

Something in the Wild West.

A WEIRDITY.

BY WALTER BLACKBURN HARTE.

I.

It was a dark, miserable night. The wind was howling round the "Golden Eagle," a shanty established for the despoliation of benighted travellers, and situated somewhere upon the road between Los Angeles and New York City, and the old sign, which hung over the entrance, was tossed furiously from side to side. The rain descended in torrents, and, in fact, to lapse into quotation: "The rain it came down in such sheets as would stagger a Bard for simile short of Niagara."

The poor eagle, so mercilessly kept awake, moaned on its hinges, as if grumbling at such treatment; the inexorable wind, however, with no respect for old age and infirmity, and determined that she should soar, continued to fling her remorselessly up to a height that threatened completely somersaulting her, a performance wholly beneath the dignity of any respectable eagle. Ever and anon the distant rumble of thunder was audible, and the darkness was rendered more sombre by a vivid flash of lightning. Altogether it was just such a night as should usher into the world a story like this, in which startling incidents are continually being totally eclipsed by events still more exciting, till the entranced reader becomes absolutely bewildered and horror-stricken.

In the parlour of the "Golden Eagle" three men were seated at a table drinking, smoking and playing euchre. The reader may note that when three villains are thus discovered met together in solemn conclave, they are always engaged in the three things enumerated above. Three desperate-looking individuals they were; beetled-browed, every one of them; top-booted; hatted in the usual low-slouching hats, which all genuine villains affect, and armed to the teeth, or, rather, each had a fairly decent armoury about his middle.

Suddenly a horse was heard galloping down the road. The villains started to their feet, threw down their cards, gave each other some dreadfully significant winks, and shook hands across the table in ratification of some unspoken but terrible vow. They then reseated themselves and resumed their game in silence. A few minutes afterward a figure, habited in a long black cloak, plentifully bespattered with mud, and somewhat the worse for wear, entered the room. His features were entirely concealed by the broad rim of his sombrero, which was drawn over his face, and the upturned collar of his cloak. His spurs jingled ominously, and, as he strode to the table, he made noise enough in his progress for a whole regiment of dragoons, all booted and spurred. He gave the usual quick glance of suspicion at the card party, and then whispered, hoarsely, "Hush!" at the same moment bringing his riding whip heavily down upon the table, as if to emphasize the remark. This action made the glasses rattle again, and had quite a contrary effect from that which might reasonably have been expected. Instead of producing a death-like stillness, it caused quite a disturbance. The three players started to their feet, and in an instant the intruder was covered with three revolvers, and became also the target of a volley of caustic humour, of a Rabelaisian flavour.

"Pray, be seated, gentlemen," said the stranger, waving his hand, upon the third finger of which, in massive setting, sparkled a gem, rivalling the Kooh-in-noor in size and brilliancy, in the direction of the vacant chairs. "Do not allow me to disturb the dove-like calm which reigned in your bosoms a few moments ago. I have no desire to break up this meeting. I merely want to let the landlord know that I have arrived, so make yourselves easy. I have no wish to diminish your number—therefore be calm."

"You want the landlord, do yer?" cried one of the trio, stepping half a pace forward, and vainly endeavouring to obtain a glimpse of the stranger's face. "Well, I guess I'm the boss here, and next

time yer request to honour me with yer delightful company, don't knock as if I lived in Hong-Kong. What d'ye want, anyway?"

"Oh! you're the boss, eh? Happy to make your acquaintance. But come, my dearest friend, is this the way you generally receive your guests? Put down those firearms; they interrupt the free interchange of civilities. By my broad acres in"—the stranger paused, and the villains exchanged mysterious glances—"in—in—somewhere," he added, parenthetically, the exact situation of his estate having momentarily slipped his memory, "I think you show extremely bad taste in this matter, my worthy host. 'Pon my soul I do. You ask me what I want. This establishment, I presume, dispenses refreshment for man and beast? I thought so. I'm dreadfully thirsty and would feel obliged to you for a brandy and soda."

The inn-keeper grinned. This unsophisticated traveller amused him.

In the interests of the story, the villains now invited the stranger to join them in a game of euchre. He readily complied, and, divesting himself of his hat and cloak, stood revealed, unarmed, before them. He then seated himself, and laid upon the table at his elbow an enormous pocket-book, bursting with bills for considerable amounts. Poor lamb! The hawks fell upon him almost immediately. He won for a short time and then kept on losing heavily, but was as blithe as a lark, and seemed to positively relish parting with his green-backs. He had no small change, and was continually being extremely obliged with change for a \$20 bill. At last the other players were quite cleaned out of small change, but elated with their evening's amusement. Then the stranger rose to proceed on his journey, having a particular appointment to keep at some distant town.

