

lowest suspicions. He was a dishonored fugitive, broken in fortune and reputation—why should she not desert him? He had been unfaithful to her from wildness, from caprice, from the effect of those fascinating qualities; it seemed to him natural that she should be disloyal from more deliberate motives, and he hugged himself with that belief. Yet there was enough doubt, enough of haunting suspicion, that he had lost or alienated a powerful affection, to make him thoroughly miserable. He returned his friend's grasp convulsively and buried his face upon his shoulder. But he was above feeling a certain exultation in the effect of his misery upon the dog-like, unreasoning affection of Patterson, nor could he entirely refrain from slightly posing his affliction before that sympathetic but melancholy man. Suddenly he raised his head, drew back, and thrust his hand into his bosom with a theatrical gesture.

"What's to keep me from killing Poindexter in his tracks?" he said wildly.

"Nothin' but *his* shooting first," returned Patterson, with dismal practicality. "He's mighty quick, like all them army men. It's about even, I reckon, that he don't get *me* first," he added in an ominous voice.

"No!" returned Tucker, grasping his hand again. "This is not your affair, Patterson; leave him to me when I come back."

"If he ever gets the drop on me, I reckon he won't wait," continued Patterson lugubriously. "He seems to object to my passin' criticism on your wife, as if she was a queen or an angel."

The blood came to Spencer's cheek, and he turned uneasily to the window. "It's dark enough now for a start," he said hurriedly, "and if I could get across the mountain without lying over at the summit, it would be a day gained."

Patterson arose without a word, filled a flask of spirit, handed it to his friend, and silently led the way through the slowly falling rain and the now settled darkness. The mustang was quickly secured and saddled; a heavy *poncho* afforded Tucker a disguise as well as a protection from the rain. With a few hurried, disconnected words, and an abstracted air, he once more shook his friend's hand and issued cautiously from the corral. When out of earshot from the house he put spurs to the mustang, and dashed into a gallop.

To intersect the mountain road he was obliged to traverse part of the highway his wife had walked that afternoon, and to pass within a mile of the *casa* where she was. Long before he reached that point his eyes were straining the darkness in that direction for some indication of the house which was to him familiar. Becoming now accustomed to the even obscurity, less trying to the vision than the alternate light and shadow of cloud or the full glare of the moonlight, he fancied he could distinguish its low walls over the monotonous level. One of those impulses which had so often taken the place of resolution in his character suddenly possessed him to diverge from his course and approach the house. Why, he could not have explained. It was not from any feeling of jealous suspicion or contemplated revenge—that had passed with the presence of Patterson; it was not from any vague lingering sentiment for the woman he had wronged—he would have shrunk from meeting her at that moment. But it was full of these and more possibilities by which he might or might not be guided, and was at least a movement towards some vague end, and a distraction from certain thoughts he dared not entertain and could not entirely dismiss. Inconceivable and inexplicable to human reason, it might have been acceptable to the Divine omniscience for its predestined result.



He left the road at a point where the marsh encroached upon the meadow, familiar to him already as near the spot where he had debarked from the Chinaman's boat the day before. He remembered that the walls of the *hacienda* were distinctly visible from the *tules* where he had hidden all day, and he now knew that the figures he had observed near the building, which had deterred his first attempts at landing, must have been his wife and his friend. He knew that a long tongue of the slough filled by the rising tide followed the marsh, and lay between him and the *hacienda*. The sinking of his horse's hoofs in the spongy soil determined its proximity, and he made a *détour* to the right to avoid it. In doing so, a light suddenly rose above the distant horizon ahead of him, trembled faintly, and then burned with a steady lustre. It was a light at the *hacienda*. Guiding his horse half abstractedly in this direction, his progress was presently checked by the splashing of the animal's hoofs in the water. But the turf below was firm, and a salt drop that had spattered to his lips told him that it was only the encroaching of the tide in the meadow. With his eyes on the light, he again urged his horse forward. The rain lulled, the clouds began to break, the landscape alternately lightened and grew dark; the outlines of the crumbling *hacienda* walls that enshrined the light grew more visible. A strange and dreamy resemblance to the long blue-grass plain before his wife's paternal house, as seen by him during his evening rides to courtship, pressed itself upon him. He remembered, too, that she used to put a light in the window to indicate her presence. Following this retrospect, the moon came boldly out, sparkled upon the overflow of silver at his feet, seemed to show the dark, opaque meadow beyond for a moment, and then disappeared. It was dark now, but the lesser earthly star still shone before him as a guide, and pushing towards it, he passed in the all-embracing shadow.

