

BRET HARTE

A WAIF OF
THE PLAINS

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A Waif of the Plains:

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CHAPTER I

A long level of dull gray that further away became a faint blue, with here and there darker patches that looked like water. At times an open space, blackened and burnt in an irregular circle, with a shred of newspaper, an old rag, or broken tin can lying in the ashes. Beyond these always a low dark line that seemed to sink into the ground at night, and rose again in the morning with the first light, but never otherwise changed its height and distance. A sense of always moving with some indefinite purpose, but of always returning at night to the same place—with the same surroundings, the same people, the same bedclothes, and the same awful black canopy dropped down from above. A chalky taste of dust on the mouth and lips, a gritty sense of earth on the fingers, and an all-pervading heat and smell of cattle.

This was “The Great Plains” as they seemed to two children from the hooded depth of an emigrant wagon, above the swaying heads of toiling oxen, in the summer of 1852.

It had appeared so to them for two weeks, always the same and always without the least sense to them of wonder or monotony.

When they viewed it from the road, walking beside the wagon, there was only the team itself added to the unvarying picture. One of the wagons bore on its canvas hood the inscription, in large black letters, "Off to California!" on the other "Root, Hog, or Die," but neither of them awoke in the minds of the children the faintest idea of playfulness or jocularly. Perhaps it was difficult to connect the serious men, who occasionally walked beside them and seemed to grow more taciturn and depressed as the day wore on, with this past effusive pleasantry.

Yet the impressions of the two children differed slightly. The eldest, a boy of eleven, was apparently new to the domestic habits and customs of a life to which the younger, a girl of seven, was evidently native and familiar. The food was coarse and less skillfully prepared than that to which he had been accustomed. There was a certain freedom and roughness in their intercourse, a simplicity that bordered almost on rudeness in their domestic arrangements, and a speech that was at times almost untranslatable to him. He slept in his clothes, wrapped up in blankets; he was conscious that in the matter of cleanliness he was left to himself to overcome the difficulties of finding water and towels. But it is doubtful if in his youthfulness it affected him more than a novelty. He ate and slept well, and found his life amusing. Only at times the rudeness of his companions, or, worse, an indifference that made him feel his dependency upon them, awoke a vague sense of some wrong that had been done to him which while it was voiceless to all others and even uneasily

put aside by himself, was still always slumbering in his childish consciousness.

To the party he was known as an orphan put on the train at "St. Jo" by some relative of his stepmother, to be delivered to another relative at Sacramento. As his stepmother had not even taken leave of him, but had entrusted his departure to the relative with whom he had been lately living, it was considered as an act of "riddance," and accepted as such by her party, and even vaguely acquiesced in by the boy himself. What consideration had been offered for his passage he did not know; he only remembered that he had been told "to make himself handy." This he had done cheerfully, if at times with the unskillfulness of a novice; but it was not a peculiar or a menial task in a company where all took part in manual labor, and where existence seemed to him to bear the charm of a prolonged picnic. Neither was he subjected to any difference of affection or treatment from Mrs. Silsbee, the mother of his little companion, and the wife of the leader of the train. Prematurely old, of ill-health, and harassed with cares, she had no time to waste in discriminating maternal tenderness for her daughter, but treated the children with equal and unbiased querulousness.

The rear wagon creaked, swayed, and rolled on slowly and heavily. The hoofs of the draft-oxen, occasionally striking in the dust with a dull report, sent little puffs like smoke on either side of the track. Within, the children were playing "keeping store." The little girl, as an opulent and extravagant customer,

was purchasing of the boy, who sat behind a counter improvised from a nail-keg and the front seat, most of the available contents of the wagon, either under their own names or an imaginary one as the moment suggested, and paying for them in the easy and liberal currency of dried beans and bits of paper. Change was given by the expeditious method of tearing the paper into smaller fragments. The diminution of stock was remedied by buying the same article over again under a different name. Nevertheless, in spite of these favorable commercial conditions, the market seemed dull.

“I can show you a fine quality of sheeting at four cents a yard, double width,” said the boy, rising and leaning on his fingers on the counter as he had seen the shopmen do. “All wool and will wash,” he added, with easy gravity.

“I can buy it cheaper at Jackson’s,” said the girl, with the intuitive duplicity of her bargaining sex.

“Very well,” said the boy. “I won’t play any more.”

“Who cares?” said the girl indifferently. The boy here promptly upset the counter; the rolled-up blanket which had deceitfully represented the desirable sheeting falling on the wagon floor. It apparently suggested a new idea to the former salesman. “I say! let’s play ‘damaged stock.’ See, I’ll tumble all the things down here right on top o’ the others, and sell ‘em for less than cost.”

The girl looked up. The suggestion was bold, bad, and momentarily attractive. But she only said “No,” apparently from

habit, picked up her doll, and the boy clambered to the front of the wagon. The incomplete episode terminated at once with that perfect forgetfulness, indifference, and irresponsibility common to all young animals. If either could have flown away or bounded off finally at that moment, they would have done so with no more concern for preliminary detail than a bird or squirrel. The wagon rolled steadily on. The boy could see that one of the teamsters had climbed up on the tail-board of the preceding vehicle. The other seemed to be walking in a dusty sleep.

“Kla’uns,” said the girl.

