

CLARENCE

BRET HARTE.

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"Well, I don't wonder! Here are all the women asking me who is that good-looking Mephistopheles, with the burning eyes, who is prowling around my rooms as if searching for a victim. Why, you're smiling for all the world like poor Jim, when he used to do the Red Avenger."

Susy's voice, an illustration, recalled him to himself. "Furious I may well be," he said, with a gentler smile, although his eyes still glittered, "furious that I have to wait until the one woman I came to see, the one woman I have not seen for so long, while these puppets have been nightly dancing before her—can give me a few moments from them, to talk of the old days."

In his reaction he was quite sincere, although he felt a slight sense of remorse as he saw the quick faint color rise, as in those old days, even through the to-night's powder of her cheek. "That's like the old Kla'uns," she said, with a slight pressure of his arm, "but we will not have a chance to speak until late. When they are nearly all gone you'll take me to get a little refreshment, and we'll have a chat in the conservatory. But you must drop that awfully wicked look, and make yourself generally agreeable to those women until then."

It was perhaps part of this reaction which enabled him to obey his hostess' commands with a certain recklessness that, however, seemed to be in keeping with the previous Satanic reputation he had, all unconsciously, achieved. The women listened to the cynical flippancy of the good-looking soldier with an undisguised admiration, which, in turn, excited curiosity and envy from his own sex. He saw the whispered questioning, the lifted eyebrows, the scornful shrugging of shoulders—and knew that the story of his disgrace was in the air. But I fear this only excited him to further recklessness and triumph. Once he thought he recognized Miss Faulkner's figure at a distance, and even fancied that she had been watching him—but he only redoubled his attentions to the fair woman beside him, and looked no more.

But he was glad when the guests began to drop off; the great rooms thinned, and Susy, appearing on the arm of her husband, coquettishly reminded him of his promise. "For I want to talk to you of old times. Gen. Brant," she went on, turning explanatorily to Boompointer, "married my adopted mother in California, at Robles, a dear old place where I spent my earliest years. So you see we are sort of relations by marriage," she added, with delightful naivete. Hooker's once vainglorious allusion to his relations to the man before him flashed across Brant's mind, but it left now only a smile on his lips. He felt he had already become a part of the irresponsible comedy of life around him. Why should he resist or examine its ethics too closely? He offered his arm to Susy; they descended the stairs; but instead of passing in the supper-room, she simply passed through it with a significant pressure of his arm, and drawing aside a muslin curtain stepped into the moonlit conservatory. Behind the curtain there was a small rustic settee; without releasing his arm she sat down, so that when he dropped beside her their hands met and mutually clasped.

"Now, Kla'uns," she said with a slight comfortable shiver as she nestled beside him, "it's a little like your chair down at old Robles, isn't it? Tell me. And to think it's five years ago. But Kla'uns, what's the matter? You are changed," she said, looking at his dark face in the moonlight, "or you have something to tell me."

"I have."

"And it's something dreadful, I know," she said, wrinkling her brows with a pretty terror. "Couldn't you pretend you had told it to me and let us go on just the same? Couldn't you, Kla'uns? Tell me."

"I am afraid I couldn't," he said, with a sad smile.

"Is it about yourself, Kla'uns? You know," she went on with cheerful rapidity, "I know everything about you—I always did, you know—and I don't care and never did care, and it don't and never did make the slightest difference to me. So don't tell it and waste time, Kla'uns."

"It's not about me—but about my wife," he said, slowly.

Her expression changed alight. "O, her!" she said, after a pause. Then half resignedly: "Go on, Kla'uns."

He began. He had a dozen times resented to himself his miserable story, always feeling it keenly, and even fearing that he might be carried away by emotion or morbid sentiment in telling it to another, but to his astonishment he found himself telling it practically, calmly, almost cynically to his old playmate, repressing the half devotion and even tenderness that had governed him, from the time that his wife, disguised as a mulatto woman, had secretly watched him in his office, to the hour that he had passed her through the lines. He withheld only the incident of Miss Faulkner's complicity and sacrifice.

