

Fenn George Manville

The Mynns' Mystery



George Fenn

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Chapter One

A Rough Suitor

“Be quiet! What a silly little fluttering dove it is, struggling like this, ruffling all your plumes, and making your face so red. But how it becomes you!”

“Mr Saul Harrington, how dare you!”

“Because I love you so, you little beauty. There – and there – and there!”

The kisses were given in spite of the frightened looks and struggles; but at each kiss there was a faint cry of shame, dislike, and indignation mingled.

“You know I love you, and I know you love me.”

“It is not true, sir. Let me go!”

“It is true, or you would have screamed the house down.”

“If I do not scream for help, it is because I would not alarm your uncle. I tell you he is dying.”

“Gammon, Gertie! The old tyrant – he is too tough. No such luck for us. There, don’t struggle any more. You are going to be my darling little wife.”

“Mr Saul. Pray, pray let me go.”

“Directly you have given me your word, Gertie. There, it is your fault that I was so rough. You do love me?”

“I hate you, sir, with all my heart, and you force me to say it. This is a cruel outrage. What have I done that you should dare to treat me so? Is there no one to help me? Bruno! Bruno!”

There was a short yelp, a sound as of a dog leaping to the floor, the rattle of nails in the hall, and a plump up against the door, accompanied by an impatient bark.

Saul Harrington, a good-looking man of five-and-thirty, started, and involuntarily loosed his hold of his captive, just as there was a sharp peal of a bell, and the slight, dark-eyed, trembling girl he had held in his arms slipped away, darted to the door of the sombre-looking dining-room, threw it open, and ran out, just as a great black Gordon-setter bounded in, set up the frill of hair about his neck, and uttered a low fierce growl, as he stood glaring at the occupant of the room.

“Lie down, you beast!” was the savage retort. “Oh, that’s it, is it? Well, the time may come, my fine fellow, when I can do as I like here, and, if it does, why, then – well, I’m sorry for you.”

But the dog did not lie down, and when requested to give his paw, turned his back upon the visitor, and slowly walked out of the room.

“A beast! All her coyness. A bit frightened, perhaps. Don’t suppose she was ever kissed before. She liked it, though, a pretty little jade. Well, what are you staring at, you old curmudgeon?” he continued, standing apostrophising a portrait hung over the sideboard – that of a stern-looking, fierce-eyed old man, the said eyes seeming to follow him, go where he would. “I’ll kiss her, and as soon as you are dead I’ll marry her, and we’ll spend your rusty coin, you miserable old usurer. I wish you were out of the world.”

He threw himself in a great morocco-covered easy-chair and bit his nails carefully all round, pulled off his left-hand glove, and treated the fingers there to the same trimming, as he looked furtively about from the rich thick Turkey carpet to the solid furniture, and the great silver salver on the sideboard; ending by trying to appraise the two fine paintings at the side of the room.

“Yes,” he muttered, “one ought to do pretty well. I’m tired of being poor – and in debt.”

“George!” he said softly, after gazing thoughtfully before him. “No, he’ll never leave him a penny. The father killed that. Gertie will get all. I shall get Gertie, and the silly little jade will not struggle then.”

He rose, laughing in an unpleasant way, and began walking up and down the room. Then, growing weary and impatient, he crossed to the door, opened it gently, looked out into the dull hall, with its black and white marble floor, and listened.

Tick-tack! tick-tack! the slowly beating off seconds measured by a tall, old-fashioned clock. Not another sound; and Saul Harrington drew back into the room and closed the door.

“She’ll come down again,” he muttered, with the same, unpleasant laugh. “Trust her woman’s nature. All latent yet, but it’s there, and opportunity will bring it out. All her pretence. She knows that she will be my wife and girls like a little rough courting, or I’m no judge.”

An hour, that seemed like two, passed slowly away, and then Saul Harrington rang the bell.

At the end of a minute a quiet, very old-looking woman in black, with white cap and old-fashioned muslin cross-over, came to the door.

“Go and tell Miss Gertrude I am waiting to see her again.”

“She is with master, sir.”

“Well, go and tell her, Mrs Denton.”

The woman shook her head.

“I dare not, sir. It would send master into a fit of fury.”

“Pish! Never mind; I’ll wait. How is he?”

The woman shook her head, lifted her white apron, and applied a corner to her eyes.

“None of that, Mrs Denton,” said Saul Harrington, with a sneering laugh. “So fond of him, eh?”

“Yes, sir. Dear old master.”

“Ha, ha! Dear old master! Won’t do, Denton, I’m too old. Don’t wait.”

“If it would please God to spare him for a score of years,” said the old servant piously, as she left the room. “A bit harsh and a bit of a temper; but I know – I know.”

“I’ll wait and see her again, if I have to wait all night,” said Saul Harrington to himself. “Hang this grim old house! It’s almost as gloomy as a tomb.”

Chapter Two

Uncle James' Plan

"That you, Gertie?"

"Yes, uncle, dear," and the girl, who had made a brave effort to grow calm, approached the side of a great four-post bedstead, where a large, thin, yellow hand lay upon the white coverlet.

"That's right, my dear, don't leave me long. It's getting very near the end, my darling."

"Oh, uncle, dearest, don't – don't talk like that," cried the girl, throwing herself upon her knees, and passionately kissing the yellow hand.

"Ah, that's nice, my pet – that's real. You couldn't have acted that."

"Uncle, dear," whispered the girl, as she raised herself, and gently passed her arm beneath the neck of the gaunt, withered old man whose head lay upon the white pillow, "it doesn't sound like you to talk so bitterly."

"Oh, yes, it does, my dear. Why shouldn't I tell you I know you are a dear, good, patient little darling, true as steel to the disagreeable, miserly old hunks whom everybody hates and wishes dead. But who was that downstairs?"

"Mr Saul Harrington, uncle."

"Damn him!"

"Uncle, dear!"

"Well, he deserves it. Do you know, Gertie, that man only says one prayer, and that is for my death."

"Oh, uncle, you misjudge him."

"Eh? What? Has he been trying to court you again?"

Gertrude inclined her head.

"Eh? What?" cried the old man excitedly, and his deeply sunken eyes seemed to glow. "You – you are not beginning to like him?"

"Oh! uncle, dear," sobbed the girl, "I detest him, and he frightens me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the old man, with a sigh of content followed by a low chuckle. "A fox, that's what he is Gertie. Thinks I shall leave you all my money, and that he'll marry you and get it to spend – a mean, despicable, cunning fox. But I haven't left you a penny, my pet."

"No, uncle."

"But don't tell him so. I want him to be punished. He deserves it. I helped him a dozen times, but he always turned out badly. Not left you a penny, Gertie. Ain't you bitter against me?"

"Bitter against you who have always been like a dear father!"

"Eh? Well, tried to be, little one," said the old man as he toyed with the girl's long, wavy dark hair. "Poor little fatherless, motherless thing! why, of course I did. But now look here, Gertie. I'm wasting time, and there's so little left."

"Don't say that, dear."

"But I must, my pet. And don't cry; nothing to cry for. An old man of eighty-six going to sleep and rest, Gertie – that's all. I'm not sorry, only to leave you, my dear. I want to live till George comes home and marries you. You – you will marry him, Gertie?"

"If he is the good, true man you say, uncle, and he will love me, and wish me to be his wife, I will pray God to make me a true, dutiful companion to him for life."

"But – but you don't speak out, my child," said the old man suspiciously.

"It is because I can't, uncle, dear. The words seem to choke me. It is such a promise to make."

"But you never cared for any one else?"

"Oh no, uncle dear. I never hardly thought of such a thing."

“No; always shut up here in the dingy old Mynns with me.”

“Where I have been very happy, uncle.”

“And Heaven knows I tried to make you so, my child. And you will be happy when I’m gone – with George. For he is all I say – a true, noble fellow. But – but,” he cried, peering into the girl’s eyes from under his shaggy brows, “suppose he is ugly?”

“Well, uncle dear,” said the girl with a little laugh, “what does that matter?”

“Ay, what does that matter? But he can’t be ugly, Gertie. Such a handsome little fellow as he was when I saw him last. And he’ll be a rich man, Gertie. He shall have The Mynns and everything, for the injury and wrong I did his father – my poor, poor boy!”

“Uncle, dear, don’t reproach yourself,” cried the girl, kissing the withered forehead, as the old man’s voice broke into a whimper, and his hands trembled. “It was all a mistake.”

“No, Gertie, my dear; I was a hard, bitter, passionate man, and made no allowances for him. He would not stick to business, and he would marry one woman when I wanted him to marry another, and I told him he’d be a beggar all his life, and we quarrelled. Yes, he defied me, Gertie, when I told him he would come cringing upon his knees for money, and he said he would sooner starve. Only like yesterday,” continued the old man after a pause, “and I never saw him but once more, he came to say good-bye, with his wife, before they sailed for what he called the Golden West, and we quarrelled again because he disobeyed me and would not stay. I was ready to forgive him, Gertie, if he would have stayed and taken to business, but he wouldn’t stop with the arbitrary old tyrant, and they went and took their boy.”

The old man lay silent for some minutes, raising the girl’s soft little hand to his lips from time to time. Then he startled her by bursting into a long low laugh.

“Uncle, dear!”

“Eh? Only laughing at him, my pet – that boy George. Such a determined little tyrant. Did what he liked with the old man. Wasn’t afraid of me a bit. A little curly-headed rascal, and as sturdy as could be. Such eyes. Gertie; looked through you. ‘I don’t like you, grandpa,’ he said. ‘You make my mamma cry.’ Bless him! that he did. Ha, ha, ha! I saw him when he was washed – a little, chubby, pink cupid of a fellow, splashing in his tub; and there, on his little white breast, was a blue heart with an arrow stuck in it. His father’s doing after he came back from the West – he went out first, leaving his wife. And I asked the little chap about it. ‘Did it hurt much, my man?’ I said. ‘Yeees,’ he said. ‘And did you cry, George?’ I said. ‘Pa said I was to be a man and not cry,’ said the little fellow sturdily, ‘but I did a little, and to did my mamma.’ ‘Have you no feeling for your child?’ I said to his father. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but I want to teach him how to bear pain. It will come easier to him, father; for he will have to bear it as I have had in my time.’ Yes, Gertie, I recollect it all. That’s twenty-five years ago, and I’ve never seen George since. But perhaps I shall now, for he’s coming back, Gertie.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Fetch me the second drawer; the keys have worked right behind.”

