

Something in the Wild West.

A WEIRDITY.

BY WALTER BLACKBURN HARTE.

III.

At dawn they reached the village of St. Porcus, from whence our hero intended going by rail to New York. The rain had ceased and the birds were carolling overhead. His fair burden slumbered in his arms, and it is with regret that we are obliged to state that gratitude did not prevent him from giving her superb Roman, upon which the rising sun shed a warm tinge (it was the sun!) to the utter neglect of the rest of her fine countenance, an occasional tweak when her heavy breathing culminated in a prodigious snore.

When they halted at the railway depot, an old decrepit negro approached them. Our heroine awoke, trembling violently. "Aha!" she cried, "I expected this. We are betrayed! We are surrounded by murderous redskins, who hunger for our scalps. Come, let us fight for dear life!"

The Mystery smiled audibly, as did also the "band of murderous redskins," who muttered under his breath, "Snakes!"

"No such luck, my pretty," replied our hero. "It is the author who has betrayed us. The Indians are wanting. They certainly should be dancing around us in their war paint, yelling like fiends and flourishing their tomahawks; but, as a matter of fact, our only visible foe is this old vagabond, who wishes to inveigle me into paying a dollar for a wretched breakfast at this miserable shanty."

Poor, excitable, highly-strung little creature! She had naturally expected a desperate encounter, and her nerves, wound up by the events of the night to their uttermost tension, collapsed and left her prostrate. Her head sank upon his breast with a dull thud, that almost unhorsed him, and she sobbed as if her heart would break. One little hand lay confidently on his shoulder; the other was in his coat pocket, groping for the flask. Ungrateful, heartless man!—he had removed it.

When she had somewhat recovered, our hero dismounted, and she slid with graceful timidity into his arms, and then sank down helpless in the road. He was a brave, strong man, used to sudden alarms and scenes of bloodshed and danger, but such occasions thoroughly unnerved him. He stood for a moment regarding her fainting form with infinite compassion in his fine eyes, and then, turning slowly on his heel, said to the negro: "Bring my horse along. I guess he's tired out, poor fellow. Put him up and give him a rub down and a feed of corn. Then you can fetch a truck for the gal. This night's adventures have almost conquered her indomitable spirit at last. Shove her in the baggage car with the luggage. We've got three days' travelling before us, and her nerves may possibly get more settled before we reach our destination."

"Poor girl!" said Cæsar. (Most niggers in stories are Cæsars. We don't know why, but it is so.) He bent tenderly over her as he released her silk neckerchief and put it in his pocket. "Poor child!—how warm it is!" He had removed her hat and stripped it of all its artificial flowers and feathers. "Poor wild flower of the West; child of Nature; lily of the prairies, sullied by the advancing tide of civilization. Ah! this civilization!" he sighed, as he endeavoured to untie the knot in the corner of her pocket handkerchief, which contained her little stock of money. It was very tight and resisted his efforts to untie it, till his sigh became merged into a western adjective. At last he tore it open, and discovered a few ten cent pieces and some coppers.

"Poor creature! Another victim of poverty. How many noble natures are debased and broken in thy mill!" He placed the coins carefully in his waistcoat pocket, looking toward the glorious ball of red fire gradually rising higher and higher in the east as he did so, with the remark: "I shall be dry to-day." His object in relieving her of this dross was to place a slight obstacle in the way of any other person who might entertain the

nefarious design of picking her pocket. Generous, worthy soul! True virtue is only to be found in the breasts of these victims of prejudice and oppression.

"Ah! you find that trick uncomfortable, do you?" She had exhibited a desire to get off and walk. "Take that, my lady!" This remark was accompanied by a persuasive blow from a valise, which had the desired effect.

IV.

A train was on the line, having been stationed there since an early hour the previous evening. The cars contained a few discontented passengers, who showed an inconsiderate haste to be moving.

After a further delay of some four hours—which the company, with infinite tenderness, allowed for refreshment—the train began to move. Our hero, who was seated and looking out of the window at the landscape, turned to a mild-looking young gentleman, who was regarding him rather intently through a pair of green spectacles, and said, with a flourish of his hand: "We are now dashing through the Wild West—figuratively speaking."

"Yes," replied the other, blandly. "I am told the Company annually loses millions of dollars through the bursting of locomotive boilers caused by the over-pressure put upon them in an endeavour to travel at an unprecedented rate of speed. I suppose one ought really to pity them, because of the consideration they display toward their patrons, to whom time means money. Still, to practical men of business, this policy seems absurd, and to the shareholders who are interested in the rolling stock, it must be exasperating. I thank my stars I'm not a shareholder. The fault undoubtedly lies with the board of control, whose ideas are too far in advance of the age in which we live."

The conversation flagged for some time. Then our Mystery asked his fellow passenger for a light. The young man handed him a box of fuses. He took one out, struck it, and regarded it with a sweet, sad, half-cynical, yet amused smile, as it turned from a bright red to black. At last he flung away the burned out fusee and enquired of his companion whether he had a weed about him.