The boy, without turning his head, responded, “Susy.”

“Wot are you going to be?” said the girl.

“Goin’ to be?” repeated Clarence.

“When you is growed,” explained Susy.

Clarence hesitated. His settled determination had been to become a pirate, merciless yet discriminating. But reading in a bethumbed “Guide to the Plains” that morning of Fort Lamarie and Kit Carson, he had decided upon the career of a “scout,” as being more accessible and requiring less water. Yet, out of compassion for Susy’s possible ignorance, he said neither, and responded with the American boy’s modest conventionality, “President.” It was safe, required no embarrassing description, and had been approved by benevolent old gentlemen with their hands on his head.

“I’m goin’ to be a parson’s wife,” said Susy, “and keep hens, and have things giv’ to me. Baby clothes, and apples, and apple

sass—and melasses! and more baby clothes! and pork when you kill.”

She had thrown herself at the bottom of the wagon, with her back towards him and her doll in her lap. He could see the curve of her curly head, and beyond, her bare dimpled knees, which were raised, and over which she was trying to fold the hem of her brief skirt.

“I wouldn’t be a President’s wife,” she said presently.

“You couldn’t!”

“Could if I wanted to!”

“Couldn’t!”

“Could now!”

“Couldn’t!”

“Why?”

Finding it difficult to explain his convictions of her ineligibility, Clarence thought it equally crushing not to give any. There was a long silence. It was very hot and dusty. The wagon scarcely seemed to move. Clarence gazed at the vignette of the track behind them formed by the hood of the rear. Presently he rose and walked past her to the tail-board. “Goin’ to get down,” he said, putting his legs over.

“Maw says ‘No,’” said Susy.

Clarence did not reply, but dropped to the ground beside the slowly turning wheels. Without quickening his pace he could easily keep his hand on the tail-board.

“Kla’uns.”

He looked up.

“Take me.”

She had already clapped on her sun-bonnet and was standing at the edge of the tail-board, her little arms extended in such perfect confidence of being caught that the boy could not resist. He caught her cleverly. They halted a moment and let the lumbering vehicle move away from them, as it swayed from side to side as if laboring in a heavy sea. They remained motionless until it had reached nearly a hundred yards, and then, with a sudden half-real, half-assumed, but altogether delightful trepidation, ran forward and caught up with it again. This they repeated two or three times until both themselves and the excitement were exhausted, and they again plodded on hand in hand. Presently Clarence uttered a cry.

“My! Susy—look there!”

The rear wagon had once more slipped away from them a considerable distance. Between it and them, crossing its track, a most extraordinary creature had halted.

At first glance it seemed a dog—a discomfited, shameless, ownerless outcast of streets and byways, rather than an honest stray of some drover's train. It was so gaunt, so dusty, so greasy, so slouching, and so lazy! But as they looked at it more intently they saw that the grayish hair of its back had a bristly ridge, and there were great poisonous-looking dark blotches on its flanks, and that the slouch of its haunches was a peculiarity of its figure, and not the cowering of fear. As it lifted its suspicious head

towards them they could see that its thin lips, too short to cover its white teeth, were curled in a perpetual sneer.

“Here, doggie!” said Clarence excitedly. “Good dog! Come.”

Susy burst into a triumphant laugh. “Et tain’t no dog, silly; it’s er coyote.”

Clarence blushed. It wasn’t the first time the pioneer’s daughter had shown her superior knowledge. He said quickly, to hide his discomfiture, “I’ll ketch him, any way; he’s nothin’ mor’n a ki yi.”

“Ye can’t, tho,” said Susy, shaking her sun-bonnet. “He’s faster nor a hoss!”

Nevertheless, Clarence ran towards him, followed by Susy. When they had come within twenty feet of him, the lazy creature, without apparently the least effort, took two or three limping bounds to one side, and remained at the same distance as before. They repeated this onset three or four times with more or less excitement and hilarity, the animal evading them to one side, but never actually retreating before them. Finally, it occurred to them both that although they were not catching him they were not driving him away. The consequences of that thought were put into shape by Susy with round-eyed significance.

“Kla’uns, he bites.”

Clarence picked up a hard sun-baked clod, and, running forward, threw it at the coyote. It was a clever shot, and struck him on his slouching haunches. He snapped and gave a short snarling yelp, and vanished. Clarence returned with a victorious

air to his companion. But she was gazing intently in the opposite direction, and for the first time he discovered that the coyote had been leading them half round a circle.

“Kla’uns,” said Susy, with a hysterical little laugh.

“Well?”

“The wagon’s gone.”

Clarence started. It was true. Not only their wagon, but the whole train of oxen and teamsters had utterly disappeared, vanishing as completely as if they had been caught up in a whirlwind or engulfed in the earth! Even the low cloud of dust that usually marked their distant course by day was nowhere to be seen. The long level plain stretched before them to the setting sun, without a sign or trace of moving life or animation. That great blue crystal bowl, filled with dust and fire by day, with stars and darkness by night, which had always seemed to drop its rim round them everywhere and shut them in, seemed to them now to have been lifted to let the train pass out, and then closed down upon them forever.

CHAPTER II

Their first sensation was one of purely animal freedom.

