

# THE STRANGE EXPERIENCE



OF  
ALKALI DICK

BY BRET HARTE.

**H**E was a "cowboy." A reckless and dashing rider, yet mindful of his horse's needs; good-humoured by nature, but quick in quarrel; independent of circumstance, yet shy and sensitive of opinion; abstemious by education and general habit, yet intemperate in amusement; self-centred, yet possessed of a childish vanity — taken altogether, a characteristic product of the Western plains, which he should have never left.

But reckless adventure after adventure had brought him into difficulties, from which there was only one equally adventurous escape: he joined a company of Indians engaged by Buffalo Bill to simulate before civilized communities the sports and customs of the uncivilized. In divers Christian arenas of the Nineteenth century he rode as a northern barbarian of the First might have disported before the Roman populace, but harmlessly, of his own free will, and of some little profit to himself. He threw his lasso under the curious eyes of languid men and women of the world, eager for some new sensation, with admiring plaudits from them and a half contemptuous egotism of his own.

But outside of the arena he was lonely, lost, and impatient for excitement.

An ingenious attempt to "paint the town red" did not commend itself as a spectacle to the householders who lived in the vicinity of Earl's Court, London, and Alkali Dick was haled before a respectable magistrate by a serious policeman, and fined as if he had been only a drunken coster. A later attempt at Paris to "incarnadine" the neighbourhood of the Champs de Mars, and "round up" a number of *boulevardiers*, met with a more disastrous result—the gleam of steel from mounted gendarmes, and a mandate to his employers.

So it came that one night, after the conclusion of the performance, Alkali Dick rode out of the corral gate of the Hippodrome with his last week's salary in his pocket and an imprecation on his lips. He had shaken the sawdust of the sham arena from his high, tight-fitting boots; he would shake off the white dust of France, and the effeminate soil of all Europe, also, and embark, at once, for his own country and the Far West!

A more practical and experienced man would have sold his horse at the nearest market and taken train to Havre, but Alkali

Dick felt himself incomplete on *terra firma* without his mustang—it would be hard enough to part from it on embarking—and he had determined to ride to the seaport.

The spectacle of a lithe horseman, clad in a Rembrandt *sombrero*, velvet jacket, turn-over collar, almost Van Dyke in its proportions, white trousers and high boots, with long, curling hair falling over his shoulders, and a pointed beard and moustache, was a picturesque one, but, still, not a novelty to the late-sipping Parisians who looked up under the midnight gas as he passed, and only recognised one of those men whom Paris had agreed to designate as “Booflo-bils” going home.

At three o'clock he pulled up at a wayside *cabaret*, preferring it to the publicity of a larger hotel, and lay there till morning. The slight consternation of the *cabaret*-keeper and his wife over this long-haired phantom, with glittering, deep-set eyes, was soothed by a royally-flung gold coin, and a few words of French slang picked up in the arena, which, with the name of Havre, comprised Dick's whole knowledge of the language. But he was touched with their ready and intelligent comprehension of his needs, and their genial if not so comprehensive loquacity. Luckily for his quick temper, he did not know that they had taken him for a travelling quack-doctor going to the Fair of Yvetot, and that Madame had been on the point of asking him for a magic balsam to prevent migraine.

He was up betimes and away, giving a wide berth to the larger towns; taking by-ways and cut-offs, yet always with the Western pathfinder's instinct, even among these alien, poplar-haunted plains, low-banked willow-fringed rivers, and cloverless meadows. The white sun shining everywhere—on dazzling arbours, summer-houses, and trellises; on light green vines and delicate pea-rows; on the white trousers, jackets, and shoes of smart shop-keepers or holiday-makers; on the white head-dresses of nurses and the white-ringed caps of the Sisters of St. Vincent—all this grew monotonous to this native of still more monotonous wastes. The long, black shadows of short, blue-skirted, sabotted women and short, blue-bloused, sabotted men slowly working in the fields, with slow oxen, or still slower heavy Norman horses; the same horses gaily bedecked, dragging slowly not only heavy waggons, but their own apparently more monstrous weight over the white road, fretted his nervous Western energy, and made him impatient to get on.

