
MARY NOAILLES MURFREE
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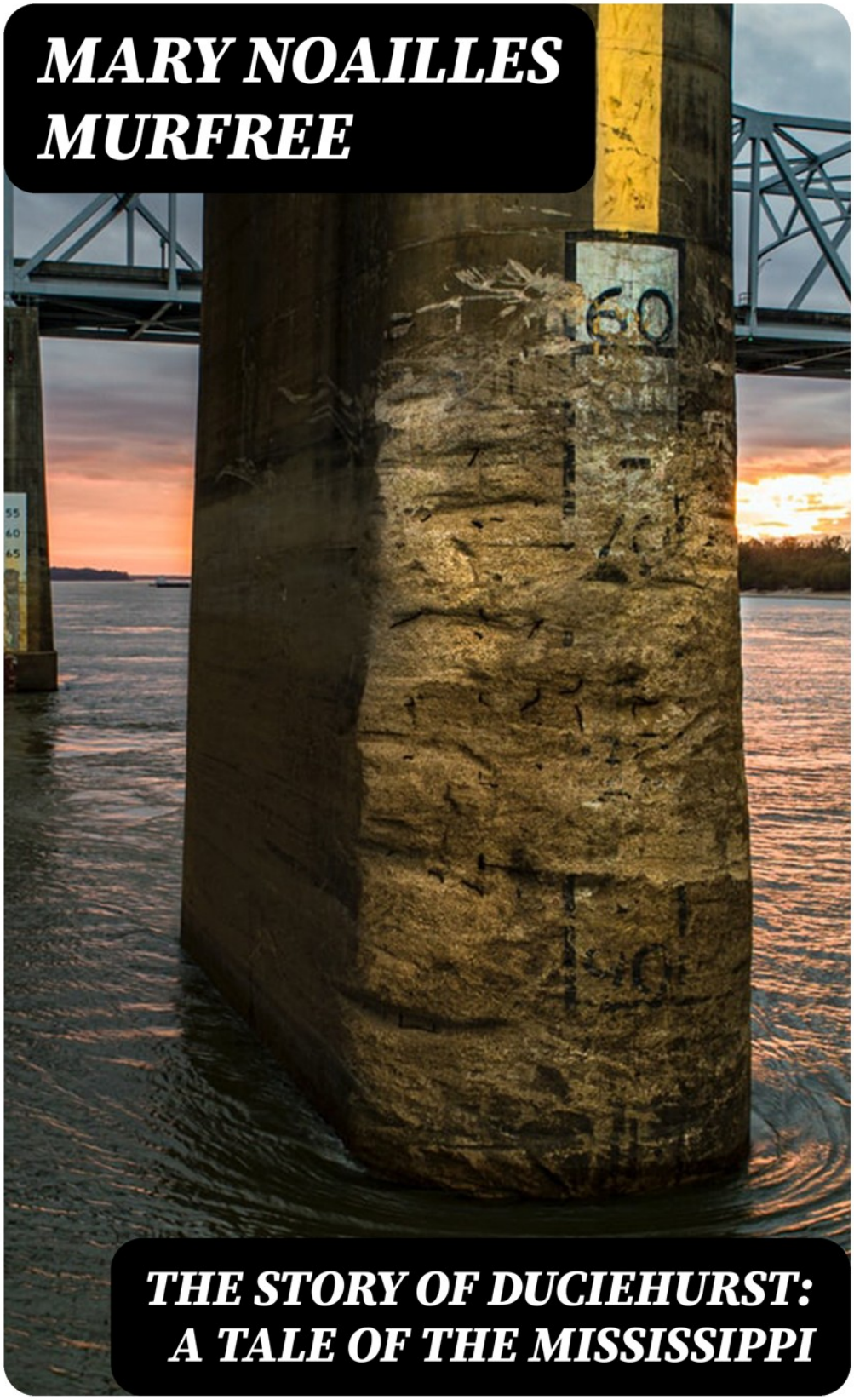
THE STORY OF DUCIEHURST: A TALE OF THE MISSISSIPPI


MARY NOAILLES MURFREE
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The Story of Duciehurst: A Tale of the Mississippi

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THE STORY OF DUCIEHURST

CHAPTER I

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DEAD low water and there the steamboat lay on the sand-bar, stranded and helpless. The surging swirls of the swift current raced impetuously on either side. Scarcely a furlong distant on that corrugated, rippling surface the leadsman had heaved the plummet of the sounding-line at “deep four.” Nevertheless the craft had grounded here on a submerged projection of a “tow-head” built of silt and detritus by the ever shifting Mississippi, attaining dangerous proportions since the last run of the boat. All unknown and unsuspected it lurked till “quarter less twain” was sung out, but the next cry of the leadsman smote the air like the sound of doom. Before the engines could be reversed the steamer was in shoal water, ploughing into the sand with the full momentum of her speed, the shock of the impact shattering the equilibrium of all on board.

