her newly plastered farmhouse, and then a heavier blast shook the pines above the low-pitched, shingled roof, and sent a shower of arrowy drops after her like a Parthian parting, as she entered. She threw aside the overcoat and hat, and somewhat inconsistently entered the sitting-room, to walk to the window and look back upon the path she had just traversed. The wind and the rain swept down a slope, half meadow, half clearing,—a mile away,—to a fringe of sycamores. A mile further lay the stage road, where, three hours later, her husband would alight on his return from Sacramento. It would be a long wet walk for Joshua Rylands, as their only horse had been borrowed by a neighbor.

In that fading light Mrs. Rylands's oval cheek was shining still from the raindrops, but there was something in the expression of her worried face that might have as readily suggested tears. She was strikingly handsome, yet quite as incongruous an ornament to her surroundings as she had been to her outer wrappings a moment ago. Even the clothes she now stood in hinted an inadaptibility to the weather—the house—the position she occupied in it. A figured silk dress, spoiled rather than overworn, was still of a quality inconsistent with her evident habits, and the lace-edged petticoat that peeped beneath it was draggled with mud and unaccustomed usage. Her glossy black hair, which had been tossed into curls in some foreign fashion, was now wind-blown into a burlesque of it. This incongruity was still further accented by the appearance of the room she had entered. It was coldly and severely furnished, making the chill of the yet damp white plaster unpleasantly obvious. A black harmonium organ stood in one corner, set out with black and white hymn-books; a trestle-like table contained a large Bible; half a dozen black, horsehair-cushioned chairs stood, geometrically distant, against the walls, from which hung four engravings of "Paradise Lost" in black mourning frames; some dried ferns and autumn leaves stood in a vase on the mantelpiece, as if the chill of the room had prematurely blighted them. The coldly glittering grate below was also decorated with withered sprays, as if an attempt had been made to burn them, but was frustrated through damp. Suddenly recalled to a sense of her wet boots and the new carpet, she hurriedly turned away, crossed the hall into the dining-room, and thence passed into the kitchen. The "hired girl," a large-boned Missourian, a daughter of a neighboring woodman, was peeling potatoes at the table. Mrs. Rylands drew a chair before the kitchen stove, and put her wet feet on the hob.

"I'll bet a cooky, Mess Rylands, you've done forgot the vanillar," said the girl, with a certain domestic and confidential familiarity.

Mrs. Rylands started guiltily. She made a miserable feint of looking in her lap and on the table. "I'm afraid I did, Jane, if I didn't bring it in HERE."

"That you didn't," returned Jane. "And I reckon ye forgot that 'ar pepper-sauce for yer husband."

Mrs. Rylands looked up with piteous contrition. “I really don’t know what’s the matter with me. I certainly went into the shop, and had it on my list,—and—really”—

Jane evidently knew her mistress, and smiled with superior toleration. “It’s kinder bewilderin’ goin’ in them big shops, and lookin’ round them stuffed shelves.” The shop at the cross roads and post-office was 14 x 14, but Jane was nurtured on the plains. “Anyhow,” she added good-humoredly, “the expressman is sure to look in as he goes by, and you’ve time to give him the order.”

“But is he SURE to come?” asked Mrs. Rylands anxiously. “Mr. Rylands will be so put out without his pepper-sauce.”

“He’s sure to come ef he knows you’re here. Ye kin always kalkilate on that.”

“Why?” said Mrs. Rylands abstractedly.

“Why? ‘cause he just can’t keep his eyes off ye! That’s why he comes every day,—‘tain’t jest for trade!”

This was quite true, not only of the expressman, but of the butcher and baker, and the “candlestick-maker,” had there been so advanced a vocation at the cross roads. All were equally and curiously attracted by her picturesque novelty. Mrs. Rylands knew this herself, but without vanity or coquettishness. Possibly that was why the other woman told her. She only slightly deepened the lines of discontent in her cheek and said abstractedly, “Well, when he comes, YOU ask him.”

She dried her shoes, put on a pair of slippers that had a faded splendor about them, and went up to her bedroom. Here she hesitated for some time between the sewing-machine and her knitting-needles, but finally settled upon the latter, and a pair of socks for her husband which she had begun a year ago. But she presently despaired of finishing them before he returned, three hours hence, and so applied herself to the sewing-machine. For a little while its singing hum was heard between the blasts that shook the house, but the thread presently snapped, and the machine was put aside somewhat impatiently, with a discontented drawing of the lines around her handsome mouth. Then she began to “tidy” the room, putting a great many things away and bringing out a great many more, a process that was necessarily slow, owing to her falling into attitudes of minute inspection of certain articles of dress, with intervals of trying them on, and observing their effect in her mirror. This kind of interruption also occurred while she was putting away some books that were lying about on chairs and tables, stopping midway to open their pages, becoming interested, and quite finishing one chapter, with the book held close against the window to catch the fading light of day. The feminine reader will gather from this that Mrs. Rylands, though charming, was not facile in domestic duties. She had just glanced at the clock, and lit the candle to again set herself to work, and thus bridge over the two hours more of waiting, when there came a tap at the door. She opened it to Jane.

“There’s an entire stranger downstairs, ez hez got a lame hoss and wants to borry a fresh one.”

“We have none, you know,” said Mrs. Rylands, a little impatiently.

“Thet’s what I told him. Then he wanted to know ef he could lie by here till he could get one or fix up his own hoss.”

“As you like; you know if you can manage it,” said Mrs. Rylands, a little uneasily. “When Mr. Rylands comes you can arrange it between you. Where is he now?”

“In the kitchen.”

“The kitchen!” echoed Mrs. Rylands.

“Yes, ma’am, I showed him into the parlor, but he kinder shivered his shoulders, and reckoned ez how he’d go inter the kitchen. Ye see, ma’am, he was all wet, and his shiny big boots was sloppy. But he ain’t one o’ the stuck-up kind, and he’s willin’ to make hisself cowf’ble before the kitchen stove.”

“Well, then, he don’t want ME,” said Mrs. Rylands, with a relieved voice.

“Yes’m,” said Jane, apparently equally relieved. “Only, I thought I’d just tell you.”

A few minutes later, in crossing the upper hall, Mrs. Rylands heard Jane’s voice from the kitchen raised in rustic laughter. Had she been satirically inclined, she might have understood Jane’s willingness to relieve her mistress of the duty of entertaining the stranger; had she been philosophical,

she might have considered the girl's dreary, monotonous life at the rancho, and made allowance for her joy at this rare interruption of it. But I fear that Mrs. Rylands was neither satirical nor philosophical, and presently, when Jane reentered, with color in her alkaline face, and light in her huckleberry eyes, and said she was going over to the cattle-sheds in the "far pasture," to see if the hired man didn't know of some horse that could be got for the stranger, Mrs. Rylands felt a little bitterness in the thought that the girl would have scarcely volunteered to go all that distance in the rain for HER. Yet, in a few moments she forgot all about it, and even the presence of her guest in the house, and in one of her fitful abstracted employments passed through the dining-room into the kitchen, and had opened the door with an "Oh, Jane!" before she remembered her absence.

The kitchen, lit by a single candle, could be only partly seen by her as she stood with her hand on the lock, although she herself was plainly visible. There was a pause, and then a quiet, self-possessed, yet amused, voice answered:—

"My name isn't Jane, and if you're the lady of the house, I reckon yours wasn't ALWAYS Rylands."

