

Flip: A California Romance.

CHAPTER I.

JUST where the red track of the Los Gatos road streams on and upward like the sinuous trail of a fiery rocket until it is extinguished in the blue shadows of the Coast Range, there is an embayed terrace near the summit, hedged by dwarf firs. At every bend of the heat-laden road the eye rested upon it wistfully; all along the flank of the mountain, which seemed to pant and quiver in the oven-like air, through rising dust, the slow creaking of dragging wheels, the monotonous cry of tired springs, and the muffled beat of plunging hoofs, it held out a promise of sheltered coolness and green silences beyond. Sun-burned and anxious faces yearned toward it from the dizzy, swaying tops of stage-coaches, from lagging teams far below, from the blinding white canvas covers of "mountain schooners," and from scorching saddles that seemed to weigh down the scrambling, sweating animals beneath. But it would seem that the hope was vain, the promise illusive. When the terrace was reached it appeared not only to have caught and gathered all the heat of the valley below, but to have evolved a fire of its own from some hidden crater-like source unknown. Nevertheless, instead of prostrating and enervating man and beast, it was said to have induced the wildest exaltation. The heated air was filled and stifling with resinous exhalations. The delirious spices of balm, bay, spruce, juniper, yerba buena, wild syringa, and strange aromatic

herbs as yet unclassified, distilled and evaporated in that mighty heat, and seemed to fire with a midsummer madness all who breathed their fumes. They stung, smarted, stimulated, intoxicated. It was said that the most jaded and foot-sore horses became furious and ungovernable under their influence; wearied teamsters and muleteers, who had exhausted their profanity in the ascent, drank fresh draughts of inspiration in this fiery air, extended their vocabulary, and created new and startling forms of objurgation. It is recorded that one bibulous stage-driver exhausted description and condensed its virtues in a single phrase: "Gin and ginger." This felicitous epithet, flung out in a generous comparison with his favorite drink, "rum and gum," clung to it ever after.

Such was the current comment on this vale of spices. Like most human criticism it was hasty and superficial. No one yet had been known to have penetrated deeply its mysterious recesses. It was still far below the summit and its wayside inn. It had escaped the intruding foot of hunter and prospector; and the inquisitive patrol of the county surveyor had only skirted its boundary. It remained for Mr. Lance Harriott to complete its exploration. His reasons for so doing were simple. He had made the journey thither underneath the stage-coach, and clinging to its axle. He had chosen this hazardous mode of conveyance at night, as the coach crept by his place of concealment in the wayside brush, to elude the sheriff of Monterey County and his posse, who were after him. He had not made himself known to his fellow-passengers, as they already knew him as a gambler, an outlaw, and a desperado; he deemed it unwise to present himself in his newer reputation of a man who had just slain a brother gambler in a quarrel, and for whom a reward was offered. He slipped from the axle as the stage-coach swirled past the brushing branches of fir, and for an

instant lay unnoticed, a scarcely distinguishable mound of dust in the broken furrows of the road. Then, more like a beast than a man, he crept on his hands and knees into the steaming underbrush. Here he lay still until the clatter of harness and the sound of voices faded in the distance. Had he been followed, it would have been difficult to detect in that inert mass of rags any semblance to a known form or figure. A hideous reddish mask of dust and clay obliterated his face; his hands were shapeless stumps exaggerated in his trailing sleeves. And when he rose, staggering like a drunken man, and plunged wildly into the recesses of the wood, a cloud of dust followed him, and pieces and patches of his frayed and rotten garments clung to the impeding branches. Twice he fell, but, maddened and upheld by the smarting spices and stimulating aroma of the air, he kept on his course.

Gradually the heat became less oppressive; once, when he stopped and leaned exhaustedly against a sapling, he fancied he saw the zephyr he could not yet feel in the glittering and trembling of leaves in the distance before him. Again the deep stillness was moved with a faint sighing rustle, and he knew he must be nearing the edge of the thicket. The spell of silence thus broken was followed by a fainter, more musical interruption — the glassy tinkle of water! A step further his foot trembled on the verge of a slight ravine, still closely canopied by the interlacing boughs overhead. A tiny stream that he could have dammed with his hand yet lingered in this parched red gash in the hillside and trickled into a deep, irregular, well-like cavity, that again overflowed and sent its slight surplus on. It had been the luxurious retreat of many a spotted trout; it was to be the bath of Lance Harriott. Without a moment's hesitation, without removing a single garment, he slipped cautiously into it, as

if fearful of losing a single drop. His head disappeared from the level of the bank; the solitude was again unbroken. Only two objects remained upon the edge of the ravine, — his revolver and tobacco pouch.

