

BRET HARTE

FROM SAND

HILL TO PINE

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A NIECE OF SNAPSHOT HARRY'S

I

There was a slight jarring though the whole frame of the coach, a grinding and hissing from the brakes, and then a sudden jolt as the vehicle ran upon and recoiled from the taut pole-straps of the now arrested horses. The murmur of a voice in the road was heard, followed by the impatient accents of Yuba Bill, the driver.

“Wha-a-t? Speak up, can’t ye?”

Here the voice uttered something in a louder key, but equally unintelligible to the now interested and fully awakened passengers.

One of them dropped the window nearest him and looked out. He could see the faint glistening of a rain-washed lantern near the wheelers’ heads, mingling with the stronger coach lights, and the glow of a distant open cabin door through the leaves and branches of the roadside. The sound of falling rain on the roof, a soft swaying of wind-tossed trees, and an impatient movement on the box-seat were all they heard. Then Yuba Bill’s voice rose again, apparently in answer to the other.

“Why, that’s half a mile away!”

“Yes, but ye might have dropped onto it in the dark, and it’s all on the down grade,” responded the strange voice more audibly.

The passengers were now thoroughly aroused.

“What’s up, Ned?” asked the one at the window of the nearest of two figures that had descended from the box.

“Tree fallen across the road,” said Ned, the expressman, briefly.

“I don’t see no tree,” responded the passenger, leaning out of the window towards the obscurity ahead.

“Now, that’s onfortnit!” said Yuba Bill grimly; “but ef any gentleman will only lend him an opery glass, mebbe he can see round the curve and over the other side o’ the hill where it is. Now, then,” addressing the stranger with the lantern, “bring along your axes, can’t ye?”

“Here’s one, Bill,” said an officious outside passenger, producing the instrument he had taken from its strap in the boot. It was the “regulation” axe, beautifully shaped, highly polished, and utterly ineffective, as Bill well knew.

“We ain’t cuttin’ no kindlin’s,” he said scornfully; then he added brusquely to the stranger: “Fetch out your biggest wood axe—you’ve got one, ye know—and look sharp.”

“I don’t think Bill need be so d–d rough with the stranger, considering he’s saved the coach a very bad smash,” suggested a reflective young journalist in the next seat. “He talks as if the man was responsible.”

“He ain’t quite sure if that isn’t the fact,” said the express messenger, in a lowered voice.

“Why? What do you mean?” clamored the others excitedly.

“Well—THIS is about the spot where the up coach was robbed six months ago,” returned the messenger.

“Dear me!” said the lady in the back seat, rising with a half hysterical laugh, “hadn’t we better get out before they come?”

“There is not the slightest danger, madam,” said a quiet, observant man, who had scarcely spoken before, “or the expressman would not have told us; nor would he, I fancy, have left his post beside the treasure on the box.”

The slight sarcasm implied in this was enough to redden the expressman’s cheek in the light of the coach lamp which Yuba Bill had just unshipped and brought to the window. He would have made some tart rejoinder, but was prevented by Yuba Bill addressing the passengers: “Ye’ll have to put up with ONE light, I reckon, until we’ve got this job finished.”

“How long will it last, Bill?” asked the man nearest the window.

“Well,” said Bill, with a contemptuous glance at the elegant coach axe he was carrying in his hand, “considerin’ these purty first-class highly expensive hash choppers that the kempany furnishes us, I reckon it may take an hour.”

“But is there no place where we can wait?” asked the lady anxiously. “I see a light in that house yonder.”

“Ye might try it, though the kempany, as a rule, ain’t in the habit o’ makin’ social calls there,” returned Bill, with a certain grim significance. Then, turning to some outside passengers, he added, “Now, then! them ez is goin’ to help me tackle that tree, trot down! I reckon that blitherin’ idiot” (the stranger with the lantern, who had disappeared) “will have sense enough to fetch us some ropes with his darned axe.”

The passengers thus addressed, apparently miners and workingmen, good humoredly descended, all except one, who seemed disinclined to leave the much coveted seat on the box beside the driver.

“I’ll look after your places and keep my own,” he said, with a laugh, as the others followed Bill through the dripping rain. When they had disappeared, the young journalist turned to the lady.

“If you would really like to go to that house, I will gladly accompany you.” It was possible that in addition to his youthful chivalry there was a little youthful resentment of Yuba Bill’s domineering prejudices in his attitude. However, the quiet, observant passenger lifted a look of approval to him, and added, in his previous level, half contemptuous tone:—

“You’ll be quite as well there as here, madam, and there is certainly no reason for your stopping in the coach when the driver chooses to leave it.”

The passengers looked at each other. The stranger spoke with authority, and Bill had certainly been a little arbitrary!

“I’ll go too,” said the passenger by the window. “And you’ll come, won’t you, Ned?” he added to the express messenger. The young man hesitated; he was recently appointed, and as yet fresh to the business—but he was not to be taught his duty by an officious stranger! He resented the interference youthfully by doing the very thing he would have preferred NOT to do, and with assumed carelessness—yet feeling in his pocket to assure himself that the key of the treasure compartment was safe—turned to follow them.

“Won’t YOU come too?” said the journalist, politely addressing the cynical passenger.

“No, I thank you! I’ll take charge of the coach,” was the smiling rejoinder, as he settled himself more comfortably in his seat.

The little procession moved away in silence. Oddly enough, no one, except the lady, really cared to go, and two—the expressman and journalist—would have preferred to remain on the coach. But the national instinct of questioning any purely arbitrary authority probably was a sufficient impulse. As they neared the opened door of what appeared to be a four-roomed, unpainted, redwood boarded cabin, the passenger who had occupied the seat near the window said,—

“I’ll go first and sample the shanty.”

He was not, however, so far in advance of them but that the others could hear quite distinctly his offhand introduction of their party on the threshold, and the somewhat lukewarm response of the inmates. “We thought we’d just drop in and be sociable until the coach was ready to start again,”

he continued, as the other passengers entered. "This yer gentleman is Ned Brice, Adams & Co.'s expressman; this yer is Frank Frenshaw, editor of the 'Mountain Banner;' this yer's a lady, so it ain't necessary to give HER name, I reckon—even if we knowed it! Mine's Sam Hexshill, of Hexshill & Dobbs's Flour Mills, of Stockton, whar, ef you ever come that way, I'll be happy to return the compliment and hospitality."

The room they had entered had little of comfort and brightness in it except the fire of pine logs which roared and crackled in the adobe chimney. The air would have been too warm but for the strong west wind and rain which entered the open door freely. There was no other light than the fire, and its tremulous and ever-changing brilliancy gave a spasmodic mobility to the faces of those turned towards it, or threw into stronger shadow the features that were turned away. Yet, by this uncertain light, they could see the figures of a man and two women. The man rose and, with a certain apathetic gesture that seemed to partake more of weariness and long suffering than positive discourtesy, tendered seats on chairs, boxes, and even logs to the self-invited guests. The stage party were surprised to see that this man was the stranger who had held the lantern in the road.

"Ah! then you didn't go with Bill to help clear the road?" said the expressman surprisedly.

The man slowly drew up his tall, shambling figure before the fire, and then facing them, with his hands behind him, as slowly lowered himself again as if to bring his speech to the level of his hearers and give a lazier and more deliberate effect to his long-drawn utterance.

"Well—no!" he said slowly. "I—didn't—go—with—no—Bill—to—help—clear—the road! I—don't—reckon—TO go—with—no—Bill—to—clear—ANY road! I've just whittled this thing down to a pint, and it's this—I ain't no stage kempany's nigger! So far as turnin' out and warnin' 'em agin goin' to smash over a fallen tree, and slap down into the canyon with a passel of innercent passengers, I'm that much a white man, but I ain't no NIGGER to work clearing things away for 'em, nor I ain't no scrub to work beside 'em." He slowly straightened himself up again, and, with his former apathetic air, looking down upon one of the women who was setting a coffee-pot on the coals, added, "But I reckon my old woman here kin give you some coffee and whiskey—of you keer for it."

Unfortunately the young expressman was more loyal to Bill than diplomatic. "If Bill's a little rough," he said, with a heightened color, "perhaps he has some excuse for it. You forget it's only six months ago that this coach was 'held up' not a hundred yards from this spot."

The woman with the coffee-pot here faced about, stood up, and, either from design or some odd coincidence, fell into the same dogged attitude that her husband had previously taken, except that she rested her hands on her hips. She was prematurely aged, like many of her class, and her black, snake-like locks, twisting loose from her comb as she lifted her head, showed threads of white against the firelight. Then with slow and implacable deliberation she said:

"We 'forget'! Well! not much, sonny! We ain't forgot it, and we ain't goin' to forget it, neither! We ain't bin likely to forget it for any time the last six months. What with visitations from the county constables, snoopin's round from 'Frisco detectives, droppin's-in from newspaper men, and yawpin's and starin's from tramps and strangers on the road—we haven't had a chance to disremember MUCH! And when at last Hiram tackled the head stage agent at Marysville, and allowed that this yer pesterin' and persecutin' had got ter stop—what did that yer head agent tell him? Told him to 'shet his head,' and be thankful that his 'thievin' old shanty wasn't burnt down around his ears!' Forget that six months ago the coach was held up near here? Not much, sonny—not much!"