At the sound of the voice Mrs. Rylands threw the door wide open, and as her eyes fell upon the speaker—her unknown guest—she recoiled with a little cry, and a white, startled face. Yet the stranger was young and handsome, dressed with a scrupulousness and elegance which even the stress of travel had not deranged, and he was looking at her with a smile of recognition, mingled with that careless audacity and self-possession which seemed to be the characteristic of his face.

"Jack Hamlin!" she gasped.

"That's me, all the time," he responded easily, "and YOU'RE Nell Montgomery!"

"How did you know I was here? Who told you?" she said impetuously.

"Nobody! never was so surprised in my life! When you opened that door just now you might have knocked me down with a feather." Yet he spoke lazily, with an amused face, and looked at her without changing his position.

"But you MUST have known SOMETHING! It was no mere accident," she went on vehemently, glancing around the room.

"That's where you slip up, Nell," said Hamlin imperturbably. "It WAS an accident and a bad one. My horse lamed himself coming down the grade. I sighted the nearest shanty, where I thought I might get another horse. It happened to be this." For the first time he changed his attitude, and leaned back contemplatively in his chair.

She came towards him quickly. "You didn't use to lie, Jack," she said hesitatingly.

"Couldn't afford it in my business,—and can't now," said Jack cheerfully. "But," he added curiously, as if recognizing something in his companion's agitation, and lifting his brown lashes to her, the window, and the ceiling, "what's all this about? What's your little game here?"

"I'm married," she said, with nervous intensity,—"married, and this is my husband's house!"

"Not married straight out!—regularly fixed?"

"Yes," she said hurriedly.

"One of the boys? Don't remember any Rylands. SPELTER used to be very sweet on you,—but Spelter mightn't have been his real name?"

"None of our lot! No one you ever knew; a—a straight out, square man," she said quickly.

"I say, Nell, look here! You ought to have shown up your cards without even a call. You ought to have told him that you danced at the Casino."

"I did."

"Before he asked you to marry him?"

"Before."

Jack got up from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and looked at her curiously. This Nell Montgomery, this music-hall "dance and song girl," this girl of whom so much had been SAID and so little PROVED! Well, this was becoming interesting.

"You don't understand," she said, with nervous feverishness; "you remember after that row I had with Jim, that night the manager gave us a supper,—when he treated me like a dog?"

"He did that," interrupted Jack.

"I felt fit for anything," she said, with a half-hysterical laugh, that seemed voiced, however, to check some slumbering memory. "I'd have cut my throat or his, it didn't matter which"—

"It mattered something to us, Nell," put in Jack again, with polite parenthesis; "don't leave US out in the cold."

"I started from 'Frisco that night on the boat ready to fling myself into anything—or the river!" she went on hurriedly. "There was a man in the cabin who noticed me, and began to hang around. I thought he knew who I was,—had seen me on the posters; and as I didn't feel like foolin', I told him so. But he wasn't that kind. He said he saw I was in trouble and wanted me to tell him all."

Mr. Hamlin regarded her cheerfully. "And you told him," he said, "how you had once run away from your childhood's happy home to go on the stage! How you always regretted it, and would have gone back but that the doors were shut forever against you! How you longed to leave, but the wicked men and women around you always"—

"I didn't!" she burst out, with sudden passion; "you know I didn't. I told him everything: who I was, what I had done, what I expected to do again. I pointed out the men—who were sitting there, whispering and grinning at us, as if they were in the front row of the theatre—and said I knew them all, and they knew me. I never spared myself a thing. I said what people said of me, and didn't even care to say it wasn't true!"

"Oh, come!" protested Jack, in perfunctory politeness.

"He said he liked me for telling the truth, and not being ashamed to do it! He said the sin was in the false shame and the hypocrisy; for that's the sort of man he is, you see, and that's like him always! He asked if I would marry him—out of hand—and do my best to be his lawful wife. He said he wanted me to think it over and sleep on it, and to-morrow he would come and see me for an answer. I slipped off the boat at 'Frisco, and went alone to a hotel where I wasn't known. In the morning I didn't know whether he'd keep his word or I'd keep mine. But he came! He said he'd marry me that very day, and take me to his farm in Santa Clara. I agreed. I thought it would take me out of everybody's knowledge, and they'd think me dead! We were married that day, before a regular clergyman. I was married under my own name,"—she stopped and looked at Jack, with a hysterical laugh,—"but he made me write underneath it, 'known as Nell Montgomery;' for he said HE wasn't ashamed of it, nor should I be."

"Does he wear long hair and stick straws in it?" said Hamlin gravely. "Does he 'hear voices' and have 'visions'?"

"He's a shrewd, sensible, hard-working man,—no more mad than you are, nor as mad as I was the day I married him. He's lived up to everything he's said." She stopped, hesitated in her quick, nervous speech; her lip quivered slightly, but she recalled herself, and looking imploringly, yet hopelessly, at Jack, gasped, "And that's what's the matter!"

Jack fixed his eyes keenly upon her. "And you?" he said curtly.

"I?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, what have YOU done?" he said, with sudden sharpness.

The wonder was so apparent in her eyes that his keen glance softened. "Why," she said bewilderingly, "I have been his dog, his slave,—as far as he would let me. I have done everything; I have not been out of the house until he almost drove me out. I have never wanted to go anywhere or see any one; but he has always insisted upon it. I would have been willing to slave here, day and night, and have been happy. But he said I must not seem to be ashamed of my past, when he is not. I would have worn common homespun clothes and calico frocks, and been glad of it, but he insists upon my wearing my best things, even my theatre things; and as he can't afford to buy more, I wear these things I had. I know they look beastly here, and that I'm a laughing-stock, and when I go out

I wear almost anything to try and hide them; but," her lip quivered dangerously again, "he wants me to do it, and it pleases him."

Jack looked down. After a pause he lifted his lashes towards her draggled skirt, and said in an easier, conversational tone, "Yes! I thought I knew that dress. I gave it to you for that walking scene in 'High Life,' didn't I?"

"No," she said quickly, "it was the blue one with silver trimming,—don't you remember? I tried to turn it the first year I was married, but it never looked the same."

"It was sweetly pretty," said Jack encouragingly, "and with that blue hat lined with silver, it was just fetching! Somehow I don't quite remember this one," and he looked at it critically.

"I had it at the races in '58, and that supper Judge Boompointer gave us at 'Frisco where Colonel Fish upset the table trying to get at Jim. Do you know," she said, with a little laugh, "it's got the stains of the champagne on it yet; it never would come off. See!" and she held the candle with great animation to the breadth of silk before her.

"And there's more of it on the sleeve," said Jack; "isn't there?"

Mrs. Rylands looked reproachfully at Jack.

"That isn't champagne; don't you know what it is?"

"No!"

"It's blood," she said gravely; "when that Mexican cut poor Ned so bad,—don't you remember? I held his head upon my arm while you bandaged him." She heaved a little sigh, and then added, with a faint laugh, "That's the worst thing about the clothes of a girl in the profession, they get spoiled or stained before they wear out."

This large truth did not seem to impress Mr. Hamlin. "Why did you leave Santa Clara?" he said abruptly, in his previous critical tone.

"Because of the folks there. They were standoffish and ugly. You see, Josh"—

"Who?"

"Josh Rylands!—HIM! He told everybody who I was, even those who had never seen me in the bills,—how good I was to marry him, how he had faith in me and wasn't ashamed,—until they didn't believe we were married at all. So they looked another way when they met us, and didn't call. And all the while I was glad they didn't, but he wouldn't believe it, and allowed I was pining on account of it."

"And were you?"

"I swear to God, Jack, I'd have been content, and more, to have been just there with him, seein' nobody, letting every one believe I was dead and gone, but he said it was wrong, and weak! Maybe it was," she added, with a shy, interrogating look at Jack, of which, however, he took no notice. "Then when he found they wouldn't call, what do you think he did?"

