

# **Trent's Trust and Other Stories**

**by**

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## Trent's Trust

### I

Randolph Trent stepped from the Stockton boat on the San Francisco wharf, penniless, friendless, and unknown. Hunger might have been added to his trials, for, having paid his last coin in passage money, he had been a day and a half without food. Yet he knew it only by an occasional lapse into weakness as much mental as physical. Nevertheless, he was first on the gangplank to land, and hurried feverishly ashore, in that vague desire for action and change of scene common to such irritation; yet after mixing for a few moments with the departing passengers, each selfishly hurrying to some rendezvous of rest or business, he insensibly drew apart from them, with the instinct of a vagabond and outcast. Although he was conscious that he was neither, but merely an unsuccessful miner suddenly reduced to the point of soliciting work or alms of any kind, he took advantage of the first crossing to plunge into a side street, with a vague sense of hiding his shame.

A rising wind, which had rocked the boat for the last few hours, had now developed into a strong sou'wester, with torrents of rain which swept the roadway. His well-worn working clothes, fitted to the warmer Southern mines, gave him more concern from their visible, absurd contrast to the climate than from any actual sense of discomfort, and his feverishness defied the chill of his soaking garments, as he hurriedly faced the blast through the dimly lighted street. At the next corner he paused; he had reached another, and, from its dilapidated appearance, apparently an older wharf than that where he had landed, but, like the first, it was still a straggling avenue leading toward the higher and more animated part of the city. He again mechanically—for a part of his trouble was a vague, undefined purpose—turned toward it.

In his feverish exaltation his powers of perception seemed to be quickened: he was vividly alive to the incongruous, half-marine, half-backwoods character of the warehouses and commercial buildings; to the hull of a stranded ship already built into a block of rude tenements; to the dark stockaded wall of a house framed of corrugated iron, and its weird contiguity to a Swiss chalet, whose galleries were used only to bear the signs of the shops, and whose frame had been carried across seas in sections to be set up at random here.

Moving past these, as in a nightmare dream, of which even the turbulency of the weather seemed to be a part, he stumbled, blinded, panting, and unexpectedly, with no consciousness of his rapid pace beyond his breathlessness, upon the dazzling main thoroughfare of the city. In spite of the weather, the slippery pavements were thronged by hurrying crowds of well-dressed people, again all intent on their own purposes,—purposes that seemed so trifling and unimportant beside his own. The shops were brilliantly lighted, exposing their brightest wares through plate-glass windows; a jeweler's glittered with precious stones; a fashionable apothecary's next to it almost outrivaled it

with its gorgeous globes, the gold and green precision of its shelves, and the marble and silver soda fountain like a shrine before it. All this specious show of opulence came upon him with the shock of contrast, and with it a bitter revulsion of feeling more hopeless than his feverish anxiety,—the bitterness of disappointment.

For during his journey he had been buoyed up with the prospect of finding work and sympathy in this youthful city,—a prospect founded solely on his inexperienced hopes. For this he had exchanged the poverty of the mining district,—a poverty that had nothing ignoble about it, that was a part of the economy of nature, and shared with his fellow men and the birds and beasts in their rude encampments. He had given up the brotherhood of the miner, and that practical help and sympathy which brought no degradation with it, for this rude shock of self-interested, self-satisfied civilization. He, who would not have shrunk from asking rest, food, or a night's lodging at the cabin of a brother miner or woodsman, now recoiled suddenly from these well-dressed citizens. What madness had sent him here, an intruder, or, even, as it seemed to him in his dripping clothes, an impostor? And yet these were the people to whom he had confidently expected to tell his story, and who would cheerfully assist him with work! He could almost anticipate the hard laugh or brutal hurried negative in their faces. In his foolish heart he thanked God he had not tried it. Then the apathetic recoil which is apt to follow any keen emotion overtook him. He was dazedly conscious of being rudely shoved once or twice, and even heard the epithet "drunken lout" from one who had run against him.