They looked at each other with sparkling eyes and long silent breaths. But this spontaneous outburst of savage nature soon passed. Susy's little hand presently reached forward and clutched Clarence's jacket. The boy understood it, and said quickly,—

“They ain't gone far, and they'll stop as soon as they find us gone.”

They trotted on a little faster; the sun they had followed every day and the fresh wagon tracks being their unfailing guides; the keen, cool air of the plains, taking the place of that all-pervading dust and smell of the perspiring oxen, invigorating them with its breath.

“We ain't skeered a bit, are we?” said Susy.

“What's there to be afraid of?” said Clarence scornfully. He said this none the less strongly because he suddenly remembered that they had been often left alone in the wagon for hours without being looked after, and that their absence might not be noticed until the train stopped to encamp at dusk, two hours later. They were not running very fast, yet either they were more tired than they knew, or the air was thinner, for they both seemed to breathe quickly. Suddenly Clarence stopped.

“There they are now.”

He was pointing to a light cloud of dust in the far-off horizon,

from which the black hulk of a wagon emerged for a moment and was lost. But even as they gazed the cloud seemed to sink like a fairy mirage to the earth again, the whole train disappeared, and only the empty stretching track returned. They did not know that this seemingly flat and level plain was really undulatory, and that the vanished train had simply dipped below their view on some further slope even as it had once before. But they knew they were disappointed, and that disappointment revealed to them the fact that they had concealed it from each other. The girl was the first to succumb, and burst into a quick spasm of angry tears. That single act of weakness called out the boy's pride and strength. There was no longer an equality of suffering; he had become her protector; he felt himself responsible for both. Considering her no longer his equal, he was no longer frank with her.

"There's nothin' to boo-boo for," he said, with a half-affected brusqueness. "So quit, now! They'll stop in a minit, and send some one back for us. Shouldn't wonder if they're doin' it now."

But Susy, with feminine discrimination detecting the hollow ring in his voice, here threw herself upon him and began to beat him violently with her little fists. "They ain't! They ain't! They ain't. You know it! How dare you?" Then, exhausted with her struggles, she suddenly threw herself flat on the dry grass, shut her eyes tightly, and clutched at the stubble.

"Get up," said the boy, with a pale, determined face that seemed to have got much older.

"You leave me be," said Susy.

“Do you want me to go away and leave you?” asked the boy.

Susy opened one blue eye furtively in the secure depths of her sun-bonnet, and gazed at his changed face.

“Ye-e-s.”

He pretended to turn away, but really to look at the height of the sinking sun.

“Kla’uns!”

“Well?”

“Take me.”

She was holding up her hands. He lifted her gently in his arms, dropping her head over his shoulder. “Now,” he said cheerfully, “you keep a good lookout that way, and I this, and we’ll soon be there.”

The idea seemed to please her. After Clarence had stumbled on for a few moments, she said, “Do you see anything, Kla’uns?”

“Not yet.”

“No more don’t I.” This equality of perception apparently satisfied her. Presently she lay more limp in his arms. She was asleep.

The sun was sinking lower; it had already touched the edge of the horizon, and was level with his dazzled and straining eyes. At times it seemed to impede his eager search and task his vision. Haze and black spots floated across the horizon, and round wafers, like duplicates of the sun, glittered back from the dull surface of the plains. Then he resolved to look no more until he had counted fifty, a hundred, but always with the same result, the

return of the empty, unending plains—the disk growing redder as it neared the horizon, the fire it seemed to kindle as it sank, but nothing more.

Staggering under his burden, he tried to distract himself by fancying how the discovery of their absence would be made. He heard the listless, half-querulous discussion about the locality that regularly pervaded the nightly camp. He heard the discontented voice of Jake Silsbee as he halted beside the wagon, and said, “Come out o’ that now, you two, and mighty quick about it.” He heard the command harshly repeated. He saw the look of irritation on Silsbee’s dusty, bearded face, that followed his hurried glance into the empty wagon. He heard the query, “What’s gone o’ them limbs now?” handed from wagon to wagon. He heard a few oaths; Mrs. Silsbee’s high rasping voice, abuse of himself, the hurried and discontented detachment of a search party, Silsbee and one of the hired men, and vociferation and blame. Blame always for himself, the elder, who might have “known better!” A little fear, perhaps, but he could not fancy either pity or commiseration. Perhaps the thought upheld his pride; under the prospect of sympathy he might have broken down.

At last he stumbled, and stopped to keep himself from falling forward on his face. He could go no further; his breath was spent; he was dripping with perspiration; his legs were trembling under him; there was a roaring in his ears; round red disks of the sun were scattered everywhere around him like spots of blood. To

the right of the trail there seemed to be a slight mound where he could rest awhile, and yet keep his watchful survey of the horizon. But on reaching it he found that it was only a tangle of taller mesquite grass, into which he sank with his burden. Nevertheless, if useless as a point of vantage, it offered a soft couch for Susy, who seemed to have fallen quite naturally into her usual afternoon siesta, and in a measure it shielded her from a cold breeze that had sprung up from the west. Utterly exhausted himself, but not daring to yield to the torpor that seemed to be creeping over him, Clarence half sat, half knelt down beside her, supporting himself with one hand, and, partly hidden in the long grass, kept his straining eyes fixed on the lonely track.