The stranger handed him his cigar-case. He took out a couple and handed it back, saying, half apologetically: "I'm a rare one for chawing up my cigars, I am, and don't get so much out of one as another man will. Do you know, I have to smoke two cigars to another's one in order to obtain the same amount of solacement and peace of mind? It's a fact! Of course, I like to be put upon an equal footing with my fellow men, and, therefore, I always do my level best to obtain my share of the world's comfort. Fact is, the world owes me a living, and she's somewhat in arrears. You don't object?"

After some further conversation our hero, who seemed not in the least fatigued by the events of the past night, proposed a game of cards. The mild young man readily assented and they played several games, in the course of which Mr. Verdant naturally lost a good deal of money and acquired possession of some valuable bills.

They played till six o'clock in the evening, when the train stopped at Walkington Junction.

"I'm going to get a drink," said the mysterious one, rising.

"I'll come with you, old man."

"Do," said our hero, pleasantly, but inwardly furious. He had suddenly changed his mind about going to New York, and intended passing through the refreshment room and boarding the train going west.

"I mean to," replied the lamb, suddenly flashing a bright revolver in our hero's face. "Come, Mr. John Smith, *alias* Charles Morton, *alias* William Johnson, *alias* Colonel Sharp, etc., etc. I want you on a charge of conspiracy and robbery."

The spectacles were off; the veil was lifted!

"Excuse me, sir," stammered our hero, growing visibly paler, as a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, "but you are mistaken. I—I—really this is too ridiculous—a most ludicrous position to find one's self in were it not so painful

to a sensitive nature. But there! I forgive you freely, young man, for committing so serious a blunder. Believe me, I bear no malice. I have not a card about me unfortunately, but I am Something in the Wild West."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that. I hope you will pardon me also, as I, too, have left my card case on the kitchen dresser. However, I have a warrant here for your arrest, which will sufficiently prove my identity and yours. I am your old friend Marvell, of the New York detective force, and now that I have got the bracelets on you and you begin to look like your old self, we'll go back to the car and talk over old times. Come along!"

It has been well said of the great Garfield family that the spirit of change and adventure was so strongly implanted in their breasts that they "hungered for the horizon." All great minds experience, to some extent, the same yearnings. As a boy, our hero had always a desire for a free, unfettered life in the Wild West, but never had he felt such a violent craving for the horizon as when Mr. Marvel dragged him back to the car, minus refreshment. It is a truly pitiable sight to see a lion pacing his narrow den with the energy of despair, or a poor bear lead off with a ring through his nose, especially when you reflect that could he be free for a few minutes you might possibly be the object of his attentions. But it is a more pitiable sight to see a wolf stripped of his sheep's clothing. 'Tis then that he really does look sheepish.

For one moment our hero looked positively guilty, but he immediately recovered himself, and, with head erect and firm step, he hied back to the car. The fire of the Immortals glowed in his fine eyes as he glanced with unutterable contempt upon the mean, curious crowd which gathered around him in his hour of trial. Thank goodness! Virtue is ever its own reward.

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We could prolong this romance indefinitely, but the editor has intimated that it is not sufficiently blood-curdling, and that we must curtail the reader's enjoyment, crowd on all sail, and run into port at once. It is hard, but unfortunately we are not newspaper proprietors, or—my stars! the romances we would write and publish!

The indulgent reader will doubtless understand us when we state that it is a most difficult task to curdle an editor's blood. We hinted as much to our editor, but he is inexorable. As the nearest port happens to be leaving the whole matter a classic fragment, we are obliged to obey his mandate and write the finis, which, we confess, saddens us, for, as the sailors say, "More days, more dollars." We are not yet the tyrants of obsequious publishers.

However, we are permitted to say a few last words, explanatory of the foregoing romance, and generally anent what is known as dime literature. This pernicious class of literature, or printed matter, in our opinion, has a deteriorating influence upon the manly and self-reliant courage of the rising generation. Through intense study of this unexciting balderdash, our youth has lost its greenness. Youthful highway robbers and bold boy-buccaneers, like the noble savage, are vanishing from our midst. It is saddening to reflect that in the police returns for twelve months, only 75 per cent. of the crimes are committed by juvenile delinquents. The spirit of adventure is fast being eliminated from youthful breasts, and it is impossible to say or guess how much of this incalculable evil is to be laid at the door of these caterers of cheap sensational literature. Nay, we will speak boldly. If fathers do not wish to see their boys grow up soulless, respectable citizens, why let them spend their time storing their minds with such trash?

It was the ambition of our life to remedy this. In our youthful ardour we aspired to rank among the greatest reformers of the age. Wicked engineers and capitalists, with the soul intention of demolishing stage-coaches, and consequently the knights of the road, have over-run the world with railways. Still, could we but wield as powerful a pen as certain of these colonels of world-wide reputation, who write for dime libraries and who are