She thrust her hand beneath the pillow, and drew out a bunch of very bright-worn keys, before crossing the room to a tall, black oak cabinet in the corner near the bed’s head. Unlocking the glass door, she unlocked also and took out a small shallow drawer which, evidently according to custom, she placed across the old man’s knees, afterwards assisting him to rise, and propping him with pillows, so that he could examine the contents.

“There,” he said eagerly, as he took a handsome gold watch from its case, the chain and seal pendant being curiously formed of natural nuggets of gold.

The watch was of American make, and looked as new as if it had only just left the maker’s hands.

The old man’s eyes looked on eagerly as the girl took and opened the watch, the peculiar sound emitted, as she carefully re-wound it, seeming to afford the invalid the greatest satisfaction.

“Not lost, has it, Gertie?” he said quickly.

“No, uncle, dear,” said Gertie, comparing her hands with those of her own watch.

“Nor likely to. A splendid watch, Gertie. No trashy present, that. My boy’s made of too good stuff to mar his future. But I was blind in those days, Gertie – blind. Now read it again.”

As if well accustomed to the task, the girl held the open case to the light, and read on its glistening concave, where it was deeply engraved with many a flourish and scroll:

James Harrington, Esq, from his grandson.

Pure gold from the golden west.

“Pure gold from the Golden West!” said the old man, as he stretched out his hands eagerly and ran the nugget chain through his fingers. “And I mocked at his poor father, and told him it was all a myth. Put it away, Gertie. George is to wear that always, my dear. I’ve saved it for him. You know I’ve only worn it on his birthdays since.”

“Yes, uncle, dear,” said the girl gravely, as she replaced the watch in its case.

“And now look here, my dear,” said the old man, taking up a small pocket-ledger and handing it to Gertie; “open at page six.”

“Yes, uncle,” said the girl wonderingly; and then looking at him for further instructions.

“Do you see that?”

“Yes, uncle – entries of money, twenty-five pounds, over and over again.”

“Do you know what that means?”

“No, uncle; but you are tiring yourself.”

“Ay, but I shall have plenty of time to rest, Gertie, by-and-bye.”

“Uncle, dear!”

“Ah, don’t you cry. Listen, Gertie. I wanted to try him – George. I’m a suspicious old man, and I said when he sent me that watch, a year after his father and mother died, ‘It’s a sprat to catch a herring!’ Ha, ha, ha! and I waited and wrote to him – such a lie, Gertie – such a lie, my dear.”

“Uncle!”

“Yes, the biggest lie I ever told. I wrote and told him that things had gone wrong with me – so they had, for I had lost two hundred and fifty pounds by a man who turned out a rogue – and I begged George to try and help his poor old grandfather in England for his father’s sake, and might I sell the watch.”

“And what did he say, uncle?” cried Gertrude eagerly.

“He sent me a hundred pounds, Gertie, in an order on a London bank; and he said if I ever sold that watch he would never forgive me, for it was his father’s wish that he should send it as a specimen of the gold I had disbelieved in. A hundred pounds, Gertie, and ever since, for four years now, he has sent me twenty-five pounds every quarter.”

“Then he thinks you are poor?”

“Yes, he did till I sent to him to come home. But I invested every penny, Gertie, and there is the interest; and now what do you say? Is he a true man – good enough to love?”

“Oh, uncle – yes!” cried the girl, with the tears glittering in her eyes.

“Yes, my darling, a worthy husband for you; one who will love and protect you when I’m gone.”

“But, uncle, dear – ” faltered the girl.

“Yes – yes?”

“Does – does he know?”

“That he is to marry you? Yes. He knows by now that he is a rich man, or will be when I’m gone, and that he has the sweetest, truest little wife waiting for him here. Put the book away; you and Mr Hampton know everything. Lock up the cabinet and put the keys under the pillow again; and some morning, when you find I’m too fast asleep to wake again, take the keys and keep them for my dear boy.”

“Oh, uncle, dearest!” sobbed the girl.

“God bless you, my pet! But I put it off too long. I may not see my boy again. That’s right; quite under the pillow, dear. Thank you. Kiss me, not as your uncle, but as James Harrington, the grim old man who told your father and mother he would protect their little girl, and has tried to do his duty by her.”

Gertrude raised the withered hand, and held it to her lips, as, after removing the pillow, the old man lay back, tired out, and slept calmly and peacefully. And, as she watched him, she thought of her position there in that great house a dozen miles from town. How she had grown up with no young companions save those she had encountered at school, and how the time had glided away. How of late the old man who had adopted her had begun to talk of his approaching end, and chilled her at first with horror till she grew accustomed to his conversation; but never chilling her so much as when Saul Harrington, the old man’s nephew, had begun to make advances to her – advances which filled her with disgust and dread.

She shivered as she thought of the scene in the dining-room that day; and, like a black cloud, the idea arose as to what her fate would be if the old man, hanging, as it were, on the brink of eternity, should pass away, leaving her alone.

There was Mrs Denton, the old housekeeper, and there were Mr and Mrs Hampton, old Harrington’s confidential solicitor and his wife, friends both – Mrs Hampton, in her harsh, snappish way, always meaning to be most kind. And then there was the doctor. Yes; and Bruno. But still, she would soon be alone, and at the mercy of Saul Harrington, a man whom she had always dreaded when he came to pester his uncle for money.

Then came a change in her musings, and she began to picture the man who had been selected for her husband, and the warm blood came and went in her cheeks as she found herself wondering what he would be like, what he would think of her, and whether, under the circumstances, her future would be happy.

She bent down and covered her face with her hands, as she sat listening to the old man’s faint, regular breathing, and seemed to see the bright-eyed, sharp-witted child who had made so great an impression on her guardian. Then the blue tattooed heart upon his little white skin stood out before her mind’s eye, and she half shuddered as she thought of the pain the brave child must have suffered under his sea-going father’s whim.

And, as she thought and thought, wondering what her future would be, she was so intent that she did not hear the door open, and a footstep cross the carpet, the first suggestion of another presence being a hand laid lightly upon her shoulder, and she started into wakefulness to encounter the mocking countenance of Saul.

Chapter Three

Out West

Dan Portway sat in the shade cast by a large hemlock, an extinct pipe between his lips, and his chin resting upon his hands, gazing down upon his companion, whose head and breast alone were in the shade, for the sun seemed to have veered farther round since they ate their meal together, and then lay down to rest until the heat had grown less. They were upon the steep slope of one of the mountains which shot up rugged and bare on all sides, and sank down in dangerous gulches, like rocky crevices in the earth, their precipitous sides sometimes going down sheer to where water gushed, and roared, and sprang from rock to rock, hundreds of feet below. Wherever a sheltered spot offered itself for foothold, the pines and hemlocks had risen, like dark green cones, towards the deep blue skies, their heads glistening in the sunshine, and exhaling a perfume that floated upon the mountain breezes far and wide. It was one of Nature's solitudes in the Far West, and the two men, as their rifles and accoutrements showed, had climbed up there in search of the game which found a home in these wilds.

They had had a long tramp and climb that day, but neither bear nor mountain sheep had fallen before their bullets, and they found themselves at last miles away from the pine grove where they had set up their tent, with the sombre boughs above and the pine-needles forming a thick bed below. The surroundings were glorious. It was the ideal haunt of a mountain hunter, and here a month before, on a farewell excursion, before obeying the recall he had received, George Harrington had revisited the neighbourhood which he had discovered far up in the mountains years before, when prospecting for gold.

The days had glided by, and evening after evening he had come to the determination that after the next day he would begin to move in the direction of civilisation, and hunt and shoot as he went; but, in spite of the fact that they had come twice over upon Indian signs there was so much fascination in the place that he always determined upon leaving in another day or two.

When George Harrington started upon his trip it was in company with an experienced guide, but the man had fallen ill and gone back to one of the towns, and just as Harrington was in despair, he had come suddenly upon a man whom he had twice before encountered and with whom he had hunted. Hearing from George the quandary in which he was placed, Dan Portway, a man of good birth and education, who had emigrated to the West a couple of years before and found the hunting life in the mountains more to his taste than straightforward labour, at once volunteered to accompany him. The offer was eagerly accepted, for it seemed suicidal to go alone, and as Dan had proved himself to be companionable, a clever shot, and well versed in hunting craft, the time had glided pleasantly away without their once encountering a soul.

Two men with a similarity of tastes cannot chum together in a little tent here and there in the mountains without becoming confidential, hence it was that before long George Harrington pretty well knew his companion's impecunious history – that is, as much as he chose to tell, and on the other hand, not only had Portway, apparently without pumping, learned Harrington's position, but had received an invitation to accompany him to England.

"Have another day," Portway would say laughingly; "at present you are free. Who can say when you will enjoy such another succession of climbs as you have out here."

"True," Harrington said thoughtfully.

"When you get back, of course, it will be pleasant to inherit the money; but what about the wife?"

"Well," said Harrington sternly, "what about her?"

"I mean," said Portway hastily, "how do you know what she may be like? Take another view of the case – pass me the tobacco pouch – I am a selfish man as well as a poor one. You are giving me a delightful trip, finding me in food, a horse, rifle and ammunition, everything I could wish for, including a glass of prime old Bourbon whiskey. So I say, let's keep it on as long as we can. By the way, how long have we been out here?"

"Going on for six weeks."

"Which are like six days."

"Ah, well," said Harrington over and over again, "we will not give up yet."

This conversation, or one very similar, occurred again and again before the day waned.

Dan Portway sat with his chin in his hands gazing down at the sleeping figure in the shade.

When Dan Portway smiled, his was a pleasant though rather a coarse face, and his changeable life had made him a man full of information, but when he did not smile his face was not a pleasant one, vice in more than one form having left its mark. When he looked at Harrington waking, he invariably smiled; but Harrington was sleeping, and Dan Portway did not smile now.

But he sat thinking of his companion's prospects – wealth, a handsome wife, a life of luxury – and compared these prospects with his own. As he watched the sleeper's frank, sun-browned face, he recalled everything he had told him about home, his father and grandfather. He noted the ring upon his finger – a heavy gold circle roughly beaten out of a piece of virgin gold. He took in his lineaments, and compared their ages, and he thought of the letters Harrington had among his traps in the tent miles away beneath the pines.

