

A Whirl Asunder

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.



“WHY DID YOU BRING ME HERE?” HE ASKED.”

CHAPTER I.

AS the train stopped for the sixth time, Clive descended abruptly.

“I think I’ll walk the rest of the way,” he said to the conductor. “Just look after my portmanteau, will you? and see that it is left at Yorba with my boxes.”

“O. K.,” said the man. “But you must like walking.”

Clive had spent seven days on the ocean, three in the furious energy of New York, and six on a transcontinental train, whose discomforts made him wonder if he had a moral right to enter the embarrassing state of matrimony with a temper hopelessly soured. As he had come to California to marry, and as his betrothed was at a hotel in the northern redwoods, he did not pause for rest in San Francisco; he left, two hours after his arrival, on a narrow gauge train, which dashed down precipitous mountain slopes, shot, rocking from side to side, about curves on a road so narrow that the brush scraped the windows, or the eye looked down into the blackness of a cañon, five hundred feet below; raced shrieking across trestles which seemed to swing midway between heaven and earth; only to slacken, with protesting snort and jerk, when climbing to some dizzy height. Clive had stood for an hour on the platform, fascinated by the danger and the bleak solemnity of the forests, whose rigid trunks and short stiffly pointed arms looked as if they had not quivered since time began. But he felt that he had had enough, moreover that he had not drawn an unaccompanied breath since he left England. If he was not possessed by the graceful impatience of the lover, he reminded himself that he was

tired and nervous, and had been obliged to go dirty for six days, enough to knock the romance out of any man; the ubiquitous human animal had talked incessantly for sixteen days, and his legs ached for want of stretching.

A twisted old man with a sharp eye, a rusty beard depending aimlessly from a thin tobacco-stained mouth, limped across the platform, rolling a flag. Clive asked him if he could get to the Yorba hotel on foot.

The man stared. "Well, you *be* an Englishman, *I* guess," he remarked.

"Yes, I am an Englishman," said Clive haughtily.

"Oh, no offence, but the way you English do walk beats us. We ain't none too fond of walkin' in Californy. Too many mountains, I guess. Yes, you kin walk it, and I guess you'll have to. There goes your train. Stranger in these parts?"

"I arrived in California to-day."

"So. Goin' to raise cattle, or just seein' the wonders of the Gold State?"

"Will you kindly point out the way? And I should like to send a dispatch to the hotel, if possible."

"Oh, suttently. We don't think much of English manners in these parts, I don't mind sayin'. You English act as if you owned God Almighty when you come out here. You forget we licked ye twice. Come after a Californy heiress?"

Clive felt an impulse to throw the man over the trestle, then laughed. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I am sorry my manners are

bad but the truth is my head is tired and my legs are not. Come, show me the way.”

Being further mollified by a silver dollar, the old man replied graciously, “All right, sir. Just amuse yourself while I send your telegram, and fetch a dark lantern. You’ll need it. The moon’s doin’ well, but the tops of them redwoods knit together, and are as close as a roof.”

Clive walked idly about the little waiting-room. The walls were decorated with illustrated weekly newspapers, and the gratuitous lithograph. John L. Sullivan, looking, under the softening influence of the weekly artist, as if sculptured from mush, glowered across at Corbett, who displayed his muscles in a dandified attitude. There were also several lithographs of pretty, rather elegant-looking girls. Clive noticed that one had a rude frame of young redwood branches about it, and occupied the post of honor at the head of the room. He walked over and examined it as well as he could by the light of the smoking lamp.

The head was in profile, severe in outline, as classic as the modern head ever is. The chin was lifted proudly, the nostrils looked capable of expansion. The brow and eyes suggested intellect, the lower part of the face pride and self-will and passion, perhaps undeveloped cruelty and sensuality.

“Who is Miss Belmont?” he asked, as the station agent left the telegraph table.

“Oh, she’s one of the heiresses. That’s our high-toned society paper. It’s printin’ a series of Californy heiresses. One of the other papers says as how it’s a good guide book for impecoonious furriners, and I guess that’s about the size of it. She’s got a million,

and nobody but an aunt, and she has her own way, I—tell—you. She'll be a handful to manage; but somehow, although she keeps people talkin', they don't believe as much harm of her as of some that's more quiet. You'll meet her, I guess, if you're goin' to stay at Yorba, for she's got a big house in the redwoods and knows a lot of the hotel folks and the Bohemian Club fellers. I like her. She rides this way once a year or so, and we have a good chin about politics. She knows a thing or two, you bet, and she believes in Grover."

"How old is she? And why doesn't she marry?" asked Clive idly, as they walked up the road.