The red disk was sinking lower. It seemed to have already crumbled away a part of the distance with its eating fires. As it sank still lower, it shot out long, luminous rays, diverging fan-like across the plain, as if, in the boy's excited fancy, it too were searching for the lost estrays. And as one long beam seemed to linger over his hiding-place, he even thought that it might serve as a guide to Silsbee and the other seekers, and was constrained to stagger to his feet, erect in its light. But it soon sank, and with it Clarence dropped back again to his crouching watch. Yet he knew that the daylight was still good for an hour, and with the withdrawal of that mystic sunset glory objects became even more distinct and sharply defined than at any other time. And with the merciful sheathing of that flaming sword which seemed to have swayed between him and the vanished train, his eyes already felt

a blessed relief.

CHAPTER III

With the setting of the sun an ominous silence fell. He could hear the low breathing of Susy, and even fancied he could hear the beating of his own heart in that oppressive hush of all nature. For the day's march had always been accompanied by the monotonous creaking of wheels and axles, and even the quiet of the night encampment had been always more or less broken by the movement of unquiet sleepers on the wagon beds, or the breathing of the cattle. But here there was neither sound nor motion. Susy's prattle, and even the sound of his own voice, would have broken the benumbing spell, but it was a part of his growing self-denial now that he refrained from waking her even by a whisper. She would awaken soon enough to thirst and hunger, perhaps, and then what was he to do? If that looked-for help would only come now—while she still slept. For it was part of his boyish fancy that if he could deliver her asleep and undemonstrative of fear and suffering, he would be less blameful, and she less mindful of her trouble. If it did not come—but he would not think of that yet! If she was thirsty meantime—well, it might rain, and there was always the dew which they used to brush off the morning grass; he would take off his shirt and catch it in that, like a shipwrecked mariner. It would be funny, and make her laugh. For himself he would not laugh; he felt he was getting very old and grown up in this loneliness.

It was getting darker—they should be looking into the wagons now. A new doubt began to assail him. Ought he not, now that he was rested, make the most of the remaining moments of daylight, and before the glow faded from the west, when he would no longer have any bearings to guide him? But there was always the risk of waking her!—to what? The fear of being confronted again with HER fear and of being unable to pacify her, at last decided him to remain. But he crept softly through the grass, and in the dust of the track traced the four points of the compass, as he could still determine them by the sunset light, with a large printed W to indicate the west! This boyish contrivance particularly pleased him. If he had only had a pole, a stick, or even a twig, on which to tie his handkerchief and erect it above the clump of mesquite as a signal to the searchers in case they should be overcome by fatigue or sleep, he would have been happy. But the plain was barren of brush or timber; he did not dream that this omission and the very unobtrusiveness of his hiding-place would be his salvation from a greater danger.

With the coming darkness the wind arose and swept the plain with a long-drawn sigh. This increased to a murmur, till presently the whole expanse—before sunk in awful silence—seemed to awake with vague complaints, incessant sounds, and low moanings. At times he thought he heard the halloaing of distant voices, at times it seemed as a whisper in his own ear. In the silence that followed each blast he fancied he could detect the creaking of the wagon, the dull thud of the oxen's hoofs,

or broken fragments of speech, blown and scattered even as he strained his ears to listen by the next gust. This tension of the ear began to confuse his brain, as his eyes had been previously dazzled by the sunlight, and a strange torpor began to steal over his faculties. Once or twice his head dropped.

He awoke with a start. A moving figure had suddenly uplifted itself between him and the horizon! It was not twenty yards away, so clearly outlined against the still luminous sky that it seemed even nearer. A human figure, but so disheveled, so fantastic, and yet so mean and puerile in its extravagance, that it seemed the outcome of a childish dream. It was a mounted figure, but so ludicrously disproportionate to the pony it bestrode, whose slim legs were stiffly buried in the dust in a breathless halt, that it might have been a straggler from some vulgar wandering circus. A tall hat, crownless and rimless, a castaway of civilization, surmounted by a turkey's feather, was on its head; over its shoulders hung a dirty tattered blanket that scarcely covered the two painted legs which seemed clothed in soiled yellow hose. In one hand it held a gun; the other was bent above its eyes in eager scrutiny of some distant point beyond and east of the spot where the children lay concealed. Presently, with a dozen quick noiseless strides of the pony's legs, the apparition moved to the right, its gaze still fixed on that mysterious part of the horizon. There was no mistaking it now! The painted Hebraic face, the large curved nose, the bony cheek, the broad mouth, the shadowed eyes, the straight long matted locks! It was an

Indian! Not the picturesque creature of Clarence's imagination, but still an Indian! The boy was uneasy, suspicious, antagonistic, but not afraid. He looked at the heavy animal face with the superiority of intelligence, at the half-naked figure with the conscious supremacy of dress, at the lower individuality with the contempt of a higher race. Yet a moment after, when the figure wheeled and disappeared towards the undulating west, a strange chill crept over him. Yet he did not know that in this puerile phantom and painted pigmy the awful majesty of Death had passed him by.

“Mamma!”

It was Susy's voice, struggling into consciousness. Perhaps she had been instinctively conscious of the boy's sudden fears.

“Hush!”

