BRET HARTE

CLARENCE

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Harte B.

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Содержание

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PART I

CHAPTER I

As Clarence Brant, President of the Robles Land Company, and husband of the rich widow of John Peyton, of the Robles Ranche, mingled with the outgoing audience of the Cosmopolitan Theatre, at San Francisco, he elicited the usual smiling nods and recognition due to his good looks and good fortune. But as he hurriedly slipped through the still lingering winter's rain into the smart coupe that was awaiting him, and gave the order "Home," the word struck him with a peculiarly ironical significance. His home was a handsome one, and lacked nothing in appointment and comfort, but he had gone to the theatre to evade its hollow loneliness. Nor was it because his wife was not there, for he had a miserable consciousness that her temporary absence had nothing to do with his homelessness. The distraction of the theatre over, that dull, vague, but aching sense of loneliness which was daily growing upon him returned with greater vigor.

He leaned back in the coupe and gloomily reflected.

He had been married scarcely a year, yet even in the illusions of the honeymoon the woman, older than himself, and the widow of his old patron, had half unconsciously reasserted herself, and slipped back into the domination of her old position. It was at first pleasant enough,—this half-maternal protectorate which is apt to mingle even with the affections of younger women,—and Clarence, in his easy, half-feminine intuition of the sex, yielded, as the strong are apt to yield, through the very consciousness of their own superiority. But this is a quality the weaker are not apt to recognize, and the woman who has once tasted equal power with her husband not only does not easily relegate it, but even makes its continuance a test of the affections. The usual triumphant feminine conclusion, "Then you no longer love me," had in Clarence's brief experience gone even further and reached its inscrutable climax, "Then I no longer love you," although shown only in a momentary hardening of the eye and voice. And added to this was his sudden, but confused remembrance that he had seen that eye and heard that voice in marital altercation during Judge Peyton's life, and that he himself, her boy partisan, had sympathized with her. Yet, strange to say, this had given him more pain than her occasional other reversions to the past—to her old suspicious of him when he was a youthful protege of her husband and a presumed suitor of her adopted daughter Susy. High natures are more apt to forgive wrong done to themselves than any abstract injustice. And her capricious tyranny over her dependents and servants, or an unreasoning enmity to a neighbor or friend, outraged his finer sense more than her own misconception of himself. Nor did he dream that this was a thing most women seldom understand, or, understanding, ever forgive.

The coupe rattled over the stones or swirled through the muddy pools of the main thoroughfares. Newspaper and telegraphic offices were still brilliantly lit, and crowds were gathered among the bulletin boards. He knew that news had arrived from Washington that evening of the first active outbreaks of secession, and that the city was breathless with excitement. Had he not just come from the theatre, where certain insignificant allusions in the play had been suddenly caught up and cheered or hissed by hitherto unknown partisans, to the dumb astonishment of a majority of the audience comfortably settled to money-getting and their own affairs alone? Had he not applauded, albeit half-scornfully, the pretty actress—his old playmate Susy—who had audaciously and all incongruously waved the American flag in their faces? Yes! he had known it; had lived for the last few weeks in

an atmosphere electrically surcharged with it—and yet it had chiefly affected him in his personal homelessness. For his wife was a Southerner, a born slaveholder, and a secessionist, whose noted prejudices to the North had even outrun her late husband's politics. At first the piquancy and recklessness of her opinionative speech amused him as part of her characteristic flavor, or as a lingering youthfulness which the maturer intellect always pardons. He had never taken her politics seriously—why should he? With her head on his shoulder he had listened to her extravagant diatribes against the North. He had forgiven her outrageous indictment of his caste and his associates for the sake of the imperious but handsome lips that uttered it. But when he was compelled to listen to her words echoed and repeated by her friends and family; when he found that with the clannishness of her race she had drawn closer to them in this controversy,—that she depended upon them for her intelligence and information rather than upon him,—he had awakened to the reality of his situation. He had borne the allusions of her brother, whose old scorn for his dependent childhood had been embittered by his sister's marriage and was now scarcely concealed. Yet, while he had never altered his own political faith and social creed in this antagonistic atmosphere, he had often wondered, with his old conscientiousness and characteristic self-abnegation, whether his own political convictions were not merely a revulsion from his domestic tyranny and alien surroundings.

In the midst of this gloomy retrospect the coupe stopped with a jerk before his own house. The door was quickly opened by a servant, who appeared to be awaiting him.

"Some one to see you in the library, sir," said the man, "and"—He hesitated and looked towards the coupe.

"Well?" said Clarence impatiently.

"He said, sir, as how you were not to send away the carriage."

"Indeed, and who is it?" demanded Clarence sharply.

"Mr. Hooker. He said I was to say Jim Hooker."

The momentary annoyance in Clarence's face changed to a look of reflective curiosity.

"He said he knew you were at the theatre, and he would wait until you came home," continued the man, dubiously watching his master's face. "He don't know you've come in, sir, and—and I can easily get rid of him."

"No matter now. I'll see him, and," added Clarence, with a faint smile, "let the carriage wait."

Yet, as he turned towards the library he was by no means certain that an interview with the old associate of his boyhood under Judge Peyton's guardianship would divert his mind. Yet he let no trace of his doubts nor of his past gloom show in his face as he entered the room.

Mr. Hooker was apparently examining the elegant furniture and luxurious accommodation with his usual resentful enviousness. Clarence had got a "soft thing." That it was more or less the result of his "artfulness," and that he was unduly "puffed up" by it, was, in Hooker's characteristic reasoning, equally clear. As his host smilingly advanced with outstretched hand, Mr. Hooker's efforts to assume a proper abstraction of manner and contemptuous indifference to Clarence's surroundings which should wound his vanity ended in his lolling back at full length in the chair with his eyes on the ceiling. But, remembering suddenly that he was really the bearer of a message to Clarence, it struck him that his supine position was, from a theatrical view-point, infelicitous. In his experiences of the stage he had never delivered a message in that way. He rose awkwardly to his feet.

"It was so good of you to wait," said Clarence courteously.

"Saw you in the theatre," said Hooker brusquely. "Third row in parquet. Susy said it was you, and had suthin' to say to you. Suthin' you ought to know," he continued, with a slight return of his old mystery of manner which Clarence so well remembered. "You saw HER—she fetched the house with that flag business, eh? She knows which way the cat is going to jump, you bet. I tell you, for all the blowing of these secessionists, the Union's goin' to pay! Yes, sir!" He stopped, glanced round the handsome room, and added darkly, "Mebbee better than this."

With the memory of Hooker's characteristic fondness for mystery still in his mind, Clarence overlooked the innuendo, and said smilingly,—

"Why didn't you bring Mrs. Hooker here? I should have been honored with her company."

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly at this seeming levity.

"Never goes out after a performance. Nervous exhaustion. Left her at our rooms in Market Street. We can drive there in ten minutes. That's why I asked to have the carriage wait."

Clarence hesitated. Without caring in the least to renew the acquaintance of his old playmate and sweetheart, a meeting that night in some vague way suggested to him a providential diversion. Nor was he deceived by any gravity in the message. With his remembrance of Susy's theatrical tendencies, he was quite prepared for any capricious futile extravagance.

"You are sure we will not disturb her?" he said politely.

