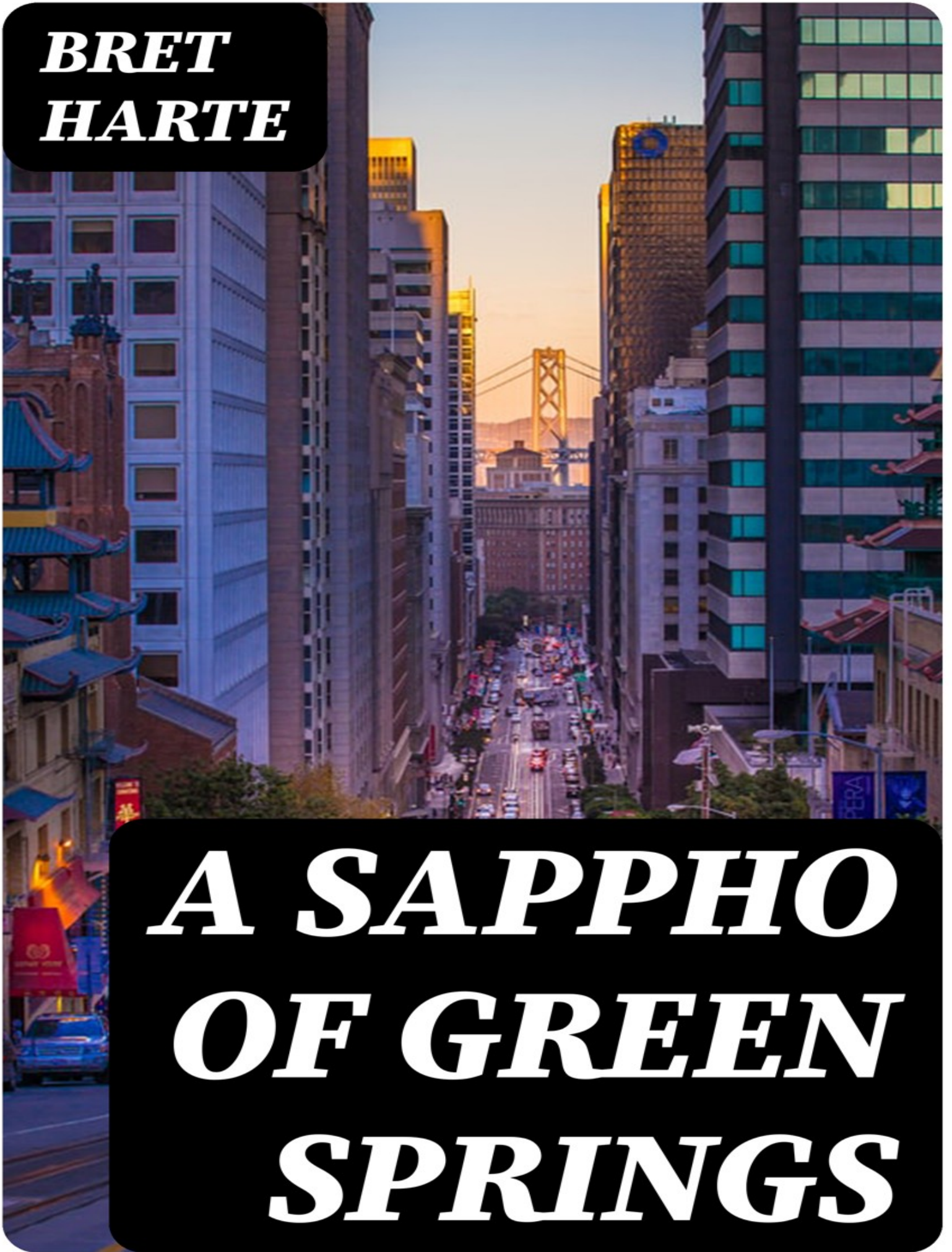


***BRET  
HARTE***

***A SAPPHO  
OF GREEN  
SPRINGS***



**Bret Harte**

# **A Sappho of Green Springs**

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# CHAPTER I

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“Come in,” said the editor.

