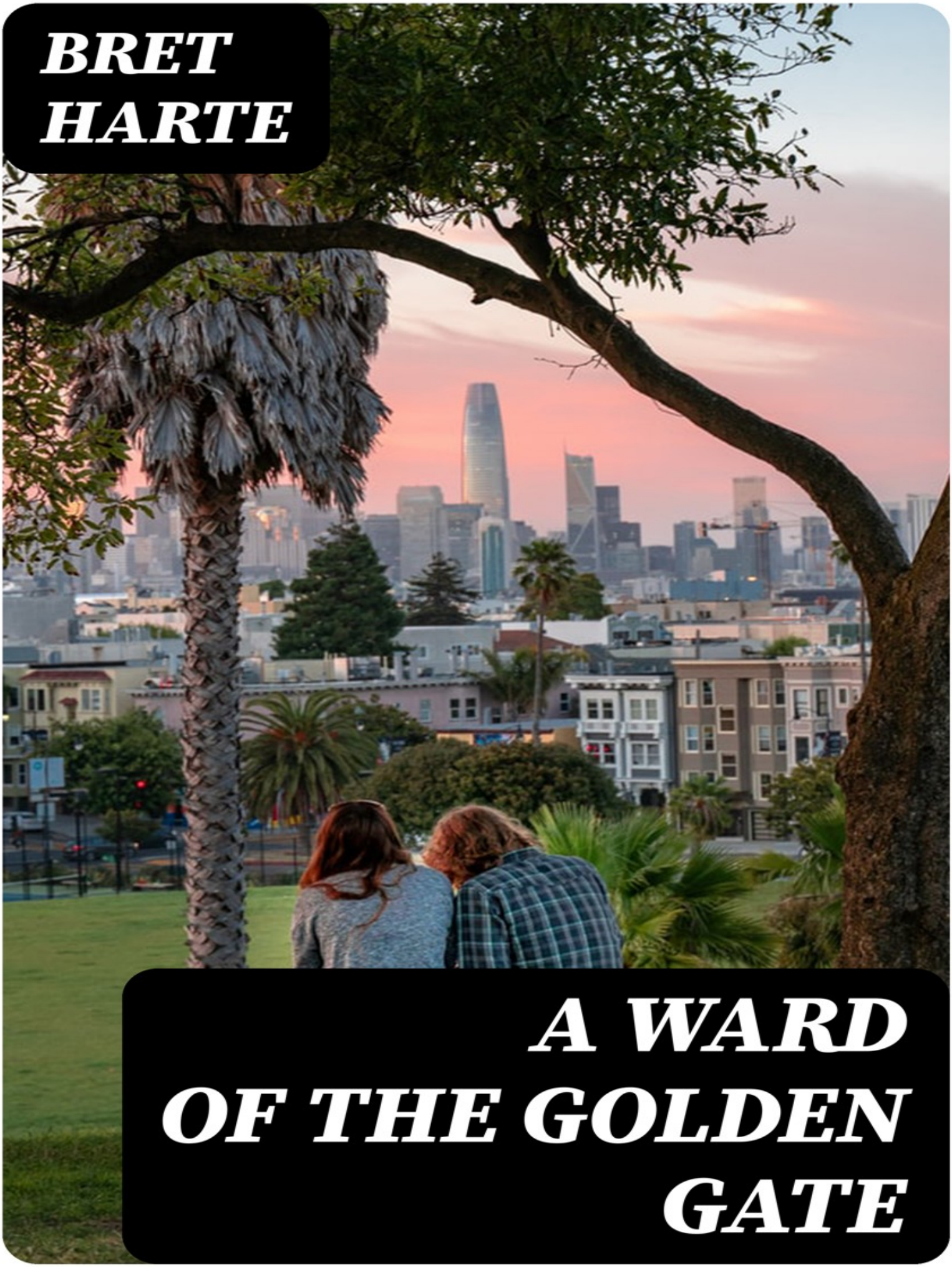
BRET HARTE
A WARD OF THE GOLDEN GATE

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PROLOGUE.