"She's twenty-six, and she's goin' to marry—a Noo York feller; one of them with Dutch names. She's had offers, *I* guess. Three of your lords, I know of. But lords don't stand much show with Californy girls—they as was raised here, anyhow. They don't give a damn for titles, and they scent a fortune-hunter before he's off the dock. They've put their heads together and talked him over before he's registered. This Dutchman's got money, so I guess he's all right. Be you a lord?"

"I am not. I am a barrister, and the son of a barrister."

"What may that be?"

"I believe you call it lawyer out here."

"O—h—h—a lawyer's a gay bird, ain't he? And don't he have a good time?" The old man chuckled.

"I never found them different from other men. What do you mean?"

“Ours are rippers. I’ve been in Californy since ’49, and I could spin some yarns that would make your hair curl, young man. Lord, Lord, the old ones were tough. The young ones ain’t quite so bad, but they’re doing their best.”

“California is rather a wild place, isn’t it?”

“It was. It’s quietin’ down now, and it ain’t near so interestin’. Jack Belmont, that there young lady’s father, was a lawyer when he fust come here, but he struck it rich in Con. Virginia, in ’74, and after that warn’t he a ripper. Oh, Lord! He *was* a terror. But he done his dooty by his girl; had her eddicated in Paris and Noo York, and never let no one cross her. He was as fine-lookin’ a man as ever I seen, almost as tall and clean made as you be, and awful open-handed and popular, although a terrible enemy. He’s shot his man twice over, they say, and I believe it. His wife died ten years before him. She was fond of him, too, poor thing, and he made no bones about bein’ unfaithful to her—they don’t out here. A man’s no good if you can’t tell a yarn or two about him. Well, Jack Belmont died five years ago, and left about a million dollars to his girl. He’d had a long sight more, but she was lucky to git that. They say as how she was awful broke up when he died.”

“You’re a regular old *chronique scandaleuse*,” said Clive, much interested. “What sort of a social position has this Miss Belmont? Is she received?”

“Received? Glory, man—why her father was a Southern gent—Maryland, as I remember, and her mother was from Boston. They led society here in the sixties; they’re one of the old families of Californy. That’s the reason Miss Belmont does as she damned

pleases, and nobody dares say boo—that and the million. She’s ancient aristocracy, she is. Received! Oh, Lord!”

Clive, much amused, asked, “What does she do that is so dreadful?”

“Oh, she’s been engaged fifteen times; she rides about the country in boy’s clothes, and sits up all night under the trees at Del Monte talkin’ to a man, or gives all her dances to one man at a party, and then cuts him the next day on the street; and when she gits tired of people, comes up here without even her aunt. She used to run to fires, but she give that up some years ago. She travels about the country for weeks without a chaperon, and once went camping alone with five men. Sometimes she’ll fill her house up with men for a week, and not have no other woman, savin’ her aunt. Lately she’s more quiet, they say, and has become a terrible reader. Last winter she stayed up here for three months alone. I hear as how people talked. But I didn’t see nothin’. She’s all right, or my name ain’t Jo Bagley. Well, here you are, sir. Good luck to ye! Keep to the road and don’t strike off on any of them side trails, and you can’t go wrong. Evenin’.”

Clive went into the dark forest. What the old man had told him of Miss Belmont had quickened his imagination, and he speculated about her for some moments; then his thoughts wandered to his English betrothed. He had not seen her for two years. Her mother’s health failing, her father had taken his family to Southern California. A year later Mrs. Gordon had died, and her husband having bought a ranch in which he was much interested, had written to Clive that he wanted his eldest daughter for another year; by that time her sister would have finished school, and could take her place as head of the household. Lately he and Mary had felt the

debilitating influence of the southern climate and had gone to the redwoods of the north. There Clive was to meet them, remain a few weeks, then marry in San Francisco and take his wife back to England.

Clive was thirty-four, ten years older than Mary Gordon. He recalled the day he had proposed to her. She had come down the steps of her father's house, in a blue gown and garden hat, and they had gone for a walk in the woods. She was not a clever woman, and she had only the white and pink and brown, the rounded lines of youth, no positive beauty of face or figure; but with the blind instinct of his race he had turned almost automatically to the type of woman who, time out of mind, has produced the strong-limbed, strong-brained men that have made a nation insolently great. She reminded him of his mother, with her even sweetness of nature, her sympathy, her large maternal suggestion. He had known her since her early girlhood and grown fonder of her each year. She rested him, and had the divine feminine faculty of making him feel a better and cleverer man than he was in the habit of thinking himself else where.

