

CHAPTER IV.

TERESA awoke with a start. It was day already, but how far advanced the even, unchanging, soft twilight of the woods gave no indication. Her companion had vanished, and to her bewildered senses so had the camp-fire, even to its embers and ashes. Was she awake, or had she wandered away unconsciously in the night? One glance at the tree above her dissipated the fancy. There was the opening of her quaint retreat and the hanging strips of bark, and at the foot of the opposite tree lay the carcass of the bear. It had been skinned, and, as Teresa thought with an inward shiver, already looked half its former size.

Not yet accustomed to the fact that a few steps in either direction around the circumference of those great trunks produced the sudden appearance or disappearance of any figure, Teresa uttered a slight scream as her young companion unexpectedly stepped to her side. "You see a change here," he said; "the stamped-out ashes of the camp-fire lie under the brush," and he pointed to some cleverly scattered boughs and strips of bark which completely effaced the traces of last night's bivouac. "We can't afford to call the attention of any packer or hunter who might straggle this way to this particular spot and this particular tree; the more naturally," he added, "as they always prefer to camp over an old fire." Accepting this explanation meekly, as partly a reproach for her caprice of the previous night, Teresa hung her head.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "but wouldn't that," pointing to the carcass of the bear, "have made them curious?"

But Low's logic was relentless.

"By this time there would have been little left to excite curiosity if you had been willing to leave those beasts to their work."

"I'm very sorry," repeated the woman, her lips quivering.

"They are the scavengers of the wood," he continued in a lighter tone; "if you stay here you must try to use them to keep your house clean."

Teresa smiled nervously.

"I mean that they shall finish their work to-night," he added, "and I shall build another camp-fire for us a mile from here until they do."

But Teresa caught his sleeve.

"No," she said hurriedly, "don't, please, for me. You must not take the trouble, nor the risk. Hear me; do, please. I can bear it, I *will* bear it — to-night. I would have borne it last night, but it was so strange — and" — she passed her hands over her forehead — "I think I must have been half mad. But I am not so foolish now."

She seemed so broken and despondent that he replied reassuringly: "Perhaps it would be better that I should find another hiding-place for you, until I can dispose of that carcass, so that it will not draw dogs after the wolves, and men after *them*. Besides, your friend the sheriff will probably remember the bear when he remembers anything, and try to get on its track again."

"He's a conceited fool," broke in Teresa in a high voice, with a slight return of her old fury, "or he'd have guessed where that shot came from; and," she added in a lower tone, looking down at her limp and nerveless fingers, "he wouldn't have let a poor, weak, nervous wretch like me get away."

"But his deputy may put two and two together, and connect your escape with it."

Teresa's eyes flashed. "It would be like the dog, just to save his pride, to swear it was an ambush of my friends, and that he was overpowered by numbers. Oh yes! I see it all!" she almost screamed, lashing herself into a rage at the bare contemplation of this diminution of her glory. "That's the dirty lie he tells everywhere, and is telling now."

She stamped her feet and glanced savagely around, as if at any risk to proclaim the falsehood. Low turned his impassive, truthful face towards her.

"Sheriff Dunn," he began gravely, "is a politician, and a fool when he takes to the trail as a hunter of man or beast. But he is not a coward nor a liar. Your chances would be better if he were — if he laid your escape to an ambush of your friends, than if his pride held you alone responsible."

"If he's such a good man, why do you hesitate?" she replied bitterly. "Why don't you give me up at once, and do a service to one of your friends?"

"I do not even know him," returned Low, opening his clear eyes upon her. "I've promised to hide you here, and I shall hide you as well from him as from anybody."

Teresa did not reply, but suddenly dropping down upon the ground buried her face in her hands and began to sob convulsively. Low turned impassively away, and putting aside the bark curtain climbed into the hollow tree. In a few moments he reappeared, laden with provisions and a few simple cooking utensils, and touched her lightly on the shoulder. She looked up timidly; the paroxysm had passed, but her lashes yet glittered.

"Come," he said, "come and get some breakfast. I find you have eaten nothing since you have been here — twenty-four hours."

"I did n't know it," she said, with a faint smile. Then seeing his burden, and possessed by a new and strange

desire for some menial employment, she said hurriedly, "Let me carry something — do, please," and even tried to disencumber him.

Half annoyed, Low at last yielded, and handing his rifle said, "There, then, take that; but be careful — it's loaded!"

