

A FIRST FAMILY OF TASAJARA

BRET HARTE*

CHAPTER I.

"It blows," said Joe Wingate.

As if to accent the words of the speaker a heavy gust of wind at that moment shook the long light wooden structure which served as the general store of Sidon settlement, in Contra Costa. Even after it had passed a prolonged whistle came through the keyhole, sides, and openings of the closed glass front doors, that served equally for windows, and filled the canvas ceiling which hid the roof above like a bellying sail. A wave of enthusiastic emotion seemed to be communicated to a line of straw hats and sou-westers suspended from a cross-beam, and swung them with every appearance of festive rejoicing, while a few dusters, overcoats, and "hickory" shirts hanging on the side walls exhibited such marked though idiotic animation that it had the effect of a satirical comment on the lazy, purposeless figures of the four living inmates of the store.

Ned Billings momentarily raised his head and shoulders depressed in the back of his wooden armchair, glanced wearily around, said, "You bet, it's no slouch of a storm," and then lapsed again with further extended legs and an added sense of comfort.

Here the third figure, which had been leaning listlessly against the shelves, putting aside the arm of a swaying overcoat that seemed to be emptily embracing him, walked slowly from behind the counter to the door, examined its fastenings, and gazed at the prospect. He was the owner of the store, and the view was a familiar one,—a long stretch of treeless waste before him meeting an equal stretch of dreary sky above, and night hovering somewhere between the two. This was indicated by splashes of darker shadow as if washed in with india ink, and a lighter low-lying streak that might have been the horizon, but was not. To the right, on a line with the front door of the store, were several scattered, widely dispersed objects, that, although vague in outline, were rigid enough in angles to suggest sheds or barns, but certainly not

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trees.

"There's a heap more wet to come afore the wind goes down," he said, glancing at the sky. "Hark to that, now!"

They listened lazily. There was a faint murmur from the shingles above; then suddenly the whole window was filmed and blurred as if the entire prospect had been wiped out with a damp sponge. The man turned listlessly away.

"That's the kind that soaks in; thar won't be much teamin' over Tasa jara for the next two weeks, I reckon," said the fourth loungee, who, seated on a high barrel, was nibbling—albeit

critically and fastidiously—biscuits and dried apples alternately from open boxes on the counter. "It's lucky you've got in your winter stock, Harkutt."

The shrewd eyes of Mr. Harkutt, proprietor, glanced at the occupation of the speaker as if even his foresight might have its possible drawbacks, but he said nothing.

"There'll be no show for Sidon until you've got a wagon road from here to the creek," said Billings languidly, from the depths of his chair. "But what's the use o' talkin' ? Thar ain't energy enough in all Tasa jara to build it. A God-forsaken place, that two months of the year can only be reached by a mail-rider once a week, don't look ez if it was goin' to break its back haulin' in goods and settlers. I tell ye what, gentlemen, it makes me sick!" And apparently it had enfeebled him to the extent of interfering with his aim in that exhortation of disgust against the stove with which he concluded his sentence.

"Why don't YOU build it?" asked Wingate, carelessly.

"I wouldn't on principle," said Billings. "It's gov'ment work.

What did we whoop up things here last spring to elect Kennedy to the legislation for? What did I rig up my shed and a thousand feet of lumber for benches at the barbecue for? Why, to get Kennedy elected and make him get a bill passed for the road! That's MY share of building it, if it comes to that. And I only wish some folks, that blow enough about what oughter be done to bulge out that ceiling, would only do as much as I have done for Sidon."

As this remark seemed to have a personal as well as local application, the storekeeper diplomatically turned it. "There's a good many as DON'T believe that a road from here to the creek is going to do any good to Sidon. It's very well to say the creek is an embarcadero, but callin' it so don't put anough water into it to float a steamboat from the bay, nor clear out the reeds and tules in it. Even if the State builds you roads, it ain't got no call to

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make Tasa jara Creek navigable for ye; and as that will cost as much as the road, I don't see where the money's comin' from for both."

"There's water enough in front of 'Lige Curtis's shanty, and his location is only a mile along the bank," returned Billings.

"Water enough for him to laze away his time fishin' when he's sober, and deep enough to drown him when he's drunk," said Wingate.

"If you call that an embarcadero, you kin buy it any day from 'Lige,—title, possession, and shanty thrown in,—for a demijohn o' whiskey."

The fourth man here distastefully threw back a half-nibbled biscuit into the box, and languidly slipped from the barrel to the floor, fastidiously flicking the crumbs from his clothes as he did so. "I reckon somebody'll get it for nothing, if 'Lige don't pull up

mighty soon. He'll either go off his head with jim-jams or jump into the creek. He's about as near desp'rit as they make 'em, and havin' no partner to look after him, and him alone in the tules, ther' 's no tellin' WHAT he may do."

