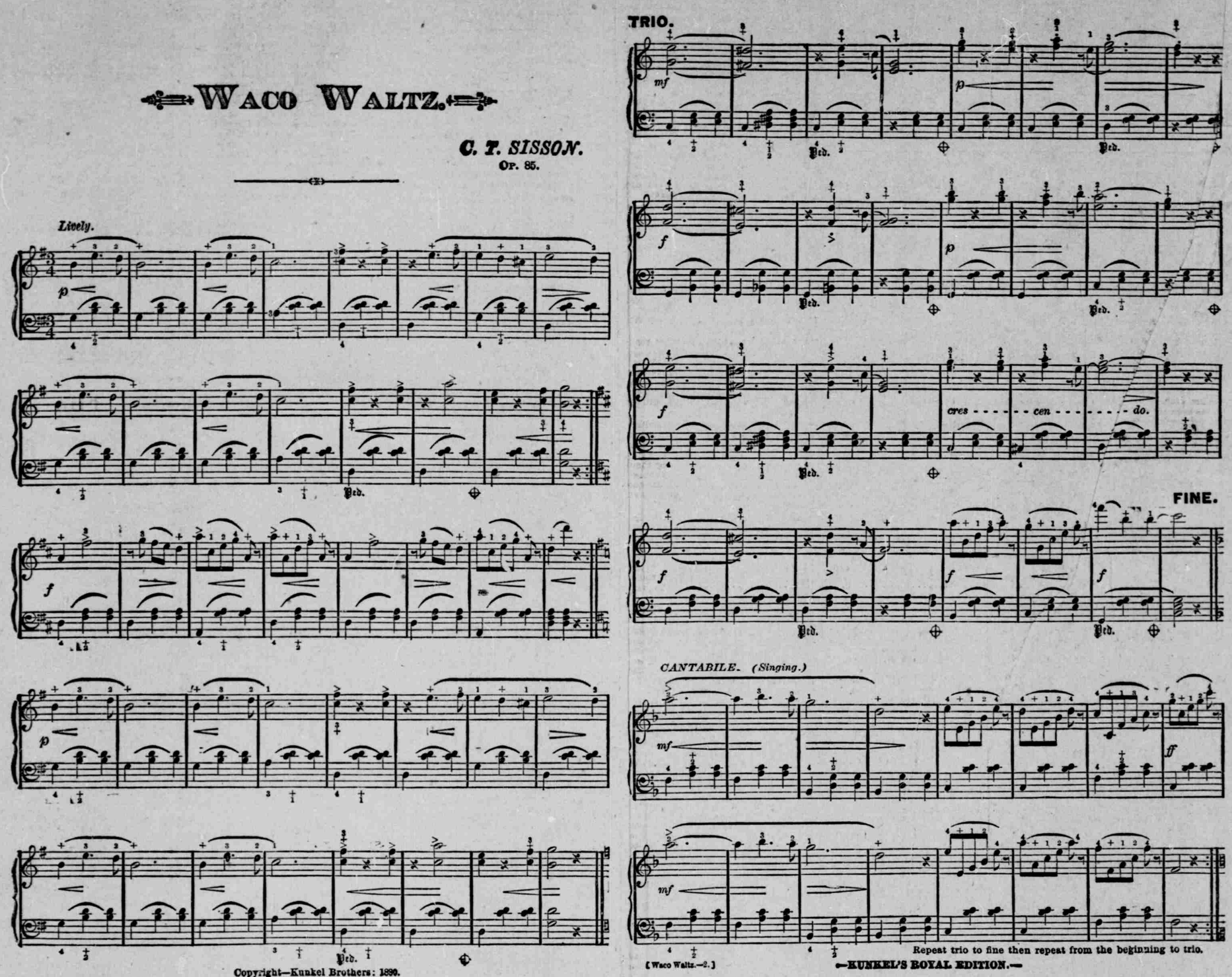


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# "CRESSY."

BY BRET HARTE.

