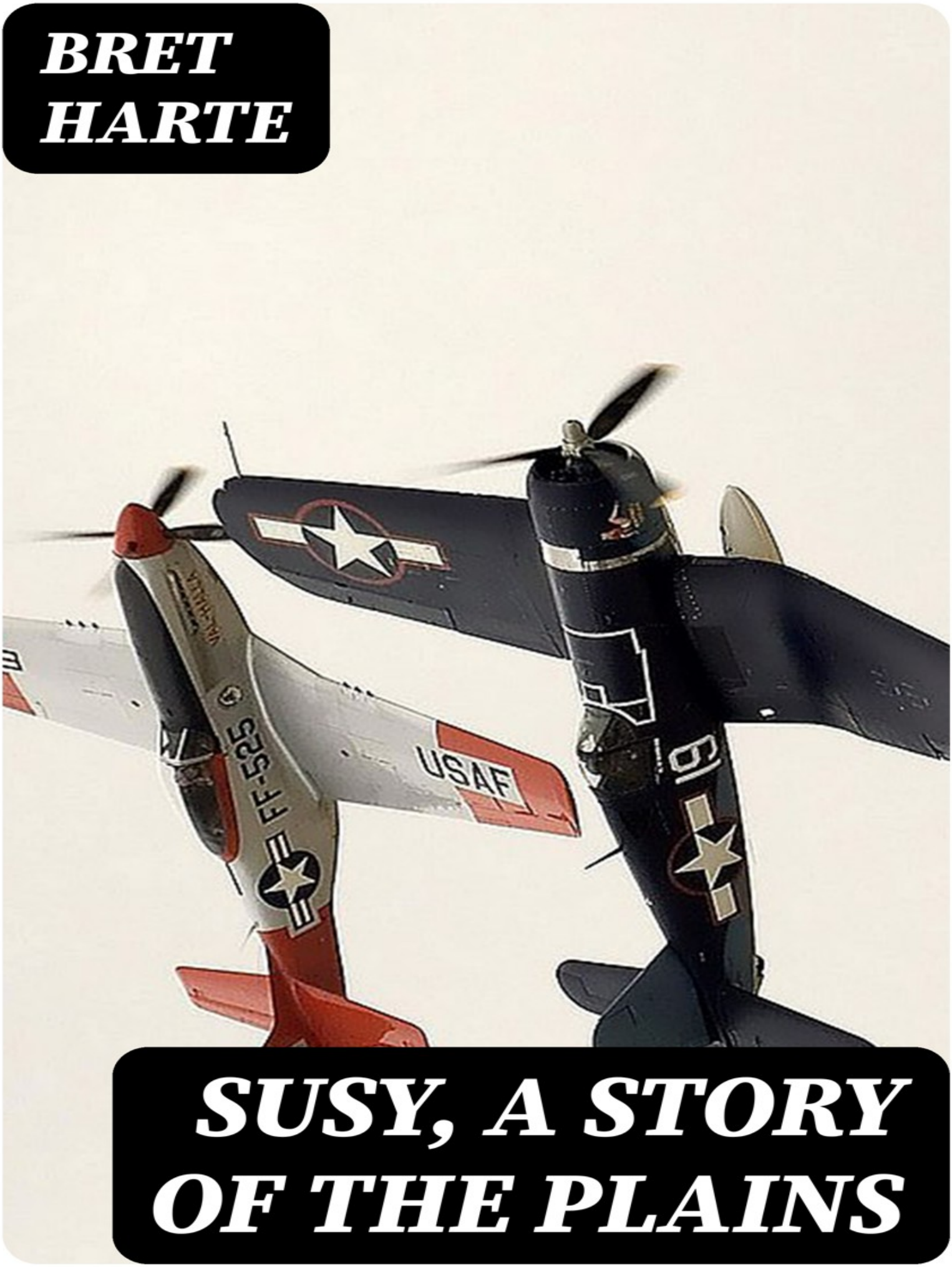
BRET HARTE



SUSY, A STORY OF THE PLAINS

Bret Harte

Susy, a Story of the Plains

EAN 8596547368007

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

Where the San Leandro turnpike stretches its dusty, hot, and interminable length along the valley, at a point where the heat and dust have become intolerable, the monotonous expanse of wild oats on either side illimitable, and the distant horizon apparently remoter than ever, it suddenly slips between a stunted thicket or hedge of “scrub oaks,” which until that moment had been undistinguishable above the long, misty, quivering level of the grain. The thicket rising gradually in height, but with a regular slope whose gradient had been determined by centuries of western trade winds, presently becomes a fair wood of live-oak, and a few hundred yards further at last assumes the aspect of a primeval forest. A delicious coolness fills the air; the long, shadowy aisles greet the aching eye with a soothing twilight; the murmur of unseen brooks is heard, and, by a strange irony, the enormous, widely-spaced stacks of wild oats are replaced by a carpet of tiny-leaved mosses and chickweed at the roots of trees, and the minutest clover in more open spaces. The baked and cracked adobe soil of the now vanished plains is exchanged for a heavy red mineral dust and gravel, rocks and boulders make their appearance, and at times the road is crossed by the white veins of quartz. It is still the San Leandro turnpike,—a few miles later to rise from this canada into the upper plains again,—but it is also the actual gateway and avenue to the Robles Rancho. When the departing visitors of Judge Peyton, now owner of the rancho, reach the outer plains again, after

twenty minutes' drive from the house, the canada, rancho, and avenue have as completely disappeared from view as if they had been swallowed up in the plain.

A cross road from the turnpike is the usual approach to the casa or mansion,—a long, low quadrangle of brown adobe wall in a bare but gently sloping eminence. And here a second surprise meets the stranger. He seems to have emerged from the forest upon another illimitable plain, but one utterly trackless, wild, and desolate. It is, however, only a lower terrace of the same valley, and, in fact, comprises the three square leagues of the Robles Rancho. Uncultivated and savage as it appears, given over to wild cattle and horses that sometimes sweep in frightened bands around the very casa itself, the long south wall of the corral embraces an orchard of gnarled pear-trees, an old vineyard, and a venerable garden of olives and oranges. A