"No."

Clarence led the way to the carriage. If Mr. Hooker expected him during the journey to try to divine the purport of Susy's message he was disappointed. His companion did not allude to it. Possibly looking upon it as a combined theatrical performance, Clarence preferred to wait for Susy as the better actor. The carriage rolled rapidly through the now deserted streets, and at last, under the directions of Mr. Hooker, who was leaning half out of the window, it drew up at a middle-class restaurant, above whose still lit and steaming windows were some ostentatiously public apartments, accessible from a side entrance. As they ascended the staircase together, it became evident that Mr. Hooker was scarcely more at his ease in the character of host than he had been as guest. He stared gloomily at a descending visitor, grunted audibly at a waiter in the passage, and stopped before a door, where a recently deposited tray displayed the half-eaten carcase of a fowl, an empty champagne bottle, two half-filled glasses, and a faded bouquet. The whole passage was redolent with a singular blending of damp cooking, stale cigarette smoke, and patchouli.

Putting the tray aside with his foot, Mr. Hooker opened the door hesitatingly and peered into the room, muttered a few indistinct words, which were followed by a rapid rustling of skirts, and then, with his hand still on the door-knob, turning to Clarence, who had discreetly halted on the threshold, flung the door open theatrically and bade him enter.

"She is somewhere in the suite," he added, with a large wave of the hand towards a door that was still oscillating. "Be here in a minit."

Clarence took in the apartment with a quiet glance. Its furniture had the frayed and discolored splendors of a public parlor which had been privately used and maltreated; there were stains in the large medallioned carpet; the gilded veneer had been chipped from a heavy centre table, showing the rough, white deal beneath, which gave it the appearance of a stage "property;" the walls, paneled with gilt-framed mirrors, reflected every domestic detail or private relaxation with shameless publicity. A damp waterproof, shawl, and open newspaper were lying across the once brilliant sofa; a powder-puff, a plate of fruit, and a play-book were on the centre table, and on the marble-topped sideboard was Mr. Hooker's second-best hat, with a soiled collar, evidently but lately exchanged for the one he had on, peeping over its brim. The whole apartment seemed to mingle the furtive disclosures of the dressing-room with the open ostentations of the stage, with even a slight suggestion of the auditorium in a few scattered programmes on the floor and chairs.

The inner door opened again with a slight theatrical start, and Susy, in an elaborate dressing-gown, moved languidly into the room. She apparently had not had time to change her underskirt, for there was the dust of the stage on its delicate lace edging, as she threw herself into an armchair and crossed her pretty slippered feet before her. Her face was pale, its pallor incautiously increased by powder; and as Clarence looked at its still youthful, charming outline, he was not perhaps sorry that the exquisite pink and white skin beneath, which he had once kissed, was hidden from that awakened recollection. Yet there was little trace of the girlish Susy in the pretty, but prematurely jaded, actress before him, and he felt momentarily relieved. It was her youth and freshness appealing to his own

youth and imagination that he had loved—not HER. Yet as she greeted him with a slight exaggeration of glance, voice, and manner, he remembered that even as a girl she was an actress.

Nothing of this, however, was in his voice and manner as he gently thanked her for the opportunity of meeting her again. And he was frank, for the diversion he had expected he had found; he even was conscious of thinking more kindly of his wife who had supplanted her.

"I told Jim he must fetch you if he had to carry you," she said, striking the palm of her hand with her fan, and glancing at her husband. "I reckon he guessed WHY, though I didn't tell him—I don't tell Jim EVERYTHING."

Here Jim rose, and looking at his watch, "guessed he'd run over to the Lick House and get some cigars." If he was acting upon some hint from his wife, his simulation was so badly done that Clarence felt his first sense of uneasiness. But as Hooker closed the door awkwardly and unostentatiously behind him, Clarence smilingly said he had waited to hear the message from her own lips.

"Jim only knows what he's heard outside: the talk of men, you know,—and he hears a good deal of that—more, perhaps, than YOU do. It was that which put me up to finding out the truth. And I didn't rest till I did. I'm not to be fooled, Clarence,—you don't mind my calling you Clarence now we're both married and done for,—and I'm not the kind to be fooled by anybody from the Cow counties—and that's the Robles Ranche. I'm a Southern woman myself from Missouri, but I'm for the Union first, last, and all the time, and I call myself a match for any lazy, dawdling, lash-swinging slaveholder and slaveholderess—whether they're mixed blood, Heaven only knows, or what—or their friends or relations, or the dirty half-Spanish grandees and their mixed half-nigger peons who truckle to them. You bet!"

His blood had stirred quickly at the mention of the Robles Ranche, but the rest of Susy's speech was too much in the vein of her old extravagance to touch him seriously. He found himself only considering how strange it was that the old petulance and impulsiveness of her girlhood were actually bringing back with them her pink cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"You surely didn't ask Jim to bring me here," he said smilingly, "to tell me that Mrs. Peyton"—he corrected himself hastily as a malicious sparkle came into Susy's blue eyes—"that my wife was a Southern woman, and probably sympathized with her class? Well, I don't know that I should blame her for that any more than she should blame me for being a Northern man and a Unionist."

"And she doesn't blame you?" asked Susy sneeringly.

The color came slightly to Clarence's cheek, but before he could reply the actress added,—

"No, she prefers to use you!"

"I don't think I understand you," said Clarence, rising coldly.

"No, you don't understand HER!" retorted Susy sharply. "Look here, Clarence Brant, you're right; I didn't ask you here to tell you—what you and everybody knows—that your wife is a Southerner. I didn't ask you here to tell you what everybody suspects—that she turns you round her little finger. But I did ask you here to tell you what nobody, not even you, suspects—but what I know!—and that is that she's a TRAITOR—and more, a SPY!—and that I've only got to say the word, or send that man Jim to say the word, to have her dragged out of her Copperhead den at Robles Ranche and shut up in Fort Alcatraz this very night!"

Still with the pink glowing in her rounding cheek, and eyes snapping like splintered sapphires, she rose to her feet, with her pretty shoulders lifted, her small hands and white teeth both tightly clenched, and took a step towards him. Even in her attitude there was a reminiscence of her willful childhood, although still blended with the provincial actress whom he had seen on the stage only an hour ago. Thoroughly alarmed at her threat, in his efforts to conceal his feelings he was not above a weak retaliation. Stepping back, he affected to regard her with a critical admiration that was only half simulated, and said with a smile,—

"Very well done—but you have forgotten the flag."

She did not flinch. Rather accepting the sarcasm as a tribute to her art, she went on with increasing exaggeration: “No, it is YOU who have forgotten the flag—forgotten your country, your people, your manhood—everything for that high-toned, double-dyed old spy and traitress! For while you are standing here, your wife is gathering under her roof at Robles a gang of spies and traitors like herself—secession leaders and their bloated, drunken ‘chivalry’! Yes, you may smile your superior smile, but I tell you, Clarence Brant, that with all your smartness and book learning you know no more of what goes on around you than a child. But others do! This conspiracy is known to the government, the Federal officers have been warned; General Sumner has been sent out here—and his first act was to change the command at Fort Alcatraz, and send your wife’s Southern friend—Captain Pinckney—to the right about! Yes—everything is known but ONE thing, and that is WHERE and HOW this precious crew meet! That I alone know, and that I’ve told you!”