The door of the editorial room of the “Excelsior Magazine” began to creak painfully under the hesitating pressure of an uncertain and unfamiliar hand. This continued until with a start of irritation the editor faced directly about, throwing his leg over the arm of his chair with a certain youthful dexterity. With one hand gripping its back, the other still grasping a proof-slip, and his pencil in his mouth, he stared at the intruder.

The stranger, despite his hesitating entrance, did not seem in the least disconcerted. He was a tall man, looking even taller by reason of the long formless overcoat he wore, known as a “duster,” and by a long straight beard that depended from his chin, which he combed with two reflective fingers as he contemplated the editor. The red dust which still lay in the creases of his garment and in the curves of his soft felt hat, and left a dusty circle like a precipitated halo around his feet, proclaimed him, if not a countryman, a recent inland importation by coach. “Busy?” he said, in a grave but pleasant voice. “I kin wait. Don't mind ME. Go on.”

The editor indicated a chair with his disengaged hand and plunged again into his proof-slips. The stranger surveyed the scant furniture and appointments of the office with a look of grave curiosity, and then, taking a chair, fixed an earnest, penetrating gaze on the editor's profile. The editor felt it, and, without looking up, said—

“Well, go on.”

“But you're busy. I kin wait.”

“I shall not be less busy this morning. I can listen.”

“I want you to give me the name of a certain person who writes in your magazine.”

The editor's eye glanced at the second right-hand drawer of his desk. It did not contain the names of his contributors, but what in the traditions of his office was accepted as an equivalent,—a revolver. He had never yet presented either to an inquirer. But he laid aside his proofs, and, with a slight darkening of his youthful, discontented face, said, “What do you want to know for?”

The question was so evidently unexpected that the stranger's face colored slightly, and he hesitated. The editor meanwhile, without taking his eyes from the man, mentally ran over the contents of the last magazine. They had been of a singularly peaceful character. There seemed to be nothing to justify homicide on his part or the stranger's. Yet there was no knowing, and his questioner's bucolic appearance by no means precluded an assault. Indeed, it had been a legend of the office that a predecessor had suffered vicariously from a geological hammer covertly introduced into a scientific controversy by an irate professor.

“As we make ourselves responsible for the conduct of the magazine,” continued the young editor, with mature severity, “we do not give up the names of our contributors. If you do not agree with their opinions”—

“But I DO,” said the stranger, with his former composure, “and I reckon that's why I want to know who wrote those

verses called 'Underbrush,' signed 'White Violet,' in your last number. They're pow'ful pretty."

The editor flushed slightly, and glanced instinctively around for any unexpected witness of his ludicrous mistake. The fear of ridicule was uppermost in his mind, and he was more relieved at his mistake not being overheard than at its groundlessness.

"The verses ARE pretty," he said, recovering himself, with a critical air, "and I am glad you like them. But even then, you know, I could not give you the lady's name without her permission. I will write to her and ask it, if you like."

The actual fact was that the verses had been sent to him anonymously from a remote village in the Coast Range,—the address being the post-office and the signature initials.

The stranger looked disturbed. "Then she ain't about here anywhere?" he said, with a vague gesture. "She don't belong to the office?"

The young editor beamed with tolerant superiority: "No, I am sorry to say."

"I should like to have got to see her and kinder asked her a few questions," continued the stranger, with the same reflective seriousness. "You see, it wasn't just the rhymin' o' them verses,—and they kinder sing themselves to ye, don't they?—it wasn't the chyce o' words,—and I reckon they allus hit the idee in the centre shot every time,—it wasn't the idees and moral she sort o' drew out o' what she was tellin',—but it was the straight thing itself,—the truth!"

"The truth?" repeated the editor.

