

# CLARENCE

BY BRET HARTE.

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Even in her attitude there was a reminiscence of her willful childhood, although still blended with the provincial actress whom he had seen on the stage only an hour ago.

Thoroughly alarmed at her threats, in his efforts to conceal his feelings he was not above a weak retaliation.

Stepping back he affected to regard her with a critical admiration that was only half simulated, and said, with a smile: "Very well done—but you have forgotten the flag." She did not flinch. Rather accepting the sarcasm as a tribute to her art she went on with increasing exaggeration:

"No, it is you who have forgotten the flag—forgotten your country, your people, your manhood—everything for that high-toned, double-dyed old spy and traitress! For while you are standing here your wife is gathering under her roof at Robles a gang of spies and traitors like herself—secession leaders and their bloated, drunken 'chivalry.'"

"Yes! You may smile your superior smile, but I tell you, Clarence Brant, that with all your smartness and book learning you know no more of what goes on around you than a child. But others do! This conspiracy is known to the government, the federal officers have been warned; Gen. Sumner has been sent out here—and his first act was to change the command at Fort Alcatraz and send your wife's southern friend—Capt. Pinkney—to the right about! Yes—everything is known but one thing—and that is where and how this precious crew meet! That I alone know, and that I have told you."

"And I suppose," said Clarence, with an unchanged smile, "that this valuable information came from your husband—my old friend, Jim Hooker?"

"No," she answered, sharply. "It comes from Cenebo—one of your own peons, who is more true to you and the old Rancho than you have ever been. He saw what was going on and came to me to warn you."

"But why not to me directly?" said Clarence, with affected incredulity.

"Ask him!" she said, viciously. "Perhaps he didn't want to warn the master against the mistress. Perhaps he thought we are still friends. Perhaps—" she hesitated, with a lower voice and a forced smile, "perhaps he used to see us together in the old times."

"Very likely," said Clarence, quietly, "and for the sake of these old times, Susy," he went on with a singular gentleness that was quite distinct from his palling face and set eyes, "I am going to forget all that you have said of me and mine, in all the old willfulness and impudence that I see you still keep with all your old prettiness." He took his hat from the table and gravely held out his hand.

She was frightened for a moment with his impressive abstraction. In the old days she had known it—had believed it was his dogged "obstinacy"—but she knew the hopelessness of opposing it. Yet, with feminine persistence, she again threw herself against it, as a wall.

"You don't believe me! Well, go and see for yourself. They are at Robles now! If you catch the early morning stage at Santa Clara, you will come upon them before they disperse. Dare you try it?"

"Whatever I do," he returned, smilingly, "I shall always be grateful to you for giving me this opportunity of seeing you again—as you were! Make my excuses to your husband. Good night!"

"Clarence!"

Thus he had already closed the door behind him. His face did not relax its expression, nor change as he looked again at the tray with its broken viands before the door, the worn, stained hall carpet, or the waiter who shuffled past him.

He was apparently as critically conscious of them and of the close doors of the hall and the atmosphere of listless decay and faded extravagance around him as before the interview.

Had the woman he had just parted from watched him she would have supposed he still utterly disbelieved her story. But he was conscious that all that he saw was a part of his degradation, for he had believed every word she had uttered.

Through all her extravagance, envy and revengefulness, he saw the central truth—that he had been deceived, not by his wife, but by himself. He had suspected all this before—this was what had been really troubling him, this was what he had put aside, rather than his faith, not in her, but in his ideal.

passed between her and Capt. Pinkney—letters that she had openly sent to notorious southern leaders, her nervous anxiety to remain at the rancho, the innuendoes and significant glances of friends which he put aside—as he had this woman's message!

Susy had told him nothing new of his wife, but the truth of himself. And the revelation came from people whom he was conscious were the inferiors of himself and his wife. To an independent, proud and self-made man it was the culminating stroke.

In the same abstracted voice he told the coachman to drive home.

The return seemed interminable, though he never shifted his position.

Let when he drove up at his own door and looked at his watch he found he had been absent only half an hour. Only half an hour! As he entered the house he turned with the same abstraction toward a mirror in the hall as if he had expected to see some outward and visible change in himself at that time.

Dismissing his servants to bed, he went into his dressing-room, completely changed his attire, put on a pair of long riding boots, and throwing a serape over his shoulders, paused a moment, took a pair of small derringer pistols from a box, put them in his pockets, and then slipped cautiously down the staircase.

A lack of confidence in his own domestics had invaded him for the first time. The lights were out. He silently opened the door and was in the street.