“And I suppose,” said Clarence, with an unchanged smile, “that this valuable information came from your husband—my old friend, Jim Hooker?”

“No,” she answered sharply, “it comes from Cencho—one of your own peons—who is more true to you and the old Rancho than YOU have ever been. He saw what was going on, and came to me, to warn you!”

“But why not to me directly?” asked Clarence, with affected incredulity.

“Ask him!” she said viciously. “Perhaps he didn’t want to warn the master against the mistress. Perhaps he thought WE are still friends. Perhaps”—she hesitated with a lower voice and a forced smile—“perhaps he used to see us together in the old times.”

“Very likely,” said Clarence quietly. “And for the sake of those old times, Susy,” he went on, with a singular gentleness that was quite distinct from his paling face and set eyes, “I am going to forget all that you have just said of me and mine, in all the old willfulness and impatience that I see you still keep—with all your old prettiness.” He took his hat from the table and gravely held out his hand.

She was frightened for a moment with his impassive abstraction. In the old days she had known it—had believed it was his dogged “obstinacy”—but she knew the hopelessness of opposing it. Yet with feminine persistency she again threw herself against it, as against a wall.

“You don’t believe me! Well, go and see for yourself. They are at Robles NOW. If you catch the early morning stage at Santa Clara you will come upon them before they disperse. Dare you try it?”

“Whatever I do,” he returned smilingly, “I shall always be grateful to you for giving me this opportunity of seeing you again AS YOU WERE. Make my excuses to your husband. Good-night.”

“Clarence!”

But he had already closed the door behind him. His face did not relax its expression nor change as he looked again at the tray with its broken viands before the door, the worn, stained hall carpet, or the waiter who shuffled past him. He was apparently as critically conscious of them and of the close odors of the hall, and the atmosphere of listless decay and faded extravagance around him, as before the interview. But if the woman he had just parted from had watched him she would have supposed he still utterly disbelieved her story. Yet he was conscious that all that he saw was a part of his degradation, for he had believed every word she had uttered. Through all her extravagance, envy, and revengefulness he saw the central truth—that he had been deceived—not by his wife, but by himself! He had suspected all this before. This was what had been really troubling him—this was what he had put aside, rather than his faith, not in her, but in his ideal. He remembered letters that had passed between her and Captain Pinckney—letters that she had openly sent to notorious Southern leaders; her nervous anxiety to remain at the Rancho; the innuendoes and significant glances of friends which he had put aside—as he had this woman’s message! Susy had told him nothing new of his wife—but the truth of HIMSELF! And the revelation came from people who he was conscious were the inferiors of himself and his wife. To an independent, proud, and self-made man it was the culminating stroke.

In the same abstracted voice he told the coachman to drive home. The return seemed interminable—though he never shifted his position. Yet when he drew up at his own door and looked at his watch he found he had been absent only half an hour. Only half an hour! As he entered the house he turned with the same abstraction towards a mirror in the hall, as if he expected to see some outward and visible change in himself in that time. Dismissing his servants to bed, he went into his dressing-room, completely changed his attire, put on a pair of long riding-boots, and throwing a serape over his shoulders, paused a moment, took a pair of small "Derringer" pistols from a box, put them in his pockets, and then slipped cautiously down the staircase. A lack of confidence in his own domestics had invaded him for the first time. The lights were out. He silently opened the door and was in the street.

He walked hastily a few squares to a livery stable whose proprietor he knew. His first inquiry was for one "Redskin," a particular horse; the second for its proprietor. Happily both were in. The proprietor asked no question of a customer of Clarence's condition. The horse, half Spanish, powerful and irascible, was quickly saddled. As Clarence mounted, the man in an impulse of sociability said,—

"Saw you at the theatre to-night, sir."

"Ah," returned Clarence, quietly gathering up the reins.

"Rather a smart trick of that woman with the flag," he went on tentatively. Then, with a possible doubt of his customer's politics, he added with a forced smile, "I reckon it's all party fuss, though; there ain't any real danger."

But fast as Clarence might ride the words lingered in his ears. He saw through the man's hesitation; he, too, had probably heard that Clarence Brant weakly sympathized with his wife's sentiments, and dared not speak fully. And he understood the cowardly suggestion that there was "no real danger." It had been Clarence's one fallacy. He had believed the public excitement was only a temporary outbreak of partisan feeling, soon to subside. Even now he was conscious that he was less doubtful of the integrity of the Union than of his own household. It was not the devotion of the patriot, but the indignation of an outraged husband, that was spurring him on.

He knew that if he reached Woodville by five o'clock he could get ferried across the bay at the Embarcadero, and catch the down coach to Fair Plains, whence he could ride to the Rancho. As the coach did not connect directly with San Francisco, the chance of his surprising them was greater. Once clear of the city outskirts, he bullied Redskin into irascible speed, and plunged into the rainy darkness of the highroad. The way was familiar. For a while he was content to feel the buffeting, caused by his rapid pace, of wind and rain against his depressed head and shoulders in a sheer brutal sense of opposition and power, or to relieve his pent-up excitement by dashing through overflowed gullies in the road or across the quaggy, sodden edges of meadowland, until he had controlled Redskin's rebellious extravagance into a long steady stride. Then he raised his head and straightened himself on the saddle, to think. But to no purpose. He had no plan; everything would depend upon the situation; the thought of forestalling any action of the conspirators, by warning or calling in the aid of the authorities, for an instant crossed his mind, but was as instantly dismissed. He had but an instinct—to see with his own eyes what his reason told him was true. Day was breaking through drifting scud and pewter-colored clouds as he reached Woodville ferry, checkered with splashes of the soil and the spume of his horse, from whose neck and flanks the sweat rolled like lather. Yet he was not conscious how intent had been his purpose until he felt a sudden instinctive shock on seeing that the ferryboat was gone. For an instant his wonderful self-possession abandoned him; he could only gaze vacantly at the leaden-colored bay, without a thought or expedient. But in another moment he saw that the boat was returning from the distance. Had he lost his only chance? He glanced hurriedly at his watch; he had come more quickly than he imagined; there would still be time. He beckoned impatiently to the ferryman; the boat—a ship's pinnace, with two men in it—crept in with exasperating slowness. At last the two rowers suddenly leaped ashore.

"Ye might have come before, with the other passenger. We don't reckon to run lightnin' trips on this ferry."

But Clarence was himself again. "Twenty dollars for two more oars in that boat," he said quietly, "and fifty if you get me over in time to catch the down stage."

The man glanced at Clarence's eyes. "Run up and rouse out Jake and Sam," he said to the other boatman; then more leisurely, gazing at his customer's travel-stained equipment, he said, "There must have been a heap o' passengers got left by last night's boat. You're the second man that took this route in a hurry."

At any other time the coincidence might have struck Clarence. But he only answered curtly, "Unless we are under way in ten minutes you will find I am NOT the second man, and that our bargain's off."

But here two men emerged from the shanty beside the ferryhouse, and tumbled sleepily into the boat. Clarence seized an extra pair of sculls that were standing against the shed, and threw them into the stern. "I don't mind taking a hand myself for exercise," he said quietly.