She had accepted him with the sweetest smile he had ever seen, and he had wondered if other men were as fortunate. For two years he saw much of her, then she went to America, and he had plunged into his work and his man's life, not missing her as consistently as he had expected, but caring for her none the less. The Saturday mail brought him, unintermittingly, a letter eight pages long, neatly written, and describing in detail the daily life of her family, and of the strange people about them. They were calm, affectionate, interesting letters, which Clive enjoyed, and to which he replied with a hurried scrawl, rarely covering more than one page. An Englishwoman does not expect much, but Mary occasionally

hinted sadly that a longer letter would make her happier; whereupon his conscience hurt him and he wrote her two pages.

He enjoyed these two years, despite hard work; he was popular with men and women, and much was popular with him that adds to the keener pleasures of life. When the time came to pack his boxes and go to America he puffed a large regretful rack from his last pipe of freedom; but it did not occur to him to ask release. For the matter of that, although he had come to regard Mary Gordon as the inevitable rather than the desired, he had felt for her the strong tenderness which such men feel for such women, which endures, and never in any circumstance turns to hate.

After a time Clive extinguished the lantern: it illumined the road fitfully, but accentuated the dense blackness of the forest. The undergrowth was too thick to permit him to stray aside, and he wanted to form some idea of his surroundings. His eyes accustomed themselves to the dark. Moon rays splashed or trickled here and there through lofty cleft and mesh. Clive paused once and looked up. The straight trees, sometimes slender, sometimes huge, were as inflexible as granite, an unbroken column for a hundred feet or more; then thrusting out rigid arms from a tapering trunk into another hundred feet of space. The effect was that of a dense forest suspended in air, supported above the low brush forest on a vast irregular colonnade, out of whose ruins it might have sprung. Clive had never known a stillness so profound, a repose so absolute. But it was not the peaceful repose of an English wood. It suggested the heavy brooding stillness of archaic days, when the uneasy world drowsed before another convulsion. There was some other influence abroad in the woods, but at the time its meaning eluded him.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he could not see Mary Gordon in this forest. There was an irritating incongruity in the very thought. She belonged to the sweet calm beech woods, of England; nothing in her was in consonance with the storm and stress, the passion and fatality which this strange country suggested. Did the women of California fit their frame? He experienced a strong desire for the companionship of a woman who would interpret this forest to him, then called himself an ass and strode on.

An hour later he became aware of a distant and deep murmur. It was crossed suddenly by a wild, hilarious yell. Clive relit the lantern and flashed it along the brush at his right. Presently he came upon a narrow trail. The prospect of adventure after sixteen days of civilized monotony lured him aside, and he walked rapidly down the by-path. In a few moments he found himself on the edge of a large clearing. The moon poured in without let, and revealed a scene of singular and uncomfortable suggestion.

In the middle of the space was a huge funeral pyre; beyond it, evidently on a bier, Clive could see the stony, upturned feet of a mammoth corpse, lightly covered with a white pall. Between the pyre and the trees nearer him a large caldron swung over a heap of fagots, which were beginning to crackle gently. The place looked as if about to be the scene of some awful rite. Englishmen are willing to believe anything about California, and Clive, who had commanded the admiration of his father's colleagues with his clear, quick, logical brain, leaped at once to the conclusion that this part of California was still the hunting-ground of the Red Indian, and that some mighty chief was about to be cremated; whilst his widow, perchance, sacrificed herself in the caldron.

He plunged his hands into his pockets and awaited developments with the nervous delight of a schoolboy. Although the forest was silent again, he had an uneasy sense of many human beings at no great distance.

He had not long to wait. There was a sudden red glare which made the aisles of the forest seem alive with dancing shapes, hideously contorted. Simultaneously there arose a low soft chanting, monotonous and musical, bizarre rather than weird. Then out of the recesses on the far side of the clearing, startlingly defined under the blaze of many torches held aloft in the background, emerged a high priest, his crown shaven, his beard flowing to his waist, his white robes marking the austerity of his order. His hands were folded on his breast, his head bowed. Behind him, two and two, followed twenty acolytes, swinging censers, the heavy perfume of the incense rising to the pungent odor of the redwoods, blending harmoniously: the lofty forest aisles were become those of some vast primeval crypt.

Then illusion was in a measure dispelled. The two hundred torch-bearers who came after wore the ordinary outing clothes of civilization.

The strange procession marched slowly round the circle, passing perilously close to Clive. Then the priest and acolytes walked solemnly up to the caldron, the others dispersing themselves irregularly, leaping occasionally and waving their torches. The fagots were blazing; Clive fancied he heard a merry bubbling. A moment of profound silence. Then the priest dropped something into the caldron, chanting an invocation of which Clive could make nothing, although he was a scholar in several languages. The acolytes and torch-bearers tossed to the priest entities and

imaginings, which he dropped with much ceremony into the caldron, to the accompaniment of hollow, not to say ribald laughter, and jests which had a strong flavor of personalities.

