

CLARENCE

By BRET HARTE.

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But as to the real intruder—spy or thief—that was another affair, and quickly settled. He gave an order to the officer of the day peremptorily forbidding the entrance of alien servants or slaves within the precincts of the headquarters. Anyone thus trespassing was to be brought before him. The officer looked surprised—he even fancied disappointed. The graces of the mulatto woman's figure had evidently been not thrown away upon his subalterns.

An hour or two later, when he was mounting his horse for a round of inspection, he was surprised to see Miss Faulkner, accompanied by the mulatto woman, running hurriedly to the house. He had forgotten his late order until he saw the latter halted by the sentries, but the young girl came flying on regardless of her companion. Her skirt was caught in one hand, her straw hat had fallen back in her flight, and was caught only by a ribbon around her swelling throat, her loosened hair lay in a black rippled loop on one shoulder. For an instant Brant thought that she was seeking him in indignation at his order, but a second look at her set face, eager eyes and parted scarlet lips



The young girl came flying on, regardless of her companion.

showed him that she had not even noticed him in the concentration of her purpose. She swept by him into the hall; he heard the wail of her skirt and rapid feet on the stairs; she was gone. What had happened—or was this another of her moods?

But he was called to himself by the apparition of a corporal standing before him with the mulatto woman—the first capture under his order. She was tall, well formed, but unmistakably showing the negro type, even in her small features. Her black eyes were excited, but unintelligent, her manner dogged, but with the obstinacy of half-conscious stupidity. Brant felt not only disappointed, but had a singular impression that she was not the same woman that he had first seen. Yet there was the tall, graceful figure, the dark profile and the turbaned head that he had once followed down the passage by his room.

Her story was stupidly simple. She had known "misy" from a child! She had just trapped over to see her that afternoon; they were walking together when the sojers stopped her. She had never been stopped before, even by "patter rollers." Her ole massa (Manny) had gib leaf to go see Miss Josey, and hadn't said nuffin' about no "orders."

More annoyed than he cared to confess, Brant briefly dismissed her with a warning. As he centered down the slope the view of the distant pickets recalled the window in the wing and he turned in his saddle to look at it. There it was—the largest and most dominant window in that part of the building—and within it, a distinct and vivid object, almost filling the opening, was the vase of flowers which he had a few hours ago removed, restored to its original position. He smiled. The hurried entrance and consternation of Miss Faulkner was now fully explained. He had interrupted some impassioned message, perhaps even countermanded some affectionate rendezvous beyond the lines. And it settled the fact that it was she who had done the signaling. But would not this also make her cognizant of the taking of the dispatch box? He reflected, however, that the room was apparently occupied by the mulatto woman; he remembered the calico dresses and turban on the bed; and it was possible that Miss Faulkner had only visited it for the purpose of signaling to her lover. But the circumstance did not tend to make his mind easier. It was, however, presently diverted by an unlooked-for incident.

As he rode through the camp a group of officers congregated before a large mess tent appeared to be highly amused by the conversation—half monologue and half harangue—of a singular-looking individual who stood in the center. He wore a "slouch" hat, to the band of which he had imparted a military air by the addition of a gold cord, but the brim was caught up at the side in a peculiarly theatrical and highly artificial fashion. A heavy cavalry saber depended from a broad buckled belt under his black frock coat, with the addition of two revolvers, minus their holsters, stuck on either side of the buckle, after the style of stage smugglers. A pair of long enameled leather riding boots, with the tops turned

deeply over, as if they had once done duty for the representative of a cavalier, completed his extraordinary equipment. The group were so absorbed in him that they did not perceive the approach of their chief and his orderly, and Brant, with a sign to the latter, halted only a few paces from the central figure. His speech was a singular mingling of high-flown and exalted epithets and inexact pronunciation, with occasional lapses of western slang.

"Well, I ain't purtendin' to any strategical smartness, and I didn't graduate at West Point as one of these Apocryphal engineers; I don't do much talking about 'flank' movements or 'recoginuzance in force' or 'Ehelson kickin'fling,' but when it comes down to square Injin fightin', I reckon I kin have my say. There are men who don't know the army contractor," he added, darkly, "who mebbe have heard of 'Red Jim.' I don't mention names, gentlemen, but only the other day a man that you all know says to me: 'If I only knew what you do about scoutin' I wouldn't be wanting for information as I do.' I ain't going to say who it was, or break any confidence between gentlemen—by saying how many stars he had on his shoulder strap, but he was a man who knew what he was saying. And I say ag'in, gentlemen, that the curse of the northern army is the want of proper scoutin'. What was it caused Bull's run? Want o' scoutin'. What was it rolled up 'lope? Want o' scoutin'. What killed Baker at Ball's Bluff? Want o' scoutin'. What caused the slaughter at the Wilderness? Want o' scoutin'. Injin scoutin'! Why, only the other day, gentlemen, I was approached to know what I'd take to organize a scoutin' force. And what did I say? 'No, general, it ain't because I represent one of the largest army beef contractors in the country.' Says I: 'It ain't because I belong, so to speak, to the 'Sinews of War,' but because I'd want about 10,000 trained Injins from the reservations! And the regular West Point high-toned, scientific inkys that weighs so heavily on our army don't see it—and won't have it! Then Sherman, he sez to me—"