He walked hastily a few squares to a livery stable, whose proprietor he knew. His first inquiry was for one Redskin—a particular horse; the second for its proprietor. Happily both were in. The proprietor asked no question of a customer of Clarence's condition.

The horse, half Spanish, powerful and irascible, was quickly saddled. As Clarence mounted, the man, in an impulse of sociability, said:

"Saw you at the theater to-night, sir?"

"Ah!" returned Clarence, quietly gazing up the reins.

"Rather a smart trick of that woman with the flag," he said, tentatively. Then, with a possible doubt of his customer's politics, he added, with a forced smile: "I reckon it's all party fuss, though—thar ain't any real danger."

But fast as Clarence might ride the words lingered in his ears. He saw through the man's hesitation—he, too, had probably heard that Clarence Brant weakly sympathized with his wife's sentiments—and dared not speak fully. And he understood the cowardly suggestion that there was "no real danger."

It had been Clarence's one fallacy. He had believed the public excitement was only a temporary outbreak of partisan feeling—soon to subside. Even now he was conscious that he was less doubtful of the integrity of the union than of his own household. It was not the devotion of the patriot, but the indignation of an outraged husband that was inspiring him on.

He knew that if he reached Woodville by five o'clock he would get ferried across the bay to the embarcadero and catch the down coach to Fair Plains, whence he could ride to the rancho. As the coach did not connect directly with San Francisco, the chance of his surprising them was greater.

Once clear of the city outskirts he bullied Redskin into irascible speed, and plunged into the rainy darkness of the high road. The way was familiar.

For awhile he was content to feel the buffeting, caused by his rapid pace, of wind and rain against his depressed head and shoulders, in a sheer brutal sense of opposition and power; or to relieve his pent-up excitement by dashing through overflowed gullies in the road, or across the quaggy, sodden edges of meadow land, until he had controlled Redskin's rebellious extravagance into a long, steady stride.

Then he raised his head and straightened himself on the saddle—to think. But to no purpose. He had no plan; everything would depend upon the situation; the thought of forestalling any action of the conspirators, by warning or calling in the aid of the authorities, for an instant crossed his mind, but was as instantly dismissed.

He had but an instinct, to see with his own eyes what his reason told him was true.

Day was breaking through drifting and pewter-colored clouds as he reached Woodville ferry, checked with splashes of the soil and the spume of his horse, from whose neck and flanks the sweat rolled like lather.

Yet he was not conscious how intent had been his purpose until he felt a sudden instinctive shock on seeing that the ferryboat was gone! For an instant his wonderful self-possession abandoned him; he could only gaze vacantly at the leaden-colored bay without a thought or expedient, but in another moment he saw that the boat was returning from the distance. Had he lost his only chance?

He glanced hurriedly at his watch; he had come quicker than he imagined; there would still be time. He beckoned impatiently to the ferryman. The boat, a ship's pinnace, with two men in it, crept in with exasperating slowness. At last the two rowers sullenly leaped ashore.

"Ye might have come before with the other passenger. We don't reckon to run lightning trips on this ferry."

But Clarence was himself again. "Twenty dollars for two more oars in that boat," he said, quietly, "and \$50 if you get me over in time to catch the down stage."

The man glanced at Clarence's eyes. "Run up and rouse our Jake and Sam," he said to the other boatman; then more leisurely, gazing at his customer's travel-stained equipment, he said: "There must have been a heap of passengers got left by last night's boat. You're the second man that took this route in a hurry."

At any other time the coincidence might have struck Clarence. But he only answered curtly: "Unless you will wait very in ten minutes you will find I am not the second man, and that our bargain's off."

But here two men emerged from the dimly lit ferry-house and tumbled sleepily into the boat.

Clarence seized an extra pair of oars that were standing against the shed and threw them into the stern. "I don't mind taking a hand myself for exercise," he said, quietly.

The ferryman placed again at Clarence's travel-worn figure and determined eyes with unglad approval and surprise. He lingered a moment with his oars lifted, looking at his passenger.



He plunged into the rainy darkness of the high road.

"It ain't no business o' mine, young man," he said, deliberately, "but I reckon you understand me when I say that I've just taken another man over there."

"I do," said Clarence, impatiently. "And you still want to go?"

"Certainly," said Clarence, with a cold stare, taking up his oar.

The man shrugged his shoulders, bent himself for a stroke and the boat sprang forward. The others rowed strongly and rapidly, the tough ash blades springing like steel from the water, the heavy boat seeming to leap in successive bounds until they were fairly beyond the curving inshore current and clearing the placid, misty surface of the bay.