He had just turned to the objective point of the Indian's gaze. There WAS something! A dark line was moving along with the gathering darkness. For a moment he hardly dared to voice his thoughts even to himself. It was a following train overtaking them from the rear! And from the rapidity of its movements a train with horses, hurrying forward to evening camp. He had never dreamt of help from that quarter. This was what the Indian's keen eyes had been watching, and why he had so precipitately fled.

The strange train was now coming up at a round trot. It was evidently well appointed with five or six large wagons and several outriders. In half an hour it would be here. Yet he refrained from waking Susy, who had fallen asleep again; his old superstition of

securing her safety first being still uppermost. He took off his jacket to cover her shoulders, and rearranged her nest. Then he glanced again at the coming train. But for some unaccountable reason it had changed its direction, and instead of following the track that should have brought it to his side it had turned off to the left! In ten minutes it would pass abreast of him a mile and a half away! If he woke Susy now, he knew she would be helpless in her terror, and he could not carry her half that distance. He might rush to the train himself and return with help, but he would never leave her alone—in the darkness. Never! If she woke she would die of fright, perhaps, or wander blindly and aimlessly away. No! The train would pass and with it that hope of rescue. Something was in his throat, but he gulped it down and was quiet again albeit he shivered in the night wind.

The train was nearly abreast of him now. He ran out of the tall grass, waving his straw hat above his head in the faint hope of attracting attention. But he did not go far, for he found to his alarm that when he turned back again the clump of mesquite was scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the plain. This settled all question of his going. Even if he reached the train and returned with some one, how would he ever find her again in this desolate expanse?

He watched the train slowly pass—still mechanically, almost hopelessly, waving his hat as he ran up and down before the mesquite, as if he were waving a last farewell to his departing hope. Suddenly it appeared to him that three of the outriders who

were preceding the first wagon had changed their shape. They were no longer sharp, oblong, black blocks against the horizon but had become at first blurred and indistinct, then taller and narrower, until at last they stood out like exclamation points against the sky. He continued to wave his hat, they continued to grow taller and narrower. He understood it now—the three transformed blocks were the outriders coming towards him.

This is what he had seen—

[Drawing of three black blocks]

This is what he saw now—

!!!

He ran back to Susy to see if she still slept, for his foolish desire to have her saved unconsciously was stronger than ever now that safety seemed so near. She was still sleeping, although she had moved slightly. He ran to the front again.

The outriders had apparently halted. What were they doing? Why wouldn't they come on?

Suddenly a blinding flash of light seemed to burst from one of them. Away over his head something whistled like a rushing bird, and sped off invisible. They had fired a gun; they were signaling to him—Clarence—like a grown-up man. He would have given his life at that moment to have had a gun. But he could only wave his hat frantically.

One of the figures here bore away and impetuously darted forward again. He was coming nearer, powerful, gigantic, formidable, as he loomed through the darkness. All at once he

threw up his arm with a wild gesture to the others; and his voice, manly, frank, and assuring, came ringing before him.

“Hold up! Good God! It’s no Injun—it’s a child!”

In another moment he had reined up beside Clarence and leaned over him, bearded, handsome, powerful and protecting.

“Hallo! What’s all this? What are you doing here?”

“Lost from Mr. Silsbee’s train,” said Clarence, pointing to the darkened west.

“Lost?—how long?”

“About three hours. I thought they’d come back for us,” said Clarence apologetically to this big, kindly man.

“And you kalkilated to wait here for ‘em?”

“Yes, yes—I did—till I saw you.”

“Then why in thunder didn’t you light out straight for us, instead of hanging round here and drawing us out?”

The boy hung his head. He knew his reasons were unchanged, but all at once they seemed very foolish and unmanly to speak out.

“Only that we were on the keen jump for Injins,” continued the stranger, “we wouldn’t have seen you at all, and might hev shot you when we did. What possessed you to stay here?”

The boy was still silent. “Kla’uns,” said a faint, sleepy voice from the mesquite, “take me.” The rifle-shot had awakened Susy.

The stranger turned quickly towards the sound. Clarence started and recalled himself. “There,” he said bitterly, “you’ve done it now, you’ve wakened her! THAT’S why I stayed. I

couldn't carry her over there to you. I couldn't let her walk, for she'd be frightened. I wouldn't wake her up, for she'd be frightened, and I mightn't find her again. There!" He had made up his mind to be abused, but he was reckless now that she was safe.

The men glanced at each other. "Then," said the spokesman quietly, "you didn't strike out for us on account of your sister?"

"She ain't my sister," said Clarence quickly. "She's a little girl. She's Mrs. Silsbee's little girl. We were in the wagon and got down. It's my fault. I helped her down."

The three men reined their horses closely round him, leaning forward from their saddles, with their hands on their knees and their heads on one side. "Then," said the spokesman gravely, "you just reckoned to stay here, old man, and take your chances with her rather than run the risk of frightening or leaving her—though it was your one chance of life!"

"Yes," said the boy, scornful of this feeble, grown-up repetition.

"Come here."

The boy came doggedly forward. The man pushed back the well-worn straw hat from Clarence's forehead and looked into his lowering face. With his hand still on the boy's head he turned him round to the others, and said quietly,—

"Suthin of a pup, eh?"

"You bet," they responded.