Straight ensued the contortions of mechanical energy common to such occasions; the steamboat repeatedly sought to back off from the sand; failing in this she went forward on one wheel and then on the other, finally on both, trying to force her way across the barrier to her progress, in technical phrase “to jump the bar.”

At length the Captain confessedly relinquished the attempt to effect the release of the craft under her own steam. The fires sank down in the furnaces; the water cooled in the boilers; and the passengers of the still and silent boat resigned themselves to await with such patience as they could muster the rescue which might be furnished

by a passing packet, none due for twenty-four hours, or which a rise in the river might compass, for the clouds of the dull October afternoon were heavy and sullen and intimated the near probability of rain.

A group had begun to assemble on the promenade deck, disconsolately looking out at the rippling tawny expanse of the vast vacant river, for the bight of the bend was as lonely a spot as could be found throughout its course. On either side of the deep groove of the great channel the banks rose high, seeming precipitous at this shrunken stage of the water. In the background loomed gigantic forests with foliage sere or green as the nature of the growths might determine.

The leveling effect of the stereotyped surroundings of travel served to bring out in distinct relief the individual characteristics of the passengers. Mr. Floyd-Rosney received the Captain’s final admission of defeat with the silence and surly dignity befitting an implacable affront, and his manner could scarcely have been justified had he and his family been wilfully abducted by orders of the owners of the packet line. In his wonted environment at his home, encompassed by all the insignia of wealth and station, he might have seemed a man of such preëminent importance and fashion as to render a contretemps impertinent and significant of a failure of respect and service, but here, on the deck of the steamer, his sullen impatience of the common disaster, his frowning ungenial mien in receiving the apology of the Captain, poor victim of the underhand wiles of the great Mississippi, betokened an exacting ill-conditioned temperament, and suggested that his wife might be

anything but a happy woman, even before she emerged from the saloon and he met her with a rebuke, which was the obvious vent of his general ill-humor that could not be visited on independent strangers.

“Too late,—*as usual*!” He turned and placed a chair for her with an air of graceful and considerate courtesy. “The fun is all over,—the Captain has given up the game.”

The coercions of good society rendered it imperative that he should somewhat veil his displeasure, but the thin veneer of his graciousness was patently insincere and did not commend his pretense of regret for her sake that she should have missed the spectacle of the gyrations of the boat in seeking to free itself from the sand-bar, though, indeed, one might travel far and never witness the like.

He was singularly handsome, about thirty-five years of age, tall, well built, admirably groomed, fair and florid, with finely chiseled features, straight dark hair and large brown eyes, whose inherent luster was dulled by their haughty, disparaging gaze. He rated his fellow-men but lightly in the scale of being, and, save for the detention, he would not have appeared on deck or exchanged a word with the rest of the passengers in the tedious interval of making his landing.

“I am glad that you have at last consented to sit here awhile,” he continued to his wife, with flimsy solicitude. “That stuffy little state-room is enough to asphyxiate you.”

His moods, indeed, were elements to be reckoned with and his wife was eager and smiling in making her excuses. “Oh, I should have come at once,” she protested,—“only the baby was so reluctant to take his nap. I couldn’t get away till

he was asleep.” She was nervously adjusting her wrap, appropriate and handsome, but evidently hastily flung on.

“I think he has a nurse,” her husband remarked in surly sarcasm.

“Oh, yes, of course,—but he wanted me,—he would not let go my hand till he was fast asleep.”

She was as much as ten years her husband’s junior, of a blonde type very usual in American life. One might have thought to have seen her often, so familiar have become the straight, delicate somewhat angular lineaments, the fair hair, the gray or blue eyes, the slender, yet strong, elastic physique. The degree of beauty, of course, is dependent on the blending of these elements and its pleasing appeal. Mrs. Floyd-Rosney was one of the finer examples of the ordinary mold. Her features were classic in their regularity; her delicately kept, redundant blonde hair had a silken sheen that simulated burnished gold; her gray eyes were of a darkly greenish luster that suggested moss-agates, and they were shaded by long, pensive lashes almost black; the whole effect was heightened by her dark brown cloth gown with narrow bands of seal fur, the hat corresponding with the rich yet plain costume that betokened a traveling garb. She had a certain covertly derisive expression in her eyes, whenever diverted from her husband, for it must needs be a brave wife, indeed, who could banter that imposing presence. To this look a trick of an occasional upward cant of the chin gave special emphasis. When she seemed amused one could not be sure whether she was laughing with her interlocutor, or at him. In fact, she had a marked gift of irony which she sometimes carried so far as to suggest the