"Beat you, perhaps," suggested Jack cheerfully.

"He never did a thing to me that wasn't straight out, square, and kind," she said, half indignantly, half hopelessly. "He thought if HIS kind of people wouldn't see me, I might like to see my own sort. So without saying anything to me, he brought down, of all things! Tinkie Clifford, she that used to dance in the cheap variety shows at 'Frisco, and her particular friend, Captain Sykes. It would have just killed you, Jack," she said, with a sudden hysteric burst of laughter, "to have seen Josh, in his square, straight-out way, trying to be civil and help things along. But," she went on, as suddenly relapsing into her former attitude of worried appeal, "I couldn't stand it, and when she got to talking free and easy before Josh, and Captain Sykes to guzzling champagne, she and me had a row. She allowed I was putting on airs, and I made her walk, in spite of Josh."

"And Josh seemed to like it," said Hamlin carelessly. "Has he seen her since?"

"No; I reckon he's cured of asking that kind of company for me. And then we came here. But I persuaded him not to begin by going round telling people who I was,—as he did the last time,—but to leave it to folks to find out if they wanted to, and he gave in. Then he let me fix up this house and furnish it my own way, and I did!"

"Do you mean to say that YOU fixed up that family vault of a sitting-room?" said Jack, in horror.

"Yes, I didn't want any fancy furniture or looking-glasses, and such like, to attract folks, nor anything to look like the old times. I don't think any of the boys would care to come here. And I got rid of a lot of sporting travelers, 'wild-cat' managers, and that kind of tramp in this way. But"—She hesitated, and her face fell again.

"But what?" said Jack.

"I don't think that Josh likes it either. He brought home the other day 'My Johnny is a Shoemakiyure,' and wanted me to try it on the organ. But it reminded me how we used to get just sick of singing it on and off the boards, and I couldn't touch it. He wanted me to go to the circus that was touring over at the cross roads, but it was the old Flanigin's circus, you know, the one Gussie Riggs used to ride in, with its old clown and its old ringmaster and the old 'wheezes,' and I chucked it."

"Look here," said Jack, rising and surveying Mrs. Rylands critically. "If you go on at this gait, I'll tell you what that man of yours will do. He'll bolt with some of your old friends!"

She turned a quick, scared face upon him for an instant. But only for an instant. Her hysteric little laugh returned, at once, followed by her weary, worried look. "No, Jack, you don't know him! If it was only that! He cares only for me in his own way,—and," she stammered as she went on, "I've no luck in making him happy."

She stopped. The wind shook the house and fired a volley of rain against the windows. She took advantage of it to draw a torn lace-edged handkerchief from her pocket behind, and keeping the tail of her eyes in a frightened fashion on Jack, applied the handkerchief furtively, first to her nose, and then to her eyes.

"Don't do that," said Jack fastidiously, "it's wet enough outside." Nevertheless, he stood up and gazed at her.

"Well," he began.

She timidly drew nearer to him, and took a seat on the kitchen table, looking up wistfully into his eyes.

"Well," resumed Jack argumentatively, "if he won't 'chuck' you, why don't you 'chuck' HIM?"

She turned quite white, and suddenly dropped her eyes. "Yes," she said, almost inaudibly, "lots of girls would do that."

"I don't mean go back to your old life," continued Jack. "I reckon you've had enough of that. But get into some business, you know, like other women. A bonnet shop, or a candy shop for children, see? I'll help start you. I've got a couple of hundred, if not in my own pocket in somebody's else, just burning to be used! And then you can look about you; and perhaps some square business man will turn up and you can marry him. You know you can't live this way, nohow. It's killing you; it ain't fair on you, nor on Rylands either."

"No," she said quickly, "it ain't fair on HIM. I know it, I know it isn't, I know it isn't," she repeated, "only"—She stopped.

"Only what?" said Jack impatiently.

She did not speak. After a pause she picked up the rolling-pin from the table and began absently rolling it down her lap to her knee, as if pressing out the stained silk skirt. "Only," she stammered, slowly rolling the pin handles in her open palms, "I—I can't leave Josh."

"Why can't you?" said Jack quickly.

"Because—because—I," she went on, with a quivering lip, working the rolling-pin heavily down her knee as if she were crushing her answer out of it,—"because—I—love him!"

There was a pause, a dash of rain against the window, and another dash from her eyes upon her hands, the rolling-pin, and the skirts she had gathered up hastily, as she cried, "O Jack! Jack! I never loved anybody like him! I never knew what love was! I never knew a man like him before! There never WAS one before!"

To this large, comprehensive, and passionate statement Mr. Jack Hamlin made no reply. An audacity so supreme had conquered his. He walked to the window, looked out upon the dark, rain-filmed pane that, however, reflected no equal change in his own dark eyes, and then returned and walked round the kitchen table. When he was at her back, without looking at her, he reached out his hand, took her passive one that lay on the table in his, grasped it heartily for a single moment, laid it gently down, and returned around the table, where he again confronted her cheerfully face to face.

"You'll make the riffle yet," he said quietly. "Just now I don't see what I could do, or where I could chip in your little game; but if I DO, or you do, count me in and let me know. You know where to write,—my old address at Sacramento." He walked to the corner, took up his still wet serape, threw it over his shoulders, and picked up his broad-brimmed riding-hat.

"You're not going, Jack?" she said hesitatingly, as she rubbed her wet eyes into a consciousness of his movements. "You'll wait to see HIM? He'll be here in an hour."

"I've been here too long already," said Jack. "And the less you say about my calling, even accidentally, the better. Nobody will believe it,—YOU didn't yourself. In fact, unless you see how I can help you, the sooner you consider us all dead and buried, the sooner your luck will change. Tell your girl I've found my own horse so much better that I have pushed on with him, and give her that."

He threw a gold coin on the table.

"But your horse is still lame," she said wonderingly. "What will you do in this storm?"

"Get into the cover of the next wood and camp out. I've done it before."

"But, Jack!"

He suddenly made a slight gesture of warning. His quick ear had caught the approach of footsteps along the wet gravel outside. A mischievous light slid into his dark eyes as he coolly moved backward to the door and, holding it open, said, in a remarkably clear and distinct voice:—

"Yes, as you say, society is becoming very mixed and frivolous everywhere, and you'd scarcely know San Francisco now. So delighted, however, to have made your acquaintance, and regret my business prevents my waiting to see your good husband. So odd that I should have known your Aunt Jemima! But, as you say, the world is very small, after all. I shall tell the deacon how well you are looking,—in spite of the kitchen smoke in your eyes. Good-by! A thousand thanks for your hospitality."

And Jack, bowing profoundly to the ground, backed out upon Jane, the hired man, and the expressman, treading, I grieve to say, with some deliberation upon the toes of the two latter, in order, possibly, that in their momentary pain and discomposure they might not scan too closely the face of this ingenious gentleman, as he melted into the night and the storm.

Jane entered, with a slight toss of her head.

"Here's your expressman,—ef you're wantin' him NOW."

Mrs. Rylands was too preoccupied to notice her handmaiden's significant emphasis, as she indicated a fresh-looking, bashful young fellow, whose confusion was evidently heightened by the unexpected egress of Mr. Hamlin, and the point-blank presence of the handsome Mrs. Rylands.

"Oh, certainly," said Mrs. Rylands quickly. "So kind of him to oblige us. Give him the order, Jane, please."

She turned to escape from the kitchen and these new intruders, when her eye fell upon the coin left by Mr. Hamlin. "The gentleman wished you to take that for your trouble, Jane," she said hastily, pointing to it, and passed out.