## IV.

As Mrs. Tucker, erect, white, and rigid, drove away from the *tienda*, it seemed to her to sink again into the monotonous plain, with all its horrible realities. Except that there was now a new and heart-breaking significance to the solitude and loneliness of the landscape, all that had passed might have been a dream. But as the blood came back to her cheek, and little by little her tingling consciousness returned, it seemed as if her life had been the dream, and this last scene the awakening reality. With eyes smarting with the moisture of shame, the scarlet blood at times dyeing her very neck and temples, she muffled her lowered crest in her shawl and bent over the reins. Bit by bit she recalled, in Poindexter's mysterious caution and strange allusions, the corroboration of her husband's shame and her own disgrace. This was why she was brought hither — the deserted wife, the abandoned confederate! The mocking glitter of the concave vault above her, scoured by the incessant wind, the cold stare of the shining pools beyond, the hard outlines of the Coast Range, and the jarring accompaniment of her horse's hoofs and rattling buggy-wheels, alternately goaded and distracted her. She found herself repeating "No! no! no!" with the dogged reiteration of fever. She scarcely knew when or how she reached the *hacienda*. She was only conscious that as she entered the *patio* the dusky solitude that had before filled her with unrest now came to her like balm. A benumbing peace seemed to fall from the crumbling walls; the peace of utter seclusion, isolation, oblivion, death! Nevertheless, an hour later, when the jingle of spurs and bridle were again heard in the road, she started to her feet with bent brows and a kindling eye, and confronted Captain Poindexter in the corridor.



"I would not have intruded upon you so soon again," he said gravely, "but I thought I might perhaps spare you a repetition of the scene of this morning. Hear me out, please," he added, with a gentle, half deprecating gesture, as she lifted the beautiful scorn of her eyes to his. "I have just heard that your neighbor, Don José Santierra, of Los Gatos, is on his way to this house. He once claimed this land, and hated your husband, who bought of the rival claimant, whose grant was confirmed. I tell you this," he added, slightly flushing as Mrs. Tucker turned impatiently away, "only to show you that legally he has no rights, and you need not see him unless you choose. I could not stop his coming without perhaps doing you more harm than good; but when he does come, my presence under this roof as your legal counsel will enable you to refer him to me." He stopped. She was pacing the corridor with short, impatient steps, her arms dropped, and her hands clasped rigidly before her. "Have I your permission to stay?"

She suddenly stopped in her walk, approached him rapidly, and fixing her eyes on his, said:

"Do I know *all*, now — everything?"

He could only reply that she had not yet told him what she had heard.

"Well," she said scornfully, "that my husband has been cruelly imposed upon — imposed upon by some wretched woman, who has made him sacrifice his property, his friends, his honor — everything but me!"

"Everything but whom?" gasped Poindexter.

"But *ME*!"

Poindexter gazed at the sky, the air, the deserted corridor, the stones of the *patio* itself, and then at the inexplicable woman before him. Then he said gravely, "I think you know everything."

"Then if my husband has left me all he could — this

property," she went on rapidly, twisting her handkerchief between her fingers, "I can do with it what I like, can't I?"

"You certainly can."

"Then sell it," she said, with passionate vehemence. "Sell it — all! everything! And sell these." She darted into her bedroom, and returned with the diamond rings she had torn from her fingers and ears when she entered the house. "Sell them for anything they'll bring, only sell them at once."

