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## PUBLICANS and SINNERS

## A LIFE PICTURE.

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## PROLOGUE.

IN THE FAR WEST.

## CHAPTER I.

"WHERE THE SUN IS SILENT."

Winter round them: not a winter in city streets, lamplit and glowing, or on a fair English country-side, dotted with cottage-roofs, humble village homes, sending up their incense of blue-grey smoke to the hearth goddess; not the winter of civilisation, with all means and appliances at hand to loosen the grip of the frost fiend; but winter in its bleakest, direst aspect, amid barren plains and trackless forests, where the trapper walks alone; winter among snow-huts and savage beasts; winter in a solitude so drear that the sound of a human voice seems more strange and awful than the prevailing silence; winter in an American forest, under the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. It is December, the bleakest, dreariest month in the long winter; for spring is still so far off.

Three men sit crouching over the wood-fire in a roughly-built log-hut in the middle of a forest, which seems to stretch away indefinitely into infinite space. The men have trodden that silent region for many a day, and have found no outlet on either side, only here and there a frozen lake, to whose margin, ere the waters were changed to ice, the forest denizens came down to gorge themselves with the small fish that abound there. They are travellers who have penetrated this dismal region for pleasure; yet each moved by a different desire. The first, Lucius Davoren, surgeon, has been impelled by that deep-rooted thirst of knowledge which in some minds is a passion. He wants to know what this strange wild world is like—this desolate tract between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific, and if there lies not here a fair road for the English emigrant. He has even cherished the hope of pushing his way still farther northward, up to the ice-bound shores of the polar sea. He looks upon this trapper-expedition as a mere experimental business, an education for grander things, the explorer's preparatory school.

So much for Lucius Davoren, surgeon without a practice. Mark him as he sits in his dusky corner by the fire. The hut boasts a couple of windows, but they are only of parchment, through which the winter light steals dimly. Mark the strongly-defined profile, the broad forehead, the clear grey eyes. The well-cut mouth and resolute chin are hidden by that bushy untrimmed beard, which stiffens with his frozen breath when he ventures outside the hut; but the broad square forehead, the Saxon type of brow, and clear penetrating eyes, are in themselves all-sufficient indications of the man's character. Here are firmness and patience, or, in one word, the noblest attribute of the human mind—constancy.

On the opposite side of that rude hearth sits Geoffrey Hossack, three years ago an undergraduate at Balliol, great at hammer-throwing and the long jump, doubtful as to divinity exam, and with vague ideas trending towards travel and adventure in the Far West as the easiest solution of that difficulty. Young, handsome, ardent, sogle, strong as a lion, gentle as a sucking dove, Geoffrey has been the delight and glory of the band in its sunnier days; he is the one spot of sunlight in the picture now, when the horizon has darkened to so deep a gloom.

The last of the trio is Absalom Schanck, a Dutchman, small and plump, with a perennial plumpness which has not suffered even from a diet of mouldy pemmican, and rare meals of buffalo or moose flesh, which has survived intervals of semi-starvation, blank dismal days when there was absolutely nothing for these explorers to eat.

At such trying periods Absalom is wont to wax plaintive, but it is not of turtle or venison he dreams; no vision of callipash or callipee, no mocking simulacrum of a lordly Aberdeen salmon or an aldermanic turbot, no mirage picture of sirloin or Christmas turkey, torments his soul; but his feverish mouth waters for the black bread and hard sour cheese of his fatherland; and the sharpest torture which fancy can create for him is the tempting suggestion of a certain boiled sausage which his soul loveth.

He has joined the expedition with half-defined ideas upon the subject of a new company of dealers in skins, to be established beyond the precincts of Hudson's Bay; and not a little influenced by a genuine love of exploration, and a lurking notion that he has in him the stuff that makes a Van Diemen.

From first to last it is, and has been, essentially an amateur expedition. No contribution from the government of any nation has aided these wanderers. They have come, as Geoffrey Hossack forcibly expresses the fact, "on their

own hook;" and if in the progress of their wanderings they should stumble upon a new and convenient North-west Passage, Geoffrey suggests that they should immediately seize upon and appropriate that short-cut to the New World, create a company on the spot, and constitute themselves its chairman and directors, with a view to trading upon the discovery.

"Hossack's Gate would be rather a good name for it," he says, between two puffs of his meerschaum; "like the Pillars of Hercules, you know, Davoren."

"We Hollanders have given more names to blazes than you Englishers," chimes in Mr. Schanck with dignity. "It is our talent to discover."