A cruel blush burnt the woman's face to the roots of her hair as she took the weapon hesitatingly in her hand.

"No!" she stammered, hurriedly lifting her shame-suffused eyes to his; "no! no!"

He turned away with an impatience which showed her how completely gratuitous had been her agitation and its significance, and said, "Well, then give it back if you are afraid of it." But she as suddenly declined to return it; and shouldering it deftly, took her place by his side. Silently they moved from the hollow tree together.

During their walk she did not attempt to invade his taciturnity. Nevertheless she was as keenly alive and watchful of his every movement and gesture as if she had hung enchanted on his lips. The unerring way with which he pursued a viewless, undeviating path through those trackless woods, his quick reconnaissance of certain trees or openings, his mute inspection of some almost imperceptible footprint of bird or beast, his critical examination of certain plants which he plucked and deposited in his deerskin haversack, were not lost on the quick-witted woman. As they gradually changed the clear, unencumbered aisles of the central woods for a more tangled undergrowth, Teresa felt that subtle admiration which culminates in imitation, and simulating perfectly the step, tread, and easy swing of her companion, followed so accurately his lead that she won a gratified exclamation from him when their goal was reached — a broken, blackened shaft, splintered by long-forgotten lightning, in the centre of a tangled carpet of wood-clover.

"I don't wonder you distanced the deputy," he said cheerfully, throwing down his burden, "if you can take the hunting-path like that. In a few days, if you stay here, I can venture to trust you alone for a little *pasear* when you are tired of the tree."

Teresa looked pleased, but busied herself with arrangements for the breakfast, while he gathered the fuel for the roaring fire which soon blazed beside the shattered tree.

Teresa's breakfast was a success. It was a revelation to the young nomad, whose ascetic habits and simple tastes were usually content with the most primitive forms of frontier cookery. It was at least a surprise to him to know that without extra trouble kneaded flour, water, and saleratus need not be essentially heavy; that coffee need not be boiled with sugar to the consistency of syrup; that even that rarest delicacy, small shreds of venison covered with ashes and broiled upon the end of a ramrod boldly thrust into the flames, would be better and even more expeditiously cooked upon burning coals. Moved in his practical nature, he was surprised to find this curious creature of disorganized nerves and useless impulses informed with an intelligence that did not preclude the welfare of humanity or the existence of a soul. He respected her for some minutes, until in the midst of a culinary triumph a big tear dropped and spluttered in the saucepan. But he forgave the irrelevancy by taking no notice of it, and by doing full justice to that particular dish.

Nevertheless, he asked several questions based upon these recently discovered qualities. It appeared that in the old days of her wanderings with the circus troupe she had often been forced to undertake this nomadic house-keeping. But she "despised it," had never done it since, and always had refused to do it for "him"—the

personal pronoun referring, as Low understood, to her lover, Curson. Not caring to revive these memories further, Low briefly concluded:—

"I don't know what you were, or what you may be, but from what I see of you you've got all the *sabe* of a frontiersman's wife."

She stopped and looked at him, and then, with an impulse of impudence that only half concealed a more serious vanity, asked, "Do you think I might have made a good squaw?"

"I don't know," he replied quietly. "I never saw enough of them to know."

Teresa, confident from his clear eyes that he spoke the truth, but having nothing ready to follow this calm disposal of her curiosity, relapsed into silence.

The meal finished, Teresa washed their scant table equipage in a little spring near the camp-fire; where, catching sight of her disordered dress and collar, she rapidly threw her shawl, after the national fashion, over her shoulder and pinned it quickly. Low *cached* the remaining provisions and the few cooking-utensils under the dead embers and ashes, obliterating all superficial indication of their camp-fire as deftly and artistically as he had before.

"There is n't the ghost of a chance," he said in explanation, "that anybody but you or I will set foot here before we come back to supper, but it's well to be on guard. I'll take you back to the cabin now, though I bet you could find your way there as well as I can."

On their way back Teresa ran ahead of her companion, and plucking a few tiny leaves from a hidden oasis in the bark-strewn trail brought them to him.

"That's the kind you're looking for, is n't it?" she said, half timidly.

"It is," responded Low, in gratified surprise; "but how did you know it? You're not a botanist, are you?"

"I reckon not," said Teresa; "but you picked some when we came, and I noticed what they were."

Here was indeed another revelation. Low stopped and gazed at her with such frank, open, utterly unabashed curiosity that her black eyes fell before him.