Jane cast a withering look after her retreating skirts, and picking the coin from the table, turned to the hired man. "Run to the stable after that dandified young feller, Dick, and hand that back to him. Ye kin say that Jane Mackinnon don't run arrants fur money, nor play gooseberry to other folks fur fun."

PART II

Mr. Joshua Rylands had, according to the vocabulary of his class, “found grace” at the age of sixteen, while still in the spiritual state of “original sin” and the political one of Missouri. He had not indeed found it by persistent youthful seeking or spiritual insight, but somewhat violently and turbulently at a camp-meeting. A village boy, naturally gentle and impressible, with an original character,—limited, however, in education and experience,—he had, after his first rustic debauch with some vulgar companions, fallen upon the camp-meeting in reckless audacity; and instead of being handed over to the district constable, was taken in and placed upon “the anxious bench,” “rastled with,” and exhorted by a strong revivalist preacher, “convicted of sin,” and—converted! It is doubtful if the shame of a public arrest and legal punishment would have impressed his youthful spirit as much as did this spiritual examination and trial, in which he himself became accuser. Howbeit, its effect, though punitive, was also exemplary. He at once cast off his evil companions; remaining faithful to his conversion, in spite of their later “backslidings.” When, after the Western fashion, the time came for him to forsake his father’s farm and seek a new “quarter section” on some more remote frontier, he carried into that secluded, lonely, half-monkish celibacy of pioneer life—which has been the foundation of so much strong Western character—more than the usual religious feeling. At once industrious and adventurous, he lived by “the Word,” as he called it, and Nature as he knew it,—tempted by none of the vices or sentiments of civilization. When he finally joined the Californian emigration, it was not as a gold-seeker, but as a discoverer of new agricultural fields; if the hardship was as great and the rewards fewer, he nevertheless knew that he retained his safer isolation and independence of spirit. Vice and civilization were to him synonymous terms; it was the natural condition of the worldly and unregenerate. Such was the man who chanced to meet “Nell Montgomery, the Pearl of the Variety Stage,” on the Sacramento boat, in one of his forced visits to civilization. Without knowing her in her profession, her frank exposition of herself did not startle him; he recognized it, accepted it, and strove to convert it. And as long as this daughter of Folly forsook her evil ways for him, it was a triumph in which there was no shame, and might be proclaimed from the housetop. When his neighbors thought differently, and avoided them, he saw no inconsistency in bringing his wife’s old friends to divert her: she might in time convert THEM. He had no more fear of her returning to their ways than he had of himself “backsliding.” Narrow as was his creed, he had none of the harshness nor pessimism of the bigot. With the keenest self-scrutiny, his credulity regarding others was touching.

The storm was still raging when he alighted that evening from the up coach at the trail nearest his house. Although incumbered with a heavy carpet-bag, he started resignedly on his two-mile tramp without begrudging the neighborly act of his wife which had deprived him of his horse. It was “like her” to do these things in her good-humored abstraction, an abstraction, however, that sometimes worried him, from the fear that it indicated some unhappiness with her present lot. He was longing to rejoin her after his absence of three days, the longest time they had been separated since their marriage, and he hurried on with a certain lover-like excitement, quite new to his usually calm and temperate blood.

Struggling with the storm and darkness, but always with the happy consciousness of drawing nearer to her in that struggle, he labored on, finding his perilous way over the indistinguishable trail by certain landmarks in the distance, visible only to his pioneer eye. That heavier shadow to the right was not the hillside, but the SLOPE to the distant hill; that low, regular line immediately before him was not a fence or wall, but the line of distant gigantic woods, a mile from his home. Yet as he began to descend the slope towards the wood, he stopped and rubbed his eyes. There was distinctly a light in it. His first idea was that he had lost the trail and was nearing the woodman Mackinnon’s cabin.

But a more careful scrutiny revealed to him that it was really the wood, and the light was a camp-fire. It was a rough night for camping out, but they were probably some belated prospectors.

When he had reached the fringe of woodland, he could see quite plainly that the fire was built beside one of the large pines, and that the little encampment, which looked quite comfortable and secluded from the storm-beaten trail, was occupied apparently by a single figure. By the good glow of the leaping fire, that figure standing erect before it, elegantly shaped, in the graceful folds of a serape, looked singularly romantic and picturesque, and reminded Joshua Rylands—whose ideas of art were purely reminiscent of boyish reading—of some picture in a novel. The heavy black columns of the pines, glancing out of the concave shadow, also seemed a fitting background to what might have been a scene in a play. So strongly was he impressed by it that but for his anxiety to reach his home, still a mile distant, and the fact that he was already late, he would have penetrated the wood and the seclusion of the stranger with an offer of hospitality for the night. The man, however, was evidently capable of taking care of himself, and the outline of a tethered horse was faintly visible under another tree. It might be a surveyor or engineer,—the only men of a better class who were itinerant.

But another and even greater surprise greeted him as he toiled up the rocky slope towards his farmhouse. The windows of the sitting-room, which were usually blank and black by night, were glittering with unfamiliar light. Like most farmers, he seldom used the room except for formal company, his wife usually avoiding it, and even he himself now preferred the dining-room or the kitchen. His first suggestion that his wife had visitors gave him a sense of pleasure on her account, mingled, however, with a slight uneasiness of his own which he could not account for. More than that, as he approached nearer he could hear the swell of the organ above the roar of the swaying pines, and the cadences were not of a devotional character. He hesitated for a moment, as he had hesitated at the fire in the woods; yet it was surely his own house! He hurried to the door, opened it; not only the light of the sitting-room streamed into the hall, but the ruddier glow of an actual fire in the disused grate! The familiar dark furniture had been rearranged to catch some of the glow and relieve its sombreness. And his wife, rising from the music-stool, was the room's only occupant!

Mrs. Rylands gazed anxiously and timidly at her husband's astonished face, as he threw off his waterproof and laid down his carpet-bag. Her own face was a little flurried with excitement, and his, half hidden in his tawny beard, and, possibly owing to his self-introspective nature, never spontaneously sympathetic, still expressed only wonder! Mrs. Rylands was a little frightened. It is sometimes dangerous to meddle with a man's habits, even when he has grown weary of them.

"I thought," she began hesitatingly, "that it would be more cheerful for you in here, this stormy evening. I thought you might like to put your wet things to dry in the kitchen, and we could sit here together, after supper, alone."

I am afraid that Mrs. Rylands did not offer all her thoughts. Ever since Mr. Hamlin's departure she had been uneasy and excited, sometimes falling into fits of dejection, and again lighting up into hysterical levity; at other times carefully examining her wardrobe, and then with a sudden impulse rushing downstairs again to give orders for her husband's supper, and to make the extraordinary changes in the sitting-room already noted. Only a few moments before he arrived, she had covertly brought down a piece of music, and put aside the hymn-books, and taken, with a little laugh, a pack of cards from her pocket, which she placed behind the already dismantled vase on the chimney.

"I reckoned you had company, Ellen," he said gravely, kissing her.

"No," she said quickly. "That is," she stopped with a sudden surge of color in her face that startled her, "there was—a man—here, in the kitchen—who had a lame horse, and who wanted to get a fresh one. But he went away an hour ago. And he wasn't in this room—at least, after it was fixed up. So I've had no company."

