

***BRET
HARTE***



***BY SHORE
AND SEDGE***

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AN APOSTLE OF THE TULE

I

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On October 10, 1856, about four hundred people were camped in Tasajara Valley, California. It could not have been for the prospect, since a more barren, dreary, monotonous, and uninviting landscape never stretched before human eye; it could not have been for convenience or contiguity, as the nearest settlement was thirty miles away; it could not have been for health or salubrity, as the breath of the ague-haunted tules in the outlying Stockton marshes swept through the valley; it could not have been for space or comfort, for, encamped on an unlimited plain, men and women were huddled together as closely as in an urban tenement-house, without the freedom or decency of rural isolation; it could not have been for pleasant companionship, as dejection, mental anxiety, tears, and lamentation were the dominant expression; it was not a hurried flight from present or impending calamity, for the camp had been deliberately planned, and for a week pioneer wagons had been slowly arriving; it was not an irrevocable exodus, for some had already returned to their homes that others might take their places. It was simply a religious revival of one or two denominational sects, known as a "camp-meeting."

A large central tent served for the assembling of the principal congregation; smaller tents served for prayer-meetings and class-rooms, known to the few unbelievers as

"side-shows"; while the actual dwellings of the worshipers were rudely extemporized shanties of boards and canvas, sometimes mere corrals or inclosures open to the cloudless sky, or more often the unhitched covered wagon which had brought them there. The singular resemblance to a circus, already profanely suggested, was carried out by a straggling fringe of boys and half-grown men on the outskirts of the encampment, acrimonious with disappointed curiosity, lazy without the careless ease of vagrancy, and vicious without the excitement of dissipation. For the coarse poverty and brutal economy of the larger arrangements, the dreary panorama of unlovely and unwholesome domestic details always before the eyes, were hardly exciting to the senses. The circus might have been more dangerous, but scarcely more brutalizing. The actors themselves, hard and aggressive through practical struggles, often warped and twisted with chronic forms of smaller diseases, or malformed and crippled through carelessness and neglect, and restless and uneasy through some vague mental distress and inquietude that they had added to their burdens, were scarcely amusing performers. The rheumatic Parkinsons, from Green Springs; the ophthalmic Filgees, from Alder Creek; the ague-stricken Harneys, from Martinez Bend; and the feeble-limbed Steptons, from Sugar Mill, might, in their combined families, have suggested a hospital, rather than any other social assemblage. Even their companionship, which had little of cheerful fellowship in it, would have been grotesque but for the pathetic instinct of some mutual vague appeal from the hardness of their lives and the helplessness of their conditions that had

brought them together. Nor was this appeal to a Higher Power any the less pathetic that it bore no reference whatever to their respective needs or deficiencies, but was always an invocation for a light which, when they believed they had found it, to unregenerate eyes scarcely seemed to illumine the rugged path in which their feet were continually stumbling. One might have smiled at the idea of the vendetta-following Ferguses praying for "justification by Faith," but the actual spectacle of old Simon Fergus, whose shot-gun was still in his wagon, offering up that appeal with streaming eyes and agonized features was painful beyond a doubt. To seek and obtain an exaltation of feeling vaguely known as "It," or less vaguely veiling a sacred name, was the burden of the general appeal.

The large tent had been filled, and between the exhortations a certain gloomy enthusiasm had been kept up by singing, which had the effect of continuing in an easy, rhythmical, impersonal, and irresponsible way the sympathies of the meeting. This was interrupted by a young man who rose suddenly, with that spontaneity of impulse which characterized the speakers, but unlike his predecessors, he remained for a moment mute, trembling and irresolute. The fatal hesitation seemed to check the unreasoning, monotonous flow of emotion, and to recall to some extent the reason and even the criticism of the worshipers. He stammered a prayer whose earnestness was undoubted, whose humility was but too apparent, but his words fell on faculties already benumbed by repetition and rhythm. A slight movement of curiosity in the rear benches, and a whisper that it was the maiden effort of a new

preacher, helped to prolong the interruption. A heavy man of strong physical expression sprang to the rescue with a hysterical cry of "Glory!" and a tumultuous fluency of epithet and sacred adjuration. Still the meeting wavered. With one final paroxysmal cry, the powerful man threw his arms around his nearest neighbor and burst into silent tears. An anxious hush followed; the speaker still continued to sob on his neighbor's shoulder. Almost before the fact could be commented upon, it was noticed that the entire rank of worshipers on the bench beside him were crying also; the second and third rows were speedily dissolved in tears, until even the very youthful scoffers in the last benches suddenly found their half-hysterical laughter turned to sobs. The danger was averted, the reaction was complete; the singing commenced, and in a few moments the hapless cause of the interruption and the man who had retrieved the disaster stood together outside the tent. A horse was picketed near them.

The victor was still panting from his late exertions, and was more or less diluvial in eye and nostril, but neither eye nor nostril bore the slightest tremor of other expression. His face was stolid and perfectly in keeping with his physique,—heavy, animal, and unintelligent.