The situation was embarrassing to the guests, as ordinary politeness called for some expression of sympathy with their gloomy hostess, and yet a selfish instinct of humanity warned them that there must be some foundation for this general distrust of the public. The journalist was troubled in his conscience; the expressman took refuge in an official reticence; the lady coughed slightly, and drew nearer to the fire with a vague but safe compliment to its brightness and comfort. It devolved upon Mr. Heckshill, who felt the responsibility of his late airy introduction of the party, to boldly keep up his role, with an equally non-committal, light-hearted philosophy.

“Well, ma’am,” he said, addressing his hostess, “it’s a queer world, and no man’s got sabe enough to say what’s the rights and wrongs o’ anything. Some folks believe one thing and act upon it, and other folks think differently and act upon THAT! The only thing ye kin safely say is that THINGS IS EZ THEY BE! My rule here and at the mill is jest to take things ez I find ‘em!”

It occurred to the journalist that Mr. Heckshill had the reputation, in his earlier career, of “taking” such things as unoccupied lands and timber “as he found them,” without much reference to their actual owners. Apparently he was acting upon the same principle now, as he reached for the demijohn of whiskey with the ingenuous pleasantries, “Did somebody say whiskey, or did I dream it?”

But this did not satisfy Frenshaw. “I suppose,” he said, ignoring Heckshill’s diplomatic philosophy, “that you may have been the victim of some misunderstanding or some unfortunate coincidence. Perhaps the company may have confounded you with your neighbors, who are believed to be friendly to the gang; or you may have made some injudicious acquaintances. Perhaps”—

He was stopped by a suppressed but not unmusical giggle, which appeared to come from the woman in the corner who had not yet spoken, and whose face and figure in the shadow he had previously overlooked. But he could now see that her outline was slim and graceful, and the contour of her head charming,—facts that had evidently not escaped the observation of the expressman and Mr. Heckshill, and that might have accounted for the cautious reticence of the one and the comfortable moralizing of the other.

The old woman cast an uneasy glance on the fair giggler, but replied to Frenshaw:

“That’s it! ‘injerdishus acquaintances!’ But just because we might happen to have friends, or even be sorter related to folks in another line o’ business that ain’t none o’ ours, the kempany hain’t no call to persecute US for it! S’pose we do happen to know some one like”—

“Spit it out, aunty, now you’ve started in! I don’t mind,” said the fair giggler, now apparently casting off all restraint in an outburst of laughter.

“Well,” said the old woman, with dogged desperation, “suppose, then, that that young girl thar is the niece of Snapshot Harry, who stopped the coach the last time”—

“And ain’t ashamed of it, either!” interrupted the young girl, rising and disclosing in the firelight an audacious but wonderfully pretty face; “and supposing he IS my uncle, that ain’t any cause for their bedevilin’ my poor old cousins Hiram and Sophy thar!” For all the indignation of her words, her little white teeth flashed mischievously in the dancing light, as if she rather enjoyed the embarrassment of her audience, not excluding her own relatives. Evidently cousin Sophy thought so too.

“It’s all very well for you to laugh, Flo, you limb!” she retorted querulously, yet with an admiring glance at the girl, “for ye know thar ain’t a man dare touch ye even with a word; but it’s mighty hard on me and Hiram, all the same.”

“Never you mind, Sophy dear,” said the girl, placing her hand half affectionately, half humorously on the old woman’s shoulder; “mebbe I won’t always be a discredit and a bother to you. Jest you hold your hosses, and wait until uncle Harry ‘holds up’ the next Pioneer Coach,”—the dancing devil in her eyes glanced as if accidentally on the young expressman,—“and he’ll make a big enough pile to send me to Europe, and you’ll be quit o’ me.”

The embarrassment, suspiciousness, and uneasiness of the coach party here found relief in a half hysteric explosion of laughter, in which even the dogged Hiram and Sophy joined. It seemed as impossible to withstand the girl’s invincible audacity as her beauty. She was quick to perceive her advantage, and, with a responsive laugh and a picturesque gesture of invitation, said:—

“Now that’s all settled, ye’d better waltz in and have your whiskey and coffee afore the stage starts. Ye kin comfort yourselves that it ain’t stolen or pizoned, even if it is served up to ye by Snapshot Harry’s niece!” With another easy gesture she swung the demijohn over her arm, and, offering a tin cup to each of the men, filled them in turn.

The ice thus broken, or perhaps thus perilously skated over, the passengers were as profuse in their thanks and apologies as they had been constrained and artificial before. Heckshill and Frenshaw

vied with each other for a glance from the audacious Flo. If their compliments partook of an extravagance that was at times ironical, the girl was evidently not deceived by it, but replied in kind. Only the expressman who seemed to have fallen under the spell of her audacious glances, was uneasy at the license of the others, yet himself dumb towards her. The lady discreetly drew nearer to the fire, the old woman, and her coffee; Hiram subsided into his apathetic attitude by the fire.

A shout from the road at last proclaimed the return of Yuba Bill and his helpers. It had the singular effect of startling the party into a vague and uneasy consciousness of indiscretion, as if it had been the voice of the outer world of law and order, and their manner again became constrained. The leave-taking was hurried and perfunctory; the diplomatic Heckshill again lapsed into glittering generalities about "the best of friends parting." Only the expressman lingered for a moment on the doorstep in the light of the fire and the girl's dancing eyes.

"I hope," he stammered, with a very youthful blush, "to come the next time—with—with—a better introduction."

"Uncle Harry's," she said, with a quick laugh and a mock curtsy, as she turned away.

Once out of hearing, the party broke into hurried comment and criticism of the scene they had just witnessed, and particularly of the fair actress who had played so important a part, averring their emphatic intention of wresting the facts from Yuba Bill at once, and cross-examining him closely; but oddly enough, reaching the coach and that redoubted individual, no one seemed to care to take the initiative, and they all scrambled hurriedly to their seats without a word. How far Yuba Bill's irritability and imperious haste contributed to this, or a fear that he might in turn catechise them kept them silent, no one knew. The cynically observant passenger was not there; he and the sole occupant of the box-seat, they were told, had joined the clearing party some moments before, and would be picked up by Yuba Bill later on.

Five minutes after Bill had gathered up the reins, they reached the scene of obstruction. The great pine-tree which had fallen from the steep bank above and stretched across the road had been partly lopped of its branches, divided in two lengths, which were now rolled to either side of the track, leaving barely space for the coach to pass. The huge vehicle "slowed up" as Yuba Bill skillfully guided his six horses through this narrow alley, whose tassels of pine, glistening with wet, brushed the panels and sides of the coach, and effectually excluded any view from its windows. Seen from the coach top, the horses appeared to be cleaving their way through a dark, shining olive sea, that parted before and closed behind them, as they slowly passed. The leaders were just emerging from it, and Bill was gathering up his slackened reins, when a peremptory voice called, "Halt!" At the same moment the coach lights flashed upon a masked and motionless horseman in the road. Bill made an impulsive reach for his whip, but in the same instant checked himself, reined in his horses with a suppressed oath, and sat perfectly rigid. Not so the expressman, who caught up his rifle, but it was arrested by Bill's arm, and his voice in his ear!

"Too late!—we're covered!—don't be a d-d fool!"

The inside passengers, still encompassed by obscurity, knew only that the stage had stopped. The "outsiders" knew, by experience, that they were covered by unseen guns in the wayside branches, and scarcely moved.

"I didn't think it was the square thing to stop you, Bill, till you'd got through your work," said a masterful but not unpleasant voice, "and if you'll just hand down the express box, I'll pass you and the rest of your load through free. But as we're both in a hurry, you'd better look lively about it."

"Hand it down," said Bill gruffly to the expressman.

The expressman turned with a white check but blazing eyes to the compartment below his seat. He lingered, apparently in some difficulty with the lock of the compartment, but finally brought out the box and handed it to another armed and masked figure that appeared mysteriously from the branches beside the wheels.

"Thank you!" said the voice; "you can slide on now."

“And thank you for nothing,” said Bill, gathering up his reins. “It’s the first time any of your kind had to throw down a tree to hold me up!”

“You’re lying, Bill!—though you don’t know it,” said the voice cheerfully. “Far from throwing down a tree to stop you, it was I sent word along the road to warn you from crashing down upon it, and sending you and your load to h-ll before your time! Drive on!”