There were other little things, too, there in the saddlebags, all of which seemed to fit in with a misty chaotic set of ideas which floated through his brain. Lastly, his eyes seemed to be fascinated by his companion's breast as he lay there with his head thrown back, his flannel shirt all open at the collar and chest, and as he gazed a ray of sunlight shot between the boughs, and fell right upon the white skin.

Dan Portway leaned a little more forward, and his gaze grew more intent, till all at once he let himself fall sidewise on the soft pine-needles.

For Harrington had made a restless motion, and then suddenly sprung up.

"Oh, hang it!" he cried. "Hi! Dan – bears!"

"Eh? Where?" cried Portway, in an excited whisper, as he rose to his knees and grasped the rifle at his side.

"In Noah's ark, for aught I know," cried Harrington, laughing. "Don't seem as if we're to find a grizzly. I just woke up in time to spoil your dinner."

"What do you mean?"

"Cannibal dinner. I was being roasted. Sun is hot."

As he spoke he gave his breast a vicious rub and buttoned the collar of his shirt.

"Come along. We'll go round the other side of the hill and get back to camp. No bear to-day, but we may get a sheep."

"All right," was the reply; and Dan Portway's countenance seemed to have been transformed; "will you lead?"

"Yes," said the other, as he carefully examined his rifle, while Portway's eyes contracted, and he glanced at his own rifle as if he were calculating odds.

"Come along, old chap, we've a long road to go," said Harrington, as he led the way.

"Yes," said Portway beneath his breath, as, instead of walking boldly and uprightly, he seemed to slouch along behind his companion.

The climb was so stiff, and in places so dangerous, that for some time after no word was spoken. But at last they reached a shelf on the mountain, running along by a profound ravine, down to the bottom of which it was possible to climb, but the task was risky.

"Bad to tumble here, Dan," said Harrington suddenly.

“Yes,” said the other, with an involuntary shiver, and he drew nearer to his companion, who suddenly stopped at a projecting portion of the shelf, and, shading his eyes, began to scan the prospect toward where, in a perfect chaos of rocks, the sinking sun was gilding the glorious scene.

“We can easily get round to camp this way,” said Harrington, after a few moments, and he took a step or two onward. “Mind how you come, Dan. Hist! No gammon. Bears, by Jove?”

He pointed to a spot not a dozen yards away, where there were unmistakable traces of a grizzly having made his lair, and dragging round the little glass which hung from his shoulder, he adjusted it as he rested his rifle against the rock, raised it to his eyes, and began to search the hills and hollows for the game they sought.

He was leaning quite over the gulch, which fell almost perpendicularly beneath them, his back to Portway, who was behind, and who, acting upon the sudden impulse born of his cogitations while the other slept, suddenly raised his rifle with both hands back over his head, and drove the plated butt with all his force crash upon his companion’s head.

There was a wild cry, and the next moment Portway was leaning forward at the very edge of the precipice gazing down at the fallen body, which plunged and rolled, and then stopped upon a mass of rock, two hundred feet below, motionless.

Portway seemed as if turned to stone for the moment, then, rifle in hand, he ran back a dozen yards, and began to descend, slipping, leaping, and displaying wondrous activity in the perilous descent, till he reached the spot where George Harrington lay, and examined the inanimate form, seeing that the eyes were closed and that the blood was welling from a terrible gash over the eyes.

Portway raised his rifle, lowered it, shook his head, and glanced round, before standing the piece against the side of the precipice, as he saw that below them the gulch went down sheer at least five hundred feet.

Then, bending over his victim, he tore open his breast, gazed for a few moments at the blue stain, which stood out plainly on the white skin, and then rapidly emptied the pockets of his trousers. As he did so his eyes fell again on the glittering plain gold ring upon Harrington’s finger. This he hurriedly transferred to his own, seeing as he did so that a name was roughly scratched within, and then, setting his teeth, he gave a glance round, a heedless precaution in that solitary place, caught the poor fellow by arm and waistband, raised him, and in another moment would have thrust him over into the gulf, when a smile full of cunning crossed his face.

Dropping the body he drew his bowie-knife, he muttered the one word “Indian,” and taking the crisp curling hair with his left hand, he prepared to give the last refined piece of diabolism to his deed by contriving that if the body were found the first wandering tribe in the neighbourhood should get the blame.

There was no sign of compunction, no quiver of muscle or nerve; the head was dragged up, and the next moment the point of the keen hunting-knife divided the skin of the scalp, and the bright steel shone red in the soft western glow.

Chapter Four

Dan Portway Thinks and Acts

“It will make assurance doubly sure,” Dan Portway thought, and, quick as lightning, he recalled the discovery of a murdered family of settlers he had seen on the plains, where, after death had been dealt with arrow and tomahawk, each poor creature had been scalped.

Dan Portway had exchanged friendly grips of the hand with his victim scores of times, had shared luxuries with him in hours of plenty, and the last scrap in those of famine. More than that, upon one occasion, during their hunting-trip, when he had slipped, fallen, and hung in deadly peril over a terrible chasm, George Harrington had risked his own life to save that of his companion by descending and grasping his wrists just as his strength was failing and he was about to drop. But there was wealth in the way – a chance of gaining possession of position in another land, and at that time the sphere of the scoundrel’s actions was growing limited, for in several districts a vigilance committee had hunted him with dire intentions connected with a lariat and the nearest tree.

And now his opportunity had come, and he seized it with the coolness of the hardened villain, free from all remorse.

“Dead or not quite dead, he can’t feel,” he muttered, as the point of his knife pierced George Harrington’s scalp, and then the poor fellow’s head dropped with a heavy thud upon the rocks, while, bending down, the ruffian seemed as if turned to stone, and gazed before him at the animal which had silently approached to within half-a-dozen yards, and then uttered a low sound like a heavy sigh.

They had seen sign of bear up above: here was the bear himself – a huge brute of the variety known to hunters as the cinnamon, at home here in his native wilds, glaring red-eyed and savage at the intruder upon his domains, and ready to make him pay dearly for his audacity.

Portway held his keen knife in his hand, but he could not stir; his rifle, ready charged, was almost within reach of his hand, but he did not try to seize it, and for fully a minute the huge beast and the hunter remained perfectly motionless.

Then the paralysis of mind and muscle passed away, and Portway stretched out his hand slowly towards where he had placed his rifle but without moving his eyes from the bear. On his right was the steep rocky wall that he had descended, on his left the terrible precipice, behind him a narrow shelf, and, in front the bear, with George Harrington between.

“If I can get the rifle?” thought Portway; and his hand searched for it, but in his heart he felt that it would be better to try and retreat slowly, while the bear would stop and wreak his anger upon the fallen man. Dan Portway knew better as regards the nature of the beast, but he could not think coolly and clearly then – he could not recall in the least that the grizzly and his relatives preferred to attack an active enemy when brought face to face with him, and that, at such a time, the recumbent body was no more to it than the rocks around – till he saw it rear up on its hind legs, a monster fully seven feet in height, its little eyes red with rage, its fangs bared, and its huge paws raised with the great claws spread.

There was a tremendous roar, full-throated, from the creature’s jaws, a rush as it leaped over George Harrington; the rifle was falling down the gulch, crashing from stone to stone; and, knife in hand, and uttering a hoarse shriek of horror, Dan Portway was bounding from rock to rock, striving to mount the steep side of the rugged place, and with the bear in full pursuit.

They were moments of agony, such as add years to a man’s life, and, listening to the panting breath of his pursuer, and his low snuffling snarl, Portway climbed on, expecting, moment by moment, to feel the monster’s huge claws upon his shoulder, and his half-inanimate body snatched back into the creature’s grasp. There was no chance of escape, for there, in its natural haunts, the bear could shuffle along at double the rate of a man, but still, for what seemed like an eternity of horror – really,

but a fraction of a minute – Portway climbed on, till in struggling round a projecting rock, he slipped, and fell some twenty feet, to be caught up by a gnarled and distorted pine-trunk, which, with its roots in a crevice of the mountain side, projected almost at right angles over the gulch.

Half maddened by fear, the wretched man instinctively clung to the boughs, and saved himself from falling farther, and then, with his eyes fixed and staring up at his enemy steadily descending in pursuit, he crept along the bending stem, seating himself astride the tree, and getting farther and farther from the side of the gulch, till a warning crack told him of danger, while the swaying motion of the little trunk showed that he had reached the farthest point which the tree would bear.

“Grizzlies can’t climb trees,” he thought, and he watched his enemy as it came on, deliberately and cautiously, until it reached the spot from whence the fir-tree sprang. Here it paused, snuffed the ground, and stretched out its neck toward the trembling man, who shifted his position a little, so as to be ready to use his knife with effect.

The bear’s movements were as cautious and deliberate as it is possible to conceive; it placed one paw on the trunk, and then, reaching out the other with its terrible array of hooked talons, made as if to claw Portway from where he sat, and to draw him to the rocks.

As the bear strained to reach him, Portway backed slowly towards the branches, shuddering as he glanced downward into the gulf, and realised that the thin elastic trunk was all that he had to depend upon to save him from the two terrible forms of death so close at hand. At any moment he felt that the weight upon the tree might act as a lever of sufficient power to tear the roots out of the crevice in which they grew, and this kept him from moving another inch, though the bear was cautiously trying the tree, and while keeping its hind-quarters well upon the substantial rocks, stretching out farther and farther with its huge length of reach, till the terrible claws came within a foot or two of his breast.

And now a curious feeling, akin to nightmare, came over the man, and he sat astride that frail trunk, gazing wildly at the red glaring eyes of the animal, but closing his own each time the huge paw swept toward him, and he saw himself, in imagination, swept from his hold.

But the bear uttered a strange gasping growl, full of disappointment, and with an action that seemed eminently human, it altered its position, creeping more over the precipice, and clasping the tree with its hind paws, so that the next time it stretched itself out, Portway saw that he would be within its reach.

Still he could not move; only sit there, watching every deliberate act of the determined creature till it had finished its preparations, and was about to make its final stroke; the paw was even in motion, when, with a yell of horror, Portway threw himself back among the boughs.