The prologue lasted ten minutes. Then the mummers crowded backward and faced the pyre. Again the heavy silence fell. The priest went forward, and raising his clasped hands and set face to the moon, stood, for a moment, like a statue on a monument, then turned slowly and beckoned. The acolytes formed in line and marched with solemn precision to the other side of the pyre. A moment later they reappeared, walking with halting steps, their heads bowed, chanting dismally. On their shoulders they carried a long bier, on which, apparently, lay the corpse of a dead giant. The priest sprinkled the body, then turned away with a gesture of loathing. The acolytes carried it by the torch-bearers, who spat upon and execrated it; then slowly and laboriously mounted the pyre, and dropping the bier on its apex, scampered indecorously down with savage grunts of satisfaction, their white garments fluttering along the dark pile like a wash on a windy day. The corpse lay long and white and horrid under the beating moon and the flare of torch. As the acolytes reached the ground the rest of the company rushed simultaneously forward, and with a hideous yell flung their torches at the pyre. There was the hiss of tar, the leap of one great flame, an angry crackling. A moment more and the forest would be more vividly alight than it had ever been at noonday. Clive, feeling as uncomfortable as an eavesdropper, but too fascinated to retreat, stepped behind a large redwood. With his eyes still fixed on the strange scene he did not pick his steps, and coming suddenly in contact with a pliable body, he nearly knocked it over. There was a smothered shriek, followed by a suppressed but forcible vocative. Clive mechanically lifted his hat.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, addressing a tall lad, whose face was partly concealed by the visor of a cap; “I hope I have not hurt you.”

“I am not so easily hurt,” said the lad haughtily.

The masculine man never lived who did not recognize a feminine woman in whatever guise, if within the radius of her magnetism. This young masquerader interested Clive at once. Her voice had a warm huskiness. The mouth and chin were classically cut, but very human. She had thrown back her head and revealed a round beautiful throat. The loose flannel shirt and jacket concealed her figure, but even the slight motions she had made revealed energy and grace.

Clive offered her a cigarette. She accepted it and smoked daintily, withdrawing as much as possible into the shadow and shielding her face with her hand. He leaned his back against the tree and lit a cigar.

“What on earth is the meaning of this scene?” he asked.

“That is the great Midsummer Jinks ceremony of the Bohemian Club. They have it every year, and never invite outsiders. So I was bound I’d see it anyhow.”

“I wonder you don’t become a member.”

“Oh, I’m too young,” promptly.

“Tell me more about it. What do these ceremonies mean?”

“Oh, they put all sorts of things into that caldron—the liver of a grasshopper with one of Harry Armstrong’s jokes; the wasted paint on somebody’s last picture with the misshapen feet of somebody’s

else latest verse. The corpse is an effigy of Care, and they are cremating him. Now they'll be happy, that is to say, drunk, till morning, for Care is dead. I'm going to stop and see it out."

"I think you had better go home."

"Indeed?" Clive saw the hand that shielded her face jerk.

"Did you ever see, or rather hear a lot of men on a lark when they fancied that no women were about?"

"No; but that is what I wish to do."

"Which you are not going to do to-night."

There was a sudden snapping of dry leaves. A small foot had come down with emphasis.

"*What* do you mean?"

"That this is no place for a woman, and that you must go."

"I'm not—well, I am, and I don't care in the least whether you know it or not. I wish you to understand, sir, that I shall stay here, and that I am not in the habit of being dictated to."

"You are Miss Belmont, I suppose."

An instant's pause. Then she replied with a haughty pluck which delighted him: "Yes, I am Miss Belmont, and you are an insolent Englishman."

"How do you know that I am an Englishman?"

"Anyone could tell from your voice and your overbearing manner."

“Well, I am,” said Clive, much amused.

“I detest Englishmen.”

“Smoke a little, or I am afraid you will cry.”

She obeyed with unexpected docility, but in a moment crushed the coal of her cigarette on a damp tree stump. Then she turned to him and folded her arms.

“I am not going to leave,” she said evenly. “What are you going to do about it?”

“How did you get here?”

“On my horse.”

“Where is he?”

“Tethered off the road.”

“Very well; if you are not on that horse in five minutes, I shall carry you to it, and what is more, I shall kiss you.”

She deliberately moved into the light and pushed her cap to the back of her head, disarranging a mass of curling dark hair. Her coloring was indefinable in the red light, but her eyes were large and long, and heavily lashed. They sparkled wickedly. The nostrils of her finely cut nose were dilating; her short upper lip was lifted. Clive ardently hoped that she would continue to defy him. Her whole attitude was that of a young worldling, delighting in an unforeseen adventure.

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