"I wish you'd discover something to eat, then, my friend Absalom," replies the Oxonian irreverently; "that mouthful of pemmican Lucius doled out to us just now has only served as a whet for my appetite. Like the half-dozen Ostend oysters they give one as the overture to a French dinner."

"Ah, they are good the oysters of Osend," says the Dutchman with a sigh, "and so are ze muzzles of Blankenberk. I dreamt ze oyster night I was in heaven eating muzzles sdeved in vin de madere."

"Don't," cries Geoffrey emphatically; "if we begin to talk about eating, we shall go mad, or eat each other. How nice you would be, Schanck, stuffed with chostnuts, and roasted, like a Norfolk turkey dressed French fashion! It's rather a pity that one's friends are reported to be indigestible; but I believe that's merely a fable, designed as a deterring influence. The Maories, cannibalised from the beginning of time, fed in and in, as well as bred in and in. One nice old man, a chieftain of Rakiraki, kept a register of his own consumption of prisoners, by means of a row of stones, which, when reckoned up after the old gentleman's demise, amounted to eight hundred and seventy-two; and yet these Maories were a healthy race enough when civilization looked them up."

Lucius Davoren takes no heed of this frivolous talk. He is lying on the floor of the log-hut, with a large chart spread under him, studying it intently, and sticking pins here and there as he pores over it. He has ideas of his own, fixed and definite, which neither of his companions share in the smallest degree. Hossack has come to these wild regions with an Englishman's unalloyed love of adventure, as well as for a quiet escape from the trusting relatives who would have urged him to go up for Divinity. Schanck has been beguiled hither by the fond expectation of finding himself in a paradise of tame polar bears and silver foxes, who would lie down at his feet, and mutely beseech him to convert them into carriage-rugs. They are waiting for the return of their guide, an Indian, who has gone to hunt for the lost trail, and to make his way back to a far distant fort in quest of provisions. If he should find the journey impossible, or fall dead upon the way, their last hope must perish with the failure of his mission, their one only chance of succor must die with his death.

Very shrunken are the stores which Lucius Davoren guards with jealous care. He doles out each man's meagre portion day by day with a Spartan severity, and a measurement so just that even hunger cannot quarrel with it. The tobacco, that sweet solacer of weary hours, begins to shrink in the barrel, and Geoffrey Hossack's lips linger lovingly over the final puffs of his short black-muzzled meerschaum, with a doleful looking forward to the broad abyss of empty hours which must be bridged over before he refills the bowl. Unless the guide returns with barrels of flour and a supply of pemmican, there is hardly any hope that these reckless adventurers will ever see the broad blue waters of the Pacific, and accomplish the end of that adventurous scheme which brought them to these barren regions. Unless help comes to them in this way or in some fortuitous fashion, they are doomed to perish. They have considered this fact among themselves many times, sitting huddled together under the low roof of their log-hut, by the feeble glimmer of their lantern.

Of the three wanderers Absalom Schanck is the only experienced traveller. He is a naturalized Englishman, and a captain in the merchant navy; having traded prosperously for some years as the owner of a ship—a sea-carrier in a small way—he had sold his vessel, and built himself a water-side villa at Battersea, half Dutch, half nautical in design; a cross between a house in Rotterdam and half-a-dozen ships' cabins packed neatly together; everything planned with as strict an economy of space as if the dainty little habitation were destined to put to sea as soon as she was finished. As many shelves and drawers and hatches in the kitchen as in a steward's cabin; stairs winding up the heart of the house, like a companion-ladder; a flat roof, from which the Dutchman can see the sunset beyond the westward lying swamps of Fulham, and which he fondly calls the admiral's poop.

But even this comfortable habitation has palled upon the mind of the professional rover. Dull are those suburban flats to the eye that for twenty years has ranged over the vast and various ocean. The Dutchman has found the consolation of pipe and case-bottle inadequate; and with speculative ideas of the vaguest nature, has joined Geoffrey Hossack's expedition to the Far West.

## CHAPTER II.

## "MUSIC HATH CHARMS."

Three weeks go by, empty weeks of which only Lucius Davoren keeps a record, in a journal

which may serve by and by for the history of the ill-fated expedition; which may be found perchance by some luckier sportsman in days to come, when the ink upon the paper has gone grey and pale, and when the date of each entry has an ancient look, and belongs to a bygone century, when the very fashion of the phrases is obsolete.