Billings, stretched at full length in his chair, here gurgled derisively. "Desp'rit!—ketch him! Why, that's his little game! He's jist playin' off his desp'rit condition to frighten Sidon.

Whenever any one asks him why he don't go to work, whenever he's hard up for a drink, whenever he's had too much or too little, he's workin' that desp'rit dodge, and even talkin' o' killin' himself!

Why, look here," he continued, momentarily raising himself to a sitting posture in his disgust, "it was only last week he was over at Rawlett's trying to raise provisions and whiskey outer his water rights on the creek! Fact, sir,—had it all written down lawyer-like on paper. Rawlett didn't exactly see it in that light, and told him so. Then he up with the desp'rit dodge and began to work that. Said if he had to starve in a swamp like a dog he might as well kill himself at once, and would too if he could afford the weppins. Johnson said it was not a bad idea, and offered to lend him his revolver; Bilson handed up his shot-gun, and left it alongside of him, and turned his head away considerate-like and thoughtful while Rawlett handed him a box of rat pizon over the counter, in case he preferred suthin' more quiet. Well, what did 'Lige do? Nothin'! Smiled kinder sickly, looked sorter wild, and shut up. He didn't suicide much. No, sir! He didn't kill himself,—not he. Why, old Bixby—and he's a deacon in good standin'—allowed, in 'Lige's hearin' and for 'Lige's benefit, that self-destruction was better nor bad example, and proved it by Scripture too. And yet 'Lige did nothin'! Desp'rit! He's only desp'rit to laze around and fish all day off a log in the tules, and soak up with whiskey, until, betwixt fever an' ague and the jumps, he kinder shakes hisself free o' responsibility."

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A long silence followed; it was somehow felt that the subject was incongruously exciting; Billings allowed himself to lapse again behind the back of his chair. Meantime it had grown so dark that the dull glow of the stove was beginning to outline a faint halo on the ceiling even while it plunged the further lines of shelves behind the counter into greater obscurity.

"Time to light up, Harkutt, ain't it?" said Wingate, tentatively.

"Well, I was reckonin' ez it's such a wild night there wouldn't be any use keepin' open, and when you fellows left I'd just shut up for good and make things fast," said Harkutt, dubiously. Before his guests had time to fully weigh this delicate hint, another gust of wind shook the tenement, and even forced the unbolted upper part of the door to yield far enough to admit an eager current of humid

air that seemed to justify the wisdom of Harkutt's suggestion. Billings slowly and with a sigh assumed a sitting posture in the chair. The biscuit-nibbler selected a fresh dainty from the counter, and Wingate abstractedly walked to the window and rubbed the glass. Sky and water had already disappeared behind a curtain of darkness that was illuminated by a single point of light—the lamp in the window of some invisible but nearer house—which threw its rays across the glistening shallows in the road. "Well," said Wingate, buttoning up his coat in slow dejection, "I reckon I oughter be travelin' to help the old woman do the chores before supper." He had just recognized the light in his own dining-room, and knew by that sign that his long-waiting helpmeet had finally done the chores herself.

"Some folks have it mighty easy," said Billings, with long-drawn discontent, as he struggled to his feet. "You've only a step to go, and yer's me and Peters there"—indicating the biscuit-nibbler, who was beginning to show alarming signs of returning to the barrel again—"hev got to trapse five times that distance."

"More'n half a mile, if it comes to that," said Peters, gloomily. He paused in putting on his overcoat as if thinking better of it, while even the more fortunate and contiguous Wingate languidly lapsed against the counter again.

The moment was a critical one. Billings was evidently also regretfully eying the chair he had just quitted. Harkutt resolved on a heroic effort.

"Come, boys," he said, with brisk conviviality, "take a parting drink with me before you go." Producing a black bottle from some obscurity beneath the counter that smelt strongly of india-rubber boots, he placed it with four glasses before his guests. Each made a feint of holding his glass against the opaque window while filling it, although nothing could be seen. A sudden tumult of

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wind and rain again shook the building, but even after it had passed the glass door still rattled violently.

"Just see what's loose, Peters," said Billings; "you're nearest it."

Peters, still holding the undrained glass in his hand, walked slowly towards it.

"It's suthin'—or somebody outside," he said, hesitatingly.

The three others came eagerly to his side. Through the glass, clouded from within by their breath, and filmed from without by the rain, some vague object was moving, and what seemed to be a mop of tangled hair was apparently brushing against the pane. The door shook again, but less strongly. Billings pressed his face against the glass. "Hol' on," he said in a quick whisper,— "it's 'Lige!"

But it was too late. Harkutt had already drawn the lower bolt, and

a man stumbled from the outer obscurity into the darker room. The inmates drew away as he leaned back for a moment against the door that closed behind him. Then dimly, but instinctively, discerning the glass of liquor which Wingate still mechanically held in his hand, he reached forward eagerly, took it from Wingate's surprised and unresisting fingers, and drained it at a gulp. The four men laughed vaguely, but not as cheerfully as they might.