At the close of the second day he found some relief on entering a trackless wood—not the usual formal avenue of equi-distant trees, leading to nowhere, and stopping upon the open field—but apparently a genuine forest as wild as one of his own “oak bottoms.” Gnarled roots and twisted branches flung themselves across his path; his mustang's hoofs sank in deep pits of moss and last year's withered leaves; trailing vines caught his heavy-stirruped feet, or brushed his broad *sombrero*; the vista before him seemed only to endlessly repeat the same sylvan glade; he was in fancy once more in the primeval Western forest, and encompassed by its vast, dim silences. He did not know that he had in fact only penetrated an ancient park, which, in former days, resounded to the winding *fanfare* of the chase, and was still, on stated occasions, swept over by accurately green-coated Parisians and green-plumed *Diane's*, who had come down by train! To him it meant only unfettered and unlimited freedom.

He rose in his stirrups, and sent a characteristic yell ringing down the dim aisles before him. But, alas! at the same moment, his mustang, accustomed to the firmer grip of the prairie, in lashing out, stepped upon a slimy root, and fell heavily, rolling over his clinging and still undislodged rider. For a few moments both lay still. Then Dick extricated himself with an oath, rose giddily, dragged up his horse—who, after the fashion of his race, was meekly succumbing to his reclining position—and then became aware that the unfortunate beast was badly sprained in the shoulder, and temporarily lame. The sudden recollection that he was some miles from the road, and that the sun was sinking, concentrated his scattered faculties. The prospect of sleeping out in that summer woodland was nothing to the pioneer-bred Dick; he could make his horse and himself comfortable anywhere—but he was delaying his arrival at Havre. He must regain the high road—or some wayside inn. He glanced around him; the westering sun was a guide for his general direction, the road must follow it north or south; he would find a “clearing” somewhere. But here Dick was mistaken; there seemed no interruption of, no encroachment upon, this sylvan tract, as in his Western woods. There was no track or trail to be found; he missed even the ordinary woodland signs that denoted the path of animals to water. For the park, from the time a Norman Duke had

first alienated it from the virgin forest, had been rigidly preserved.

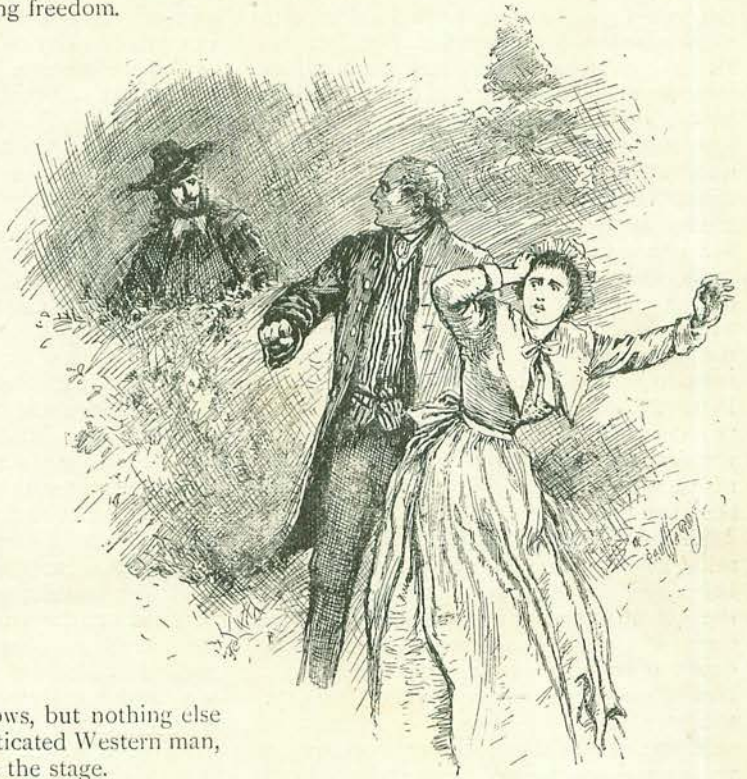
Suddenly, rising apparently from the ground before him, he saw the high roof-ridges and *tourelles* of a long, irregular, gloomy building. A few steps further showed him that it lay in a cup-like depression of the forest, and that it was still a long descent from where he had wandered to where it stood in the gathering darkness. His mustang was moving with great difficulty; he uncoiled his *lariat* from the saddle-horn, and, selecting the most open space, tied one end to the trunk of a large tree—the forty feet of horse-hair rope giving the animal a sufficient degree of grazing freedom.