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In San Francisco the "rainy season" had been making itself a reality to the wondering Eastern immigrant. There were short days of drifting clouds and flying sunshine, and long succeeding nights of incessant downpour, when the rain rattled on the thin shingles or drummed on the resounding zinc of pioneer roofs. The shifting sand-dunes on the outskirts were beaten motionless and sodden by the onslaught of consecutive storms; the southeast trades brought the saline breath of the outlying Pacific even to the busy haunts of Commercial and Kearney streets; the low-lying Mission road was a quagmire; along the City Front, despite of piles and pier and wharf, the Pacific tides still asserted themselves in mud and ooze as far as Sansome Street; the wooden sidewalks of Clay and Montgomery streets were mere floating bridges or buoyant pontoons superposed on elastic bogs; Battery Street was the Silurian beach of that early period on which tin cans, packing-boxes, freight, household furniture, and even the runaway crews of deserted ships had been cast away. There were dangerous and unknown depths in Montgomery Street and on the Plaza, and the wheels of a passing carriage hopelessly mired had to be lifted by the volunteer hands of a half dozen high-booted wayfarers, whose wearers were sufficiently content to believe that a woman, a child, or an invalid was behind its closed windows, without troubling themselves or the occupant by looking through the glass.

It was a carriage that, thus released, eventually drew up before the superior public edifice known as the City Hall. From it a woman, closely veiled, alighted, and quickly entered the building. A few passers-by turned to look at her, partly from the rarity of the female figure at that period, and partly from the greater rarity of its being well formed and even ladylike.

As she kept her way along the corridor and ascended an iron staircase, she was passed by others more preoccupied in business at the various public offices. One of these visitors, however, stopped as if struck by some fancied resemblance in her appearance, turned, and followed her. But when she halted before a door marked "Mayor's Office," he paused also, and, with a look of half humorous bewilderment and a slight glance around him as if seeking for some one to whom to impart his arch fancy, he turned away. The woman then entered a large anteroom with a certain quick feminine gesture of relief, and, finding it empty of other callers, summoned the porter, and asked him some question in a voice so suppressed by the official severity of the apartment as to be hardly audible. The attendant replied by entering another room marked "Mayor's Secretary," and reappeared with a stripling of seventeen or eighteen, whose singularly bright eyes were all that was youthful in his composed features. After a slight scrutiny of the woman—half boyish, half official—he desired her to be seated, with a certain exaggerated gravity as if he was over-acting a grown-up part, and, taking a card from her, reentered his office. Here, however, he did NOT stand on his head or call out a confederate youth from a closet, as

the woman might have expected. To the left was a green baize door, outlined with brass-studded rivets like a cheerful coffin-lid, and bearing the mortuary inscription, "Private." This he pushed open, and entered the Mayor's private office.

The municipal dignitary of San Francisco, although an erect, soldier-like man of strong middle age, was seated with his official chair tilted back against the wall and kept in position by his feet on the rungs of another, which in turn acted as a support for a second man, who was seated a few feet from him in an easy-chair. Both were lazily smoking.

The Mayor took the card from his secretary, glanced at it, said "Hullo!" and handed it to his companion, who read aloud "Kate Howard," and gave a prolonged whistle.

"Where is she?" asked the Mayor.

"In the anteroom, sir."

"Any one else there?"

"No, sir."

"Did you say I was engaged?"

"Yes, sir; but it appears she asked Sam who was with you, and when he told her, she said, All right, she wanted to see Colonel Pendleton too."

The men glanced interrogatively at each other, but Colonel Pendleton, abruptly anticipating the Mayor's functions, said, "Have her in," and settled himself back in his chair.

A moment later the door opened, and the stranger appeared. As she closed the door behind her she removed her heavy veil, and displayed the face of a very handsome

woman of past thirty. It is only necessary to add that it was a face known to the two men, and all San Francisco.

"Well, Kate," said the Mayor, motioning to a chair, but without rising or changing his attitude. "Here I am, and here is Colonel Pendleton, and these are office hours. What can we do for you?"

If he had received her with magisterial formality, or even politely, she would have been embarrassed, in spite of a certain boldness of her dark eyes and an ever present consciousness of her power. It is possible that his own ease and that of his companion was part of their instinctive good nature and perception. She accepted it as such, took the chair familiarly, and seated herself sideways upon it, her right arm half encircling its back and hanging over it; altogether an easy and not ungraceful pose.

"Thank you, Jack—I mean, Mr. Mayor—and you, too, Harry. I came on business. I want you two men to act as guardians for my little daughter."

"Your what?" asked the two men simultaneously.