The effect was immediate. The weight placed upon the trunk was the full extent of that which it would bear; the extra leverage produced by Portway’s action did the rest. There was a sharp, snapping, cracking noise, the tree was torn out by the roots, and in company with an avalanche of stones and earth, man, tree, and bear plunged crashing down into the great chasm yawning beneath.

The effect was varied.

The bear, whose hind paws clung to the root and rock, went down head first, and its fore paws touched the bushes beneath, clung to them, and held on, while, following the tree, its hind-quarters went right over, making the animal turn an involuntary somersault. Then its fore paws were snatched from their hold by its weight, and it fell some twenty feet, from tree to tree, where they bristled from the side before it could check its downward course, after which the huge beast coolly began to climb diagonally upward, till it reached the shelf from which it had fallen, and, after shaking itself, began slowly to retrace its steps upward, when it came upon the rifle Portway had dropped, stopped to snuffle round it for a few moments, and then proceeded toward where the encounter had first taken place, and where lay ready for him a feast such as did not often come in his generally vegetarian way.

Meanwhile, with a terrible rush, the tree, with its occupant, had gone down into the gulf, plunging from rock to bush and clump of pine, Portway clinging to it desperately, till it fell athwart a couple more trunks, and there lodged, but with such a jerk that the man was thrown from where he

clung, to continue his descent alone crashing through tree and bush, till he was brought up suddenly and lay stunned and insensible to what had been going on.

At the end of a few minutes Portway unclosed his eyes and lay staring up at the sky, through the thick, ragged growth which sprang everywhere from the sides of the chasm. Then by degrees he realised that he had escaped, so far, from a terrible death, but it was some time longer before he dared to move.

When he did venture he uttered a cry of agony, and lay perfectly still again, for an acute pain had shot through his side, telling him plainly that he had not escaped free. At last though the cold sweat seemed to dry upon his brow, and he began to look round and upward so as thoroughly to grasp his position.

The side of the gulch projected where he lay, and quite a clump of pines had found sustenance, sufficient to grow into a bushy patch, among whose boughs Portway had fallen, the tops proving sufficiently elastic and dense to break his descent, though he had torn off enough to form quite a bed, upon which he rested.

He listened and looked about him, but he could neither see nor hear anything of his enemy, and at last, with his confidence returning, he drew himself into a sitting posture in spite of the pain, took a flask from his breast, drank a dram of whiskey, and began once more to look around.

His first shuddering gaze was upward, and something like a feeling of satisfaction gave him encouragement to proceed, as he grasped the fact that to climb back was impossible, for if the bear had escaped falling with him, the beast was probably waiting his return.

"No, it must be downward," he muttered; and in spite of his agony, he set about the task of descent, at once finding it less difficult than he had anticipated; for the tough roots and bushes, which projected everywhere, gave him foot and hand hold, as he let himself down, lower and lower.

But there was a fresh difficulty awaiting him, for the lower he went the darker it seemed to grow. The sun had sunk behind the mountains, and in half an hour it would be perfectly black where he hung, and any attempt to continue the descent so much madness.

It was, then, with a sense of relief that he reached a sharp slope where, among the bushes and creepers that tangled the side of the gulch, he was able to find a resting-place where there was no danger of falling, and as he lay down here, hot, exhausted, and in pain, he saw the twilight fade into darkness, and thought of the body of his companion lying somewhere above.

A shudder ran through him at the thought – a shudder of dread – but it was only compounded of fear lest he should not have effectually completed his deadly work, and with the full determination of revisiting the spot, so as to secure Harrington's rifle and make perfectly sure of his death, providing he could avoid the bear, he dropped off into a heavy sleep which lasted till the soft grey light was beginning to fill the valley once again.

He was so stiff, and suffered such agony from the injury to his side, that for some time he did not care to stir; but at last, bringing all his energies to bear, he rose carefully, looked round, and began to descend, reaching the bottom with no very great difficulty, and then pausing to consider as to what course he should pursue.

His desire was to make for the camp at once, but he felt that he must see the spot where he had left George Harrington; and to do this he doggedly set forth, making his way to the mouth of the gulch, and then spending half the day in getting round and back to the ledge, along which he and his companion had passed the day before.

It was nearly midday when he passed the spot where they had lain down and slept, and he would have given anything to have rested, but he contented himself with slaking his thirst at a trickling spring and doggedly went on.

"I must see him, and get his rifle," he muttered, as he trudged on, till at last, peering cautiously about the while, he reached the place where Harrington had stood gazing down, and he had delivered that cowardly blow.

For a moment or two he hesitated and stood panting, with his hand to his side. Then, taking a step forward, he peered down to gaze upon his ghastly work, and stood there, as if fascinated, before he made a terrible effort, and turned and fled.

For there below him, and interposed between him and that he wished to see, was his huge enemy of the previous day, bending down, and evidently licking the rock; till, divining danger, it looked up suddenly, uttered a low fierce growl, and began to climb.

But by the time it reached the rocky path, Dan Portway was out of sight, and he did not pause till he reached the little camp, from which he took the few things he sought, refreshed himself, made ready a pack of necessities, set fire to the rest, and mounting the horse left hobbled in a grassy hollow, rode slowly away.

“To seek my fortune,” he said with a curious laugh; and then, with bent head and thoughtful brow, he let the reins drop on the horse’s neck, took a pin from out of his knife, and began to make experiments by pricking the skin of his wrist till it bled, and rubbing in gunpowder.

“Easy enough,” he said, with a laugh. “Now we shall see what change of scene will do. Nothing like a removal when a place grows too hot.”

Chapter Five

Mr Hampton is Too Late

“Old boy asleep, Gertie?”

“Mr Saul, why have you come?” cried the frightened girl.

“Because I wanted to see you again; because I was tired of waiting down in that dreary old dining-room. Why, what a little tease you are.”

Gertrude made a step to get on the other side of the bed, so as to place the old man between them; but Saul caught her wrist, and laughingly swung her round.

“Won’t do, my coy little beauty,” he whispered. “I want to settle that little matter.”

“Uncle!”

“Ha!” ejaculated Saul in a fierce whisper. “Wake him if you dare! If you do I’ll swear you asked me to come up and sit with you. Now look here – tell me, Gertie, the old man has left you all his money?”

“No, no, no,” she cried eagerly, “nothing at all.”

“Don’t believe it, darling. Trick to throw me off the scent; but I’m on it safe, and I’m not going to be tricked.”

“Then ask uncle when he wakes,” cried the girl, flushing up angrily, as she snatched her hand away.

“No, thanks; don’t want a bottle or jug thrown at my head. But I don’t believe you, you artful little jade. It’s all your cunning way to lead me on. He has left you all his money, darling, and you’ve played your cards splendidly; but it would not make any difference to me if you hadn’t a penny. You are going to be my little wife.”

“Never!” cried Gertrude, with a hurried glance at the sunken features on the pillow.

They both spoke in a low, quick, subdued whisper, and as if under the influence of the same dread lest the old man should awake.

“Don’t talk stuff, my darling. Think of your position.”

“I tell you I am penniless,” cried Gertrude excitedly, as she felt that Saul’s advances were mainly due to his belief in her future wealth.

“All the more need for you to listen to me, darling,” whispered Saul, as he threw his arm round the girl’s waist, and held her in spite of her struggles. “When the old man dies, if you are as you say, what’s to become of you?”

“I shall not tell you,” cried Gertrude, striving to escape.

“Then I’ll tell you. There’s that nice little idea in your head that my beloved cousin – that Yankee vagabond – is coming back to marry you, so that all is to be happy ever after. But suppose he does not come?”

“He will come; your uncle has sent for him.”

“Ah, he may have sent, but the fellow may not come. He may be drowned if he did; and even if he does come, that’s no reason why he should marry you.”

Gertrude, finding her efforts vain, ceased struggling, but stood there, panting heavily, and waiting her opportunity to free herself from the intruder’s grasp.

“Better come to an understanding, Gertie, and let’s begin to be friends at once. George Harrington must be a Wild West ruffian, not fit to make you a husband, so don’t think any more of that. I know, as well as can be, that he will never come back here; and if anything happens to him, as something is sure to happen, seeing what sort of a character he is. I shall be master here.”

“You?” cried Gertrude, with dilating eyes, as she again tried to get free.

“Yes, I; master of the houses, and lands, tenements, messuages, and all the rest of it; above all, my little struggling pet, master of you.”

“Ha!”

They both turned sharply, and Saul Harrington started back, for that hoarsely-sounding ejaculation came from the bed, and there, with the lamp shining full upon his cavernous eyes, sat the old man, glaring wildly at his nephew, and pointing towards the fireplace with outstretched hand.

“Uncle, dearest,” cried Gertrude, running to his side, and clinging to him; but he did not heed her, only remained pointing towards the fireplace.

“Why is he here?” panted the old man.

“Only a little visit, uncle. Don’t be cross.”

“A lie?” panted the old man hoarsely. “Money – always money,” and he still pointed excitedly towards the fireplace, forgetful of the fact that he had a bell-rope close by his hand.

“Not very polite to your nephew, uncle,” said Saul coolly.

“I heard – all,” he said. “If you would marry him – because you will have my money. That’s why – I wouldn’t leave it to you – strong and fierce – frighten you into accepting him – when I’m gone. But I knew better. No lie, Saul Harrington; she hasn’t a penny. But you’ll be master, eh? If George does not come – if George dies – eh, Saul? Yes, I had forgotten – next-of-kin, I suppose, and you would seize everything, eh? Yes, I know you; but no, Saul Harrington, no, no, no! I’ll take care of that. You did wrong in coming here to-night. Ring, Gertie, ring.”

“Yes, uncle, dear.”

“My solicitor – I want Hampton directly, he is to be fetched. No, no, my dear nephew, if George Harrington does not come home you shall not be master here, next-of-kin though you be. Hampton, Gertie – send for Hampton. I did not think of that. Ring – ring!”

“Yes, uncle, dearest, I have rung,” whispered Gertrude, as she vainly tried to calm the old man. “Lie down now and rest, and Mr Saul Harrington will go. Don’t – pray don’t talk like this.”

“No, no – don’t go, Saul. Stop and see my solicitor – stop and hear the codicil to my will. I’ll have it made right directly. Never be master here, Saul – no, not if George dies – never be master here. Scoundrel, robbed me living, now you would rob me dead; but – but – you shall – Ha!”

