

## CHAPTER VII.

It was quite dark when Mr. Jack Brace stopped before Father Wynn's open door. The windows were also invitingly open to the wayfarer, as were the pastoral counsels of Father Wynn, delivered to some favored guest within, in a tone of voice loud enough for a pulpit. Jack Brace paused. The visitor was the convalescent sheriff, Jim Dunn, who had publicly commemorated his recovery by making his first call upon the father of his inamorata. The Reverend Mr. Wynn had been expatiating upon the unremitting heat as a possible precursor of forest fires, and exhibiting some catholic knowledge of the designs of a Deity in that regard, and what should be the policy of the Legislature, when Mr. Brace concluded to enter. Mr. Wynn and the wounded man, who occupied an arm-chair by the window, were the only occupants of the room. But in spite of the former's ostentatious greeting, Brace could see that his visit was inopportune and unwelcome. The sheriff nodded a quick, impatient recognition, which, had it not been accompanied by an anathema on the heat, might have been taken as a personal insult. Neither spoke of Miss Nellie, although it was patent to Brace that they were momentarily expecting her. All of which went far to strengthen a certain wavering purpose in his mind.

"Ah, ha! strong language, Mr. Dunn," said Father Wynn, referring to the sheriff's adjuration, "but 'out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh.' Job, sir, cursed, we are told, and even expressed himself in vigorous Hebrew regarding his birthday. Ha, ha! I'm not

opposed to that. When I have often wrestled with the spirit I confess I have sometimes said, 'D—n you.' Yes, sir, 'D—n you.'"

There was something so unutterably vile in the reverend gentleman's utterance and emphasis of this oath that the two men, albeit both easy and facile blasphemers, felt shocked; as the purest of actresses is apt to overdo the rakishness of a gay Lothario, Father Wynn's immaculate conception of an imprecation was something terrible. But he added, "The law ought to interfere with the reckless use of camp-fires in the woods in such weather by packers and prospectors."

"It is n't so much the work of white men," broke in Brace, "as it is of Greasers, Chinamen, and Diggers, especially Diggers. There's that blasted Low, ranges the whole Carquinez Woods as if they were his. I reckon he ain't particular just where he throws his matches."

"But he's not a Digger; he's a Cherokee, and only a half-breed at that," interpolated Wynn. "Unless," he added, with the artful suggestion of the betrayed trust of a too credulous Christian, "he deceived me in this as in other things."

In what other things Low had deceived him he did not say; but, to the astonishment of both men, Dunn growled a dissent to Brace's proposition. Either from some secret irritation with that possible rival, or impatience at the prolonged absence of Nellie, he had "had enough of that sort of hog-wash ladled out to him for genuine liquor." As to the Carquinez Woods, he [Dunn] "did n't know why Low had n't as much right there as if he'd grabbed it under a preëmption law and did n't live there." With this hint at certain speculations of Father Wynn in public lands for a homestead, he added that "If they [Brace and Wynn] could bring him along



any older American settler than an Indian, they might rake down his [Dunn's] pile." Unprepared for this turn in the conversation, Wynn hastened to explain that he did not refer to the pure aborigine, whose gradual extinction no one regretted more than himself, but to the mongrel, who inherited only the vices of civilization. "There should be a law, sir, against the mingling of races. There are men, sir, who violate the laws of the Most High by living with Indian women—squaw men, sir, as they are called."

Dunn rose with a face livid with weakness and passion. "Who dares say that? They are a d—d sight better than sneaking Northern Abolitionists, who married their daughters to buck niggers like"—But a spasm of pain withheld this Parthian shot at the politics of his two companions, and he sank back helplessly in his chair.

An awkward silence ensued. The three men looked at each other in embarrassment and confusion. Dunn felt that he had given way to a gratuitous passion; Wynn had a vague presentiment that he had said something that imperiled his daughter's prospects; and Brace was divided between an angry retort and the secret purpose already alluded to.

"It's all the blasted heat," said Dunn, with a forced smile, pushing away the whiskey which Wynn had ostentatiously placed before him.

"Of course," said Wynn hastily; "only it's a pity Nellie ain't here to give you her smelling-salts. She ought to be back now," he added, no longer mindful of Brace's presence; "the coach is over-due now, though I reckon the heat made Yuba Bill take it easy at the up grade."

"If you mean the coach from Indian Spring," said Brace quietly, "it's in already; but Miss Nellie did n't come on it."

"Maybe she got out at the Crossing," said Wynn cheerfully; "she sometimes does."