“Yes, sir. I've bin there. I've seen all that she's seen in the brush—the little flicks and checkers o' light and shadder down in the brown dust that you wonder how it ever got through the dark of the woods, and that allus seems to slip away like a snake or a lizard if you grope. I've heard all that she's heard there—the creepin', the sighin', and the whisperin' through the bracken and the ground-vines of all that lives there.”

“You seem to be a poet yourself,” said the editor, with a patronizing smile.

“I'm a lumberman, up in Mendocino,” returned the stranger, with sublime naivete. “Got a mill there. You see, sightin' standin' timber and selectin' from the gen'ral show of the trees in the ground and the lay of roots hez sorter made me take notice.” He paused. “Then,” he added, somewhat despondingly, “you don't know who she is?”

“No,” said the editor, reflectively; “not even if it is really a WOMAN who writes.”

“Eh?”

“Well, you see, 'White Violet' may as well be the nom de plume of a man as of a woman, especially if adopted for the purpose of mystification. The handwriting, I remember, WAS more boyish than feminine.”

“No,” returned the stranger doggedly, “it wasn't no MAN. There's ideas and words there that only come from a woman: baby-talk to the birds, you know, and a kind of fearsome keer of bugs and creepin' things that don't come to a man who wears boots and trousers. Well,” he added, with a return to his previous air of resigned disappointment, “I suppose you don't even know what she's like?”

“No,” responded the editor, cheerfully. Then, following an idea suggested by the odd mingling of sentiment and shrewd perception in the man before him, he added: “Probably not at all like anything you imagine. She may be a mother with three or four children; or an old maid who keeps a boarding-house; or a wrinkled school-mistress; or a chit of a school-girl. I've had some fair verses from a red-haired girl of fourteen at the Seminary,” he concluded with professional coolness.

The stranger regarded him with the naive wonder of an inexperienced man. Having paid this tribute to his superior knowledge, he regained his previous air of grave perception. “I reckon she ain't none of them. But I'm keepin' you from your work. Good-by. My name's Bowers—Jim Bowers, of Mendocino. If you're up my way, give me a call. And if you do write to this yer 'White Violet,' and she's willin', send me her address.”

He shook the editor's hand warmly—even in its literal significance of imparting a good deal of his own earnest caloric to the editor's fingers—and left the room. His footfall echoed along the passage and died out, and with it, I fear, all impression of his visit from the editor's mind, as he plunged again into the silent task before him.

Presently he was conscious of a melodious humming and a light leisurely step at the entrance of the hall. They continued on in an easy harmony and unaffected as the passage of a bird. Both were pleasant and both familiar to the editor. They belonged to Jack Hamlin, by vocation a gambler, by taste a musician, on his way from his apartments on the upper floor, where he had just risen, to



drop into his friend's editorial room and glance over the exchanges, as was his habit before breakfast.

The door opened lightly. The editor was conscious of a faint odor of scented soap, a sensation of freshness and cleanliness, the impression of a soft hand like a woman's on his shoulder and, like a woman's, momentarily and playfully caressing, the passage of a graceful shadow across his desk, and the next moment Jack Hamlin was ostentatiously dusting a chair with an open newspaper preparatory to sitting down.

"You ought to ship that office-boy of yours, if he can't keep things cleaner," he said, suspending his melody to eye grimly the dust which Mr. Bowers had shaken from his departing feet.

The editor did not look up until he had finished revising a difficult paragraph. By that time Mr. Hamlin had comfortably settled himself on a cane sofa, and, possibly out of deference to his surroundings, had subdued his song to a peculiarly low, soft, and heartbreaking whistle as he unfolded a newspaper. Clean and faultless in his appearance, he had the rare gift of being able to get up at two in the afternoon with much of the dewy freshness and all of the moral superiority of an early riser.

"You ought to have been here just now, Jack," said the editor.

"Not a row, old man, eh?" inquired Jack, with a faint accession of interest.