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The rude preliminaries were soon settled. The parties, armed with rifles, were to fire, at the word, from a distance of eighty yards, and then approach each other, continuing the fight with revolvers until one or the other fell. The selection of seconds was effected by the elder rison acting for McKinstry, and after a moment's delay by the volunteering of the long, lank figure previously noted to act for the master. Preoccupied by other thoughts, Mr. Ford paid but little heed to his self-elected supporter, who, to the others, seemed to be only taking that method of showing his contempt for McKinstry's recent insult. The master received the rifle mechanically from his hand, and walked to position. He noticed, however, and remembered afterwards, that his second was half-hidden by the trunk of a large pine to his right that marked the limit of the ground.

In that supreme moment it must be recorded, albeit against all preconceived theory, that he did not review his past life, was not illuminated by a flash of remorseful or sentimental memory, and did not commend his soul to his Maker, but that he was simply and keenly alive to the very actual present in which he still existed and to his one idea of not firing at his adversary. And if anything could render his conduct more theoretically incorrect it was a certain exalted sense that he was doing quite right, and was not only not a bad sort of a fellow, but one whom his survivors might possibly regret!

"Are you ready, gentlemen? One—two—three—fi . . . !"

The explosions were singularly simultaneous—so remarkable in fact that it seemed to the master that his rifle, fired in the air, had given a double report. A light wreath of smoke lay between him and his opponent. He was unhurt—so evidently was his adversary, for the voice rose again.

"Advance! . . . . Hallo there! Stop!"

He looked up quickly to see McKinstry stagger and then fall heavily to the ground.

With an exclamation of horror, the first and only terrible emotion he had felt, he ran to the fallen man, as Harrison reached his side at the same moment.

"For God's sake," he said wildly, throwing himself on his knees beside McKinstry, "what has happened? For I swear to you, I never aimed at you! I fired in the air. Speak! Tell him, you," he turned with a despairing appeal to Harrison, "you must have seen it all—tell him it was not me!"

A half-wondering, half-incredulous smile passed quickly over Harrison's face. "In course you didn't mean it," he said dryly, "but let that slide. Get up and get away from yer, while you kin," he added impatiently, with a significant glance at one or two men who lingered after the sudden and general dispersion of the crowd at McKinstry's fall. "Get—will ye!"

"Never!" said the young man passionately, "until he knows that it was not my hand that fired that shot."

McKinstry painfully struggled to his elbow. "It took me yere," he said with a slow deliberation, as if answering some previous question, and pointing to his hip, "and it kinder let me down when I started forward at the second call."

"But it was not I who did it, McKinstry, I swear it. Hear me! For God's sake, say you believe me."

McKinstry turned his drowsy, troubled eyes upon the master as if he were vaguely recalling something. "Stand back thar a minit, will ye," he said to Harrison, with a languid wave of his crippled hand, "I want to speak to this yer man."

Harrison drew back a few paces and the master sought to take the wounded man's hand, but he was stopped by a gesture. "Where hev you put Cressy?" McKinstry said slowly.

"I don't understand you," stammered Ford.

"Where are you hidin' her from me?" repeated McKinstry, with painful distinctness. "Whar hev you run her to, that you're reckonin' to jine her arter—arter—this!"

"I am not hiding her! I am not going to her! I do not know where she is. I have not seen her since we parted this morning, without a word of meeting again," said the master rapidly, yet with a bewildered astonishment that was obvious even to the dulled faculties of his hearer.

"That war true?" asked McKinstry, laying his hand upon the master's shoulder and bringing his dull eyes to the level of the young man's.

"It is the whole truth," said Ford fervently, "and true also that I never raised my hand against you."

McKinstry beckoned to Harrison and the two others who had joined him, and then sank partly back with his hand upon his side, where the slow empurpling of his red shirt showed the slight ooze of a deeply-seated wound.

"You fellers kin take me over to the ranch," he said calmly, "and let him," pointing to Ford, "ride your best hoss fer the doctor. I don't," he continued in grave explanation, "gin'rally use a doctor, but this yer is suthin' outside the old woman's regular gait." He paused, and then drawing the master's head down towards him, he added, in his ear, "When I get to hev a look at the size and shape o' this yer ball that's in my hip I'll—I'll—I'll—be—a—little more kam!" A gleam of dull significance struggled into his eye. The master evidently understood him, for he rose quickly, ran to the horse, mounted him and dashed off for medical assistance, while McKinstry, closing his heavy lids, anticipated this looked-for calm by fainting gently away.