Then he strode more quickly down the forest side towards the building, which now revealed its austere proportions, though Dick could see that they were mitigated by a strange, formal flower-garden, with quaint statues and fountains. There were grim black *aliées* of clipped trees, a curiously wrought iron gate, and twisted iron espaliers. On one side the edifice was supported by a great stone terrace, which seemed to him as broad as a Parisian *boulevard*. Yet everywhere it appeared sleeping in the desertion and silence of the summer twilight. The evening breeze swayed the lace curtains at the tall windows, but nothing else moved. To the unsophisticated Western man, it looked like a scene on the stage.

His progress was, however, presently checked by the first sign of preservation he had met in the forest—a thick hedge, which interfered between him and a sloping lawn beyond. It was up to his waist, yet he began to break his way through it, when suddenly he was arrested by the sound of voices. Before him, on the lawn, a man and woman, evidently servants, were slowly advancing, peering into the shadows of the wood which he had just left. He could not understand what they were saying, but he was about to speak and indicate his desire to find the road by signs, when the woman,

turning towards her companion, caught sight of his face and shoulders above the hedge. To his surprise and consternation, he saw the colour drop out of her fresh cheeks, her round eyes fix in their sockets, and with a despairing shriek, she turned and fled towards the house. The man turned at his companion's cry, gave the same horrified glance at Dick's face, uttered a hoarse "*Sacré!*" crossed himself violently, and fled also!

Amazed, indignant, and for the first time in his life humiliated, Dick gazed speechlessly after them. The man, of course, was a sneaking coward—but the woman was rather



"SHE TURNED AND FLED."

pretty. It had not been Dick's experience to have women run *from* him! Should he follow them, knock the silly fellow's head against a tree, and demand an explanation? Alas! he knew not the language! They had already reached the house and disappeared in one of the offices. Well! Let them go—for a mean, "low down" pair of country bumpkins!—*he* wanted no favours from them!

He turned back angrily into the forest to seek his unlucky beast. The gurgle of water fell on his ear; hard by was a spring, where

at least he could water the mustang. He stooped to examine it; there was yet light enough in the sunset sky to throw back from that little mirror the reflection of his thin, oval face, his long, curling hair, and his pointed beard and moustache. Yes! this was his face—the face that many women in Paris had agreed was romantic and picturesque. Had those wretched greenhorns never seen a real man before? Were they idiots, or insane? A sudden recollection of the silence and the seclusion of the building suggested certainly an asylum—but where were the keepers?

It was getting darker in the wood; he made haste to recover his horse, to drag it to the spring, and there bathe its shoulder in the water mixed with whisky taken from his flask. His saddle-bag contained enough bread and meat for his own supper; he would camp out for the night where he was, and with the first light of dawn make his way back through the wood whence he came. As the light slowly faded from the wood he rolled himself in his saddle-blanket and lay down.

But not to sleep! His strange position, the accident to his horse, an unusual irritation over the incident of the frightened servants—trivial as it might have been to any other man—and above all, an increasing childish curiosity, kept him awake and restless. Presently he could see also that it was growing lighter beyond the edge of the wood, and that the rays of a young crescent moon, while it plunged the forest into darkness and impassable shadow, evidently was illuminating the hollow below. He threw aside his blanket, and made his way to the hedge again. He was right; he could see the quaint, formal lines of the old garden more distinctly—the broad terrace—the queer, dark bulk of the house, with lights now gleaming from a few of its open windows.

Before one of these windows opening on the terrace was a small, white, draped table with fruits, cups and glasses, and two or three chairs. As he gazed curiously at these new signs of life and occupation, he became aware of a regular and monotonous tap upon the stone flags of the terrace. Suddenly he saw three figures slowly turn the corner of the terrace at the further end of the building, and walk towards the table. The central figure was that of an elderly woman, yet tall and stately of carriage, walking with a stick, whose regular tap he had heard, supported on the one side by an elderly *curé* in black *soutaine*, and on the other by a tall and slender girl in white.