manor, formerly granted by Charles V. to Don Vincente Robles, of Andalusia, of pious and ascetic memory, it had commended itself to Judge Peyton, of Kentucky, a modern heretic pioneer of bookish tastes and secluded habits, who had bought it of Don Vincente's descendants. Here Judge Peyton seemed to have realized his idea of a perfect climate, and a retirement, half-studious, half-active, with something of the seignioralty of the old slaveholder that he had been. Here, too, he had seen the hope of restoring his wife's health—for which he had undertaken the overland emigration—more than fulfilled in Mrs. Peyton's improved physical condition, albeit at the expense, perhaps, of some of the languorous graces of ailing American wifehood.

It was with a curious recognition of this latter fact that Judge Peyton watched his wife crossing the patio or courtyard with her arm around the neck of her adopted daughter “Suzette.” A sudden memory crossed his mind of the first day that he had seen them together,—the day that he had brought the child and her boy-companion—two estrays from an emigrant train on the plains—to his wife in camp. Certainly Mrs. Peyton was stouter and stronger fibred; the wonderful Californian climate had materialized her figure, as it had their Eastern fruits and flowers, but it was stranger that “Susy”—the child of homelier frontier blood and parentage, whose wholesome peasant plumpness had at first attracted them—should have grown thinner and more graceful, and even seemed to have gained the delicacy his wife had lost. Six years had imperceptibly wrought this change; it had never struck him before so forcibly as on this day of Susy's return from the convent school at Santa Clara for the holidays.

The woman and child had reached the broad veranda which, on one side of the patio, replaced the old Spanish corridor. It was the single modern innovation that Peyton had allowed himself when he had broken the quadrangular symmetry of the old house with a wooden “annexe” or addition beyond the walls. It made a pleasant lounging-place, shadowed from the hot midday sun by sloping roofs and awnings, and sheltered from the boisterous afternoon trade winds by the opposite side of the court. But Susy did not seem inclined to linger there long that morning, in spite of Mrs. Peyton's evident desire for a maternal tete-a-tete. The nervous preoccupation and capricious ennui of an

indulged child showed in her pretty but discontented face, and knit her curved eyebrows, and Peyton saw a look of pain pass over his wife's face as the young girl suddenly and half-laughingly broke away and fluttered off towards the old garden.

