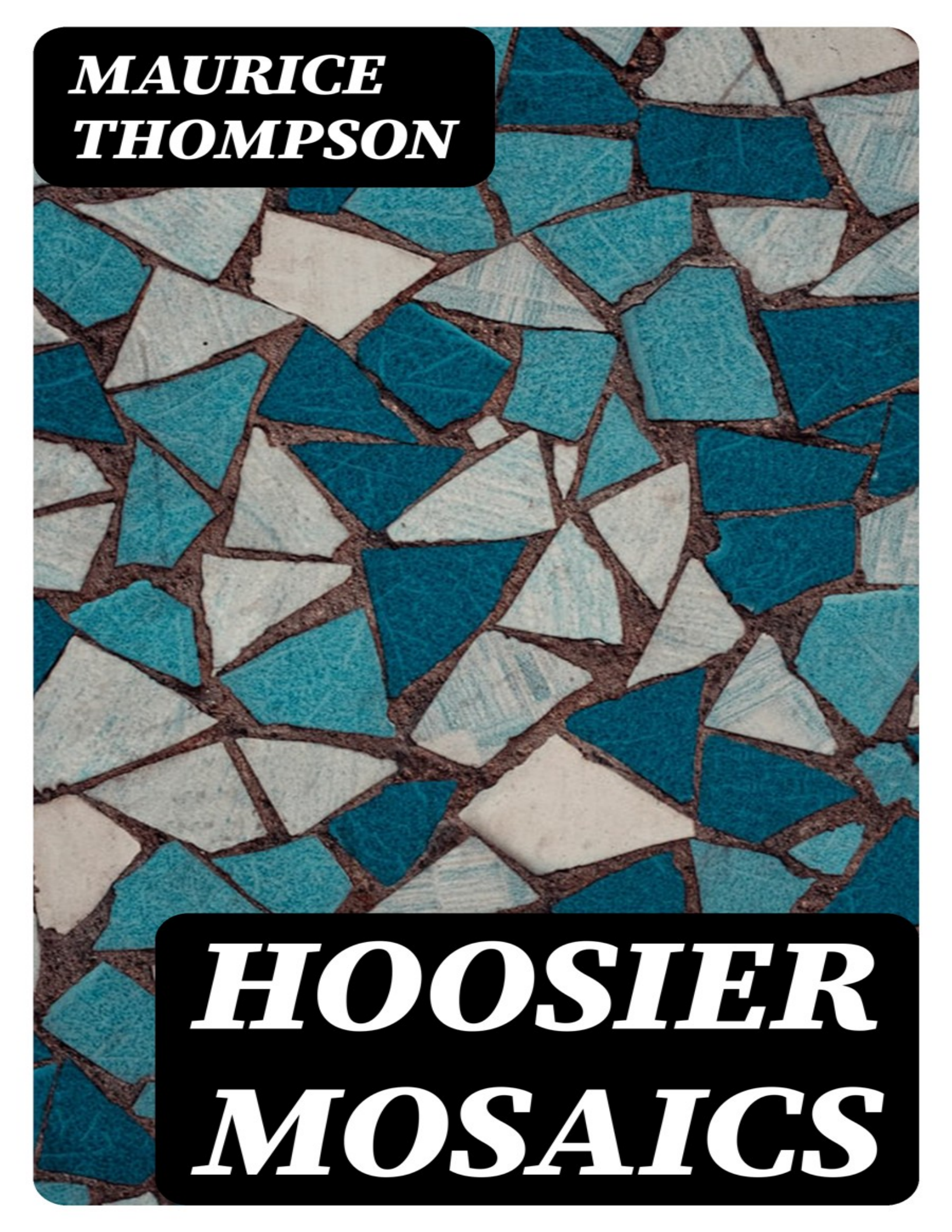




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MOSAICS***

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WAS SHE A BOY?

No matter what business or what pleasure took me, I once, not long ago, went to Colfax. Whisper it not to each other that I was seeking a foreign appointment through the influence of my fellow Hoosier, the late Vice-President of the United States. O no, I didn't go to the Hon. Schuyler Colfax at all; but I went to Colfax, simply, which is a little dingy town, in Clinton County, that was formerly called Midway, because it is half way between Lafayette and Indianapolis. It was and is a place of some three hundred inhabitants, eking out an aguish subsistence, maintaining a swampy, malarious aspect, keeping up a bilious, nay, an atra-bilious color, the year round, by sucking like an attenuated leech at the junction, or, rather, the crossing of the I. C. & L., and the L. C. & S. W. railroads. It lay mouldering, like something lost and forgotten, slowly rotting in the swamp.