The voice was not unkindly, although the speaker had thrown

his lower jaw forward as if to pronounce the word “pup” with a humorous suggestion of a mastiff. Before Clarence could make up his mind if the epithet was insulting or not, the man put out his stirrped foot, and, with a gesture of invitation, said, “Jump up.”

“But Susy,” said Clarence, drawing back.

“Look; she’s making up to Phil already.”

Clarence looked. Susy had crawled out of the mesquite, and with her sun-bonnet hanging down her back, her curls tossed around her face, still flushed with sleep, and Clarence’s jacket over her shoulders, was gazing up with grave satisfaction in the laughing eyes of one of the men who was with outstretched hands bending over her. Could he believe his senses? The terror-stricken, willful, unmanageable Susy, whom he would have translated unconsciously to safety without this terrible ordeal of being awakened to the loss of her home and parents at any sacrifice to himself—this ingenuous infant was absolutely throwing herself with every appearance of forgetfulness into the arms of the first new-comer! Yet his perception of this fact was accompanied by no sense of ingratitude. For her sake he felt relieved, and with a boyish smile of satisfaction and encouragement vaulted into the saddle before the stranger.

CHAPTER IV

The dash forward to the train, securely held in the saddle by the arms of their deliverers, was a secret joy to the children that seemed only too quickly over. The resistless gallop of the fiery mustangs, the rush of the night wind, the gathering darkness in which the distant wagons, now halted and facing them, looked like domed huts in the horizon—all these seemed but a delightful and fitting climax to the events of the day. In the sublime forgetfulness of youth, all they had gone through had left no embarrassing record behind it; they were willing to repeat their experiences on the morrow, confident of some equally happy end. And when Clarence, timidly reaching his hand towards the horse-hair reins lightly held by his companion, had them playfully yielded up to him by that hold and confident rider, the boy felt himself indeed a man.

But a greater surprise was in store for them. As they neared the wagons, now formed into a circle with a certain degree of military formality, they could see that the appointments of the strange party were larger and more liberal than their own, or indeed anything they had ever known of the kind. Forty or fifty horses were tethered within the circle, and the camp fires were already blazing. Before one of them a large tent was erected, and through the parted flaps could be seen a table actually spread with a white cloth. Was it a school feast, or was this their ordinary

household arrangement? Clarence and Susy thought of their own dinners, usually laid on bare boards beneath the sky, or under the low hood of the wagon in rainy weather, and marveled. And when they finally halted, and were lifted from their horses, and passed one wagon fitted up as a bedroom and another as a kitchen, they could only nudge each other with silent appreciation. But here again the difference already noted in the quality of the sensations of the two children was observable. Both were equally and agreeably surprised. But Susy's wonder was merely the sense of novelty and inexperience, and a slight disbelief in the actual necessity of what she saw; while Clarence, whether from some previous general experience or peculiar temperament, had the conviction that what he saw here was the usual custom, and what he had known with the Silsbees was the novelty. The feeling was attended with a slight sense of wounded pride for Susy, as if her enthusiasm had exposed her to ridicule.

The man who had carried him, and seemed to be the head of the party, had already preceded them to the tent, and presently reappeared with a lady with whom he had exchanged a dozen hurried words. They seemed to refer to him and Susy; but Clarence was too much preoccupied with the fact that the lady was pretty, that her clothes were neat and thoroughly clean, that her hair was tidy and not ruffled, and that, although she wore an apron, it was as clean as her gown, and even had ribbons on it, to listen to what was said. And when she ran eagerly forward, and with a fascinating smile lifted the astonished Susy in her arms,

Clarence, in his delight for his young charge, quite forgot that she had not noticed him. The bearded man, who seemed to be the lady's husband, evidently pointed out the omission, with some additions that Clarence could not catch; for after saying, with a pretty pout, "Well, why shouldn't he?" she came forward with the same dazzling smile, and laid her small and clean white hand upon his shoulder.

"And so you took good care of the dear little thing? She's such an angel, isn't she? and you must love her very much."

Clarence colored with delight. It was true it had never occurred to him to look at Susy in the light of a celestial visitant, and I fear he was just then more struck with the fair complimenter than the compliment to his companion, but he was pleased for her sake. He was not yet old enough to be conscious of the sex's belief in its irresistible domination over mankind at all ages, and that Johnny in his check apron would be always a hopeless conquest of Jeannette in her pinafore, and that he ought to have been in love with Susy.

Howbeit, the lady suddenly whisked her away to the recesses of her own wagon, to reappear later, washed, curled, and beribboned like a new doll, and Clarence was left alone with the husband and another of the party.

"Well, my boy, you haven't told me your name yet."

"Clarence, sir."

"So Susy calls you, but what else?"

"Clarence Brant."

“Any relation to Colonel Brant?” asked the second man carelessly.

“He was my father,” said the boy, brightening under this faint prospect of recognition in his loneliness.

The two men glanced at each other. The leader looked at the boy curiously, and said,—

“Are you the son of Colonel Brant, of Louisville?”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy, with a dim stirring of uneasiness in his heart. “But he’s dead now,” he added finally.

“Ah, when did he die?” said the man quickly.

“Oh, a long time ago. I don’t remember him much. I was very little,” said the boy, half apologetically.

“Ah, you don’t remember him?”