The angry Bill waited for no second comment, but laying his whip over the backs of his team, drove furiously forward. So rapidly had the whole scene passed that the inside passengers knew nothing of it, and even those on the top of the coach roused from their stupor and inglorious inaction only to cling desperately to the terribly swaying coach as it thundered down the grade and try to keep their equilibrium. Yet, furious as was their speed, Yuba Bill could not help noticing that the expressman from time to time cast a hurried glance behind him. Bill knew that the young man had shown readiness and nerve in the attack, although both were hopeless; yet he was so much concerned at his set white face and compressed lips that when, at the end of three miles’ unabated speed, they galloped up to the first station, he seized the young man by the arm, and, as the clamor of the news they had brought rose around them, dragged him past the wondering crowd, caught a decanter from the bar, and, opening the door of a side room, pushed him into it and closed the door behind them.

“Look yar, Brice! Stop it! Quit it right thar!” he said emphatically, laying his large hand on the young fellow’s shoulder. “Be a man! You’ve shown you are one, green ez you are, for you had the sand in ye—the clear grit to-night, yet you’d have been a dead man now, if I hadn’t stopped ye! Man! you had no show from the beginning! You’ve done your level best to save your treasure, and I’m your witness to the kempany, and proud of it, too! So shet your head and—and,” pouring out a glass of whiskey, “swaller that!”

But Brice waved him aside with burning eyes and dry lips.

“You don’t know it all, Bill!” he said, with a half choked voice.

“All what?”

“Swear that you’ll keep it a secret,” he said feverishly, gripping Bill’s arm in turn, “and I’ll tell you.”

“Go on!”

“THE COACH WAS ROBBED BEFORE THAT!”

“Wot yer say?” ejaculated Bill.

“The treasure—a packet of greenbacks—had been taken from the box before the gang stopped us!”

“The h-ll, you say!”

“Listen! When you told me to hand down the box, I had an idea—a d-d fool one, perhaps—of taking that package out and jumping from the coach with it. I knew they would fire at me only; I might get away, but if they killed me, I’d have done only my duty, and nobody else would have got hurt. But when I got to the box I found that the lock had been forced and the money was gone. I managed to snap the lock again before I handed it down. I thought they might discover it at once and chase us, but they didn’t.”

“And then thar war no greenbacks in the box that they took?” gasped Bill, with staring eyes.

“No!”

Bill raised his hand in the air as if in solemn adjuration, and then brought it down on his knee, doubling up in a fit of uncontrollable but perfectly noiseless laughter. “Oh, Lord!” he gasped, “hol’ me afore I bust right open! Hush,” he went on, with a jerk of his fingers towards the next room, “not a word o’ this to any one! It’s too much to keep, I know; it’s nearly killing me! but we must swaller it ourselves! Oh, Jerusalem the Golden! Oh, Brice! Think o’ that face o’ Snapshot Harry’s ez he opened that treasure box afore his gang in the brush! And he allers so keen and so easy and so cock sure! Created snakes! I’d go through this every trip for one sight of him as he just riz up from that box and

cussed!” He again shook with inward convulsions till his face grew purple, and even the red came back to the younger man’s cheek.

“But this don’t bring the money back, Bill,” said Brice gloomily.

Yuba Bill swallowed the glass of whiskey at a gulp, wiped his mouth and eyes, smothered a second explosion, and then gravely confronted Brice.

“When do you think it was taken, and how?”

“It must have been taken when I left the coach on the road and went over to that settler’s cabin,” said Brice bitterly. “Yet I believed everything was safe, and I left two men—both passengers—one inside and one on the box, that man who sat the other side of you.”

“Jee whillikins!” ejaculated Bill, with his hand to his forehead, “the men I clean forgot to pick up in the road, and now I reckon they never intended to be picked up, either.”

“No doubt a part of the gang,” said Brice, with increased bitterness; “I see it all now.”

“No!” said Bill decisively, “that ain’t Snapshot Harry’s style; he’s a clean fighter, with no underhand tricks. And I don’t believe he threw down that tree, either. Look yer, sonny!” he added, suddenly laying his hand on Brice’s shoulder, “a hundred to one that that was the work of a couple o’ d-d sneaks or traitors in that gang who kem along as passengers. I never took any stock in that coyote who paid extra for his box-seat.”

Brice knew that Bill never looked kindly on any passenger who, by bribing the ticket agent, secured this favorite seat, which Bill felt was due to his personal friends and was in his own selection. He only returned gloomily:—

“I don’t see what difference it makes to us which robber got the money.

“Ye don’t,” said Bill, raising his head, with a sudden twinkle in his eyes. “Then ye don’t know Snapshot Harry. Do ye suppose he’s goin’ to sit down and twiddle his thumbs with that skin game played on him? No, sir,” he continued, with a thoughtful deliberation, drawing his fingers slowly through his long beard, “he spotted it—and smelt out the whole trick ez soon ez he opened that box, and that’s why he didn’t foller us! He’ll hunt those sneak thieves into h-ll but what he’ll get ‘em, and,” he went on still more slowly, “by the livin’ hokey! I reckon, sonny, that’s jest how ye’ll get your chance to chip in!”

“I don’t understand,” said Brice impatiently.

“Well,” said Bill, with more provoking slowness, as if he were communing with himself rather than Brice, “Harry’s mighty proud and high toned, and to be given away like this has cut down into his heart, you bet. It ain’t the money he’s thinkin’ of; it’s this split in the gang—the loss of his power ez boss, ye see—and ef he could get hold o’ them chaps he’d let the money slide ez long ez they didn’t get it. So you’ve got a detective on your side that’s worth the whole police force of Californy! Ye never heard anything about Snapshot Harry, did ye?” asked Bill carelessly, raising his eyes to Brice’s eager face.

The young man flushed slightly. “Very little,” he said. At the same time a vision of the pretty girl in the settler’s cabin flashed upon him with a new significance.

“He’s more than half white, in some ways,” said Bill thoughtfully, “and they say he lives somewhere about here in a cabin in the bush, with a crippled sister and her darter, who both swear by him. It mightn’t be hard to find him—ef a man was dead set on it.”

Brice faced about with determined eyes. “I’LL DO IT,” he said quietly.

“Ye might,” said Bill, still more deliberately stroking his beard, “mention my name, ef ye ever get to see him.”

“Your name,” ejaculated the astonished Brice.

“My name,” repeated Bill calmly. “He knows it’s my bounden duty to kill him ef I get the chance, and I know that he’d plug me full o’ holes in a minit ef thar war a necessity for it. But in these yer affairs, sonny, it seems to be the understood thing by the kempany that I’m to keep fiery young squirts like you, and chuckle-headed passengers like them”—jerking his thumb towards the

other room—"from gettin' themselves killed by their rashness. So ontill the kempany fill the top o' that coach with men who ain't got any business to do BUT fightin' other men who ain't got any other business to do BUT to fight them—the odds are agin us! Harry has always acted square to me—that's how I know he ain't in this sneak-thief business, and why he didn't foller us, suspectin' suthin', and I've always acted square to him. All the same, I'd like ter hev seen his face when that box was opened! Lordy!" Here Bill again collapsed in his silent paroxysm of mirth. "Ye might tell him how I laughed!"

"I would hardly do that, Bill," said the young man, smiling in spite of himself. "But you've given me an idea, and I'll work it out."

Bill glanced at the young fellow's kindling eyes and flushing cheek, and nodded. "Well, rastle with that idea later on, sonny. I'll fix you all right in my report to the kempany, but the rest you must work alone. I've started out the usual posse, circus-ridin' down the road after Harry. He'd be a rough customer to meet just now," continued Bill, with a chuckle, "ef thar was the ghost of a chance o' them comin' up with him, for him and his gang is scattered miles away by this." He paused, tossed off another glass of whiskey, wiped his mouth, and saying to Brice, with a wink, "It's about time to go and comfort them thar passengers," led the way through the crowded barroom into the stage office.

The spectacle of Bill's humorously satisfied face and Brice's bright eyes and heightened color was singularly effective. The "inside" passengers, who had experienced neither the excitement nor the danger of the robbery, yet had been obliged to listen to the hairbreadth escapes of the others, pooh-poohed the whole affair, and even the "outsides" themselves were at last convinced that the robbery was a slight one, with little or no loss to the company. The clamor subsided almost as suddenly as it had arisen; the wiser passengers fashioned their attitude on the sang-froid of Yuba Bill, and the whole coach load presently rolled away as complacently as if nothing had happened.

II

The robbery furnished the usual amount of copy for the local press. There was the inevitable compliment to Yuba Bill for his well-known coolness; the conduct of the young expressman, "who, though new to the service, displayed an intrepidity that only succumbed to numbers," was highly commended, and even the passengers received their meed of praise, not forgetting the lady, "who accepted the incident with the light-hearted pleasantry characteristic of the Californian woman." There was the usual allusion to the necessity of a Vigilance Committee to cope with this "organized lawlessness" but it is to be feared that the readers of "The Red Dog Clarion," however ready to lynch a horse thief, were of the opinion that rich stage express companies were quite able to take care of their own property.