CHAPTER XIV.

Of the various sentimental fallacies entertained by adult humanity in regard to childhood, none are more ingeniously inaccurate and gratuitously idiotic than a comfortable belief in its profound ignorance of the events in which it daily moves, and the motives and characters of the people who surround it. Yet even the occasional revelations of an enfant terrible are as nothing compared to the perilous secrets which a discreet infant daily buttons up, or secures with a hook-and-eye, or even fastens with a safety-pin across its gentle bossom. Society can never cease to be grateful for that tact and consideration—qualities more often joined with childish intuition and perception than with matured observation—that they owe to it; and the most accomplished man or woman of the great world might take a lesson from this little audience who receive from their lips the lie they feel too palpable, with round-eyed complacency, or outwardly accept as moral and genuine the hollow sentiment they overheard rehearsed in private for their benefit.

It was not strange, therefore, that the little people of the Indian Spring school knew, perhaps, more of the real relations of Cressy McKinstry to her admirers than the admirers themselves. Not that this knowledge was outspoken—for children rarely gossip in the grown-up sense—or even communicable by words intelligent to the matured intellect. A whisper, a laugh that often seemed vague and unmeaning, conveyed to each other a world of secret significance, and an apparently senseless burst of merriment in which the whole class joined, and that the adult critic set down to "animal spirits"—a quality much more rare with children than generally supposed—was only a sympathetic expression of some discovery, happily oblivious to older preoccupation. The childish simplicity of Uncle Ben, perhaps, appealed more strongly to their sympathy, and although, for that very reason, they regarded him with no more respect than they did each other, he was, at times, carelessly admitted to their confidence. It was especially Rupert Filgee who extended a kind of patronizing protectorate over him—not unmixed with doubts of his sanity—in spite of the promised confidential clerkship he was to receive from his hands.

On the day of the events chronicled in the preceding chapter, Rupert, on returning from school, was somewhat surprised to find Uncle Ben perched upon the rail fence before the humble door of the Filgee mansion and evidently awaiting him. Slowly dismounting as Rupert and Johnny approached, he beamed upon the former for some moments with arch and yet affable mystery.

"Roopy, old man, I s'pose ye've got yer duds ready in all yer pack, eh?"

A flush of pleasure passed over the boy's handsome face. He cast, however, a hurried look down on the all-pervading Johnny.

"'Cause ye see we kalkilate to take the down stage to Sacramento at 4 o'clock," continued Uncle Ben, enjoying Rupert's half-skeptical surprise. "Ye enter into office, so to speak, with me at that hour, when the sellery, $75 a month and board, ez private and confidential clerk, begins—eh?"

Rupert's dimples deepened in charming, almost feminine, embarrassment. "But dad—?" he stammered.

"Et's all right with him. He's agreeable."

"But——?"

Uncle Ben followed Rupert's glance at Johnny, who, however, appeared to be absorbed in the pattern of Uncle Ben's New trousers.

"That's fixed," he said with a meaning smile. "There's a sort o' bonus we pays down, you know—for a Chinyman to do the old jobs."

"And teacher—Mr. Ford—did ye tell him?" said Rupert brightening.

Uncle Ben coughed slightly. "He's agreeable, too, I reckon. That is," he wiped his mouth meditatively, "he ez good ez allowed it in gin'ral conversation a week ago, Rupe."

A swift shadow of suspicion darkened the boy's brown eyes. "Is anybody else going with us?" he said quickly.

"Not this yer trip," replied Uncle Ben, complacently. "Ye see, Rupe," he continued, drawing him aside with an air of comfortable mystery, "this yer biz'ness belongs to the private and confidential branch of the office. From informashun we've received——"

"We?" interrupted Rupert.