“Uncle! Help!” cried Gertrude excitedly, as the old man’s head dropped suddenly upon her shoulder, for he had been working himself up into a terrible pitch of excitement; his eyes flashed, the veins on his brow seemed to be knotted, and stood out in a thick network; and his hands clawed and gesticulated as his words came more broken and huskily, till all at once, and without warning, his head fell, and Gertrude let him sink motionless upon the pillow.

At that moment the door opened, and in answer to the bell, the housekeeper entered.

“Mrs Denton, quick – uncle!” cried Gertrude.

“Your master wants his solicitor, Mrs Denton,” said Saul, coolly walking to the bedside and taking one of the old man’s hands. “No,” he said huskily, “a doctor.”

“Yes, yes; the doctor, Mrs Denton – quick!” cried Gertrude excitedly, and the old woman ran out.

As the door closed behind her, Saul let the hand fall heavily and inert upon the counterpane.

“Uncle, dearest, speak – pray speak to me!” cried Gertrude passionately.

“Never again, my girl,” said Saul quietly. “The fit has done its work. Too late.”

“What do you mean?” cried Gertrude, staring all aghast.

“That the old man is dead,” said Saul coldly; and he added softly to himself: “If George Harrington dies. I am master here.”

Chapter Six

How the Money was Left

"A singularly quiet funeral, Mr Hampton," said Doctor Lawrence as he rode back in the same carriage with the solicitor.

"The wish of the deceased, sir. He had a great dislike to wasting money."

"Bit miserly, Mr Hampton."

"No, sir, no. On the whole a generous man, but if he spent money, as he used to say to me. He liked to have something substantial in return."

"Well, I must say for him, that he was always prompt in his payments."

"Always," said the lawyer.

"But with his wealth it seems strange that we have not got a host of needy relatives. We can talk about it, Hampton, not being relatives. Wish I was. A slice of the poor old boy's cake would have been a nice help to a family man like me."

"Humph, yes, I suppose so. Money's nice. Very sudden at last, doctor."

"Ye-es, and no," said the doctor. "When a man gets to eighty-five you may say his life hangs by a cobweb. Any little excitement may bring it to an end."

"Humph! Hah! And I've a shrewd suspicion that he had an angry interview with Mr Harrington – the nephew."

"And heir?" said the doctor.

"My dear Lawrence," said the old lawyer, smiling, "never try to pump one of our profession. In a very short time I shall be reading the will, so curb your impatience."

"Of course, my dear sir, of course; only a little natural curiosity. Between ourselves I think it will be a pity if he marries our charming young friend, Gertrude."

"Thousand pities," said the old lawyer drily. "Sooner marry her myself – if I could."

The carriage drew up at the outer gates as he spoke, and the ugly old brick house, known as "The Mynns," seemed a little more cheerful now that the blinds, which had been down for days, were raised and the sun allowed to light up the gloomy rooms, in one of which – the dining-room – the little party assembled after a while to hear the reading of the will; Saul's enemy, the dog, taking up his position on the hearthrug.

The party consisted of Gertrude, who came in attended by Bruno; Mrs Hampton, a stiff, stern old lady, who looked like a black dress with a face on the top; Saul Harrington, and the servants. Mr Hampton was there officially, and the doctor was retiring to see a patient in town, when the lawyer took him by the coat.

"Don't go, Lawrence," he said; "you forget you are an executor."

"Oh, yes, of course, so I did."

"It's a long time since the will was executed, and I have some recollection of a snuff-box left to you."

"Indeed," said the doctor, with his face lighting up as he rubbed his hands; "then he has left me the old engine turned silver snuff-box. I took a fancy to it years ago, and he laughed and said he would leave it to me in his will. Now that's very pleasant of him to remember me. Eh Miss Gertrude? Yes, I'm very glad."

The doctor drew out a holly-root box, took snuff loudly, and looking up at the portrait of the old man, gave it a friendly nod, while the eyes seemed to be gazing into his as they did into those of all present.

Then the last will and testament was read, and Saul Harrington listened impatiently to the minor bequests to the under-servants, no one being forgotten; and to the comfortable legacy left to Mrs

Denton with the wish that she would always remain housekeeper at The Mynns, so long as her health permitted. Then came a fairly large amount for the maintenance of “my old and faithful servant Bruno,” with the addition that if “my heir” did not feel inclined keep the dog, Mrs Denton was to have him in charge and care for him till his death.

“Lucky dog!” said the doctor to himself; and he glanced at Gertrude, who was holding Mrs Hampton’s hand while crying gently, and, as if not to intrude on her sorrow, he again looked up at the portrait, gave it a friendly nod, and then chirruped softly to the dog, which came and laid its head upon his knee, after turning its eyes apologetically to Gertrude.

Then the doctor’s attention was excited by the next clause in the will which bequeathed “to my old friend and adviser, Phineas Hampton, five thousand pounds clear of legacy duty.”

“Another lucky dog,” muttered the doctor, who then drew in his breath with a hiss as he heard the lawyer’s words:

“To my very old friend, Edward Lawrence, MD, my old silver snuff-box which he once admired.”

“Hah! I’m very glad,” said the doctor, meeting Gertrude’s eyes now, as the lawyer paused to look up and repeat from the will the next words:

“And ten thousand pounds free of legacy duty.”

“No!” ejaculated the doctor, half rising. Then sitting down again he exclaimed, “Well!” took out his pocket-handkerchief, blew his nose loudly, and then, without disguise, sat quietly wiping away the tears.

“To my nephew, Saul Harrington, one hundred pounds a year, raised as hereinafter specified by a Government annuity.”

Saul frowned and looked down at the carpet, though it was all he had dared to expect, and he listened eagerly to the next clause which left an annuity of one hundred per annum to the testator’s dear adopted child, Gertrude Bellwood, with the hope that she would fulfil his wishes. In conclusion, as Saul was trying to recover from the shock of knowing that Gertrude had spoken the truth, came the clauses dealing with the remainder of the old man’s wealth, which was left unconditionally with certain sums and their interest, sums remitted from the United States, “to my grandson, George Harrington, in the hope that he will dutifully fulfil my wishes expressed to him in the last letter I sent to America.”

The other parts of the will, with its appointment of “my old friends, Doctor Lawrence and Phineas Hampton, to be my sole executors,” seemed to consist of the ringing of bells in Saul Harrington’s ears as he still sat gazing down at the carpet when all was over.

“My congratulations, Lawrence,” said the old lawyer, smiling.

“My dear Hampton, I don’t know how to be sufficiently grateful. And, my dear Miss Gertrude, I cannot take this. Ten thousand pounds, and you only left with a hundred a year. Look here, Hampton. Now, no nonsense. I shall only take some of this money – half. The other I insist upon making over to Miss Gertrude here as her dowry.”

“Can’t be done. Shan’t be done,” said the old lawyer gruffly. “Lawrence, we’ve known each other twenty years.”

“Yes, we have.”

“Then don’t be a fool.”

“And not at his side when he died,” said the doctor, nodding his head. “My dear Miss Gertrude, I feel as if I am robbing you.”

“You don’t know how glad I am, Doctor Lawrence,” cried Gertrude, laying her hands in his. “Dear uncle always liked you, and I felt sure he would leave you something handsome in his will.”

“Hah!”

It was a long, low expiration of the breath from Saul Harrington, who was too deep in thought to hear what was going on, as, with hands down in his pockets, he gazed down fixedly at the carpet.

“And if George Harrington dies, I succeed to everything. Yes,” he said to himself, “I should be master here. Get out! Beast!”

He said these last words aloud, for the dog was sniffing at his legs, and all the time it seemed as if the portrait of old James Harrington was the old man himself, gazing down sternly from the wall at his plotting nephew.

“Yes, if he dies – if he dies – I shall be master here.”

Chapter Seven

Ready for the Heir

"There, Miss Gertrude," said Mrs Denton, carefully pinning the white apron she had rolled up to guard against its falling open – the apron she had been wearing for a fortnight, "I don't like to boast, but I think I may say that The Mynns never looked cleaner since it was a house."

"Never, Denton."

"And I've had my work to do, my dear, for servants will be servants. They're paid so much a year, and they reckon how much they ought to do for the money, and when they've done that it's hard to get them to move."

"Well, Denton," said Gertrude, smiling, "is it not natural?"

"Natural enough, my dear, if you'll excuse me calling you so now you're a grown young lady; but we don't go by nature in service. I like to see servants take a pride in their work, and the place they're in. I do, and I always try to make the place look better when there's no one to watch me."

"You're a dear, good old soul, Denton, and I hope we may never part."

"Till the last, miss, and the last comes to us all as it did to poor dear master. Forty years was I with him, my dear; and it don't seem like forty weeks. Any news, my dear?"

"No, Denton," said Gertrude, flushing slightly now.

"Well, he might have written if he has got the news, and said when you might expect him. It isn't as if Mr Hampton hadn't telegraphed out. And it does seem so strange. Six weeks since poor master died, and no letter. You'd be glad to hear, miss, wouldn't you?"

"I – I – yes – I don't know, Denton."

"Ah well, natural enough, my dear, when you don't know what he's like, and he's to be your husband. I hope he'll turn out all poor master said about him, and make you very happy, my dear. I remember well when his poor father and mother brought him here before they sailed for America. Sad, restless gentleman, his poor father, wanting to go to foreign countries, to find gold when master used to tell him that there was more gold to be dug out of people's pockets than ever he'd find out there. Don't you think, my dear, that we might begin putting flowers now in young master's room?"

"Yes, Denton, do," cried Gertrude quickly. "He may not come for days yet, but you could renew them."

"I mean for you to put them, my dear."

"I?"

"Yes. There, don't blush, my pretty," said the old woman, smiling affectionately. "He's to be your husband, you know, and I can see what you mean; you don't want him to think you forward and pressing for it. Quite right, my child, but this is a particular case as we may say."

There was a double-knock and a sharp ring, and Bruno gave token of his presence by starting out from under the table and uttering a fierce bay.

"Down, Bruno, down!" cried Gertrude, colouring deeply and then turning pale.

"That's a strange knock, Miss Gertrude. Perhaps it's Mr George."

