

CLARENCE

By BRET HARTE.

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He was sitting one afternoon alone before his reports and dispatches when this influence seemed so strong that he half impulsively laid them aside to indulge in a long reverie. He was recalling his last day at Robles, the early morning duel with Pincney, the return to San Francisco, and the sudden resolution which sent him that day across the continent to offer his services to the government. He remembered his delay in the western town where a volunteer regiment was being recruited, his entrance into it as a private, his rapid selection, through the force of his sheer devotion and intelligent concentration, to the captaincy of his company, his swift promotion on hard-fought fields to the head of the regiment, and the singular success that had followed his resistless energy which left him no time to think of anything but his duty. The sudden intrusion of his wife upon his career—even in this accidental and perhaps innocent way, had seriously unsettled him.

The shadows were growing heavier and deeper, it lacked only a few moments of the sunset bugle when he was recalled to himself by that singular instinctive consciousness—common to humanity—of being intently looked at. He turned quickly—the door behind him closed softly. He rose and slipped into the hall. The tall figure of a woman was coming down the passage. She was erect and graceful, but as she turned toward the door leading to the offices, he distinctly saw the gaudily turbaned head and black silhouette of a negro. Nevertheless he halted a moment at the door of the next room.

"See who that woman is who just passed, Mr. Martin. She doesn't seem to belong to the house."

The young officer rose, put on his cap and departed. In a few moments he returned.

"Was she tall, sir—of a good figure and very straight?"

"Yes."

"She is a servant of our neighbors, the Manlys, who occasionally visits the servants here. A mulatto, I think."

Brant reflected. Many of the mulattos and negroes were of good figure, and the habit of carrying burdens on their heads gave them a singularly erect carriage.

The lieutenant looked at his chief. "Have you any orders to give concerning her, general?"

"No," said Brant, after a moment's pause, and turned away.

The officer smiled. It seemed a good story to tell at mess of this human weakness of his handsome, reserved and ascetic-looking leader.

A few moments afterward Brant was interrupted over his reports by the almost abrupt entrance of the officer of the day. His face was flushed, and it was evident that only the presence of his superior restrained his excitement. He held a paper in his hand.

"A lady presents this order and pass from Washington, countersigned by the division general."

"A lady?"

"Yes, sir—she is dressed as such. But she has not only declined the most ordinary civilities and courtesies we have offered her, but has insulted Mr. Martin and myself grossly, and demands to be shown to you alone."

Brant took the paper. It was a special order from the president, passing Miss Matilda Faulkner through the federal lines, to visit her uncle's home, known as "Grey Oaks," now held and occupied as the headquarters of Brant's brigade, in order to arrange for the preservation and disposal of certain family effects and private property that still remained there, or to take or carry away such property, and invoking all necessary aid and assistance from the United States forces in such occupancy. It was countersigned by the division commander. It was perfectly regular and of undoubted authenticity. He had heard of passes of this kind—the terror of the army—issued in Washington under some strange controlling influence and against military protest, but he did not let his subordinate feel the uneasiness with which it filled him.

"Show her in," he said, quietly.

But she had already entered, brushing scornfully past the officer, and drawing her skirt aside as if contaminated. A very pretty southern girl, scornful and red-lipped, clad in gray riding habit, and still carrying her riding whip clenched ominously in her slim, gauntleted hand.

"You have my permit in your hand," she said, brusquely, hardly raising her eyes to Brant—"I suppose it's all straight enough, and even if it isn't, I don't reckon to be kept waiting with those hirelings."

...and so coldly invincible in manner. Still less was she prepared for that kind of antagonism. In keeping up her pre-concentrated attitude toward the "northern hireling" she had been met with official brusqueness, contemptuous silence or aggrieved indignation—nothing as exasperating as this. She even fancied that this elegant but sardonic-looking soldier was inwardly mocking her. She bit her red lip, but with a scornful gesture of her riding whip said:

"I reckon that your knowledge of southern ladies is, for certain reasons, not very extensive."

"Pardon me. I have had the honor of marrying one."

Apparently more exasperated than before she turned upon him abruptly. "You say my pass is all right. Then I presume I may attend to the business that brought me here."

"Certainly, but you will forgive me if I imagined that an expression of contempt for your host was a part of it." He rang a bell on the table. It was responded to by an orderly. "Send all the household servants here."

The room was presently filled with the dusky faces of the negro retainers. Here and there was the gleaming of white teeth, but a majority of the assembly wore the true negro acceptance of the importance of "an occasion."