They walked leisurely to the other end of the terrace, as if performing a regular exercise, and returned, stopping before the open French window; where, after remaining in conversation a few moments, the elderly lady and her ecclesiastical companion entered. The young girl sauntered slowly to the steps of the terrace, and leaning against a huge vase as she looked over the garden, seemed lost in contemplation. Her face was turned towards the wood, but in quite another direction from where he stood.

There was something so gentle, refined, and graceful in her figure, yet dominated by a girlish youthfulness of movement and gesture, that Alkali Dick was singularly interested. He had probably never seen an *ingénue* before; he had certainly never come in contact with a girl of that caste and seclusion in his brief Parisian experience. He was sorely tempted to leave his hedge and try to obtain a nearer view of her. There was a fringe of lilac bushes running from the garden up the slope; if he could gain their shadows, he could descend into the garden. What he should do after his arrival, he had not thought; but he had one idea—he knew not why—that if he ventured to speak to her he would not be met with the abrupt rustic terror he had experienced at the hands of the servants. *She* was not of that kind! He crept through the hedge, reached the lilacs, and began the descent softly and securely in the shadow. But at the same moment she arose, called in a youthful voice towards the open window, and began to descend the steps. A half-expostulating reply came from the window, but the young girl answered it with the laughing, capricious confidence of a spoiled child, and continued her way into the garden. Here she paused a moment and hung over a rose tree, from which she gathered a flower, which she thrust into her belt. Dick paused, too, half-crouching, half-leaning over a lichen-stained, cracked stone pedestal from which the statue had long been overthrown and forgotten.

To his surprise, however, the young girl, following the path to the lilacs, began leisurely to ascend the hill, swaying from side to side with a youthful movement, and swinging the long stalk of a lily at her side. In another moment he would be discovered! Dick was frightened; his confidence of the moment before had all gone; he would fly—and yet, an exquisite and fearful joy kept him motionless. She was approaching him, full and clear in the moonlight. He could

see the grace of her delicate figure in the simple white frock drawn at the waist with broad satin ribbon, and its love-knots of pale blue ribbons on her shoulders; he could see the coils of her brown hair, the pale, olive tint of her oval cheek, the delicate, swelling nostril of her straight, clear-cut nose; he could even smell the lily she carried in her little hand. Then, suddenly, she lifted her long lashes, and her large grey eyes met his.

Alas! the same look of vacant horror came into her eyes, and fixed and dilated their clear pupils. But she uttered no outcry—there was something in her blood that checked it—something that even gave a dignity to her recoiling figure, and made Dick flush with admiration. She put her hand to her side, as if the shock of the exertion of her ascent had set her heart to beating, but she did not faint. Then her fixed look gave way to one of infinite sadness, pity, and pathetic appeal. Her lips were parted—they seemed to be moving, apparently in prayer. At last her voice came, wonderingly, timidly, tenderly:—

*"Mon Dieu! c'est donc vous? Ici. C'est vous que Marie a cru voir! Que venez vous faire ici, Armand de Fontonelles? Répondez!"*

Alas, not a word was comprehensible to Dick; nor could he think of a word to say in reply. He made an uncouth, half-irritated, half-despairing gesture towards the wood he had quitted, as if to indicate his helpless horse, but he knew it was meaningless to the frightened yet exalted girl before him. Her little hand crept to her breast and clutched a rosary within the folds of her dress, as her soft voice again arose, low but appealingly:—

*"Vous souffrez! Ah, mon Dieu! Peut-on vous secourir? Moi même—mes prières pourraient elles interceder pour vous? Je supplierai le Ciel de prendre en pitié l'âme de mon ancêtre. Monsieur le Curé est là—je lui parlerai. Lui et ma mere vous viendront en aide."*

She clasped her hands appealingly before him.



"SHE CLASPED HER HANDS APPEALINGLY BEFORE HIM."

