

he had been unconscious of his surroundings he did not know, but he returned to consciousness to find a voice ringing in his ears, and turned in some confusion to the direction from which it came.

A man was standing just within the door. He was a tall, well-built, athletic looking fellow, with a bronzed face, clean shaven, and a mass of dark brown hair, touched with grey about the ears and at the temples. His dress was shabby, though of originally good materials, and in its cut and in his careless fashion of carrying it hinted at the artistic pursuits of its wearer, a hint strengthened by the sketch book he held in his hand.

"Ten thousand pardons," he began, as Mr. Herbert rose in surprise at his apparition. "Do I address the owner of the house?"

"No," replied Mr. Herbert. "It belongs to a friend of mine—a lady. She is absent for the moment, but will return presently."

"Indeed. Thank you. It is a charming place. I have just made a sketch of it from the outside, and was going to ask permission to see the interior."

"An artist, sir?" asked Mr. Herbert.

"An amateur," said the stranger. He spoke with a rather affected accent, and with a self-conscious smile. "You, sir, I perceive, are in holy orders."

"I am the Vicar of Crouchford, sir."

The stranger bowed, with a flourish of the broad brimmed wideawake he held in his hand.

"I salute you, sir. If there is one thing in the world I reverence, it is religion. I look upon it as the mother of art."

"It has, I should hope, even greater claims upon our reverence than that," returned Mr. Herbert, obviously pleased, however; "though I would not be understood as underestimating your beautiful occupation. Pray come in. The lady of the house is so old a friend of mine that I may take it upon myself to play cicerone. You are a stranger in the neighbourhood?"

"Quite. In fact, almost a stranger in England. I am just returned after a long sojourn abroad, and am wandering hither and thither at accident, reviving old impressions. There is something in the English atmosphere, in English scenes and institutions indescribably refreshing. Decay is always beautiful."

"Eh?" said Mr. Herbert, a blank stare of astonishment succeeding to the smile with which he had listened to the first part of this speech.

"Decay is the beauty of our England," continued the stranger. "Its sleepy conventions, its mouldering habitations, its mildewed churches, its moss-grown religion, delight me inexpressibly."

"I trust, my dear sir," said Mr. Herbert, whom the stranger's fluent chatter had rather put to sea, "I trust that you are one of us. I mean I hope you belong to the church which is the symbol of our civilization?"

"I am a Churchman, sir—a fervent Churchman. That is a very fine bit of black oak, by the way, and, pardon me—yes. That delightful bit of colour. Yes, sir, I am a Churchman. To be frank with you—I hope I may be so fortunate as to find your views correspond with my own, my leaning is towards the higher and more symbolic forms of Episcopacy."

"I am delighted to hear it!" It did not occur to the worthy clergyman that he was at least as obviously High Church in his dress and appearance as his interlocutor was obviously artistic.

"Dissent is so radically unlovely, its forms are so bare, so harsh, its teachings void of grace."

This was an utterance which chimed in with Mr. Herbert's mind.

"The furnishing of this place," said the stranger, "is worthy of its exterior. It gives me a keen desire to make the acquaintance of your friend. Such perfect taste."

"Mrs. Dartmouth is a lady of good taste," said Mr. Herbert. "A most charming and accomplished lady."

"Mrs. Dartmouth," repeated the stranger. "That is her name? A piano? Excuse me." He ran his fingers deftly along the keys. "An exquisite tone. Ah!" He gave a slight shudder and struck a solitary note, listening with corrugated brows. "That F is a semi-tone flat."

"You play?" said Mr. Herbert.

"A little," replied the artist, with a deprecatory smile.

"I am sorry Mrs. Dartmouth is from home. She would be delighted in this dull place to meet a person so accomplished."

"Oh, pray don't call me accomplished, I am simply an amateur of the beautiful. I am so constituted that what is beautiful alone gives me pleasure—next, of course, to what is religious. The terms are really interchangeable. Religion, true religion, the religion of which you are an exponent, and I the humblest of devotees, is the soul of beauty. Only religion interprets thus the full meaning of the beauties which make up the sum of life. A sower passing with measured footsteps, posed like a god, from furrow to furrow, with the sunlight sparkling on the seeds as he casts them, making them gleam like golden rain—a star, a flower, a dewdrop—life is full of such felicities, which, justified by their beauty, are divine."

"You talk, my dear sir, like a poet."

"I hope I have the poet's nature."

"You write?"

"A little."

"Bless me, you seem to do everything."

"A little."

"And you have travelled."

"A little. You don't mind me sketching as we talk? That chimney piece is delightfully quaint."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the entrance of Dora. She came running in with her hair streaming and her eyes sparkling and her lips parted to communicate some childish confidence to her old friend, when she caught sight of the stranger, and paused.

"Ah!" said the latter. "A child! I love children. And how very beautiful! Come to me, my rosebud. What is your name? It should be a pretty one."

"Dora," said the child, looking up at him shyly through the tangle of her disordered hair.