One or two even affected an official and soldierly bearing. And as he fully expected there were several glances of significant recognition of the stranger.

"You will give," said Brant, sternly, "every aid and attention to the wants of this young lady, who is here to represent the interests of your old master. As she will be entirely dependent upon you in all things connected with her visit here, see to it that she does not have to complain to me of any inattention—or to be obliged to ask for other assistance."

As Miss Faulkner, albeit a trifle paler in the cheek, but as scornful as ever, was about to follow the servant from the room, Brant stopped her with a cold stare before she had time to utter a word of protest.

"I had reason to believe that you were a servant of our neighbors, the Manlys, who occasionally visits the servants here. A mulatto, I think."

Brant reflected. Many of the mulattos and negroes were of good figure, and the habit of carrying burdens on their heads gave them a singularly erect carriage.

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"Your permit is 'straight enough," Miss Faulkner," said Brant, slowly reading her name from the document before him, "but as it does not seem to include permission to insult my officers you will perhaps first allow them to retire." He made a sign to the officer, who passed out of the door. As it closed he went on in a gentle, but coldly unimpassioned voice. "I perceive you are a southern lady, and, therefore, I need not remind you that it is not considered good form to treat even the slaves of those one does not like uncivilly, and I must therefore expect that you will keep your active animosity for yourself."

The young girl lifted her eyes, and had evidently not expected to meet a

casual proximity with less negative favor. Once when she had mounted the wall to gather a magnolia blossom, the chair by which she had ascended rolled over, leaving her on the wall. At a signal from the guard room two sappers and miners appeared, carrying a scaling ladder, which they placed against the wall, and as she sat there, withdrawing. On another occasion the same spirited young lady, whom Brant was satisfied would have probably imperiled her life under fire, in devotion to her cause, was brought ignominiously to lay in the field by that most appalling of domestic animals—the wandering and untrammelled cow. Brant could not help smiling as he heard the quick, harsh call to "turn out guard," saw the men marched solidly with fixed bayonets to the vicinity of the frightened animal, who fled, leaving the fair stranger to walk shamefacedly to the house. He was surprised, however, that she should have halted before his door, and with tremulous indignation said:

"I thank you, sir, for your chivalrousness in turning a defenseless woman into ridicule."

"I regret, Miss Faulkner," began Brant, gravely, "that you should believe that I am able to control the advances of farmyard cattle as easily as—" but he stopped as he saw that the angry flash of her blue eyes, as she darted from him, were set in tears. A little remorseful on the following day, he added a word to his ordinary cap lifting when he passed her, but she retained a reproachful silence. Later in the day he received from her servant a respectful request for an interview, and was relieved to find that she entered his presence with no trace of her former aggression—but rather with the resignation of a deeply injured, yet not entirely unforgiving woman.

"I thought," she began, coldly, "that I ought to inform you that I would probably be able to conclude my business here by the day after tomorrow, and that you would then be relieved of my presence. I am aware, indeed," she added, bitterly, "I could scarcely help perceiving, that it has been an exceedingly irksome one."

"I trust," began Brant, coldly, "that no gentleman of my command has—" "No!" she interrupted him quickly, with a return of her former manner, and a passionate sweep of her hand, "do you suppose for a moment that I am speaking—that I am even thinking of them? What are they to me?"

"Thank you. I am glad to know that they are nothing, and that I may now trust that you have consulted my wishes and have reserved your animosity for me," returned Brant, quietly. "If that is so, I see no reason for your hurrying your departure in the least."

She rose instantly. "I have," she said, slowly, controlling herself with a slight effort, "found some one who will take my duty off my hands. She is a servant of one of your neighbors—who is an old friend of my uncle's—the woman is familiar with the house and our private property. I will give her full instructions to act for me—and even an authorization in writing if you prefer it. She is already in the habit of coming here—but her visits will give you very little trouble. And as she is a slave—or, as you call it, I believe—a chattel, she will be already quite accustomed to the treatment which her class are in the habit of receiving from northern hands." Without waiting to perceive the effect of her Partisan shot, she swept proudly out of the room.

"I wonder what she means?" mused Brant, as her quick step died away in the passage. "One thing is certain, a woman like that is altogether too impulsive for a spy."

Later, in the twilight, he saw her walking in the garden. There was a figure at her side. A little curious, he examined it more closely from his window. It was already familiar to him—the erect shapely form of his neighbor's servant. A thoughtful look passed over his face as he muttered: "So this is to be her deputy!"