They stood listening in the drawing-room; the old woman, in her white crape cap, looking flushed and excited, and Gertrude, in her unrelieved black dress, white – even sallow – with excitement.

"What will he think of poor little insignificant me?" she said to herself; and her heart beat more and more heavily as steps were heard in the hall; then their dull sound on the carpet, the door handle rattled, and Saul Harrington marched in unannounced.

"Ah, Gertie," he cried with boisterous familiarity. "How do, Denton? Here, keep that dog back or I shall kill him."

“Lie down, Bruno?” said Gertrude.

“Send him out of the room.”

“He will be quite quiet now,” replied Gertrude, who longed to tell the old housekeeper to stop in the room, but dared not make so great a confession of her dread of the visitor.

“Oh, very well,” said Saul carelessly. “As long as he does not try to eat me, I don’t mind. Hah! gone,” he continued with a satisfied smile; “now we can have a chat.”

“You wished to speak to me, Mr Harrington?” said Gertrude, trying hard not to show her agitation.

“Only dropped in to see how you were, and to ask the news. Well, is my beloved relative on his way yet? When do you expect him?”

“We have not heard from Mr George Harrington yet.”

“You will open his letter, I suppose, when it comes for the old man?”

“I shall pass it on to the executors.”

“Pooh! we could read it. I say we, as I am so near a relative; but mark my words, Gertie, he’ll never come back. There, don’t cry. You never knew him, and don’t want to know him I’ll be sworn. Gertie, it’s as good as certain that he is dead, for the old man had not heard from him for quite a year, I know, and out there a man’s life isn’t worth much. Come, let’s see if you and I can’t have a little sensible talk.”

Gertrude glanced uneasily at the door, and wondered whether Mrs Denton was near. Then she heard a sigh come from beneath the table, and felt comforted, for there was help at hand.

Saul laughed as he interpreted her looks rightly.

“What a silly little bird it is,” he said banteringly, “pretending to be afraid of me on purpose to lead me on. There, I apologise for being so rough that day. I ought to have approached you more gently, but it is your fault – you are so pretty and enticing. Why, what a terrible look!”

“I have no right to forbid you this house, Mr Harrington,” said Gertrude coldly, “but I must beg of you not to refer to that terrible day again. I cannot bear it.”

“Stuff!”

“I cannot keep back the feeling that your presence shortened my poor uncle’s life.”

“You’re a little goose, Gertie,” said Saul contemptuously. “The old man threw himself into a passion about nothing, and he paid the penalty.”

Gertrude shook her head as she took up some work so as to avoid looking at the man lolling before her in an easy-chair.

“Why, you little sceptic,” cried Saul laughingly. “It was a foregone conclusion that he would pop off some day in a fit of temper – because there were no coals in the scuttle, or his beef-tea was too hot. I happened to be there, and you blame me. That’s all.”

“Pray say no more.”

“All right, I will not. Always ready to obey you, Gertie, because I want to show you that I really love you very dearly.”

Gertrude gave a hurried glance at the door, remembered the dog, and grew calm.

“I’m not going to frighten you, Gertie,” continued Saul, “but I want for us to understand our position. Never mind what the executors or any one else says, George Harrington is not coming back. He’s dead or he would have been here.”

“He has not had time yet. He was in the West – Far West, last time my uncle heard.”

“I don’t care if he was in the much farther West. Letters would have reached him, and he would have known that his grandfather was dead, and if he had known it, do you think the man is living who would not have rushed over to secure this property?”

Gertrude felt her heart sink. Not many minutes before she had felt a dread of meeting George Harrington; now that there was a possibility of Saul’s words being true, a curious feeling of sorrow

attacked her, and she felt that she would give anything for the man, whose praises the old man had sung, to take her by the hand.

“Well, you might talk,” continued Saul. “I’m not going to bother you, nor to hurry things. I know I’m right. There is no George Harrington, and you are going to be my wife.”

“No, no,” cried Gertrude hastily.

“And I say yes, yes, so don’t be silly. Better than being married to a man you have never seen – some whiskey-drinking, loafing rowdy from the States, who would have ill-used you, degraded you, spent every penny the old man left, and then gone back to America, and left you to starve, if you were not already dead of a broken heart.”

Gertrude listened in silence, wondering at the strange feeling of indignation within her, and the desire to take up the cudgels on George Harrington’s behalf.

“There, I’m speaking strongly,” said Saul, changing his tone, “because, of course, I feel strongly. You have always hung back from me, Gertie, because you did not thoroughly know me. But you are beginning to know me better, and I am going to wait patiently till you lay your hand in mine, and say, ‘Saul, dear, I am yours.’”

Gertie started, and looked at her visitor with lips apart, dazed at the confident way in which he prophesied of the future.

Saul noted it, and smiled to himself.

“It’s easy enough,” he said to himself. “Only got to let ’em feel the curb, and they give in directly.”

“Patience is the thing, Gertie, dear,” he continued aloud. “I suppose it will have to be a year first. There’s all that executor business to go through, and the law will be precious slow, of course, about giving up the property to the rightful heir. I’m the rightful heir, Gertie, there’s no mistake about that, and I think I’m behaving very fairly about you. It’s plain enough, now, that I didn’t come after you on account of your prospects, isn’t it?”

He rose as he spoke with a peculiar smile on his face, and made two quick steps across to where Gertrude was seated.

Her first thought was to spring up and make for the door, but, by a strong effort of will, she mastered herself and sat perfectly rigid in her seat, meeting his eyes without flinching, with the effect of disconcerting him, for he stopped short, and began tapping the crown of his hat. Had she tried to escape, he would have caught her in his arms.

“That’s better,” he said, after an awkward pause. “I like that. You’re getting used to me, Gertie, and I tell you what, my girl, it will be a fine thing for you. Do you now what you ought to do if you are the clever girl I think you to be?”

She shook her head. She dared not trust herself to speak, lest he should note the tremble in her voice.

“Make sure of me while you can. Not many girls have the chance of such a rich husband.”

“If he would only go,” thought Gertrude, fighting hard with the hysterical feeling which threatened to break forth in a fit of sobbing.

For she was moved more than she knew. She had grown to expect, as a part of her life, that she should marry the frank-hearted man whose praise her guardian had constantly sung. She did not love him, but there was the germ of love in her breast waiting to be warmed into life and burst forth as a blossom, while now, speaking quite with the voice of authority, Saul Harrington had come at the end of her weeks of patient watching and expectation, to announce brutally his full conviction of her betrothed’s death. Her heart sank lower and lower, as she felt how probable his words were, and how likely it was that George Harrington had fallen a victim to climate or accident, or in some encounter, leaving her helpless and alone, at the mercy of a man who would lord it in his place, and who openly avowed his intention of making her his wife – another name for what would prove to be his slave.

“Well, Gertie,” he said at last, after terrifying the poor girl by his manner, “I sha’n’t ask you to keep me to dinner to-day. Next time I come you will, won’t you?”

She looked up in his face with her eyes wild with horror and perplexity. What should she do – what could she say? She felt now that she must end her position at The Mynns by making an appeal to Doctor Lawrence or Mr Hampton, and she blamed herself for not doing so sooner. But these thoughts did not help her now, and she remained silent.

“Silence gives consent,” said Saul, laughing meaningly, as he passed his stick into the hand which held his hat, and held out his right. “I must be going now. Good-bye, Gertie.”

She rose at this, and, with a feeling of relief, held out her hand.

“Ah, that’s better,” he said, as he took it; and before the poor girl could realise her position, he had snatched her to his breast, dropping hat and stick to have both hands free.

“Mr Saul!”

“My darling little girl! The devil!”

The last words were accompanied by a yell of pain and horror, as he literally flung Gertrude from him, and made for the door.

For there had been no warning. Unknown to Saul, and forgotten in her agitation by Gertrude, Bruno had been lying beneath the table unseen, but seeing all, till what had seemed to his dumb brute mind a cowardly attack upon his mistress, when, with one quick swing round of his head, he caught Saul by the ankle, held on for a moment, and then stood before Gertrude, uttering a low fierce growl.

“That settles it,” said Saul, trying to recover his equanimity, but speaking in a low voice full of fury. “I don’t want to be hard on you, Gertie, but if that dog is here next time I come, I’ll poison him, as sure as he is alive. I’m master now, and – ”

He stopped short, for the old housekeeper entered the room with a card, the ring at the front door and the answering footsteps having passed unnoticed in the drawing-room.

“For me, Denton?” cried Gertie, eagerly running to the old woman, and clinging to her arm.

“He asked for master, miss,” whispered the old woman. “He did not know. In the dining-room, miss. It’s Master George.”

A mist seemed to float before Gertrude’s eyes, but not before she had read upon the card the name:

“Mr George Harrington.”

Chapter Eight

“Mr George Harrington.”

“Who’s that? What’s that?” cried Saul Harrington sharply, as he saw by Gertrude’s agitation that there was something particular on the way.

“It’s Master George come, sir,” said the old housekeeper.

“What?” he roared; and his face turned sallow. “Impossible!”

Gertrude stood trembling, with the card in her hand, the name thereon seeming to play strange tricks, and growing larger and then dying away, till it seemed to be hidden in a mist, while a chaos of thoughts ran confusedly through her brain. At one moment she looked upon the coming of this stranger with dread, for a stranger he was to her; the next her heart began to beat, and her cheeks flushed, as she recalled that he was her affianced husband, and that he had come to protect her from this man, and that henceforth she would be safe.

She was brought back to the present by the old housekeeper, who, for the second time, touched her arm.

“Miss Gertrude, ma’am, don’t you hear me?” she said. “What shall I tell him?”

“I – I – ”

“Stop!” cried Saul sharply. “You are a young unprotected girl, and as the executors are not here, Gertie, I look upon it as my duty to see after your welfare. How do we know that this is George Harrington? Let me look at that card.”

He snatched the card from the trembling girl’s fingers, and scowled as he read the inscription, though he could gather nothing from that.

“Here, I’ll go down and see what he’s like. It may be some impostor.”

He had reached the door when Gertrude flushed up, and seemed in her decisive action to have changed from girl to woman.

“Stop, Mr Harrington!” she said; “this would not be the way to welcome my poor dead guardian’s grandson, and I think it is due to me that you should refrain.”