He found himself presently staring vacantly in the apothecary's window. How long he stood there he could not tell, for he was aroused only by the door opening in front of him, and a young girl emerging with some purchase in her hand. He could see that she was handsomely dressed and quite pretty, and as she passed out she lifted to his withdrawing figure a pair of calm, inquiring eyes, which, however, changed to a look of half-wondering, half-amused pity as she gazed. Yet that look of pity stung his pride more deeply than all. With a deliberate effort he recovered his energy. No, he would not beg, he would not ask assistance from these people; he would go back—anywhere! To the steamboat first; they might let him sleep there, give him a meal, and allow him to work his passage back to Stockton. He might be refused. Well, what then? Well, beyond, there was the bay! He laughed bitterly—his mind was sane enough for that—but he kept on repeating it vaguely to himself, as he crossed the street again, and once more made his way to the wharf.

The wind and rain had increased, but he no longer heeded them in his feverish haste and his consciousness that motion could alone keep away that dreadful apathy which threatened to overcloud his judgment. And he wished while he was able to reason logically to make up his mind to end this unsupportable situation that night. He was scarcely twenty, yet it seemed to him that it had already been demonstrated that his life was a failure; he was an orphan, and when he left college to seek his own fortune in California, he believed he had staked his all upon that venture—and lost.

That bitterness which is the sudden recoil of boyish enthusiasm, and is none the less terrible for being without experience to justify it,—that melancholy we are too apt to look

back upon with cynical jeers and laughter in middle age,—is more potent than we dare to think, and it was in no mere pose of youthful pessimism that Randolph Trent now contemplated suicide. Such scraps of philosophy as his education had given him pointed to that one conclusion. And it was the only refuge that pride—real or false—offered him from the one supreme terror of youth—shame.

The street was deserted, and the few lights he had previously noted in warehouses and shops were extinguished. It had grown darker with the storm; the incongruous buildings on either side had become misshapen shadows; the long perspective of the wharf was a strange gloom from which the spars of a ship stood out like the cross he remembered as a boy to have once seen in a picture of the tempest-smitten Calvary. It was his only fancy connected with the future—it might have been his last, for suddenly one of the planks of the rotten wharf gave way beneath his feet, and he felt himself violently precipitated toward the gurgling and oozing tide below. He threw out his arms desperately, caught at a strong girder, drew himself up with the energy of desperation, and staggered to his feet again, safe—and sane. For with this terrible automatic struggle to avoid that death he was courting came a flash of reason. If he had resolutely thrown himself from the pier head as he intended, would he have undergone a hopeless revulsion like this? Was he sure that this might not be, after all, the terrible penalty of self-destruction—this inevitable fierce protest of mind and body when TOO LATE? He was momentarily touched with a sense of gratitude at his escape, but his reason told him it was not from his ACCIDENT, but from his intention.

He was trying carefully to retrace his steps, but as he did so he saw the figure of a man dimly lurching toward him out of the darkness of the wharf and the crossed yards of the ship. A gleam of hope came over him, for the emotion of the last few minutes had rudely displaced his pride and self-love. He would appeal to this stranger, whoever he was; there was more chance that in this rude locality he would be a belated sailor or some humbler wayfarer, and the darkness and solitude made him feel less ashamed. By the last flickering street lamp he could see that he was a man about his own size, with something of the rolling gait of a sailor, which was increased by the weight of a traveling portmanteau he was swinging in his hand. As he approached he evidently detected Randolph's waiting figure, slackened his speed slightly, and changed his portmanteau from his right hand to his left as a precaution for defense.

Randolph felt the blood flush his cheek at this significant proof of his disreputable appearance, but determined to accost him. He scarcely recognized the sound of his own voice now first breaking the silence for hours, but he made his appeal. The man listened, made a slight gesture forward with his disengaged hand, and impelled Randolph slowly up to the street lamp until it shone on both their faces. Randolph saw a man a few years his senior, with a slightly trimmed beard on his dark, weather-beaten cheeks, well-cut features, a quick, observant eye, and a sailor's upward glance and bearing. The stranger saw a thin, youthful, anxious, yet refined and handsome face beneath straggling damp curls, and dark eyes preternaturally bright with suffering. Perhaps his experienced ear, too, detected some harmony with all this in Randolph's voice.