Dick stood bewildered, hopeless, mystified; he had not understood a word; he could not say a word. For an instant he had a wild idea of seizing her hand and leading

her to his helpless horse, and then came what he believed was his salvation—a sudden flash of recollection that he had seen the word he wanted, the one word that would explain all, in a placarded notice at the Cirque of a bracelet that had been *lost*—yes, the single word "*perdu*." He made a step towards her, and in voice almost as faint as her own, stammered: "*Perdu!*"

With a little cry, that was more like a sigh than an outcry, the girl's arms fell to her side; she took a step backwards, reeled, and fainted away.

Dick caught her as she fell. What had he said!—but, more than all, what should he do now? He could not leave her alone and helpless—yet how could he justify another disconcerting intrusion? He touched her hands, they were cold and lifeless—her eyes were half-closed, her face as pale and drooping as her lily. Well, he must brave the worst now—and carry her to the house, even at the risk of meeting the others and terrifying them as he had her. He caught her up—he scarcely felt her weight against his breast and shoulder, and ran hurriedly down the slope to the terrace, which was still deserted. If he had time to place her on some bench beside the window, within their reach, he might still fly undiscovered! But as he panted up the steps of the terrace with his burden, he saw that the French window was still open, but the light seemed to have been extinguished. It would be safer for her if he could place her *inside* the house—if he but dared to enter. He was desperate—and he dared!

He found himself alone, in a long *salon* of rich but faded white and gold hangings, lit at the further end by two tall candles on either side of the high marble mantel, whose rays, however, scarcely reached the window where he had entered. He laid his burden on a high-backed sofa. In so doing, the rose fell from her belt. He picked it up, put it in his breast, and turned to go. But he was arrested by a voice from the terrace:—

“Renée!”

It was the voice of the elderly lady, who, with the *curé* at her side, had just appeared from the rear of the house, and from the further end of the terrace was looking towards the garden in search of the young girl. His escape in that way was cut off. To add to his dismay, the young girl, perhaps roused by her mother's voice, was beginning to show signs of recovering consciousness. Dick looked quickly around him. There was an open door, opposite the window, leading to a hall which, no doubt, offered some exit on the other

side of the house. It was his only remaining chance! He darted through it, closed it behind him, and found himself at the end of a long hall or picture-gallery, strangely illuminated through high windows, reaching nearly to the roof, by the moon, which on that side of the building threw nearly level bars of light and shadows across the floor and the quaint portraits on the wall.

But to his delight he could see at the other end a narrow, lance-shaped open postern door showing the moonlit pavement without—evidently the door through which the mother and the *curé* had just passed out. He ran rapidly towards it. As he did so he heard the hurried ringing of bells and voices in the room he had quitted—the young girl had evidently been discovered—and this would give him time. He had nearly reached the door, when he stopped suddenly—his blood chilled with awe! It was his turn to be terrified—he was standing, apparently, before *himself*!

His first recovering thought was that it was a mirror—so accurately was every line and detail of his face and figure reflected. But a second scrutiny showed some discrepancies of costume, and he saw it was a panelled portrait on the wall. It was of a man of his



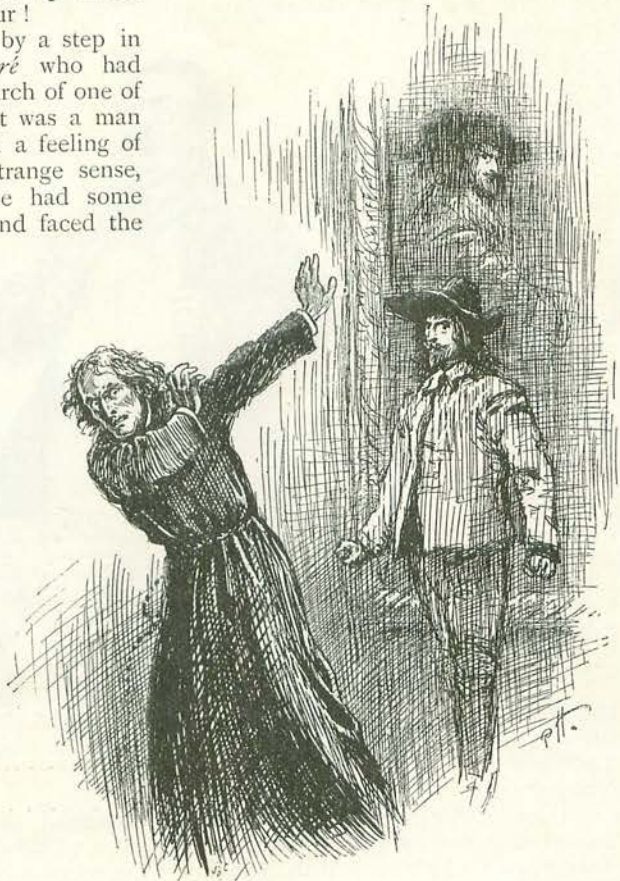
“HE WAS STANDING, APPARENTLY, BEFORE HIMSELF!”