Mrs. Peyton looked up and caught her husband's eye.

“I am afraid Susy finds it more dull here every time she returns,” she said, with an apologetic smile. “I am glad she has invited one of her school friends to come for a visit to-morrow. You know, yourself, John,” she added, with a slight partisan attitude, “that the lonely old house and wild plain are not particularly lively for young people, however much they may suit YOUR ways.”

“It certainly must be dull if she can't stand it for three weeks in the year,” said her husband dryly. “But we really cannot open the San Francisco house for her summer vacation, nor can we move from the rancho to a more fashionable locality. Besides, it will do her good to run wild here. I can remember when she wasn't so fastidious. In fact, I was thinking just now how changed she was from the day when we picked her up”—

“How often am I to remind you, John,” interrupted the lady, with some impatience, “that we agreed never to speak of her past, or even to think of her as anything but our own child. You know how it pains me! And the poor dear herself has forgotten it, and thinks of us only as her own parents. I really believe that if that wretched father and mother of hers had not been killed by the Indians, or were to come to life again, she would neither know them nor care for them. I mean, of course, John,” she said, averting her eyes from a

slightly cynical smile on her husband's face, “that it's only natural for young children to be forgetful, and ready to take new impressions.”

“And as long, dear, as WE are not the subjects of this youthful forgetfulness, and she isn't really finding US as stupid as the rancho,” replied her husband cheerfully, “I suppose we mustn't complain.”

“John, how can you talk such nonsense?” said Mrs. Peyton impatiently. “But I have no fear of that,” she added, with a slightly ostentatious confidence. “I only wish I was as sure”—

“Of what?”

“Of nothing happening that could take her from us. I do not mean death, John,—like our first little one. That does not happen to one twice; but I sometimes dread”—

“What? She's only fifteen, and it's rather early to think about the only other inevitable separation,—marriage. Come, Ally, this is mere fancy. She has been given up to us by her family,—at least, by all that we know are left of them. I have legally adopted her. If I have not made her my heiress, it is because I prefer to leave everything to YOU, and I would rather she should know that she was dependent upon you for the future than upon me.”

“And I can make a will in her favor if I want to?” said Mrs. Peyton quickly.

“Always,” responded her husband smilingly; “but you have ample time to think of that, I trust. Meanwhile I have some news for you which may make Susy's visit to the rancho this time less dull to her. You remember Clarence

Brant, the boy who was with her when we picked her up, and who really saved her life?”

“No, I don't,” said Mrs. Peyton pettishly, “nor do I want to! You know, John, how distasteful and unpleasant it is for me to have those dreary, petty, and vulgar details of the poor child's past life recalled, and, thank Heaven, I have forgotten them except when you choose to drag them before me. You agreed, long ago, that we were never to talk of the Indian massacre of her parents, so that we could also ignore it before her; then why do you talk of her vulgar friends, who are just as unpleasant? Please let us drop the past.”

“Willingly, my dear; but, unfortunately, we cannot make others do it. And this is a case in point. It appears that this boy, whom we brought to Sacramento to deliver to a relative”—

“And who was a wicked little impostor,—you remember that yourself, John, for he said that he was the son of Colonel Brant, and that he was dead; and you know, and my brother Harry knew, that Colonel Brant was alive all the time, and that he was lying, and Colonel Brant was not his father,” broke in Mrs. Peyton impatiently.

“As it seems you do remember that much,” said Peyton dryly, “it is only just to him that I should tell you that it appears that he was not an impostor. His story was TRUE. I have just learned that Colonel Brant WAS actually his father, but had concealed his lawless life here, as well as his identity, from the boy. He was really that vague relative to whom Clarence was confided, and under that disguise he afterwards protected the boy, had him carefully educated at

the Jesuit College of San Jose, and, dying two years ago in that filibuster raid in Mexico, left him a considerable fortune."