"And you want something to eat, a night's lodging, and a chance of work afterward," the stranger repeated with good-humored deliberation.

"Yes," said Randolph.

"You look it."

Randolph colored faintly.

"Do you ever drink?"

"Yes," said Randolph wonderingly.

"I thought I'd ask," said the stranger, "as it might play hell with you just now if you were not accustomed to it. Take that. Just a swallow, you know—that's as good as a jugful."

He handed him a heavy flask. Randolph felt the burning liquor scald his throat and fire his empty stomach. The stranger turned and looked down the vacant wharf to the darkness from which he came. Then he turned to Randolph again and said abruptly,—

"Strong enough to carry this bag?"

"Yes," said Randolph. The whiskey—possibly the relief—had given him new strength. Besides, he might earn his alms.

"Take it up to room 74, Niantic Hotel—top of next street to this, one block that way—and wait till I come."

"What name shall I say?" asked Randolph.

"Needn't say any. I ordered the room a week ago. Stop; there's the key. Go in; change your togs; you'll find something in that bag that'll fit you. Wait for me. Stop—no; you'd better get some grub there first." He fumbled in his pockets, but fruitlessly. "No matter. You'll find a buckskin purse, with some scads in it, in the bag. So long." And before Randolph could thank him, he lurched away again into the semi-darkness of the wharf.

Overflowing with gratitude at a hospitality so like that of his reckless brethren of the mines, Randolph picked up the portmanteau and started for the hotel. He walked warily now, with a new interest in life, and then, suddenly thinking of his own miraculous escape, he paused, wondering if he ought not to warn his benefactor of the perils of the rotten wharf; but he had already disappeared. The bag was not heavy, but he found that in his exhausted state this new exertion was telling, and he was glad when he reached the hotel. Equally glad was he in his dripping clothes to slip by the porter, and with the key in his pocket ascend unnoticed to 74.

Yet had his experience been larger he might have spared himself that sensitiveness. For the hotel was one of those great caravansaries popular with the returning miner. It received him and his gold dust in his worn-out and bedraggled working clothes, and returned him the next day as a well-dressed citizen on Montgomery Street. It was hard indeed to recognize the unshaven, unwashed, and unkempt "arrival" one met on the principal staircase at night in the scrupulously neat stranger one sat opposite to at breakfast the next morning. In this daily whirl of mutation all identity was swamped, as Randolph learned to know.

At present, finding himself in a comfortable bedroom, his first act was to change his wet clothes, which in the warmer temperature and the decline of his feverishness now began to chill him. He opened the portmanteau and found a complete suit of clothing, evidently a foreign make, well preserved, as if for "shore-going." His pride would have preferred a humbler suit as lessening his obligation, but there was no other. He discovered the purse, a chamois leather bag such as miners and travelers carried, which contained a dozen gold pieces and some paper notes. Taking from it a single coin to defray the expenses of a meal, he restrapped the bag, and leaving the key in the door lock for the benefit of his returning host, made his way to the dining room.

For a moment he was embarrassed when the waiter approached him inquisitively, but it was only to learn the number of his room to "charge" the meal. He ate it quickly, but not voraciously, for his appetite had not yet returned, and he was eager to get back to the room and see the stranger again and return to him the coin which was no longer necessary.

But the stranger had not yet arrived when he reached the room. Over an hour had elapsed since their strange meeting. A new fear came upon him: was it possible he had mistaken the hotel, and his benefactor was awaiting him elsewhere, perhaps even beginning to suspect not only his gratitude but his honesty! The thought made him hot again, but he was helpless. Not knowing the stranger's name, he could not inquire without exposing his situation to the landlord. But again, there was the key, and it was scarcely possible that it fitted another 74 in another hotel. He did not dare to leave the room, but sat by the window, peering through the streaming panes into the storm-swept street below. Gradually the fatigue his excitement had hitherto kept away began to overcome him; his eyes once or twice closed during his vigil, his head nodded against the pane. He rose and walked up and down the room to shake off his drowsiness. Another hour passed—nine o'clock, blown in fitful, far-off strokes from some wind-rocked steeple. Still no stranger. How inviting the bed looked to his weary eyes! The man had told him he wanted rest; he could lie down on the bed in his clothes until he came. He would waken quickly and be ready for his benefactor's directions. It was a great temptation. He yielded to it. His head had scarcely sunk upon the pillow before he slipped into a profound and dreamless sleep.