"And do you think," he asked with logical deliberation, "that you could find any plant from another I should give you?"

"Yes."

"Or from a drawing of it?"

"Yes; perhaps even if you described it to me."

A half-confidential, half fraternal silence followed.

"I tell you what. I've got a book" —

"I know it," interrupted Teresa; "full of these things."

"Yes. Do you think you could" —

"Of course I could," broke in Teresa, again.

"But you don't know what I mean," said the imperturbable Low.

"Certainly I do. Why, find 'em, and preserve all the different ones for you to write under — that's it, is n't it?"

Low nodded his head, gratified but not entirely convinced that she had fully estimated the magnitude of the endeavor.

"I suppose," said Teresa, in the feminine postscriptum voice which it would seem entered even the philosophical calm of the aisles they were treading — "I suppose that *she* places great value on them?"

Low had indeed heard Science personified before, nor was it at all impossible that the singular woman walking by his side had also. He said "Yes;" but added, in mental reference to the Linnean Society of San Francisco, that "*they* were rather particular about the rarer kinds."

Content as Teresa had been to believe in Low's tender

relations with some favored *one* of her sex, this frank confession of a plural devotion staggered her.

"They?" she repeated.

"Yes," he continued calmly. "The Botanical Society I correspond with are more particular than the Government Survey."

"Then you are doing this for a society?" demanded Teresa, with a stare.

"Certainly. I'm making a collection and classification of specimens. I intend — but what are you looking at?"

Teresa had suddenly turned away. Putting his hand lightly on her shoulder, the young man brought her face to face with him again. She was laughing.

"I thought all the while it was for a girl," she said; "and" — But here the mere effort of speech sent her off into an audible and genuine outburst of laughter. It was the first time he had seen her even smile other than bitterly. Characteristically unconscious of any humor in her error, he remained unembarrassed. But he could not help noticing a change in the expression of her face, her voice, and even her intonation. It seemed as if that fit of laughter had loosed the last ties that bound her to a self-imposed character, had swept away the last barrier between her and her healthier nature, had dispossessed a painful unreality, and relieved the morbid tension of a purely nervous attitude. The change in her utterance and the resumption of her softer Spanish accent seemed to have come with her confidences, and Low took leave of her before their sylvan cabin with a comrade's heartiness, and a complete forgetfulness that her voice had ever irritated him.

When he returned that afternoon he was startled to find the cabin empty. But instead of bearing any appearance of disturbance or hurried flight, the rude interior

seemed to have magically assumed a decorous order and cleanliness unknown before. Fresh bark hid the inequalities of the floor. The skins and blankets were folded in the corners, the rude shelves were carefully arranged, even a few tall ferns and bright but quickly fading flowers were disposed around the blackened chimney. She had evidently availed herself of the change of clothing he had brought her, for her late garments were hanging from the hastily-devised wooden pegs driven in the wall. The young man gazed around him with mixed feelings of gratification and uneasiness. His presence had been dispossessed in a single hour; his ten years of lonely habitation had left no trace that this woman had not effaced with a deft move of her hand. More than that, it looked as if she had always occupied it; and it was with a singular conviction that even when she should occupy it no longer it would only revert to him as her dwelling that he dropped the bark shutters athwart the opening, and left it to follow her.

To his quick ear, fine eye, and abnormal senses, this was easy enough. She had gone in the direction of this morning's camp. Once or twice he paused with a half-gesture of recognition and a characteristic "Good!" at the place where she had stopped, but was surprised to find that her main course had been as direct as his own. Deviating from this direct line with Indian precaution he first made a circuit of the camp, and approached the shattered trunk from the opposite direction. He consequently came upon Teresa unawares. But the momentary astonishment and embarrassment were his alone.

He scarcely recognized her. She was wearing the garments he had brought her the day before — a certain discarded gown of Miss Nellie Wynn, which he had hurriedly begged from her under the pretext of clothing the wife of a distressed over-land emigrant then on the way

to the mines. Although he had satisfied his conscience with the intention of confessing the pious fraud to her when Teresa was gone and safe from pursuit, it was not without a sense of remorse that he witnessed the sacrilegious transformation. The two women were nearly the same height and size; and although Teresa's maturer figure accented the outlines more strongly, it was still becoming enough to increase his irritation.

