

remaining pride and glory of Low's race, was yet to be revealed to Wynn's civilized eyes.

The young man took the letter, and read it without changing a muscle, folded the ring in it, and dropped it into his haversack. Then he picked up his blanket, threw it over his shoulder, took his trusty rifle in his hand, and turned toward Wynn as if coldly surprised that he was still standing there.

"Are you — are you — going?" stammered Wynn.

"Are you *not*?" replied Low dryly, leaning on his rifle for a moment as if waiting for Wynn to precede him. The preacher looked at him a moment, mumbled something, and then shambled feebly and ineffectively down the staircase before Low, with a painful suggestion to the ordinary observer of being occasionally urged thereto by the moccasin of the young man behind him.

On reaching the lower hall, however, he endeavored to create a diversion in his favor by dashing into the bar-room and clapping the occupants on the back with indiscriminate playfulness. But here again he seemed to be disappointed. To his great discomfiture, a large man not only returned his salutation with powerful levity, but with equal playfulness seized him in his arms, and after an ingenious simulation of depositing him in the horse-trough set him down in affected amazement. "Bleth't if I did n't think from the weight of your hand it wath my old friend, Thacramento Bill," said Curson apologetically, with a wink at the bystanders. "That 'th the way Bill alwayth uthed to tackle hith friendth, till he wath one day bounthed by a prithe-fighter in Frithco, whom he had mithtaken for a mithionary." As Mr. Curson's reputation was of a quality that made any form of apology from him instantly acceptable, the amused spectators made way for him as, recognizing Low, who was just leaving the hotel, he turned coolly from them and walked towards him.

"Halloo!" he said, extending his hand. "You're the man I'm waiting for. Did you get a book from the exthpreth offithe latht night?"

"I did. Why?"

"It 'th all right. Ath I'm rethponthible for it, I only wanted to know."

"Did *you* send it?" asked Low, quickly fixing his eyes on his face.

"Well, not exactly *me*. But it 'th not worth making a mythtery of it. Teretha gave me a commithion to buy it and thend it to you anonymouthly. That 'th a woman 'th nonthenth, for how could thee get a retheipt for it?"

"Then it was *her* present," said Low gloomily.

"Of courthe. It wath n't mine, my boy. I'd have thent you a Tharp'th rifle in plathe of that muthe loader you carry, or thomething thenthible. But, I thay! what 'th up? You look ath if you had been running all night."

Low grasped his hand. "Thank you," he said hurriedly; "but it's nothing. Only I must be back to the woods early. Good-by."

But Curson retained Low's hand in his own powerful grip.

"I'll go with you a bit further," he said. "In fact, I've got thomething to thay to you; only don't be in thuch a hurry; the woodth can wait till you get there." Quietly compelling Low to alter his own characteristic Indian stride to keep pace with his, he went on: "I don't mind thaying I rather cottoned to you from the time you acted like a white man — no offenthe — to Teretha. She thayth you were left when a child lying round, jutht ath promithcuouthly ath she wath; and if I can do anything towardth putting you on the trail of your people, I'll do it. I know thome of the *voyageurth* who traded with the Cherokeeeth, and your father wath one — was n't



he?" He glanced at Low's utterly abstracted and immobile face. "I thay, you don't theem to take a hand in thith game, pardner. What 'th the row? Ith anything wrong over there?" and he pointed to the Carquinez Woods, which were just looming out of the morning horizon in the distance.

Low stopped. The last words of his companion seemed to recall him to himself. He raised his eyes automatically to the woods, and started.

"There *is* something wrong over there," he said breathlessly. "Look!"

"I thee nothing," said Curson, beginning to doubt Low's sanity; "nothing more than I thaw an hour ago."

"Look again. Don't you see that smoke rising straight up? It is n't blown over from the Divide; it's new smoke! The fire is in the woods!"

"I reckon that 'th so," muttered Curson, shading his eyes with his hand. "But, hullo! wait a minute! We'll get hortheth. I say!" he shouted, forgetting his lisp in his excitement — "stop!" But Low had already lowered his head and darted forward like an arrow.