"And what has he to do with Susy's holidays?" said Mrs. Peyton, with uneasy quickness. "John, you surely cannot expect her ever to meet this common creature again, with his vulgar ways. His wretched associates like that Jim Hooker, and, as you yourself admit, the blood of an assassin, duelist, and—Heaven knows what kind of a pirate his father wasn't at the last—in his veins! You don't believe that a lad of this type, however much of his father's ill-gotten money he may have, can be fit company for your daughter? You never could have thought of inviting him here?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I have done, Ally," said the smiling but unmoved Peyton; "but I'm still more afraid that your conception of his present condition is an unfair one, like your remembrance of his past. Father Sobriente, whom I met at San Jose yesterday, says he is very intelligent, and thoroughly educated, with charming manners and refined tastes. His father's money, which they say was an investment for him in Carson's Bank five years ago, is as good as any one's, and his father's blood won't hurt him in California or the Southwest. At least, he is received everywhere, and Don Juan Robinson was his guardian. Indeed, as far as social status goes, it might be a serious question if the actual daughter of the late John Silsbee, of Pike County, and the adopted child of John Peyton was in the least his superior. As Father Sobriente evidently knew Clarence's former companionship with Susy and her

parents, it would be hardly politic for us to ignore it or seem to be ashamed of it. So I intrusted Sobriente with an invitation to young Brant on the spot.”

Mrs. Peyton's impatience, indignation, and opposition, which had successively given way before her husband's quiet, masterful good humor, here took the form of a neurotic fatalism. She shook her head with superstitious resignation.

“Didn't I tell you, John, that I always had a dread of something coming”—

“But if it comes in the shape of a shy young lad, I see nothing singularly portentous in it. They have not met since they were quite small; their tastes have changed; if they don't quarrel and fight they may be equally bored with each other. Yet until then, in one way or another, Clarence will occupy the young lady's vacant caprice, and her school friend, Mary Rogers, will be here, you know, to divide his attentions, and,” added Peyton, with mock solemnity, “preserve the interest of strict propriety. Shall I break it to her,—or will you?”

“No,—yes,” hesitated Mrs. Peyton; “perhaps I had better.”

“Very well, I leave his character in your hands; only don't prejudice her into a romantic fancy for him.” And Judge Peyton lounged smilingly away.

Then two little tears forced themselves from Mrs. Peyton's eyes. Again she saw that prospect of uninterrupted companionship with Susy, upon which each successive year she had built so many maternal hopes and confidences, fade away before her. She dreaded the coming of Susy's

school friend, who shared her daughter's present thoughts and intimacy, although she had herself invited her in a more desperate dread of the child's abstracted, discontented eyes; she dreaded the advent of the boy who had shared Susy's early life before she knew her; she dreaded the ordeal of breaking the news and perhaps seeing that pretty animation spring into her eyes, which she had begun to believe no solicitude or tenderness of her own ever again awakened,—and yet she dreaded still more that her husband should see it too. For the love of this recreated woman, although not entirely materialized with her changed fibre, had nevertheless become a coarser selfishness fostered by her loneliness and limited experience. The maternal yearning left unsatisfied by the loss of her first-born had never been filled by Susy's thoughtless acceptance of it; she had been led astray by the child's easy transference of dependence and the forgetfulness of youth, and was only now dimly conscious of finding herself face to face with an alien nature.

She started to her feet and followed the direction that Susy had taken. For a moment she had to front the afternoon trade wind which chilled her as it swept the plain beyond the gateway, but was stopped by the adobe wall, above whose shelter the stunted treetops—through years of exposure—slanted as if trimmed by gigantic shears. At first, looking down the venerable alley of fantastic, knotted shapes, she saw no trace of Susy. But half way down the gleam of a white skirt against a thicket of dark olives showed her the young girl sitting on a bench in a neglected arbor. In the midst of this formal and faded pageantry she

looked charmingly fresh, youthful, and pretty; and yet the unfortunate woman thought that her attitude and expression at that moment suggested more than her fifteen years of girlhood. Her golden hair still hung unfettered over her straight, boy-like back and shoulders; her short skirt still showed her childish feet and ankles; yet there seemed to be some undefined maturity or a vague womanliness about her that stung Mrs. Peyton's heart. The child was growing away from her, too!

“Susy!”