But here a roar of laughter interrupted him, and in a cross-fire of sarcastic interrogations that began, Brant saw with relief a chance of escape. For in the voice, manner and, above all, the characteristic temperament of the stranger, he had recognized his old playmate and the husband of Susy—the redoubtable Jim Hooker! There was no mistaking that gloomy and taciturn—that mysterious significance—that magnificent lying. But even at that moment Clarence Brant's heart had gone out—with all his old loyalty of feeling—toward his old companion. He knew that a public recognition of him then and there would plunge Hooker into confusion. He felt keenly the ironical plaudits and laughter of his officers over the manifest weakness and vanity of the ex-teamster, ex-rancher, ex-actor and husband of his girl sweetheart, and would have spared him the knowledge that he had overheard it. Turning hastily to the orderly he bade him bring the stranger to his headquarters, and rode away unperceived.

He had heard enough, however, to account for his presence there, and the singular chance that had brought them again together. He was evidently one of those large civil contractors of supplies whom the government was obliged to employ, who visited the camp, half officially, and whom the army alternately depended upon and abused. Brant had dealt with his underlings in the commissariat, and even now remembered that he had heard he was coming, but had overlooked the significance of his name. But how he came to leave his theatrical profession, how he had attained a position which implied a command of considerable capital—for many of the contractors had already amassed large fortunes—and what had become of Susy and her ambitions in this radical change of circumstances, were things to be learned. In his own changed conditions he had seldom thought of her; it was with a strange feeling of irritation and half responsibility that he now recalled his last interview with her and the emotion to which he had succumbed.

He had not long to wait. He had scarcely regained the quarters at his own private office before he heard the step of the orderly upon the veranda and the trailing clank of Hooker's saber. He did not know, however, that Hooker, without recognizing his name, had received the message as a personal tribute, and had left his sarcastic companions triumphantly, with the air of going to a confidential interview to which his well-known military connection had entitled him. It was with a bearing of gloomy importance, and his characteristic sullen sidelong glance that he entered the apartment, and did not look up until Brant had signaled the orderly to withdraw and closed the door behind him. And then he recognized his old boyish companion—the professed favorite of fortune! For a moment he gasped with astonishment. For a moment gloomy incredulity, suspicion, delight, pride, admiration, even affection, struggled for mastery in his sullen-staring eyes, and open, twitching mouth. For here was Clarence Brant, the man who had

over, more superior than ever in the majesty of uniform and authority—which fitted him, the younger man, through his four years of active service with the careless ease and bearing of the veteran! Here was the hero whose name was already so famous that the mere coincidence of it with that of the modest civilian he had known would have struck him as preposterous. Yet here he was—supreme and dazzling—surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of war—into whose reserved presence he, Jim Hooker, had been ushered with the formality of challenge, saluting and presented bayonets!

Luckily Brant had taken advantage of his first gratified ejaculation to shake him warmly by the hand, and then with both hands laid familiarly on his shoulder force him down into a chair. Luckily, for by that time Jim Hooker had with characteristic gloominess found time to taste the pangs of envy—an envy the more keen since, in spite of his success as a peaceful contractor, he had always secretly longed for military display and distinction. He looked at the man who had achieved it, as he firmly believed, by sheer luck and accident and his eyes darkened. Then, with characteristic weakness and vanity, he began to resist his first impressions of Clarence's superiority, and to air his own importance. He leaned heavily back in his chair in which he had been thus genially forced, drew off his gaiter and attempted to thrust it through his belt, as he had seen Brant do, but failed on account of his pistols already occupying that position, dropped it, got his sword between his legs in attempting to pick it up, and then leaned back again, with half-closed eyes, serenely indifferent of his old companion's smiling face.

"I reckon," he began, slowly, with a slightly patronizing air, "that we'd have met, sooner or later, at Washington, or at Grant's headquarters, for Hooker, Meacham & Co. go everywhere, and are about as well known as major generals, to say nothin'," he went on, with a sidelong glance at Brant's shoulder straps, "of brigadiers—and it's rather strange, only, of course, you're kind of fresh in the service—that you ain't heard of me afore."

"But I'm very glad to hear of you now, Jim," said Brant, smiling, "and from your own lips—which I am also delighted to find," he added, mischievously, "are still as frankly communicative on that topic, as of old. But I congratulate you, old fellow, on your good fortune. When did you leave the stage?"

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly. "I never really was on the stage, you know," he said, waving his hand with assumed negligence—"only went on to please my wife. Mrs. Hooker wouldn't act with vulgar professionals, don't you see! I was really manager—most of the time, and lessee of the theater. Went east when the war broke out to offer—my sword and knowledge of Injin fightin'—to Uncle Sam! Drifted into a big pork contract at St. Louis with Fremont. Been at it ever since. Offered a commission in the regular service lots o' times. Refused."