“No,” said Clarence shortly. He was beginning to fall back upon that certain dogged repetition which in sensitive children arises from their hopeless inability to express their deeper feelings. He also had an instinctive consciousness that this want of a knowledge of his father was part of that vague wrong that had been done him. It did not help his uneasiness that he could see that one of the two men, who turned away with a half-laugh, misunderstood or did not believe him.

“How did you come with the Silsbees?” asked the first man.

Clarence repeated mechanically, with a child’s distaste of practical details, how he had lived with an aunt at St. Jo, and how his stepmother had procured his passage with the Silsbees to California, where he was to meet his cousin. All this with a

lack of interest and abstraction that he was miserably conscious told against him, but he was yet helpless to resist.

The first man remained thoughtful, and then glanced at Clarence's sunburnt hands. Presently his large, good-humored smile returned.

"Well, I suppose you are hungry?"

"Yes," said Clarence shyly. "But—"

"But what?"

"I should like to wash myself a little," he returned hesitatingly, thinking of the clean tent, the clean lady, and Susy's ribbons.

"Certainly," said his friend, with a pleased look. "Come with me." Instead of leading Clarence to the battered tin basin and bar of yellow soap which had formed the toilet service of the Silsbee party, he brought the boy into one of the wagons, where there was a washstand, a china basin, and a cake of scented soap. Standing beside Clarence, he watched him perform his ablutions with an approving air which rather embarrassed his protegee. Presently he said, almost abruptly,—

"Do you remember your father's house at Louisville?"

"Yes, sir; but it was a long time ago."

Clarence remembered it as being very different from his home at St. Joseph's, but from some innate feeling of diffidence he would have shrunk from describing it in that way. He, however, said he thought it was a large house. Yet the modest answer only made his new friend look at him the more keenly.

"Your father was Colonel Hamilton Brant, of Louisville,

wasn't he?" he said, half-confidentially.

"Yes," said Clarence hopelessly.

"Well," said his friend cheerfully, as if dismissing an abstruse problem from his mind, "Let's go to supper."

When they reached the tent again, Clarence noticed that the supper was laid only for his host and wife and the second man—who was familiarly called "Harry," but who spoke of the former always as "Mr. and Mrs. Peyton"—while the remainder of the party, a dozen men, were at a second camp fire, and evidently enjoying themselves in a picturesque fashion. Had the boy been allowed to choose, he would have joined them, partly because it seemed more "manly," and partly that he dreaded a renewal of the questioning.

But here, Susy, sitting bolt upright on an extemporized high stool, happily diverted his attention by pointing to the empty chair beside her.

"Kla'uns," she said suddenly, with her usual clear and appalling frankness, "they is chickens, and hamanaigs, and hot biksquits, and lasses, and Mister Peyton says I kin have 'em all."

Clarence, who had begun suddenly to feel that he was responsible for Susy's deportment and was balefully conscious that she was holding her plated fork in her chubby fist by its middle, and, from his previous knowledge of her, was likely at any moment to plunge it into the dish before her, said softly,—

"Hush!"

"Yes, you shall, dear," said Mrs. Peyton, with tenderly

beaming assurance to Susy and a half-reproachful glance at the boy. "Eat what you like, darling."

"It's a fork," whispered the still uneasy Clarence, as Susy now seemed inclined to stir her bowl of milk with it.

"'Tain't, now, Kla'uns, it's only a split spoon," said Susy.

But Mrs. Peyton, in her rapt admiration, took small note of these irregularities, plying the child with food, forgetting her own meal, and only stopping at times to lift back the forward straying curls on Susy's shoulders. Mr. Peyton looked on gravely and contentedly. Suddenly the eyes of husband and wife met.

"She'd have been nearly as old as this, John," said Mrs. Peyton, in a faint voice.

John Peyton nodded without speaking, and turned his eyes away into the gathering darkness. The man "Harry" also looked abstractedly at his plate, as if he was saying grace. Clarence wondered who "she" was, and why two little tears dropped from Mrs. Peyton's lashes into Susy's milk, and whether Susy might not violently object to it. He did not know until later that the Peytons had lost their only child, and Susy comfortably drained this mingled cup of a mother's grief and tenderness without suspicion.

"I suppose we'll come up with their train early tomorrow, if some of them don't find us to-night," said Mrs. Peyton, with a long sigh and a regretful glance at Susy. "Perhaps we might travel together for a little while," she added timidly.

Harry laughed, and Mr. Peyton replied gravely, "I am afraid

we wouldn't travel with them, even for company's sake; and," he added, in a lower and graver voice, "it's rather odd the search party hasn't come upon us yet, though I'm keeping Pete and Hank patrolling the trail to meet them."

"It's heartless—so it is!" said Mrs. Peyton, with sudden indignation. "It would be all very well if it was only this boy, who can take care of himself; but to be so careless of a mere baby like this, it's shameful!"

For the first time Clarence tasted the cruelty of discrimination. All the more keenly that he was beginning to worship, after his boyish fashion, this sweet-faced, clean, and tender-hearted woman. Perhaps Mr. Peyton noticed it, for he came quietly to his aid.

"Maybe they knew better than we in what careful hands they had left her," he said, with a cheerful nod towards Clarence. "And, again, they may have been fooled as we were by Injin signs and left the straight road."

