

***BRET
HARTE***



***THANKFUL
BLOSSOM***

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Thankful Blossom

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DigiCat, 2022

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I

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The time was the year of grace 1779; the locality, Morristown, New Jersey.

It was bitterly cold. A northeasterly wind had been stiffening the mud of the morning's thaw into a rigid record of that day's wayfaring on the Baskingridge road. The hoof-prints of cavalry, the deep ruts left by baggage-wagons, and the deeper channels worn by artillery, lay stark and cold in the waning light of an April day. There were icicles on the fences, a rime of silver on the windward bark of maples, and occasional bare spots on the rocky protuberances of the road, as if Nature had worn herself out at the knees and elbows through long waiting for the tardy spring. A few leaves disinterred by the thaw became crisp again, and rustled in the wind, making the summer a thing so remote that all human hope and conjecture fled before them.

Here and there the wayside fences and walls were broken down or dismantled; and beyond them fields of snow downtrodden and discolored, and strewn with fragments of leather, camp equipage, harness, and cast-off clothing, showed traces of the recent encampment and congregation of men. On some there were still standing the ruins of rudely constructed cabins, or the semblance of fortification

equally rude and incomplete. A fox stealing along a half-filled ditch, a wolf slinking behind an earthwork, typified the human abandonment and desolation.

One by one the faint sunset tints faded from the sky; the far-off crests of the Orange hills grew darker; the nearer files of pines on the Whatnong Mountain became a mere black background; and, with the coming-on of night, came too an icy silence that seemed to stiffen and arrest the very wind itself. The crisp leaves no longer rustled; the waving whips of alder and willow snapped no longer; the icicles no longer dropped a cold fruitage from barren branch and spray; and the roadside trees relapsed into stony quiet, so that the sound of horse's hoofs breaking through the thin, dull, lustreless films of ice that patched the furrowed road, might have been heard by the nearest Continental picket a mile away.

Either a knowledge of this, or the difficulties of the road, evidently irritated the viewless horseman. Long before he became visible, his voice was heard in half-suppressed objurgation of the road, of his beast, of the country folk, and the country generally. "Steady, you jade!" "Jump, you devil, jump!" "Curse the road, and the beggarly farmers that durst not mend it!" And then the moving bulk of horse and rider suddenly arose above the hill, floundered and splashed, and then as suddenly disappeared, and the rattling hoof-beats ceased.

The stranger had turned into a deserted lane still cushioned with untrodden snow. A stone wall on one hand—in better keeping and condition than the boundary monuments of the outlying fields—bespoke protection and

exclusiveness. Half-way up the lane the rider checked his speed, and, dismounting, tied his horse to a wayside sapling. This done, he went cautiously forward toward the end of the lane, and a farm-house from whose gable window a light twinkled through the deepening night. Suddenly he stopped, hesitated, and uttered an impatient ejaculation. The light had disappeared. He turned sharply on his heel, and retraced his steps until opposite a farm-shed that stood a few paces from the wall. Hard by, a large elm cast the gaunt shadow of its leafless limbs on the wall and surrounding snow. The stranger stepped into this shadow, and at once seemed to become a part of its trembling intricacies.

At the present moment it was certainly a bleak place for a tryst. There was snow yet clinging to the trunk of the tree, and a film of ice on its bark; the adjacent wall was slippery with frost, and fringed with icicles. Yet in all there was a ludicrous suggestion of some sentiment past and unseasonable: several dislodged stones of the wall were so disposed as to form a bench and seats, and under the elm-tree's film of ice could still be seen carved on its bark the effigy of a heart, divers initials, and the legend, "Thine Forever."

The stranger, however, kept his eyes fixed only on the farm-shed and the open field beside it. Five minutes passed in fruitless expectancy. Ten minutes! And then the rising moon slowly lifted herself over the black range of the Orange hills, and looked at him, blushing a little, as if the appointment were her own.

The face and figure thus illuminated were those of a strongly built, handsome man of thirty, so soldierly in bearing that it needed not the buff epaulets and facings to show his captain's rank in the Continental army. Yet there was something in his facial expression that contradicted the manliness of his presence,—an irritation and querulousness that were inconsistent with his size and strength. This fretfulness increased as the moments went by without sign or motion in the faintly lit field beyond, until, in peevish exasperation, he began to kick the nearer stones against the wall.

"Moo-oo-w!"

The soldier started. Not that he was frightened, nor that he had failed to recognize in these prolonged syllables the deep-chested, half-drowsy low of a cow, but that it was so near him—evidently just beside the wall. If an object so bulky could have approached him so near without his knowledge, might not she—

"Moo-oo!"

He drew nearer the wall cautiously. "So, Cushy! Mooly! Come up, Bossy!" he said persuasively. "Moo"—but here the low unexpectedly broke down, and ended in a very human and rather musical little laugh.

"Thankful!" exclaimed the soldier, echoing the laugh a trifle uneasily and affectedly as a hooded little head arose above the wall.

"Well," replied the figure, supporting a prettily rounded chin on her hands, as she laid her elbows complacently on the wall,— "well, what did you expect? Did you want me to stand here all night, while you skulked moonstruck under a