"I was just shutting up," began Harkutt, dubiously.

"I won't keep you a minit," said the intruder, nervously fumbling in the breast pocket of his hickory shirt. "It's a matter of business—Harkutt—I"— But he was obliged to stop here to wipe his face and forehead with the ends of a loose handkerchief tied round his throat. From the action, and what could be seen of his pale, exhausted face, it was evident that the moisture upon it was beads of perspiration, and not the rain which some abnormal heat of his body was converting into vapor from his sodden garments as he stood there.

"I've got a document here," he began again, producing a roll of paper tremblingly from his pocket, "that I'd like you to glance over, and perhaps you'd"— His voice, which had been feverishly exalted, here broke and rattled with a cough.

Billings, Wingate, and Peters fell apart and looked out of the window. "It's too dark to read anything now, 'Lige," said Harkutt, with evasive good humor, "and I ain't lightin' up to-night."

"But I can tell you the substance of it," said the man, with a

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faintness that however had all the distinctness of a whisper, "if you'll just step inside a minute. It's a matter of importance and a bargain"—

"I reckon we must be goin'," said Billings to the others, with marked emphasis. "We're keepin' Harkutt from shuttin' up." "Good-night!" "Good-night!" added Peters and Wingate, ostentatiously following Billings hurriedly through the door. "So long!"

The door closed behind them, leaving Harkutt alone with his importunate intruder. Possibly his resentment at his customers' selfish abandonment of him at this moment developed a vague spirit of opposition to them and mitigated his feeling towards 'Lige. He groped his way to the counter, struck a match, and lit a candle. Its feeble rays faintly illuminated the pale, drawn face of the applicant, set in a tangle of wet, unkempt, party-colored hair. It was not the face of an ordinary drunkard; although tremulous and sensitive from some artificial excitement, there was no ENGORGEMENT or congestion in the features or complexion, albeit they were morbid and unhealthy. The expression was of a suffering that was as much mental as physical, and yet in some vague way appeared

unmeaning—and unheroic.

"I want to see you about selling my place on the creek. I want you to take it off my hands for a bargain. I want to get quit of it, at once, for just enough to take me out o' this. I don't want any profit; only money enough to get away." His utterance, which had a certain kind of cultivation, here grew thick and harsh again, and he looked eagerly at the bottle which stood on the counter.

"Look here, 'Lige," said Harkutt, not unkindly. "It's too late to do anythin' tonight. You come in to-morrow." He would have added "when you're sober," but for a trader's sense of politeness to a possible customer, and probably some doubt of the man's actual condition.

"God knows where or what I may be tomorrow! It would kill me to go back and spend another night as the last, if I don't kill myself on the way to do it."

Harkutt's face darkened grimly. It was indeed as Billings had said. The pitiable weakness of the man's manner not only made his desperation inadequate and ineffective, but even lent it all the cheapness of acting. And, as if to accent his simulation of a part, his fingers, feebly groping in his shirt bosom, slipped aimlessly and helplessly from the shining handle of a pistol in his pocket to wander hesitatingly towards the bottle on the counter. Harkutt took the bottle, poured out a glass of the liquor, and pushed it before his companion, who drank it eagerly. Whether it

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gave him more confidence, or his attention was no longer diverted, he went on more collectedly and cheerfully, and with no trace of his previous desperation in his manner. "Come, Harkutt, buy my place. It's a bargain, I tell you. I'll sell it cheap. I only want enough to get away with. Give me twenty-five dollars and it's yours. See, there's the papers—the quitclaim—all drawn up and signed." He drew the roll of paper from his pocket again, apparently forgetful of the adjacent weapon.

"Look here, 'Lige," said Harkutt, with a business-like straightening of his lips, "I ain't buyin' any land in Tasa jara,—least of all yours on the creek. I've got more invested here already than I'll ever get back again. But I tell you what I'll do. You say you can't go back to your shanty. Well, seein' how rough it is outside, and that the waters of the creek are probably all over the trail by this time, I reckon you're about right. Now, there's five dollars!" He laid down a coin sharply on the counter. "Take that and go over to Rawlett's and get a bed and some supper. In the mornin' you may be able to strike up a trade with somebody else—or change your mind. How did you get here? On your hoss?"

"Yes."

"He ain't starved yet?"

"No; he can eat grass. I can't."

Either the liquor or Harkutt's practical unsentimental treatment of the situation seemed to give him confidence. He met Harkutt's eye more steadily as the latter went on. "You kin turn your hoss for the night into my stock corral next to Rawlett's. It'll save you payin' for fodder and stablin'."

The man took up the coin with a certain slow gravity which was almost like dignity. "Thank you," he said, laying the paper on the counter. "I'll leave that as security."

"Don't want it, 'Lige," said Harkutt, pushing it back.

"I'd rather leave it."

"But suppose you have a chance to sell it to somebody at Rawlett's?" continued Harkutt, with a precaution that seemed ironical.