“What!” he cried, staggered for the moment by her manner and bearing, as she crossed to a writing-table. “Nonsense, girl; you know nothing of the ways of the world. I’ll meet this man, and see what he is like.”

Gertrude took no notice, but wrote two telegrams, and handed them to the housekeeper.

“Send them at once,” she whispered, and she turned to the door, where Saul’s hand was raised to stop her, but there was a low growl from close at hand, Saul started and shrank away, leaving the door free; but before Gertrude was half way to the room, with the dog close at her heels, Saul had followed, and entered the dining-room just as the keen-looking, sun-browned, and well-dressed man, who had stood gazing at old Harrington’s portrait, turned quickly and advanced to meet the agitated girl.

“How do you do?” he said, in a sharp decisive way, as he held out both hands, Gertrude placing hers within them, to be retained, as the stranger looked at her searchingly, and evidently with satisfaction. “There you need not tell me,” he continued, “you’re Gertrude, I know. I say, quite a shock to me to come back too late. That’s the old man, I suppose?”

He nodded towards the portrait as, without moving her eyes from his, Gertrude replied:

“Yes, that is uncle’s – I mean dear guardian’s portrait.”

“Like him?”

“Oh, so very like,” replied Gertrude, “I can almost fancy sometimes he is looking down at me from the wall.”

“Ah,” exclaimed the other, giving a quick glance up at the picture and back to Gertrude, whose hands he still held, and pressed warmly. “Of course I don’t remember. Quite a little shaver when I went over yonder.”

Saul, who stood glowering at the pair, half mad with rage and disappointment, winced at these words, but setting his teeth hard, he said quietly:

“Have you just arrived?”

“Reached Liverpool last night. Came on this morning. Very rough passage. Who are you?”

“I,” said Saul, forcing a smile – “well, I am – here is my card.”

He did not finish his sentence, but drew a card from his case.

“Mr Saul Harrington,” read the stranger. “Let’s see, I think I have heard of you?”

“Well, I should presume so,” replied Saul stiffly.

“I was right up the country when grandfather’s last letter came,” said the new-comer hastily, “but I got back to ’Frisco, and then across to New York, and took boat soon as I could, and here I am. Didn’t stop about much luggage, so as to be quick. Can I stay here?”

“Stay here?” said Gertrude, withdrawing her hands. “Oh, yes, it is your own house.”

“Ah, to be sure, I suppose so,” cried the young man sharply; and as he spoke his dark eyes were running from one to the other, and then to the dog, which kept on sniffing at him uneasily. “Won’t bite, will he?”

“Oh no. Lie down, Bruno,” cried Gertrude hastily.

“Don’t know so much about that,” said Saul; “he can bite sometimes.”

“Well, he’d better keep his fangs out of me,” said the young man, with an involuntary movement of the hand beneath the back of his morning coat.

“You’ll excuse me,” interposed Saul, taking a step forward, “but you are a perfect stranger to us, sir.”

“Natural-lee,” said the young man. “Never met before, of course.”

“Then will you be good enough to give me some proofs that you are the gentleman whose card you sent up.”

“Eh? Proofs? Oh, yes. No, I won’t. Look here, sir, this is a curious welcome; pray, who are you?”

“I gave you my card, sir.”

“Yes, of course, Saul Harrington – Mr Saul Harrington. But that don’t explain – yes, it does, you’re a cousin. The old man said something about you in his last letter.”

“And in the others,” said Saul sharply.

“Of course.”

“Have you the letters?”

“I told you I had, didn’t I? Am I to show them to you?”

“Stop,” cried Gertrude quietly.

“Eh? Stop!” cried Saul fiercely. “How do we know that this is not an impostor?”

“A what,” roared the young man fiercely.

“Stop, if you please,” said Gertrude. “Mr Saul Harrington is only a visitor here, Mr George, and has no right to make such a demand of you.”

“Mind what you are saying,” cried Saul angrily.

“I am minding what I am saying, sir. You have no right to ask such questions.”

“What? Not in your behalf?”

“No, sir,” interposed their visitor sharply, as he took his cue from Gertrude; “no right at all.”

“I was not speaking to you,” said Saul roughly; and the two men stood glowering at each other, Saul having rather the best of it, till Gertrude spoke hastily, in dread of a quarrel:

“If there is any need for Mr George Harrington to prove his identity, it should be to Mr Hampton and Doctor Lawrence.”

“Who are they?” said the young man sharply.

“My dear guardians,” replied Gertrude.

“Seems rather a strange thing,” said the young man, giving Gertrude a reproachful look, and then metaphorically setting up his hackles as he turned defiantly upon Saul, “that I come back to England, at my grandfather’s invitation, to my own place, and find some one, who has no right, beginning to dictate to me as to what I am to do.”

“I don’t know about dictating,” said Saul, who grew more calm as the stranger became excited; “but you don’t suppose, sir, that I, as my uncle’s representative, am going to stand by and let a perfect stranger enter upon the place, and take possession. What proof have I that you are George Harrington?”

“Proof? Didn’t I send up my card?”

“Card!” cried Saul contemptuously.

“Oh, if that isn’t enough I can give you plenty more proofs,” cried the young man quickly.

“Stop, Mr George Harrington,” said Gertrude, warmly espousing his cause. “Mr Saul Harrington assumes too much. I am my guardian’s representative at The Mynns till his grandson comes and takes possession. I decline, then, to let you be treated in this uncalled-for way.”

“Thank you, my dear, thank you,” cried the young fellow sharply. “Now, Mr Saul Harrington, what have you got to say to that?”

“Gertrude, you’ll repent this,” cried Saul, whose jealous rage and disappointment swept away the calm manner he had assumed.

“Perhaps so. But if she does, I suppose it’s no business of yours, sir. He has no right to bully you, has he, my dear?”

Gertrude flinched a little at this over-friendly, familiar way; but she thought to herself that George Harrington had led a rough life out in the West, and it was well meant. She could not help leaning, too, towards the man who had, she felt, a right to champion her, and he had come now to protect her and defend her against one whom now she literally loathed.

She replied then eagerly:

“None whatever, Mr George. This is your home, too, and he has no right to interfere upon your taking possession.”

She held out her hand to him, and looked him frankly in the eyes, as she said quickly:

“I’m very glad you have come.”

“Thank ye, my dear, thank ye. I’m rather rough, but you must not mind that. Been hunting, and gold-digging, and living in camp. Soon rub off the corners. It’s very nice and kind of you to speak so well as you have.”

He took the hand she held out, drew it through his arm, and kept it in quiet possession, as he turned with an insolent look of triumph upon Saul.

“Now, Mr What’s-your-name, do you live here?”

“No,” said Saul sharply, and he returned the other’s defiant look, and felt hard pressed to keep back his jealous rage as he saw Gertrude rest calmly, with her hand in that of the new-comer. “No – not yet,” he added to himself.

“Well, then, my dear sir, as I do – in future – and as I have come a very long journey, and am tired and hungry, and want to talk to miss here, perhaps you’ll be good enough to take your hat and get out.”

Saul’s eyes flashed, and his cheeks became of an uglier pallor, as he listened to this speech, which bore a strong resemblance to that of one of the late Mr Chucks, the boatswain, of “Peter Simple” fame. For it was all refinement at the beginning, and wandered off into argot that was the very reverse.

“I am not accustomed to be ordered out of this house, sir,” said Saul in a low voice, full of suppressed rage; “and I refuse to go until I have seen your credentials.”

“What!”

“And I’m not going to be bullied,” said Saul. “Your cowboy manners don’t frighten me; and if it wasn’t for the lady here, whom, in spite of her preference for an utter stranger, I am bound to protect, I’d just take you and show you how to behave in an English house.”

“Would you, sir? Then look here. Out in the West, from where I came, we have no policemen and magistrates at every corner, ready to do all our dirty work. We do it ourselves, and carry with us all that is ready and necessary for the job.”

He advanced menacingly towards Saul; and as he took his first step, his hand dropped Gertrude’s, and he put it behind him.

“George Harrington! For Heaven’s sake?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he cried laughingly, taking her hand, laying it upon his arm, and stroking it gently. “I forgot. He riled me, and I felt as if I was back among the roughs out yonder. There, I don’t want to quarrel, Mr Saul Harrington. I suppose we are uncles and cousins or something of the kind. Shake hands, and let’s have a glass of something to show we are not bad friends. I suppose there is something in the house – eh, my dear?”

“Yes, but – ”

“Look here, sir,” cried Saul, ignoring the proffered hand, “I am not frightened by your Yankee, bullying ways, and I tell you what it is – ”

Saul Harrington did not tell the new-comer what it was, for the door opened, and Doctor Lawrence came in hastily.

“What’s the matter?” he cried. “Some one ill?”

“Yes, old gentleman,” said the stranger banteringly. “This chap – Mr Saul Harrington I think he calls himself – has got a fit.”

Doctor Lawrence gazed sharply at the speaker, and then placed his glasses upon his nose, as Gertrude withdrew her arm and hurriedly crossed to the doctor’s side.

“Yes, sir,” cried Saul fiercely, “a fit of indignation. I refused to – ”

“Oh, look here, let’s have an end of this. I don’t know who you are, old gentleman.”

“My name is Lawrence.”

“Well, then, Mr Lawrence – Oh, I know; you are my grandfather’s executor.”

“One of them, sir.”

“Well, I’ve come home at my grandfather’s wish, and I find he’s dead, and this man ready here to bully, and order, and insist upon my showing my papers.”

“Hum, my dear, don’t be alarmed,” said the doctor quietly; and then he turned to the last speaker. “You come as a stranger, sir, and it will be quite necessary for you to give ample proof that you are Mr George Harrington.”

“Of course, old gentleman, of course.”

“To me and my colleague, Mr Hampton; but I think Mr Saul Harrington might have waited till those who have a right to question come upon the spot. Lucky I came down.”

“You got my telegram?” said Gertrude.

“Telegram? No, my dear. I left home two hours ago. Now, Mr Saul, what have you to say?”

“Oh, I do not want to interfere,” said Saul quickly. “But there was no one here to protect Miss Bellwood.”

“Surely she needed no protection?” said the doctor, looking from one to the other.

“How do you know that, sir, when a man comes here assuming to be my cousin.”

“Assuming!” cried the new-comer very fiercely.