It was with full cognizance of these facts and their uselessness to him that the next morning Mr. Ned Brice turned from the road where the coach had just halted on the previous night and approached the settler's cabin. If a little less sanguine than he was in Yuba Bill's presence, he was still doggedly inflexible in his design, whatever it might have been, for he had not revealed it even to Yuba Bill. It was his own; it was probably crude and youthful in its directness, but for that reason it was probably more convincing than the vacillations of older counsel.

He paused a moment at the closed door, conscious, however, of some hurried movement within which signified that his approach had been observed. The door was opened, and disclosed only the old woman. The same dogged expression was on her face as when he had last seen it, with the addition of querulous expectancy. In reply to his polite "Good-morning," she abruptly faced him with her hands still on the door.

"Ye kin stop right there! Ef yer want ter make any talk about this yar robbery, ye might ez well skedaddle to oncet, for we ain't 'takin' any' to-day!"

"I have no wish to talk about the robbery," said Brice quietly, "and as far as I can prevent it, you will not be troubled by any questions. If you doubt my word or the intentions of the company, perhaps you will kindly read that."

He drew from his pocket a still damp copy of "The Red Dog Clarion" and pointed to a paragraph.

"Wot's that?" she said querulously, feeling for her spectacles.

"Shall I read it?"

"Go on."

He read it slowly aloud. I grieve to say it had been jointly concocted the night before at the office of the "Clarion" by himself and the young journalist—the latter's assistance being his own personal tribute to the graces of Miss Flo. It read as follows:—

"The greatest assistance was rendered by Hiram Tarbox, Esq., a resident of the vicinity, in removing the obstruction, which was, no doubt, the preliminary work of some of the robber gang, and in providing hospitality for the delayed passengers. In fact, but for the timely warning of Yuba Bill by Mr. Tarbox, the coach might have crashed into the tree at that dangerous point, and an accident ensued more disastrous to life and limb than the robbery itself."

The sudden and unmistakable delight that expanded the old woman's mouth was so convincing that it might have given Brice a tinge of remorse over the success of his stratagem, had he not been utterly absorbed in his purpose. "Hiram!" she shouted suddenly.

The old man appeared from some back door with a promptness that proved his near proximity, and glanced angrily at Brice until he caught sight of his wife's face. Then his anger changed to wonder.

"Read that again, young feller," she said exultingly.

Brice re-read the paragraph aloud for Mr. Tarbox's benefit.

"That 'ar 'Hiram Tarbox, Esquire,' means YOU, Hiram," she gasped, in delighted explanation.

Hiram seized the paper, read the paragraph himself, spread out the whole page, examined it carefully, and then a fatuous grin began slowly to extend itself over his whole face, invading his eyes and ears, until the heavy, harsh, dogged lines of his nostrils and jaws had utterly disappeared.

"B'gosh!" he said, "that's square! Kin I keep it?"

"Certainly," said Brice. "I brought it for you."

"Is that all ye came for?" said Hiram, with sudden suspicion.

"No," said the young man frankly. Yet he hesitated a moment as he added, "I would like to see Miss Flora."

His hesitation and heightened color were more disarming to suspicion than the most elaborate and carefully prepared indifference. With their knowledge and pride in their relative's fascinations they felt it could have but one meaning! Hiram wiped his mouth with his hand, assumed a demure expression, glanced at his wife, and answered:—

"She ain't here now."

Mr. Brice's face displayed his disappointment. But the true lover holds a talisman potent with old and young. Mrs. Tarbox felt a sneaking maternal pity for this suddenly stricken Strephon.

"She's gone home," she added more gently—"went at sun-up this mornin'."

"Home," repeated Brice. "Where's that?"

Mrs. Tarbox looked at her husband and hesitated. Then she said—a little in her old manner—"Her uncle's."

"Can you direct me the way there?" asked Brice simply.

The astonishment in their faces presently darkened into suspicion again. "Ef that's your little game," began Hiram, with a lowering brow—

"I have no little game but to see her and speak with her," said Brice boldly. "I am alone and unarmed, as you see," he continued, pointing to his empty belt and small dispatch bag slung on his shoulder, "and certainly unable to do any one any harm. I am willing to take what risks there are."

And as no one knows of my intention, nor of my coming here, whatever might happen to me, no one need know it. You would be safe from questioning.”

There was that hopeful determination in his manner that overrode their resigned doggedness. “Ef we knew how to direct you thar,” said the old woman cautiously, “ye’d be killed outer hand afore ye even set eyes on the girl. The house is in a holler with hills kept by spies; ye’d be a dead man as soon as ye crossed its boundary.”

“Wot do YOU know about it?” interrupted her husband quickly, in querulous warning. “Wot are ye talkin’ about?”

“You leave me alone, Hiram! I ain’t goin’ to let that young feller get popped off without a show, or without knowin’ jest wot he’s got to tackle, nohow ye kin fix it! And can’t ye see he’s bound to go, whatever ye says?”

Mr. Tarbox saw this fact plainly in Brice’s eyes, and hesitated.

“The most that I kin tell ye,” he said gloomily, “is the way the gal takes when she goes from here, but how far it is, or if it ain’t a blind, I can’t swar, for I hev’n’t bin thar myself, and Harry never comes here but on an off night, when the coach ain’t runnin’ and thar’s no travel.” He stopped suddenly and uneasily, as if he had said too much.

“Thar ye go, Hiram, and ye talk of others gabblin’! So ye might as well tell the young feller how that thar ain’t but one way, and that’s the way Harry takes, too, when he comes yer oncet in an age to talk to his own flesh and blood, and see a Christian face that ain’t agin him!”

Mr. Tarbox was silent. “Ye know whar the tree was thrown down on the road,” he said at last. “Yes.”

“The mountain rises straight up on the right side of the road, all hazel brush and thorn—whar a goat couldn’t climb.”

“Yes.”

“But that’s a lie! for thar’s a little trail, not a foot wide, runs up from the road for a mile, keepin’ it in view all the while, but bein’ hidden by the brush. Ye kin see everything from thar, and hear a teamster spit on the road.”

“Go on,” said Brice impatiently.

“Then it goes up and over the ridge, and down the other side into a little gulch until it comes to the canyon of the North Fork, where the stage road crosses over the bridge high up. The trail winds round the bank of the Fork and comes out on the LEFT side of the stage road about a thousand feet below it. That’s the valley and hollow whar Harry lives, and that’s the only way it can be found. For all along the LEFT of the stage road is a sheer pitch down that thousand feet, whar no one kin git up or down.”

“I understand,” said Brice, with sparkling eyes. “I’ll find my way all right.”

“And when ye git thar, look out for yourself!” put in the woman earnestly. “Ye may have regular greenhorn’s luck and pick up Flo afore ye cross the boundary, for she’s that bold that when she gets lonesome o’ stayin’ thar she goes wanderin’ out o’ bounds.”

“Hev ye any weppin,—any shootin’-iron about ye?” asked Tarbox, with a latent suspicion.

The young man smiled, and again showed his empty belt. “None!” he said truthfully.

“I ain’t sure ef that ain’t the safest thing arter all with a shot like Harry,” remarked the old man grimly. “Well, so long!” he added, and turned away.

It was clearly a leave-taking, and Brice, warmly thanking them both, returned to the road.

It was not far to the scene of the obstruction, yet but for Tarbox’s timely hint, the little trail up the mountain side would have escaped his observation. Ascending, he soon found himself creeping along a narrow ledge of rock, hidden from the road that ran fifty yards below by a thick network growth of thorn and bramble, which still enabled him to see its whole parallel length. Perilous in the extreme to any hesitating foot, at one point, directly above the obstruction, the ledge itself was missing—broken away by the fall of the tree from the forest crest higher up. For an instant Brice stood

dizzy and irresolute before the gap. Looking down for a foothold, his eye caught the faint imprint of a woman's shoe on a clayey rock projecting midway of the chasm. It must have been the young girl's footprint made that morning, for the narrow toe was pointed in the direction she would go! Where SHE could pass should he shrink from going? Without further hesitation he twined his fingers around the roots above him, and half swung, half pulled himself along until he once more felt the ledge below him.

From time to time, as he went on along the difficult track, the narrow little toe-print pointed the way to him, like an arrow through the wilds. It was a pleasant thought, and yet a perplexing one. Would he have undertaken this quest just to see her? Would he be content with that if his other motive failed? For as he made his way up to the ridge he was more than once assailed by doubts of the practical success of his enterprise. In the excitement of last night, and even the hopefulness of the early morning, it seemed an easy thing to persuade the vain and eccentric highwayman that their interests might be identical, and to convince him that his, Brice's, assistance to recover the stolen greenbacks and insure the punishment of the robber, with the possible addition of a reward from the express company, would be an inducement for them to work together. The risks that he was running seemed to his youthful fancy to atone for any defects in his logic or his plans. Yet as he crossed the ridge, leaving the civilized highway behind him, and descended the narrow trail, which grew wilder at each step, his arguments seemed no longer so convincing. He now hurried forward, however, with a feverish haste to anticipate the worst that might befall him.