"I don't think there's much chance of that."

He remained quiet, looking at Harkutt with an odd expression as he rubbed the edge of the coin that he held between his fingers abstractedly on the counter. Something in his gaze—rather perhaps the apparent absence of anything in it approximate to the present

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occasion—was beginning to affect Harkutt with a vague uneasiness.

Providentially a resumed onslaught of wind and rain against the panes effected a diversion. "Come," he said, with brisk practicality, "you'd better hurry on to Rawlett's before it gets worse. Have your clothes dried by his fire, take suthin' to eat, and you'll be all right." He rubbed his hands cheerfully, as if summarily disposing of the situation, and incidentally of all 'Lige's troubles, and walked with him to the door. Nevertheless, as the man's look remained unchanged, he hesitated a moment with his hand on the handle, in the hope that he would say something, even if only to repeat his appeal, but he did not. Then Harkutt opened the door; the man moved mechanically out, and at the distance of a few feet seemed to melt into the rain and darkness. Harkutt remained for a moment with his face pressed against the glass. After an interval he thought he heard the faint splash of hoofs in the shallows of the road; he opened the door softly and looked out.

The light had disappeared from the nearest house; only an uncertain bulk of shapeless shadows remained. Other remoter and more vague outlines near the horizon seemed to have a funereal suggestion of tombs and grave mounds, and one—a low shed near the road—looked not unlike a halted bier. He hurriedly put up the shutters in a momentary lulling of the wind, and re-entering the store began to fasten them from within.

While thus engaged an inner door behind the counter opened softly and cautiously, projecting a brighter light into the deserted apartment from some sacred domestic interior with the warm and

wholesome incense of cooking. It served to introduce also the equally agreeable presence of a young girl, who, after assuring herself of the absence of every one but the proprietor, idly slipped into the store, and placing her rounded elbows, from which her sleeves were uprolled, upon the counter, leaned lazily upon them, with both hands supporting her dimpled chin, and gazed indolently at him; so indolently that, with her pretty face once fixed in this comfortable attitude, she was constrained to follow his movements with her eyes alone, and often at an uncomfortable angle. It was evident that she offered the final but charming illustration of the enfeebling listlessness of Sidon.

"So those loafers have gone at last," she said, meditatively.

"They'll take root here some day, pop. The idea of three strong men like that lazing round for two mortal hours doin' nothin'. Well!" As if to emphasize her disgust she threw her whole weight upon the counter by swinging her feet from the floor to touch the shelves behind her.

Mr. Harkutt only replied by a slight grunt as he continued to screw on the shutters.

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"Want me to help you, dad?" she said, without moving.

Mr. Harkutt muttered something unintelligible, which, however, seemed to imply a negative, and her attention here feebly wandered to the roll of paper, and she began slowly and lazily to read it aloud.

"For value received, I hereby sell, assign, and transfer to Daniel D. Harkutt all my right, titles and interest in, and to the undivided half of, Quarter Section 4, Range 5, Tasa jara Township'—hum—hum," she murmured, running her eyes to the bottom of the page. "Why, Lord! It's that 'Lige Curtis!" she laughed. "The idea of HIM having property! Why, dad, you ain't been THAT silly!" "Put down that paper, miss," he said, aggrievedly; "bring the candle here, and help me to find one of these infernal screws that's dropped."

The girl indolently disengaged herself from the counter and Elijah Curtis's transfer, and brought the candle to her father. The screw was presently found and the last fastening secured. "Supper gettin' cold, dad," she said, with a slight yawn. Her father sympathetically responded by stretching himself from his stooping position, and the two passed through the private door into inner domesticity, leaving the already forgotten paper lying with other articles of barter on the counter.

CHAPTER II.

With the closing of the little door behind them they seemed to have shut out the turmoil and vibration of the storm. The reason became apparent when, after a few paces, they descended half a dozen steps

to a lower landing. This disclosed the fact that the dwelling part of the Sidon General Store was quite below the level of the shop and the road, and on the slope of the solitary undulation of the Tasa jara plain,—a little ravine that fell away to a brawling stream below. The only arboreous growth of Tasa jara clothed its banks in the shape of willows and alders that set compactly around the quaint, irregular dwelling which straggled down the ravine and looked upon a slope of bracken and foliage on either side. The transition from the black, treeless, storm-swept plain to this sheltered declivity was striking and suggestive. From the opposite bank one might fancy that the youthful and original dwelling had ambitiously mounted the crest, but, appalled at the dreary prospect beyond, had gone no further; while from the road it seemed as if

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the fastidious proprietor had tried to draw a line between the vulgar trading-post, with which he was obliged to face the coarser civilization of the place, and the privacy of his domestic life. The real fact, however, was that the ravine furnished wood and water; and as Nature also provided one wall of the house,—as in the well-known example of aboriginal cave dwellings,—its peculiar construction commended itself to Sidon on the ground of involving little labor.

