

ing it her quick ear caught the sound of galloping hoofs behind her. She turned quickly and saw she was followed by a horseman. But her momentary alarm was succeeded by a feeling of relief as she recognized the erect figure and square shoulders of Poindexter. Yet she could not help thinking that he looked more like a militant scout, and less like a cautious legal adviser, than ever.

With unaffected womanliness she rearranged her slightly disordered hair as he drew up beside her. "I thought you were in yonder boat," she said.

"Not I," he laughed; "I distanced you by the high-road two hours, and have been reconnoitering, until I saw you hesitate at the cross-roads."

"But who is in the boat?" asked Mrs. Tucker, partly to hide her embarrassment.

"Only some early Chinese market gardener, I dare say. But you are safe now. You are on your own land. You passed the boundary monument of the rancho five minutes ago. Look! All you see before you is yours from the *embarcadero* to yonder Coast Range."

The tone of half raillery did not, however, cheer Mrs. Tucker. She shuddered slightly and cast her eyes over the monotonous sea of *tule* and meadow.

"It does n't look pretty, perhaps," continued Poindexter, "but it's the richest land in the State, and the *embarcadero* will some day be a town. I suppose you'll call it Blue Grassville. But you seem tired!" he said, suddenly dropping his voice to a tone of half humorous sympathy.

Mrs. Tucker managed to get rid of an impending tear under the pretense of clearing her eyes. "Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"Nearly. You know," he added, with the same half mischievous, half sympathizing gayety, "it's not exactly

a palace you're coming to,—hardly. It's the old *casa* that has been deserted for years, but I thought it better you should go into possession there than take up your abode at the shanty where your husband's farm-hands are. No one will know when you take possession of the *casa*, while the very hour of your arrival at the shanty would be known; and if they should make any trouble"—

"If they should make any trouble?" repeated Mrs. Tucker, lifting her frank, inquiring eyes to Poindexter.

His horse suddenly rearing from an apparently accidental prick of the spur, it was a minute or two before he was able to explain. "I mean if this ever comes up as a matter of evidence, you know. But here we are!"

What had seemed to be an overgrown mound rising like an island out of the dead level of the grassy sea now resolved itself into a collection of adobe walls, eaten and incrustured with shrubs and vines, that bore some resemblance to the usual uninhabited-looking exterior of a Spanish-American dwelling. Apertures that might have been lance-shaped windows or only cracks and fissures in the walls were choked up with weeds and grass, and gave no passing glimpse of the interior. Entering a ruinous corral they came to a second entrance, which proved to be the *patio* or courtyard. The deserted wooden corridor, with beams, rafters, and floors whitened by the sun and wind, contained a few withered leaves, dryly rotting skins, and thongs of leather, as if undisturbed by human care. But among these scattered *débris* of former life and habitation there was no noisome or unclean suggestion of decay. A faint spiced odor of desiccation filled the bare walls. There was no slime on stone or sun-dried brick. In place of fungus or discolored moisture the dust of efflorescence whitened in the obscured corners. The elements had picked clean the bones of

the old and crumbling tenement ere they should finally absorb it.

A withered old *peon* woman, who in dress, complexion, and fibrous hair might have been an animated fragment of the débris, rustled out of a low vaulted passage and welcomed them with a feeble crepitation. Following her into the dim interior, Mrs. Tucker was surprised to find some slight attempt at comfort and even adornment in the two or three habitable apartments. They were scrupulously clean and dry, two qualities which in her feminine eyes atoned for poverty of material.

"I could not send anything from San Bruno, the nearest village, without attracting attention," explained Poin-dexter; "but if you can manage to picnic here for a day longer, I'll get one of our Chinese friends here," he pointed to the slough, "to bring over, for his return cargo from across the bay, any necessities you may want. There is no danger of his betraying you," he added, with an ironical smile; "Chinamen and Indians are, by an ingenious provision of the statute of California, incapable of giving evidence against a white person. You can trust your handmaiden perfectly — even if she can't trust *you*. That is your sacred privilege under the constitution. And now, as I expect to catch the up boat ten miles from hence, I must say 'good-by' until to-morrow night. I hope to bring you then some more definite plans for the future. The worst is over." He held her hand for a moment, and with a graver voice continued, "You have done it very well — do you know — very well!"