I do not mean to attack the inhabitants of Colfax, for they were good people, and deserved a better fate than the eternal rattling the ague took them through from year's end to year's end. Why, they had had the ague so long that they had no respect for it at all. I've seen a woman in Colfax shaking with a chill, spanking a baby that had a chill, and scolding a husband who had a chill, all at once—and I had a dreadful ague on me at the same time! But, as I have said, they were good people, and I suppose they are still. They go quietly about the usual business of dead towns. They have "stores" in which they offer for sale calico, of the big-figured, orange and red sort, surprisingly cheap. They smoke those little Cuba sixes at a half cent apiece, and call them cigars;

they hang round the dépôt, and trade jack-knives and lottery watches on the afternoons of lazy Sundays; they make harmless sport of the incoming and outgoing country folk; and, in a word, keep pretty busy at one thing or another, and above all—they shake.

In Colfax the chief sources of exciting amusement are dog fights and an occasional row at Sheehan's saloon, a doggery of the regular old-fashioned, drink, gamble, rob and fight sort—a low place, known to all the hard bats in the State.

As you pass through the town you will not fail to notice a big sign, outhanging from the front of the largest building on the principal street, which reads: "Union Hotel, 1865." From the muddy suburbs of the place, in every direction, stretch black muck swamps, for the most part heavily timbered with a variety of oaks, interspersed with sycamores, ash, and elms. In the damp, shady labyrinths of these boggy woods millions of lively, wide awake, tuneful mosquitoes are daily manufactured; and out from decaying logs and piles of fermenting leaves, from the green pools and sluggish ditch streams, creeps a noxious gas, known in that region as the "double refined, high pressure, forty hoss power quintessential of the ager!" So, at least, I was told by the landlord of the Union Hotel, and his skin had the color of one who knew.

Notwithstanding what I have said, Colfax, in summer, is not wholly without attractions of a certain kind. It has some yellow dogs and some brindle ones; it has some cattle and some swine; it has some swallows and some spotted pigeons; it has cool, fresh smelling winds, and, after the water has sufficiently dried out, the woods are really glorious with wild roses, violets, turkey-pea blossoms, and wild pinks. But to my story.

I was sitting on the long veranda of the Union Hotel, when a rough but kindly voice said to me:

"Mornin', stranger; gi' me a light, will ye?"

I looked up from the miserable dime novel at which I had been tugging for the last hour, and saw before me a corpulent man of, perhaps, forty-five years of age, who stood quite ready to thrust the charred end of a cigar stump into the bowl of my meerschaum. I gave him a match, and would fain have returned to Angelina St. Fortescue, the heroine of the novel, whom I had left standing on the extreme giddy verge of a sheer Alpine precipice, known, by actual triangulation, to be just seven thousand feet high, swearing she would leap off if Donald Gougerizeout, the robber, persisted further in his rough addresses; but my new friend, the corpulent smoker, seemed bent on a little bit of conversation.

"Thankee, sir. Fine mornin', sir, a'n't it?"

"Beautiful," I replied, raising my head, elevating my arms, and, by a kind of yawn, taking in a deep draught of the fresh spring weather, absorbing it, assimilating it, till, like a wave of retarded electricity, it set my nerves in tune for enjoying the bird songs, and filled my blood with the ecstasy of vigorous health and youth. I, no doubt, just then felt the burden of life much less than did the big yellow dog at my feet, who snapped lazily at the flies.

"Yes, yes, this 'ere's a fine mornin'—julicious, sir, julicious, indeed; but le' me tell ye, sir, this 'ere wind's mighty deceitful—for a fact it is, sir, jist as full of ager as a acorn is of meat. It's blowin' right off'n ponds, and is loaded chock down with the miasm—for a fact it is, sir."

While delivering this speech, the fat man sat down on the bench beside me there in the veranda. By this time I had my

thumbs in the arm holes of my vest, and my chest expanded to its utmost—my lungs going like a steam bellows, which is a way I have in fine weather.

"Monstrous set o' respiratory organs, them o' your'n," he said, eyeing my manœuvres. Just then I discovered that he was a physician of the steam doctor sort, for, glancing down at my feet, I espied his well worn leather medicine bags. I immediately grew polite. Possibly I might ere long need some quinine, or mandrake, or a hot steam bath—anything for the ague!

"Yes, I've got lungs like a porpoise," I replied, "but still the ague may get me. Much sickness about here, Doctor—a—a—what do they call your name?"

"Benjamin Hurd—Doctor Hurd, they call me. I'm the only thorer bred botanic that's in these parts. I do poorty much all the practice about here. Yes, there's considerable of ager and phthisic and bilious fever. Keeps me busy most of my time. These nasty swamps, you know."

After a time our conversation flagged, and the doctor having lit a fresh cigar, we smoked in silence. The wind was driving the dust along the street in heavy waves, and I sat watching a couple of lean, spotted calves making their way against the tide. They held their heads low and shut their eyes, now and then bawling vigorously. Some one up stairs was playing "Days of Absence" on a wretched wheezing accordeon.