"And she got away—after having kicked you out of your place, Kla'uns?" said Susy when he had ended.

Clarence stiffened beside her. But he felt he had gone too far to quarrel with his confidante. "She went away, I honestly believe that we shall see her again—"

you this?"

"Kla'uns," she said lightly, taking his hand again, "don't you believe it! She won't let you go. You're one of those men that a woman when she once has hooked on to won't let go of even when she believes she no longer loves him—or meets bigger and better men. I reckon it's because you're so different from other men—maybe—there are so many different things about you to hook on to—and you don't slip off as easily as the others. Now, if you were like old Peyton, her first husband, or like poor Jim, or even my Boompointer, you'd be all right! No, my boy, all we can do is try to keep her from getting at you here. I reckon she won't trust herself in Washington again in a hurry!"

"But I cannot stay here—my career is in the field."

"Your career is alongside o' me, honey—and Boompointer. But nearer me. We'll fix all that. I heard something about your being in disgrace, but the story was that you were soft on some seecah girl down there and neglected your business, Kla'uns. But Lord! to think it was only your own wife! Never mind, we'll straighten that out. We've had worse jobs than that on. Why, there was that commissary who was buying up dead horses at one end of the field and selling them to the government for mess beef at the other; and there was that general who wouldn't make an attack when it rained, and the other general—you know who I mean, Kla'uns—who wouldn't invade the state where his sister lived—but we straightened them out somehow, and they were a heap worse than you. We'll get you a position in the war department here, one of the bureau offices, where you keep your rank and your uniform—you don't look out in it, Kla'uns—on better pay. And you'll come and see me—and we'll talk over old times."

Brant felt his heart turn sick within him. But he was at her mercy now! He said with an effort: "But I've told you that my career—my life—now is in the field."

"Don't you be a fool, Kla'uns, and leave it there. You have done your work of fighting—mighty good fighting, too, and everybody knows it. You've earned a change. Let others take your place."

He shuddered as he remembered that his wife had made the same appeal. Was he a fool, then, and these two women—so totally unlike in everything—right in this?

"Come, Kla'uns," said Susy, relapsing against his shoulder, "now talk to me! You don't say what you think of me, of my home, my furniture—of my position—even of him! Tell me!"

"I find you well, prosperous, and happy," he said, with a faint smile.

"Is that all? How do I look?"

She turned her still youthful mischievous face toward him in the moonlight. The witchery of her blue eyes was still there as of old, the same frank irresponsibility beamed from them; her parted lips seemed to give him back the breath of his youth. He started, but she did not.

"Susy, dear!"

It was her husband's voice. "I quite forgot," it went on, as he drew the curtain aside, "that you are engaged with a friend, but Miss Faulkner is waiting to say 'good night,' and I volunteered to find you."

"Tell her to wait a moment," said Susy, with an impatience that was as undisguised as it was without embarrassment or confusion.

But Miss Faulkner, unconsciously following Mr. Boompointer, was already upon them. For a moment, the whole four were silent—although perfectly composed.

Senator Boompointer, unconscious of any infelicity in his interruption, was calmly waiting. Clarence, opposed suddenly to the young girl, whom he believed was avoiding his recognition, rose, coldly imperturbable. Miss Faulkner, looking taller and more erect in the long folds of her satin cloak, neither paled nor blushed, as she regarded Susy and Brant with a smile of well-bred apology.

"I expect to leave Washington tomorrow, and may not be able to call again," she said, "or I would not have so particularly pressed a leave-taking upon you."

"I was talking with my old friend, Gen. Brant," said Susy, more by way of introduction than apology.

Brant bowed. For an instant the clear eyes of Miss Faulkner slipped icily across him as she made him an old-fashioned colonial courtesy, and taking Susy's arm she left the room. Brant did not linger, but took leave of his host and

most in the same breath. At the front door a well-appointed carriage of one of the legations had just rolled into waiting. He looked back and saw Miss Faulkner, erect and beautiful as a bride in her gauzy draperies, descending the stairs before the waiting servants. He felt his heart beat strangely. He hesitated; recalled himself with an effort—hurriedly stepped from the porch into the path as he heard the carriage door close behind him in the distance, and even felt the dust from her horses' hoofs rise around him as she drove past him and away.