"No," said the editor, smiling. Then he related the incidents of the previous interview, with a certain humorous

exaggeration which was part of his nature. But Jack did not smile.

“You ought to have booted him out of the ranch on sight,” he said. “What right had he to come here prying into a lady's affairs?—at least a lady as far as HE knows. Of course she's some old blowzy with frumpled hair trying to rope in a greenhorn with a string of words and phrases,” concluded Jack, carelessly, who had an equally cynical distrust of the sex and of literature.

“That's about what I told him,” said the editor.

“That's just what you **SHOULDN'T** have told him,” returned Jack. “You ought to have stuck up for that woman as if she'd been your own mother. Lord! you fellows don't know how to run a magazine. You ought to let **ME** sit on that chair and tackle your customers.”

“What would you have done, Jack?” asked the editor, much amused to find that his hitherto invincible hero was not above the ordinary human weakness of offering advice as to editorial conduct.

“Done?” reflected Jack. “Well, first, sonny, I shouldn't keep a revolver in a drawer that I had to **OPEN** to get at.”

“But what would you have said?”

“I should simply have asked him what was the price of lumber at Mendocino,” said Jack, sweetly, “and when he told me, I should have said that the samples he was offering out of his own head wouldn't suit. You see, you don't want any trifling in such matters. You write well enough, my boy,” continued he, turning over his paper, “but what you're lacking in is editorial dignity. But go on with your work. Don't mind me.”

Thus admonished, the editor again bent over his desk, and his friend softly took up his suspended song. The editor had not proceeded far in his corrections when Jack's voice again broke the silence.

“Where are those d—d verses, anyway?”

Without looking up, the editor waved his pencil towards an uncut copy of the “Excelsior Magazine” lying on the table.

“You don't suppose I'm going to READ them, do you?” said Jack, aggrievedly. “Why don't you say what they're about? That's your business as editor.”

But that functionary, now wholly lost and wandering in the non-sequitur of an involved passage in the proof before him, only waved an impatient remonstrance with his pencil and knit his brows. Jack, with a sigh, took up the magazine.

A long silence followed, broken only by the hurried rustling of sheets of copy and an occasional exasperated start from the editor. The sun was already beginning to slant a dusty beam across his desk; Jack's whistling had long since ceased. Presently, with an exclamation of relief, the editor laid aside the last proof-sheet and looked up.

Jack Hamlin had closed the magazine, but with one hand thrown over the back of the sofa he was still holding it, his slim forefinger between its leaves to keep the place, and his handsome profile and dark lashes lifted towards the window. The editor, smiling at this unwonted abstraction, said quietly,—

“Well, what do you think of them?”

Jack rose, laid the magazine down, settled his white waistcoat with both hands, and lounged towards his friend

with audacious but slightly veiled and shining eyes. "They sort of sing themselves to you," he said, quietly, leaning beside the editor's desk, and looking down upon him. After a pause he said, "Then you don't know what she's like?"

"That's what Mr. Bowers asked me," remarked the editor.

"D—n Bowers!"

"I suppose you also wish me to write and ask for permission to give you her address?" said the editor, with great gravity.

"No," said Jack, coolly. "I propose to give it to YOU within a week, and you will pay me with a breakfast. I should like to have it said that I was once a paid contributor to literature. If I don't give it to you, I'll stand you a dinner, that's all."

"Done!" said the editor. "And you know nothing of her now?"

"No," said Jack, promptly. "Nor you?"

"No more than I have told you."

"That'll do. So long!" And Jack, carefully adjusting his glossy hat over his curls at an ominously wicked angle, sauntered lightly from the room. The editor, glancing after his handsome figure and hearing him take up his pretermitted whistle as he passed out, began to think that the contingent dinner was by no means an inevitable prospect.