This suggestion instantly recalled to Clarence his vision in the mesquite. Should he dare tell them? Would they believe him, or would they laugh at him before her? He hesitated, and at last resolved to tell it privately to the husband. When the meal was ended, and he was made happy by Mrs. Peyton's laughing acceptance of his offer to help her clear the table and wash the dishes, they all gathered comfortably in front of the tent before the large camp fire. At the other fire the rest of the party were playing cards and laughing, but Clarence no longer cared to join

them. He was quite tranquil in the maternal propinquity of his hostess, albeit a little uneasy as to his reticence about the Indian.

“Kla’uns,” said Susy, relieving a momentary pause, in her highest voice, “knows how to speak. Speak, Kla’uns!”

It appearing from Clarence’s blushing explanation that this gift was not the ordinary faculty of speech, but a capacity to recite verse, he was politely pressed by the company for a performance.

“Speak ‘em, Kla’uns, the boy what stood unto the burnin’ deck, and said, ‘The boy, oh, where was he?’” said Susy, comfortably lying down on Mrs. Peyton’s lap, and contemplating her bare knees in the air. “It’s ‘bout a boy,” she added confidentially to Mrs. Peyton, “whose father wouldn’t never, never stay with him on a burnin’ ship, though he said, ‘Stay, father, stay,’ ever so much.”

With this clear, lucid, and perfectly satisfactory explanation of Mrs. Hemans’s “Casabianca,” Clarence began. Unfortunately, his actual rendering of this popular school performance was more an effort of memory than anything else, and was illustrated by those wooden gestures which a Western schoolmaster had taught him. He described the flames that “roared around him,” by indicating with his hand a perfect circle, of which he was the axis; he adjured his father, the late Admiral Casabianca, by clasping his hands before his chin, as if wanting to be manacled in an attitude which he was miserably conscious was unlike anything he himself had ever felt or seen before; he described that father “faint in death below,” and “the flag on high,” with

one single motion. Yet something that the verses had kindled in his active imagination, perhaps, rather than an illustration of the verses themselves, at times brightened his gray eyes, became tremulous in his youthful voice, and I fear occasionally incoherent on his lips. At times, when not conscious of his affected art, the plain and all upon it seemed to him to slip away into the night, the blazing camp fire at his feet to wrap him in a fateful glory, and a vague devotion to something—he knew not what—so possessed him that he communicated it, and probably some of his own youthful delight in extravagant voice, to his hearers, until, when he ceased with a glowing face, he was surprised to find that the card players had deserted their camp fires and gathered round the tent.

CHAPTER V

“You didn’t say ‘Stay, father, stay,’ enough, Kla’uns,” said Susy critically. Then suddenly starting upright in Mrs. Peyton’s lap, she continued rapidly, “I kin dance. And sing. I kin dance High Jambooree.”

“What’s High Jambooree, dear?” asked Mrs. Peyton.

“You’ll see. Lemme down.” And Susy slipped to the ground.

The dance of High Jambooree, evidently of remote mystical African origin, appeared to consist of three small skips to the right and then to the left, accompanied by the holding up of very short skirts, incessant “teetering” on the toes of small feet, the exhibition of much bare knee and stocking, and a gurgling accompaniment of childish laughter. Vehemently applauded, it left the little performer breathless, but invincible and ready for fresh conquest.

“I kin sing, too,” she gasped hurriedly, as if unwilling that the applause should lapse. “I kin sing. Oh, dear! Kla’uns,” piteously, “WHAT is it I sing?”

“Ben Bolt,” suggested Clarence.

“Oh, yes. Oh, don’t you remember sweet Alers Ben Bolt?” began Susy, in the same breath and the wrong key. “Sweet Alers, with hair so brown, who wept with delight when you giv’d her a smile, and—” with knitted brows and appealing recitative, “what’s er rest of it, Kla’uns?”

“Who trembled with fear at your frown?” prompted Clarence.

“Who trembled with fear at my frown?” shrilled Susy. “I forget er rest. Wait! I kin sing—”

“Praise God,” suggested Clarence.

“Yes.” Here Susy, a regular attendant in camp and prayer-meetings, was on firmer ground.

Promptly lifting her high treble, yet with a certain acquired deliberation, she began, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.” At the end of the second line the whispering and laughing ceased. A deep voice to the right, that of the champion poker player, suddenly rose on the swell of the third line. He was instantly followed by a dozen ringing voices, and by the time the last line was reached it was given with a full chorus, in which the dull chant of teamsters and drivers mingled with the soprano of Mrs. Peyton and Susy’s childish treble. Again and again it was repeated, with forgetful eyes and abstracted faces, rising and falling with the night wind and the leap and gleam of the camp fires, and fading again like them in the immeasurable mystery of the darkened plain.

In the deep and embarrassing silence that followed, at last the party hesitatingly broke up, Mrs. Peyton retiring with Susy after offering the child to Clarence for a perfunctory “good-night” kiss, an unusual proceeding, which somewhat astonished them both—and Clarence found himself near Mr. Peyton.

“I think,” said Clarence timidly, “I saw an Injin to-day.”

Mr. Peyton bent down towards him. “An Injin—where?” he

asked quickly, with the same look of doubting interrogatory with which he had received Clarence's name and parentage.

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