Howbeit, from the two open windows of the sitting-room which they had entered only the faint pattering of dripping boughs and a slight murmur from the swollen brook indicated the storm that shook the upper plain, and the cool breath of laurel, syringa, and alder was wafted through the neat apartment. Passing through that pleasant rural atmosphere they entered the kitchen, a much larger room, which appeared to serve occasionally as a dining-room, and where supper was already laid out. A stout, comfortable-looking woman—who had, however, a singularly permanent expression of pained sympathy upon her face—welcomed them in tones of gentle commiseration.

"Ah, there you be, you two! Now sit ye right down, dears; DO. You must be tired out; and you, Phemie, love, draw up by your poor father. There—that's right. You'll be better soon."

There was certainly no visible sign of suffering or exhaustion on the part of either father or daughter, nor the slightest apparent earthly reason why they should be expected to exhibit any. But, as already intimated, it was part of Mrs. Harkutt's generous idiosyncrasy to look upon all humanity as suffering and toiling; to be petted, humored, condoled with, and fed. It had, in the course of years, imparted a singularly caressing sadness to her voice, and given her the habit of ending her sentences with a melancholy cooing and an unintelligible murmur of agreement. It was undoubtedly sincere and sympathetic, but at times inappropriate and distressing.

It had lost her the friendship of the one humorist of Tasa jara, whose best jokes she had received with such heartfelt commiseration and such pained appreciation of the evident labor involved as to reduce him to silence.

Accustomed as Mr. Harkutt was to his wife's peculiarity, he was not above assuming a certain slightly fatigued attitude befitting it.

"Yes," he said, with a vague sigh, "where's Clemmie?"

"Lysin' down since dinner; she reckoned she wouldn't get up to supper," she returned soothingly. "Phemie's goin' to take her up some sass and tea. The poor dear child wants a change."

"She wants to go to 'Frisco, and so do I, pop," said Phemie, leaning her elbow half over her father's plate. "Come, pop, say
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do,—just for a week."

"Only for a week," murmured the commiserating Mrs. Harkutt.

"Perhaps," responded Harkutt, with gloomy sarcasm, "ye wouldn't mind tellin' me how you're goin' to get there, and where the money's comin' from to take you? There's no teamin' over Tasa jara till the rain stops, and no money comin' in till the ranchmen can move their stuff. There ain't a hundred dollars in all Tasa jara; at least there ain't been the first red cent of it paid across my counter for a fortnit! Perhaps if you do go you wouldn't mind takin' me and the store along with ye, and leavin' us there."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Harkutt, with sympathetic but shameless tergiversation. "Don't bother your poor father, Phemie, love; don't you see he's just tired out? And you're not eatin' anything, dad."

As Mr. Harkutt was uneasily conscious that he had been eating heartily in spite of his financial difficulties, he turned the subject abruptly. "Where's John Milton?"

Mrs. Harkutt shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed meditatively on the floor before the fire and in the chimney corner for her only son, baptized under that historic title. "He was here a minit ago," she said doubtfully. "I really can't think where he's gone. But," assuringly, "it ain't far."

"He's skipped with one o' those story-books he's borrowed," said Phemie. "He's always doin' it. Like as not he's reading with a candle in the wood-shed. We'll all be burnt up some night."

"But he's got through his chores," interposed Mrs. Harkutt deprecatingly.

"Yes," continued Harkutt, aggrievedly, "but instead of goin' to bed, or addin' up bills, or takin' count o' stock, or even doin' sums or suthin' useful, he's ruinin' his eyes and wastin' his time over trash." He rose and walked slowly into the sitting-room, followed by his daughter and a murmur of commiseration from his wife. But Mrs. Harkutt's ministrations for the present did not pass

beyond her domain, the kitchen.

"I reckon ye ain't expectin' anybody tonight, Phemie?" said Mr. Harkutt, sinking into a chair, and placing his slippered feet against the wall.

"No," said Phemie, "unless something possesses that sappy little Parmlee to make one of his visitations. John Milton says that out on the road it blows so you can't stand up. It's just like that

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idiot Parmlee to be blown in here, and not have strength of mind enough to get away again."

Mr. Harkutt smiled. It was that arch yet approving, severe yet satisfied smile with which the deceived male parent usually receives any depreciation of the ordinary young man by his daughters. Euphemia was no giddy thing to be carried away by young men's attentions,—not she! Sitting back comfortably in his rocking-chair, he said, "Play something."

The young girl went to the closet and took from the top shelf an excessively ornamented accordion,—the opulent gift of a reckless admirer. It was so inordinately decorated, so gorgeous in the blaze of papier mache, mother-of-pearl, and tortoise-shell on keys and keyboard, and so ostentatiously radiant in the pink silk of its bellows that it seemed to overawe the plainly furnished room with its splendors. "You ought to keep it on the table in a glass vase, Phemie," said her father admiringly.