danger of recoil. Her old nurse, in the state-room, who had tended her infancy, as well as now her three-year-old boy, had often warned her in years agone, when the victim of her unhallowed mirth, “You surely will stump your toe some day,—better mind how you skip along.” The discerning observer might well fancy she had duly met this check in her career in her choice of a husband, for the obvious repression in her manner toward him suggested a spirit-breaking process already well in hand. Her deprecatory disarming glance when their eyes met had in it an eager plea for approval which was almost derogatory, curiously at variance with her beauty, and position, and handsome garb, and her assured manner in deporting herself toward others.

“The best you can do for us, Captain Disnett?” she had caught the words of the skipper’s apology as she issued. “Then all I can say is that bad is the best!”

She regarded the immense spread of the great river with disparaging objection. “How low it is,—in every sense of the word.”

Despite her assured pose a certain consciousness informed her manner when her eyes suddenly fell upon a young man of thirty, perhaps, who was standing near the railing of the guards, apparently ruefully revolving the Captain’s announcement that it was impossible to get the *Cherokee Rose* off the sand-bar under her own steam. Mrs. Floyd-Rosney’s surprise, for she had started on perceiving him and flushed with embarrassment, was not reciprocal. He gave her no glance of recognition, although his eyes met hers in a casual regard as he turned from the rail and drew forth his cigar-case with the presumable intention of making

himself as comfortable as the detention would permit. As yet the baleful sign, “Cotton aboard. No smoking on deck,” had not been displayed, for the boat was on its downward beat and would not take on cotton until returning up the river. His muscles were suddenly stilled, however, and there was a moment of intent, though covert, observation of her, when her name was abruptly called out in blithe tones as a young girl emerged upon the deck.

“Oh, Mrs. Floyd-Rosney! I did not know you were on board. How perfectly delightful,” with a swift cordial rush, both hands outstretched. “Captain Disnett,” she whirled upon the skipper, in buoyant parenthesis, “I forgive you! You have merely contrived us an enchanting week-end house party. I don’t know when or where I should have met Mrs. Floyd-Rosney otherwise. And Mr. Floyd-Rosney, too. Is little Ned here? Asleep?—Well, I’ll spare his nap.”

The deck, the whole dull day, seemed suddenly irradiated by the presence of the joyous young beauty. Naught but happiness surely came her way. Eternal springtide shone lustrous, soft, mellow in the depths of her great sapphire eyes with their long black lashes and thick white lids. Her hair was black and straight but her complexion was transparently fair and an exquisitely delicate rose bloomed on her cheek. Her coral lips were slightly parted, for she was always exclamatory and breathless, and showed a glimpse of her even white teeth. She was tall and slender, very erect, and moved with the deft certainty of trained muscles, the athletic girl of the day. She wore a simple gown of rough gray cloth, and a knowing little gray toque. She had no disposition to await events

and, after a brief comprehensive survey of the personnel of the group, she abruptly accosted the young man at the rail, an impassive spectator of her entrance on the scene.

“Why, Mr. Ducie,” she exclaimed in blended surprise and affront, “aren’t you going to speak to me?”

He started as if he had been shot. He had much ado to get his hat off his head with a cigar in one hand and a blazing match in the other. But this accomplished, through casting the match overboard, he came forward, replying with genial grace, albeit in some embarrassment: “I think my brother has the advantage of me. I am Mr. Ducie, all right, but my Christian name is Adrian. I fancy it must be Mr. Randal Ducie who has the honor of your acquaintance.”

“Oh,—oh,—yes,—but this——” She was leaning on the back of one of the stiff arm-chairs and across it openly studying his lineaments. He had distinctive features; a thin, delicate, slightly aquiline nose, a firm well-rounded chin, bold, luminous hazel eyes, with a thick fringe of long straight lashes, a fair complexion not altogether devoid of the concomitant freckles here and there; fine teeth and mobile red lips; and his hair, glowing in the light, for he still held his hat in his hand, was of that rich auburn shade that artists love and that one sees in paintings and seldom elsewhere. “But this——” she continued, “oh,—you are fooling us. Do you think I can forget you so soon when I waltzed ten miles with you last winter, if it were all strung out in a row! This is certainly Randal Ducie.”

He had begun to laugh in enjoyment of her perplexity. “Randal Ducie is not half so good a man,” he protested gaily.