"But for what?" asked Poindexter, with demure lips but twinkling eyes.

"To pay the debts that this — this — woman has led him into; to return the money she has stolen!" she went on rapidly; "to keep him from sharing infamy! Can't you understand?"

"But, my dear madam," began Poindexter, "even if this could be done" —

"Don't tell me 'if it could' — it *must* be done. Do you think I could sleep under this roof, propped up by the timbers of that ruined *tienda*? Do you think I could wear those diamonds again, while that termagant shop-woman can say that her money bought them? No! If you are my husband's friend you will do this — for — for his sake." She stopped, locked and interlocked her cold fingers before her, and said, hesitating and mechanically, "You meant well, Captain Poindexter, in bringing me here, I know! You must not think that I blame you for it, or for the miserable result of it that you have just witnessed. But if I have gained anything by it, for God's sake let me reap it quickly, that I may give it to these people and go! I have a friend who can aid me to get to my husband or to my home in Kentucky, where Spencer will yet find me, I know. I want nothing more." She stopped again. With another woman the pause would



have been one of tears. But she kept her head above the flood that filled her heart, and the clear eyes fixed upon Poindexter, albeit pained, were undimmed.

"But this would require time," said Poindexter, with a smile of compassionate explanation; "you could not sell now, nobody would buy. You are safe to hold this property while you are in actual possession, but you are not strong enough to guarantee it to another. There may still be litigation; your husband has other creditors than these people you have talked with. But while nobody could oust you — the wife who would have the sympathies of judge and jury — it might be a different case with any one who derived title from you. Any purchaser would know that you could not sell, or if you did, it would be at a ridiculous sacrifice."

She listened to him abstractedly, walked to the end of the corridor, returned, and without looking up, said:

"I suppose you know her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"This woman. You have seen her?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"And you are his friend! That's strange." She raised her eyes to his. "Well," she continued impatiently, "who is she? and what is she? You know that surely."

"I know no more of her than what I have said," said Poindexter. "She is a notorious woman."

The swift color came to Mrs. Tucker's face as if the epithet had been applied to herself. "I suppose," she said in a dry voice, as if she were asking a business question, but with an eye that showed her rising anger, — "I suppose there is some law by which creatures of this kind can be followed and brought to justice — some law that would keep innocent people from suffering for their crimes?"

"I am afraid," said Poindexter, "that arresting her would hardly help these people over in the *tienda*."

"I am not speaking of them," responded Mrs. Tucker, with a sudden sublime contempt for the people whose cause she had espoused; "I am talking of my husband."

Poindexter bit his lip. "You'd hardly think of bringing back the strongest witness against him," he said bluntly.

Mrs. Tucker dropped her eyes and was silent. A sudden shame suffused Poindexter's cheek; he felt as if he had struck that woman a blow. "I beg your pardon," he said hastily; "I am talking like a lawyer to a lawyer." He would have taken any other woman by the hand in the honest fullness of his apology, but something restrained him here. He only looked down gently on her lowered lashes, and repeated his question if he should remain during the coming interview with Don José. "I must beg you to determine quickly," he added, "for I already hear him entering the gate."

"Stay," said Mrs. Tucker, as the ringing of spurs and clatter of hoofs came from the corral. "One moment." She looked up suddenly, and said, "How long had he known her?" But before he could reply there was a step in the doorway, and the figure of Don José Santierra emerged from the archway.

He was a man slightly past middle age, fair, and well shaven, wearing a black broadcloth *serape*, the deeply embroidered opening of which formed a collar of silver rays around his neck, while a row of silver buttons down the side seams of his riding-trousers, and silver spurs completed his singular equipment. Mrs. Tucker's swift feminine glance took in these details, as well as the deep salutation, more formal than the exuberant frontier politeness she was accustomed to, with which he greeted her. It was enough to arrest her first impulse to retreat. She



hesitated and stopped as Poindexter stepped forward, partly interposing between them, acknowledging Don José's distant recognition of himself with an ironical accession of his usual humorous tolerance. The Spaniard did not seem to notice it, but remained gravely silent before Mrs. Tucker, gazing at her with an expression of intent and unconscious absorption.