She felt herself again blushing at having blushed, and a little terrified. There was no reason for it. But for Jack's warning, she would have been quite ready to tell her husband all. She had never blushed before him over her past life; why she should now blush over seeing Jack, of all people! made

her utter a little hysterical laugh. I am afraid that this experienced little woman took it for granted that her husband knew that if Jack or any man had been there as a clandestine lover, she would not have blushed at all. Yet with all her experience, she did not know that she had blushed simply because it was to Jack that she had confessed that she loved the man before her. Her husband noted the blush as part of her general excitement. He permitted her to drag him into the room and seat him before the hearth, where she sank down on one knee to pull off his heavy rubber boots. But he waved her aside at this, pulled them off with his own hands, and let her take them to the kitchen and bring back his slippers. By this time a smile had lighted up his hard face. The room was certainly more comfortable and cheerful. Still he was a little worried; was there not in these changes a falling away from the grace of self-abnegation which she had so sedulously practiced?

When supper was served by Jane, in the dull dining-room, Mr. Rylands, had he not been more engaged in these late domestic changes, might have noticed that the Missouri girl waited upon him with a certain commiserating air that was remarkable by its contrast with the frigid ceremonious politeness with which she attended her mistress. It had not escaped Mrs. Rylands, however, who ever since Jack's abrupt departure had noticed this change in the girl's demeanor to herself, and with a woman's intuitive insight of another woman, had fathomed it. The comfortable tete-a-tete with Jack, which Jane had looked forward to, Mrs. Rylands had anticipated herself, and then sent him off! When Joshua thanked his wife for remembering the pepper-sauce, and Mrs. Rylands pathetically admitted her forgetfulness, the head-toss which Jane gave as she left the room was too marked to be overlooked by him. Mrs. Rylands gave a hysterical little laugh. "I am afraid Jane doesn't like my sending away the expressman just after I had also dismissed the stranger whom she had taken a fancy to, and left her without company," she said unwisely.

Mr. Rylands did not laugh. "I reckon," he returned slowly, "that Jane must feel kinder lonely; she bears all the burden of our bein' outer the world, without any of our glory in the cause of it."

Nevertheless, when supper was over, and the pair were seated in the sitting-room before the fire, this episode was forgotten. Mrs. Rylands produced her husband's pipe and tobacco-pouch. He looked around the formal walls and hesitated. He had been in the habit of smoking in the kitchen.

"Why not here?" said Mrs. Rylands, with a sudden little note of decision. "Why should we keep this room only for company that don't come? I call it silly."

This struck Mr. Rylands as logical. Besides, undoubtedly the fire had mellowed the room. After a puff or two he looked at his wife musingly. "Couldn't you make yourself one of them cigarettys, as they call 'em? Here's the tobacco, and I'll get you the paper."

"I COULD," she said tentatively. Then suddenly, "What made you think of it? You never saw ME smoke!"

"No," said Rylands, "but that lady, your old friend, Miss Clifford, does, and I thought you might be hankering after it."

"How do you know Tinkie Clifford smokes?" said Mrs. Rylands quickly.

"She lit a cigaretty that day she called."

"I hate it," said Mrs. Rylands shortly.

Mr. Rylands nodded approval, and puffed meditatively.

"Josh, have you seen that girl since?"

"No," said Joshua.

"Nor any other girl like her?"

"No," said Joshua wonderingly. "You see I only got to know her on your account, Ellen, that she might see you."

"Well, don't you do it any more! None of 'em! Promise me!" She leaned forward eagerly in her chair.

"But Ellen,"—her husband began gravely.

"I know what you're going to say, but they can't do me any good, and you can't do them any good as you did ME, so there!"

Mr. Rylands was silent, and smiled meditatively.

"Josh!"

"Yes."

"When you met me that night on the Sacramento boat, and looked at me, did you—did I," she hesitated,—"did you look at me because I had been crying?"

"I thought you were troubled in spirit, and looked so."

"I suppose I looked worried, of course; I had no time to change or even fix my hair; I had on that green dress, and it NEVER was becoming. And you only spoke to me on account of my awful looks?"

"I saw only your wrestling soul, Ellen, and I thought you needed comfort and help."

She was silent for a moment, and then, leaning forward, picked up the poker and began to thrust it absently between the bars.

"And if it had been some other girl crying and looking awful, you'd have spoken to her all the same?"

This was a new idea to Mr. Rylands, but with most men logic is supreme. "I suppose I would," he said slowly.

"And married her?" She rattled the bars of the grate with the poker as if to drown the inevitable reply.

Mr. Rylands loved the woman before him, but it pleased him to think that he loved truth better. "If it had been necessary to her salvation, yes," he said.

"Not Tinkie?" she said suddenly.

"SHE never would have been in your contrite condition."

"Much you know! Girls like that can cry as well as laugh, just as they want to. Well! I suppose I DID look horrid." Nevertheless, she seemed to gain some gratification from her husband's reply, and changed the subject as if fearful of losing that satisfaction by further questioning.

"I tried some of those songs you brought, but I don't think they go well with the harmonium," she said, pointing to some music on its rack, "except one. Just listen." She rose, and with the same nervous quickness she had shown before, went to the instrument and began to sing and play. There was a hopeless incongruity between the character of the instrument and the spirit of the song. Mrs. Rylands's voice was rather forced and crudely trained, but Joshua Rylands, sitting there comfortably slippered by the fire and conscious of the sheeted rain against the window, felt it good. Presently he arose, and lounging heavily over to the fair performer, leaned down and imprinted a kiss on the labyrinthine fringes of her hair. At which Mrs. Rylands caught blindly at his hand nearest her, and without lifting her other hand from the keys, or her eyes from the music, said tentatively:—

"You know there's a chorus just here! Why can't you try it with me?"

Mr. Rylands hesitated a moment, then, with a preliminary cough, lifted a voice as crude as hers, but powerful through much camp-meeting exercise, and roared a chorus which was remarkable chiefly for requiring that archness and playfulness in execution which he lacked. As the whole house seemed to dilate with the sound, and the wind outside to withhold its fury, Mr. Rylands felt that physical delight which children feel in personal outcry, and was grateful to his wife for the opportunity. Laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder, he noticed for the first time that she was in a kind of evening-dress, and that her delicate white shoulder shone through the black lace that enveloped it.

For an instant Mr. Rylands was shocked at this unwonted exposure. He had never seen his wife in evening-dress before. It was true they were alone, and in their own sitting-room, but the room was still invested with that formality and publicity which seemed to accent this indiscretion. The simple-minded frontier man's mind went back to Jane, to the hired man, to the expressman, the stranger, all of whom might have noticed it also.

"You have a new dress," he said slowly, "have you worn it all day?"

"No," she said, with a timid smile. "I only put it on just before you came. It's the one I used to wear in the ballroom scene in 'Gay Times in 'Frisco.' You don't know it, I know. I thought I would wear it tonight, and then," she suddenly grasped his hand, "you'll let me put all these things away forever! Won't you, Josh? I've seen such nice pretty calico at the store to-day, and I can make up one or two home dresses, like Jane's, only better fitting, of course. In fact, I asked them to send the roll up here to-morrow for you to see."

Mr. Rylands felt relieved. Perhaps his views had changed about the moral effect of her retaining these symbols of her past, for he consented to the calico dresses, not, however, without an inward suspicion that she would not look so well in them, and that the one she had on was more becoming.

Meantime she tried another piece of music. It was equally incongruous and slightly Bacchantic.

"There used to be a mighty pretty dance went to that," she said, nodding her head in time with the music, and assisting the heavily spasmodic attempts of the instrument with the pleasant levity of her voice. "I used to do it."

"Ye might try it now, Ellen," suggested her husband, with a half-frightened, half-amused tolerance.

"YOU play, then," said Mrs. Rylands quickly, offering her seat to him.