“*Les absens ont toujours tort*,” Mrs. Floyd-Rosney brought herself, uninvited, into the conversation. Not altogether welcome was her interpolation, for the laugh faded from Mr. Ducie’s face and he remembered to resume his hat and to slip his cigar-case into his pocket, as if in preparation to betake himself elsewhere. But if this were his intention it was forestalled by Miss Dean.

“Now, Mrs. Floyd-Rosney,” she turned vivaciously to that lady, since she had of her own motion entered the discussion, “wouldn’t anybody think this was Randal Ducie?”

“They are much alike, but I saw the difference in a moment,” Mrs. Floyd-Rosney was smiling naturally, graciously, and looking extremely pretty, as her husband, leaning against one of the posts that supported the superstructure of the deck and, smoking with strong long-drawn puffs, watched her with fixed inscrutable eyes.

“Oh, you didn’t,” Miss Dean contradicted gaily. “You *couldn’t*! The likeness is amazing! Oh, pshaw! it is no likeness. He is guying us. This *is* Randal Ducie.”

“You are the twin brother of my young friend, Randal Ducie?” Colonel Kenwynton asked, smiling, an old gentleman of the old school, with a courteous manner and a commanding presence. His tall figure still retained the muscular slenderness of his athletic youth and his stately martial carriage; his dense snowy hair, brushed forward to his brow and parted on the side, and also, straight down the back, the white imperial and long military mustachios gave him the look of a portrait of some by-gone celebrity rather than a man of to-day, so had the thought of this fashion

perished. His age was frosty but kindly, and the young man responded with covert humor, as if elucidating a mystery.

“Oh, yes, we have always been twins,” he declared.

“How *did* you know the difference, Mrs. Floyd-Rosney?” demanded Miss Dean.

“I knew it at once,” she replied, still smiling, but the gravity in the eyes of her husband deepened momently as he gazed, silently, motionlessly at her. “I myself don’t know the difference at all,” said the subject of the discussion. “When I am with Ran I feel as if I were looking into a mirror.”

“Oh, how quaint,—how enchanting it must be,” cried Miss Dean extravagantly.

“And so convenient,—I have always made Ran try the new hair cuts first.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean any such preposterous thing as that—but to have another self so near, so dear, to duplicate one’s lot in life, to understand and sympathize with every sentiment, to share one’s mind, one’s heart——”

“No,—no,—we draw the line there. I am a deep secret fellow! I could tolerate no twin of an inner consciousness to spy out my true soul.” Ducie was letting himself go in this badinage, and he had no meaning of a deeper intent than the surface of jest. “And I could undertake no such contract as to sympathize with Ran’s extravagant enthusiasms and silly sentimentalities.”

The attention of the group was focused on the speaker. None of them noticed the uprising conscious flare in the face of Mrs. Floyd-Rosney—except, indeed, her husband, who was quick, too, to recollect the significant fact that only she had had the keen discernment to detect the difference

between this man and the twin brother of whom he seemed the counterpart.

“Oh, Mr. Ducie, how unkind!” cried Miss Dean.

“Yes, indeed,” with affected obduracy, “Ran must sigh his sighs, and hope his hopes, and shed his tears all by himself. For my own part I don’t deal in goods of that grade. But if ever he strikes on some nice little speculation, or discovers a gold mine, why I am his own only twin brother and I will come in with him on the ground floor.”

“And, speaking of business,” said Colonel Kenwynton, “how goes it in the south of France? Your brother did not accompany you.”

The group had taken chairs, and, with the permission of the ladies, Ducie had lighted his cigar. “No, Ran sticks to cotton through thick and thin. It is his creed that God never thought it worth while to create anything but the cotton plant, and the earth was evolved to grow and market it.”

Mrs. Floyd-Rosney was struggling with the species of discomposure which is incompatible with reserve and silence. “You went into the wine trade instead,” she made the parenthetical statement from an imperfect memory.

Mr. Ducie had that air of averse distaste which one feels in hearing one’s own affairs misrepresented. “Beg pardon,” he said, “I quitted New Orleans some six years ago with old Mr. Chenault; he was a wine merchant there, a branch of a Bordeaux house,—knew my father and used to furnish my grandfather’s cellar at Duciehurst in the long ago. He offered me an opening in the French house at Bordeaux, but I didn’t take kindly to the trade, and as the Chenaults had

connections with the silk manufacturing interests in Lyons they contrived to wedge me in with their relatives."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Floyd-Rosney had obviously lost her poise, "I remember now,—but I can't recall who was speaking of you and your success the other day,—to be a junior partner in the concern."