"My daughter," she repeated, with a short laugh, which, however, ended with a note of defiance. "Of course you don't know. Well," she added half aggressively, and yet with the air of hurrying over a compromising and inexplicable weakness, "the long and short of it is I've got a little girl down at the Convent of Santa Clara, and have had—there! I've been taking care of her—GOOD care, too, boys—for some time. And now I want to put things square for her for the future. See? I want to make over to her all my property—it's nigh on to seventy-five thousand dollars, for Bob Snelling put me up to getting those water lots a year ago—

and, you see, I'll have to have regular guardians, trustees, or whatever you call 'em, to take care of the money for her."

"Who's her father?" asked the Mayor.

"What's that to do with it?" she said impetuously.

"Everything—because he's her natural guardian."

"Suppose he isn't known? Say dead, for instance."

"Dead will do," said the Mayor gravely. "Yes, dead will do," repeated Colonel Pendleton. After a pause, in which the two men seemed to have buried this vague relative, the Mayor looked keenly at the woman.

"Kate, have you and Bob Ridley had a quarrel?"

"Bob Ridley knows too much to quarrel with me," she said briefly.

"Then you are doing this for no motive other than that which you tell me?"

"Certainly. That's motive enough—ain't it?"

"Yes." The Mayor took his feet off his companion's chair and sat upright. Colonel Pendleton did the same, also removing his cigar from his lips. "I suppose you'll think this thing over?" he added.

"No—I want it done NOW—right here—in this office."

"But you know it will be irrevocable."

"That's what I want it—something might happen afterwards."

"But you are leaving nothing for yourself, and if you are going to devote everything to this daughter and lead a different life, you'll"—

"Who said I was?"

The two men paused, and looked at her. "Look here, boys, you don't understand. From the day that paper is

signed, I've nothing to do with the child. She passes out of my hands into yours, to be schooled, educated, and made a rich girl out of—and never to know who or what or where I am. She doesn't know now. I haven't given her and myself away in that style—you bet! She thinks I'm only a friend. She hasn't seen me more than once or twice, and not to know me again. Why, I was down there the other day, and passed her walking out with the Sisters and the other scholars, and she didn't know me—though one of the Sisters did. But they're mum—THEY are, and don't let on. Why, now I think of it, YOU were down there, Jack, presiding in big style as Mr. Mayor at the exercises. You must have noticed her. Little thing, about nine—lot of hair, the same color as mine, and brown eyes. White and yellow sash. Had a necklace on of real pearls I gave her. I BOUGHT THEM, you understand, myself at Tucker's—gave two hundred and fifty dollars for them—and a big bouquet of white rosebuds and lilacs I sent her."

"I remember her now on the platform," said the Mayor gravely. "So that is your child?"

"You bet—no slouch either. But that's neither here nor there. What I want now is you and Harry to look after her and her property the same as if I didn't live. More than that, as if I had NEVER LIVED. I've come to you two boys, because I reckon you're square men and won't give me away. But I want to fix it even firmer than that. I want you to take hold of this trust not as Jack Hammersley, but as the MAYOR OF SAN FRANCISCO! And when you make way for a new Mayor, HE takes up the trust by virtue of his office, you see, so there's a trustee all along. I reckon there'll always be a San

Francisco and always a Mayor—at least till the child's of age; and it gives her from the start a father, and a pretty big one too. Of course the new man isn't to know the why and wherefore of this. It's enough for him to take on that duty with his others, without asking questions. And he's only got to invest that money and pay it out as it's wanted, and consult Harry at times."

The two men looked at each other with approving intelligence. "But have you thought of a successor for ME, in case somebody shoots me on sight any time in the next ten years?" asked Pendleton, with a gravity equal to her own.

"I reckon, as you're President of the El Dorado Bank, you'll make that a part of every president's duty too. You'll get the directors to agree to it, just as Jack here will get the Common Council to make it the Mayor's business."

The two men had risen to their feet, and, after exchanging glances, gazed at her silently. Presently the Mayor said:—

"It can be done, Kate, and we'll do it for you—eh, Harry?"

"Count me in," said Pendleton, nodding. "But you'll want a third man."

"What's that for?"

"The casting vote in case of any difficulty."

The woman's face fell. "I reckoned to keep it a secret with only you two," she said half bitterly.

"No matter. We'll find some one to act, or you'll think of somebody and let us know."

"But I wanted to finish this thing right here," she said impatiently. She was silent for a moment, with her arched black brows knitted. Then she said abruptly, "Who's that

smart little chap that let me in? He looks as if he might be trusted."