"You are quite right, Don José," said Poindexter, with ironical concern, "it *is* Mrs. Tucker. Your eyes do *not* deceive you. She will be glad to do the honors of her house," he continued, with a simulation of appealing to her, "unless you visit her on business, when I need not say I shall be only too happy to attend you, as before."

Don José, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows, allowed himself to become conscious of the lawyer's meaning. "It is not of business that I come to kiss the Señora's hand to-day," he replied, with a melancholy softness; "it is as her neighbor, to put myself at her disposition. Ah! what have we here fit for a lady?" he continued, raising his eyes in deprecation of the surroundings; "a house of nothing, a place of winds and dry bones, without refreshments, or satisfaction, or delicacy. The Señora will not refuse to make us proud this day to send her of that which we have in our poor home at Los Gatos, to make her more complete. Of what shall it be? Let her make choice. Or if she would commemorate this day by accepting of our hospitality at Los Gatos, until she shall arrange herself the more to receive us here, we shall have too much honor."

"The Señora would only find it the more difficult to return to this humble roof again, after once leaving it for Don José's hospitality," said Poindexter, with a demure glance at Mrs. Tucker. But the innuendo seemed to lapse equally unheeded by his fair client and the stranger. Raising her eyes with a certain timid dignity which Don

José's presence seemed to have called out, she addressed herself to him.

"You are very kind and considerate, Mister Santierra, and I thank you. I know that my husband" — she let the clear beauty of her translucent eyes rest full on both men — "would thank you too. But I shall not be here long enough to accept your kindness in this house nor in your own. I have but one desire and object now. It is to dispose of this property, and indeed all I possess, to pay the debt of my husband. It is in your power, perhaps, to help me. I am told that you wish to possess Los Cuervos," she went on, equally oblivious of the consciousness that appeared in Don José's face, and a humorous perplexity on the brow of Poindexter. "If you can arrange it with Mr. Poindexter, you will find me a liberal vendor. That much you can do, and I know you will believe I shall be grateful. You can do no more, unless it be to say to your friends that Mrs. Belle Tucker remains here only for that purpose, and to carry out what she knows to be the wishes of her husband." She paused, bent her pretty crest, dropped a quaint curtsy to the superior age, the silver braid, and the gentlemanly bearing of Don José, and with the passing sunshine of a smile disappeared from the corridor.

The two men remained silent for a moment, Don José gazing abstractedly on the door through which she had vanished, until Poindexter, with a return of his tolerant smile, said, "You have heard the views of Mrs. Tucker. You know the situation as well as she does."

"Ah, yes; possibly better."

Poindexter darted a quick glance at the grave, sallow face of Don José, but detecting no unusual significance in his manner, continued, "As you see, she leaves this matter in my hands. Let us talk like business men. Have you any idea of purchasing this property?"



"Of purchasing? ah, no."

Poindexter bent his brows, but quickly relaxed them with a smile of humorous forgiveness. "If you have any other idea, Don José, I ought to warn you, as Mrs. Tucker's lawyer, that she is in legal possession here, and that nothing but her own act can change that position."

"Ah, so."

Irritated at the shrug which accompanied this, Poindexter continued haughtily, "If I am to understand, you have nothing to say"—

"To say, ah, yes, possibly. But"—he glanced toward the door of Mrs. Tucker's room—"not here." He stopped, appeared to recall himself, and with an apologetic smile and a studied but graceful gesture of invitation, he motioned to the gateway, and said, "Will you ride?"

"What can the fellow be up to?" muttered Poindexter, as with an assenting nod he proceeded to remount his horse. "If he was n't an old *hidalgo*, I'd mistrust him. No matter! here goes!"

The Don also remounted his half-broken mustang; they proceeded in solemn silence through the corral, and side by side emerged on the open plain. Poindexter glanced round; no other being was in sight. It was not until the lonely *hacienda* had also sunk behind them that Don José broke the silence.