He awoke with a start, and for a few moments lay vaguely staring at the sunbeams that stretched across his bed before he could recall himself. The room was exactly as before, the portmanteau strapped and pushed under the table as he had left it. There came a tap at the door—the chambermaid to do up the room. She had been there once already, but

seeing him asleep, she had forbore to wake him. Apparently the spectacle of a gentleman lying on the bed fully dressed, even to his boots, was not an unusual one at that hotel, for she made no comment. It was twelve o'clock, but she would come again later.

He was bewildered. He had slept the round of the clock—that was natural after his fatigue—but where was his benefactor? The lateness of the time forbade the conclusion that he had merely slept elsewhere; he would assuredly have returned by this time to claim his portmanteau. The portmanteau! He unstrapped it and examined the contents again. They were undisturbed as he had left them the night before. There was a further change of linen, the buckskin bag, which he could see now contained a couple of Bank of England notes, with some foreign gold mixed with American half-eagles, and a cheap, rough memorandum book clasp'd with elastic, containing a letter in a boyish hand addressed "Dear Daddy" and signed "Bobby," and a photograph of a boy taken by a foreign photographer at Callao, as the printed back denoted, but nothing giving any clue whatever to the name of the owner.

A strange idea seized him: did the portmanteau really belong to the man who had given it to him? Had he been the innocent receiver of stolen goods from some one who wished to escape detection? He recalled now that he had heard stories of robbery of luggage by thieves "Sydney ducks"—on the deserted wharves, and remembered, too,—he could not tell why the thought had escaped him before,—that the man had spoken with an English accent. But the next moment he recalled his frank and open manner, and his mind cleared of all unworthy suspicion. It was more than likely that his benefactor had taken this delicate way of making a free, permanent gift for that temporary service. Yet he smiled faintly at the return of that youthful optimism which had caused him so much suffering.

Nevertheless, something must be done: he must try to find the man; still more important, he must seek work before this dubious loan was further encroached upon. He restrapped the portmanteau and replaced it under the table, locked the door, gave the key to the office clerk, saying that any one who called upon him was to await his return, and sallied forth. A fresh wind and a blue sky of scudding clouds were all that remained of last night's storm. As he made his way to the fateful wharf, still deserted except by an occasional "wharf-rat,"—as the longshore vagrant or petty thief was called,—he wondered at his own temerity of last night, and the trustfulness of his friend in yielding up his portmanteau to a stranger in such a place. A low drinking saloon, feebly disguised as a junk shop, stood at the corner, with slimy green steps leading to the water.

The wharf was slowly decaying, and here and there were occasional gaps in the planking, as dangerous as the one from which he had escaped the night before. He thought again of the warning he might have given to the stranger; but he reflected that as a seafaring man he must have been familiar with the locality where he had landed. But had he landed there? To Randolph's astonishment, there was no sign or trace of any late occupation of the wharf, and the ship whose crossyards he had seen dimly through the darkness the night before was no longer there. She might have "warped out" in the early morning, but there was no trace of her in the stream or offing beyond. A bark and brig quite dismantled

at an adjacent wharf seemed to accent the loneliness. Beyond, the open channel between him and Verba Buena Island was racing with white-maned seas and sparkling in the shifting sunbeams. The scudding clouds above him drove down the steel-blue sky. The lateen sails of the Italian fishing boats were like shreds of cloud, too, blown over the blue and distant bay. His ears sang, his eyes blinked, his pulses throbbed, with the untiring, fierce activity of a San Francisco day.