The trail grew more intricate in the deep ferns; the friendly little footprint had vanished in this primeval wilderness. As he pushed through the gorge, he could hear at last the roar of the North Fork forcing its way through the canyon that crossed the gorge at right angles. At last he reached its current, shut in by two narrow precipitous walls that were spanned five hundred feet above by the stage road over a perilous bridge. As he approached the gloomy canyon, he remembered that the river, seen from above, seemed to have no banks, but to have cut its way through the solid rock.

He found, however, a faint ledge made by caught driftwood from the current and the debris of the overhanging cliffs. Again the narrow footprint on the ooze was his guide. At last, emerging from the canyon, a strange view burst upon his sight. The river turned abruptly to the right, and, following the mountain side, left a small hollow completely walled in by the surrounding heights. To his left was the ridge he had descended from on the other side, and he now understood the singular detour he had made. He was on the other side of the stage road also, which ran along the mountain shelf a thousand feet above him. The wall, a sheer cliff, made the hollow inaccessible from that side. Little hills covered with buckeye encompassed it. It looked like a sylvan retreat, and yet was as secure in its isolation and approaches as the outlaw's den that it was.

He was gazing at the singular prospect when a shot rang in the air. It seemed to come from a distance, and he interpreted it as a signal. But it was followed presently by another; and putting his hand to his hat to keep it from falling, he found that the upturned brim had been pierced by a bullet. He stopped at this evident hint, and, taking his dispatch bag from his shoulder, placed it significantly upon a boulder, and looked around as if to await the appearance of the unseen marksman. The rifle shot rang out again, the bag quivered, and turned over with a bullet hole through it!

He took out his white handkerchief and waved it. Another shot followed, and the handkerchief was snapped from his fingers, torn from corner to corner. A feeling of desperation and fury seized him; he was being played with by a masked and skillful assassin, who only waited until it pleased him to fire the deadly shot! But this time he could see the rifle smoke drifting from under a sycamore not a hundred yards away. He set his white lips together, but with a determined face and unfaltering step walked directly towards it. In another moment he believed and almost hoped that all would be over. With such a marksman he would not be maimed, but killed outright.

He had not covered half the distance before a man lounged out from behind the tree carelessly shouldering his rifle. He was tall but slightly built, with an amused, critical manner, and nothing about

him to suggest the bloodthirsty assassin. He met Brice halfway, dropping his rifle slantingly across his breast with his hands lightly grasping the lock, and gazed at the young man curiously.

"You look as if you'd had a big scare, old man, but you've clear grit for all that!" he said, with a critical and reassuring smile. "Now, what are you doing here? Stay," he continued, as Brice's parched lips prevented him from replying immediately. "I ought to know your face. Hello! you're the expressman!" His glance suddenly shifted, and swept past Brice over the ground beyond him to the entrance of the hollow, but his smile returned as he apparently satisfied himself that the young man was alone. "Well, what do you want?"

"I want to see Snapshot Harry," said Brice, with an effort. His voice came back more slowly than his color, but that was perhaps hurried by a sense of shame at his physical weakness.

"What you want is a drop o' whiskey," said the stranger good humoredly, taking his arm, "and we'll find it in that shanty just behind the tree." To Brice's surprise, a few steps in that direction revealed a fair-sized cabin, with a slight pretentiousness about it of neatness, comfort, and picturesque effect, far superior to the Tarbox shanty. A few flowers were in boxes on the window—signs, as Brice fancied, of feminine taste. When they reached the threshold, somewhat of this quality was also visible in the interior. When Brice had partaken of the whiskey, the stranger, who had kept silence, pointed to a chair, and said smilingly:—

"I am Henry Dimwood, alias Snapshot Harry, and this is my house."

"I came to speak with you about the robbery of greenbacks from the coach last night," began Brice hurriedly, with a sudden access of hope at his reception. "I mean, of course,"—he stopped and hesitated,—“the actual robbery before YOU stopped us.”

"What!" said Harry, springing to his feet, "do you mean to say YOU knew it?"

Brice's heart sank, but he remained steadfast and truthful. "Yes," he said, "I knew it when I handed down the box. I saw that the lock had been forced, but I snapped it together again. It was my fault. Perhaps I should have warned you, but I am solely to blame."

"Did Yuba Bill know of it?" asked the highwayman, with singular excitement.

"Not at the time, I give you my word!" replied Brice quickly, thinking only of loyalty to his old comrade. "I never told him till we reached the station."

"And he knew it then?" repeated Harry eagerly.

"Yes."

"Did he say anything? Did he do anything? Did he look astonished?"

Brice remembered Bill's uncontrollable merriment, but replied vaguely and diplomatically, "He was certainly astonished."

A laugh gathered in Snapshot Harry's eyes which at last overspread his whole face, and finally shook his frame as he sat helplessly down again. Then, wiping his eyes, he said in a shaky voice:—

"It would have been sure death to have trusted myself near that station, but I think I'd have risked it just to have seen Bill's face when you told him! Just think of it! Bill, who was a match for anybody! Bill, who was never caught napping! Bill, who only wanted supreme control of things to wipe me off the face of the earth! Bill, who knew how everything was done, and could stop it if he chose, and then to have been **ROBBED TWICE IN ONE EVENING BY MY GANG!** Yes, sir! Yuba Bill and his rotten old coach were **GONE THROUGH TWICE INSIDE HALF AN HOUR** by the gang!"

"Then you knew of it too?" said Brice, in uneasy astonishment.

"Afterwards, my young friend—like Yuba Bill—afterwards." He stopped; his whole expression changed. "It was done by two sneaking hounds," he said sharply; "one whom I suspected before, and one, a new hand, a pal of his. They were detached to watch the coach and be satisfied that the greenbacks were aboard, for it isn't my style to 'hold up' except for something special. They were to take seats on the coach as far as Ringwood Station, three miles below where we held you up, and to get out there and pass the word to us that it was all right. They didn't; that made us a little extra

careful, seeing something was wrong, but never suspecting THEM. We found out afterwards that they got one of my scouts to cut down that tree, saying it was my orders and a part of our game, calculating in the stoppage and confusion to collar the swag and get off with it. Without knowing it, YOU played into their hands by going into Tarbox's cabin."

"But how did you know this?" interrupted Brice, in wonder.

"They forgot one thing," continued Snapshot Harry grimly. "They forgot that half an hour before and half an hour after a stage is stopped we have that road patrolled, every foot of it. While I was opening the box in the brush, the two fools, sneaking along the road, came slap upon one of my patrols, and then tried to run for it. One was dropped, but before he was plugged full of holes and hung up on a tree, he confessed, and said the other man who escaped had the greenbacks."

Brice's face fell. "Then they are lost," he said bitterly.

"Not unless he eats them—as he may want to do before I'm done on him, for he must either starve or come out. That road is still watched by my men from Tarbox's cabin to the bridge. He's there somewhere, and can't get forward or backward. Look!" he said, rising and going to the door. "That road," he pointed to the stage road,—a narrow ledge flanked on one side by a precipitous mountain wall, and on the other by an equally precipitate descent,—“is his limit and tether, and he can't escape on either side."

"But the trail?"

"There is but one entrance to it,—the way you came, and that is guarded too. From the time you entered it until you reached the bottom, you were signaled here from point to point! HE would have been dropped! I merely gave YOU a hint of what might have happened to you, if you were up to any little game! You took it like a white man. Come, now! What is your business?"

Thus challenged, Brice plunged with youthful hopefulness into his plan; if, as he voiced it, it seemed to him a little extravagant, he was buoyed up by the frankness of the highwayman, who also had treated the double robbery with a levity that seemed almost as extravagant. He suggested that they should work together to recover the money; that the express company should know that the unprecedented stealthy introduction of robbers in the guise of passengers was not Snapshot Harry's method, and he repudiated it as unmanly and unsportsmanlike; and that, by using his superior skill and knowledge of the locality to recover the money and deliver the culprit into the company's hands, he would not only earn the reward that they should offer, but that he would evoke a sentiment that all Californians would understand and respect. The highwayman listened with a tolerant smile, but, to Brice's surprise, this appeal to his vanity touched him less than the prospective punishment of the thief.

"It would serve the d-d hound right," he muttered, "if, instead of being shot like a man, he was made to 'do time' in prison, like the ordinary sneak thief that he is." When Brice had concluded, he said briefly, "The only trouble with your plans, my young friend, is that about twenty-five men have got to consider them, and have THEIR say about it. Every man in my gang is a shareholder in these greenbacks, for I work on the square; and it's for him to say whether he'll give them up for a reward and the good opinion of the express company. Perhaps," he went on, with a peculiar smile, "it's just as well that you tried it on me first! However, I'll sound the boys, and see what comes of it, but not until you're safe off the premises."

"And you'll let me assist you?" said Brice eagerly.