"She did n't take the coach at Indian Spring," returned Brace, "because I saw it leave, and passed it on Buckskin ten minutes ago, coming up the hills."

"She's stopped over at Burnham's," said Wynn reflectively. Then, in response to the significant silence of his guests, he added, in a tone of chagrin which his forced heartiness could not disguise, "Well, boys, it's a disappointment all round; but we must take the lesson as it comes. I'll go over to the coach office and see if she's sent any word. Make yourselves at home until I return."

When the door had closed behind him, Brace arose and took his hat as if to go. With his hand on the lock, he turned to his rival, who, half-hidden in the gathering darkness, still seemed unable to comprehend his ill-luck.

"If you're waiting for that bald-headed fraud to come back with the truth about his daughter," said Brace coolly, "you'd better send for your things and take up your lodgings here."

"What do you mean?" said Dunn sternly.

"I mean that she's not at the Burnhams'; I mean that he does or does not know *where* she is, and that in either case he is not likely to give you information. But I can."

"You can?"

"Yes."

"Then, where is she?"

"In the Carquinez Woods, in the arms of the man you were just defending—Low, the half-breed."

The room had become so dark that from the road nothing could be distinguished. Only the momentary sound of struggling feet was heard.

"Sit down," said Brace's voice, "and don't be a fool."



You're too weak, and it ain't a fair fight. Let go your hold. I'm not lying — I wish to God I was!"

There was a silence, and Brace resumed, "We've been rivals, I know. Maybe I thought my chance as good as yours. If what I say ain't truth, we'll stand as we stood before; and if you're on the shoot, I'm your man when you like, where you like, or on sight if you choose. But I can't see another man played upon as I've been played upon — given dead away as I have been. It ain't on the square.

"There," he continued, after a pause, "that's right; now steady. Listen. A week ago that girl went down just like this to Indian Spring. It was given out, like this, that she went to the Burnhams'. I don't mind saying, Dunn, that I went down myself, all on the square, thinking I might get a show to talk to her, just as *you* might have done, you know, if you had my chance. I didn't come across her anywhere. But two men that I met thought they recognized her in a disguise going into the woods. Not suspecting anything, I went after her; saw her at a distance in the middle of the woods in another dress that I can swear to, and was just coming up to her when she vanished — went like a squirrel up a tree, or down like a gopher in the ground, but vanished."

"Is that all?" said Dunn's voice. "And just because you were a d—d fool, or had taken a little too much whiskey, you thought" —

"Steady! That's just what I said to myself," interrupted Brace coolly, "particularly when I saw her that same afternoon in another dress, saying good-by to the Burnhams, as fresh as a rose and as cold as those snow-peaks. Only one thing — she had a ring on her finger she never wore before, and didn't expect me to see."

"What if she did? She might have bought it. I

reckon she has n't to consult you," broke in Dunn's voice sternly.

"She did n't buy it," continued Brace quietly. "Low gave that Jew trader a bearskin in exchange for it, and presented it to her. I found that out two days afterwards. I found out that out of the whole afternoon she spent less than an hour with the Burnhams. I found out that she bought a duster like the disguise the two men saw her in. I found the yellow dress she wore that day hanging up in Low's cabin — the place where I saw her go — the *rendezvous where she meets him*. Oh, you're listenin', are you? Stop! SIT DOWN!"

"I discovered it by accident," continued the voice of Brace when all was again quiet; "it was hidden as only a squirrel or an Injin can hide when they improve upon nature. When I was satisfied that the girl had been in the woods, I was determined to find out where she vanished, and went there again. Prospecting around, I picked up at the foot of one of the biggest trees this yer old memorandum-book, with grasses and herbs stuck in it. I remembered that I'd heard old Wynn say that Low, like the d—d Digger that he was, collected these herbs; only he pretended it was for science. I reckoned the book was his and that he might n't be far away. I lay low and waited. Bimeby I saw a lizard running down the root. When he got sight of me he stopped."

"D—n the lizard! What's that got to do with where she is now?"

"Everything. That lizard had a piece of sugar in his mouth. Where did it come from? I made him drop it, and calculated he'd go back for more. He did. He scooted up that tree and slipped in under some hanging strips of bark. I shoved 'em aside, and found an opening to the hollow where they do their house-keeping."



"But you did n't see her there — and how do you know she is there now?"

"I determined to make it sure. When she left to-day, I started an hour ahead of her, and hid myself at the edge of the woods. An hour after the coach arrived at Indian Spring, she came there in a brown duster and was joined by him. I'd have followed them, but the d—d hound has the ears of a squirrel, and though I was five hundred yards from him he was on his guard."