The young girl raised her head quickly; her deep violet eyes seemed also to leap with a sudden suspicion, and with a half-mechanical, secretive movement, that might have been only a schoolgirl's instinct, her right hand had slipped a paper on which she was scribbling between the leaves of her book. Yet the next moment, even while looking interrogatively at her mother, she withdrew the paper quietly, tore it up into small pieces, and threw them on the ground.

But Mrs. Peyton was too preoccupied with her news to notice the circumstance, and too nervous in her haste to be tactful. “Susy, your father has invited that boy, Clarence Brant,—you know that creature we picked up and assisted on the plains, when you were a mere baby,—to come down here and make us a visit.”

Her heart seemed to stop beating as she gazed breathlessly at the girl. But Susy's face, unchanged except for the alert, questioning eyes, remained fixed for a moment; then a childish smile of wonder opened her small red mouth, expanded it slightly as she said simply:—

“Lor, mar! He hasn't, really!”

Inexpressibly, yet unreasonably reassured, Mrs. Peyton hurriedly recounted her husband's story of Clarence's fortune, and was even joyfully surprised into some fairness of statement.

“But you don't remember him much, do you, dear? It was so long ago, and—you are quite a young lady now,” she added eagerly.

The open mouth was still fixed; the wondering smile would have been idiotic in any face less dimpled, rosy, and piquant than Susy's. After a slight gasp, as if in still incredulous and partly reminiscent preoccupation, she said without replying:—

“How funny! When is he coming?”

“Day after to-morrow,” returned Mrs. Peyton, with a contented smile.

“And Mary Rogers will be here, too. It will be real fun for her.”

Mrs. Peyton was more than reassured. Half ashamed of her jealous fears, she drew Susy's golden head towards her and kissed it. And the young girl, still reminiscent, with smilingly abstracted toleration, returned the caress.

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

It was not thought inconsistent with Susy's capriciousness that she should declare her intention the next morning of driving her pony buggy to Santa Inez to anticipate the stage-coach and fetch Mary Rogers from the station. Mrs. Peyton, as usual, supported the young lady's whim and opposed her husband's objections.

“Because the stage-coach happens to pass our gate, John, it is no reason why Susy shouldn't drive her friend from Santa Inez if she prefers it. It's only seven miles, and you can send Pedro to follow her on horseback to see that she comes to no harm.”

“But that isn't Pedro's business,” said Peyton.

“He ought to be proud of the privilege,” returned the lady, with a toss of her head.

Peyton smiled grimly, but yielded; and when the stage-coach drew up the next afternoon at the Santa Inez Hotel, Susy was already waiting in her pony carriage before it. Although the susceptible driver, expressman, and passengers generally, charmed with this golden-haired vision, would have gladly protracted the meeting of the two young friends, the transfer of Mary Rogers from the coach to the carriage was effected with considerable hauteur and youthful dignity by Susy. Even Mary Rogers, two years Susy's senior, a serious brunette, whose good-humor did not, however, impair her capacity for sentiment, was impressed and even embarrassed by her demeanor; but only for a moment. When they had driven from the hotel

and were fairly hidden again in the dust of the outlying plain, with the discreet Pedro hovering in the distance, Susy dropped the reins, and, grasping her companion's arm, gasped, in tones of dramatic intensity:—

“He's been heard from, and is coming HERE!”

“Who?”

A sickening sense that her old confidante had already lost touch with her—they had been separated for nearly two weeks—might have passed through Susy's mind.

“Who?” she repeated, with a vicious shake of Mary's arm, “why, Clarence Brant, of course.”

“No!” said Mary, vaguely.

Nevertheless, Susy went on rapidly, as if to neutralize the effect of her comrade's vacuity.

“You never could have imagined it! Never! Even I, when mother told me, I thought I should have fainted, and ALL would have been revealed!”

“But,” hesitated the still wondering confidante, “I thought that was all over long ago. You haven't seen him nor heard from him since that day you met accidentally at Santa Clara, two years ago, have you?”

Susy's eyes shot a blue ray of dark but unutterable significance into Mary's, and then were carefully averted. Mary Rogers, although perfectly satisfied that Susy had never seen Clarence since, nevertheless instantly accepted and was even thrilled with this artful suggestion of a clandestine correspondence. Such was the simple faith of youthful friendship.