Snapshot Harry smiled again. "Well, if you come across the d-d thief, and you recognize him and can get the greenbacks from him, I'll pass over the game to you." He rose and added, apparently by way of farewell, "Perhaps it's just as well that I should give you a guide part of the way to prevent accidents." He went to a door leading to an adjoining room, and called "Flo!"

Brice's heart leaped! If he had forgotten her in the excitement of his interview, he atoned for it by a vivid blush. Her own color was a little heightened as she slipped into the room, but the two managed to look demurely at each other, without a word of recognition.

"This is my niece, Flora," said Snapshot Harry, with a slight wave of the hand that was by no means uncourtly, "and her company will keep you from any impertinent questioning as well as if I were with you. This is Mr. Brice, Flo, who came to see me on business, and has quite forgotten my practical joking."

The girl acknowledged Brice's bow with a shyness very different from her manner of the evening before. Brice felt embarrassed and evidently showed it, for his host, with a smile, put an end to the constraint by shaking the young man's hand heartily, bidding him good-by, and accompanying him to the door.

Once on their way, Mr. Brice's spirits returned. "I told you last night," he said, "that I hoped to meet you the next time with a better introduction. You suggested your uncle's. Well, are you satisfied?"

"But you didn't come to see ME," said the girl mischievously.

"How do you know what my intentions were?" returned the young man gayly, gazing at the girl's charming face with a serious doubt as to the singleness of his own intentions.

"Oh, because I know," she answered, with a toss of her brown head. "I heard what you said to uncle Harry."

Mr. Brice's brow contracted. "Perhaps you saw me, too, when I came," he said, with a slight touch of bitterness as he thought of his reception.

Miss Flo laughed. Brice walked on silently; the girl was heartless and worthy of her education. After a pause she said demurely, "I knew he wouldn't hurt you—but YOU didn't. That's where you showed your grit in walking straight on."

"And I suppose you were greatly amused," he replied scornfully.

The girl lifted her arms a little wearily, as with a half sigh she readjusted her brown braids under her uncle's gray slouch hat, which she had caught up as she passed out. "Thar ain't much to laugh at here!" she said. "But it was mighty funny when you tried to put your hat straight, and then found thur was that bullet hole right through the brim! And the way you stared at it—Lordy!"

Her musical laugh was infectious, and swept away his outraged dignity. He laughed too. At last she said, gazing at his hat, "It won't do for you to go back to your folks wearin' that sort o' thing. Here! Take mine!" With a saucy movement she audaciously lifted his hat from his head, and placed her own upon it.

"But this is your uncle's hat," he remonstrated.

"All the same; he spoiled yours," she laughed, adjusting his hat upon her own head. "But I'll keep yours to remember you by. I'll loop it up by this hole, and it'll look mighty purty. Jes' see!" She plucked a wild rose from a bush by the wayside, and, passing the stalk through the bullet hole, pinned the brim against the crown by a thorn. "There," she said, putting on the hat again with a little affectation of coquetry, "how's that?"

Mr. Brice thought it very picturesque and becoming to the graceful head and laughing eyes beneath it, and said so. Then, becoming in his turn audacious, he drew nearer to her side.

"I suppose you know the forfeit of putting on a gentleman's hat?"

Apparently she did, for she suddenly made a warning gesture, and said, "Not here! It would be a bigger forfeit than you'd keer fo'." Before he could reply she turned aside as if quite innocently, and passed into the shade of a fringe of buckeyes. He followed quickly. "I didn't mean that," she said; but in the mean time he had kissed the pink tip of her ear under its brown coils. He was, nevertheless, somewhat discomfited by her undisturbed manner and serene face. "Ye don't seem to mind bein' shot at," she said, with an odd smile, "but it won't do for you to kalkilate that EVERYBODY shoots as keerfully as uncle Harry."

"I don't understand," he replied, struck by her manner.

"Ye ain't very complimentary, or you'd allow that other folks might be wantin' what you took just now, and might consider you was poachin'," she returned gravely. "My best and strongest holt

among those men is that uncle Harry would kill the first one who tried anything like that on—and they know it. That’s how I get all the liberty I want here, and can come and go alone as I like.”

Brice’s face flushed quickly with genuine shame and remorse. “Do forgive me,” he said hurriedly. “I didn’t think—I’m a brute and a fool!”

“Uncle Harry allowed you was either drunk or a born idiot when you was promenadin’ into the valley just now,” she said, with a smile.

“And what did you think?” he asked a little uneasily.

“I thought you didn’t look like a drinkin’ man,” she answered audaciously.

Brice bit his lip and walked on silently, at which she cast a sidelong glance under her widely spaced heavy lashes and said demurely, “I thought last night it was mighty good for you to stand up for your frien’ Yuba Bill, and then, after ye knew who I was, to let the folks see you kinder cottoned to me too. Not in the style o’ that land-grabber Heckshill, nor that peart newspaper man, neither. Of course I gave them as good as they sent,” she went on, with a little laugh, but Brice could see that her sensitive lip in profile had the tremulous and resentful curve of one who was accustomed to slight and annoyance. Was it possible that this reckless, self-contained girl felt her position keenly?

“I am proud to have your good opinion,” he said, with a certain respect mingled with his admiring glance, “even if I have not your uncle’s.”

“Oh, he likes you well enough, or he wouldn’t have hearkened to you a minute,” she said quickly. “When you opened out about them greenbacks, I jes’ clutched my cheer SO,” she illustrated her words with a gesture of her hands, and her face actually seemed to grow pale at the recollection,—“and I nigh started up to stop ye; but that idea of Yuba Bill bein’ robbed TWICE I think tickled him awful. But it was lucky none o’ the gang heard ye or suspected anything. I reckon that’s why he sent me with you,—to keep them from doggin’ you and askin’ questions that a straight man like you would be sure to answer. But they daren’t come nigh ye as long as I’m with you!” She threw back her head and rose-crested hat with a mock air of protection that, however, had a certain real pride in it.

“I am very glad of that, if it gives me the chance of having your company alone,” returned Brice, smiling, “and very grateful to your uncle, whatever were his reasons for making you my guide. But you have already been that to me,” and he told her of the footprints. “But for you,” he added, with gentle significance, “I should not have been here.”

She was silent for a moment, and he could only see the back of her head and its heavy brown coils. After a pause she asked abruptly, “Where’s your handkerchief?”

He took it from his pocket; her ingenious uncle’s bullet had torn rather than pierced the cambric.

“I thought so,” she said, gravely examining it, “but I kin mend it as good as new. I reckon you allow I can’t sew,” she continued, “but I do heaps of mendin’, as the digger squaw and Chinamen we have here do only the coarser work. I’ll send it back to you, and meanwhiles you keep mine.”

She drew a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to him. To his great surprise it was a delicate one, beautifully embroidered, and utterly incongruous to her station. The idea that flashed upon him, it is to be feared, showed itself momentarily in his hesitation and embarrassment.

She gave a quick laugh. “Don’t be frightened. It’s bought and paid for. Uncle Harry don’t touch passengers’ fixin’s; that ain’t his style. You oughter know that.” Yet in spite of her laugh, he could see the sensitive pout of her lower lip.

“I was only thinking,” he said hurriedly and sympathetically, “that it was too fine for me. But I will be proud to keep it as a souvenir of you. It’s not too pretty for THAT!”

“Uncle gets me these things. He don’t keer what they cost,” she went on, ignoring the compliment. “Why, I’ve got awfully fine gowns up there that I only wear when I go to Marysville oncet in a while.”

“Does he take you there?” asked Brice.

"No!" she answered quietly. "Not"—a little defiantly—"that he's afeard, for they can't prove anything against him; no man kin swear to him, and thar ain't an officer that keers to go for him. But he's that shy for ME he don't keer to have me mixed with him."

"But nobody recognizes you?"

"Sometimes—but I don't keer for that." She cocked her hat a little audaciously, but Brice noticed that her arms afterwards dropped at her side with the same weary gesture he had observed before. "Whenever I go into shops it's always 'Yes, miss,' and 'No, miss,' and 'Certainly, Miss Dimwood.' Oh, they're mighty respectful. I reckon they allow that Snapshot Harry's rifle carries far."

Presently she faced him again, for their conversation had been carried on in profile. There was a critical, searching look in her brown eyes.

"Here I'm talkin' to you as if you were one"—Mr. Brice was positive she was going to say "one of the gang," but she hesitated and concluded, "one of my relations—like cousin Hiram."

"I wish you would think of me as being as true a friend," said the young man earnestly.

She did not reply immediately, but seemed to be examining the distance. They were not far from the canyon now, and the river bank. A fringe of buckeyes hid the base of the mountain, which had begun to tower up above them to the invisible stage road overhead. "I am going to be a real guide to you now," she said suddenly. "When we reach that buckeye corner and are out of sight, we will turn into it instead of going through the canyon. You shall go up the mountain to the stage road, from THIS side."