"We, that's the offis, you know," continued Uncle Ben, with a heavy assumption of business formality, "wot we've received per several hands and consignee—we—that's you and me, Rupe—we goes down to Sacramento to inquire into the standing of a certing party, as per invoice, and ter see—ter see—ter negotiate, you know, to find out if she is married or di-vorced," he concluded quickly, as if abandoning for the moment his business manner in consideration of Rupert's inexperience. "We're to find out her standin', Rupe," he began again with a more judicious blending of ease and technicality, "and her contracts, if any, and where she lives and her way o' life, and examine her books and papers ez to marriages and sich, and arbitrate with her gin'rally in conversation—you inside the house and me out on the pavement, ready to be called in if an interview with business principals is desired."

Observing Rupert somewhat perplexed and confused with these technicalities, he tactfully abandoned them for the present, and consulting a pocket-book, said, "I've made a memorandum of some pints that we'll talk over on the journey," again charged Rupert to be punctually at the stage office with his carpet-bag, and cheerfully departed.

When he had disappeared Johnny Filgee, without a single word of explanation, fell upon his brother, and at once began a violent attack of kicks and blows upon his legs and other easily accessible parts of his person, accompanying his assault with unintelligible gasps and actions, finally culminating in a flood of tears and the casting of himself on his back in the dust with the copper-fastened toes of his small boots turning imaginary wheels in the air. Rupert received these characteristic marks of despairing and outraged affection with great forbearance, only saying: "There, now, Johnny, quit that," and eventually bearing him still struggling into the house. Here Johnny, declaring that he would kill any "Chinyman" that offered to dress him, and burn down the house after his brother's infamous desertion of it, Rupert was constrained to mingle a few nervous, excited tears with his brother's outbreak. Whereat Johnny, admitting the alleviation of an orange, a four-bladed knife, and the reversionary interest in much of Rupert's personal property, became more subdued. Sitting there with their arms entwined about each other, the sunlight searching the shiftless desolation of their motherless home, the few cheap playthings they had known lying around them, they beguiled themselves with those charming illusions of their future intentions common to their years—illusions they only half believed themselves and half accepted of each other. Rupert was quite certain that he would return in a few days with a gold watch and a present for Johnny, and Johnny, with a baleful vision of never seeing him again, and a catching breath, magnificently undertook to bring in the wood and build the fire and wash the dishes "all of himself." And then there were a few childish confidences regarding their absent father—then ingenuously playing poker in the Magnolia saloon—that might have made that public-spirited, genial companion somewhat uncomfortable, and more tears that were half smiling and some brave silences that were wholly pathetic, and then the hour for Rupert's departure all too suddenly arrived. They separated with ostentatious whooping, and then Johnny, suddenly overcome with the dreadfulness of all earthly things, and the hollowness of life generally, instantly resolved to run away!

To do this he prepared himself with a purposeless hatchet, an inconsistent but long-treasured lump of putty and all the sugar that was left in the cracked sugar-bowl. Thus accoutred he sallied forth, first to remove all traces of his hated existence that might be left in his desk at school. If the master were there he would say Rupert had sent him; if he wasn't he would climb in at the window. The sun was already sinking when he reached the clearing and found a cavalcade of armed men around the building.

Johnny's first conviction was that the master had killed Uncle Ben or Masters, and that the men, taking advantage of the absence of his—Johnny's—big brother were about to summarily execute him. Observing no struggle from within, his second belief was that the master had been suddenly elected Governor of California and was about to start with a state escort for the school-house, and that he—Johnny—was in time to see the procession. But when the master appeared with McKinstry, followed by part of the crowd afoot, this quick-witted child of the frontier, from his secure outlook in the "brush," gathered enough of their fragmentary speech to guess the serious purport of their errand, and thrill with anticipation and slightly creepy excitement.

A duel! A thing hitherto witnessed only by grown-up men, afterwards swaggering with importance and strange technical blood-thirsty words, and now for the first time reserved for a boy—and that boy, him, Johnny! to behold in all its fearful completeness! A duel! of which he, Johnny, meanly abandoned by his brother, was now exalted perhaps to be the only survivor! He could scarcely credit his senses. It was too much!