"Guard be blessed! Was n't you armed? Why did n't you go for him?" said Dunn, furiously.

"I reckoned I'd leave that for you," said Brace coolly. "If he'd killed me, and if he'd even covered me with his rifle, he'd be sure to let daylight through me at double the distance. I should n't have been any better off, nor you either. If I'd killed *him*, it would have been your duty as sheriff to put me in jail; and I reckon it would n't have broken your heart, Jim Dunn, to have got rid of *two* rivals instead of one. Hullo! Where are you going?"

"Going?" said Dunn hoarsely. "Going to the Carquinez Woods, by God! to kill him before her. I'll risk it, if you dare n't. Let me succeed, and you can hang *me* and take the girl yourself."

"Sit down, sit down. Don't be a fool, Jim Dunn! You would n't keep the saddle a hundred yards. Did I say I would n't help you? No. If you're willing, we'll run the risk together, but it must be in my way. Hear me. I'll drive you down there in a buggy before daylight, and we'll surprise them in the cabin or as they leave the wood. But you must come as if to arrest him for some offense — say, as an escaped Digger from the Reservation, a dangerous tramp, a destroyer of public property in the forests, a suspected road agent, or anything to give you the right to hunt him. The exposure of him and Nellie, don't you see, must be accidental. If he

resists, kill him on the spot, and nobody'll blame you; if he goes peaceably with you, and you once get him in Excelsior jail, when the story gets out that he's taken the belle of Excelsior for his squaw, if you'd the angels for your posse you could n't keep the boys from hanging him to the first tree. What's that?"

He walked to the window, and looked out cautiously.

"If it was the old man coming back and listening," he said, after a pause, "it can't be helped. He'll hear it soon enough, if he don't suspect something already."

"Look yer, Brace," broke in Dunn hoarsely. "D—d if I understand you or you me. That dog Low has got to answer to *me*, not to the *law*! I'll take my risk of killing him, on sight and on the square. I don't reckon to handicap myself with a warrant, and I am not going to draw him out with a lie. You hear me? That's me all the time!"

"Then you calkilate to go down thar," said Brace contemptuously, "yell out for him and Nellie, and let him line you on a rest from the first tree as if you were a grizzly."

There was a pause. "What's that you were saying just now about a bearskin he sold?" asked Dunn slowly, as if reflecting.

"He exchanged a bearskin," replied Brace, "with a single hole right over the heart. He's a dead shot, I tell you."

"D—n his shooting," said Dunn. "I'm not thinking of that. How long ago did he bring in that bearskin?"

"About two weeks, I reckon. Why?"

"Nothing! Look yer, Brace, you mean well — thar's my hand. I'll go down with you there, but not as the sheriff. I'm going there as Jim Dunn, and you can come along as a white man, to see things fixed on the square. Come!"



Brace hesitated. You 'll think better of my plan before you get there ; but I 've said I 'd stand by you, and I will. Come, then. There 's no time to lose."

They passed out into the darkness together.

"What are you waiting for?" said Dunn impatiently, as Brace, who was supporting him by the arm, suddenly halted at the corner of the house.

"Some one was listening — did you not see him? Was it the old man?" asked Brace hurriedly.

"Blast the old man! It was only one of them Mexican packers chock-full of whiskey, and trying to hold up the house. What are you thinking of? We shall be late."

In spite of his weakness, the wounded man hurriedly urged Brace forward, until they reached the latter's lodgings. To his surprise, the horse and buggy were already before the door.

"Then you reckoned to go, any way?" said Dunn, with a searching look at his companion.

"I kalkilated *somebody* would go," returned Brace, evasively, patting the impatient Buckskin; "but come in and take a drink before we leave."

Dunn started out of a momentary abstraction, put his hand on his hip, and mechanically entered the house. They had scarcely raised the glasses to their lips when a sudden rattle of wheels was heard in the street. Brace set down his glass and ran to the window.

"It's the mare bolted," he said, with an oath. "We've kept her too long standing. Follow me;" and he dashed down the staircase into the street. Dunn followed with difficulty; when he reached the door he was confronted by his breathless companion. She's gone off on a run, and I'll swear there was a man in the buggy!" He stopped and examined the halter-strap, still fastened to the fence. "Cut! by God!"

Dunn turned pale with passion. "Who's got another horse and buggy?" he demanded.

"The new blacksmith in Main Street; but we won't get it by borrowing," said Brace.

"How, then?" asked Dunn savagely.

"Seize it, as the sheriff of Yuba and his deputy, pursuing a confederate of the Injin Low — THE HORSE THIEF!"