In a few moments he had left not only his companion but the last straggling houses of the outskirts far behind him, and had struck out in a long, swinging trot for the disused "cut-off." Already he fancied he heard the note of clamor in Indian Spring, and thought he distinguished the sound of hurrying hoofs on the great highway. But the sunken trail hid it from his view. From the column of smoke now plainly visible in the growing morning light he tried to locate the scene of the conflagration. It was evidently not a fire advancing regularly from the outer skirt of the wood, communicated to it from the Divide; it was a local outburst near its centre. It was not in the direction of his cabin in the tree. There was no immediate danger to Teresa, unless fear drove her

beyond the confines of the wood into the hands of those who might recognize her. The screaming of jays and ravens above his head quickened his speed, as it heralded the rapid advance of the flames; and the unexpected apparition of a bounding body, flattened and flying over the yellow plain, told him that even the secure retreat of the mountain wild-cat had been invaded. A sudden recollection of Teresa's uncontrollable terror that first night smote him with remorse and redoubled his efforts. Alone in the track of these frantic and bewildered beasts, to what madness might she not be driven!

The sharp crack of a rifle from the highroad turned his course momentarily in that direction. The smoke was curling lazily over the heads of a party of men in the road, while the huge bulk of a grizzly was disappearing in the distance. A battue of the escaping animals had commenced! In the bitterness of his heart he caught at the horrible suggestion, and resolved to save her from them or die with her there.

How fast he ran, or the time it took him to reach the woods, has never been known. Their outlines were already hidden when he entered them. To a sense less keen, a courage less desperate, and a purpose less unaltered than Low's, the wood would have been impenetrable. The central fire was still confined to the lofty tree-tops, but the downward rush of wind from time to time drove the smoke into the aisles in blinding and suffocating volumes. To simulate the creeping animals, and fall to the ground on hands and knees, feel his way through the underbrush when the smoke was densest, or take advantage of its momentary lifting, and without uncertainty, mistake, or hesitation glide from tree to tree in one undeviating course, was possible only to an experienced woodsman. To keep his reason and insight so clear as to be able in the midst of this bewildering con-



fusion to shape that course so as to intersect the wild and unknown tract of an inexperienced, frightened wanderer belonged to Low, and to Low alone. He was making his way against the wind towards the fire. He had reasoned that she was either in comparative safety to windward of it, or he should meet her being driven towards him by it, or find her succumbed and fainting at its feet. To do this he must penetrate the burning belt, and then pass under the blazing dome. He was already upon it; he could see the falling fire dropping like rain or blown like gorgeous blossoms of the conflagration across his path. The space was lit up brilliantly. The vast shafts of dull copper cast no shadow below, but there was no sign nor token of any human being. For a moment the young man was at fault. It was true this hidden heart of the forest bore no undergrowth; the cool matted carpet of the aisles seemed to quench the glowing fragments as they fell. Escape might be difficult, but not impossible; yet every moment was precious. He leaned against a tree, and sent his voice like a clarion before him: "Teresa!" There was no reply. He called again. A faint cry at his back from the trail he had just traversed made him turn. Only a few paces behind him, blinded and staggering, but following like a beaten and wounded animal, Teresa halted, knelt, clasped her hands, and dumbly held them out before her. "Teresa!" he cried again, and sprang to her side.

She caught him by the knees, and lifted her face imploringly to his.

"Say that again!" she cried, passionately. "Tell me it was Teresa you called, and no other! You have come back for me! You would not let me die here alone!"

He lifted her tenderly in his arms, and cast a rapid glance around him. It might have been his fancy, but there seemed a dull glow in the direction he had come.

"You do not speak!" she said. "Tell me! You did not come here to seek her?"

"Whom?" he said quickly.

"Nellie!"

With a sharp cry he let her slip to the ground. All the pent-up agony, rage, and mortification of the last hour broke from him in that inarticulate outburst. Then, catching her hands again, he dragged her to his level.

"Hear me!" he cried, disregarding the whirling smoke and the fiery baptism that sprinkled them — "hear me! If you value your life, if you value your soul, and if you do not want me to cast you to the beasts like Jezebel of old, never — never take that accursed name again upon your lips. Seek her — *her*? Yes! Seek her to tie her like a witch's daughter of hell to that blazing tree!" He stopped. "Forgive me," he said in a changed voice. "I'm mad, and forgetting myself and you. Come."