Howbeit, he plunged once more into his monotonous duties. But the freshness of the day seemed to have departed with Jack, and the later interruptions of foreman and publisher were of a more practical character. It was not until the post arrived that the superscription on one of the

letters caught his eye, and revived his former interest. It was the same hand as that of his unknown contributor's manuscript—ill-formed and boyish. He opened the envelope. It contained another poem with the same signature, but also a note—much longer than the brief lines that accompanied the first contribution—was scrawled upon a separate piece of paper. This the editor opened first, and read the following, with an amazement that for the moment dominated all other sense:—

MR. EDITOR,—I see you have got my poetry in. But I don't see the spondulix that oughter follow. Perhaps you don't know where to send it. Then I'll tell you. Send the money to Lock Box 47, Green Springs P. O., per Wells Fargo's Express, and I'll get it there, on account of my parents not knowing. We're very high-toned, and they would think it's low making poetry for papers. Send amount usually paid for poetry in your papers. Or may be you think I make poetry for nothing? That's where you slip up!

Yours truly,

WHITE VIOLET.

P. S.—If you don't pay for poetry, send this back. It's as good as what you did put in, and is just as hard to make. You hear me? that's me—all the time.

WHITE VIOLET.

The editor turned quickly to the new contribution for some corroboration of what he felt must be an extraordinary blunder. But no! The few lines that he hurriedly read breathed the same atmosphere of intellectual repose, gentleness, and imagination as the first contribution. And yet they were in the same handwriting as the singular

missive, and both were identical with the previous manuscript.

Had he been the victim of a hoax, and were the verses not original? No; they were distinctly original, local in color, and even local in the use of certain old English words that were common in the Southwest. He had before noticed the apparent incongruity of the handwriting and the text, and it was possible that for the purposes of disguise the poet might have employed an amanuensis. But how could he reconcile the incongruity of the mercenary and slangy purport of the missive itself with the mental habit of its author? Was it possible that these inconsistent qualities existed in the one individual? He smiled grimly as he thought of his visitor Bowers and his friend Jack. He was startled as he remembered the purely imaginative picture he had himself given to the seriously interested Bowers of the possible incongruous personality of the poetess.

Was he quite fair in keeping this from Jack? Was it really honorable, in view of their wager? It is to be feared that a very human enjoyment of Jack's possible discomfiture quite as much as any chivalrous friendship impelled the editor to ring eventually for the office-boy.

“See if Mr. Hamlin is in his rooms.”

The editor then sat down, and wrote rapidly as follows:—

DEAR MADAM,—You are as right as you are generous in supposing that only ignorance of your address prevented the manager from previously remitting the honorarium for your beautiful verses. He now begs to send it to you in the manner you have indicated. As the verses have attracted deserved attention, I have been applied to for your address.

Should you care to submit it to me to be used at my discretion, I shall feel honored by your confidence. But this is a matter left entirely to your own kindness and better judgment. Meantime, I take pleasure in accepting "White Violet's" present contribution, and remain, dear madam, your obedient servant,

THE EDITOR.

The boy returned as he was folding the letter. Mr. Hamlin was not only NOT in his rooms, but, according to his negro servant Pete, had left town an hour ago for a few days in the country.

"Did he say where?" asked the editor, quickly.

"No, sir: he didn't know."

"Very well. Take this to the manager." He addressed the letter, and, scrawling a few hieroglyphics on a memorandum-tag, tore it off, and handed it with the letter to the boy.

An hour later he stood in the manager's office. "The next number is pretty well made up," he said, carelessly, "and I think of taking a day or two off."

"Certainly," said the manager. "It will do you good. Where do you think you'll go?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind."

# CHAPTER II

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“Hullo!” said Jack Hamlin.

He had halted his mare at the edge of an abrupt chasm. It did not appear to be fifty feet across, yet its depth must have been nearly two hundred to where the hidden mountain-stream, of which it was the banks, alternately slipped, tumbled, and fell with murmuring and monotonous regularity. One or two pine-trees growing on the opposite edge, loosened at the roots, had tilted their straight shafts like spears over the abyss, and the top of one, resting on the upper branches of a sycamore a few yards from him, served as an aerial bridge for the passage of a boy of fourteen to whom Mr. Hamlin's challenge was addressed.