Clarence did not speak, but bent abstractedly to his oar; the ferryman and his crew rowed in equal panting silence, a few startled ducks whirred before them, but dropped again to rest.

In half an hour they were at the Embarcadero. The time was fairly up; Clarence's eyes were eagerly bent for the first appearance of the stage coach around the little promontory; the ferryman was as eagerly scanning the bare, empty street of the still sleeping settlement.

"I don't see him anywhere," said the ferryman with a glance, half of astonishment and half of curiosity, at his solitary passenger.

"See whom?" said Clarence, carelessly as he handed the man his promised fee.

"The other man I ferried over to catch the stage. He must have gone on without waiting. You're in luck, young fellow."

"I don't understand you," said Clarence, impatiently. "What has your previous passenger to do with me?"

"Well, I reckon you know best. He's the kind of man, gin'rally speaking, that other men in a powerful hurry don't care to meet, and as a rule I don't follow arter. It's gin'rally the other way."

"What do you mean?" said Clarence, sternly. "Who are you speaking of?"

"The chief of police of San Francisco!"

CHAPTER 'II.

The laugh that instinctively broke from Clarence's lips was so sincere and unaffected that the man was disconcerted, and at last joined in it, a little shamefacedly. The grotesque blunder of being taken as a fugitive from justice relieved Clarence's mind from its acute tension, he was momentarily diverted, and it was not until the boatman had departed and he was again alone that it seemed to have any collateral significance.

Then an uneasy recollection of Susy's threat that she had the power to put his wife in Fort Alcatraz came across him.

Could she have already warned the municipal authorities, and this man—but he quickly remembered any action from such a warning could only have been taken by the United States marshal, and not by a civic official, and dismissed the idea.

Nevertheless, when the stage with its half-spent lamps still burning dimly against the morning light swept round the curve and rolled heavily up to the pier, he became watchful.

A single yawning individual in its doorway received a few letters and parcels, but Clarence was evidently the only waiting passenger. Any hope that he might have entertained that his mysterious predecessor would emerge from some seclusion at that moment, was disappointed.

As he entered the coach he made a rapid survey of his fellow-travelers, but satisfied himself that the stranger was not among them. They were mainly small traders or farmers, a miner or two, and apparently a Spanish-American of better degree and personality.

Possibly the circumstance that men of this class usually preferred to travel on horseback and were rarely seen in public conveyances attracted his attention, and their eyes met more than once, in mutual curiosity.

Presently Clarence addressed a remark to him in Spanish. He replied fluently and courteously, but at the next stopping place he asked a question of the expressman in an unmistakable Missouri accent.

Clarence's curiosity was satisfied; he was evidently one of those early American settlers who had been so long domiciled in southern California as to adopt the speech as well as the habiliments of the Spaniard.

The conversation fell upon the political news of the previous night, or rather

seemed to be lazily continued from some previous more exciting discussion, in which one of the contestants, a red-headed miner, had subsided into an occasional growl of surly dissent.

It struck Clarence that the Missourian had been an amused auditor, and even, judging from a twinkle in his eye, a mischievous instigator of the controversy. He was not surprised, therefore, when the man turned to him with a certain courtesy and said:

"And what, sir, is the political feeling in your district?"

But Clarence was in no mood to be drawn, and replied, almost curtly, that as he had come only from San Francisco, they were probably as well informed on that subject as himself.

A quick and searching glance from the stranger's eyes made him regret it, but in the silence that ensued the red-headed passenger, evidently still mulling at heart, saw his opportunity.

Slapping his huge hands on his knees, and leaning far forward, until he seemed to plunge his flaming beard like a firebrand—into the controversy, he said grimly:

"Well, I kin tell you gin'rally that it ain't goin' to be no matter wot's the political feeling here or thar—it ain't goin' to be no matter wot's state-rights and wot's federal rights—it ain't goin' to be no question whether the gov'ment's got the right to relieve its own soldiers that those secedin' be secedin' in Fort Sumter, or whether they haven't—but the first gun that's fired at the flag blows the chains off every blamed nigger south of Mason and Dixon's line! You hear me! I'm shoutin'! And whether you call yourselves 'secedin'' or 'union,' or 'copper-head,' or 'peace men,' you got to face it!"

There was an angry start in one or two of the seats; one man caught at the swinging side strap and half rose, a husky voice began: "It's a confounded—," and then all as suddenly subsided.

Every eye was turned to an insignificant figure in the back seat. It was a woman holding a child on her lap and gazing out of the window with her sex's profound unconcern in politics.

(To be continued.)

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