In the slight embarrassment produced by his sudden change of manner she felt that her thanks seemed awkward and restrained. "Don't thank me," he laughed, with a prompt return of his former levity; "that's my trade. I only advised. You have saved yourself like a

plucky woman — shall I say like Blue Grass? Good-by!" He mounted his horse, but, as if struck by an after-thought, wheeled and drew up by her side again. "If I were you I would n't see many strangers for a day or two, and listen to as little news as a woman possibly can." He laughed again, waved her a half gallant, half military salute, and was gone. The question she had been trying to frame, regarding the probability of communication with her husband, remained unasked. At least she had saved her pride before him.

Addressing herself to the care of her narrow household, she mechanically put away the few things she had brought with her, and began to readjust the scant furniture. She was a little discomposed at first at the absence of bolts, locks, and even window-fastenings until assured, by Concha's evident inability to comprehend her concern, that they were quite unknown at Los Cuervos. Her slight knowledge of Spanish was barely sufficient to make her wants known, so that the relief of conversation with her only companion was debarred her, and she was obliged to content herself with the sapless, crackling smiles and withered genuflexions that the old woman dropped like dead leaves in her path. It was staring noon when, the house singing like an empty shell in the monotonous wind, she felt she could stand the solitude no longer, and, crossing the glaring *patio* and whistling corridor, made her way to the open gateway.

But the view without seemed to intensify her desolation. The broad expanse of the shadowless plain reached apparently to the Coast Range, trackless and unbroken save by one or two clusters of dwarfed oaks, which at that distance were but mossy excrescences on the surface, barely raised above the dead level. On the other side the marsh took up the monotony and carried it, scarcely interrupted by undefined water-courses, to the faintly

marked-out horizon line of the remote bay. Scattered and apparently motionless black spots on the meadows that gave a dreary significance to the title of "the Crows" which the rancho bore, and sudden gray clouds of sand-pipers on the marshes, that rose and vanished down the wind, were the only signs of life. Even the white sail of the early morning was gone.

She stood there until the aching of her straining eyes and the stiffening of her limbs in the cold wind compelled her to seek the sheltered warmth of the courtyard. Here she endeavored to make friends with a bright-eyed lizard, who was sunning himself in the corridor; a graceful little creature in blue and gold, from whom she felt at other times she might have fled, but whose beauty and harmlessness solitude had made known to her. With misplaced kindness she tempted it with bread-crumbs, with no other effect than to stiffen it into stony astonishment. She wondered if she should become like the prisoners she had read of in books, who poured out their solitary affections on noisome creatures, and she regretted even the mustang, which with the buggy had disappeared under the charge of some unknown retainer on her arrival. Was she not a prisoner? The shutterless windows, yawning doors, and open gate refuted the suggestion, but the encompassing solitude and trackless waste still held her captive. Poindexter had told her it was four miles to the shanty; she might walk there. Why had she given her word that she would remain at the rancho until he returned?

The long day crept monotonously away, and she welcomed the night which shut out the dreary prospect. But it brought no cessation of the harassing wind without, nor surcease of the nervous irritation its perpetual and even activity wrought upon her. It haunted her pillow even in her exhausted sleep, and seemed to im-

patiently beckon her to rise and follow it. It brought her feverish dreams of her husband, footsore and weary, staggering forward under its pitiless lash and clamorous outcry; she would have gone to his assistance, but when she reached his side and held out her arms to him it hurried her past with merciless power, and, bearing her away, left him hopelessly behind. It was broad day when she awoke. The usual night showers of the waning rainy season had left no trace in sky or meadow; the fervid morning sun had already dried the *patio*; only the restless, harrying wind remained.

