

breathlessly, and, thanks to the bark-strewn floor, noiselessly. He was near enough to distinguish and recognize the dress she wore, a pale yellow, that he had admired when he first saw her. It was Nellie, unmistakably; if it were she of the brown duster, she had discarded it, perhaps for greater freedom. He was near enough to call out now, but a sudden nervous timidity overcame him; his lips grew dry. What should he say to her? How account for his presence? "Miss Nellie, one moment!" he gasped. She darted forward and — vanished.

At this moment he was not more than a dozen yards from her. He rushed to where she had been standing, but her disappearance was perfect and complete. He made a circuit of the group of trees within whose radius she had last appeared, but there was neither trace of her, nor suggestion of her mode of escape. He called aloud to her; the vacant Woods let his helpless voice die in their unresponsive depths. He gazed into the air and down at the bark-strewn carpet at his feet. Like most of his vocation, he was sparing of speech, and epigrammatic after his fashion. Comprehending in one swift but despairing flash of intelligence the existence of some fateful power beyond his own weak endeavor, he accepted its logical result with characteristic grimness, threw his hat upon the ground, put his hands in his pockets, and said —

"Well, I'm d——d!"

CHAPTER III.

OUT of compliment to Miss Nellie Wynn, Yuba Bill, on reaching Indian Spring, had made a slight *détour* to enable him to ostentatiously set down his fair passenger before the door of the Burnhams. When it had closed on the admiring eyes of the passengers and the coach had rattled away, Miss Nellie, without any undue haste or apparent change in her usual quiet demeanor, managed, however, to dispatch her business promptly, and, leaving an impression that she would call again before her return to Excelsior, parted from her friends, and slipped away through a side street, to the General Furnishing Store of Indian Spring. In passing this emporium, Miss Nellie's quick eye had discovered a cheap brown linen duster hanging in its window. To purchase it, and put it over her delicate cambric dress, albeit with a shivering sense that she looked like a badly-folded brown-paper parcel, did not take long. As she left the shop it was with mixed emotions of chagrin and security that she noticed that her passage through the settlement no longer turned the heads of its male inhabitants. She reached the outskirts of Indian Spring and the high-road at about the time Mr. Brace had begun his fruitless patrol of the main street. Far in the distance a faint olive-green table mountain seemed to rise abruptly from the plain. It was the Carquinez Woods. Gathering her spotless skirts beneath her extemporized brown domino, she set out briskly towards them.

But her progress was scarcely free or exhilarating. She was not accustomed to walking in a country where

"buggy-riding" was considered the only genteel young-lady-like mode of progression, and its regular provision the expected courtesy of mankind. Always fastidiously booted, her low-quartered shoes were charming to the eye, but hardly adapted to the dust and inequalities of the high-road. It was true that she had thought of buying a coarser pair at Indian Spring, but once face to face with their uncompromising ugliness, she had faltered and fled. The sun was unmistakably hot, but her parasol was too well known and offered too violent a contrast to the duster for practical use. Once she stopped with an exclamation of annoyance, hesitated, and looked back. In half an hour she had twice lost her shoe and her temper; a pink flush took possession of her cheeks, and her eyes were bright with suppressed rage. Dust began to form grimy circles around their orbits; with cat-like shivers she even felt it pervade the roots of her blonde hair. Gradually her breath grew more rapid and hysterical, her smarting eyes became humid, and at last, encountering two observant horsemen in the road, she turned and fled, until, reaching the wood, she began to cry.

Nevertheless she waited for the two horsemen to pass, to satisfy herself that she was not followed; then pushed on vaguely, until she reached a fallen tree, where, with a gesture of disgust, she tore off her hapless duster and flung it on the ground. She then sat down sobbing, but after a moment dried her eyes hurriedly and started to her feet. A few paces distant, erect, noiseless, with outstretched hand, the young solitary of the Carquinez Woods advanced towards her. His hand had almost touched hers, when he stopped.

"What has happened?" he asked gravely.

"Nothing," she said, turning half away, and searching the ground with her eyes, as if she had lost something. "Only I must be going back now."

"You shall go back at once, if you wish it," he said, flushing slightly. "But you have been crying; why?"

Frank as Miss Nellie wished to be, she could not bring herself to say that her feet hurt her, and the dust and heat were ruining her complexion. It was therefore with a half-confident belief that her troubles were really of a moral quality that she answered, "Nothing — nothing, but — but — it's wrong to come here."