The ferryman glanced again at Clarence's travel-worn figure and determined eyes with mingled approval and surprise. He lingered a moment with his oars lifted, looking at his passenger. "It ain't no business o' mine, young man," he said deliberately, "but I reckon you understand me when I say that I've just taken another man over there."

"I do," said Clarence impatiently.

"And you still want to go?"

"Certainly," replied Clarence, with a cold stare, taking up his oars.

The man shrugged his shoulders, bent himself for the stroke, and the boat sprung forward. The others rowed strongly and rapidly, the tough ashen blades springing like steel from the water, the heavy boat seeming to leap in successive bounds until they were fairly beyond the curving inshore current and clearing the placid, misty surface of the bay. Clarence did not speak, but bent abstractedly over his oar; the ferryman and his crew rowed in equal panting silence; a few startled ducks whirred before them, but dropped again to rest. In half an hour they were at the Embarcadero. The time was fairly up. Clarence's eyes were eagerly bent for the first appearance of the stage-coach around the little promontory; the ferryman was as eagerly scanning the bare, empty street of the still sleeping settlement.

"I don't see him anywhere," said the ferryman with a glance, half of astonishment and half of curiosity, at his solitary passenger.

"See whom?" asked Clarence carelessly, as he handed the man his promised fee.

"The other man I ferried over to catch the stage. He must have gone on without waiting. You're in luck, young fellow!"

"I don't understand you," said Clarence impatiently. "What has your previous passenger to do with me?"

"Well, I reckon you know best. He's the kind of man, gin'rally speaking, that other men, in a pow'ful hurry, don't care to meet—and, az a rule, don't FOLLER arter. It's gin'rally the other way."

"What do you mean?" inquired Clarence sternly. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"The Chief of Police of San Francisco!"

CHAPTER II

The laugh that instinctively broke from Clarence's lips was so sincere and unaffected that the man was disconcerted, and at last joined in it, a little shamefacedly. The grotesque blunder of being taken as a fugitive from justice relieved Clarence's mind from its acute tension,—he was momentarily diverted,—and it was not until the boatman had departed, and he was again alone, that it seemed to have any collateral significance. Then an uneasy recollection of Susy's threat that she had the power to put his wife in Fort Alcatraz came across him. Could she have already warned the municipal authorities and this man? But he quickly remembered that any action from such a warning could only have been taken by the United States Marshal, and not by a civic official, and dismissed the idea.

Nevertheless, when the stage with its half-spent lamps still burning dimly against the morning light swept round the curve and rolled heavily up to the rude shanty which served as coach-office, he became watchful. A single yawning individual in its doorway received a few letters and parcels, but Clarence was evidently the ONLY waiting passenger. Any hope that he might have entertained that his mysterious predecessor would emerge from some seclusion at that moment was disappointed. As he entered the coach he made a rapid survey of his fellow-travelers, but satisfied himself that the stranger was not among them. They were mainly small traders or farmers, a miner or two, and apparently a Spanish-American of better degree and personality. Possibly the circumstance that men of this class usually preferred to travel on horseback and were rarely seen in public conveyances attracted his attention, and their eyes met more than once in mutual curiosity. Presently Clarence addressed a remark to the stranger in Spanish; he replied fluently and courteously, but at the next stopping-place he asked a question of the expressman in an unmistakable Missouri accent. Clarence's curiosity was satisfied; he was evidently one of those early American settlers who had been so long domiciled in Southern California as to adopt the speech as well as the habiliments of the Spaniard.

The conversation fell upon the political news of the previous night, or rather seemed to be lazily continued from some previous, more excited discussion, in which one of the contestants—a red-bearded miner—had subsided into an occasional growl of surly dissent. It struck Clarence that the Missourian had been an amused auditor and even, judging from a twinkle in his eye, a mischievous instigator of the controversy. He was not surprised, therefore, when the man turned to him with a certain courtesy and said,—

"And what, sir, is the political feeling in YOUR district?"

But Clarence was in no mood to be drawn out, and replied, almost curtly, that as he had come only from San Francisco, they were probably as well informed on that subject as himself. A quick and searching glance from the stranger's eye made him regret his answer, but in the silence that ensued the red-bearded miner, evidently still rankling at heart, saw his opportunity. Slapping his huge hands on his knees, and leaning far forward until he seemed to plunge his flaming beard, like a firebrand, into the controversy, he said grimly,—

"Well, I kin tell you, gen'l'men, THIS. It ain't goin' to be no matter wot's the POLITICAL FEELING here or thar—it ain't goin' to be no matter wot's the State's rights and wot's Fed'ral rights—it ain't goin' to be no question whether the gov'ment's got the right to relieve its own soldiers that those Secesh is besieging in Fort Sumter or whether they haven't—but the first gun that's fired at the flag blows the chains off every d—n nigger south of Mason and Dixon's line! You hear me! I'm shoutin'! And whether you call yourselves 'Secesh' or 'Union' or 'Copperhead' or 'Peace men,' you've got to face it!"

There was an angry start in one or two of the seats; one man caught at the swinging side-strap and half rose, a husky voice began, "It's a d–d"—and then all as suddenly subsided. Every eye was turned to an insignificant figure in the back seat. It was a woman, holding a child on her lap, and gazing out of the window with her sex's profound unconcern in politics. Clarence understood the

rude chivalry of the road well enough to comprehend that this unconscious but omnipotent figure had more than once that day controlled the passions of the disputants. They dropped back weakly to their seats, and their mutterings rolled off in the rattle of the wheels. Clarence glanced at the Missourian; he was regarding the red-bearded miner with a singular curiosity.

The rain had ceased, but the afternoon shadows were deepening when they at last reached Fair Plains, where Clarence expected to take horse to the Rancho. He was astonished, however, to learn that all the horses in the stable were engaged, but remembering that some of his own stock were in pasturage with a tenant at Fair Plains, and that he should probably have a better selection, he turned his steps thither. Passing out of the stable-yard he recognized the Missourian's voice in whispered conversation with the proprietor, but the two men withdrew into the shadow as he approached. An ill-defined uneasiness came over him; he knew the proprietor, who also seemed to know the Missourian, and this evident avoidance of him was significant. Perhaps his reputation as a doubtful Unionist had preceded him, but this would not account for their conduct in a district so strongly Southern in sympathy as Fair Plains. More impressed by the occurrence than he cared to admit, when at last, after some delay, he had secured his horse, and was once more in the saddle, he kept a sharp lookout for his quondam companion. But here another circumstance added to his suspicions: there was a main road leading to Santa Inez, the next town, and the Rancho, and this Clarence had purposely taken in order to watch the Missourian; but there was also a cutoff directly to the Rancho, known only to the habitues of the Rancho. After a few moments' rapid riding on a mustang much superior to any in the hotel stables, he was satisfied that the stranger must have taken the cut-off. Putting spurs to his horse he trusted still to precede him to the Rancho—if that were his destination.

As he dashed along the familiar road, by a strange perversity of fancy, instead of thinking of his purpose, he found himself recalling the first time he had ridden that way in the flush of his youth and hopefulness. The girl-sweetheart he was then going to rejoin was now the wife of another; the woman who had been her guardian was now his own wife. He had accepted without a pang the young girl's dereliction, but it was through her revelation that he was now about to confront the dereliction of his own wife. And this was the reward of his youthful trust and loyalty! A bitter laugh broke from his lips. It was part of his still youthful self-delusion that he believed himself wiser and stronger for it.