“Mother knows nothing of it, of course, and a word from you or him would ruin everything,” continued the breathless

Susy. “That's why I came to fetch you and warn you. You must see him first, and warn him at any cost. If I hadn't run every risk to come here to-day, Heaven knows what might have happened! What do you think of the ponies, dear? They're my own, and the sweetest! This one's Susy, that one Clarence,—but privately, you know. Before the world and in the stables he's only Birdie.”

“But I thought you wrote to me that you called them 'Paul and Virginie,'” said Mary doubtfully.

“I do, sometimes,” said Susy calmly. “But one has to learn to suppress one's feelings, dear!” Then quickly, “I do so hate deceit, don't you? Tell me, don't you think deceit perfectly hateful?”

Without waiting for her friend's loyal assent, she continued rapidly: “And he's just rolling in wealth! and educated, papa says, to the highest degree!”

“Then,” began Mary, “if he's coming with your mother's consent, and if you haven't quarreled, and it is not broken off, I should think you'd be just delighted.”

But another quick flash from Susy's eyes dispersed these beatific visions of the future. “Hush!” she said, with suppressed dramatic intensity. “You know not what you say! There's an awful mystery hangs over him. Mary Rogers,” continued the young girl, approaching her small mouth to her confidante's ear in an appalling whisper. “His father was —a PIRATE! Yes—lived a pirate and was killed a pirate!”

The statement, however, seemed to be partly ineffective. Mary Rogers was startled but not alarmed, and even protested feebly. “But,” she said, “if the father's dead, what's that to do with Clarence? He was always with your

papa—so you told me, dear—or other people, and couldn't catch anything from his own father. And I'm sure, dearest, he always seemed nice and quiet."

"Yes, SEEMED," returned Susy darkly, "but that's all you know! It was in his BLOOD. You know it always is,—you read it in the books,—you could see it in his eye. There were times, my dear, when he was thwarted,—when the slightest attention from another person to me revealed it! I have kept it to myself,—but think, dearest, of the effects of jealousy on that passionate nature! Sometimes I tremble to look back upon it."

Nevertheless, she raised her hands and threw back her lovely golden mane from her childish shoulders with an easy, untroubled gesture. It was singular that Mary Rogers, leaning back comfortably in the buggy, also accepted these heart-rending revelations with comfortably knitted brows and luxuriously contented concern. If she found it difficult to recognize in the picture just drawn by Susy the quiet, gentle, and sadly reserved youth she had known, she said nothing. After a silence, lazily watching the distant wheeling vacquero, she said:—

"And your father always sends an outrider like that with you? How nice! So picturesque—and like the old Spanish days."

"Hush!" said Susy, with another unutterable glance.

But this time Mary was in full sympathetic communion with her friend, and equal to any incoherent hiatus of revelation.

"No!" she said promptly, "you don't mean it!"

“Don't ask me, I daren't say anything to papa, for he'd be simply furious. But there are times when we're alone, and Pedro wheels down so near with SUCH a look in his black eyes, that I'm all in a tremble. It's dreadful! They say he's a real Briones,—and he sometimes says something in Spanish, ending with 'senorita,' but I pretend I don't understand.”

“And I suppose that if anything should happen to the ponies, he'd just risk his life to save you.”

“Yes,—and it would be so awful,—for I just hate him!”

“But if I was with you, dear, he couldn't expect you to be as grateful as if you were alone. Susy!” she continued after a pause, “if you just stirred up the ponies a little so as to make 'em go fast, perhaps he might think they'd got away from you, and come dashing down here. It would be so funny to see him,—wouldn't it?”

The two girls looked at each other; their eyes sparkled already with a fearful joy,—they drew a long breath of guilty anticipation. For a moment Susy even believed in her imaginary sketch of Pedro's devotion.

“Papa said I wasn't to use the whip except in a case of necessity,” she said, reaching for the slender silver-handled toy, and setting her pretty lips together with the added determination of disobedience. “G'long!”—and she laid the lash smartly on the shining backs of the animals.

They were wiry, slender brutes of Mojave Indian blood, only lately broken to harness, and still undisciplined in temper. The lash sent them rearing into the air, where, forgetting themselves in the slackened traces and loose reins, they came down with a succession of bounds that