"Ye oughter trusted in the Lord," he said to the young preacher.

"But I did," responded the young man, earnestly.

"That's it. Justifyin' yourself by works instead o' leanin' onto Him! Find Him, sez you! Git Him, sez you! Works is vain. Glory! glory!" he continued, with fluent vacuity and wandering, dull, observant eyes.

"But if I had a little more practice in class, Brother Silas, more education?"

"The letter killeth," interrupted Brother Silas. Here his wandering eyes took dull cognizance of two female faces peering through the opening of the tent. "No, yer mishun, Brother Gideon, is to seek Him in the by-ways, in the wilderness,—where the foxes hev holes and the ravens hev their young,—but not in the Temples of the people. Wot sez Sister Parsons?"

One of the female faces detached itself from the tent flaps, which it nearly resembled in color, and brought forward an angular figure clothed in faded fustian that had taken the various shades and odors of household service.

"Brother Silas speaks well," said Sister Parsons, with stridulous fluency. "It's fore-ordained. Fore-ordinashun is better nor ordinashun, saith the Lord. He shall go forth, turnin' neither to the right hand nor the left hand, and seek Him among the lost tribes and the ungodly. He shall put aside the temptashun of Mammon and the flesh." Her eyes and those of Brother Silas here both sought the other female face, which was that of a young girl of seventeen.

"Wot sez little Sister Meely,—wot sez Meely Parsons?" continued Brother Silas, as if repeating an unctuous formula.

The young girl came hesitatingly forward, and with a nervous cry of "Oh, Gideon!" threw herself on the breast of the young man.

For a moment they remained locked in each other's arms. In the promiscuous and fraternal embracings which were a part of the devotional exercises of the hour, the act passed without significance. The young man gently raised

her face. She was young and comely, albeit marked with a half-frightened, half-vacant sorrow. "Amen," said Brother Gideon, gravely.

He mounted his horse and turned to go. Brother Silas had clasped his powerful arms around both women and was holding them in a ponderous embrace.

"Go forth, young man, into the wilderness."

The young man bowed his head, and urged his horse forward in the bleak and barren plain. In half an hour every vestige of the camp and its unwholesome surroundings was lost in the distance. It was as if the strong desiccating wind, which seemed to spring up at his horse's feet, had cleanly erased the flimsy structures from the face of the plain, swept away the lighter breath of praise and plaint, and dried up the easy-flowing tears. The air was harsh but pure; the grim economy of form and shade and color in the level plain was coarse but not vulgar; the sky above him was cold and distant but not repellent; the moisture that had been denied his eyes at the prayer-meeting overflowed them here; the words that had choked his utterance an hour ago now rose to his lips. He threw himself from his horse, and kneeling in the withered grass—a mere atom in the boundless plain—lifted his pale face against the irresponsive blue and prayed.

He prayed that the unselfish dream of his bitter boyhood, his disappointed youth, might come to pass. He prayed that he might in higher hands become the humble instrument of good to his fellow-man. He prayed that the deficiencies of his scant education, his self-taught learning, his helpless isolation, and his inexperience might be overlooked or reinforced by grace. He prayed that the Infinite Compassion

might enlighten his ignorance and solitude with a manifestation of the Spirit; in his very weakness he prayed for some special revelation, some sign or token, some visitation or gracious unbending from that coldly lifting sky. The low sun burned the black edge of the distant tules with dull eating fires as he prayed, lit the dwarfed hills with a brief but ineffectual radiance, and then died out. The lingering trade winds fired a few volleys over its grave and then lapsed into a chilly silence. The young man staggered to his feet; it was quite dark now, but the coming night had advanced a few starry vedettes so near the plain they looked like human watch-fires. For an instant he could not remember where he was. Then a light trembled far down at the entrance of the valley. Brother Gideon recognized it. It was in the lonely farmhouse of the widow of the last Circuit preacher.



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The abode of the late Reverend Marvin Hiler remained in the disorganized condition he had left it when removed from his sphere of earthly uselessness and continuous accident. The straggling fence that only half inclosed the house and barn had stopped at that point where the two deacons who had each volunteered to do a day's work on it had completed their allotted time. The building of the barn had been arrested when the half load of timber contributed by Sugar Mill brethren was exhausted, and three windows given by "Christian Seekers" at Martinez painfully accented

the boarded spaces for the other three that "Unknown Friends" in Tasajara had promised but not yet supplied. In the clearing some trees that had been felled but not taken away added to the general incompleteness.