Mrs. Tucker arose with a resolve. She had learned from Concha on the previous evening that a part of the shanty was used as a *tienda* or shop for the laborers and *rancheros*. Under the necessity of purchasing some articles, she would go there and for a moment mingle with those people, who would not recognize her. Even if they did, her instinct told her it would be less to be feared than the hopeless uncertainty of another day. As she left the house the wind seemed to seize her as in her dream, and hurry her along with it, until in a few moments the walls of the low *casa* sank into the earth again and she was alone, but for the breeze on the solitary plain. The level distance glittered in the sharp light, a few crows with slant wings dipped and ran down the wind before her, and a passing gleam on the marsh was explained by the far-off cry of a curlew.

She had walked for an hour, upheld by the stimulus of light and morning air, when the cluster of scrub oaks, which was her destination, opened enough to show two rambling sheds, before one of which was a wooden platform containing a few barrels and bones. As she approached nearer, she could see that one or two horses were tethered under the trees, that their riders were lounging by a horse-trough, and that over an open door

the word *Tienda* was rudely painted on a board, and as rudely illustrated by the wares displayed at door and window. Accustomed as she was to the poverty of frontier architecture, even the crumbling walls of the old *hacienda* she had just left seemed picturesque to the rigid angles of the thin, blank, unpainted shell before her. One of the loungers, who was reading a newspaper aloud as she advanced, put it aside and stared at her; there was an evident commotion in the shop as she stepped upon the platform, and when she entered, with breathless lips and beating heart, she found herself the object of a dozen curious eyes. Her quick pride resented the scrutiny and recalled her courage, and it was with a slight coldness in her usual lazy indifference that she leaned over the counter and asked for the articles she wanted.

The request was followed by a dead silence. Mrs. Tucker repeated it with some *hauteur*.

"I reckon you don't seem to know this store is in the hands of the sheriff," said one of the loungers.

Mrs. Tucker was not aware of it.

"Well, I don't know any one who's a better right to know than Spence Tucker's wife," said another with a coarse laugh. The laugh was echoed by the others. Mrs. Tucker saw the pit into which she had deliberately walked, but did not flinch.

"Is there any one to serve here?" she asked, turning her clear eyes full upon the bystanders.

"You'd better ask the sheriff. He was the last one to *sarve* here. He sarved an attachment," replied the inevitable humorist of all Californian assemblages.

"Is he here?" asked Mrs. Tucker, disregarding the renewed laughter which followed this subtle witticism.

The loungers at the door made way for one of their party, who was half dragged, half pushed into the shop. "Here he is," said half a dozen eager voices, in the fond

belief that his presence might impart additional humor to the situation. He cast a deprecating glance at Mrs. Tucker and said, "It's so, madam! This yer place *is* attached; but if there's anything you're wanting, why I reckon, boys," — he turned half appealingly to the crowd, "we could oblige a lady." There was a vague sound of angry opposition and remonstrance from the back door of the shop, but the majority, partly overcome by Mrs. Tucker's beauty, assented. "Only," continued the officer explanatorily, "ez these yer goods are in the hands of the creditors, they ought to be represented by an equivalent in money. If you're expecting they should be charged" —

"But I wish to *pay* for them," interrupted Mrs. Tucker, with a slight flush of indignation; "I have the money."

"Oh, I bet you have!" screamed a voice, as, overturning all opposition, the malcontent at the back door, in the shape of an infuriated woman, forced her way into the shop. "I'll bet you have the money! Look at her, boys! Look at the wife of the thief, with the stolen money in diamonds in her ears and rings on her fingers. *She's* got money if *we've* none. *She* can pay for what she fancies, if we have n't a cent to redeem the bed that's stolen from under us. Oh yes, buy it all, Mrs. Spencer Tucker! buy the whole shop, Mrs. Spencer Tucker, do you hear? And if you ain't satisfied then, buy my clothes, my wedding ring, the only things your husband has n't stolen."

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Tucker coldly, turning towards the door. But with a flying leap across the counter her relentless adversary stood between her and retreat.