Mr. Rylands sat down to the harmonium, as Mrs. Rylands briskly moved the table and chairs against the wall. Mr. Rylands played slowly and strenuously, as from a conscientious regard of the instrument. Mrs. Rylands stood in the centre of the floor, making a rather pretty, animated picture, as she again stimulated the heavy harmonium swell not only with her voice but her hands and feet. Presently she began to skip.

I should warn the reader here that this was before the "shawl" or "skirt" dancing was in vogue, and I am afraid that pretty Mrs. Rylands's performances would now be voted slow. Her silk skirt and frilled petticoat were lifted just over her small ankles and tiny bronze-kid shoes. In the course of a pirouette or two, there was a slight further revelation of blue silk stockings and some delicate embroidery, but really nothing more than may be seen in the sweep of a modern waltz. Suddenly the music ceased. Mr. Rylands had left the harmonium and walked over to the hearth. Mrs. Rylands stopped, and came towards him with a flushed, anxious face.

"It don't seem to go right, does it?" she said, with her nervous laugh. "I suppose I'm getting too old now, and I don't quite remember it."

"Better forget it altogether," he replied gravely. He stopped at seeing a singular change in her face, and added awkwardly, "When I told you I didn't want you to be ashamed of your past, nor to try to forget what you were, I didn't mean such things as that!"

"What did you mean?" she said timidly.

The truth was that Mr. Rylands did not know. He had known this sort of thing only in the abstract. He had never had the least acquaintance with the class to which his wife had belonged, nor known anything of their methods. It was a revelation to him now, in the woman he loved, and who was his wife. He was not shocked so much as he was frightened.

"You shall have the dress to-morrow, Ellen," he said gently, "and you can put away these gewgaws. You don't need to look like Tinkie Clifford."

He did not see the look of triumph that lit up her eye, but added, "Go on and play."

She sat down obediently to the instrument. He watched her for a few moments from the toe of her kid slipper on the pedals to the swell of her shoulders above the keyboard, with a strange, abstracted face. Presently she stopped and came over to him.

"And when I've got these nice calico frocks, and you can't tell me from Jane, and I'm a good housekeeper, and settle down to be a farmer's wife, maybe I'll have a secret to tell you."

"A secret?" he repeated gravely. "Why not now?"

Her face was quite aglow with excitement and a certain timid mischief as she laughed: "Not while you are so solemn. It can wait."

He looked at his watch. “I must give some orders to Jim about the stock before he turns in,” he said.

“He’s gone to the stables already,” said Mrs. Rylands.

“No matter; I can go there and find him.”

“Shall I bring your boots?” she said quickly.

“I’ll put them on when I pass through the kitchen. I won’t be long away. Now go to bed. You are looking tired,” he said gently, as he gazed at the drawn lines about her eyes and mouth. Her former pretty color struck him also as having changed of late, and as being irregular and inharmonious.

As Mrs. Rylands obediently ascended the stairs she heaved a faint sigh, her only recognition of her husband’s criticism. He turned and passed quickly into the kitchen. He wanted to be alone to collect his thoughts. But he was surprised to find Jane still there, sitting bolt upright in a chair in the corner. Apparently she had been expecting him, for as he entered she stood up, and wiped her cheek and mouth with one hand, as if to compress her lips the more tightly.

“I reckoned,” she began, “that unless you war for forgettin’ everythin’ in these yer goings on, ye’d be passin’ through here to tend to your stock. I’ve got a word to say to ye, Mr. Rylands. When I first kem over here to help, I got word from the folks around that your wife afore you married her was just one o’ them bally dancers. Well, that was YOUR lookout, not mine! Jane Mackinnon ain’t the kind to take everybody’s sayin’ as gospil, but she kalkilates to treat folks ez she finds ‘em. When she finds ‘em lyin’ and deceivin’; when she finds em purtendin’ one thing and doin’ another; when she finds ‘em makin’ fools tumble to ‘em; playing soots on their own husbands, and turnin’ an honest house into a music-hall and a fandango shop, she kicks! You hear me! Jane Mackinnon kicks!”

“What do you mean?” said Mr. Rylands sternly.

“I mean,” said Miss Mackinnon, striking her hips with the back of her hands smartly, and accenting each word that dropped like a bullet from her mouth with an additional blow,—“I—mean—that—your—wife—had one—of—her—old—hangers-on—from—‘Frisco—here—in—this very—kitchen—all—the—arternoon; there! I mean that whiles she was waitin’ here for you, she was canoodlin’ and cryin’ over old times with him! I saw her myself through the winder. That’s what I mean, Mr. Joshua Rylands.”

“It’s false! She had some poor stranger here with a lame horse. She told me so herself.”

Jane Mackinnon laughed shrilly.

“Did she tell you that the poor stranger was young and pretty-faced, with black moustarches? that his store clothes must have cost a fortin, saying nothing of his gold-lined, broadcloth sarrapper? Did she say that his horse was so lame that when I went to get another he wouldn’t WAIT for it? Did she tell you WHO he was?”

“No, she did not know,” said Rylands sternly, but with a whitening face.

“Well, I’ll tell you! The gambler, the shooter!—the man whose name is black enough to stain any woman he knows. Jim recognized him like a shot; he sez, the moment he clapped eyes on him at the door, ‘Dod blasted, if it ain’t Jack Hamlin!’”

Little as Mr. Rylands knew of the world, he had heard that name. But it was not THAT he was thinking of. He was thinking of the camp-fire in the wood, the handsome figure before it, the tethered horse. He was thinking of the lighted sitting-room, the fire, his wife’s bare shoulders, her slippers, stockings, and the dance. He saw it all,—a lightning-flash to his dull imagination. The room seemed to expand and then grow smaller, the figure of Jane to sway backwards and forwards before him. He murmured the name of God with lips that were voiceless, caught at the kitchen table to steady himself, held it till he felt his arms grow rigid, and then recovered himself,—white, cold, and sane.

“Speak a word of this to HER,” he said deliberately, “enter her room while I’m gone, even leave the kitchen before I come back, and I’ll throw you into the road. Tell that hired man, if he dares to breathe it to a soul I’ll strangle him.”

The unlooked-for rage of this quiet, God-fearing man, and dupe, as she believed, was terrible, but convincing. She shrank back into the corner as he coolly drew on his boots and waterproof, and without another word left the house.

He knew what he was going to do as well as if it had been ordained for him. He knew he would find the young man in the wood; for whatever were the truth of the other stories, he and the visitor were identical; he had seen him with his own eyes. He would confront him face to face and know all; and until then, he could not see his wife again. He walked on rapidly, but without feverishness or mental confusion. He saw his duty plainly,—if Ellen had "backslidden," he must give her another trial. These were his articles of faith. He should not put her away; but she should nevermore be wife to him. It was HE who had tempted her, it was true; perhaps God would forgive her for that reason, but HE could never love her again.

The fury of the storm had somewhat abated as he reached the wood. The fire was still there, but no longer a leaping flame. A dull glow in the darkness of the forest aisles was all that indicated its position. Rylands at once plunged in that direction; he was near enough to see the red embers when he heard a sharp click, and a voice called:—

"Hold up!"

Mr. Hamlin was a light sleeper. The crackle of underbrush had been enough to disturb him. The voice was his; the click was the cocking of his revolver.

Rylands was no coward, but halted diplomatically.

"Now, then," said Mr. Hamlin's voice, "a little more this way, IN THE LIGHT, if you please!"

Rylands moved as directed, and saw Mr. Hamlin lying before the fire, resting easily on one hand, with his revolver in the other.