He took her hands in his and drew her to him, looking at her with a curious scrutiny. "C'est bien ça," he said, under his breath.

"Oh," she said, catching sight of the sketch-book on his knee. "You are drawing. Please go on. I am learning to draw. Mamma is teaching me."

"A charming little pupil. Would you like me to teach you?"

"I like mamma best."

"Charmingly frank, these little people," said the artist with a smile.

"Can you paint houses?" asked Dora. "Mamma can."

"Oh yes, I can paint houses—and little girls, when they are pretty."

"You must be very clever," said the child, solemnly.

"I am considered fairly intelligent," said the stranger, with his own smile. "Your mamma is out, this gentleman tells me."

"Yes, she is riding with Sir George."

"Oh, with Sir George. And your papa?"

"I've never had a papa," said Dora. "But I'm going to have one soon."

"Really. That will be delightful. How should you like me in that capacity?"

"I should like you pretty well; but I like Sir George best. Why do you laugh so much?"

"You amuse me, my innocent child." He stroked her hair with a lingering touch, and his face saddened. "Will you give me a kiss, little one?"

"Yes," said Dora shyly. "I like you."

The stranger kissed her, and, rising walked to the window for a moment, passing a handkerchief across his eyes.

"Excuse me," he said to Mr. Herbert in an altered voice as he returned. "I had a little child once. She would be of about this little darling's age if she be still alive. And the same name. I am not ashamed of these tears, sir. My little child, my Dora. Where is she?"

"My dear sir!" said Mr. Herbert.

"I must not afflict you with my sorrow," said the artist, putting away the handkerchief after passing it again across his eyes; "but these memories will

return at moments. There!" He bent over the child again. The beat of horses' hoofs became audible nearing the house. "Music is the cure for such sorrow as mine. Do you love music, my darling?"

"Yes," said Dora. "And I like to dance. Sir George plays waltzes for me."

"Come then."

He sat at the piano, and dashed into a lively tune with the manner of one trying to banish unpleasant memories. Dora flitted round the room and was watched with a pleased smile by Mr. Herbert. The sound of horses' feet came near, and paused on the gravel before the door. The tune changed suddenly from the lively rhythm of the waltz to "Home, Sweet Home."

"Mamma, mamma!" cried Dora, pirouetting to the door. "Come and see the funny gent!"

Gillian, her face flushed with free air and exercise, entered the hall, followed by Sir George, and stopped for a moment at sight of the stranger. He, with his fingers still playing the melody, turned half round upon the music stool.

"Gillian!" he said softly, smiling.

The poor woman's face changed to a look of stony horror.

"Philip!"

She spoke the name scarcely louder than a whisper, and fell fainting into Sir George's arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BRIDE OF JACOB'S FLAT.

Three years before the meeting described in our last chapter, a number of men were assembled around the bar in the only drinking-house in Jacob's Flat, a rough mining settlement within a two days' ride of San Francisco.

It was Saturday night, and drink of all kinds was flowing like water. Every one seemed in high spirits, from the burly bearded fellows in red shirts who were lounging against the bar, to the little group of gamblers seated at small tables and engaged busily at cards.

Though oaths were common, and the general conversation scarcely fit for ears polite, everybody present seemed in remarkably good humor, and the merriment had reached its highest when Prairie Bill, a giant of six feet, known to his facetious intimates as "Prairie Oyster" (the name also of an insidious kind of American drink) dashed his fist upon the counter, lifted up his glass in the air, and exclaimed:

"H'yar's Jake's health and fam'ly! Long life to Jake and her."

The toast was received with acclamation, and drunk with enthusiasm.

"What time, now, do you calc'late they'll be a-coming to Parson's Ford?" asked a little thick-set man with the lingering remains of a strong Cockney accent.

"Wal, ye see," said Bill reflectively, "the coach passes the Big Creek at arf past three, and it'll take the wagon two hours or more to reach the Ford in this weather. You bet they won't be there afore daylight. I say, boys," he added, raising his voice, "who's a-going to ride over?"

"Who's a-going to ride over?" echoed the little man contemptuously, "Better ask, who's a-going to stay? I ain't seen a blooming female since the school-mistress was drowned last year, poor thing, and I'm curious to see what kind of petticoat Jake's married."

"Married her up to Frisco, didn't he?" demanded another voice, that of a new-comer.

"Put your bottom dollar on that," said Prairie Bill proudly; "and if you don't believe me, thar's Jake's pardner—ask him to show you her pictur."

The partner alluded to, an old man busily engaged in a game of euchre, looked up and nodded; whereupon he was immediately surrounded by the whole assembled company, clamorously demanding to see the picture in question. Determined, however, not merely to gratify public curiosity, but to do a stroke of business, he expressed his determination not to assent until every man had planked down a five dollar note, explaining at the same time, that the amount was not to go into his own pocket, but to constitute part of a home-coming present for Jake's wife.