"But it is impossible!" he exclaimed, in astonishment. "Your uncle said so."

"Coming DOWN, but not going up," she returned, with a laugh. "I found it, and no one knows it but myself."

He glanced up at the towering cliff; its nearly perpendicular flanks were seamed with fissures, some clefts deeply set with stunted growths of thorn and "scrub," but still sheer and forbidding, and then glanced back at her incredulously. "I will show you," she said, answering his look with a smile of triumph. "I haven't tramped over this whole valley for nothing! But wait until we reach the river bank. They must think that we've gone through the canyon."

"They?"

"Yes—any one who is watching us," said the girl dryly.

A few steps further on brought them to the buckeye thicket, which extended to the river bank and mouth of the canyon. The girl lingered for a moment ostentatiously before it, and then, saying "Come," suddenly turned at right angles into the thicket. Brice followed, and the next moment they were hidden by its friendly screen from the valley. On the other side rose the mountain wall, leaving a narrow trail before them. It was composed of the rocky debris and fallen trees of the cliff, from which buckeyes and larches were now springing. It was uneven, irregular, and slowly ascending; but the young girl led the way with the free footstep of a mountaineer, and yet a grace that was akin to delicacy. Nor could he fail to notice that, after the Western girl's fashion, she was shod more elegantly and lightly than was consistent with the rude and rustic surroundings. It was the same slim shoe-print which had guided him that morning. Presently she stopped, and seemed to be gazing curiously at the cliff side. Brice followed the direction of her eyes. On a protruding bush at the edge of one of the wooded clefts of the mountain flank something was hanging, and in the freshening southerly wind was flapping heavily, like a raven's wing, or as if still saturated with the last night's rain. "That's mighty queer!" said Flo, gazing intently at the unsightly and incongruous attachment to the shrub, which had a vague, weird suggestion. "It wasn't there yesterday."

"It looks like a man's coat," remarked Brice uneasily.

"Whew!" said the girl. "Then somebody has come down who won't go up again! There's a lot of fresh rocks and brush here, too. What's that?" She was pointing to a spot some yards before them where there had been a recent precipitation of debris and uprooted shrubs. But mingled with it lay a mass of rags strangely akin to the tattered remnant that flagged from the bush a hundred feet

above them. The girl suddenly uttered a sharp feminine cry of mingled horror and disgust,—the first weakness of sex she had shown,—and, recoiling, grasped Brice's arm. "Don't go there! Come away!"

But Brice had already seen that which, while it shocked him, was urging him forward with an invincible fascination. Gently releasing himself, and bidding the girl stand back, he moved toward the unsightly heap. Gradually it disclosed a grotesque caricature of a human figure, but so maimed and doubled up that it seemed a stuffed and fallen scarecrow. As is common in men stricken suddenly down by accident in the fullness of life, the clothes asserted themselves before all else with a hideous ludicrousness, obliterating even the majesty of death in their helpless yet ironical incongruity. The garments seemed to have never fitted the wearer, but to have been assumed in ghastly jocularly,—a boot half off the swollen foot, a ripped waistcoat thrown over the shoulder, were like the properties of some low comedian. At first the body appeared to be headless; but as Brice cleared away the debris and lifted it, he saw with horror that the head was twisted under the shoulder, and swung helplessly from the dislocated neck. But that horror gave way to a more intense and thrilling emotion as he saw the face—although strangely free from laceration or disfigurement, and impurpled and distended into the simulation of a self-complacent smile—was a face he recognized! It was the face of the cynical traveler in the coach—the man who he was now satisfied had robbed it.

A strange and selfish resentment took possession of him. Here was the man through whom he had suffered shame and peril, and who even now seemed complacently victorious in death. He examined him closely; his coat and waistcoat had been partly torn away in his fall; his shirt still clung to him, but through its torn front could be seen a heavy treasure belt encircling his waist. Forgetting his disgust, Brice tore away the shirt and unloosed the belt. It was saturated with water like the rest of the clothing, but its pocket seemed heavy and distended. In another instant he had opened it, and discovered the envelope containing the packet of greenbacks, its seal still inviolate and unbroken. It was the stolen treasure!

A faint sigh recalled him to himself. The girl was standing a few feet from him, regarding him curiously.

"It's the thief himself!" he said, in a breathless explanation. "In trying to escape he must have fallen from the road above. But here are the greenbacks safe! We must go back to your uncle at once," he said excitedly. "Come!"

"Are you mad?" she cried, in astonishment.

"No," returned Brice, in equal astonishment, "but you know I agreed with him that we should work together to recover the money, and I must show him our good luck."

"He told you that if you met the thief and could get the money from him, you were welcome to it," said the girl gravely, "and you HAVE got it."

"But not in the way he meant," returned Brice hurriedly. "This man's death is the result of his attempting to escape from your uncle's guards along the road; the merit of it belongs to them and your uncle. It would be cowardly and mean of me to take advantage of it."

The girl looked at him with an expression of mingled admiration and pity. "But the guards were placed there before he ever saw you," said she impatiently. "And whatever uncle Harry may want to do, he must do what the gang says. And with the money once in their possession, or even in yours, if they knew it, I wouldn't give much for its chances—or YOURS either—for gettin' out o' this hollow again."

"But if THEY are treacherous, that is no reason why I should be so," protested Brice stoutly.

"You've no right to say they were treacherous when they knew nothing of your plans," said the girl sharply. "Your company would have more call to say YOU were treacherous to it for making a plan without consultin' them." Brice winced, for he had never thought of that before. "You can offer that reward AFTER you get away from here with the greenbacks. But," she added proudly, with a toss of her head, "go back if you want to! Tell him all! Tell him where you found it—tell him I did not take you through the canyon, but was showin' you a new trail I had never shown to THEM! Tell

him that I am a traitor, for I have given them and him away to you, a stranger, and that you consider yourself the only straight and honest one about here!”

Brice flushed with shame. “Forgive me,” he said hurriedly; “you are right and I am wrong again. I will do just what you say. I will first place these greenbacks in a secure place—and then”—

“Get away first—that’s your only holt,” she interrupted him quickly, her eyes still flashing through indignant tears. “Come quick, for I must put you on the trail before they miss me.”

She darted forward; he followed, but she kept the lead, as much, he fancied, to evade his observation as to expedite his going. Presently they stopped before the sloping trunk of a huge pine that had long since fallen from the height above, but, although splintered where it had broken ground, had preserved some fifty feet of its straight trunk erect and leaning like a ladder against the mountain wall. “There,” she said, hurriedly pointing to its decaying but still projecting lateral branches, “you climb it—I have. At the top you’ll find it’s stuck in a cleft among the brush. There’s a little hollow and an old waterway from a spring above which makes a trail through the brush. It’s as good as the trail you took from the stage road this mornin’, but it’s not as safe comin’ down. Keep along it to the spring, and it will land ye jest the other side of uncle Hiram’s cabin. Go quick! I’ll wait here until ye’ve reached the cleft.”

“But you,” he said, turning toward her, “how can I ever thank you?”

As if anticipating a leave-taking, the girl had already withdrawn herself a few yards away, and simply made an upward gesture with her hand. “Quick! Up with you! Every minute now is a risk to me.”

Thus appealed to, Brice could only comply. Perhaps he was a little hurt at the girl’s evident desire to avoid a gentler parting. Securing his prized envelope within his breast, he began to ascend the tree. Its inclination, and the aid offered by the broken stumps of branches, made this comparatively easy, and in a few moments he reached its top, and stood upon a little ledge in the wall. A swift glance around him revealed the whole waterway or fissure slanting upward along the mountain face. Then he turned quickly to look down the dizzy height. At first he could distinguish nothing but the top of the buckeyes and their white clustering blossoms. Then something fluttered,—the torn white handkerchief of his that she had kept. And then he caught a single glimpse of the flower-plumed hat receding rapidly among the trees, and Flora Dimwood was gone.

III

In twenty-four hours Edward Brice was in San Francisco. But although successful and the bearer of the treasure, it is doubtful if he approached this end of his journey with the temerity he had shown on entering the robbers’ valley. A consciousness that the methods he had employed might excite the ridicule, if not the censure, of his principals, or that he might have compromised them in his meeting with Snapshot Harry, considerably modified his youthful exultation. It is possible that Flora’s reproach, which still rankled in his mind, may have quickened his sensitiveness on that point. However, he had resolved to tell the whole truth, except his episode with Flora, and to place the conduct of Snapshot Harry and the Tarboxes in as favorable a light as possible. But first he had recourse to the manager, a man of shrewd worldly experience, who had recommended him to his place. When he had finished and handed him the treasured envelope, the man looked at him with a critical and yet not unkindly expression. “Perhaps it’s just as well, Brice, that you did come to me at first, and did not make your report to the president and directors.”

“I suppose,” said Brice diffidently, “that they wouldn’t have liked my communicating with the highwayman without their knowledge?”