Lucius takes note of everything, every cloud in the sky, every red gleam of the aurora, with its ghostly rustling sound, as of phantom trees shaken by the north wind. He finds matter for observation where to the other two there seems only an endless blank, a universe that is emptied of everything except ice and snow.

Geoffrey Hossack practises hammer-throwing with an iron crowbar, patches the worn-out sledges, makes little expeditions on his own account, and discovers nothing, except that he has a non-geographical mind, and that, instead of the trapper's unerring instinct, which enables him to travel always in a straight line, he has an unpleasant tendency to describe a circle; prowls about with his gun, and the scanty supply of ammunition which Davoren allows him; makes traps for silver foxes, and has the mortification of seeing his bait devoured by a wolverine, who bears a life as charmed as that Macbeth was promised; and sometimes, but alas too seldom, kills something—a moose, or betimes a buffalo, O, then what a hunter's feast they have in the thick northern darkness! what a wild orgie seems that rare supper! Their souls expand over the fresh meat; they feel mighty as northern gods, Odin and Thor. Hope rekindles in every breast; the moody silence which has well-nigh grown habitual to them in the gloom of these hungry hopeless days, melts into wild torrents of talk. They are moved with a kind of rapture engendered of this roast flesh, and recognise the truth of Barry Cornwall's dictum, that a poet should be a high feeder.

The grip of the frost-fiend tightens upon them; there is well-nigh no day, only a dim glimmer at dreary intervals, like the very ghost of daylight. They sit in their log-hut in a dreary silence, each man seated on the ground, with his knees drawn up to his chin, and his back against the wall. Were they already dead, and this their sepulchre, they could have worn no ghastlier aspect.

They are silent from no sullen humor. Discord has never arisen between them. What have they to talk about? Swift impending death, the sharp stings of hunger the bitterness of an empty tobacco-barrel. Their dumbness is the dumbness of stoics who can suffer and make no moan.

They have not yet come to absolute starvation; there is a little pemmican still, enough to sustain their attenuated thread of life for five more days. When that is gone, they can see before them nothing but death. The region to which they have pushed their way seems empty of human life—a hyperborean chaos ruled by Death. What hardy wanderer, half-breed or Indian, would venture hither at such a season?

They are sitting thus, mute and statue-like, in the brief interval which they call daylight, when something happens which sets every heart beating with a sudden violence—something so unexpected, that they wait breathless, transfixed by surprise. A voice, a human voice, breaks the dead silence; a wild face, with bright fierce eyes peers in at the entrance of the hut, from which a bony hand has dragged aside the tarpaulin that serves for a screen against the keen northern winds, which creep in round the angles of the rough wooden porch.

The face belongs to neither Indian nor half-breed; it is as white as their own. By the faint light that glimmers through the parchment they see it scrutinising them interrogatively with a piercing scrutiny.

"Explorers?" he asks, "and Englishmen?" Yes, they tell him, they are English explorers, Absalom Schanck of course counts as an Englishman.

"Are you sent out by the English government?"

"No, we came on our own hook," replies Geoffrey Hossack, who is the first to recover from the surprise of the man's appearance, and from a certain half-supernatural awe engendered by his aspect, which has a wild ghastliness, as of a wanderer from the under world. "But never mind how we came here; what we want is to get away. Don't stand there jawing about our business, but come inside, and drop that tarpaulin behind you. Where have you left your party?"

"Nowhere," answers the stranger, stepping into the hut, and standing in the midst of them tall and gaunt, clad in garments that are half Esquimaux, half Indian, and in the last stage of dilapidation, torn moose-skin shoes upon his feet, the livid flesh showing between every rent; "nowhere. I belong to no party—I'm alone."

"Alone!" they all exclaim, with a bitter pang of disappointment. They had been ready to welcome this wild creature as the forerunner of succour.

"Yes, I was up two thousand miles or so northward of this, among icebergs and polar bears and Dog-rib Indians and Esquimaux, with a party of Yankees the summer before last, and served them well, too, for I know some of the Indian lingo, and was able to act as their interpreter; but the expedition was a failure. Unsuccessful men are hard to deal with. In short, we quarrelled, and parted company; they went their way, I went mine. There's no occasion to enter into details. It was winter when I left them—the stores were exhausted, with the exception of a little ammunition. They had their guns, and may have found reindeer or musk oxen, but I don't fancy they can have come to

much good. They didn't know the country as well as I do."

"You have been alone nearly a year?" asks Lucius Davoren, interested in this wild-looking stranger. "How have you lived during that time?"