It was quite dark when he reached the upper field or first terrace of the Rancho. He could see the white walls of the casa rising dimly out of the green sea of early wild grasses, like a phantom island. It was here that the cut-off joined the main road—now the only one that led to the casa. He was satisfied that no one could have preceded him from Fair Plains; but it was true that he must take precautions against his own discovery. Dismounting near a clump of willows, he unsaddled and unbridled his horse, and with a cut of the riata over its haunches sent it flying across the field in the direction of a band of feeding mustangs, which it presently joined. Then, keeping well in the shadow of a belt of shrub-oaks, he skirted the long lesser terraces of the casa, intending to approach the house by way of the old garden and corral. A drizzling rain, occasionally driven by the wind into long, misty, curtain-like waves, obscured the prospect and favored his design. He reached the low adobe wall of the corral in safety; looking over he could detect, in spite of the darkness, that a number of the horses were of alien brands, and even recognized one or two from the Santa Inez district. The vague outline of buggies and carryalls filled the long shed beside the stables. There WAS company at the casa—so far Susy was right!

Nevertheless, lingering still by the wall of the old garden for the deepening of night, his nervous feverishness was again invaded and benumbed by sullen memories. There was the opening left by the old grille in the wall, behind which Mrs. Peyton stood on the morning when he thought he was leaving the ranch forever; where he had first clasped her in his arms, and stayed. A turn of the head, a moment's indecision, a single glance of a languorous eye, had brought this culmination. And now he stood again before that ruined grille, his house and lands, even his NAME, misused by a mad, scheming enthusiast, and himself a creeping spy of his own dishonor! He turned with a bitter smile

again to the garden. A few dark red Castilian roses still leaned forward and swayed in the wind with dripping leaves. It was here that the first morning of his arrival he had kissed Susy; the perfume and color of her pink skin came back to him with a sudden shock as he stood there; he caught at a flower, drew it towards him, inhaled its odor in a long breath that left him faint and leaning against the wall. Then again he smiled, but this time more wickedly—in what he believed his cynicism had sprung up the first instinct of revenge!

It was now dark enough for him to venture across the carriage road and make his way to the rear of the house. His first characteristic instinct had been to enter openly at his own front gate, but the terrible temptation to overhear and watch the conspiracy unobserved—that fascination common to deceived humanity to witness its own shame—had now grown upon him. He knew that a word or gesture of explanation, apology, appeal, or even terror from his wife would check his rage and weaken his purpose. His perfect knowledge of the house and the security of its inmates would enable him from some obscure landing or gallery to participate in any secret conclave they might hold in the patio—the only place suitable for so numerous a rendezvous. The absence of light in the few external windows pointed to this central gathering. And he had already conceived his plan of entrance.

Gaining the rear wall of the casa he began cautiously to skirt its brambly base until he had reached a long, oven-like window half obliterated by a monstrous passion vine. It was the window of what had once been Mrs. Peyton's boudoir; the window by which he had once forced an entrance to the house when it was in the hands of squatters, the window from which Susy had signaled her Spanish lover, the window whose grating had broken the neck of Judge Peyton's presumed assassin. But these recollections no longer delayed him; the moment for action had arrived. He knew that since the tragedy the boudoir had been dismantled and shunned; the servants believed it to be haunted by the assassin's ghost. With the aid of the passion vine the ingress was easy; the interior window was open; the rustle of dead leaves on the bare floor as he entered, and the whir of a frightened bird by his ear, told the story of its desolation and the source of the strange noises that had been heard there. The door leading to the corridor was lightly bolted, merely to keep it from rattling in the wind. Slipping the bolt with the blade of his pocket-knife he peered into the dark passage. The light streaming under a door to the left, and the sound of voices, convinced him that his conjecture was right, and the meeting was gathered on the broad balconies around the patio. He knew that a narrow gallery, faced with Venetian blinds to exclude the sun, looked down upon them. He managed to gain it without discovery; luckily the blinds were still down; between their slats, himself invisible, he could hear and see everything that occurred.

Yet even at this supreme moment the first thing that struck him was the almost ludicrous contrast between the appearance of the meeting and its tremendous object. Whether he was influenced by any previous boyish conception of a clouded and gloomy conspiracy he did not know, but he was for an instant almost disconcerted by the apparent levity and festivity of the conclave. Decanters and glasses stood on small tables before them; nearly all were drinking and smoking. They comprised fifteen or twenty men, some of whose faces were familiar to him elsewhere as Southern politicians; a few, he was shocked to see, were well-known Northern Democrats. Occupying a characteristically central position was the famous Colonel Starbottle, of Virginia. Jaunty and youthful-looking in his mask-like, beardless face, expansive and dignified in his middle-aged port and carriage, he alone retained some of the importance—albeit slightly theatrical and affected—of the occasion. Clarence in his first hurried glance had not observed his wife, and for a moment had felt relieved; but as Colonel Starbottle arose at that moment, and with a studiously chivalrous and courtly manner turned to his right, he saw that she was sitting at the further end of the balcony, and that a man whom he recognized as Captain Pinckney was standing beside her. The blood quickly tightened around his heart, but left him cold and observant.

"It was seldom, indeed," remarked Colonel Starbottle, placing his fat fingers in the frill of his shirt front, "that a movement like this was graced with the actual presence of a lofty, inspiring, yet

delicate spirit—a Boadicea—indeed, he might say a Joan of Arc—in the person of their charming hostess, Mrs. Brant. Not only were they favored by her social and hospitable ministration, but by her active and enthusiastic cooperation in the glorious work they had in hand. It was through her correspondence and earnest advocacy that they were to be favored to-night with the aid and counsel of one of the most distinguished and powerful men in the Southern district of California, Judge Beeswinger, of Los Angeles. He had not the honor of that gentleman's personal acquaintance; he believed he was not far wrong in saying that this was also the misfortune of every gentleman present; but the name itself was a tower of strength. He would go further, and say that Mrs. Brant herself was personally unacquainted with him, but it was through the fervor, poetry, grace, and genius of her correspondence with that gentleman that they were to have the honor of his presence that very evening. It was understood that advices had been received of his departure, and that he might be expected at Robles at any moment."

"But what proof have we of Judge Beeswinger's soundness?" said a lazy Southern voice at the conclusion of Colonel Starbottle's periods. "Nobody here seems to know him by sight: is it not risky to admit a man to our meeting whom we are unable to identify?"

"I reckon nobody but a fool or some prying mudsill of a Yankee would trust his skin here," returned another; "and if he did we'd know what to do with him."

But Clarence's attention was riveted on his wife, and the significant speech passed him as unheeded as had the colonel's rhetoric. She was looking very handsome and slightly flushed, with a proud light in her eyes that he had never seen before. Absorbed in the discussion, she seemed to be paying little attention to Captain Pinckney as she rose suddenly to her feet.

"Judge Beeswinger will be attended here by Mr. MacNiel, of the Fair Plains Hotel, who will vouch for him and introduce him," she said in a clear voice, which rang with an imperiousness that Clarence well remembered. "The judge was to arrive by the coach from Martinez to Fair Plains, and is due now."