Without noticing the expression of half savage delight that had passed across her face, he lifted her in his arms.

"Which way are you going?" she asked, passing her hands vaguely across his breast, as if to reassure herself of his identity.

"To our camp by the scarred tree," he replied.

"Not there, not there," she said, hurriedly. "I was driven from there just now. I thought the fire began there until I came here."

Then it was as he feared. Obeying the same mysterious law that had launched this fatal fire like a thunderbolt from the burning mountain crest five miles away into the heart of the Carquinez Woods, it had again leaped a mile beyond, and was hemming them between two narrowing lines of fire. But Low was not daunted. Retracing his steps through the blinding smoke, he strode off at right angles to the trail near the point where he had en-



tered the wood. It was the spot where he had first lifted Nellie in his arms to carry her to the hidden spring. If any recollection of it crossed his mind at that moment, it was only shown in his redoubled energy. He did not glide through the thick underbrush, as on that day, but seemed to take a savage pleasure in breaking through it with sheer brute force. Once Teresa insisted upon relieving him of the burden of her weight, but after a few steps she staggered blindly against him, and would fain have recourse once more to his strong arms. And so, alternately staggering, bending, crouching, or bounding and crashing on, but always in one direction, they burst through the jealous rampart, and came upon the sylvan haunt of the hidden spring. The great angle of the half fallen tree acted as a barrier to the wind and drifting smoke, and the cool spring sparkled and bubbled in the almost translucent air. He laid her down beside the water, and bathed her face and hands. As he did so his quick eye caught sight of a woman's handkerchief lying at the foot of the disrupted root. Dropping Teresa's hand, he walked towards it, and with the toe of his moccasin gave it one vigorous kick into the ooze at the overflow of the spring. He turned to Teresa, but she evidently had not noticed the act.

"Where are you?" she asked, with a smile.

Something in her movement struck him. He came towards her, and bending down looked into her face.

"Teresa! Good God!—look at me! What has happened?"

She raised her eyes to his. There was a slight film across them; the lids were blackened; the beautiful lashes gone forever!

"I see you a little now, I think," she said, with a smile, passing her hands vaguely over his face. "It must have happened when he fainted, and I had to drag

him through the blazing brush; both my hands were full, and I could not cover my eyes."

"Drag whom?" said Low, quickly.

"Why, Dunn."

"Dunn! He here?" said Low, hoarsely.

"Yes; did n't you read the note I left on the herbarium? Did n't you come to the camp-fire?" she asked hurriedly, clasping his hands. "Tell me quickly!"

"No!"

"Then you were not there—then you did n't leave me to die?"

"No! I swear it, Teresa!" the stoicism that had upheld his own agony breaking down before her strong emotion.

"Thank God!" She threw her arms around him, and hid her aching eyes in his troubled breast.

"Tell me all, Teresa," he whispered in her listening ear. "Don't move; stay there, and tell me all."

With her face buried in his bosom, as if speaking to his heart alone, she told him part, but not all. With her eyes filled with tears, but a smile on her lips, radiant with new-found happiness, she told him how she had overheard the plans of Dunn and Brace, how she had stolen their conveyance to warn him in time. But here she stopped, dreading to say a word that would shatter the hope she was building upon his sudden revulsion of feeling for Nellie. She could not bring herself to repeat their interview—that would come later, when they were safe and out of danger; now not even the secret of his birth must come between them with its distraction, to mar their perfect communion. She faltered that Dunn had fainted from weakness, and that she had dragged him out of danger. "He will never interfere with us—I mean," she said softly, "with *me* again. I can promise you that as well as if he had sworn it."



"Let him pass now," said Low; "that will come later on," he added, unconsciously repeating her thought in a tone that made her heart sick. "But tell me, Teresa, why did you go to Excelsior?"

She buried her head still deeper, as if to hide it. He felt her broken heart beat against his own; he was conscious of a depth of feeling her rival had never awakened in him. The possibility of Teresa loving him had never occurred to his simple nature. He bent his head and kissed her. She was frightened, and unloosed her clinging arms; but he retained her hand, and said, "We will leave this accursed place, and you shall go with me as you said you would; nor need you ever leave me, unless you wish it."