"There's a case of asthma, doctor," I said, intending to be witty. But my remark was not noticed. The doctor was in a brown study, from which my words had not startled him. Presently he said, as if talking to himself, and without taking the cigar from his mouth:

"'Twas just a year ago to-night, the 28th day of May, 'at they took 'er away. And he'll die afore day to a dead certainty. Beats all the denied queer things I ever seed or heerd of."

He was poking with the toe of his boot in the dust on the veranda floor, as he spoke, and stealing a glance at his face, I saw that it wore an abstracted, dreamy, perplexed look.

"What was your remark, doctor?" I asked, more to arouse him than from any hope of being interested.

"Hum!—ah, yes," he said, starting, and beginning a vigorous puffing. "Ah, yes, I was cogitatin' over this matter o' Berry Young's. Never have been able to 'count for that, no how. Think about it more an' more every day. What's your theory of it?"

"Can't say, never having heard anything of it," I replied.

"Well, I do say! Thought everybody had hearn of that, any how! It's a rale romance, a reg'lar mystery, sir. It's been talked about, and writ about in the papers so much 'at I s'posed 'at it was knowed of far and wide."

"I've been in California for several years past," I replied, by way of excuse for my ignorance of even the vaguest outline of the affair, whatever it might be.

"Well, you see, a leetle more'n a year ago a gal an' her father come here and stopped at this 'ere very hotel. The man must 'a' been som'res near sixty years old; but the gal was young, and jist the poortiest thing I ever seed in all my life. I couldn't describe how she looked at all; but everybody 'at saw her said she was the beautifulest creatur they ever laid eyes onto. Where these two folks come from nobody ever knowed, but they seemed like mighty nice sort of persons, and everybody liked 'em, 'specially the gal. Somehow, from the very start, a kind of mystery hung

'round 'em. They seemed always to have gobs o' money, and onct in awhile some little thing'd turn up to make folks kinder juberous somehow 'at they wasn't jist what they ginerally seemed to be. But that gal was fascinatin' as a snake, and as poorty as any picter. Her flesh looked like tinted wax mixed with moon-shine, and her eyes was as clear as a lime-stone spring—though they was dark as night. She was that full of restless animal life 'at she couldn't set still—she roamed round like a leopard in a cage, and she'd romp equal to a ten-year-old boy. Well, as mought be expected, sich a gal as that 'ere 'd 'tract attention in these parts, and I must say 'at the young fellows here did git 'bominable sweet on her. 'Casionally two of 'em 'd git out in the swamps and have a awful fight on her 'count; but she 'peared to pay precious little 'tention to any of 'em till finally Berry Young stepped in and jist went for 'er like mad, and she took to 'm. Berry was r'ally the nicest and intelligentest young man in all this country. He writ poetry for the papers, sir—snatchin' good poetry, too—and had got to be talked of a right smart for his larnin', an' 'complishments. He was good lookin', too; powerful handsome, for a fact, sir. So they was to be married, Berry and the gal, an' the time it was sot, an' the day it come, an' all was ready, an' the young folks was on the floor, and the 'squire was jist a commencin' to say the ceremony, when lo! and beholden, four big, awful, rough lookin' men rushed in with big pistols and mighty terrible bowie knives, and big papers and big seals, and said they was a sheriff and possum from Kaintucky. They jist jumped right onto the gal an' her father an' han'cuffed 'em, an' took 'em!"

"Handcuffed them and took them!" I repeated, suddenly growing intensely interested. This was beating my dime novel, for sensation, all hollow.

"Yes, sir, han'cuffed 'em an' took 'em, an' away they went, an' they've not been hearn of since to this day. But the mysteriousest thing about the whole business was that when the sheriff grabbed the gal he called her George, and said she wasn't no gal at all, but jist a terrible onery boy 'at had been stealin' an' counterfeitin' an' robbin' all round everywhere. What d'ye think of that?"

"A remarkably strange affair, certainly," I replied; "and do you say that the father and the girl have not since been heard from?"

"Never a breath. The thing got into all the newspapers and raised a awful rumpus, and it turned out that it wasn't no sheriff 'at come there; but some dark, mysterious kidnappin' transaction 'at nobody could account for. Detectives was put on their track an' follered 'em to Injun territory an' there lost 'em. Some big robberies was connected with the affair, but folks could never git head nor tail of the partic'lars."

"And it wasn't a real sheriff's arrest, then?" said I.

"No, sir, 'twas jist a mystery. Some kind of a dodge of a band of desperadoes to avoid the law some way. The papers tried to explain it, but I never could see any sense to it. 'Twas a clean, dead mystery. But I was goin' on to tell ye 'at Berry Young took it awful hard 'bout the gal, an' he's been sort o' sinkin' away ever sence, an' now he's jist ready to wink out. Yonder's where Berry lives, in that 'ere white cottage house with the vines round the winder. He's desp'rit sick—a sort o' consumption. I'm goin' to see 'im now; good mornin' to ye."