"You don't understand! Perhaps you don't understand that your husband not only stole the hard labor of these men, but even the little money they brought here

and trusted to his thieving hands. Perhaps you don't know that he stole my husband's hard earnings, mortgaged these very goods you want to buy, and that he is to-day a convicted thief, a forger, and a runaway coward. Perhaps, if you can't understand *me*, you can read the newspaper. Look!" She exultingly opened the paper the sheriff had been reading aloud, and pointed to the displayed headlines. "Look! there are the very words, 'Forgery, Swindling, Embezzlement!' Do you see? And perhaps you can't understand this. Look! 'Shameful Flight. Abandons his Wife. Runs off with a Notorious' " —

"Easy, old gal, easy now. D—n it! Will you dry up? I say. *Stop!*"

It was too late! The sheriff had dashed the paper from the woman's hand, but not until Mrs. Tucker had read a single line, a line such as she had sometimes turned from with weary scorn in her careless perusal of the daily shameful chronicle of domestic infelicity. Then she had coldly wondered if there could be any such men and women. And now! The crowd fell back before her; even the virago was silenced as she looked at her face. The humorist's face was as white, but not as immobile, as he gasped, "Christ! if I don't believe she knew nothin' of it!"

For a moment the full force of such a supposition, with all its poignancy, its dramatic intensity, and its pathos, possessed the crowd. In the momentary clairvoyance of enthusiasm they caught a glimpse of the truth, and by one of the strange reactions of human passion they only waited for a word of appeal or explanation from her lips to throw themselves at her feet. Had she simply told her story they would have believed her; had she cried, fainted, or gone into hysterics, they would have pitied her. She did neither. Perhaps she thought of

neither, or indeed of anything that was then before her eyes. She walked erect to the door and turned upon the threshold. "I mean what I say," she said calmly. "I don't understand you. But whatever just claims you have upon my husband will be paid by me, or by his lawyer, Captain Poindexter."

She had lost the sympathy but not the respect of her hearers. They made way for her with sullen deference as she passed out on the platform. But her adversary, profiting by the last opportunity, burst into an ironical laugh.

"Captain Poindexter, is it? Well, perhaps he's safe to pay *your* bill; but as for your husband's" —

"That's another matter," interrupted a familiar voice with the greatest cheerfulness; "that's what you were going to say, was n't it? Ha! ha! Well, Mrs. Patterson," continued Poindexter, stepping from his buggy, "you never spoke a truer word in your life. — One moment, Mrs. Tucker. Let me send you back in the buggy. Don't mind *me*. I can get a fresh horse of the sheriff. I'm quite at home here." Then, turning to one of the bystanders, "I say, Patterson, step a few paces this way, will you? A little further from your wife, please. That will do. You've got a claim of five thousand dollars against the property, have n't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that woman just driving away is your one solitary chance of getting a cent of it. If your wife insults her again, that chance is gone. And if *you* do" —

"Well?"

"As sure as there is a God in Israel and a Supreme Court of the State of California, I'll kill you in your tracks! . . . Stay!"

Patterson turned. The irrepressible look of humorous tolerance of all human frailty had suffused Poindexter's

black eyes with mischievous moisture. "If you think it quite safe to confide to your wife this prospect of her improvement by widowhood, you may!"

III.

Mr. Patterson did not inform his wife of the lawyer's personal threat to himself. But he managed, after Poindexter had left, to make her conscious that Mrs. Tucker might be a power to be placated and feared. "You've shot off your mouth at her," he said argumentatively, "and whether you've hit the mark or not you've had your say. Ef you think it's worth a possible five thousand dollars and interest to keep on, heave ahead. Ef you rather have the chance of getting the rest in cash, you'll let up on her." "You don't suppose," returned Mrs. Patterson contemptuously, "that she's got anything but what that man of hers—Poindexter—lets her have?" "The sheriff says," retorted Patterson surlily, "that she's notified him that she claims the *rancho* as a gift from her husband three years ago, and she's in *possession* now, and was so when the execution was out. It don't make no matter," he added, with gloomy philosophy, "who's got a full hand as long as *we* ain't got the cards to chip in. I would n't 'a' minded it," he continued meditatively, "ef Spence Tucker had dropped a hint to me afore he put out." "And I suppose," said Mrs. Patterson angrily, "you'd have put out too?" "I reckon," said Patterson simply.