"Thank you!" said Jack. "Excuse my precautions, but it is night, and this is, for the present, my bedroom."

"My name is Rylands; you called at my house this afternoon and saw my wife," said Rylands slowly.

"I did," said Hamlin. "It was mighty kind of you to return my call so soon, but I didn't expect it."

"I reckon not. But I know who you are, and that you are an old associate of hers, in the days of her sin and unregeneration. I want you to answer me, before God and man, what was your purpose in coming there to-day?"

"Look here! I don't think it's necessary to drag in strangers to hear my answer," said Jack, lying down again, "but I came to borrow a horse."

"Is that the truth?"

Jack got upon his feet very solemnly, put on his hat, drew down his waistcoat, and approached Mr. Rylands with his hands in his pockets.

"Mr. Rylands," he said, with great suavity of manner, "this is the second time today that I have had the honor of having my word doubted by your family. Your wife was good enough to question my assertion that I didn't know that she was living here, but that was a woman's vanity. You have no such excuse. There is my horse yonder, lame, as you may see. I didn't lame him for the sake of seeing your wife nor you."

There was that in Mr. Hamlin's audacity and perfect self-possession which, even while it irritated, never suggested deceit. He was too reckless of consequence to lie. Mr. Rylands was staggered and half convinced. Nevertheless, he hesitated.

"Dare you tell me everything that happened between my wife and you?"

"Dare you listen?" said Mr. Hamlin quietly.

Mr. Rylands turned a little white. After a moment he said:—

"Yes."

"Good!" said Mr. Hamlin. "I like your grit, though I don't mind telling you it's the ONLY thing I like about you. Sit down. Well, I haven't seen Nell Montgomery for three years until I met her as

your wife, at your house. She was surprised as I was, and frightened as I wasn't. She spent the whole interview in telling me the history of her marriage and her life with you, and nothing more. I cannot say that it was remarkably entertaining, or that she was as amusing as your wife as she was as Nell Montgomery, the variety actress. When she had finished, I came away."

Mr. Rylands, who had seated himself, made a movement as if to rise. But Mr. Hamlin laid his hand on his knee.

"I asked you if you dared to listen. I have something myself to say of that interview. I found your wife wearing the old dresses that other men had given her, and she said she wore them because she thought it pleased you. I found that you, who are questioning my calling upon her, had already got the worst of her old chums to visit her without asking her consent; I found that instead of being the first one to lie for her and hide her, you were the first one to tell anybody her history, just because you thought it was to the glory of God generally, and of Joshua Rylands in particular."

"A man's motives are his own," stammered Rylands.

"Sorry you didn't see it when you questioned mine just now," said Jack coolly.

"Then she complained to you?" said Rylands hesitatingly.

"I didn't say that," said Jack shortly.

"But you found her unhappy?"

"Damnably."

"And you advised her"—said Rylands tentatively.

"I advised her to chuck you and try to get a better husband." He paused, and then added, with a disgusted laugh, "but she didn't tumble to it, for a d–d silly reason."

"What reason?" said Rylands hurriedly.

"Said she LOVED you," returned Jack, kicking a brand back into the fire. Mr. Rylands's white cheeks flamed out suddenly like the brand. Seeing which, Jack turned upon him deliberately.

"Mr. Joshua Rylands, I've seen many fools in my time. I've seen men holding four aces backed down because they thought they KNEW the other man had a royal flush! I've seen a man sell his claim for a wild-cat share, with the gold lying a foot below him in the ground he walked on. I've seen a dead shot shoot wild because he THOUGHT he saw something in the other man's eye. I've seen a heap of God-forsaken fools, but I never saw one before who claimed God as a pal. You've got a wife a d–d sight truer to you for what you call her 'sin,' than you've ever been to her, with all your d–d salvation! And as you couldn't make her otherwise, though you've tried to hard enough, it seems to me that for square downright chuckle-headedness, you can take the cake! Good-night! Now, run away and play! You're making me tired."

"One moment," said Mr. Rylands awkwardly and hurriedly. "I may have wronged you; I was mistaken. Won't you come back with me and accept my—our—hospitality?"

"Not much," said Jack. "I left your house because I thought it better for you and her that no one should know of my being there."

"But you were already recognized," said Mr. Rylands. "It was Jane who lied about you, and your return with me will confute her slanders."

"Who?" asked Jack.

"Jane, our hired girl."

Mr. Hamlin uttered an indescribable laugh.

"That's just as well! You simply tell Jane you SAW me; that I was greatly shocked at what she said, but that I forgive her. I don't think she'll say any more."

Strange to add, Mr. Hamlin's surmise was correct. Mr. Rylands found Jane still in the kitchen alone, terrified, remorseful, yet ever after silent on the subject. Stranger still, the hired man became equally uncommunicative. Mrs. Rylands, attributing her husband's absence only to care of the stock, had gone to bed in a feverish condition, and Mr. Rylands did not deem it prudent to tell her of his interview. The next day she sent for the doctor, and it was deemed necessary for her to keep her

bed for a few days. Her husband was singularly attentive and considerate during that time, and it was probable that Mrs. Rylands seized that opportunity to tell him the secret she spoke of the night before. Whatever it was,—for it was not generally known for a few months later,—it seemed to draw them closer together, imparted a protecting dignity to Joshua Rylands, which took the place of his former selfish austerity, gave them a future to talk of confidentially, hopefully, and sometimes foolishly, which took the place of their more foolish past, and when the roll of calico came from the cross roads, it contained also a quantity of fine linen, laces, small caps, and other trifles, somewhat in contrast to the more homely materials ordered.

And when three months were past, the sitting-room was often lit up and made cheerful, particularly on that supreme occasion when, with a great deal of enthusiasm, all the women of the countryside flocked to see Mrs. Rylands and her first baby. And a more considerate and devoted couple than the father and mother they had never known.

THE MAN AT THE SEMAPHORE

In the early days of the Californian immigration, on the extremest point of the sandy peninsula, where the bay of San Francisco debouches into the Pacific, there stood a semaphore telegraph. Tossing its black arms against the sky,—with its back to the Golden Gate and that vast expanse of sea whose nearest shore was Japan,—it signified to another semaphore further inland the "rigs" of incoming vessels, by certain uncouth signs, which were again passed on to Telegraph Hill, San Francisco, where they reappeared on a third semaphore, and read to the initiated "schooner," "brig" "ship," or "steamer." But all homesick San Francisco had learned the last sign, and on certain days of the month every eye was turned to welcome those gaunt arms widely extended at right angles, which meant "sidewheel steamer" (the only steamer which carried the mails) and "letters from home." In the joyful reception accorded to that herald of glad tidings, very few thought of the lonely watcher on the sand dunes who dispatched them, or even knew of that desolate Station.

For desolate it was beyond description. The Presidio, with its voiceless, dismounted cannon and empty embrasures hidden in a hollow, and the Mission Dolores, with its crumbling walls and belfry tower lost in another, made the ultima thule of all San Francisco wandering. The Cliff house and Fort Point did not then exist; from Black Point the curving line of shore of "Yerba Buena"—or San Francisco—showed only a stretch of glittering wind-swept sand dunes, interspersed with straggling gullies of half-buried black "scrub oak." The long six months' summer sun fiercely beat upon it from the cloudless sky above; the long six months' trade winds fiercely beat upon it from the west; the monotonous roll-call of the long Pacific surges regularly beat upon it from the sea. Almost impossible to face by day through sliding sands and buffeting winds, at night it was impracticable through the dense sea-fog that stole softly through the Golden Gate at sunset. Thence, until morning, sea and shore were a trackless waste, bounded only by the warning thunders of the unseen sea. The station itself, a rudely built cabin, with two windows,—one furnished with a telescope,—looked like a heap of driftwood, or a stranded wreck left by the retiring sea; the semaphore—the only object for leagues —lifted above the undulating dunes, took upon itself various shapes, more or less gloomy, according to the hour or weather,—a blasted tree, the masts and clinging spars of a beached ship, a dismantled gallows; or, with the background of a golden sunset across the Gate, and its arms extended at right angles, to a more hopeful fancy it might have seemed the missionary Cross, which the enthusiast Portala lifted on that heathen shore a hundred years before.