CHAPTER III.

Called to a general council of officers at divisional headquarters the next day, Brant had little time for further speculation regarding his strange guest. But a remark from the division commander that he preferred to commit the general plan of a movement then under discussion to the memories rather than to written orders in the ordinary routine, seemed to show that his chief still suspected the existence of a spy. He therefore told him of his late interview with Miss Faulkner and her probable withdrawal in favor of a mulatto neighbor.

The division commander received the information with indifference. "They're much too clever to employ a husky like that, who shows her hand at every turn—either as a spy or a messenger of spies—and the mulattos are too stupid, to say nothing of their probable fidelity to us. No, general, if we are watched, it is by an eagle and not a mocking bird. Miss Faulkner has nothing worse about her than her tongue, and there isn't the nigger blood in the whole south that would risk a noose for her, or for any of their masters or mistresses."

It was therefore, perhaps, with some mitigation of his usual critical severity that he saw her walking before him alone in the lane as he rode home to quarters. She was apparently lost in a half impatient, half moody reverie, which even the trotting hoof-beats of his own and orderly's horses had not disturbed. From time to time she struck the myrtle hedge beside her with the head of a huge flower which hung by its stalk from her listless hands, or held it to her face as if to inhale its perfume. Dismissing his orderly by a side path he rode gently forward, but to his surprise, without turning or seeming to be aware of his presence, she quickened her pace, and even appeared to look from side to side for some avenue of escape; it only to find that he was obliged to ride quickly

forward to her side, where he threw himself from his horse, flung the reins on his arm, and began to walk beside her. She at first turned a slightly flushed cheek away from him, and then looked up with a purely simulated start of surprise.

"I am afraid," he said, gently, "that I am the first to break my own orders in regard to any intrusion on your privacy. But I wanted to ask you if I could give you any aid whatever in the change you think of making." He was quite sincere, had been touched by her manifest disturbance, and despite his masculine volubility of criticism he had an intuition of feminine suffering that was in itself feminine.

"Meaning that you are in a hurry to get rid of me," she said curtly, without raising her eyes.

"Meaning that I only wish to expedite a business which I think is unpleasant to you, but which I believe you have undertaken from unselfish devotion."

The scant expression of a reserved smile was sometimes more attractive to her than the most fluent vivacity. Usually there was also a melancholy tinge in his sardonic soldier's manner that affected her, for she looked up and said impulsively:

"You think so?"

But he met her eager eyes with some surprise. "I certainly do," he replied with a smile. "I can imagine your feelings on finding your uncle's name in the possession of your enemies, and your presence under the family roof only a suffering. I can hardly believe it a pleasure to you or a task you would have accepted for yourself alone."

"But," she said, turning from him wearily, "what if I did it only to excite my revenge; what if I knew it would give me courage to entice my people to carry the way into your own homes, to make you of the north feel as I feel, and taste our bitterness?"

"I could easily understand that too," he returned with listless coldness, "although I don't admit that revenge is an unmitigated pleasure even to a woman."

"A woman," she repeated, indignantly. "There is no sex in a war like this." "You are spilling your flower," he said quietly. "It is very pretty—and a native one, too—not an invader—nor even transplanted. May I look at it?"

She hesitated, half recoiling for an instant, and her hand trembling. Then suddenly and abruptly she said with a hysterical little laugh: "Take it—then, and almost thrust it in his hand."

It certainly was a pretty flower, like a lily in appearance, with a be-

like cup and long anthers covered with a fine pollen like red dust. As he lifted it to his face to inhale its perfume, it uttered a slight cry and snatched from his hand.

"There!" she said with the same nervous laugh. "I knew you would—ought to have warned you. The pollen comes off so easily, and leaves a stain. And you've got some on your cheek. Look!" she continued, taking her handkerchief from her pocket and wiping his cheek, "see there!" The delicate cambrie showed a blood red streak.

"It grows in a swamp," she continued in the same excited strain, "we call it dragon's teeth—the kind that was sown in the story, you know. We children used to find it and then paint our faces and lips with it. We called it our rouge. I was almost tempted to try it again when I found it just now. It took me back so to the old times."

Following her odd manner rather than her words, as she turned her face toward him suddenly, Brant was inclined to think that she had tried it already, so scarlet was her cheek. But it presently paled again under his cold scrutiny.

(To be continued.)

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