The boy stopped midway in his perilous transit, and, looking down upon the horseman, responded, coolly, “Hullo, yourself!”

“Is that the only way across this infernal hole, or the one you prefer for exercise?” continued Hamlin, gravely.

The boy sat down on a bough, allowing his bare feet to dangle over the dizzy depths, and critically examined his questioner. Jack had on this occasion modified his usual correct conventional attire by a tasteful combination of a vaquero's costume, and, in loose white bullion-fringed trousers, red sash, jacket, and sombrero, looked infinitely more dashing and picturesque than his original. Nevertheless, the boy did not reply. Mr. Hamlin's pride in his usual ascendancy over women, children, horses, and all



unreasoning animals was deeply nettled. He smiled, however, and said, quietly,—

“Come here, George Washington. I want to talk to you.”

Without rejecting this august yet impossible title, the boy presently lifted his feet, and carelessly resumed his passage across the chasm until, reaching the sycamore, he began to let himself down squirrel-wise, leap by leap, with an occasional trapeze swinging from bough to bough, dropping at last easily to the ground. Here he appeared to be rather good-looking, albeit the sun and air had worked a miracle of brown tan and freckles on his exposed surfaces, until the mottling of his oval cheeks looked like a polished bird's egg. Indeed, it struck Mr. Hamlin that he was as intensely a part of that sylvan seclusion as the hidden brook that murmured, the brown velvet shadows that lay like trappings on the white flanks of his horse, the quivering heat, and the stinging spice of bay. Mr. Hamlin had vague ideas of dryads and fauns, but at that moment would have bet something on the chances of their survival.

“I did not hear what you said just now, general,” he remarked, with great elegance of manner, “but I know from your reputation that it could not be a lie. I therefore gather that there IS another way across.”

The boy smiled; rather, his very short upper lip apparently vanished completely over his white teeth, and his very black eyes, which showed a great deal of the white around them, danced in their orbits.

“But YOU couldn't find it,” he said, slyly.

“No more could you find the half-dollar I dropped just now, unless I helped you.”

Mr. Hamlin, by way of illustration, leaned deeply over his left stirrup, and pointed to the ground. At the same moment a bright half-dollar absolutely appeared to glitter in the herbage at the point of his finger. It was a trick that had always brought great pleasure and profit to his young friends, and some loss and discomfiture of wager to his older ones.

The boy picked up the coin: "There's a dip and a level crossing about a mile over yer,"—he pointed,—“but it's through the woods, and they're that high with thick bresh.”

“With what?”

“Bresh,” repeated the boy; “THAT,”—pointing to a few fronds of bracken growing in the shadow of the sycamore.

“Oh! underbrush?”

“Yes; I said 'bresh,'” returned the boy, doggedly. “YOU might get through, ef you war spry, but not your hoss. Where do you want to go, anyway?”

“Do you know, George,” said Mr. Hamlin, lazily throwing his right leg over the horn of his saddle for greater ease and deliberation in replying, “it's very odd, but that's just what I'D like to know. Now, what would YOU, in your broad statesmanlike views of things generally, advise?”

Quite convinced of the stranger's mental unsoundness, the boy glanced again at his half-dollar, as if to make sure of its integrity, pocketed it doubtfully, and turned away.

“Where are you going?” said Hamlin, resuming his seat with the agility of a circus-rider, and spurring forward.

“To Green Springs, where I live, two miles over the ridge on the far slope,”—indicating the direction.

“Ah!” said Jack, with thoughtful gravity. “Well, kindly give my love to your sister, will you?”

“George Washington didn't have no sister,” said the boy, cunningly.

“Can I have been mistaken?” said Hamlin, lifting his hand to his forehead with grieved accents. “Then it seems YOU have. Kindly give her my love.”