Adrian Ducie's consciousness of the breach of the commercial verities turned him stiff. "Oh no! I?—a junior partner? Why, never in the world!" he exclaimed brusquely. Then, realizing that there was no reason for heat, since the matter had no concern for those present, he went on more suavely. "I occupy a sort of confidential and privileged relation to the members of the firm, owing chiefly to the value of the Chenault interest, but I have neither the responsibility nor the profits of a junior partner."

As he ceased to speak he had a sudden look of affront—more than aught else it suggested the impulse of some spirited horse refusing a mandate of urgency, and ready to bolt, to rear, to assert an insurgent and untamed power. Mrs. Floyd-Rosney's words might bear an interpretation of an ill-judged patronage,—her facile foolish blandness in magnifying the importance of his opportunity that at its best must seem so very small to her. With an almost visible effort he brought himself under control without a snort of contempt or an impatient stamp. There was an interval of silence so awkward, in view of these forced disclosures of commercial status and financial interest, that Ducie was disposed to continue the personal relation as a less crude method of its conclusion than bolting precipitately from the subject. "We have close connections, of course, with

importers in America as well as elsewhere. It is my mission to effect a settlement of a matter in controversy with a company having extensive dealings with us and I am glad to utilize the opportunity to run in on Ran at his plantation in this lower country while I am en route to New Orleans. It makes this detention all the more unfortunate. I lose time that I might otherwise spend with him."

"You must be awfully lonesome over on the other side without your twin brother, your other self," said Miss Dean, sweetly commiserative.

And, indeed, his face fell.

"But how lovely to be in France," sighed Mrs. Floyd-Rosney. "I envy you your Paris."

"Paris!" he could but fleer. "I see as much of Paris as if I were in the Mississippi swamp." Then, recovering himself, "Paris is not France, so far as the silk manufacturing interest is concerned."

An interruption was at hand and this seemed well. An old gentleman, dressed in black, a Prince Albert coat, a wide soft felt hat, with a white beard and sightless eyes, seeming more aged and infirm than he really was, by reason of his groping progress between a stout stick and a pompous negro man-servant, was steered down the guards and toward the group; perceiving whom, Colonel Kenwynton hastily arose and advanced.

"Here we are, Major," he exclaimed jovially, "and here we are likely to stay. (Make yourself scarce, Tobe," he added in parenthesis to the servant, "I'll look after the Major.") And Tobe relinquished his charge with a grateful bow, after the manner of the servitors of yore. Doubtless, he was glad of

the leisure thus vouchsafed him to spend, after his own liking, but he showed no undue alacrity to avail himself of it. He did not disappear until he had placed chairs both for the Major and Colonel Kenwynton, glanced discerningly at the clouds to judge whether a possible outburst of the setting sun might render the spot selected undesirable, asked if he should not bring glasses of water, notified the Major that he had placed a light overcoat on a chair hard by, in case the veering of the wind should necessitate protection, and only then did the Major's faithful body-servant "make himself scarce."

It was seldom, indeed, that Major Lacey ventured so far from his home, in view of his increasing age, with which his infirmities waxed in proportion, except, indeed, on the various occasions of Confederate reunions, when his years fell from him, and the scales dropped from his eyes, and he was once more a dashing young officer with his sword in his hand and his heart in his cause. He was now returning from one of these symposia, and the old soldier would canvass its incidents, and discuss its personnel, and repeat the toasts, and recount the old stories and live again in the days of yore, growing ever dimmer, till the next reunion would endow the past with reviviscence and it would glow anew and the dull present would sink out of sight. He was barely ensconced in his chair when Miss Dean gaily accosted him.

"Yes,—here we are, indeed, Major,—you remember me?—Miss Hildegarde Dean,—but you ought to have been on deck when we were trying to get away. It was just like an attempt to jump over a fence by pulling on the rosettes of your slippers,—wasn't it, Mrs. Floyd-Rosney?"

“Oh, she didn’t witness it,” said Floyd-Rosney hastily, reminded of his displeasure because of her tardiness. “Too late,—*as usual*. She closely resembles Athelstane the Unready. You remember the Saxon nobleman, Major Lacey.”

His bland patronage was a bit more insufferable than his obvious disapproval, if such comparison be attempted, for the casual stranger had done naught to incur his unwelcome benignities, whereas his wife, by consenting to become his wife, had brought her doom upon her own head.

The receptivity of the object of his grace in this instance was blunted by misunderstanding. “Well, now,” the Major replied, knitting his brows, “there was a foreign nobleman—a native of Saxony,—for a time on the staff of General Lancaster while I, too, was a member of his military family. This stranger was eager to see our artillery in action,—greatly interested in the Gatling gun,—it was new, then, invented by a gentleman from North Carolina. But I don’t remember that the officer’s name was Athelstane,—my memory is not so good as it once was,—his name has escaped me. But he had been a lieutenant of the Line in his own country,—light artillery.”