"Is there no GENTLEMAN to introduce him? Must we take him on the word of a common trader—by Jove! a whiskey-seller?" continued the previous voice sneeringly.

"On the word of a lady, Mr. Brooks," said Captain Pinckney, with a slight gesture towards Mrs. Brant—"who answers for both."

Clarence had started slightly at his wife's voice and the information it conveyed. His fellow-passenger, and the confidant of MacNiel, was the man they were expecting! If they had recognized him, Clarence, would they not warn the company of his proximity? He held his breath as the sound of voices came from the outer gate of the courtyard. Mrs. Brant rose; at the same moment the gate swung open, and a man entered. It WAS the Missourian.

He turned with old-fashioned courtesy to the single woman standing on the balcony.

"My fair correspondent, I believe! I am Judge Beeswinger. Your agent, MacNiel, passed me through your guards at the gate, but I did not deem it advisable to bring him into this assembly of gentlemen without your further consideration. I trust I was right."

The quiet dignity and self-possession, the quaint, old-fashioned colonial precision of speech, modified by a soft Virginian intonation, and, above all, some singular individuality of the man himself, produced a profound sensation, and seemed to suddenly give the gathering an impressiveness it had lacked before. For an instant Clarence forgot himself and his personal wrongs in the shock of indignation he felt at this potent addition to the ranks of his enemies. He saw his wife's eyes sparkle with pride over her acquisition, and noticed that Pinckney cast a disturbed glance at the newcomer.

The stranger ascended the few steps to the balcony and took Mrs. Brant's hand with profound courtesy. "Introduce me to my colleagues—distinctly and separately. It behooves a man at such a moment to know to whom he entrusts his life and honor, and the life and honor of his cause."

It was evidently no mere formal courtesy to the stranger. As he stepped forward along the balcony, and under Mrs. Brant's graceful guidance was introduced to each of the members, he not only

listened with scrupulous care and attention to the name and profession of each man, but bent upon him a clear, searching glance that seemed to photograph him in his memory. With two exceptions. He passed Colonel Starbottle's expanding shirt frill with a bow of elaborate precision, and said, "Colonel Starbottle's fame requires neither introduction nor explanation." He stopped before Captain Pinckney and paused.

"An officer of the United States army, I believe, sir?"

"Yes."

"Educated at West Point, I think, by the government, to whom you have taken the oath of allegiance?"

"Yes."

"Very good, sir," said the stranger, turning away.

"You have forgotten one other fact, sir," said Pinckney, with a slightly supercilious air.

"Indeed! What is it?"

"I am, first of all, a native of the State of South Carolina!"

A murmur of applause and approval ran round the balcony. Captain Pinckney smiled and exchanged glances with Mrs. Brant, but the stranger quietly returned to the central table beside Colonel Starbottle. "I am not only an unexpected delegate to this august assembly, gentlemen," he began gravely, "but I am the bearer of perhaps equally unexpected news. By my position in the Southern district I am in possession of dispatches received only this morning by pony express. Fort Sumter has been besieged. The United States flag, carrying relief to the beleaguered garrison, has been fired upon by the State of South Carolina."

A burst of almost hysteric applause and enthusiasm broke from the assembly, and made the dim, vault-like passages and corridors of the casa ring. Cheer after cheer went up to the veiled gallery and the misty sky beyond. Men mounted on the tables and waved their hands frantically, and in the midst of this bewildering turbulence of sound and motion Clarence saw his wife mounted on a chair, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes, waving her handkerchief like an inspired priestess. Only the stranger, still standing beside Colonel Starbottle, remained unmoved and impassive. Then, with an imperative gesture, he demanded a sudden silence.

"Convincing and unanimous as this demonstration is, gentlemen," he began quietly, "it is my duty, nevertheless, to ask you if you have seriously considered the meaning of the news I have brought. It is my duty to tell you that it means civil war. It means the clash of arms between two sections of a mighty country; it means the disruption of friends, the breaking of family ties, the separation of fathers and sons, of brothers and sisters—even, perhaps, to the disseverment of husband and wife!"

"It means the sovereignty of the South—and the breaking of a covenant with lowborn traders and abolitionists," said Captain Pinckney.

"If there are any gentlemen present," continued the stranger, without heeding the interruption, "who have pledged this State to the support of the South in this emergency, or to the establishment of a Pacific republic in aid and sympathy with it, whose names are on this paper"—he lifted a sheet of paper lying before Colonel Starbottle—"but who now feel that the gravity of the news demands a more serious consideration of the purpose, they are at liberty to withdraw from the meeting, giving their honor, as Southern gentlemen, to keep the secret intact."

"Not if I know it," interrupted a stalwart Kentuckian, as he rose to his feet and strode down the steps to the patio. "For," he added, placing his back against the gateway, "I'll shoot the first coward that backs out now."

A roar of laughter and approval followed, but was silenced again by the quiet, unimpassioned voice of the stranger. "If, on the other hand," he went on calmly, "you all feel that this news is the fitting culmination and consecration of the hopes, wishes, and plans of this meeting, you will assert it again, over your own signatures, to Colonel Starbottle at this table."

When the Kentuckian had risen, Clarence had started from his concealment; when he now saw the eager figures pressing forward to the table he hesitated no longer. Slipping along the passage, he reached the staircase which led to the corridor in the rear of the balcony. Descending this rapidly, he not only came upon the backs of the excited crowd around the table, but even elbowed one of the conspirators aside without being noticed. His wife, who had risen from her chair at the end of the balcony, was already moving towards the table. With a quick movement he seized her wrist, and threw her back in the chair again. A cry broke from her lips as she recognized him, but still holding her wrist, he stepped quickly between her and the astonished crowd. There was a moment of silence, then the cry of "Spy!" and "Seize him!" rose quickly, but above all the voice and figure of the Missourian was heard commanding them to stand back. Turning to Clarence, he said quietly,—

"I should know your face, sir. Who are you?"

"The husband of this woman and the master of this house," said Clarence as quietly, but in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"Stand aside from her, then—unless you are hoping that her danger may protect YOU!" said the Kentuckian, significantly drawing his revolver.

But Mrs. Brant sprang suddenly to her feet beside Clarence.

"We are neither of us cowards, Mr. Brooks—though he speaks the truth—and—more shame to me"—she added, with a look of savage scorn at Clarence—"IS MY HUSBAND!"

"What is your purpose in coming here?" continued Judge Beeswinger, with his eyes fixed on Clarence.

"I have given you all the information," said Clarence quietly, "that is necessary to make you, as a gentleman, leave this house at once—and that is my purpose. It is all the information you will get from me as long as you and your friends insult my roof with your uninvited presence. What I may have to say to you and each of you hereafter—what I may choose to demand of you, according to your own code of honor,"—he fixed his eyes on Captain Pinckney's,—"is another question, and one not usually discussed before a lady."

"Pardon me. A moment—a single moment."