"Why?" asked Brant, demurely.

"Too much West Point stareh around to suit me," returned Hooker, darkly.

"And too many spies!"

"Spies?" echoed Brant, abstractedly, with a momentary reminiscence of Miss Faulkner.

"Yes, spies," continued Hooker, with dogged mystery. "One-half of Washington is watching 'other half, and, from the president's wife down, most of the women are seesh!"

Brant suddenly fixed his keen eyes on his guest. But the next moment he reflected that this was only Jim Hooker's usual speech and possessed no ulterior significance. He smiled again and said more gently:

"And how is Mrs. Hooker?"

Mr. Hooker fixed his eyes on the ceiling, rose, pretended to look out of the window; then, taking his seat again by the table, as if fronting an imaginary audience, and pulling slowly at his gaiter, after the usual theatrical indication of a perfect sang froid, said:

"There ain't any."

"Good heavens!" said Brant, with genuine emotion. "I beg your pardon—really I—"

"Mrs. Hooker and me are divorced," continued Hooker, slightly changing his attitude and leaning heavily on his saber, with his eyes still on his fanciful audience. "There was, you understand,—lightly tossing his gaiter aside—"incompatibility of temper!—and we—parted. Ha!" he uttered a low, bitter, scornful laugh, which, however, produced the distinct impression in Brant's mind that up to that moment he had never had the slightest feeling in the matter whatever.

"You seemed to be on such good terms with each other," murmured Brant, vaguely.

"Seemed!" said Hooker bitterly, glancing sardonically at an ideal second row in the pit before him—"yes, seemed! There were—other differences—social and political. You understand that—you have suffered too." He reached out his hand and pressed Brant's in heavy offensiveness. "But," he continued, laughingly, lightly tossing his glove again, "we are all men of the world—we let that pass!" And it was possible that he found the strain of his present attitude too great, for he changed to a cooler position.

"But," said Brant, curiously, "I always thought that Mrs. Hooker was intensely union and northern."

"Put on!" said Hooker, in his natural voice.

"But you remember the incident of the flag?" persisted Brant.

"Mrs. Hooker was always an actress," said Hooker significantly. "But," he added cheerfully, "Mrs. Hooker is now the wife of Senator Boompointer, one of the wealthiest and most powerful republicans in Washington—carries the patronage of the whole west in his vest pocket!"

"Yet if she is not a republican—why did she"—began Brant.

"For a purpose," responded Hooker, darkly. "But," he added again with greater cheerfulness, "she belongs to the very elite of Washington society. Goes to all the foreign ambassador's balls, and is a power at the white house. Her picture is in all the first-class illustrated papers."

The singular but unmistakable pride of the man in the importance of the wife from whom he was divorced, and for whom he did not care, would have offended Brant's delicacy, or at least have excited his ridicule, but for the reason that he was more deeply stung by Hooker's allusion to his own wife and his degrading similitude of their two conditions. But he dismissed the former as part of Hooker's invincible and still boyish extravagance, and the latter as part of his equally characteristic assumption. Perhaps he was conscious, too, notwithstanding the lapse of years and the condonation of separation and forgetfulness, that he deserved little delicacy from the hands of Susy's husband.

Nevertheless he dreaded to hear him speak again of her. And the fear was realized in a question.

"Does she know you are here?"

"Who?" said Brant, curiously.

"Your wife. That is—I reckon she's your wife still, eh?"

"I do not know that she knows," returned Brant quietly. He had regained his self-composure.

"Susy—Mrs. Senator Boompointer, that is—he seemed to feel a certain dignity in his late wife's new title, "allowed that she'd gone abroad on a secret mission from the southern confederacy to them crowned heads over there. She was good at ropin' men in, you know. Anyhow, Susy—afore she was Mrs. Boompointer—was dead set on findin' out where she was—but never could. She seemed to drop out of sight a year ago. Some said one thing and some said another. But you can bet your bottom dollar that Mrs. Senator Boompointer, who knows how to pull all the wires in Washington, will know if anyone does."

"But is Mrs. Boompointer really disaffected and a southern sympathizer," said Brant, "or is it only caprice or fashion?" While speaking he had risen with a half abstracted face and had gone to the window, where he stood in a loitering attitude. Presently he opened the window and stepped outside. Hooker wonderingly followed him. One or two officers had already stepped out of their rooms, and were standing upon the veranda, another had halted in the path. Then one quickly reentered the house, reappeared with his cap and sword in his hand and ran lightly toward the guard house. A slight crackling noise seemed to come from beyond the garden wall.

"What's up?" said Hooker, with staring eyes.

"Picket firing."

The crackling suddenly became a long rattle. Brant reentered the room, and picked up his hat.

"You'll excuse me for a few moments?"

A hollow sound shook the house.

"What's that?" gasped Hooker.

"Cannon."

(To be continued.)

The Express would like some hay on subscription.

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