"That's Paul Hathaway, my secretary. He's sensible, but too young. Stop! I don't know about that. There's no legal age necessary, and he's got an awfully old head on him," said the Mayor thoughtfully.

"And I say his youth's in his favor," said Colonel Pendleton, promptly. "He's been brought up in San Francisco, and he's got no d—d old-fashioned Eastern notions to get rid of, and will drop into this as a matter of business, without prying about or wondering. I'LL serve with him."

"Call him in!" said the woman.

He came. Very luminous of eye, and composed of lip and brow. Yet with the same suggestion of "making believe" very much, as if to offset the possible munching of forbidden cakes and apples in his own room, or the hidden presence of some still in his pocket.

The Mayor explained the case briefly, but with business-like precision. "Your duty, Mr. Hathaway," he concluded, "at present will be merely nominal and, above all, confidential. Colonel Pendleton and myself will set the thing going." As the youth—who had apparently taken in and "illuminated" the whole subject with a single bright-eyed glance—bowed and was about to retire, as if to relieve himself of his real feelings behind the door, the woman stopped him with a gesture.

"Let's have this thing over now," she said to the Mayor. "You draw up something that we can all sign at once." She fixed her eyes on Paul, partly to satisfy her curiosity and

justify her predilection for him, and partly to detect him in any overt act of boyishness. But the youth simply returned her glance with a cheerful, easy prescience, as if her past lay clearly open before him. For some minutes there was only the rapid scratching of the Mayor's pen over the paper. Suddenly he stopped and looked up.

"What's her name?"

"She mustn't have mine," said the woman quickly. "That's a part of my idea. I give that up with the rest. She must take a new name that gives no hint of me. Think of one, can't you, you two men? Something that would kind of show that she was the daughter of the city, you know."

"You couldn't call her 'Santa Francisca,' eh?" said Colonel Pendleton, doubtingly.

"Not much," said the woman, with a seriousness that defied any ulterior insinuation.

"Nor Chrysopolinia?" said the Mayor, musingly.

"But that's only a FIRST name. She must have a family name," said the woman impatiently.

"Can YOU think of something, Paul?" said the Mayor, appealing to Hathaway. "You're a great reader, and later from your classics than I am." The Mayor, albeit practical and Western, liked to be ostentatiously forgetful of his old Alma Mater, Harvard, on occasions.

"How would YERBA BUENA do, sir?" responded the youth gravely. "It's the old Spanish title of the first settlement here. It comes from the name that Father Junipero Serra gave to the pretty little vine that grows wild over the sandhills, and means 'good herb.' He called it 'A balm for the wounded and sore.'"

"For the wounded and sore?" repeated the woman slowly.

"That's what they say," responded Hathaway.

"You ain't playing us, eh?" she said, with a half laugh that, however, scarcely curved the open mouth with which she had been regarding the young secretary.

"No," said the Mayor, hurriedly. "It's true. I've often heard it. And a capital name it would be for her too. YERBA the first name. BUENA the second. She could be called Miss Buena when she grows up."

"Yerba Buena it is," she said suddenly. Then, indicating the youth with a slight toss of her handsome head, "His head's level—you can see that."

There was a silence again, and the scratching of the Mayor's pen continued. Colonel Pendleton buttoned up his coat, pulled his long moustache into shape, slightly arranged his collar, and walked to the window without looking at the woman. Presently the Mayor arose from his seat, and, with a certain formal courtesy that had been wanting in his previous manner, handed her his pen and arranged his chair for her at the desk. She took the pen, and rapidly appended her signature to the paper. The others followed; and, obedient to a sign from him, the porter was summoned from the outer office to witness the signatures. When this was over, the Mayor turned to his secretary. "That's all just now, Paul."

Accepting this implied dismissal with undisturbed gravity, the newly made youthful guardian bowed and retired. When the green baize door had closed upon him, the Mayor turned abruptly to the woman with the paper in his hand.

"Look here, Kate; there is still time for you to reconsider your action, and tear up this solitary record of it. If you choose to do so, say so, and I promise you that this interview, and all you have told us, shall never pass beyond these walls. No one will be the wiser for it, and we will give you full credit for having attempted something that was too much for you to perform."

She had half risen from her chair when he began, but fell back again in her former position and looked impatiently from him to his companion, who was also regarding her earnestly.

"What are you talking about?" she said sharply.

"YOU, Kate," said the Mayor. "You have given everything you possess to this child. What provision have you made for yourself?"