Colonel Kenwynton observed Floyd-Rosney’s satiric smile and resented it. He would not suffer the matter to rest here. “Mr. Floyd-Rosney is alluding to a character in one of the Waverley novels, Major,” he said tactfully.

“Eh? Oh, I remember, now,—I remember,—Ivanhoe,—Athelstane of Coningsburgh,” the Major replied casually. “But I was thinking of that foreign nobleman from Saxony,—much impressed by the Gatling gun in action.”

The war was all-in-all with the Major.

Miss Hildegarde Dean suddenly rose and, with her swinging athletic gait, walked across the deck and seated herself in a chair beside the Major. He was conscious, of course, of an approach and a new proximity, but whose presence it was and of what intent he could not divine. He turned his sightless face toward his unseen neighbor, expressive of a courteous abeyance, ready and reciprocal toward the advance were it charged with a meaning for him, yet with a dignity of reserve in awaiting it. He, of course, could not see Hildegarde smiling at him so brightly that one must needs deplore afresh his affliction which debarred him from such suffusive and gracious radiance.

“Major Lacey,” she began blithely, “I have just lived for this moment. I want you to tell me exactly how your grandmother—now that is your great-niece Elodie Lacey’s great, great stupendously great grandmother,—Elodie is a chum of mine and a precious monkey-fied thing.” (The Major’s eyebrows were elevated doubtfully at this description of his young relative, but the tone was one of approval and affection and he took the compliment on trust.) “We have such gay old times together,” in a burst of reminiscent enthusiasm. “But now about your grandmother’s romance. How did she happen to marry the Revolutionary lieutenant and not the rich English baronet whom she sent away in despair. Elodie delights in telling the story,—all about the fox-chase and all—but she mixes things up so with a piece of the white brocade of the wedding dress that she treasures and the carved ivory fan and the white satin slippers and she owns the whole bertha too—it is Honiton,—lovely lace, but out of style now,—that one can’t

get at the details for the millinery. A rational account of the whole affair would be as sentimental and exciting as a novel. Take a turn with me up and down the guards, Major, and justify your grandmother's choice. I am as steady as a rock, and this ship is not going to pitch and toss among the breakers on this sand-bar,—eh, Captain Disnett?" with an arch smile over her shoulder.

The old man's stick was tremulously feeling the way as he arose. Then she passed her arm through his, and moved forward at a measured pace, with the other hand deftly putting out of the way chairs that might have otherwise blocked their progress. Colonel Kenwynton looked on with a benignant smile, for, presently, their slow and wavering march up and down, the old blind soldier, supported between the radiant young beauty and his stout cane, was interrupted by bursts of laughter, genuine and hearty, such as he had not enjoyed for many a day.

Then ensued deep and earnest narrative, entangled in such a whirl of questions as would imply that Miss Hildegarde Dean had never before heard of the great battle of Shiloh, and, indeed, save that she had once been of an excursion party that had visited the famous site, she would have scarcely remembered its name. But she was gifted with a keen and enduring observation, and ever and anon she broke into his detail of special incidents,—the fall of noted officers, the result of intrepid charges, the location of certain troops,—to describe the monuments that now marked the spot, their composition, their approximate measurements, their inscriptions, and her opinion of the general effect, with such gusto as to incite a revival of

recollection and to recall an episode or two of that momentous event which had eluded till now his comprehensive memory.

“That is a lovely, lovely girl,” said Colonel Kenwynton to Mrs. Floyd-Rosney, as he contemplated the incongruous cronies.

“Yes, indeed,” she acceded with graceful alacrity, “but she should not trifle with the affections of the venerable Major.”

“Perhaps the venerable Major is a bit of a flirt himself”; the flavor of Mr. Floyd-Rosney’s pleasantry was acrid to the taste.

“Why, I should not call that ‘flirting,’ on her part,” said the matter-of-fact captain of the steamboat. “I have known her since she was that high,”—he indicated with his right hand a minute stature,—“her uncle has a plantation down here a bit and she and her mother have often been passengers of the *Cherokee Rose*. She was always just of that kind, thoughtful disposition.”

For the old Major was laughing on keys of mirth so long disused that they had fallen out of tune and accord with the dominant tones of his voice, as if in another moment he might burst into tears.

“Well, perhaps not exactly ‘flirting,’—only a bit of her universal fascination system,” said Mrs. Floyd-Rosney, with her chin in the air.

“I shouldn’t think she pursues any sort of system,—she seems all spontaneity. She is incapable of calculation,” said young Ducie.