CHAPTER III.

Although Brant was convinced as soon as he left the house that he could not accept anything from the Boompointer influence, and that his interview with Susy was fruitless, he knew that he must temporize. While he did not believe that his old playmate would willingly betray him, he was uneasy when he thought of the vanity and impulsiveness which might compromise him—or of a possible jealousy that might seek revenge. Yet he had no reason to believe that Susy's nature was jealous, or that she was likely to have any cause, but the fact was that the climax of Miss Faulkner's reappearance when they were together affected him more strongly than the real climax of his interview with Susy—which was her offer. Once out of the atmosphere of that house, it struck him, too, that Miss Faulkner was almost as much of an alien to it as himself. He wondered what she had been doing there. Could it be possible that she was obtaining information for the south? But he rejected the idea as quickly as it had occurred to him. Perhaps there could be no stronger proof of the unconscious influence the young girl already had over him.

He remembered the liveries of the diplomatic carriage that had borne her away and ascertained without difficulty that her sister had married one of the foreign ministers, and that she was the guest in his house. But he was the more astonished to hear that she and her sister were considered to be southern unionists, and were greatly petted in governmental circles for their sacrificing fidelity to the flag. His informant, an official in the state department, added that Miss Matilda might have been a good deal of a madcap at the outbreak of the war, for the sisters had a brother in the confederate service, but that she had changed greatly, and, indeed, within a month. "For," he added, "she was at the white house for the first time last week, and they say the president talked more to her than any other woman."

The indescribable sensation with which this simple information filled Brant startled him more than the news itself. Hope, joy, fear, distrust and despair alternately thrilled him. He recalled Miss Faulkner's almost agonizing glance of appeal to him in the drawing room at Susy's, and it seemed to be equally consistent with the truth of what he had just heard—or some monstrous treachery and deceit of which she might be capable. Even now she might be a secret emissary of some spy within the president's family; she might have been in correspondence with some traitor in the Boompointer clique, and her imploring glance only the result of a fear of exposure. Or, again, she might have truly recoiled after her escapade at Gray Oaks, and feared only his recollection of her as go-between of spies. And yet both of these presumptions were inconsistent with her conduct in the conservatory. It seemed impossible that this impulsive woman, capable of doing what he had himself known her to do, and equally sensitive to the shame or joy of such impulses, should be the same heartless woman of society, who had so coldly recognized and parted from him.

But this interval of doubt was transient. The next day he received a dispatch from the war department, ordering him to report himself for duty at once. With a beating heart he hurried to the secretary. But that official had merely left a memorandum with his assistant, directing Gen. Brant to accompany some fresh levies to a camp of occupation near the front for "organization." Brant felt a chill of disappointment. Duties of this kind had been left to dubious, regular army veterans, hurriedly displaced general officers and favored detachments. But if it was not restoration, it was no longer inaction, and it was at least a release from Washington.

It was, also, evidently the result of some influence, but hardly that of the Boompointers, for he knew that Susy wished to keep him at the capital. Was there another power at work to send him away to Washington? His previous suspicion returned, nor were they dissipated when the chief of the bureau placed a letter before him with the remark that it had been entrusted to him by a lady, with the request that it should be delivered only into his own hands. "She did not know your hotel address, but ascertained you were to call here. She said it was of importance. There is no mystery about it, general," continued the official with a mischievous glance at Brant's handsome, perplexed face, "although it's from a very pretty woman—whom we all know."

"Mrs. Boompointer?" suggested Brant with affected lightness.

It was a maladroit speech. The official's face darkened. "We have not yet become a postal department for the Boompointers, general," he said, drily, "however great their influence elsewhere. It was from rather a different style of woman—Miss Faulkner. You will receive your papers later at your hotel, and leave to-night."

Brant's untimely slip was still potent enough to divert the official's attention, or he would have noticed the change in his visitor's face, and the abruptness of his departure.