"Anyhow," answers the other with a careless shrug of his bony shoulders. "Sometimes with the Indians, sometimes with the Esquimaux—they're civil enough to a solitary Englishman, though they hate the Indians like poison—sometimes by myself. As long as I've a charge for my gun I don't much fear starvation, though I've found myself face to face with it a good many times since I parted with my Yankee friends."

"Do you know this part of the country?" "No; it's beyond my chart. I shouldn't be here now if I hadn't lost my way. But I suppose, now I am here, you'll give me shelter."

The three men looked at one another. Hospitality is a noble virtue, and a virtue peculiarly appropriate to the dwellers in remote and savage regions; but hospitality with these men meant a division of their five remaining days' life. And the last of those five days might hold the chance of rescue. Who could tell? To share their shrunken stores with this stranger would be a kind of suicide. Yet the dictates of humanity prevailed. The stranger was not pleasant to look upon, nor especially conciliating in manner; but he was a fellow sufferer, and he must be sheltered.

"Yes," says Lucius Davoren, "you are welcome to share what we have. It's not much. Just five days' rations."

The stranger takes a canvas bag from his neck, and flings it into a corner of the hut.

"There's more than five days' food in that," he says; "dried reindeer, rather mouldy, but I don't suppose you're very particular."

"Particular!" cried Geoffrey Hossack, with a groan. "When I think of the dinners I have turned up my nose at, the saddles of mutton I have despised because life seemed *aujourd'hui* saddle of mutton, I blush for the iniquity of civilised man. I remember a bottle of French plums and a canister of Presburg biscuits that I left in a chiffonier at Balliol. Of course my scout consumed them. O, would I had those toothsome cakes to-day!"

"Balliol!" says the stranger, looking at him curiously. "So you're a Balliol man, are you?"

There was something strange in the sound of this question from an unkempt savage, with half-bare feet, in ragged moose-skin shoes. The new-comer pushed aside the elf-locks that overhung his forehead, and stared at Geoffrey Hossack as he waited for the answer to his inquiry.

"Yes," replied Geoffrey with his usual coolness, "I have had the honor to be gated occasionally by the dons of that college. Are you an Oxford man?"

"Do I look like it?" asks the other, with a harsh laugh. "I am nothing; I come from nowhere; I have no history, no kith or kin. I fancy I know this kind of life better than you do, and I know how to talk to the natives, which I conclude you don't. If we can hold on till this infernal season is over, and the trappers come this way, I'll be your interpreter, your servant, anything you like."

"If!" said Lucius gravely. "I don't think we shall ever see the end of this winter. But you can stay with us, if you please. At the worst, we can die together."

The stranger gives a shivering sigh, and drops in an angular heap in a corner of the hut.

"It isn't a lively prospect," he says. "Death is a gentleman I mean to keep at arm's length as long as I can. I've had to face him often enough, but I've got the best of it so far. Have you used all your tobacco?"

"Every shred," says Geoffrey Hossack dolefully. "I smoked my last pipe and bade farewell to the joys of existence three days ago."

"Smoke another, then," replies the stranger, taking a leather pouch from his bosom, "and renew your acquaintance with pleasure."

"Bless you!" exclaims Geoffrey, clutching the prize. "Welcome to our tents! I would welcome Beszebub if he brought me a pipe of tobacco. But if one fills, all fill—that's understood. We are brothers in misfortune, and must share alike."

"Fill, and be quick about it," says the stranger. So the three fill their pipes, light them, and their souls float into Elysium on the wings of the seraph tobacco.

The stranger also fills and lights and smokes silently, but not with a paradisiac air, rather with the gloomy aspect of some fallen spirit, whose lost soul sensuous joys bring no contentment. His large dark eyes—seeming unnaturally large in his haggard face—wander slowly round the walls of the hut, mark the benches filled with dried prairie grass, and each provided with a buffalo robe. Indications of luxury these; actual starvation would have reduced the wanderers to boiling down strips of their buffalo skins into an unsavoury soup. Slowly these great wan eyes travel round the hut. Listlessly, yet marking every detail—the hunting knives and fishing tackle hanging against the wall, Geoffrey's handsome collection of rifles, which have been the admiration of every Indian who has ever beheld them. The stranger's gaze lingers upon these, and an envious look glimmers in his eyes. Signs of wealth these. He glances at the three companions, and wonders which is the man who finds the money for the expedition, and owns these guns. There could hardly be three rich fools mad enough to waste life and wealth on such wanderings. He concludes, that one is the dupe, the other two adventurers, trading, or hoping to trade, upon his folly. His keen eye lights on Hossack, the