Once more Mrs. Floyd-Rosney flushed unaccountably, but she said, lightly, “I perceive that you are profoundly versed in that most difficult science, the knowledge of human nature.”

“You do me too much honor,” he replied, looking not at her but at his cigar as he flipped off the ash. “It requires a very superficial observation to discern that she is as open and undesigning as the day.”

“For my own part I think the day is particularly enigmatic,” she retorted with her scathing little laugh, that yet was so sweetly keyed. “I think it has something in reserve, especially obnoxious for us.”

“So it seems that you, too, are a profound observer, and that meteorological phenomena are your province,” her husband ponderously adopted her method of persiflage. Then he added pointedly, “I beg you to observe it was not I that initiated the personal tone of this talk.”

He rose with his pervasive suggestion of a lordly ill-humor, which enabled one to realize how grievous it was to be alone with him and privileged to note the workings of his disaffected and censorious moods. He strolled casually off, and began to talk at some little distance to one of the several passengers about the price of cotton and the disposition of the planters to hold it back from the market for a rise.

Mrs. Floyd-Rosney and Mr. Ducie were left seated near each other amidst a cluster of vacant chairs. With that peculiar clarity of the twilight air when there is no mist every detail of this limited world was visible with special distinctness, as if there were no insufficiency of light, but

one looked through amber glasses;—the slate-tinted lowering sky, the ceaseless silent flow of the vast murky river, the high bank so far above the water at this low stage that the grassy levee, an elevation of prominent emphasis in so level a country, was far withdrawn and invisible from this point of view. There was on the bank a swamper's hut perched on tall grotesque supports to escape inundation in the rise of the river, which gave some idea of the height of the flood-level in times of high water. The red glow from the open door of the cabin pulsed like the fluctuating fires of an opal, and thus intimated that a mist was insidiously beginning to rise. There was no other token of life in the riparian borders,—no token on the broad spread of the river, save that a tiny craft, a dugout, was slowly making its way across the tortured currents,—seemingly an insignificant object, for who could imagine it was freighted with grim Fate? The moment was of peculiarly lonely intimations and she spoke abruptly.

"By your leave I shall make the conversation even more personal." Then, with an intent gaze, "Where is your brother?—and what is he doing?"

Adrian Ducie flushed deeply, looking both affronted and indignant. Then he replied in his wonted vein: "You do not know but that I am my brother,—you could not distinguish one of us from the other to save your life."

"Oh, yes, the difference is obvious to me," she exclaimed in agitated tones. "Besides, Randal would have spoken,—he would have greeted me. When you evidently did not recognize me I was sure that you were the one I had never seen."

“Doubtless, Randal would have rejoiced to offer you the compliments of the season.” He could not altogether maintain his self-control and his voice had a tense note of satire.

She cast upon him a quick upbraiding glance. Then, as if with an afterthought: “I am aware that you must resent my course toward Randal.”

“Oh, no,—not at all,—though it would scarcely be courteous to say that I congratulate him upon your inconstancy. But when a lady plays a man out within a fortnight of their anticipated marriage with no reason or provocation, his relatives can hardly be expected to lament his escape. Pardon my blunt phrase for its sincerity, since I am no artist in words, and this discussion has taken me by surprise.”

She flushed hotly, feeling arraigned for having introduced the inappropriate subject. Yet she persisted: “Oh, you do not understand,” she said in increasing agitation. “You haven’t the temperament, I can see, to make subtle deductions.”

“Well, if Randal has such a temperament as you seem disposed to credit him with,—or to discredit him with, if I may appraise the endowment,—I am happy to say, in reply to your kind inquiries, that his subtlety has not affected his health or spirits. He is in fine fettle and as happy as he deserves to be. As to the rest, he is much absorbed in business,—in fact, he is in a fair way to make a fortune. He is of a speculative turn and has always been peculiarly lucky. Randal is something of a gambler.”

“No, never,” she interrupted hastily, “Randal was never a gambler.”

He revolted at her tone of defense and arrogations of superior knowledge. He could not restrain a smile of sarcastic rebuke as he retorted: “Oh, of course I meant only in a commercial way. He is bold and takes chances that would deter many men. He has great initiative.”

“We have been abroad so long that I had lost sight of him altogether,” she said in embarrassment.

The subject was infinitely distasteful to him but its sensitive avoidance would seem a disparagement of his slighted brother. His fraternal affection nerved him to complete the response she had elicited.

“Randal has made a ‘ten strike’ several times, and has a long lease of some fine land that this year has produced a stunning crop of cotton. He has had a rare chance, too, to buy a standing crop, and, of course, he took it in. The planter had shot a man,—very unpopular affair,—and had to quit the country.”