“Which one?” asked the boy, with a swift glance of mischief. “I've got four.”

“The one that's like you,” returned Hamlin, with prompt exactitude. “Now, where's the 'bresh' you spoke of?”

“Keep along the edge until you come to the log-slide. Foller that, and it'll lead you into the woods. But ye won't go far, I tell ye. When you have to turn back, instead o' comin' back here, you kin take the trail that goes round the woods, and that'll bring ye out into the stage road ag'in near the post-office at the Green Springs crossin' and the new hotel. That'll be war ye'll turn up, I reckon,” he added, reflectively. “Fellers that come yer gunnin' and fishin' gin'rally do,” he concluded, with a half-inquisitive air.

“Ah?” said Mr. Hamlin, quietly shedding the inquiry. “Green Springs Hotel is where the stage stops, eh?”

“Yes, and at the post-office,” said the boy. “She'll be along here soon,” he added.

“If you mean the Santa Cruz stage,” said Hamlin, “she's here already. I passed her on the ridge half an hour ago.”

The boy gave a sudden start, and a quick uneasy expression passed over his face. “Go 'long with ye!” he said, with a forced smile: “it ain't her time yet.”

“But I SAW her,” repeated Hamlin, much amused. “Are you expecting company? Hullo! Where are you off to? Come back.”

But his companion had already vanished in the thicket with the undeliberate and impulsive act of an animal. There was a momentary rustle in the alders fifty feet away, and then all was silent. The hidden brook took up its monotonous murmur, the tapping of a distant woodpecker became suddenly audible, and Mr. Hamlin was again alone.

“Wonder whether he's got parents in the stage, and has been playing truant here,” he mused, lazily. “Looked as if he'd been up to some devilment, or more like as if he was primed for it. If he'd been a little older, I'd have bet he was in league with some road-agents to watch the coach. Just my luck to have him light out as I was beginning to get some talk out of him.” He paused, looked at his watch, and straightened himself in his stirrups. “Four o'clock. I reckon I might as well try the woods and what that imp calls the 'bresh;’ I may strike a shanty or a native by the way.”

With this determination, Mr. Hamlin urged his horse along the faint trail by the brink of the watercourse which the boy had just indicated. He had no definite end in view beyond the one that had brought him the day before to that locality—his quest of the unknown poetess. His clue would have seemed to ordinary humanity the faintest. He had merely noted the provincial name of a certain plant mentioned in the poem, and learned that its habitat was limited to the southern local range; while its peculiar nomenclature was clearly of French Creole or Gulf State origin. This gave him a large though sparsely-populated area for locality, while it

suggested a settlement of Louisianians or Mississippians near the Summit, of whom, through their native gambling proclivities, he was professionally cognizant. But he mainly trusted Fortune. Secure in his faith in the feminine character of that goddess, he relied a great deal on her well-known weakness for scamps of his quality.

It was not long before he came to the "slide"—a lightly-cut or shallow ditch. It descended slightly in a course that was far from straight, at times diverging to avoid the obstacles of trees or boulders, at times shaving them so closely as to leave smooth abrasions along their sides made by the grinding passage of long logs down the incline. The track itself was slippery from this, and preoccupied all Hamlin's skill as a horseman, even to the point of stopping his usual careless whistle. At the end of half an hour the track became level again, and he was confronted with a singular phenomenon.

He had entered the wood, and the trail seemed to cleave through a far-stretching, motionless sea of ferns that flowed on either side to the height of his horse's flanks. The straight shafts of the trees rose like columns from their hidden bases and were lost again in a roof of impenetrable leafage, leaving a clear space of fifty feet between, through which the surrounding horizon of sky was perfectly visible. All the light that entered this vast sylvan hall came from the sides; nothing permeated from above; nothing radiated from below; the height of the crest on which the wood was placed gave it this lateral illumination, but gave it also the profound isolation of some temple raised by long-forgotten hands. In spite of the height of these clear shafts, they seemed