To creep through the brush while the preliminaries were being settled, reach a certain silver fir on the appointed ground, and, with the aid of his now lucky hatchet, climb unseen to its upper boughs, was an exciting and difficult task, but one eventually overcome by his short but energetic legs. Here he could not only see all that occurred, but by a fortunate chance the large pine next to him had been selected as the limit of the ground. The sharp eye of the boy had long since penetrated the guises of the remaining masked men, and when the long, lank figure of the master's self-appointed second took up its position beneath the pines in full view of him, although hidden from the spectators, Johnny instantly recognized it to be none other than Seth Davis. The manifest inconsistency of his appearance as Mr. Ford's second with what Johnny knew of his relations to the master was the one thing that firmly fixed the incident in the boy's memory.

The men were already in position. Harrison stepped forward to give the word. Johnny's down-hanging legs tingled with cramp and excitement. Why didn't they begin? What were they waiting for? What if it were interrupted, or—terrible thought—made up at the last moment? Would they "holler" out when they were hit, or stagger round convulsively as they did at the "cirkiss?" Would they all run away afterwards and leave Johnny alone to tell the tale? And—horrible thought!—would any body believe him? Would Rupert? Rupert, had he "on'y knowed this," he wouldn't have gone away.

"One"—

With a child's perfect faith in the invulnerable superiority of his friends, he had not even looked at the master, but only at his destined victim. Yet as the word "two" rang out Johnny's attention was suddenly attracted to the surprising fact that the master's second, Seth Davis, had also drawn a pistol, and from behind his tree was deliberately and stealthily aiming at McKinstry! He understood it all now—he was a friend of the master's. Bully for Seth!

"Three!"

Crack! Z-i-i-p! Crackle! What a funny noise! And yet he was obliged to throw himself flat upon the bough to keep from falling. It seemed to have snapped beneath him and benumbed his right leg. He did not know that his master's bullet, fired in the air, had ranged along the bough, stripping the bark throughout its length and glancing with half-spent force to inflict a slight flesh wound on his leg!

He was giddy and a little frightened. And he had seen nobody hit, nor nothin.' It was all a humbug. Seth had disappeared. So had the others. There was a faint sound of voices and something like a group in the distance—that was all. It was getting dark too, and his leg was still asleep, but warm and wet. He would get down. This was very difficult, for his leg would not wake up, and but for the occasional support he got by striking his hatchet in the tree he would have fallen in descending. When he reached the ground his leg began to pain, and looking down he saw that his stocking and shoe were soaked with blood.

His small and dirty handkerchief, a hard wad in his pocket, was insufficient to staunch the flow. With a vague recollection of a certain poultice applied to a boil on his father's neck, he collected a quantity of soft moss and dried yerba buena leaves, and with the aid of his check apron and of one of his torn suspenders tightly wound round the whole mass, achieved a bandage of such elephantine proportions that he could scarcely move with it. In fact, like most imaginative children, he became slightly terrified at his own alarming precautions. Nevertheless, although a word or an outcry from him would have at that moment brought the distant group to his assistance, a certain respect to himself and his brother kept him from uttering even a whimper of weakness.

Yet he found refuge, oddly enough, in a suppressed but bitter denunciation of the other boys of his acquaintance. What was Cal. Harrison doing, while he, Johnny, was alone in the woods, wounded in a grown-up duel—for nothing would convince this doughty infant that he had not been an active participant. Where was Jemmy Snyder that he didn't come to his assistance with the other fellers. Cowards all; they were afraid. Ho, ho! And he, Johnny, wasn't afraid! ho—he didn't mind it! Nevertheless, he had to repeat the phrase two or three times until, after repeated struggles to move forward through the brush, he at last sank down exhausted. By this time the distant group had slowly moved away, carrying something between them, and leaving Johnny alone in the fast-coming darkness. Yet even this desertion did not affect him as strongly as his implicit belief in the cowardly treachery of his old associates.

It grew darker and darker, until the open theater of the late conflict appeared enclosed in funereal walls; a cool, searching breath of air that seemed to have crept through the bracken and undergrowth like a stealthy animal, lifted the curls on his hot forehead. He grasped his hatchet firmly, as against possible wild beasts, and as a medicinal and remedial precaution, took another turn with his suspender around his bandage. It occurred to him then that he would probably die. They would all feel exceedingly sorry and alarmed, and regret having made him wash himself on Saturday night. They would attend his funeral in large numbers in the little grave-yard, where a white tombstone inscribed to "John Filgree, fell in a duel at the age of seven," would be awaiting him. He would forgive his brother, his father and Mr. Ford. Yet even then he vaguely resented a few leaves and twigs dropped by a woodpecker in the tree above him, with a shake of his weak fist and an incoherent declaration that they couldn't "play no babes in the woods on him." And then having composed himself he once more turned on his side to die, as became the scion of a heroic race! The free woods, touched by an upspringing wind, waved their dark arms above him, and higher yet a few patient stars silently ranged themselves around his pillow.