Even as he spoke he realized how meager were these scanty graces of opportunity in comparison with Floyd-Rosney’s magnificent fortune, but he would not seem to recognize the fact. He would not minimize his brother’s lot in life as too small for her consideration, since, with an avid curiosity and interest, she had sought information.

Mrs. Floyd-Rosney was silent for a moment. She had achieved a startling and florid success in her brilliant marriage, a girl of very limited means. But this temperate, conventional atmosphere, the opportunities of people of moderate resources and high lineage, was her native element, and somehow it exerted a recurrent fascination upon her at the moment, it had the charm of old

associations forever relinquished. The joy of effort, of laborious acquisition, the splendor of superior capacity, of trying conclusions with Fate could never be hers to share, but she felt it was fine to ride at Fortune with lance in rest as in the jousts of some great tourney. She listened wistfully to the simple annals of agricultural ventures so familiar to her early experience, with the sentiment of gazing through barred gates,—she, to whom all the world was open.

“I am glad to know that Randal is well and happy,” she said at length. “You may think it strange that I should introduce this topic with you,—and you not even an acquaintance.”

She paused to give him space for a disclaimer, but he was rancorous on this theme,—he would not make it easy for her. “No, Mrs. Floyd-Rosney,” he said gravely, “nothing that you could do would seem strange to me.”

She was accustomed to deference, apart from the sullen tyranny of her husband, and this experience of conjugal life was only within the last five years. She scarcely knew how to dispense with the phrase, the smile, the bow, which, however little genuine, respectfully annotated and acquiesced in her discourse. Adrian Ducie’s blunt rebuke,—it did not affect her as discourtesy, for it was too sincere—his obvious hatred of her, not only of her course, his absolute lack of confidence or approval, the impossibility of winning him even to a modicum of neutrality baffled her. She was losing her composure,—the threads of her intention. Her eyes, looking at him wistfully, large and lustrous, despite the closing dusk, pleaded with him for help. When the sound of the dynamo began to pulse on the stillness, the electric

lights flared out on the deck as well as in the saloon, and showed that those eyes were full of tears. He met their glance calmly with unconcern. He had not caused her grief. This evident attitude of mind flung her back on her pride, her own individuality. In the supreme crisis of her life she was arguing within herself, she had exerted her feminine prerogative of choice, and this in the manner that best suited her. He should not sit in judgment thus on the justice of her decisions, on her line of conduct, and she wondered at her meekness that had permitted him to take this position, that had made his standpoint possible. She sought to rally her self-control, and then she said, in her clear-cut enunciation:

“Thank you very much,—the idea occurred to me when I saw you this afternoon that I had here an opportunity which I have long sought.”

She glanced about among the shadows, bulkier, blacker, because of the keenness of the electric glare, as if she feared observation or interruption. The piano in the saloon was beginning to strum “Oh, rosy dreams!” with a disregard of accidentals calculated to give the nightmare to the fellow-passengers of the performer. The perfume of cigars floated down from the hurricane deck—Ducie’s was dead in his hand. A dreary cow on the lower deck seemed to have just discovered that she was in process of shipment and was mournfully lowing for her calf a hundred miles or more up-stream. Deep guttural voices of roustabouts rose in jocose altercation for a moment from the depths of the boiler deck, and then all was silent again.

“I have long sought an opportunity to restore to Randal one of his gifts, overlooked at the time that I returned the others. I found it afterward, and was embarrassed,—shocked, in fact——” she paused abruptly.

“There was the registered mail, or the express, I suppose,” he suggested coolly.

“I wanted to explain.” She felt her face flame. “It was of intrinsic value other than sentimental.”

“——which was great,” he interpolated.

“And,” she sturdily held to her purpose, “I did not wish him to misinterpret my motive in keeping it.”

“You could not write to him?”

“Oh, no, I could not write to him.”

“I can easily understand that,” he fleered, full of vicarious rancor.

“It is a bauble in the shape of a key—it is set with a large diamond and a circle of rubies. It was understood between us as the key of his heart,” she could but falter at the revelation of the forlorn little sentimentalities, shallow of root and wilted in the sun of a sudden blaze of prosperity. “And I kept it,” she quavered.

“Randal would never think of the diamond and rubies,” he said, reaching, indeed, the limit. “You have too many jewels, doubtless, for your motive to be misconstrued.”

There was a moment of dead silence. “He could never have said that,” she replied, in a voice that trembled with anger. “He is not in the least like you. I hate you for looking like him.”

“Thank you for dispensing with ceremony and telling me this on so short an acquaintance. It is more than evident