Of this becomingness she was doubtless unaware at the moment that he surprised her. She was conscious of having "a change," and this had emboldened her to "do her hair" and otherwise compose herself. After their greeting she was the first to allude to the dress, regretting that it was not more of a rough disguise, and that, as she must now discard the national habit of wearing her shawl "manta" fashion over her head, she wanted a hat. "But you must not," she said, "borrow any more dresses for me from your young woman. Buy them for me at some shop. They left me enough money for that." Low gently put aside the few pieces of gold she had drawn from her pocket, and briefly reminded her of the suspicion such a purchase by him would produce. "That's so," she said, with a laugh. "*Caramba!* what a mule I'm becoming! Ah! wait a moment. I have it! Buy me a common felt hat — a man's hat — as if for yourself, as a change to that animal," pointing to the fox-tailed cap he wore summer and winter, "and I'll show you a trick. I have n't run a theatrical wardrobe for nothing." Nor had she, for the hat thus procured, a few days later, became, by the aid of a silk handkerchief and a bluejay's feather, a fascinating "pork pie."

Whatever cause of annoyance to Low still lingered in Teresa's dress, it was soon forgotten in a palpable evidence of Teresa's value as botanical assistant. It appeared that during the afternoon she had not only dupli-

cated his specimens, but had discovered one or two rare plants as yet unclassified in the flora of the Carquinez Woods. He was delighted, and in turn, over the camp-fire, yielded up some details of his present life and some of his earlier recollections.

"You don't remember anything of your father?" she asked. "Did he ever try to seek you out?"

"No! Why should he?" replied the imperturbable Low; "he was not a Cherokee."

"No, he was a beast," responded Teresa promptly. "And your mother — do you remember her?"

"No, I think she died."

"You *think* she died? Don't you know?"

"No!"

"Then you're another!" said Teresa. Notwithstanding this frankness, they shook hands for the night; Teresa nestling like a rabbit in a hollow by the side of the camp-fire; Low with his feet towards it, Indian-wise, and his head and shoulders pillowed on his haversack, only half distinguishable in the darkness beyond.

With such trivial details three uneventful days slipped by. Their retreat was undisturbed, nor could Low detect, by the least evidence to his acute perceptive faculties, that any intruding feet had since crossed the belt of shade. The echoes of passing events at Indian Spring had recorded the escape of Teresa as occurring at a remote and purely imaginative distance, and her probable direction the county of Yolo.

"Can you remember," he one day asked her, "what time it was when you cut the *riata* and got away?"

Teresa pressed her hands upon her eyes and temples.

"About three, I reckon."

"And you were here at seven; you could have covered some ground in four hours?"

"Perhaps — I don't know," she said, her voice taking

up its old quality again. "Don't ask me — I ran all the way."

Her face was quite pale as she removed her hands from her eyes, and her breath came as quickly as if she had just finished that race for life.

"Then you think I am safe here?" she added, after a pause.

"Perfectly — until they find you are *not* in Yolo. Then they'll look here. And *that's* the time for you to go *there*." Teresa smiled timidly.

"It will take them some time to search Yolo — unless," she added, "you're tired of me here." The charming *non sequitur* did not, however, seem to strike the young man. "I've got time yet to find a few more plants for you," she suggested.

"Oh, certainly!"

"And give you a few more lessons in cooking."

"Perhaps."

The conscientious and literal Low was beginning to doubt if she were really practical. How otherwise could she trifle with such a situation?

It must be confessed that that day and the next she did trifle with it. She gave herself up to a grave and delicious languor that seemed to flow from shadow and silence and permeate her entire being. She passed hours in a thoughtful repose of mind and spirit that seemed to fall like balm from those steadfast guardians, and distill their gentle ether in her soul; or breathed into her listening ear immunity from the forgotten past, and security for the present. If there was no dream of the future in this calm, even recurrence of placid existence, so much the better. The simple details of each succeeding day, the quaint housekeeping, the brief companionship and coming and going of her young host — himself at best a crystallized personification of the sedate and hospitable woods —

satisfied her feeble cravings. She no longer regretted the inferior passion that her fears had obliged her to take the first night she came; she began to look up to this young man — so much younger than herself — without knowing what it meant; it was not until she found that this attitude did not detract from his picturesqueness that she discovered herself seeking for reasons to degrade him from this seductive eminence.