"But you did not think it was wrong when you agreed to come, at our last meeting," said the young man, with that persistent logic which exasperates the inconsequent feminine mind. "It cannot be any more wrong to-day."

"But it was not so far off," murmured the young girl, without looking up.

"Oh, the distance makes it more improper, then," he said abstractedly; but after a moment's contemplation of her half-averted face, he asked gravely, "Has any one talked to you about me?"

Ten minutes before, Nellie had been burning to unburden herself of her father's warning, but now she felt she would not. "I wish you would n't call yourself Low," she said at last.

"But it's my name," he replied quietly.

"Nonsense! It's only a stupid translation of a stupid nickname. They might as well call you 'Water' at once."

"But you said you liked it."

"Well, so I do. But don't you see — I — oh dear! you don't understand."

Low did not reply, but turned his head with resigned gravity towards the deeper woods. Grasping the barrel of his rifle with his left hand, he threw his right arm across his left wrist and leaned slightly upon it with the habitual ease of a Western hunter — doubly picturesque in his own lithe, youthful symmetry. Miss Nellie looked

at him from under her eyelids, and then half defiantly raised her head and her dark lashes. Gradually an almost magical change came over her features; her eyes grew larger and more and more yearning, until they seemed to draw and absorb in their liquid depths the figure of the young man before her; her cold face broke into an ecstasy of light and color; her humid lips parted in a bright, welcoming smile, until, with an irresistible impulse, she arose, and throwing back her head stretched towards him two hands full of vague and trembling passion.

In another moment he had seized them, kissed them, and, as he drew her closer to his embrace, felt them tighten around his neck. "But what name do you wish to call me?" he asked, looking down into her eyes.

Miss Nellie murmured something confidentially to the third button of his hunting-shirt. "But that," he replied, with a faint smile, "*that* would n't be any more practical, and you would n't want others to call me *dar*—" Her fingers loosened around his neck, she drew her head back, and a singular expression passed over her face, which to any calmer observer than a lover would have seemed, however, to indicate more curiosity than jealousy.

"Who else *does* call you so?" she added earnestly. "How many, for instance?"

Low's reply was addressed not to her ear, but her lips. She did not avoid it, but added, "And do you kiss them all like that?" Taking him by the shoulders, she held him a little way from her, and gazed at him from head to foot. Then drawing him again to her embrace, she said, "I don't care, at least no woman has kissed you like that." Happy, dazzled, and embarrassed, he was beginning to stammer the truthful protestation that rose to his lips, but she stopped him: "No, don't protest! say nothing! Let *me* love *you* — that is all. It is enough." He would

have caught her in his arms again, but she drew back. "We are near the road," she said quietly. "Come! you promised to show me where you camped. Let us make the most of our holiday. In an hour I must leave the woods."

"But I shall accompany you, dearest."

"No, I must go as I came — alone."

"But Nellie" —

"I tell you no," she said, with an almost harsh practical decision, incompatible with her previous abandonment. "We might be seen together."

"Well, suppose we are; we must be seen together eventually," he remonstrated.

The young girl made an involuntary gesture of impatient negation, but checked herself. "Don't let us talk of that now. Come, while I am here under your own roof" — she pointed to the high interlaced boughs above them — "you must be hospitable. Show me your home; tell me, is n't it a little gloomy sometimes?"

"It never has been; I never thought it *would* be until the moment you leave it to-day."

She pressed his hand briefly and in a half-perfunctory way, as if her vanity had accepted and dismissed the compliment. "Take me somewhere," she said inquisitively, "where you stay most; I do not seem to see you *here*," she added, looking around her with a slight shiver. "It is so big and so high. Have you no place where you eat and rest and sleep?"

"Except in the rainy season, I camp all over the place — at any spot where I may have been shooting or collecting."

"Collecting?" queried Nellie.

"Yes; with the herbarium, you know."

"Yes," said Nellie dubiously. "But you told me once — the first time we ever talked together," she added,

looking in his eyes — "something about your keeping your things like a squirrel in a tree. Could we not go there? Is there not room for us to sit and talk without being browbeaten and looked down upon by these supercilious trees?"

"It's too far away," said Low truthfully, but with a somewhat pronounced emphasis, "much too far for you just now; and it lies on another trail that enters the wood beyond. But come, I will show you a spring known only to myself, the wood ducks, and the squirrels. I discovered it the first day I saw you, and gave it your name. But you shall christen it yourself. It will be all yours, and yours alone, for it is so hidden and secluded that I defy any feet but my own or whoso shall keep step with mine to find it. Shall that foot be yours, Nellie?"