Twice or thrice during the evening he referred, more or less directly, to this lack of confidence shown by his late debtor and employer, and seemed to feel it more keenly than the loss of property. He confided his sentiments quite openly to the sheriff in possession, over the whiskey

and euchre with which these gentlemen avoided the difficulties of their delicate relations. He brooded over it as he handed the keys of the shop to the sheriff when they parted for the night, and was still thinking of it when the house was closed, everybody gone to bed, and he was fetching a fresh jug of water from the well. The moon was at times obscured by flying clouds, the *avant-couriers* of the regular evening shower. He was stooping over the well, when he sprang suddenly to his feet again. "Who's there?" he demanded sharply.

"Hush!" said a voice so low and faint it might have been a whisper of the wind in the palisades of the corral. But, indistinct as it was, it was the voice of a man he was thinking of as far away, and it sent a thrill of alternate awe and pleasure through his pulses.

He glanced quickly round. The moon was hidden by a passing cloud, and only the faint outlines of the house he had just quitted were visible. "Is that you, Spence?" he said tremulously.

"Yes," replied the voice, and a figure dimly emerged from the corner of the corral.

"Lay low, lay low, for God's sake," said Patterson, hurriedly throwing himself upon the apparition. "The sheriff and his posse are in there."

"But I must speak to you a moment," said the figure.

"Wait," said Patterson, glancing toward the building. Its blank, shutterless windows revealed no inner light; a profound silence encompassed it. "Come quick," he whispered. Letting his grasp slip down to the unresisting hand of the stranger, he half dragged, half led him, brushing against the wall, into the open door of the deserted bar-room he had just quitted, locked the inner door, poured a glass of whiskey from a decanter, gave it to him, and then watched him drain it at a single draught.

The moon came out, and falling through the bare windows full upon the stranger's face, revealed the artistic but slightly disheveled curls and mustache of the fugitive, Spencer Tucker.

Whatever may have been the real influence of this unfortunate man upon his fellows, it seemed to find expression in a singular unanimity of criticism. Patterson looked at him with a half dismal, half welcoming smile. "Well, you are a h—ll of a fellow, ain't you?"

Spencer Tucker passed his hand through his hair and lifted it from his forehead, with a gesture at once emotional and theatrical. "I am a man with a price on me!" he said bitterly. "Give me up to the sheriff, and you'll get five thousand dollars. Help me, and you'll get nothing. That's my d—d luck, and yours too, I suppose."

"I reckon you're right there," said Patterson gloomily. "But I thought you got clean away, — went off in a ship" —

"Went off in a boat to a ship," interrupted Tucker savagely; "went off to a ship that had all my things on board — everything. The cursed boat capsized in a squall just off the Heads. The ship, d—n her, sailed away, the men thinking I was drowned, likely, and that they'd make a good thing off my goods, I reckon."

"But the girl, Inez, who was with you, did n't she make a row?"

"*Quien sabe?*" returned Tucker, with a reckless laugh. "Well, I hung on like grim death to that boat's keel until one of those Chinese fishermen, in a 'dug-out,' hauled me in opposite Saucelito. I chartered him and his dug-out to bring me down here."

"Why here?" asked Patterson, with a certain ostentatious caution that ill concealed his pensive satisfaction.

"You may well ask," returned Tucker, with an equal

ostentation of bitterness, as he slightly waved his companion away. "But I reckoned I could trust a white man that I'd been kind to, and who would n't go back on me. No, no, let me go! Hand me over to the sheriff!"

Patterson had suddenly grasped both the hands of the picturesque scamp before him, with an affection that for an instant almost shamed the man who had ruined him. But Tucker's egotism whispered that this affection was only a recognition of his own superiority, and felt flattered. He was beginning to believe that he was really the injured party.