“More than that—they wouldn’t have believed your story.”

“Not believe it?” cried Brice, flushing quickly. “Do you think”—

The manager checked him with a laugh. "Hold on! I believe every word of it, and why? Because you've added nothing to it to make yourself the regular hero. Why, with your opportunity, and no one able to contradict you, you might have told me you had a hand-to-hand fight with the thief, and had to kill him to recover the money, and even brought your handkerchief and hat back with the bullet holes to prove it." Brice winked as he thought of the fair possessor of those articles. "But as a story for general circulation, it won't do. Have you told it to any one else? Does any one know what happened but yourself?"

Brice thought of Flora, but he had resolved not to compromise her, and he had a consciousness that she would be equally loyal to him. "No one," he answered boldly.

"Very good. And I suppose you wouldn't mind if it were kept out of the newspapers? You're not hankering after a reputation as a hero?"

"Certainly not," said Brice indignantly.

"Well, then, we'll keep it where it is. You will say nothing. I will hand over the greenbacks to the company, but only as much of your story as I think they'll stand. You're all right as it is. Yuba Bill has already set you up in his report to the company, and the recovery of this money will put you higher! Only, the PUBLIC need know nothing about it."

"But," asked Brice amazedly, "how can it be prevented? The shippers who lost the money will have to know that it has been recovered."

"Why should they? The company will assume the risk, and repay them just the same. It's a great deal better to have the reputation for accepting the responsibility than for the shippers to think that they only get their money through the accident of its recovery."

Brice gasped at this large business truth. Besides, it occurred to him that it kept the secret, and Flora's participation in it, from Snapshot Harry and the gang. He had not thought of that before.

"Come," continued the manager, with official curtness. "What do you say? Are you willing to leave it to me?"

Brice hesitated a moment. It was not what his impulsive truthful nature had suggested. It was not what his youthful fancy had imagined. He had not worked upon the sympathies of the company on behalf of Snapshot Harry as he believed he would do. He had not even impressed the manager. His story, far from exciting a chivalrous sentiment, had been pronounced improbable. Yet he reflected he had so far protected HER, and he consented with a sigh.

Nevertheless, the result ought to have satisfied him. A dazzling check, inclosed in a letter of thanks from the company the next day, and his promotion from "the road" to the San Francisco office, would have been quite enough for any one but Edward Brice. Yet he was grateful, albeit a little frightened and remorseful over his luck. He could not help thinking of the kindly tolerance of the highwayman, the miserable death of the actual thief, which had proved his own salvation, and above all the generous, high-spirited girl who had aided his escape. While on his way to San Francisco, and yet in the first glow of his success, he had written her a few lines from Marysville, inclosed in a letter to Mr. Tarbox. He had received no reply.

Then a week passed. He wrote again, and still no reply. Then a vague feeling of jealousy took possession of him as he remembered her warning hint of the attentions to which she was subjected, and he became singularly appreciative of Snapshot Harry's proficiency as a marksman. Then, cruelest of all, for your impassioned lover is no lover at all if not cruel in his imaginings, he remembered how she had evaded her uncle's espionage with HIM; could she not equally with ANOTHER? Perhaps that was why she had hurried him away,—why she had prevented his returning to her uncle. Following this came another week of disappointment and equally miserable cynical philosophy, in which he persuaded himself he was perfectly satisfied with his material advancement, that it was the only outcome of his adventure to be recognized; and he was more miserable than ever.

A month had passed, when one morning he received a small package by post. The address was in a handwriting unknown to him, but opening the parcel he was surprised to find only a handkerchief

neatly folded. Examining it closely, he found it was his own,—the one he had given her, the rent made by her uncle's bullet so ingeniously and delicately mended as to almost simulate embroidery. The joy that suddenly filled him at this proof of her remembrance showed him too plainly how hollow had been his cynicism and how lasting his hope! Turning over the wrapper eagerly, he discovered what he had at first thought was some business card. It was, indeed, printed and not engraved, in some common newspaper type, and bore the address, "Hiram Tarbox, Land and Timber Agent, 1101 California Street." He again examined the parcel; there was nothing else,—not a line from HER! But it was a clue at last, and she had not forgotten him! He seized his hat, and ten minutes later was breasting the steep sand hill into which California Street in those days plunged, and again emerged at its crest, with a few struggling houses.

But when he reached the summit he could see that the outline of the street was still plainly marked along the distance by cottages and new suburban villa-like blocks of houses. No. 1101 was in one of these blocks, a small tenement enough, but a palace compared to Mr. Tarbox's Sierran cabin. He impetuously rang the bell, and without waiting to be announced dashed into the little drawing-room and Mr. Tarbox's presence. That had changed too; Mr. Tarbox was arrayed in a suit of clothes as new, as cheaply decorative, as fresh and, apparently, as damp as his own drawing room.

"Did you get my letter? Did you give her the one I inclosed? Why didn't you answer?" burst out Brice, after his first breathless greeting.

Mr. Tarbox's face here changed so suddenly into his old dejected doggedness that Brice could have imagined himself back in the Sierran cabin. The man straightened and bowed himself at Brice's questions, and then replied with bold, deliberate emphasis:

"Yes, I DID get your letter. I DIDN'T give no letter o' yours to her. And I didn't answer your letter BEFORE, for I didn't propose to answer it AT ALL."

"Why?" demanded Brice indignantly.

"I didn't give her your letter because I didn't kalkilate to be any go-between 'twixt you and Snapshot Harry's niece. Look yar, Mr. Brice. Sense I read that 'ar paragraph in that paper you gave me, I allowed to myself that it wasn't the square thing for me to have any more doin's with him, and I quit it. I jest chucked your letter in the fire. I didn't answer you because I reckoned I'd no call to correspond with ye, and when I showed ye that trail over to Harry's camp, it was ended. I've got a house and business to look arter, and it don't jibe with keepin' company with 'road agents.' That's what I got outer that paper you gave me, Mr. Brice."

Rage and disgust filled Brice at the man's utter selfishness and shameless desertion of his kindred, none the less powerfully that he remembered the part he himself had played in concocting the paragraph. "Do you mean to say," he demanded passionately, "that for the sake of that foolish paragraph you gave up your own kindred? That you truckled to the mean prejudices of your neighbors and kept that poor, defenseless girl from the only honest roof she could find refuge under? That you dared to destroy my letter to her, and made her believe I was as selfish and ungrateful as yourself?"

"Young feller," said Mr. Tarbox still more deliberately, yet with a certain dignity that Brice had never noticed before, "what's between you and Flo, and what rights she has fer thinkin' ye 'ez selfish' and 'ez ongrateful' ez me—ef she does, I dunno!—but when ye talk o' me givin' up my kindred, and sling such hogwash ez 'ongrateful' and 'selfish' round this yer sittin'-room, mebbe it mout occur to ye that Harry Dimwood might hev HIS opinion o' what was 'ongrateful' and 'selfish' ef I'd played in between his niece and a young man o' the express company, his nat'ral enemy. It's one thing to hev helped ye to see her in her uncle's own camp, but another to help ye by makin' a clandestine post-offis o' my cabin. Ef, instead o' writin', you'd hev posted yourself by comin' to me, you mout hev found out that when I broke with Harry I offered to take Flo with me for good and all—ef he'd keep away from us. And that's the kind o' 'honest roof' that that thar 'poor defenseless girl' got under when her crippled mother died three weeks ago, and left Harry free. It was by 'trucklin' to them 'mean prejudices,' and readin' that thar 'foolish paragraph,' that I settled this thing then and thar!"

Brice's revulsion of sentiment was so complete, and the gratitude that beamed in his eyes was so sincere, that Mr. Tarbox hardly needed the profuse apologies which broke from him. "Forgive me!" he continued to stammer, "I have wronged you, wronged HER—everybody. But as you know, Mr. Tarbox, how I have felt over this, how deeply—how passionately"—

"It DOES make a man loony sometimes," said Mr. Tarbox, relaxing into demure dryness again, "so I reckon you DID! Mebbe she reckoned so, too, for she asked me to give you the handkercher I sent ye. It looked as if she'd bin doin' some fancy work on it."

Brice glanced quickly at Mr. Tarbox's face. It was stolid and imperturbable. She had evidently kept the secret of what passed in the hollow to herself. For the first time he looked around the room curiously. "I didn't know you were a land agent before," he said.

"No more I was! All that kem out o' that paragraph, Mr. Brice. That man Heckshill, who was so mighty perlite that night, wrote to me afterwards that he didn't know my name till he'd seed that paragraph, and he wanted to know ef, ez a 'well-known citizen,' I could recommend him some timber lands. I recommended him half o' my own quarter section, and he took it. He's puttin' up a mill thar, and that's another reason why we want peace and quietness up thar. I'm tryin' (betwixt and between us, Mr. Brice) to get Harry to cl'ar out and sell his rights in the valley and the water power on the Fork to Heckshill and me. I'm opening a business here."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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