But with the rising wind and stars came the swift trampling of horses' hoofs and the flashing of lanterns and Dr. Duchesne, and the master swept into the opening.

"It was here," said the master quickly, "but they must have taken him on to his own home. Let us follow."

"Hold on a moment," said the doctor, who had halted before the tree. "What's all this? Why, it's baby Filgee—by thunder!"

In another moment they had both dismounted and were leaning over the half-conscious child. Johnny turned his feverishly bright eyes from the lantern to the master and back again.

"What is it, Johnny boy?" asked the master tenderly. "Were you lost?"

With a gleam of feverish exaltation, Johnny rose, albeit wanderingly, to the occasion!

"Hit!" he lisped feebly, "Hit in a duell! at the age of theven."

"What!" asked the bewildered master.

But Dr. Duchesne, after a single swift scrutiny of the boy's face, had unearthed him from his nest of leaves, laid him in his lap, and deftly ripped away the preposterous bandage. "Hold the light here. By Jove! he tells the truth. Who did it, Johnny?"

But Johnny was silent. In an interval of feverish consciousness and pain, his perception and memory had been quickened; a suspicion of the real cause of his disaster had dawned upon him—but his childish lips were heroically sealed. The master glanced appealingly at the doctor.

"Take him before you in the saddle to McKinstry's," said the latter promptly. "I can attend to both."

The master lifted the boy tenderly in his arms. Johnny, stimulated by the prospect of a free ride, became feebly interested in his fellow-sufferer.

"Did Theth hit him bad?" he asked.

"Seth!" echoed the master, wildly.

"Yeth. I theed him when he took aim."

The master did not reply, but the next moment Johnny felt himself clasped in his arms in the saddle before him, borne like a whirlwind in the direction of the McKinstry ranch.

CHAPTER XV.

They found the wounded man lying in the front room upon a rudely extemporized couch of bear-skins, he having sternly declined the effeminacy of his wife's bed-room. In the possibility of a fatal termination to his wound, and in obedience to a grim frontier tradition, he had also refused to have his boots removed, in order that he might "die with them on," as become his ancestral custom. Johnny was therefore speedily made comfortable in the McKinstry bed while Dr. Duchesne gave his whole attention to his more serious patient. The master glanced hurriedly around for Mrs. McKinstry. She was not only absent from the room, but there seemed to be no suggestion of her presence in the house. To his great surprise the hurried inquiry that rose to his lips was checked by a significant warning from the attendant. He sat down beside the now sleeping boy, and awaited the doctor's return with his mind wandering between the condition of the little sufferer and the singular revelation that had momentarily escaped his childish lips. If Johnny had actually seen Seth fire at McKinstry, the latter's mysterious wound was accounted for—but not Seth's motive. The act was so utterly incomprehensible and inconsistent with Seth's avowed hatred of the master that the boy must have been delirious.

He was roused by the entrance of the surgeon. "It's not so bad as I thought," he said, with a reassuring nod. "It was a mighty close shave between a shattered bone and a severed artery, but we've got the ball, and he'll pull through in a week. By Jove, though!—the old fire-eater was more concerned about finding the ball than living or dying! Go in there—he wants to see you. Don't let him talk too much. He's called in a lot of his friends for some reason or other—and there's a regular mass-meeting in there. Go in, and get rid of 'em. I'll look after baby Filgee—though the little chap will be all right again after another dressing."

The master cast a hurried look of relief at the surgeon and re-entered the front room. It was filled with men whom the master instinctively recognized as his former adversaries. But they gave way before him with a certain rude respect and half-abashed sympathy as Mr. McKinstry called him to his side. The wounded man grasped his hand. "Lift me up a bit," he whispered. The master assisted him with difficulty to his elbow.