own age, height, beard, complexion, and features, with long curls like his own, falling over a lace Van Dyke collar, which, however, again simulated the appearance of his own hunting-shirt. The broad-brimmed hat in the picture, whose drooping plume was lost in shadow, was scarcely different from Dick's *sombrero*. But the likeness of the face to Dick was marvellous—convincing! As he gazed at it, the wicked, black eyes seemed to flash and kindle at his own—its lip curled with Dick's own sardonic humour!

He was recalled to himself by a step in the gallery. It was the *curé* who had entered hastily, evidently in search of one of the servants. Partly because it was a man and not a woman, partly from a feeling of bravado—and partly from a strange sense, excited by the picture, that he had some claim to be there, he turned and faced the pale priest with a slight dash of impatient devilry that would have done credit to the portrait. But he was sorry for it the next moment!

The priest, looking up suddenly, discovered what seemed to him to be the portrait standing before its own frame and glaring at him. Throwing up his hands with an averted head and an "*Exorcis—!*" he wheeled and scuffled away. Dick seized the opportunity, darted through the narrow door on to the rear terrace, and ran, under cover of the shadow of the house, to the steps into the garden. Luckily for him, this new and unexpected diversion occupied the inmates too much with what was going on in the house, to give them time to search outside. Dick reached the lilac hedge, tore up the hill, and in a few moments threw himself, panting, on his blanket. In the single look he had cast behind, he had seen that the half-dark *salon* was now brilliantly lit—where no doubt the whole terrified household was now assembled. He had no fear of being followed; since his confrontation with his own likeness in the mysterious portrait, he understood everything. The apparently supernatural character of his visitation was made plain; his ruffled vanity was

soothed—his vindication was complete. He laughed to himself and rolled about, until in his suppressed merriment the rose fell from his bosom, and—he stopped! Its freshness and fragrance recalled the innocent young girl he had frightened. He remembered her gentle, pleading voice, and his cheek flushed. Well, he had done the best he could in bringing her back to the house—at the risk of being



"EXORCIS!"

taken for a burglar—and she was safe now! If that stupid French parson didn't know the difference between a living man and a dead and painted one—it wasn't his fault. But he fell asleep with the rose in his fingers.

He was awake at the first streak of dawn. He again bathed his horse's shoulder, saddled, but did not mount him, as the beast, although better, was still stiff, and Dick wished to spare him for the journey to still distant Havre, although he had determined to lie over that night at the first way-

side inn. Luckily for him, the disturbance at the Château had not extended to the forest, for Dick had to lead his horse slowly and could not have escaped, but no suspicion of external intrusion seemed to have been awakened, and the woodland was, evidently, seldom invaded.

By dint of laying his course by the sun and the exercise of a little woodcraft, in the course of two hours he heard the creaking of a hay-cart, and knew that he was near a travelled road. But to his discomfiture he presently came to a high wall, which had evidently guarded this portion of the woods from the public. Time, however, had made frequent breaches in the stones; these had been roughly filled in with a rude *abatis* of logs and tree tops pointing towards the road. But as these were mainly designed to prevent intrusion into the park rather than egress from it, Dick had no difficulty in rolling them aside and emerging at last with his limping steed upon the white, high road. The creaking cart had passed; it was yet early for traffic, and Dick presently came upon a wine-shop, a bakery, a blacksmith's shop, laundry, and a somewhat pretentious *café* and hotel in a broader space which marked the junction of another road.