Her face beamed with a bright assent. "It may be difficult to track it from here," he said, "but stand where you are a moment, and don't move, rustle, nor agitate the air in any way. The woods are still now." He turned at right angles with the trail, moved a few paces into the ferns and underbrush, and then stopped with his finger on his lips. For an instant both remained motionless; then, with his intent face bent forward and both arms extended, he began to sink slowly upon one knee and one side, inclining his body with a gentle, perfectly-graduated movement until his ear almost touched the ground. Nellie watched his graceful figure breathlessly, until, like a bow unbent, he stood suddenly erect again, and beckoned to her without changing the direction of his face.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"All right; I have found it," he continued, moving forward without turning his head.

"But how? What did you kneel for?" He did not reply, but taking her hand in his continued to move

slowly on through the underbrush, as if obeying some magnetic attraction. "How did you find it?" again asked the half-awed girl, her voice unconsciously falling to a whisper. Still silent, Low kept his rigid face and forward tread for twenty yards further; then he stopped and released the girl's half-impatient hand. "How did you find it?" she repeated sharply.

"With my ears and nose," replied Low gravely.

"With your nose?"

"Yes; I smelt it."

Still fresh with the memory of his picturesque attitude, the young man's reply seemed to involve something more irritating to her feelings than even that absurd anti-climax. She looked at him coldly and critically, and appeared to hesitate whether to proceed. "Is it far?" she asked.

"Not more than ten minutes now, as I shall go."

"And you won't have to smell your way again?"

"No; it is quite plain now," he answered seriously, the young girl's sarcasm slipping harmlessly from his Indian stolidity. "Don't you smell it yourself?"

But Miss Nellie's thin, cold nostrils refused to take that vulgar interest.

"Nor hear it? Listen!"

"You forget I suffer the misfortune of having been brought up under a roof," she replied coldly.

"That's true," repeated Low, in all seriousness; "it's not your fault. But do you know, I sometimes think I am peculiarly sensitive to water; I feel it miles away. At night, though I may not see it or even know where it is, I am conscious of it. It is company to me when I am alone, and I seem to hear it in my dreams. There is no music as sweet to me as its song. When you sang with me that day in church, I seemed to hear it ripple in your voice. It says to me more than the birds do, more than the rarest plants I find. It seems to live with me and for

me. It is my earliest recollection ; I know it will be my last, for I shall die in its embrace. Do you think, Nellie," he continued, stopping short and gazing earnestly in her face — "do you think that the chiefs knew this when they called me 'Sleeping Water'?"

To Miss Nellie's several gifts I fear the gods had not added poetry. A slight knowledge of English verse of a select character, unfortunately, did not assist her in the interpretation of the young man's speech, nor relieve her from the momentary feeling that he was at times deficient in intellect. She preferred, however, to take a personal view of the question, and expressed her sarcastic regret that she had not known before that she had been indebted to the great flume and ditch at Excelsior for the pleasure of his acquaintance. This pert remark occasioned some explanation, which ended in the girl's accepting a kiss in lieu of more logical argument. Nevertheless, she was still conscious of an inward irritation — always distinct from her singular and perfectly material passion — which found vent as the difficulties of their undeviating progress through the underbrush increased. At last she lost her shoe again, and stopped short. "It's a pity your Indian friends did not christen you 'Wild Mustard' or 'Clover,'" she said satirically, "that you might have had some sympathies and longings for the open fields instead of these horrid jungles! I know we will not get back in time."

Unfortunately, Low accepted this speech literally and with his remorseless gravity. "If my name annoys you, I can get it changed by the legislature, you know, and I can find out what my father's name was, and take that. My mother, who died in giving me birth, was the daughter of a chief."

"Then your mother was really an Indian?" said Nellie, "and you are" — She stopped short.

"But I told you all this the day we first met," said Low, with grave astonishment. "Don't you remember our long talk coming from church?"

"No," said Nellie, coldly, "you did n't tell me." But she was obliged to drop her eyes before the unwavering, undeniable truthfulness of his.

"You have forgotten," he said calmly; "but it is only right you should have your own way in disposing of a name that I have cared little for; and as you're to have a share of it" —

"Yes, but it's getting late, and if we are not going forward" — interrupted the girl impatiently.

"We *are* going forward," said Low imperturbably; "but I wanted to tell you, as we were speaking on *that* subject" (Nellie looked at her watch), "I've been offered the place of botanist and naturalist in Professor Grant's survey of Mount Shasta, and if I take it — why when I come back, darling — well" —

"But you're not going just yet," broke in Nellie, with a new expression in her face.