She could hear the beating of her own heart through his words; she longed to look at the eyes and lips that told her this, and read the meaning his voice alone could not entirely convey. For the first time she felt the loss of her sight. She did not know that it was, in this moment of happiness, the last blessing vouchsafed to her miserable life.

A few moments of silence followed, broken only by the distant rumor of the conflagration and the crash of falling boughs. "It may be an hour yet," he whispered, "before the fire has swept a path for us to the road below. We are safe here, unless some sudden current should draw the fire down upon us. You are not frightened?" She pressed his hand; she was thinking of the pale face of Dunn, lying in the secure retreat she had purchased for him at such a sacrifice. Yet the possibility of danger to him now for a moment marred her present happiness and security. "You think the fire will not go north of where you found me?" she asked softly.

"I think not," he said; "but I will reconnoitre. Stay where you are."

They pressed hands and parted. He leaped upon the slanting trunk and ascended it rapidly. She waited in mute expectation.

There was a sudden movement of the root on which she sat, a deafening crash, and she was thrown forward on her face.

The vast bulk of the leaning tree, dislodged from its aerial support by the gradual sapping of the spring at its roots, or by the crumbling of the bark from the heat, had slipped, made a half revolution, and, falling, overbore the lesser trees in its path, and tore, in its resistless momentum, a broad opening to the underbrush.

With a cry to Low, Teresa staggered to her feet. There was an interval of hideous silence, but no reply. She called again. There was a sudden deepening roar, the blast of a fiery furnace swept through the opening, a thousand luminous points around her burst into fire, and in an instant she was lost in a whirlwind of smoke and flame! From the onset of its fury to its culmination twenty minutes did not elapse; but in that interval a radius of two hundred yards around the hidden spring was swept of life and light and motion.

For the rest of that day and part of the night a pall of smoke hung above the scene of desolation. It lifted only towards the morning, when the moon, riding high, picked out in black and silver the shrunken and silent columns of those roofless vaults, shorn of base and capital. It flickered on the still, overflowing pool of the hidden spring, and shone upon the white face of Low, who, with a rootlet of the fallen tree holding him down like an arm across his breast, seemed to be sleeping peacefully in the sleeping water.

Contemporaneous history touched him as briefly, but not as gently. "It is now definitely ascertained," said



"The Slumgullion Mirror," "that Sheriff Dunn met his fate in the Carquinez Woods in the performance of his duty; that fearless man having received information of the concealment of a band of horse thieves in their recesses. The desperadoes are presumed to have escaped, as the only remains found are those of two wretched tramps, one of whom is said to have been a digger, who supported himself upon roots and herbs, and the other a degraded half-white woman. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the fire originated through their carelessness, although Father Wynn of the First Baptist Church, in his powerful discourse of last Sunday, pointed at the warning and lesson of such catastrophes. It may not be out of place here to say that the rumors regarding an engagement between the pastor's accomplished daughter and the late lamented sheriff are utterly without foundation, as it has been an *on dit* for some time in all well-informed circles that the indefatigable Mr. Brace, of Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express, will shortly lead the lady to the hymeneal altar."

## At the Mission of San Carmel.

### PROLOGUE.

It was noon of the 10th of August, 1838. The monotonous coast line between Monterey and San Diego had set its hard outlines against the steady glare of the Californian sky and the metallic glitter of the Pacific Ocean. The weary succession of rounded, dome-like hills obliterated all sense of distance; the rare whaling vessel or still rarer trader, drifting past, saw no change in these rusty undulations, barren of distinguishing peak or headland, and bald of wooded crest or timbered ravine. The withered ranks of wild oats gave a dull procession of uniform color to the hills, unbroken by any relief of shadow in their smooth, round curves. As far as the eye could reach, sea and shore met in one bleak monotony, flecked by no passing cloud, stirred by no sign of life or motion. Even sound was absent; the Angelus, rung from the invisible Mission tower far inland, was driven back again by the steady northwest trades, that for half the year had swept the coast line and left it abraded of all umbrage and color.

But even this monotony soon gave way to a change and another monotony as uniform and depressed. The western horizon, slowly contracting before a wall of vapor, by four o'clock had become a mere cold, steely strip of sea, into which gradually the northern trend of the coast faded and was lost. As the fog stole with soft step southward, all distance, space, character, and locality again vanished; the hills upon which the sun still shone