A week had elapsed with little change. On two days he had been absent all day, returning only in time to sup in the hollow tree, which, thanks to the final removal of the dead bear from its vicinity, was now considered a safer retreat than the exposed camp-fire. On the first of these occasions she received him with some preoccupation, paying but little heed to the scant gossip he brought from Indian Spring, and retiring early under the plea of fatigue, that he might seek his own distant camp-fire, which, thanks to her stronger nerves and regained courage, she no longer required so near. On the second occasion, he found her writing a letter more or less blotted with her tears. When it was finished, she begged him to post it at Indian Spring, where in two days an answer would be returned, under cover, to him.

"I hope you will be satisfied then," she added.

"Satisfied with what?" queried the young man.

"You'll see," she replied, giving him her cold hand. "Good-night."

"But can't you tell me now?" he remonstrated, retaining her hand.

"Wait two days longer — it is n't much," was all she vouchsafed to answer.

The two days passed. Their former confidence and good fellowship were fully restored when the morning came on which he was to bring the answer from the post-office at Indian Spring. He had talked again of his fu-

ture, and had recorded his ambition to procure the appointment of naturalist to a Government Surveying Expedition. She had even jocularly proposed to dress herself in man's attire and "enlist" as his assistant.

"But you will be safe with your friends, I hope, by that time," responded Low.

"Safe with my friends," she repeated in a lower voice. "Safe with my friends — yes!" An awkward silence followed; Teresa broke it gayly: "But your girl, your sweetheart, my benefactor — will *she* let you go?"

"I have n't told her yet," said Low, gravely, "but I don't see why she should object."

"Object, indeed!" interrupted Teresa in a high voice and a sudden and utterly gratuitous indignation; "how should she? I'd like to see her do it!"

She accompanied him some distance to the intersection of the trail, where they parted in good spirits. On the dusty plain without a gale was blowing that rocked the high tree-tops above her, but, tempered and subdued, entered the low aisles with a fluttering breath of morning and a sound like the cooing of doves. Never had the wood before shown so sweet a sense of security from the turmoil and tempest of the world beyond; never before had an intrusion from the outer life — even in the shape of a letter — seemed so wicked a desecration. Tempted by the solicitation of air and shade, she lingered, with Low's herbarium slung on her shoulder.

A strange sensation, like a shiver, suddenly passed across her nerves, and left them in a state of rigid tension. With every sense morbidly acute, with every faculty strained to its utmost, the subtle instincts of Low's woodcraft transformed and possessed her. She knew it now! A new element was in the wood — a strange being — another life — another man approaching! She did not even raise her head to look about her, but darted with the pre-

cision and fleetness of an arrow in the direction of her tree. But her feet were arrested, her limbs paralyzed, her very existence suspended, by the sound of a voice:

"Teresa!"

It was a voice that had rung in her ears for the last two years in all phases of intensity, passion, tenderness, and anger; a voice upon whose modulations, rude and unmusical though they were, her heart and soul had hung in transport or anguish. But it was a chime that had rung its last peal to her senses as she entered the Carquinez Woods, and for the last week had been as dead to her as a voice from the grave. It was the voice of her lover — Dick Curson!

CHAPTER V.

THE wind was blowing towards the stranger, so that he was nearly upon her when Teresa first took the alarm. He was a man over six feet in height, strongly built, with a slight tendency to a roundness of bulk which suggested reserved rather than impeded energy. His thick beard and moustache were closely cropped around a small and handsome mouth that lisped except when he was excited, but always kept fellowship with his blue eyes in a perpetual smile of half-cynical good-humor. His dress was superior to that of the locality; his general expression that of a man of the world, albeit a world of San Francisco, Sacramento, and Murderer's Bar. He advanced towards her with a laugh and an outstretched hand.

"*You* here!" she gasped, drawing back.

Apparently neither surprised nor mortified at this reception, he answered frankly, "Yeth. You did n't expect me, I know. But Doloreth showed me the letter you wrote her, and — well — here I am, ready to help you, with two men and a thpare horth waiting outside the woodth on the blind trail."

"You — *you* — here?" she only repeated.

— Curson shrugged his shoulders. "Yeth. Of courth you never expected to thee me again, and leatht of all *here*. I'll admit that; I'll thay I would n't if I'd been in your plathe. I'll go further, and thay you did n't want to thee me again — anywhere. But it all cometh to the thame thing; here I am; I read the letter you wrote Doloreth. I read how you were hiding here, under Dunn'th very nothe, with his whole pothe out, cavorting