"You say just now we shall speak as business men. I say no, Don Marco; I will not. I shall speak, we shall speak, as gentlemen."

"Go on," said Poindexter, who was beginning to be amused.

"I say just now I will not purchase the *rancho* from the Señora. And why? Look you, Don Marco;" he reined in his horse, thrust his hand under his *serape*, and drew out a folded document: "this is why."

With a smile, Poindexter took the paper from his hand and opened it. But the smile faded from his lips as he read. With blazing eyes he spurred his horse beside the Spaniard, almost unseating him, and said sternly, "What does this mean?"

"What does it mean?" repeated Don José, with equally flashing eyes; "I'll tell you. It means that your client, this man Spencer Tucker, is a Judas, a traitor! It means that he gave Los Cuervos to his mistress a year ago, and that she sold it to me—to me, you hear!—*me*, José Santierra, the day before she left! It means that the coyote of a Spencer, the thief, who bought these lands of a thief and gave them to a thief, has tricked you all. Look," he said, rising in his saddle, holding the paper like a *bâton*, and defining with a sweep of his arm the whole level plain, "all these lands were once mine, they are mine again to-day. Do I want to purchase Los Cuervos? you ask, for you will speak of the *business*. Well, listen. I *have* purchased Los Cuervos, and here is the deed."

"But it has never been recorded," said Poindexter, with a carelessness he was far from feeling.

"Of a verity, no. Do you wish that I should record it?" asked Don José, with a return of his simple gravity.

Poindexter bit his lip. "You said we were to talk like gentlemen," he returned. "Do you think you have come into possession of this alleged deed like a gentleman?"

Don José shrugged his shoulders. "I found it tossed in the lap of a harlot. I bought it for a song. Eh, what would you?"

"Would you sell it again for a song?" asked Poindexter.

"Ah! what is this?" said Don José, lifting his iron-gray brows; "but a moment ago we would sell everything, for any money. Now we would buy. Is it so?"



"One moment, Don José," said Poindexter, with a baleful light in his dark eyes. "Do I understand that you are the ally of Spencer Tucker and his mistress, that you intend to turn this doubly betrayed wife from the only roof she has to cover her?"

"Ah, I comprehend not. You heard her say she wished to go. Perhaps it may please *me* to distribute largess to these cattle yonder, I do not say no. More she does not ask. But *you*, Don Marco, of whom are you advocate? You abandon your client's mistress for the wife, is it so?"

"What I may do you will learn hereafter," said Poindexter, who had regained his composure, suddenly reining up his horse. "As our paths seem likely to diverge, they had better begin now. Good morning."

"Patience, my friend, patience! Ah, blessed St. Anthony, what these Americans are! Listen. For what *you* shall do, I do not inquire. The question is to me what I"—he emphasized the pronoun by tapping himself on the breast—"I, José Santierra, will do. Well, I shall tell you. To-day, nothing. To-morrow, nothing. For a week, for a month, nothing! After, we shall see."

Poindexter paused thoughtfully. "Will you give your word, Don José, that you will not press the claim for a month?"

"Truly, on one condition. Observe! I do not ask you for an equal promise, that you will not take this time to defend yourself." He shrugged his shoulder. "No! It is only this. You shall promise that during that time the Señora Tucker shall remain ignorant of this document."

Poindexter hesitated a moment. "I promise," he said at last.

"Good. Adios, Don Marco."

"Adios, Don José."

The Spaniard put spurs to his mustang and galloped off in the direction of Los Gatos. The lawyer remained for a moment gazing on his retreating but victorious figure. For the first time the old look of humorous toleration with which Mr. Poindexter was in the habit of regarding all human infirmity gave way to something like bitterness. "I might have guessed it," he said, with a slight rise of color. "He's an old fool; and she—well, perhaps it's all the better for her!" He glanced backwards almost tenderly in the direction of Los Cuervos, and then turned his head towards the *embarcadero*.