It was the voice of Colonel Starbottle; it was the frilled shirt front, the lightly buttoned blue coat with its expanding lapels, like bursting petals, and the smiling mask of that gentleman rising above the table and bowing to Clarence Brant and his wife with infinite courtesy. "The—er—humiliating situation in which we find ourselves, gentlemen,—the reluctant witnesses of—er—what we trust is only a temporary disagreement between our charming hostess and the—er—gentleman whom she recognized under the highest title to our consideration,—is distressing to us all, and would seem to amply justify that gentleman's claims to a personal satisfaction, which I know we would all delight to give. But that situation rests upon the supposition that our gathering here was of a purely social or festive nature! It may be," continued the colonel with a blandly reflective air, "that the spectacle of these decanters and glasses, and the nectar furnished us by our Hebe-like hostess" (he lifted a glass of whiskey and water to his lips while he bowed to Mrs. Brant gracefully), "has led the gentleman to such a deduction. But when I suggest to him that our meeting was of a business, or private nature, it strikes me that the question of intrusion may be fairly divided between him and ourselves. We may be even justified, in view of that privacy, in asking him if his—er—entrance to this house was—er—coincident with his appearance among us."

"With my front door in possession of strangers," said Clarence, more in reply to a sudden contemptuous glance from his wife than Starbottle's insinuation, "I entered the house through the window."

"Of my boudoir, where another intruder once broke his neck," interrupted his wife with a mocking laugh.

"Where I once helped this lady to regain possession of her house when it was held by another party of illegal trespassers, who, however, were content to call themselves 'jumpers,' and did not claim the privacy of gentlemen."

"Do you mean to imply, sir," began Colonel Starbottle haughtily, "that"—

"I mean to imply, sir," said Clarence with quiet scorn, "that I have neither the wish to know nor the slightest concern in any purpose that brought you here, and that when you quit the house you take your secrets and your privacy with you intact, without let or hindrance from me."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Brant," said Judge Beeswinger, suppressing the angry interruption of his fellows with a dominant wave of his hand, as he fixed his eyes on Clarence keenly, "that you have no sympathy with your wife's political sentiments?"

"I have already given you the information necessary to make you quit this house, and that is all you have a right to know," returned Clarence with folded arms.

"But I can answer for him," said Mrs. Brant, rising, with a quivering voice and curling lip. "There IS no sympathy between us. We are as far apart as the poles. We have nothing in common but this house and his name."

"But you are husband and wife, bound together by a sacred compact."

"A compact!" echoed Mrs. Brant, with a bitter laugh. "Yes, the compact that binds South Carolina to the nigger-worshipping Massachusetts. The compact that links together white and black, the gentleman and the trader, the planter and the poor white—the compact of those UNITED States. Bah! THAT has been broken, and so can this."

Clarence's face paled. But before he could speak there was a rapid clattering at the gate and a dismounted vaquero entered excitedly. Turning to Mrs. Brant he said hurriedly, "Mother of God! the casa is surrounded by a rabble of mounted men, and there is one among them even now who demands admittance in the name of the Law."

"This is your work," said Brooks, facing Clarence furiously. "You have brought them with you, but, by God, they shall not save you!" He would have clutched Clarence, but the powerful arm of Judge Beeswinger intervened. Nevertheless, he still struggled to reach Clarence, appealing to the others: "Are you fools to stand there and let him triumph! Don't you see the cowardly Yankee trick he's played upon us?"

"He has not," said Mrs. Brant haughtily. "I have no reason to love him or his friends; but I know he does not lie."

"Gentlemen!—gentlemen!" implored Colonel Starbottle with beaming and unctuous persuasion, "may I—er—remark—that all this is far from the question? Are we to be alarmed because an unknown rabble, no matter whence they come, demand entrance here in the name of the Law? I am not aware of any law of the State of California that we are infringing. By all means admit them."

The gate was thrown open. A single thick-set man, apparently unarmed and dressed like an ordinary traveler, followed by half a dozen other equally unpretentious-looking men, entered. The leader turned to the balcony.

"I am the Chief of Police of San Francisco. I have warrants for the arrest of Colonel Culpepper Starbottle, Joshua Brooks, Captain Pinckney, Clarence Brant and Alice his wife, and others charged with inciting to riot and unlawful practice calculated to disturb the peace of the State of California and its relations with the Federal government," said the leader, in a dry official voice.

Clarence started. In spite of its monotonous utterance it was the voice of the red-bearded controversialist of the stage-coach. But where were his characteristic beard and hair? Involuntarily Clarence glanced at Judge Beeswinger; that gentleman was quietly regarding the stranger with an impassive face that betrayed no recognition whatever.

"But the city of San Francisco has no jurisdiction here," said Colonel Starbottle, turning a bland smile towards his fellow-members. "I am—er—sorry to inform you that you are simply trespassing, sir."

"I am here also as deputy sheriff," returned the stranger coolly. "We were unable to locate the precise place of this meeting, although we knew of its existence. I was sworn in this morning at Santa Inez by the judge of this district, and these gentlemen with me are my posse."

There was a quick movement of resistance by the members, which was, however, again waived blandly aside by Colonel Starbottle. Leaning forward in a slightly forensic attitude, with his fingers on the table and a shirt frill that seemed to have become of itself erectile, he said, with pained but polite precision, "I grieve to have to state, sir, that even that position is utterly untenable here. I am a lawyer myself, as my friend here, Judge Beeswinger—eh? I beg your pardon!"

The officer of the law had momentarily started, with his eyes fixed on Judge Beeswinger, who, however, seemed to be quietly writing at the table.

"As Judge Beeswinger," continued Colonel Starbottle, "will probably tell you and as a jurist himself, he will also probably agree with me when I also inform you that, as the United States government is an aggrieved party, it is a matter for the Federal courts to prosecute, and that the only officer we can recognize is the United States Marshal for the district. When I add that the marshal, Colonel Crackenthorpe, is one of my oldest friends, and an active sympathizer with the South in the present struggle, you will understand that any action from him in this matter is exceedingly improbable."

The general murmur of laughter, relief, and approval was broken by the quiet voice of Judge Beeswinger.

"Let me see your warrant, Mr. Deputy Sheriff."

The officer approached him with a slightly perplexed and constrained air, and exhibited the paper. Judge Beeswinger handed it back to him. "Colonel Starbottle is quite right in his contention," he said quietly; "the only officer that this assembly can recognize is the United States Marshal or his legal deputy. But Colonel Starbottle is wrong in his supposition that Colonel Crackenthorpe still retains the functions of that office. He was removed by the President of the United States, and his successor was appointed and sworn in by the Federal judge early this morning." He paused, and folding up the paper on which he had been writing, placed it in the hands of the deputy. "And this," he continued in the same even voice, "constitutes you his deputy, and will enable you to carry out your duty in coming here."

"What the devil does this mean, sir? Who are you?" gasped Colonel Starbottle, recoiling suddenly from the man at his side.

"I am the new United States Marshal for the Southern District of California."

CHAPTER III

Unsuspected and astounding as the revelation was to Clarence, its strange reception by the conspirators seemed to him as astounding. He had started forward, half expecting that the complacent and self-confessed spy would be immolated by his infuriated dupes. But to his surprise the shock seemed to have changed their natures, and given them the dignity they had lacked. The excitability, irritation, and recklessness which had previously characterized them had disappeared. The deputy and his posse, who had advanced to the assistance of their revealed chief, met with no resistance. They had evidently, as if with one accord, drawn away from Judge Beeswinger, leaving a cleared space around him, and regarded their captors with sullen contemptuous silence. It was only broken by Colonel Starbottle:—

"Your duty commands you, sir, to use all possible diligence in bringing us before the Federal judge of this district—unless your master in Washington has violated the Constitution so far as to remove him, too!"

