

"Is Thatcher a lady's man?" queried the lady suddenly.

"Hardly, I should say," responded Wiles. "He pretends to be absorbed in his swindle and devoted to his mine, and I don't think that even you—" he stopped with a slight sneer.

"There, you are misunderstanding me again, and what is worse, you are misunderstanding your case. Thatcher is pleased with her because he has probably seen no one else. Wait till he comes to Washington and has an opportunity for comparison," and she cast a frank glance at her mirror, where Wiles, with a sardonic bow, left her standing.

Mr. Gashwiler was quite as confident of his own success with Congress. "We are within a few days of the end of the session. We will manage to have it taken up and rushed through before that fellow Thatcher knows what he is about."

"If it could be done before he gets here," said Wiles. "It's a reasonably sure thing. He is delayed two days—he might have been delayed longer." Here Mr. Wiles sighed; if the accident had happened on a mountain road, and the stage had been precipitated over the abyss? What valuable time would have been saved and success become a surety. But Mr. Wiles' functions as an advocate did not include murder; at least he was doubtful if it could be taxed as costs.

"We need have no fears, sir," resumed Mr. Gashwiler, "the matter is now in the hands of the highest tribunal of appeal in the country. It will meet, sir, with inflexible justice. I have already prepared some remarks—"

"By the way," interrupted Wiles infelicitously, "where's your young man—your private secretary—Dobbs?"

The Congressman for a moment looked confused. "He is not here. And I must correct your error in applying that term to him. I have never put my confidence in the hands of any one."

"But you introduced him to me as your secretary?"

"A mere honorary title, sir. A brevet rank. I might, it is true, have thought to repose such a trust in him. But I was deceived, sir, as I fear I am too apt to be when I permit my feelings as a man to overcome my duty as an American legislator. Mr. Dobbs enjoyed my patronage, and the opportunity it gave me to introduce him into public life, only to abuse it. He became, I fear, deeply indebted. His extravagance was unlimited, his ambition unbounded, but without, sir, a cash basis. I advanced money to him from time to time upon the little property you so generously extended to him for his services. Yet, sir, such is the ingratitude of man that his family lately appealed to me for assistance. I felt it was necessary to be stern, and I refused. I would not for the sake of his family say anything, but I have missed, sir, books from my library. On the day after he left two volumes of Patent Office reports and a Blue Book of Congress, purchased that day by me at a store on Pennsylvania avenue, were *missing*—missing! I had difficulty, sir, great difficulty in keeping it from the papers?"

As Mr. Wiles had heard the story already from Gashwiler's acquaintance, with more or less free comment on the gifted legislator's economy, he could not help thinking that the difficulty had been great indeed. But he only fixed his malevolent eye on Gashwiler and said:

"So he is gone, eh?"

"Yes."

"And you have made an enemy of him? That's bad."

Mr. Gashwiler tried to look dignifiedly unconcerned, but something in his visitor's manner made him uneasy.

"I say it's bad, if you have. Listen. Before I left here I found at a boarding-house where he had boarded, and still owed a bill, a trunk which the landlord retained. Opening it I found some letters and papers of yours, with certain memoranda of his, which I thought ought to be in your possession. As an alleged friend of his I redeemed the trunk by paying the amount of his bill, and secured the more valuable papers."

Gashwiler's face, which had grown apoplectically suffused as Wiles went on, at last gazed. "But you got the trunk and have the papers?"

"Unfortunately, no; and that's why it's bad."

"But, good God! what have you done with them?"

"I've lost them somewhere on the Overland Road."

Mr. Gashwiler sat for a few moments speechless, vacillating between a purple rage and a pallid fear. Then he said hoarsely:

"They are all blank forgeries—every one of them."

"Oh, no!" said Wiles, smiling blandly on his dexter side, and enjoying the whole scene malevolently with his sinister eye. "Your papers are all genuine, and I won't say are not all right, but unfortunately I had in the same bag some memoranda of my own for the use of my client, that, you understand, might be put to some bad use if found by a clever man."

The two rascals looked at each other. There is, on the whole, a really very little honour among thieves—at least great ones—and the inferior rascal succumbed at the reflection of what he might do if he were in the other rascal's place. "See here, Wiles," he said, relaxing his dignity with the perspiration that oozed from every pore, and made the collar of his shirt a mere limp rag. "See here. *We*—this first use of the plural was equivalent to a confession—*we* must get them papers."

"Of course," if we can, and if Thatcher don't get wind of them."

"He cannot."

"He was on the coach when I lost them, coming East."

Mr. Gashwiler paled again. In the emergency he had recourse to the sideboard and a bottle, forgetting Wiles. Ten minutes before, Wiles would have remained seated; but it is recorded that he rose, took the bottle from the gifted Gashwiler's fingers, helped himself *first*, and then sat down.

"Yes, but my boy," said Gashwiler, now rapidly changing situations with the cooler Wiles, "yes, but old fellow," he added, poking Wiles with a fat forefinger. "don't you see the whole thing will be up before he gets here?"

"Yes," said Wiles gloomily. "but those lazy, easy, honest men have a way of popping up just at the nick of time. They never need hurry; all things wait for them. Why, don't you remember that on the very day Mrs. Hopkinson and me and you got the President to sign that patent, that very day one of them d—d fellows turns up from San Francisco or Australia, having taken his own time to get here; gets here about half an hour after the President had signed the patent and sent it over to the office, finds the right man to introduce him to the President, has a talk with him, makes him sign an order counting manding its issuance, and undoes all that has been done in six years in one hour."

"Yes, but Congress is a tribunal that does not