“Yes, assuming, sir. You refused to show any credentials.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t, and I don’t. But when a fellow begins to bully me, and to come the high-handed, I hit back. Look here, Mr Lawrence, has this Mr Saul Harrington any right to insist upon my clearing up to him?”

“None whatever, sir.”

“That’s enough. As to my refusing – not such a fool. Only we learn too much out in the West to begin opening out to every one who says, ‘I’m the proper moral custom-house officer: give up your keys.’”

“I only interfered as the executors were not present,” said Saul Harrington. “If this gentleman is what he professes to be, I shall only be too glad to give him the hand of welcome.”

“Thank ye for nothing. Now then, I’m hungry, so don’t let’s have any more jaw.”

Chapter Nine

Proofs of Identity

The new-comer was furnished with refreshment, and at the end of a couple of hours, after a long talk between Saul and Doctor Lawrence, the visitor rejoined them, just as there was a loud ring, steps, and, to Gertrude's great delight, the lawyer entered the room.

"Who's this?" said the young man sharply. "My fellow executor – Mr Hampton," said the doctor. "Hampton, this is Mr George Harrington."

"Oh, indeed," said the old lawyer, setting down a very glossy silk hat, and depositing a new pair of black kid gloves therein. "Good-morning, my dear Miss Gertrude. Sit down, sir, pray."

"Thank ye."

"Mr Saul Harrington, are you going to stay to this little conference?"

"Certainly, sir. You know it concerns me very closely."

"Ye-es," said the lawyer, "true. Mr George Harrington?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Hampton, I am George Harrington."

"You will excuse me, I am sure."

"Oh, yes, old gentleman, go ahead."

"You see Doctor Lawrence and I are the late Mr Harrington's executors, and we have a duty to perform. In the pursuit of that duty we shall have to ask questions that may seem impertinent."

"Oh, I don't mind. Quite right. I'll answer, only let's get it done. Here! I like dogs," he said softly to Gertrude, as he patted his leg, chirruped, and Bruno wagged his tail, trotted toward him, and then turned off, and went to the other side of where Gertrude was seated. "Ha, ha, ha! Dog wants to hear first whether I am the genuine article."

Saul watched him closely, and the doctor and lawyer exchanged glances, as if satisfied by the bluff nonchalant manner of the claimant, who raised his eyes now, and looked long and searchingly at the portrait whose eyes met his.

"Will you be good enough, sir, to tell me whose son you are?"

"Eh? George and Isabel Harrington's."

"And when you were born?"

"No! Hang it all, sir, that's a poser. Can't recollect being born."

The lawyer raised his eyebrows.

"Somewhere about five-and-twenty years ago, I believe; but I've led such a rough life out there, that you mustn't ask me any questions about dates or books."

"Can you tell me anything about your childhood?"

"Oh, yes. Father had a ranche, and he went gold-digging, and prospecting, and we had an old nigger servant, who used to wash and cook and do everything; and a half-breed chap, half Indian, half Englishman, who used to take me out in the woods; and old Jake, that was the nigger, used to give me rides on his back."

"But I mean about your earlier life."

"No; can't go back any farther than that."

"You remember your grandfather, of course?"

"Eh? No, how should I remember a man I never saw?"

There was a pause here, and the young man looked sharply from one to the other, as the old lawyer cleared his throat.

"Will you be good enough to tell us any little act that you can recall."

"Well, I haven't a very good memory, gentlemen, but I've got a few notes and letters in my pocket-book."

“Ha! documentary evidence,” said the lawyer, brightening up, as the young man took a well-worn letter-case from his pocket.

“Here’s the old man’s letter to me about a watch I sent him.”

Gertrude’s face, which had seemed pained and full of anxious care brightened at this, and Saul bit his lip.

“To be sure – yes,” said the lawyer, passing the letter to Doctor Lawrence, who smiled and nodded.

“Then here are a few notes I made about some remittances I sent home.”

“To be sure – yes,” said the lawyer, eagerly scanning the pencilled entries in the book. “Anything else, my dear sir?”

“There are some letters in one of the pockets, and the last one I received is there, telling me to come back, and what I was to do. But don’t read that aloud,” he said, smiling, as he fixed his eyes meaningly upon Gertrude’s, making her lower her lids and turn scarlet, while Saul, who missed nothing, ground his teeth. “Private, that letter is, gentlemen, please.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said the doctor, nodding pleasantly at Gertrude; who felt at the moment as if she would have given anything to have had with her an elderly woman friend.

“All very satisfactory, Mr George Harrington,” said the old lawyer gravely; “but, unpleasant as it may seem, we must go a little further, please.”

“Come,” said the young man, smiling, “you acknowledge me as George Harrington, then?”

“A *lapsus lingua*— a mere slip of the tongue. Now, sir, can you give us any other proof. Have you brought any letters of introduction from well-known people in the States?”

“I have brought you a letter of introduction from my grandfather, gentlemen – several.”

“Yes, yes. Quite right. But any others?”

“Good Heavens, gentlemen, I have been for months hunting in the wildest parts of the North West, fighting bears; always on the watch to save myself from Indians; and when at last I got your letter at Laramie City, I came home. Letters from people in the States! Why, I never thought of such a thing.”

“No, he would not,” said the doctor quietly.

“By the way, gentlemen, as I am to come into some property now, I ought to make a will.”

“A most wise proceeding, sir,” assented the old lawyer.

“Then will you two gentlemen agree to be my executors?”

“Really, sir, I – ”

“Because no man could have a more careful pair.”

“You are complimentary, sir. Doctor Lawrence and I are only doing our duty.”

“Of course, of course. Well, gentlemen, I’ve shown you my grandfather’s letters, etcetera, and I am George Harrington. That’s all I have got to say.”

“But – you’ll excuse me. We are rather awkwardly placed. We ought to have some other proof of your identity. My dear Miss Gertrude, have we any of Mr George Harrington’s letters?”

“I think there are some among my guardian’s papers.”

“Stop a moment – I forgot. Here’s my watch, with my initials engraved upon the case, and to be sure – why, what a dunderhead I am!”

Saul, who had been undergoing a torture of change – doubt and hope – watched the young man’s actions as he passed his hands behind his neck, and for a few moments seemed to be trying to unfasten something.

“That’s it,” he said, as he undid the clasp of a thin gold chain, and drew out chain and locket, both gold, and pressing a spring at either end, the locket flew open back and front, to display two daguerreotype heads. “Know them Mr – Mr – ”

“Hampton,” said the old lawyer, taking the locket, and examining it carefully, and looking long at the two faces before handing them to Doctor Lawrence. “What do you say to those?”

The Doctor examined the locket as carefully as his colleague, while Saul looked on with an intense interest as he waited for the next remark, and the claimant of the estate chirruped carelessly to the dog.

"As far as I can recollect them," said Doctor Lawrence, at length, "I should say these are the miniatures of Mr and Mrs George Harrington, but I only saw them once."

"Well," said the young man, smiling, as he held out his hand for the locket, "satisfactory?"

"Quite, sir," said the old lawyer, handing back the locket.

"Looks girlish," said its recipient, "but I always wear it round my neck. Shouldn't like to lose that. Now, gentlemen, any more questions to ask?"

"One more, sir," said the old lawyer. "My dear Gertrude Bellwood, may I ask you to leave us for a few minutes. You may have some orders to give."

Gertrude started to her feet, and was making for the door, when Saul rose to open it, but his rival was quicker, darting before him, and smiling at the girl as she passed out, more agitated and excited than she had ever felt before.

"Now, gentlemen, what's the next piece of cross-examination which this culprit is to bear?"

"I have – we have – but one more question to ask, sir," said the old lawyer. "It is in our instructions, drawn out by my old and esteemed client, a year before his death. If you can answer that to our satisfaction, I for one shall be perfectly satisfied."

"And I," said the doctor; then to himself, "as far as your being the right man is concerned."

"Very good, gentlemen," was the smiling reply; "let's see if I can oblige you."

The words were light, but there was a peculiar intensity in the speaker's eyes, and a slight twitching about the corners of his lips, which a close observer would have detected.

"Have you not some birth-mark about you?" said Doctor Lawrence.

"No, sir, as far as I am aware – none."

"No peculiar marks about your person?"

"I have the scar of a bullet-wound in the shoulder – the entrance and exit. I believe it went through my scalp."

"Scapular," said the doctor, smiling.

"Yes – the blade-bone."

"Anything else?"

"An ugly seam or ridge on the skull where I had a chop from an Indian axe; and a knot here in my right arm, where it was broken and mended again."

"Is that all, sir?"

"No; one other mark – a trifle done some time or another – here on my breast. Like to see it, gentlemen?"

"Ha!" ejaculated the old lawyer. "If you are Mr George Harrington, sir, you have the figure of a heart tattooed upon your breast – a heart transfixed by an arrow."

"That anything like it, gentlemen?" said the young man, unbuttoning his vest, and throwing open the flannel shirt he wore, to show, plainly marked upon his white skin, the figure described.

"Like it, sir? – yes," said the old lawyer. "Mr George Harrington, welcome home, sir, and I hope we may be the best of friends."

"And I add my congratulations, and the same wish, Mr George Harrington," said the doctor, shaking one hand as his colleague shook the other; "but," he added to himself, "as to the friendship, I have my doubts."

"And now it is my turn, Cousin George," said Saul Harrington, advancing with extended hand. "I apologise for playing the British bulldog to you, but you were a stranger, and you will be the last to blame me for showing a bold front in defence of your patrimony."

“To be sure, Cousin Saul. How are you, old fellow? Stop and let’s all dine together. No more business to-day, I hope. Let’s have a glass of wine – champagne – and, Cousin Saul, suppose you and I have a good long talk over a cigar.”

“We will,” said Saul, as they stood hand in hand, eye gazing into eye, and, singularly enough, with similar thoughts agitating each breast.

For the successor to the estate left by the original of the picture on the wall said to himself:

“If we were out in some parts of the West, Saul Harrington, any office would find it a bad spec to insure your life.”

And Saul thought:

“If this man had not come back, I was master here – of the house, of the money, and of – ”

He stopped and gazed hard across the room, for at that moment, looking flushed and handsome, Gertrude stood hesitating at the doorway, as if asking if she might come in.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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