"No."

"Then we need not talk of it now," she said with animation.

Her sudden vivacity relieved him. "I see what's the matter," he said gently, looking down at her feet, "these little shoes were not made to keep step with a moccasin. We must try another way." He stooped as if to secure the erring buskin, but suddenly lifted her like a child to his shoulder. "There," he continued, placing her arm around his neck, "you are clear of the ferns and brambles now, and we can go on. Are you comfortable?" He looked up, read her answer in her burning eyes and the warm lips pressed to his forehead at the roots of his straight dark hair, and again moved onward as in a mesmeric dream. But he did not swerve from his direct

course, and with a final dash through the undergrowth parted the leafy curtain before the spring.

At first the young girl was dazzled by the strong light that came from a rent in the interwoven arches of the wood. The breach had been caused by the huge bulk of one of the great giants that had half fallen, and was lying at a steep angle against one of its mightiest brethren, having borne down a lesser tree in the arc of its downward path. Two of the roots, as large as younger trees, tossed their blackened and bare limbs high in the air. The spring — the insignificant cause of this vast disruption — gurgled, flashed, and sparkled at the base; the limpid baby fingers that had laid bare the foundations of that fallen column played with the still clinging rootlets, laved the fractured and twisted limbs, and, widening, filled with sleeping water the graves from which they had been torn.

"It had been going on for years, down there," said Low, pointing to a cavity from which the fresh water now slowly welled, "but it had been quickened by the rising of the subterranean springs and rivers which always occurs at a certain stage of the dry season. I remember that on that very night — for it happened a little after midnight, when all sounds are more audible — I was troubled and oppressed in my sleep by what you would call a nightmare; a feeling as if I was kept down by bonds and pinions that I longed to break. And then I heard a crash in this direction, and the first streak of morning brought me the sound and scent of water. Six months afterwards I chanced to find my way here, as I told you, and gave it your name. I did not dream that I should ever stand beside it with you, and have you christen it yourself."

He unloosed the cup from his flask, and filling it at the spring handed it to her. But the young girl leant

over the pool, and pouring the water idly back said, "I'd rather put my feet in it. May n't I?"

"I don't understand you," he said wonderingly.

"My feet are *so* hot and dusty. The water looks deliciously cool. May I?"

"Certainly."

He turned away as Nellie, with apparent unconsciousness, seated herself on the bank, and removed her shoes and stockings. When she had dabbled her feet a few moments in the pool, she said over her shoulder —

"We can talk just as well, can't we?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, why did n't you come to church more often, and why did n't you think of telling father that you were convicted of sin and wanted to be baptized?"

"I don't know," hesitated the young man.

"Well, you lost the chance of having father convert you, baptize you, and take you into full church fellowship."

"I never thought," — he began.

"You never thought. Are n't you a Christian?"

"I suppose so."

"He supposes so! Have you no convictions — no professions?"

"But, Nellie, I never thought that you" —

"Never thought that I — what? Do you think that I could ever be anything to a man who did not believe in justification by faith, or in the covenant of church fellowship? Do you think father would let me?"

In his eagerness to defend himself he stepped to her side. But seeing her little feet shining through the dark water, like outcroppings of delicately veined quartz, he stopped embarrassed. Miss Nellie, however, leaped to one foot, and, shaking the other over the pool, put her hand on his shoulder to steady herself. "You have n't

got a towel — or," she said dubiously, looking at her small handkerchief, "anything to dry them on?"

But Low did not, as she perhaps expected, offer his own handkerchief.

"If you take a bath after our fashion," he said gravely, "you must learn to dry yourself after our fashion."

Lifting her again lightly in his arms, he carried her a few steps to the sunny opening, and bade her bury her feet in the dried mosses and baked withered grasses that were bleaching in a hollow. The young girl uttered a cry of childish delight, as the soft ciliated fibres touched her sensitive skin.

"It is healing, too," continued Low; "a moccasin filled with it after a day on the trail makes you all right again."

But Miss Nellie seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Is that the way the squaws bathe and dry themselves?"

"I don't know; you forget I was a boy when I left them."

"And you're sure you never knew any?"

"None."

The young girl seemed to derive some satisfaction in moving her feet up and down for several minutes among the grasses in the hollow; then, after a pause, said, "You are quite certain I am the first woman that ever touched this spring?"

"Not only the first woman, but the first human being, except myself."

"How nice!"