As the afternoon wore on, a creaking, antiquated ox-cart arrived at Los Cuervos, bearing several articles of furniture, and some tasteful ornaments from Los Gatos, at the same time that a young Mexican girl mysteriously appeared in the kitchen, as a temporary assistant to the decrepit Concha. These were both clearly attributable to Don José, whose visit was not so remote but that these delicate attentions might have been already projected before Mrs. Tucker had declined them, and she could not, without marked discourtesy, return them now. She did not wish to seem discourteous; she would like to have been more civil to this old gentleman, who still retained the evidences of a picturesque and decorous past, and a repose so different from the life that was perplexing her. Reflecting that if he bought the estate these things would be ready to his hand, and with a woman's instinct recognizing their value in setting off the house to other purchasers' eyes, she took a pleasure in tastefully arranging them, and even found herself speculating how she might have enjoyed them herself had she been able to keep possession of the property. After all, it would not have been so lonely if refined and gentle neighbors, like this old man, would have sympathized with her; she had an instinctive feeling that, in their own hopeless decay and



hereditary unfitness for this new civilization, they would have been more tolerant of her husband's failure than his own kind. She could not believe that Don José really hated her husband for buying of the successful claimant, as there was no other legal title. Allowing herself to become interested in the guileless gossip of the new handmaiden, proud of her broken English, she was drawn into a sympathy with the grave simplicity of Don José's character, a relic of that true nobility which placed this descendant of the Castilians and the daughter of a free people on the same level.

In this way the second day of her occupancy of Los Cuervos closed, with dumb clouds along the gray horizon, and the paroxysms of hysterical wind growing fainter and fainter outside the walls; with the moon rising after nightfall, and losing itself in silent and mysterious confidences with drifting scud. She went to bed early, but woke past midnight, hearing, as she thought, her own name called. The impression was so strong upon her that she rose, and, hastily enwrapping herself, went to the dark embrasures of the oven-shaped windows, and looked out. The dwarfed oak beside the window was still dropping from a past shower, but the level waste of marsh and meadow beyond seemed to advance and recede with the coming and going of the moon. Again she heard her name called, and this time in accents so strangely familiar that with a slight cry she ran into the corridor, crossed the *patio*, and reached the open gate. The darkness that had, even in this brief interval, again fallen upon the prospect she tried in vain to pierce with eye and voice. A blank silence followed. Then the veil was suddenly withdrawn; the vast plain, stretching from the mountain to the sea, shone as clearly as in the light of day; the moving current of the channel glittered like black pearls, the stagnant pools like molten lead; but not a sign of life nor

motion broke the monotony of the broad expanse. She must have surely dreamed it. A chill wind drove her back to the house again; she entered her bedroom, and in half an hour she was in a peaceful sleep.

## V.

The two men kept their secret. Mr. Poindexter convinced Mrs. Tucker that the sale of Los Cuervos could not be effected until the notoriety of her husband's flight had been fairly forgotten, and she was forced to accept her fate. The sale of her diamonds, which seemed to her to have realized a singularly extravagant sum, enabled her to quietly reinstate the Pattersons in the *tienda* and to discharge in full her husband's liabilities to the *rancheros* and his humbler retainers.

Meanwhile the winter rains had ceased. It seemed to her as if the clouds had suddenly one night struck their white tents and stolen away, leaving the unvanquished sun to mount the vacant sky the next morning alone, and possess it thenceforward unchallenged. One afternoon she thought the long sad waste before her window had caught some tint of grayer color from the sunset; a week later she found it a blazing landscape of poppies, broken here and there by blue lagoons of lupine, by pools of daisies, by banks of dog-roses, by broad outlying shores of dandelions that scattered their lavish gold to the foot of the hills, where the green billows of wild oats carried it on and upwards to the darker crests of pines. For two months she was dazzled and bewildered with color. She had never before been face to face with this spendthrift Californian Flora, in her virgin wastefulness, her more than goddess-like prodigality. The teeming earth seemed to quicken and throb beneath her feet; the