Something of this unfinished character clung to the Widow Hiler and asserted itself in her three children, one of whom was consistently posthumous. Prematurely old and prematurely disappointed, she had all the inexperience of girlhood with the cares of maternity, and kept in her family circle the freshness of an old maid's misogynistic antipathies with a certain guilty and remorseful consciousness of widowhood. She supported the meagre household to which her husband had contributed only the extra mouths to feed with reproachful astonishment and weary incapacity. She had long since grown tired of trying to make both ends meet, of which she declared "the Lord had taken one." During her two years' widowhood she had waited on Providence, who by a pleasing local fiction had been made responsible for the disused and cast-off furniture and clothing which, accompanied with scriptural texts, found their way mysteriously into her few habitable rooms. The providential manna was not always fresh; the ravens who fed her and her little ones with flour from the Sugar Mills did not always select the best quality. Small wonder that, sitting by her lonely hearthstone,—a borrowed stove that supplemented the unfinished fireplace,—surrounded by her mismatched furniture and clad in misfitting garments, she had contracted a habit of sniffing during her dreary watches. In her weaker moments she attributed it to grief;

in her stronger intervals she knew that it sprang from damp and draught.

In her apathy the sound of horses' hoofs at her unprotected door even at that hour neither surprised nor alarmed her. She lifted her head as the door opened and the pale face of Gideon Deane looked into the room. She moved aside the cradle she was rocking, and, taking a saucepan and tea-cup from a chair beside her, absently dusted it with her apron, and pointing to the vacant seat said, "Take a chair," as quietly as if he had stepped from the next room instead of the outer darkness.

"I'll put up my horse first," said Gideon gently.

"So do," responded the widow briefly.

Gideon led his horse across the inclosure, stumbling over the heaps of rubbish, dried chips, and weather-beaten shavings with which it was strewn, until he reached the unfinished barn, where he temporarily bestowed his beast. Then taking a rusty axe, by the faint light of the stars, he attacked one of the fallen trees with such energy that at the end of ten minutes he reappeared at the door with an armful of cut boughs and chips, which he quietly deposited behind the stove. Observing that he was still standing as if looking for something, the widow lifted her eyes and said, "Ef it's the bucket, I reckon ye'll find it at the spring, where one of them foolish Filgee boys left it. I've been that tuckered out sens sundown, I ain't had the ambition to go and tote it back." Without a word Gideon repaired to the spring, filled the missing bucket, replaced the hoop on the loosened staves of another he found lying useless beside it, and again returned to the house. The widow once more

pointed to the chair, and Gideon sat down. "It's quite a spell sens you was here," said the Widow Hiler, returning her foot to the cradle-rocker; "not sens yer was ordained. Be'n practicin', I reckon, at the meetin'."

A slight color came into his cheek. "My place is not there, Sister Hiler," he said gently; "it's for those with the gift o' tongues. I go forth only a common laborer in the vineyard." He stopped and hesitated; he might have said more, but the widow, who was familiar with that kind of humility as the ordinary perfunctory expression of her class, suggested no sympathetic interest in his mission.

"Thar's a deal o' talk over there," she said dryly, "and thar's folks ez thinks thar's a deal o' money spent in picnicking the Gospel that might be given to them ez wish to spread it, or to their widows and children. But that don't consarn you, Brother Gideon. Sister Parsons hez money enough to settle her darter Meely comfortably on her own land; and I've heard tell that you and Meely was only waitin' till you was ordained to be jined together. You'll hev an easier time of it, Brother Gideon, than poor Marvin Hiler had," she continued, suppressing her tears with a certain astringency that took the place of her lost pride; "but the Lord wills that some should be tried and some not."

"But I am not going to marry Meely Parsons," said Gideon quietly.

The widow took her foot from the rocker. "Not marry Meely!" she repeated vaguely. But relapsing into her despondent mood she continued: "Then I reckon it's true what other folks sez of Brother Silas Braggley makin' up to her and his powerful exhortin' influence over her ma. Folks

sez ez Sister Parsons hez just resigned her soul inter his keepin'."

"Brother Silas hez a heavenly gift," said the young man, with gentle enthusiasm; "and perhaps it may be so. If it is, it is the Lord's will. But I do not marry Meely because my life and my ways henceforth must lie far beyond her sphere of strength. I oughtn't to drag a young inexperienced soul with me to battle and struggle in the thorny paths that I must tread."

"I reckon you know your own mind," said Sister Hiler grimly. "But thar's folks ez might allow that Meely Parsons ain't any better than others, that she shouldn't have her share o' trials and keers and crosses. Riches and bringin' up don't exempt folks from the shadder. I married Marvin Hiler outer a house ez good ez Sister Parsons', and at a time when old Cyrus Parsons hadn't a roof to his head but the cover of the emigrant wagon he kem across the plains in. I might say ez Marvin knowed pretty well wot it was to have a helpmeet in his ministration, if it wasn't vanity of sperit to say it now. But the flesh is weak, Brother Gideon." Her influenza here resolved itself into unmistakable tears, which she wiped away with the first article that was accessible in the work-bag before her. As it chanced to be a black silk neckerchief of the deceased Hiler, the result was funereal, suggestive, but practically ineffective.

"You were a good wife to Brother Hiler," said the young man gently. "Everybody knows that."

"It's suthin' to think of since he's gone," continued the widow, bringing her work nearer to her eyes to adjust it to their tear-dimmed focus. "It's suthin' to lay to heart in the