"And have HIM think I worshiped it! Not me, indeed! He's conceited enough already," she returned, saucily.

Mr. Harkutt again smiled his approbation, then deliberately closed his eyes and threw his head back in comfortable anticipation of the coming strains.

It is to be regretted that in brilliancy, finish, and even cheerfulness of quality they were not up to the suggestions of the keys and keyboard. The most discreet and cautious effort on the part of the young performer seemed only to produce startlingly unexpected, but instantly suppressed complaints from the instrument, accompanied by impatient interjections of "No, no," from the girl herself. Nevertheless, with her pretty eyebrows knitted in some charming distress of memory, her little mouth half open between an apologetic smile and the exertion of working the bellows, with her white, rounded arms partly lifted up and waving before her, she was pleasantly distracting to the eye. Gradually, as the scattered strains were marshaled into something like an air, she began to sing also, glossing over the instrumental weaknesses, filling in certain dropped notes and omissions, and otherwise assisting the ineffectual accordion with a youthful but not unmusical voice. The song was a lugubrious religious chant; under its influence the house seemed to sink into greater quiet,

permitting in the intervals the murmur of the swollen creek to appear more distinct, and even the far moaning of the wind on the plain to become faintly audible. At last, having fairly mastered the instrument, Phemie got into the full swing of the chant. Unconstrained by any criticism, carried away by the sound of her own voice, and perhaps a youthful love for mere uproar, or possibly desirous to drown her father's voice, which had unexpectedly joined

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in with a discomposing bass, the conjoined utterances seemed to threaten the frail structure of their dwelling, even as the gale had distended the store behind them. When they ceased at last it was in an accession of dripping from the apparently stirred leaves outside. And then a voice, evidently from the moist depths of the abyss below, called out,—

"Hullo, there!"

Phemie put down the accordion, said, "Who's that now?" went to the window, lazily leaned her elbows on the sill, and peered into the darkness. Nothing was to be seen; the open space of dimly outlined landscape had that blank, uncommunicative impenetrability with which Nature always confronts and surprises us at such moments. It seemed to Phemie that she was the only human being present. Yet after the feeling had passed she fancied she heard the wash of the current against some object in the stream, half stationary and half resisting.

"Is any one down there? Is that you, Mr. Parmlee?" she called.

There was a pause. Some invisible auditor said to another, "It's a young lady." Then the first voice rose again in a more deferential tone: "Are we anywhere near Sidon?"

"This is Sidon," answered Harkutt, who had risen, and was now quite obliterating his daughter's outline at the window.

"Thank you," said the voice. "Can we land anywhere here, on this bank?"

"Run down, pop; they're strangers," said the girl, with excited, almost childish eagerness.

"Hold on," called out Harkutt, "I'll be thar in a moment!" He hastily thrust his feet into a pair of huge boots, clapped on an oilskin hat and waterproof, and disappeared through a door that led to a lower staircase. Phemie, still at the window, albeit with a newly added sense of self-consciousness, hung out breathlessly. Presently a beam of light from the lower depths of the house shot out into the darkness. It was her father with a bull's-eye lantern. As he held it up and clambered cautiously down the bank, its rays fell upon the turbid rushing stream, and what appeared to be a rough raft of logs held with difficulty against the bank by two men with long poles. In its centre was a roll of blankets, a valise and saddle-bags, and the shining brasses of some odd-looking

instruments.

As Mr. Harkutt, supporting himself by a willow branch that overhung the current, held up the lantern, the two men rapidly transferred

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their freight from the raft to the bank, and leaped ashore. The action gave an impulse to the raft, which, no longer held in position by the poles, swung broadside to the current and was instantly swept into the darkness.

Not a word had been spoken, but now the voices of the men rose freely together. Phemie listened with intense expectation. The explanation was simple. They were surveyors who had been caught by the overflow on Tasa jara plain, had abandoned their horses on the bank of Tasa jara Creek, and with a hastily constructed raft had intrusted themselves and their instruments to the current. "But," said Harkutt quickly, "there is no connection between Tasa jara Creek and this stream."

The two men laughed. "There is NOW," said one of them.

"But Tasa jara Creek is a part of the bay," said the astonished Harkutt, "and this stream rises inland and only runs into the bay four miles lower down. And I don't see how—

"You're almost twelve feet lower here than Tasa jara Creek," said the first man, with a certain professional authority, "and that's WHY. There's more water than Tasa jara Creek can carry, and it's seeking the bay this way. Look," he continued, taking the lantern from Harkutt's hand and casting its rays on the stream, "that's salt drift from the upper bay, and part of Tasa jara Creek's running by your house now! Don't be alarmed," he added reassuringly, glancing at the staring storekeeper. "You're all right here; this is only the overflow and will find its level soon."

But Mr. Harkutt remained gazing abstractedly at the smiling speaker. From the window above the impatient Phemie was wondering why he kept the strangers waiting in the rain while he talked about things that were perfectly plain. It was so like a man!