What! Was their pigeon to depart half plucked? Were they so inhospitable as to permit him to leave them on such a night as this?—and take with him the remainder of those bills? No, a thousand times, no! But our hero had anticipated them, and stood, hatted and cloaked, with his back to the entrance, with folded arms, like the brave he was, glaring defiance into the hungry faces looking into his. Why did they not immediately despatch him? Why?—because all melodramatic villains have so much to say; because they are strictly conservative in their ideas, and stick to the old traditions. He was perfectly defenceless, but he had the courage of a lion. To say he gave back oath for oath would be but giving a very inadequate idea of his rhetorical powers and fecundity of ideas in any emergency. He was simply a past master, a transcendentalist in the art of using bad language. His originality was astounding. He never repeated any of his adjectival phrases, and his manner of delivering himself was perfectly unique.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

What's that? A woman at the window, with a smoking pistol in each hand. She has shattered every article on the mantel shelf. In another moment she is in the room and at the side of our hero.

The reader may be curious to know from whence we have produced this Amazon, who appears so opportunely at this stage of our proceedings. We have not the slightest idea. She is the heroine. We have got our hero into a very perilous position, for it is not likely that these villains would argue forever, and it is our duty to extricate him therefrom. This lady is the *deus ex machina*, and is necessary to the action of the story. Where she was before making her sudden appearance at the window we cannot tell. Possibly in the rain.

It is her rôle to strike a noble attitude, utter some noble sentiments in the blank verse of the Wild West, cock her revolver at the villains, link her arm in our hero's, and waltz out, all of which she does.

II.

A few minutes later our hero and heroine were upon the back of his black charger galloping through the night. She was swung upon the

saddle before him. He had flung the reins upon his horse's back, and clasped her slight form in his strong arms.

Poor, nervous little fairy! She fainted after her exertions. The sustaining influence of intense horror evaporated and left her weak and sobbing—in a word, limp. The motion of the horse did not tend to decrease her distress, and, having placed a good distance between himself and his late companions, our hero slackened his pace.

"Darling!" she whispered (these familiarities are always permissible between hero and heroine) when she had partially recovered her breath, "give me a nip—" The effort of speech was too much for exhausted frame, and she sank, panting, again into his arms.

He squeezed the fleshy part of her arm gently in answer. The effect was electrical. Her soft, small palm smote him across his cheek with a force that somewhat surprised him.

"No, not that, stupid. But just ever such a wee nip—of brandy!" This was quite articulate. She was rapidly "coming to."

He handed her his pocket-flask, which held about three pints, and was full to the neck with undiluted spirit. A few minutes afterward a sharp exclamation rang out upon the startled air. It was a cry like that of a man in most acute agony, and echoed and re-echoed among the adjacent woods. It was "Whoa, Emma!" and was jerked from the agonized soul of our hero. He was addressing his fair preserver, not his faithful steed, and the remark was accompanied by a convulsive grasp of the flask. She released it with a deep-drawn sigh. A rift in the clouds shed just light enough to enable him to see that half the contents of the flask had been absorbed by his fair companion.

"Great Scott!" he cried in astonishment. The deeds of this unprotected female within the short period of their acquaintance had impressed him as being altogether phenomenal. He had conceived the idea that she must be a person of some notoriety in that district, and her last exploit convinced him it was no mere fallacy. It was with some warmth, therefore, that he asked: "Who are you, pray?"

Our heroine, although a child of the West and denied the opportunities afforded to her sex in the crowded centres of civilization, where books on etiquette are to be had for a nominal sum, still had some vague notions of the proprieties, for she replied, evasively: "The heroine of this story, bet yer life. And who may you be?"

"Something in the Wild West," he replied, mournfully. "That is all I can tell you. Although naturally of a confiding disposition, there are certain family reasons which oblige me to travel *incog*. I cannot say definitely who or what I am. My liberty—possibly my life—is in danger. I am hunted down by desperate, remorseless blackguards. Of course, all will soon be cleared up satisfactorily, and the world will see me in my true character; but till then, for further particulars of me, see police notices and handbills."

She was silent for some time, and then exclaimed, breathlessly: "Is this correct to be flying from our foes? Do heroes in dime novels generally think discretion the better part of valour and bolt, or do they face their enemies and calmly slaughter them, whilst the bullets whizz harmlessly around their own heads, as if they bore charmed lives? Speak, or I faint!"

The latter threat instantaneously dissolved any hesitation he might have displayed, and, in a hoarse whisper, he replied: "Do you—can you—mistrust me, sweet one? Can you mistake me for aught but the hero of this story? I know I don't twirl my moustache savagely; if I had one I would. But I am confident my eyes glare defiance. Do you think my attitude requires a shade more of cynical indifference? If so, I'll have it altered at the next inn we come to, but I positively cannot turn back."

"Why?" she cried, almost fiercely.

"Wal, you see, I guess they've found out by this time that those bills are no good."

She started back from him, and cried, with a