Thus abruptly ending our interview, the doctor took up his medicine bag and went his way. He left me in a really excited state of mind; the story of itself was so strange, and the narrator had told it so solemnly and graphically. I suppose, too, that I must have been in just the proper state

of mind for that rough outline, that cartoon of a most startling and mysterious affair, to become deeply impressed in my mind, perhaps, in the most fascinating and fantastic light possible. A thirst to know more of the story took strong hold on my mind, as if I had been reading a tantalizing romance and had found the leaves torn out just where the mystery was to be explained. I half closed my eyes to better keep in the lines and shades of the strange picture. Its influence lay upon me like a spell. I enjoyed it. It was a luxury.

The wings of the morning wind fanned the heat into broken waves, rising and sinking, and flowing on, with murmur and flash and glimmer, to the cool green ways of the woods, and, like the wind, my fancy went out among golden fleece clouds and into shady places, following the thread of this new romance. I cannot give a sufficient reason why the story took so fast a hold on me. But it did grip my mind and master it. It appeared to me the most intensely strange affair I had ever heard of.

While I sat there, lost in reflection, with my eyes bent on a very unpromising pig, that wallowed in the damp earth by the town pump, the landlord of the hotel came out and took a seat beside me. I gave him a pipe of my tobacco and forthwith began plying him with questions touching the affair of which the doctor had spoken. He confirmed the story, and added to its mystery by going minutely into its details. He gave the names of the father and daughter as Charles Afton and Ollie Afton.

Ollie Afton! Certainly no name sounds sweeter! How is it that these gifted, mysteriously beautiful persons always have musical names!

"Ah," said the landlord, "you'd ort to have seen that boy!"

"Boy!" I echoed.

"Well, gal or boy, one or t'other, the wonderfulest human bein' I ever see in all the days o' my life! Lips as red as ripe cur'n's, and for ever smilin'. Such smiles—oonkoo! they hurt a feller all over, they was so sweet. She was tall an' dark, an' had black hair that curled short all 'round her head. Her skin was wonderful clear and so was her eyes. But it was the way she looked at you that got you. Ah, sir, she had a power in them eyes, to be sure!"

The pig got up from his muddy place by the pump, grunted, as if satisfied, and slowly strolled off; a country lad drove past, riding astride the hounds of a wagon; a pigeon lit on the comb of the roof of Sheehan's saloon, which was just across the street, and began pluming itself. Just then the landlord's little sharp-nosed, weasel-eyed boy came out and said, in a very subdued tone of voice:

"Pap, mam says 'at if you don't kill 'er that 'ere chicken for dinner you kin go widout any fing to eat all she cares."

The landlord's spouse was a red-headed woman, so he got up very suddenly and took himself into the house. But before he got out of hearing the little boy remarked:

"Pap, I speaks for the gizzard of that 'ere chicken, d'ye hear, now?"

I sat there till the dinner hour, watching the soft pink and white vapors that rolled round the verge of the horizon. I was thoroughly saturated with romance. Strange, that here, in this dingy little out-of-the-way village, should have transpired one of the most wonderful mysteries history may ever hold!

At dinner the landlord talked volubly of the Afton affair, giving it as his opinion that the Aftons were persons tinged

with negro blood, and had been kidnapped into slavery.

"They was jist as white, an' whiter, too, than I am," he went on, "but them Southerners'd jist as soon sell one person as 'nother, anyhow."

I noticed particularly that the little boy got his choice bit of the fowl. He turned his head one side and ate like a cat.

When the meal was over I was again joined by Doctor Hurd on the verandah. He reported Berry Young still alive, but not able to live till midnight. I noticed that the doctor was nervous and kept his eyes fixed on Sheehan's saloon.

"Stranger," said he, leaning over close to me, and speaking in a low, guarded way, "things is workin' dasted curious 'bout now—sure's gun's iron they jist is!"

"Where—how—in what way, doctor?" I stammered, taken aback by his behavior.

"Sumpum's up, as sure as Ned!" he replied, wagging his head.

"Doctor," I said, petulantly, "if you would be a trifle more explicit I could probably guess, with some show of certainty, at what you mean!"

"Can't ye hear? Are ye deaf? Did ye ever, in all yer born days, hear a voice like that ere 'un? Listen!"

Sure enough, a voice of thrilling power, a rich, heavy, quavering alto, accompanied by some one thrumming on a guitar, trickled and gurgled, and poured through the open window of Sheehan's saloon. The song was a wild, drinking carol, full of rough, reckless wit, but I listened, entranced, till it was done.