"I understand you perfectly," returned Judge Beeswinger, with unchanged composure; "and as you know that Judge Wilson unfortunately cannot be removed except through a regular course of impeachment, I suppose you may still count upon his Southern sympathies to befriend you. With that I have nothing to do; my duty is complete when my deputy has brought you before him and I have stated the circumstances of the arrest."

"I congratulate you, sir," said Captain Pinckney, with an ironical salute, "on your prompt reward for your treachery to the South, and your equally prompt adoption of the peculiar tactics of your friends in the way in which you have entered this house."

"I am sorry I cannot congratulate YOU, sir," returned Judge Beeswinger gravely, "on breaking your oath to the government which has educated and supported you and given you the epaulettes you disgrace. Nor shall I discuss 'treachery' with the man who has not only violated the trust of his country, but even the integrity of his friend's household. It is for that reason that I withhold the action of this warrant in so far as it affects the persons of the master and mistress of this home. I am satisfied that Mr. Brant has been as ignorant of what has been done here as I am that his wife has been only the foolish dupe of a double traitor!"

"Silence!"

The words broke simultaneously from the lips of Clarence and Captain Pinckney. They stood staring at each other—the one pale, the other crimson—as Mrs. Brant, apparently oblivious of the significance of their united adjuration, turned to Judge Beeswinger in the fury of her still stifled rage and mortification.

"Keep your mercy for your fellow-spy," she said, with a contemptuous gesture towards her husband; "I go with these gentlemen!"

"You will not," said Clarence quietly, "until I have said a word to you alone." He laid his hand firmly upon her wrist.

The deputy and his prisoners filed slowly out of the courtyard together, the latter courteously saluting Mrs. Brant as they passed, but turning from Judge Beeswinger in contemptuous silence. The judge followed them to the gate, but there he paused. Turning to Mrs. Brant, who was still half struggling in the strong grip of her husband, he said,—

"Any compunction I may have had in misleading you by accepting your invitation here I dismissed after I had entered this house. And I trust," he added, turning to Clarence sternly, "I leave you the master of it!"

As the gate closed behind him, Clarence locked it. When his wife turned upon him angrily, he said quietly,—

"I have no intention of restraining your liberty a moment after our interview is over, but until then I do not intend to be disturbed."

She threw herself disdainfully back in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap in half-contemptuous resignation, with her eyes upon her long slim arched feet crossed before her. Even in her attitude there was something of her old fascination which, however, now seemed to sting Clarence to the quick.

"I have nothing to say to you in regard to what has just passed in this house, except that as long as I remain even nominally its master it shall not be repeated. Although I shall no longer attempt to influence or control your political sympathies, I shall not allow you to indulge them where in any way they seem to imply my sanction. But so little do I oppose your liberty, that you are free to rejoin your political companions whenever you choose to do so on your own responsibility. But I must first know from your own lips whether your sympathies are purely political—or a name for something else?"

She had alternately flushed and paled, although still keeping her scornful attitude as he went on, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of her vague wonderment at his concluding words.

"I don't understand you," she said, lifting her eyes to his in a moment of cold curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What did Judge Beeswinger mean when he called Captain Pinckney a double traitor?" he said roughly.

She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes. "And you—YOU! dare to repeat the cowardly lie of a confessed spy. This, then, is what you wished to tell me—this the insult for which you have kept me here; because you are incapable of understanding unselfish patriotism or devotion—even to your own cause—you dare to judge me by your own base, Yankee-trading standards. Yes, it is worthy of you!" She walked rapidly up and down, and then suddenly faced him. "I understand it all; I appreciate your magnanimity now. You are willing I should join the company of these chivalrous gentlemen in order to give color to your calumnies! Say at once that it was you who put up this spy to correspond with me—to come here—in order to entrap me. Yes entrap me—I—who a moment ago stood up for you before these gentlemen, and said you could not lie. Bah!"

Struck only by the wild extravagance of her speech and temper, Clarence did not know that when women are most illogical they are apt to be most sincere, and from a man's standpoint her unreasoning deductions appeared to him only as an affectation to gain time for thought, or a theatrical display, like Susy's. And he was turning half contemptuously away, when she again faced him with flashing eyes.

"Well, hear me! I accept; I leave here at once, to join my own people, my own friends—those who understand me—put what construction on it that you choose. Do your worst; you cannot do more to separate us than you have done just now."

She left him, and ran up the steps with a singular return of her old occasional nymph-like nimbleness—the movement of a woman who had never borne children—and a swish of her long skirts that he remembered for many a day after, as she disappeared in the corridor. He remained looking after her—indignant, outraged, and unconvinced. There was a rattling at the gate.

He remembered he had locked it. He opened it to the flushed pink cheeks and dancing eyes of Susy. The rain was still dripping from her wet cloak as she swung it from her shoulders.

"I know it all!—all that's happened," she burst out with half-girlish exuberance and half the actress's declamation. "We met them all in the road—posse and prisoners. Chief Thompson knew me and told me all. And so you've done it—and you're master in your old house again. Clarence, old boy! Jim said you wouldn't do it—said you'd weaken on account of her! But I said 'No.' I knew you better, old Clarence, and I saw it in your face, for all your stiffness! ha! But for all that I was mighty nervous and uneasy, and I just made Jim send an excuse to the theatre and we rushed it down here! Lordy! but it looks natural to see the old house again! And she—you packed her off with the others —didn't you? Tell me, Clarence," in her old appealing voice, "you shook her, too!"

Dazed and astounded, and yet experiencing a vague sense of relief with something like his old tenderness towards the willful woman before him, he had silently regarded her until her allusion to his wife recalled him to himself.

"Hush!" he said quickly, with a glance towards the corridor.

"Ah!" said Susy, with a malicious smile, "then that's why Captain Pinckney was lingering in the rear with the deputy."

"Silence!" repeated Clarence sternly. "Go in there," pointing to the garden room below the balcony, "and wait there with your husband."

He half led, half pushed her into the room which had been his business office, and returned to the patio. A hesitating voice from the balcony said, "Clarence!"

It was his wife's voice, but modified and gentler—more like her voice as he had first heard it, or as if it had been chastened by some reminiscence of those days. It was his wife's face, too, that looked down on his—paler than he had seen it since he entered the house. She was shawled and hooded, carrying a traveling-bag in her hand.

"I am going, Clarence," she said, pausing before him, with gentle gravity, "but not in anger. I even ask you to forgive me for the foolish words that I think your still more foolish accusation"—she smiled faintly—"dragged from me. I am going because I know that I have brought—and that while I am here I shall always be bringing—upon you the imputation and even the responsibility of my own faith! While I am proud to own it,—and if needs be suffer for it,—I have no right to ruin your prospects, or even make you the victim of the slurs that others may cast upon me. Let us part as friends—separated only by our different political faiths, but keeping all other faiths together—until God shall settle the right of this struggle. Perhaps it may be soon—I sometimes think it may be years of agony for all; but until then, good-by."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.