With something of its restlessness he hurried back to the hotel. Still the stranger was not there, and no one had called for him. The room had been put in order; the portmanteau, that sole connecting link with his last night's experience, was under the table. He drew it out again, and again subjected it to a minute examination. A few toilet articles, not of the best quality, which he had overlooked at first, the linen, the buckskin purse, the memorandum book, and the suit of clothes he stood in, still comprised all he knew of his benefactor. He counted the money in the purse; it amounted, with the Bank of England notes, to about seventy dollars, as he could roughly guess. There was a scrap of paper, the torn-off margin of a newspaper, lying in the purse, with an address hastily scribbled in pencil. It gave, however, no name, only a number: "85 California Street." It might be a clue. He put it, with the purse, carefully in his pocket, and after hurriedly partaking of his forgotten breakfast, again started out.

He presently found himself in the main thoroughfare of last night, which he now knew to be Montgomery Street. It was more thronged than then, but he failed to be impressed, as then, with the selfish activity of the crowd. Yet he was half conscious that his own brighter fortune, more decent attire, and satisfied hunger had something to do with this change, and he glanced hurriedly at the druggist's broad plate-glass windows, with a faint hope that the young girl whose amused pity he had awakened might be there again. He found California Street quickly, and in a few moments he stood before No. 85. He was a little disturbed to find it a rather large building, and that it bore the inscription "Bank." Then came the usual shock to his mercurial temperament, and for the first time he began to consider the absurd hopelessness of his clue.

He, however, entered desperately, and approaching the window of the receiving teller, put the question he had formulated in his mind: Could they give him any information concerning a customer or correspondent who had just arrived in San Francisco and was putting up at the Niantic Hotel, room 74? He felt his face flushing, but, to his astonishment, the clerk manifested no surprise. "And you don't know his name?" said the clerk quietly. "Wait a moment." He moved away, and Randolph saw him speaking to one of the other clerks, who consulted a large register. In a few minutes he returned. "We don't have many customers," he began politely, "who leave only their hotel-room addresses," when he was interrupted by a mumbling protest from one of the other clerks. "That's very different," he replied to his fellow clerk, and then turned to Randolph. "I'm afraid we cannot help you; but I'll make other inquiries if you'll come back in ten minutes." Satisfied to be relieved from the present perils of his questioning, and doubtful of returning, Randolph turned away. But as he left the building he saw a written notice on the swinging door, "Wanted: a Night Porter;" and this one chance of employment determined his return.

When he again presented himself at the window the clerk motioned him to step inside through a lifted rail. Here he found himself confronted by the clerk and another man, distinguished by a certain air of authority, a keen gray eye, and singularly compressed lips set in a closely clipped beard. The clerk indicated him deferentially but briefly—everybody was astonishingly brief and businesslike there—as the president. The president absorbed and possessed Randolph with eyes that never seemed to leave him. Then leaning back against the counter, which he lightly grasped with both hands, he said: "We've sent to the Niantic Hotel to inquire about your man. He ordered his room by letter, giving no name. He arrived there on time last night, slept there, and has occupied the room No. 74 ever since. WE don't know him from Adam, but"—his eyes never left Randolph's—"from the description the landlord gave our clerk, you're the man himself."

For an instant Randolph flushed crimson. The natural mistake of the landlord flashed upon him, his own stupidity in seeking this information, the suspicious predicament in which he was now placed, and the necessity of telling the whole truth. But the president's eye was at once a threat and an invitation. He felt himself becoming suddenly cool, and, with a business brevity equal to their own, said:—

"I was looking for work last night on the wharf. He employed me to carry his bag to the hotel, saying I was to wait for him. I have waited since nine o'clock last night in his room, and he has not come."

"What are you in such a d——d hurry for? He's trusted you; can't you trust him? You've got his bag?" returned the president.

Randolph was silent for a moment. "I want to know what to do with it," he said.

"Hang on to it. What's in it?"

"Some clothes and a purse containing about seventy dollars."

"That ought to pay you for carrying it and storage afterward," said the president decisively. "What made you come here?"

"I found this address in the purse," said Randolph, producing it.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"And that's the only reason you came here, to find an owner for that bag?"

"Yes."

The president disengaged himself from the counter.

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