They had taken each other's hands; seated side by side, they leaned against a curving elastic root that half supported, half encompassed them. The girl's capricious, fitful manner succumbed as before to the near con-

tact of her companion. Looking into her eyes, Low fell into a sweet, selfish lover's monologue, descriptive of his past and present feelings towards her, which she accepted with a heightened color, a slight exchange of sentiment, and a strange curiosity. The sun had painted their half-embraced silhouettes against the slanting tree-trunk, and began to decline unnoticed; the ripple of the water mingling with their whispers came as one sound to the listening ear; even their eloquent silences were as deep, and, I wot, perhaps as dangerous, as the darkened pool that filled so noiselessly a dozen yards away. So quiet were they that the tremor of invading wings once or twice shook the silence, or the quick scamper of frightened feet rustled the dead grass. But in the midst of a prolonged stillness the young man sprang up so suddenly that Nellie was still half clinging to his neck as he stood erect. "Hush!" he whispered; "some one is near!"

He disengaged her anxious hands gently, leaped upon the slanting tree-trunk, and running half-way up its incline with the agility of a squirrel, stretched himself at full length upon it and listened.

To the impatient, inexplicably startled girl, it seemed an age before he rejoined her.

"You are safe," he said; "he's going by the western trail toward Indian Spring."

"Who is *he*?" she asked, biting her lips with a poorly restrained gesture of mortification and disappointment.

"Some stranger," replied Low.

"As long as he was n't coming here, why did you give me such a fright?" she said pettishly. "Are you nervous because a single wayfarer happens to stray here?"

"It was no wayfarer, for he tried to keep near the trail," said Low. "He was a stranger to the wood, for he lost his way every now and then. He was seeking or expecting some one, for he stopped frequently and waited or

listened. He had not walked far, for he wore spurs that tinkled and caught in the brush; and yet he had not ridden here, for no horse's hoofs passed the road since we have been here. He must have come from Indian Spring."

"And you heard all that when you listened just now?" asked Nellie half disdainfully.

Impervious to her incredulity, Low turned his calm eyes on her face. Certainly, I'll bet my life on what I say. Tell me: do you know anybody in Indian Spring who would likely spy upon you?"

The young girl was conscious of a certain ill-defined uneasiness, but answered, "No."

"Then it was not *you* he was seeking," said Low thoughtfully. Miss Nellie had not time to notice the emphasis, for he added, "You must go at once, and lest you have been followed I will show you another way back to Indian Spring. It is longer, and you must hasten. Take your shoes and stockings with you until we are out of the bush."

He raised her again in his arms and strode once more out through the covert into the dim aisles of the wood. They spoke but little; she could not help feeling that some other discordant element, affecting him more strongly than it did her, had come between them, and was half perplexed and half frightened. At the end of ten minutes he seated her upon a fallen branch, and telling her he would return by the time she had resumed her shoes and stockings glided from her like a shadow. She would have uttered an indignant protest at being left alone, but he was gone ere she could detain him. For a moment she thought she hated him. But when she had mechanically shod herself once more, not without nervous shivers at every falling needle, he was at her side.

"Do you know any one who wears a frieze coat like

that?" he asked, handing her a few torn shreds of wool affixed to a splinter of bark.

Miss Nellie instantly recognized the material of a certain sporting-coat worn by Mr. Jack Brace on festive occasions, but a strange yet infallible instinct that was part of her nature made her instantly disclaim all knowledge of it.

"No," she said.

"Not any one who scents himself with some doctor's stuff like cologne?" continued Low, with the disgust of keen olfactory sensibilities.

Again Miss Nellie recognized the perfume with which the gallant expressman was wont to make redolent her little parlor, but again she avowed no knowledge of its possessor. "Well," returned Low, with some disappointment, "such a man has been here. Be on your guard. Let us go at once."

She required no urging to hasten her steps, but hurried breathlessly at his side. He had taken a new trail by which they left the wood at right angles with the highway, two miles away. Following an almost effaced mule track along a slight depression of the plain, deep enough, however, to hide them from view, he accompanied her, until, rising to the level again, she saw they were beginning to approach the highway and the distant roofs of Indian Spring. "Nobody meeting you now," he whispered, "would suspect where you had been. Good night! until next week — remember."

They pressed each other's hands, and standing on the slight ridge outlined against the paling sky, in full view of the highway, parting carelessly, as if they had been chance met travellers. But Nellie could not restrain a parting backward glance as she left the ridge. Low had descended to the deserted trail, and was running swiftly in the direction of the Carquinez Woods.