Not that Dick Jarman—the solitary station keeper—ever indulged this fancy. An escaped convict from one of her Britannic Majesty's penal colonies, a "stowaway" in the hold of an Australian ship, he had landed penniless in San Francisco, fearful of contact with his more honest countrymen already there, and liable to detection at any moment. Luckily for him, the English immigration consisted mainly of gold-seekers en route to Sacramento and the southern mines. He was prudent enough to resist the temptation to follow them, and accepted the post of semaphore keeper,—the first work offered him,—which the meanest immigrant, filled with dreams of gold, would have scorned. His employers asked him no questions, and demanded no references; his post could be scarcely deemed one of trust,—there was no property for him to abscond with but the telescope; he was removed from temptation and evil company in his lonely waste; his duties were as mechanical as the instrument he worked, and interruption of them would be instantly known at San Francisco. For this he would receive his board and lodging and seventy-five dollars a month,—a sum to be ridiculed in those "flush days," but which seemed to the broken-spirited and half-famished stowaway a princely independence.

And then there was rest and security! He was free from that torturing anxiety and fear of detection which had haunted him night and day for three months. The ceaseless vigilance and watchful dread he had known since his escape, he could lay aside now. The rude cabin on the sand dune was

to him as the long-sought cave to some hunted animal. It seemed impossible that any one would seek him there. He was spared alike the contact of his enemies or the shame of recognizing even a friendly face, until by each he would be forgotten. From his coign of vantage on that desolate waste, and with the aid of his telescope, no stranger could approach within two or three miles of his cabin without undergoing his scrutiny. And at the worst, if he was pursued here, before him was the trackless shore and the boundless sea!

And at times there was a certain satisfaction in watching, unseen and in perfect security, the decks of passing ships. With the aid of his glass he could mingle again with the world from which he was debarred, and gloomily wonder who among those passengers knew their solitary watcher, or had heard of his deeds; it might have made him gloomier had he known that in those eager faces turned towards the golden haven there was little thought of anything but themselves. He tried to read in faces on board the few outgoing ships the record of their success with a strange envy. They were returning home! HOME! For sometimes—but seldom—he thought of his own home and his past. It was a miserable past of forgery and embezzlement that had culminated a career of youthful dissipation and self-indulgence, and shut him out, forever, from the staid old English cathedral town where he was born. He knew that his relations believed and wished him dead. He thought of this past with little pleasure, but with little remorse. Like most of his stamp, he believed it was ill-luck, chance, somebody else's fault, but never his own responsible action. He would not repent; he would be wiser only. And he would not be retaken—alive!

Two or three months passed in this monotonous duty, in which he partly recovered his strength and his nerves. He lost his furtive, restless, watchful look; the bracing sea air and the burning sun put into his face the healthy tan and the uplifted frankness of a sailor. His eyes grew keener from long scanning of the horizon; he knew where to look for sails, from the creeping coastwise schooner to the far-rounding merchantman from Cape Horn. He knew the faint line of haze that indicated the steamer long before her masts and funnels became visible. He saw no soul except the solitary boatman of the little "plunger," who landed his weekly provisions at a small cove hard by. The boatman thought his secretiveness and reticence only the surliness of his nation, and cared little for a man who never asked for the news, and to whom he brought no letters. The long nights which wrapped the cabin in sea-fog, and at first seemed to heighten the exile's sense of security, by degrees, however, became monotonous, and incited an odd restlessness, which he was wont to oppose by whiskey,—allowed as a part of his stores,—which, while it dulled his sensibilities, he, however, never permitted to interfere with his mechanical duties.

He had been there five months, and the hills on the opposite shore between Tamalpais were already beginning to show their russet yellow sides. One bright morning he was watching the little fleet of Italian fishing-boats hovering in the bay. This was always a picturesque spectacle, perhaps the only one that relieved the general monotony of his outlook. The quaint lateen sails of dull red, or yellow, showing against the sparkling waters, and the red caps or handkerchiefs of the fishermen, might have attracted even a more abstracted man. Suddenly one of the larger boats tacked, and made directly for the little cove where his weekly plunger used to land. In an instant he was alert and suspicious. But a close examination of the boat through his glass satisfied him that it contained, in addition to the crew, only two or three women, apparently the family of the fishermen. As it ran up on the beach and the entire party disembarked he could see it was merely a careless, peaceable invasion, and he thought no more about it. The strangers wandered about the sands, gesticulating and laughing; they brought a pot ashore, built a fire, and cooked a homely meal. He could see that from time to time the semaphore—evidently a novelty to them—had attracted their attention; and having occasion to signal the arrival of a bark, the working of the uncouth arms of the instrument drew the children in half-frightened curiosity towards it, although the others held aloof, as if fearful of trespassing upon some work of the government, no doubt secretly guarded by the police. A few mornings later he was surprised to see upon the beach, near the same locality, a small heap of lumber which had evidently been landed in the

early morning fog. The next day an old tent appeared on the spot, and the men, evidently fishermen, began the erection of a rude cabin beside it. Jarman had been long enough there to know that it was government land, and that these manifestly humble "squatters" upon it would not be interfered with for some time to come. He began to be uneasy again; it was true they were fully half a mile from him, and they were foreigners; but might not their reckless invasion of the law attract others, in this lawless country, to do the same? It ought to be stopped. For once Richard Jarman sided with legal authority.

But when the cabin was completed, it was evident from what he saw of its rude structure that it was only a temporary shelter for the fisherman's family and the stores, and refitting of the fishing-boat, more convenient to them than the San Francisco wharves. The beach was utilized for the mending of nets and sails, and thus became half picturesque. In spite of the keen northwestern trades, the cloudless, sunshiny mornings tempted these southerners back to their native al fresco existence; they not only basked in the sun, but many of their household duties, and even the mysteries of their toilet, were performed in the open air. They did not seem to care to penetrate into the desolate region behind them; their half-amphibious habit kept them near the water's edge, and Richard Jarman, after taking his limited walks for the first few mornings in another direction, found it no longer necessary to avoid the locality, and even forgot their propinquity.

But one morning, as the fog was clearing away and the sparkle of the distant sea was beginning to show from his window, he rose from his belated breakfast to fetch water from the "breaker" outside, which had to be replenished weekly from Sancelito, as there was no spring in his vicinity. As he opened the door, he was inexpressibly startled by the figure of a young woman standing in front of it, who, however, half fearfully, half laughingly withdrew before him. But his own manifest disturbance apparently gave her courage.

"I jess was looking at that thing," she said bashfully, pointing to the semaphore.

He was still more astonished, for, looking at her dark eyes and olive complexion, he had expected her to speak Italian or broken English. And, possibly because for a long time he had seen and known little of women, he was quite struck with her good looks. He hesitated, stammered, and then said:—

"Won't you come in?"

She drew back still farther and made a rapid gesture of negation with her head, her hand, and even her whole lithe figure. Then she said, with a decided American intonation:—

"No, sir."

"Why not?" said Jarman mechanically.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.