"Gentlemen!" said McKinstry with a characteristic wave of his crippled hand toward the crowd as he laid the other on the master's shoulder. "Ye heerd me talkin' a minit ago; ye heer me now. This yer young man as yer've slipped up on and meskalkilated has told the truth—every time! Ye ken tie to him whenever and wherever ye want to. Ye ain't expected to feel ez I feel, in course, but the man ez goes back on him—quo'ls with me. That's all—and thanks for inquiring friends. Ye'll git now, boys, and leave him a minit with me."

The men filed slowly out, a few lingering long enough to shake the master's hand with grave earnestness, or half-smiling, half-abashed embarrassment. The master received the proffered reconciliation of these men, who, but a few hours before, would have lynched him with equal sincerity, with cold bewilderment. As the door closed on the last of the party, he turned to McKinstry. The wounded man had sunk down again, but was regarding with drowsy satisfaction a leaden bullet he was holding between his finger and thumb.

"This yer shot, Mr. Ford," he said in a slow voice, whose weakness was only indicated by its extreme deliberation, "never kem from the gun I gave ye—and was never fired by you." He paused and then added with his old dull abstraction. "It's a long time since I've run agin anythin' that makes me feel more—kam."

In Mr. McKinstry's weak condition the master did not dare to make Johnny's revelation known to him, and contented himself by simply pressing his hand, but the next moment the wounded man resumed—

"That ball jest fits Seth's navy revolver—and the hound has made tracks outer the country."

"But what motive could he have in attacking you at such a time?" asked the master.

"He reckoned that either I'd kill you and so he'd get shut of us both in that way, without it being noticed; or if I missed you, the others would hang you—ez they kalkilated to—for killing me! The idea kem to him when he overheard you hintin' you wouldn't return my fire."

A shuddering conviction that McKinstry had divined the real truth passed over the master. In the impulse of the moment he again would have corroborated it by revealing Johnny's story, but a glance at the growing feverishness of the wounded man checked his utterance. "Don't talk of it now," he said hurriedly. "Enough for me to know that you acquit me. I am here now only to beg you to compose yourself until the doctor comes back—as you seemed to be alone, and Mrs. McKinstry——" he stopped in awkward embarrassment.

A singular confusion overspread the invalid's face. "She bed steppt out afore this happened, owin' to contrairy opinions betwixt me and her. Ye mout hev noticed, Mr. Ford, that ginrally she didn't 'pear to cotton to ye! Thar ain't a woman a-goin' ez is the ekal of Blain Rawlin's darter in nussin' a man and keeping him in fightin' order, but in matters like things that consarn herself and Cress, I begin to think, Mr. Ford, that somehow, she ain't exakly—kam! "Bein' kam yourself, ye'll put any unpleasantness down to that. Wotever you hear from her, and for the matter o' that, from her own darter, too — for I'm takin' back the foolishness I said to ye over yon about your runnin' off with Cress—you'll remember, Mr. Ford, it warn't from no ill feeling to you, in her or Cress—but on'y a want of kam! I mout hev had my idees about Cress, you mout hev had yours, and that fool Dabney mout hev had his; but it warn't the old woman's—nor Cressy's—it warn't Blain Rawlin's darter's idea—nor yet her darter's! And why? For want o' kam! Times I reckon it was left out o' woman's nater. And bein' kam yourself, you understand it and take it all in."

The old look of drowsy pain had settled so strongly in his red eyes again that the master was fain to put his hand gently over them, and with a faint smile beg him to compose himself to sleep. This he finally did, after a whispered suggestion that he himself was feeling "more kam." The master sat for some moments with his hand upon the sleeping man's eyes, and a vague and undefinable sense of loneness seemed to fall upon him from the empty rafters of the silent and deserted house. The rising wind moaned fitfully around its bleak shell with the despairing sound of far and forever receding voices. So strong was the impression that when the Doctor and McKinstry's attending brother re-entered the room, the master still lingered beside the bed with a dazed sensation of abandonment that the doctor's practical reassuring smile could hardly dispel.

"He's doing splendidly now," he said, listen-