"Do I look played out?" she said, facing them.

She certainly did not look like anything but a strong, handsome, resolute woman, but the men did not reply.

"That is not all, Kate," continued the Mayor, folding his arms and looking down upon her. "Have you thought what this means? It is the complete renunciation not only of any claim but any interest in your child. That is what you have just signed, and what it will be our duty now to keep you to. From this moment we stand between you and her, as we stand between her and the world. Are you ready to see her grow up away from you, losing even the little recollection she has had of your kindness—passing you in the street without knowing you, perhaps even having you pointed out to her as a person she should avoid? Are you prepared to shut your eyes and ears henceforth to all that you may hear

of her new life, when she is happy, rich, respectable, a courted heiress—perhaps the wife of some great man? Are you ready to accept that she will never know—that no one will ever know—that you had any share in making her so, and that if you should ever breathe it abroad we shall hold it our duty to deny it, and brand the man who takes it up for you as a liar and the slanderer of an honest girl?"

"That's what I came here for," she said curtly, then, regarding them curiously, and running her ringed hand up and down the railed back of her chair, she added, with a half laugh, "What are you playin' me for, boys?"

"But," said Colonel Pendleton, without heeding her, "are you ready to know that in sickness or affliction you will be powerless to help her; that a stranger will take your place at her bedside, that as she has lived without knowing you she will die without that knowledge, or that if through any weakness of yours it came to her then, it would embitter her last thoughts of earth and, dying, she would curse you?"

The smile upon her half-open mouth still fluttered around it, and her curved fingers still ran up and down the rails of the chair-back as if they were the cords of some mute instrument, to which she was trying to give voice. Her rings once or twice grated upon them as if she had at times gripped them closely. But she rose quickly when he paused, said "Yes," sharply, and put the chair back against the wall.

"Then I will send you copies of this tomorrow, and take an assignment of the property."

"I've got the check here for it now," she said, drawing it from her pocket and laying it upon the desk. "There, I reckon that's finished. Good-by!"

The Mayor took up his hat, Colonel Pendleton did the same; both men preceded her to the door, and held it open with grave politeness for her to pass.

"Where are you boys going?" she asked, glancing from the one to the other.

"To see you to your carriage, Mrs. Howard," said the Mayor, in a voice that had become somewhat deeper.

"Through the whole building? Past all the people in the hall and on the stairs? Why, I passed Dan Stewart as I came in."

"If you will allow us?" he said, turning half appealing to Colonel Pendleton, who, without speaking, made a low bow of assent.

A slight flush rose to her face—the first and only change in the even healthy color she had shown during the interview.

"I reckon I won't trouble you, boys, if it's all the same to you," she said, with her half-strident laugh. "YOU mightn't mind being seen—but I would— Good-by."

She held out a hand to each of the men, who remained for an instant silently holding them. Then she passed out of the door, slipping on her close black veil as she did so with a half-funereal suggestion, and they saw her tall, handsome figure fade into the shadows of the long corridor.

"Paul," said the Mayor, reentering the office and turning to his secretary, "do you know who that woman is?"

"Yes, sir."

"She's one in a million! And now forget that you have ever seen her."

CHAPTER I.

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The principal parlor of the New Golden Gate Hotel in San Francisco, fairly reported by the local press as being "truly palatial" in its appointments, and unrivaled in its upholstery, was, nevertheless, on August 5, 1860, of that startling newness that checked any familiarity, and evidently had produced some embarrassment on the limbs of four visitors who had just been ushered into its glories. After hesitating before one or two gorgeous fawn-colored brocaded easy-chairs of appalling and spotless virginity, one of them seated himself despairingly on a tete-a-tete sofa in marked and painful isolation, while another sat uncomfortably upright on a sofa. The two others remained standing, vaguely gazing at the ceiling, and exchanging ostentatiously admiring but hollow remarks about the furniture in unnecessary whispers. Yet they were apparently men of a certain habit of importance and small authority, with more or less critical attitude in their speech.

To them presently entered a young man of about five-and-twenty, with remarkably bright and singularly sympathetic eyes. Having swept the group in a smiling glance, he singled out the lonely occupier of the tete-a-tete, and moved pleasantly towards him. The man rose instantly with an eager gratified look.

"Well, Paul, I didn't allow you'd remember me. It's a matter of four years since we met at Marysville. And now you're bein' a great man you've"—