A few minutes elapsed. A fearless blue-jay alighted on the bank and made a prospecting peck at the tobacco pouch. It yielded in favor of a gopher, who endeavored to draw it toward his hole, but in turn gave way to a red squirrel, whose attention was divided, however, between the pouch and the revolver, which he regarded with mischievous fascination. Then there was a splash, a grunt, a sudden dispersion of animated nature, and the head of Mr. Lance Harriott appeared above the bank. It was a startling transformation. Not only that he had, by this wholesale process, washed himself and his light "drill" garments entirely clean, but that he had, apparently by the same operation, morally cleansed *himself*, and left every stain and ugly blot of his late misdeeds and reputation in his bath. His face, albeit scratched here and there, was rosy, round, shining with irrepressible good-humor and youthful levity. His large blue eyes were infantine in their innocent surprise and thoughtlessness. Dripping yet with water, and panting, he rested his elbows lazily on the bank, and became instantly absorbed with a boy's delight in the movements of the gopher, who, after the first alarm, returned cautiously to abduct the tobacco pouch. If any familiar had failed to detect Lance Harriott in this hideous masquerade of dust and grime and tatters, still less would any passing stranger have recognized in this blonde faun the possible outcast and murderer. And when with a swirl of his spattering sleeve he drove back the gopher in a shower of spray and leaped to the bank, he seemed to have accepted his felonious hiding-place as a mere picnicking bower.

A slight breeze was unmistakably permeating the wood

from the west. Looking in that direction, Lance imagined that the shadow was less dark, and although the undergrowth was denser, he struck off carelessly toward it. As he went on, the wood became lighter and lighter; branches, and presently leaves, were painted against the vivid blue of the sky. He knew he must be near the summit, stopped, felt for his revolver, and then lightly put the few remaining branches aside.

The full glare of the noonday sun at first blinded him. When he could see more clearly, he found himself on the open western slope of the mountain, which in the Coast Range was seldom wooded. The spiced thicket stretched between him and the summit, and again between him and the stage road that plunges from the terrace, like forked lightning into the valley below. He could command all the approaches without being seen. Not that this seemed to occupy his thoughts or cause him any anxiety. His first act was to disencumber himself of his tattered coat; he then filled and lighted his pipe, and stretched himself full-length on the open hillside, as if to bleach in the fierce sun. While smoking he carelessly perused the fragment of a newspaper which had enveloped his tobacco, and being struck with some amusing paragraph, read it half aloud again to some imaginary auditor, emphasizing its humor with an hilarious slap upon his leg.

Possibly from the relaxation of fatigue and the bath, which had become a vapor one as he alternately rolled and dried himself in the baking grass, his eyes closed dreamily. He was awakened by the sound of voices. They were distant; they were vague; they approached no nearer. He rolled himself to the verge of the first precipitous grassy descent. There was another bank or plateau below him, and then a confused depth of olive shadows, pierced here and there by the spiked helmets of pines. There was no trace of habitation, yet the

voices were those of some monotonous occupation, and Lance distinctly heard through them the click of crockery and the ring of some household utensil. It appeared to be the interjectional, half listless, half perfunctory, domestic dialogue of an old man and a girl, of which the words were unintelligible. Their voices indicated the solitude of the mountain, but without sadness; they were mysterious without being awe-inspiring. They might have uttered the dreariest commonplaces, but, in their vast isolation, they seemed musical and eloquent. Lance drew his first sigh, — they had suggested dinner.

Careless as his nature was, he was too cautious to risk detection in broad daylight. He contented himself for the present with endeavoring to locate that particular part of the depths from which the voices seemed to rise. It was more difficult, however, to select some other way of penetrating it than by the stage road. "They're bound to have a fire or show a light when it's dark," he reasoned, and, satisfied with that reflection, lay down again. Presently he began to amuse himself by tossing some silver coins in the air. Then his attention was directed to a spur of the Coast Range which had been sharply silhouetted against the cloudless western sky. Something intensely white, something so small that it was scarcely larger than the silver coin in his hand, was appearing in a slight cleft of the range.

While he looked it gradually filled and obliterated the cleft. In another moment the whole serrated line of mountain had disappeared. The dense, dazzling white, encompassing host began to pour over and down every ravine and pass of the coast. Lance recognized the sea-fog, and knew that scarcely twenty miles away lay the ocean — and safety! The drooping sun was now caught and hidden in its soft embraces. A sudden chill breathed over the mountain. He shivered, rose, and plunged

again for very warmth into the spice-laden thicket. The heated balsamic air began to affect him like a powerful sedative; his hunger was forgotten in the languor of fatigue: he slumbered. When he awoke it was dark. He groped his way through the thicket. A few stars were shining directly above him, but beyond and below, everything was lost in the soft, white, fleecy veil of fog. Whatever light or fire might have betokened human habitation was hidden. To push on blindly would be madness; he could only wait for morning. It suited the outcast's lazy philosophy. He crept back again to his bed in the hollow and slept. In that profound silence and shadow, shut out from human association and sympathy by the ghostly fog, what torturing visions conjured up by remorse and fear should have pursued him? What spirit passed before him, or slowly shaped itself out of the infinite blackness of the wood? None. As he slipped gently into that blackness he remembered with a slight regret, some biscuits that were dropped from the coach by a careless luncheon-consuming passenger. That pang over, he slept as sweetly, as profoundly, as divinely, as a child.