"Then there's a waterway straight to Tasa jara Creek?" he said slowly.

"There is, as long as this flood lasts," returned the first speaker promptly; "and a cutting through the bank of two or three hundred yards would make it permanent. Well, what's the matter with that?"

"Nothin'," said Harkutt hurriedly. "I am only considerin' ! But come in, dry yourselves, and take suthin'."

The light over the rushing water was withdrawn, and the whole prospect sank back into profound darkness. Mr. Harkutt had disappeared with his guests. Then there was the familiar shuffle of his feet on the staircase, followed by other more cautious footsteps that grew delicately and even courteously deliberate as

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they approached. At which the young girl, in some new sense of decorum, drew in her pretty head, glanced around the room quickly, reset the tidy on her father's chair, placed the resplendent accordion like an ornament in the exact centre of the table, and then vanished into the hall as Mr. Harkutt entered with the strangers.

They were both of the same age and appearance, but the principal speaker was evidently the superior of his companion, and although their attitude to each other was equal and familiar, it could be easily seen that he was the leader. He had a smooth, beardless face, with a critical expression of eye and mouth that might have been fastidious and supercilious but for the kindly, humorous perception that tempered it. His quick eye swept the apartment and then fixed itself upon the accordion, but a smile lit up his face as he said quietly,—

"I hope we haven't frightened the musician away. It was bad enough to have interrupted the young lady."

"No, no," said Mr. Harkutt, who seemed to have lost his abstraction in the nervousness of hospitality. "I reckon she's only lookin' after her sick sister. But come into the kitchen, both of you, straight off, and while you're dryin' your clothes, mother'll fix you suthin' hot."

"We only need to change our boots and stockings; we've some dry ones in our pack downstairs," said the first speaker hesitatingly.

"I'll fetch 'em up and you can change in the kitchen. The old woman won't mind," said Harkutt reassuringly. "Come along." He led the way to the kitchen; the two strangers exchanged a glance of humorous perplexity and followed.

The quiet of the little room was once more unbroken. A far-off commiserating murmur indicated that Mrs. Harkutt was receiving her guests. The cool breath of the wet leaves without slightly stirred the white dimity curtains, and somewhere from the darkened eaves there was a still, somnolent drip. Presently a hurried whisper and a half-laugh appeared to be suppressed in the outer passage or hall. There was another moment of hesitation and the door opened suddenly and ostentatiously, disclosing Phemie, with a taller and slighter young woman, her elder sister, at her side. Perceiving that the room was empty, they both said "Oh!" yet with a certain artificiality of manner that was evidently a lingering trace of some previous formal attitude they had assumed. Then without further speech they each selected a chair and a position, having first shaken out their dresses, and gazed silently at each other. It may be said briefly that sitting thus—in spite of their

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unnatural attitude, or perhaps rather because of its suggestion of a photographic pose—they made a striking picture, and strongly

accented their separate peculiarities. They were both pretty, but the taller girl, apparently the elder, had an ideal refinement and regularity of feature which was not only unlike Phemie, but gratuitously unlike the rest of her family, and as hopelessly and even wantonly inconsistent with her surroundings as was the elaborately ornamented accordion on the centre-table. She was one of those occasional creatures, episodic in the South and West, who might have been stamped with some vague ante-natal impression of a mother given to over-sentimental contemplation of books of beauty and albums rather than the family features; offspring of typical men and women, and yet themselves incongruous to any known local or even general type. The long swan-like neck, tendriled hair, swimming eyes, and small patrician head, had never lived or moved before in Tasa jara or the West, nor perhaps even existed except as a personified "Constancy," "Meditation," or the "Baron's Bride," in mezzotint or copperplate. Even the girl's common pink print dress with its high sleeves and shoulders could not conventionalize these original outlines; and the hand that rested stiffly on the back of her chair, albeit neither over-white nor well kept, looked as if it had never held anything but a lyre, a rose, or a good book. Even the few sprays of wild jessamine which she had placed in the coils of her waving hair, although a local fashion, became her as a special ornament.

The two girls kept their constrained and artificially elaborated attitude for a few moments, accompanied by the murmur of voices in the kitchen, the monotonous drip of the eaves before the window, and the far-off sigh of the wind. Then Phemie suddenly broke into a constrained giggle, which she however quickly smothered as she had the accordion, and with the same look of mischievous distress. "I'm astonished at you, Phemie," said Clementina in a deep contralto voice, which seemed even deeper from its restraint. "You don't seem to have any sense. Anybody'd think you never had seen a stranger before."

"Saw him before you did," retorted Phemie pertly. But here a pushing of chairs and shuffling of feet in the kitchen checked her. Clementina fixed an abstracted gaze on the ceiling; Phemie regarded a leaf on the window sill with photographic rigidity as the door opened to the strangers and her father.