Once in the street, Brant tore off the envelope. But he found it was another, and when he opened it he discovered a

finer hand: "Please do not open this until you reach your destination."

Then she knew he was going! And this was her influence. All his suspicions again returned. She knew he was going through the lines, and this very appointment, through her influence, might be a plot to serve her and the enemy. Was this letter which she was intrusting to him the cover of a misadventure to her southern friends, which she expected him to carry, as a return for her own act of self-sacrifice? Was this the appeal she had been making to his chivalry, his gratitude, his honor? The perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. What defect lay hidden in his nature that seemed to make him an easy victim of these intriguing women? He had not even the excuse of gallantry. Less susceptible to the potencies of the sex than most men, he was still compelled to bear that reputation. He remembered his coldness to Miss Faulkner in the first days of their meeting, and her effect upon his subalterns. Why had she selected him from among them, when she could have modeled the others like wax to her purpose? Why? And yet with the question came a possible answer that he hardly dared to think of; that in its very vagueness seemed to fill him with a stimulating thrill and hopefulness. He quickened his pace. He would take the letter and yet be master of himself when the time came to open it.

That time came three days later, in his tent on Three Pine Crossing. As he broke open the envelope he was relieved to find that it contained no other inclosure, and seemed intended only for himself. It began abruptly:

"When you read this you will understand why I did not speak to you when we met last night; why I even dreaded that you might speak to me, knowing what I ought to tell you even at such a place and moment—something you could hear from me alone. I did not know you were in Washington, although I knew that you were relieved; I had no way of seeing you or sending to you before, and I only came to Mrs. Boompointer's party in the hope of hearing news of you."

"You know that my brother was captured by your pickets, in company with another officer. He thinks you suspected the truth, that he and his friend were hovering near your lines to effect the escape of the spy. But he says that although they failed to help her she did escape, or was passed through the lines by your connivance. He says that you seemed to know her, that from what Rose, the mulatto woman, told him, you and she were evidently old friends. I would not speak of this, nor intrude upon your private affairs only that I think you ought to know that I had no knowledge of it when I was in your house, but believed her to be a stranger to you. You gave me no intimation that you knew her, and I believed that you were frank with me. But I should not speak of this at all, for I believe that it would have made no difference to me in repairing the wrong that I thought I had done you, only that as I am forced by circumstances to tell you the terrible ending of this story you ought to know it all."

"My brother wrote to me that the evening after you left the burying party picked up the body of what they believed to be a mulatto woman lying on the slope. It was not Rose, but the body of that very woman—the real and only spy—whom you had passed through the lines at daybreak. My brother thinks she was accidentally killed in the first attack upon you by her own friends, and so fell a double martyr. But only my brother and his friend recognized her through her blackened face and disguise, and on the plea that she was a servant of one of their friends, they got permission from the division commander to take her away, and she was buried by her friends and among her people in the little cemetery of Three Pine Crossing, not far from where you have gone. My brother thought I ought to tell you this; it seems that he and his friend had a strange sympathy for you in what they appear to know or guess of your relations with that woman, and I think he was touched by what he thought was your kindness and chivalry to him on account of his sister. But I do not think he ever knew, or will know, how great is the task that he has imposed upon me."

"You know now, do you not, why I did not speak to you when we first met. It seemed so impossible to do it in an atmosphere and a festivity that was so incongruous to the dreadful message I was charged with. And when I had to meet you later—perhaps I may have wronged you—but it seemed to me that you were so preoccupied and interested with other things that I might perhaps only be wearying you with something you cared little for, or perhaps already knew and had quickly forgotten."

(To be continued.)

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In this connection arrangements have been made whereby the tug "Resolute" has been placed in regular service between Yaquina and Newport for the accommodation of excursionists. The "Resolute" is one of the largest and most commodious tugs on the Pacific coast and will take fishing parties to sea and return whenever desired the weather permitting.

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Fare, good on this train only, from Corvallis, Albany and Philomath to Newport and return, \$1 50. CORVALLIS, June 17, 1896.

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"I was talking to my old friend, Gen. Brant," said Susy.