"What I *have* and what I have *had* is yours, Spence," returned Patterson, with a sad and simple directness that made any further discussion a gratuitous insult. "I only wanted to know what you reckoned to do here."

"I want to get over across the Coast Range to Monterey," said Tucker. "Once there, one of those coasting schooners will bring me down to Acapulco, where the ship will put in."

Patterson remained silent for a moment. "There's a mustang in the corral you can take — leastways, I shan't know that it's gone — until to-morrow afternoon. In an hour from now," he added, looking from the window, "these clouds will settle down to business. It will rain; there will be light enough for you to find your way by the regular trail over the mountain, but not enough for any one to know you. If you can't push through to-night, you can lie over at the *posada* on the summit. Them greasers that keep it won't know you, and if they did they won't go back on you. And if they did go back on you, nobody would believe them. It's mighty curious," he added, with gloomy philosophy, but I reckon it's the reason why Providence allows this kind of cattle to live among white men and others made in his image. Take

a piece of pie, won't you?" he continued, abandoning this abstract reflection and producing half a flat pumpkin pie from the bar. Spencer Tucker grasped the pie with one hand and his friend's fingers with the other, and for a few moments was silent from the hurried deglutition of viand and sentiment. "You're a white man, Patterson, any way," he resumed. "I'll take your horse, and put it down in our account at your own figure. As soon as this cursed thing is blown over, I'll be back here and see you through, you bet! I don't desert my friends, however rough things go with me."

"I see you don't," returned Patterson, with an unconscious and serious simplicity that had the effect of the most exquisite irony. "I was only just saying to the sheriff that if there was anything I could have done for you, you would n't have cut away without letting me know." Tucker glanced uneasily at Patterson, who continued, "Ye ain't wanting anything else?" Then observing that his former friend and patron was roughly but newly clothed, and betrayed no trace of his last escapade, he added, "I see you've got a fresh harness."

"That d—d Chinaman bought me these at the landing. They're not much in style or fit," he continued, trying to get a moonlight view of himself in the mirror behind the bar, "but that don't matter here." He filled another glass of spirits, jauntily settled himself back in his chair, and added, "I don't suppose there are any girls around, anyway."

"'Cept your wife; she was down here this afternoon," said Patterson meditatively.

Mr. Tucker paused with the pie in his hand. "Ah, yes!" He essayed a reckless laugh, but that evident simulation failed before Patterson's melancholy. With an assumption of falling in with his friend's manner, rather than from any personal anxiety, he continued, "Well?"

"That man Poindexter was down here with her. Put her in the *hacienda* to hold possession afore the news came out."

"Impossible!" said Tucker, rising hastily. "It don't belong — that is" — he hesitated.

"Yer thinking the creditors'll get it, mebbe," returned Patterson, gazing at the floor. "Not as long as she's in it; no sir! Whether it's really hers, or she's only keeping house for Poindexter, she's a fixture, you bet. They are a team when they pull together, they are!"

The smile slowly faded from Tucker's face, that now looked quite rigid in the moonlight. He put down his glass and walked to the window as Patterson gloomily continued: "But that's nothing to you. You've got ahead of 'em both, and had your revenge by going off with the gal. That's what I said all along. When folks — specially women folks — wondered how you could leave a woman like your wife, and go off with a scallawag like that gal, I allers said they'd find out there was a reason. And when your wife came flaunting down here with Poindexter before she'd quite got quit of you, I reckon they began to see the whole little game. No, sir! I knew it was n't on account of the gal! Why, when you came here to-night and told me quite nat'ral-like and easy how she went off in the ship, and then calmly ate your pie and drank your whiskey after it, I knew you did n't care for her. There's my hand, Spence; you're a trump, even if you are a little looney, eh? Why, what's up?"

Shallow and selfish as Tucker was, Patterson's words seemed like a revelation that shocked him as profoundly as it might have shocked a nobler nature. The simple vanity and selfishness that made him unable to conceive any higher reason for his wife's loyalty than his own personal popularity and success, now that he no longer possessed that *éclat*, made him equally capable of the