The look of undisguised satisfaction which lit the young men's faces relieved Mr. Harkutt's awkward introduction of any embarrassment, and almost before Phemie was fully aware of it, she found herself talking rapidly and in a high key with Mr. Lawrence Grant, the surveyor, while her sister was equally, although more sedately, occupied with Mr. Stephen Rice, his assistant. But the

pleased was so genuine and contagious that presently the accordion was brought into requisition, and Mr. Grant exhibited a surprising faculty of accompaniment to Mr. Rice's tenor, in which both the girls joined.

Then a game of cards with partners followed, into which the rival parties introduced such delightful and shameless obviousness of cheating, and displayed such fascinating and exaggerated partisanship that the game resolved itself into a hilarious melee, to which peace was restored only by an exhibition of tricks of legerdemain with the cards by the young surveyor. All of which Mr. Harkutt supervised patronizingly, with occasional fits of abstraction, from his rocking-chair; and later Mrs. Harkutt from her kitchen threshold, wiping her arms on her apron and commiseratingly observing that she "declared, the young folks looked better already."

But it was here a more dangerous element of mystery and suggestion was added by Mr. Lawrence Grant in the telling of Miss Euphemia's fortune from the cards before him, and that young lady, pink with excitement, fluttered her little hands not unlike timid birds over the cards to be drawn, taking them from him with an audible twitter of anxiety and great doubts whether a certain "fair-haired gentleman" was in hearts or diamonds.

"Here are two strangers," said Mr. Grant, with extraordinary gravity laying down the cards, "and here is a 'journey;' this is 'unexpected news,' and this ten of diamonds means 'great wealth' to you, which you see follows the advent of the two strangers and is some way connected with them."

"Oh, indeed," said the young lady with great pertness and a toss of her head. "I suppose they've got the money with them."

"No, though it reaches you through them," he answered with unflinching solemnity. "Wait a bit, I have it! I see, I've made a mistake with this card. It signifies a journey or a road. Queer! isn't it, Steve? It's THE ROAD."

"It is queer," said Rice with equal gravity; "but it's so. The road, sure!" Nevertheless he looked up into the large eyes of Clementina with a certain confidential air of truthfulness.

"You see, ladies," continued the surveyor, appealing to them with unabashed rigidity of feature, "the cards don't lie! Luckily we are in a position to corroborate them. The road in question is a secret known only to us and some capitalists in San Francisco. In fact even THEY don't know that it is feasible until WE report to them. But I don't mind telling you now, as a slight return for

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your charming hospitality, that the road is a RAILROAD from Oakland to Tasa jara Creek of which we've just made the preliminary survey. So you see what the cards mean is this: You're not far from

Tasa jara Creek; in fact with a very little expense your father could connect this stream with the creek, and have a WATERWAY STRAIGHT TO THE RAILROAD TERMINUS. That's the wealth the cards promise; and if your father knows how to take a hint he can make his fortune!"

It was impossible to say which was the most dominant in the face of the speaker, the expression of assumed gravity or the twinkling of humor in his eyes. The two girls with superior feminine perception divined that there was much truth in what he said, albeit they didn't entirely understand it, and what they did understand—except the man's good-humored motive—was not particularly interesting. In fact they were slightly disappointed. What had promised to be an audaciously flirtatious declaration, and even a mischievous suggestion of marriage, had resolved itself into something absurdly practical and business-like.

Not so Mr. Harkutt. He quickly rose from his chair, and, leaning over the table, with his eyes fixed on the card as if it really signified the railroad, repeated quickly: "Railroad, eh! What's that? A railroad to Tasa jara Creek? Ye don't mean it!—That is—it ain't a SURE thing?"

"Perfectly sure. The money is ready in San Francisco now, and by this time next year—"

"A railroad to Tasa jara Creek!" continued Harkutt hurriedly. "What part of it? Where?"

"At the embarcadero naturally," responded Grant. "There isn't but the one place for the terminus. There's an old shanty there now belongs to somebody."

"Why, pop!" said Phemie with sudden recollection, "ain't it 'Lige Curtis's house? The land he offered"—

"Hush!" said her father.

"You know, the one written in that bit of paper," continued the innocent Phemie.

"Hush! will you? God A'mighty! are you goin' to mind me? Are you goin' to keep up your jabber when I'm speakin' to the gentlemen? Is that your manners? What next, I wonder!"

The sudden and unexpected passion of the speaker, the incomprehensible change in his voice, and the utterly disproportionate exaggeration

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of his attitude towards his daughters, enforced an instantaneous silence. The rain began to drip audibly at the window, the rush of the river sounded distinctly from without, even the shaking of the front part of the dwelling by the distant gale became perceptible. An angry flash sprang for an instant to the young assistant's eye, but it met the cautious glance of his friend, and together both discreetly sought the table. The two girls alone remained white and collected. "Will you go on with my fortune, Mr. Grant?" said Phemie

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