Directly before it, however, to his consternation, were the massive, but time-worn, iron gates of a park, which Dick did not doubt was the one in which he had spent the previous night. But it was impossible to go further in his present plight, and he boldly approached the restaurant. As he was preparing to make his usual explanatory signs, to his great delight he was addressed in a quaint, broken English, mixed with forgotten American slang, by the white-trousered, black alpaca-coated proprietor. More than that—he was a Social Democrat

and an enthusiastic lover of America—had he not been to “Bos-town” and New York, and penetrated as far West as “Booflo”?—and had much pleasure in that beautiful and free country! Yes! it was a “go-a’ed” country—you “bet-your-lif.” One had reason to say so—there was your electricity—your street cars—your “steambots”—ah! such steamboats—and your “r-rail-r-roads.” Ah! observe! compare your r-rail-r-roads and the buffet of the Pullman with the line from Paris, for example—and where is one? No—where! Actually, positively, without doubt, nowhere!

Later, at an appetizing breakfast—at which, to Dick's great satisfaction, the good man had permitted and congratulated himself to sit at table with a free-born American—he was even more loquacious. For what then, he would ask, was this incompetence—this imbecility—of France? He would tell. It was the vile corruption of Paris, the grasping of capital and companies, the fatal influence of the still clinging *noblesse*, and the insidious Jesuitical power of the priests. As for example, Monsieur “the

Booflo-bil” had doubtless noticed the great gates of the park before the *café*? It was the preserve—the hunting-park of one of the old grand seigneurs, still kept up by his descendants, the Counts of Fontonelles—hundreds of acres that had never been tilled, and kept as wild waste wilderness—kept for a day's pleasure in a year! And, look you! the peasants starving around its walls in their small garden patches and pinched farms! And the present Comte de Fontonelles cascading gold on his mistresses in Paris; and the Comtesse, his mother, and her daughter living there to feed and fatten and pension a brood of plotting, black-cowled priests. Ah, bah! where was your Republican France, then? But a time



“AN ENTHUSIASTIC LOVER OF AMERICA.”



would come. The "Booflo-bil" had, without doubt, noticed, as he came along the road, the breaches in the wall of the park?

Dick, with a slight dry reserve, "reckoned that he had."

"They were made by the scythes and pitchforks of the peasants in the Revolution of '93, when the Count was *émigré*, as one says with reason 'skedadelle,' to England. Let them look the next time that they burn not the Château—"bet your lif'!"

"The Château," said Dick, with affected carelessness. "Wot's the blamed thing like?"

It was an old affair—with armour and a picture-gallery—and *bric-à-brac*. He had never seen it. Not even as a boy—it was kept very secluded then. As a man—you understand—he could not ask the favour. The Comtes de Fontonelles and himself were not friends. The family did not like a *café* near their sacred gates—where had stood only the huts of their retainers. The American would observe that he had not called it "*Café de Château*," nor "*Café de Fontonelles*"—the gold of California would not induce him. Why did he remain there? Naturally, to goad them! It was a principle, one understood! To *goad* them and hold them in check! One kept a *café*—why not? One had one's principles—one's convictions—that was another thing! That was the kind of "'air-pin"—was it not?—that *he*, Gustav Ribaud, was like!

Yet for all his truculent Socialism, he was quick, obliging, and charmingly attentive to Dick and his needs. As to Dick's horse, he should have the best veterinary surgeon—there was an incomparable one in the person of the blacksmith—see to him, and if it were an affair of days, and Dick must go, he himself would be glad to purchase the beast, his saddle, and accoutrements. It was an affair of business—an advertisement for the *café*! He would ride the horse himself before the gates of the park. It would please his customers. Ha! He had learned a trick or two in free America.

Dick's first act had been to shave off his characteristic beard and moustache, and even to submit his long curls to the village barber's shears, while a straw hat, which he bought to take the place of his slouched *sombrero*, completed his transformation. His host saw in the change only the natural preparation of a voyager, but Dick had really made the sacrifice, not from fear of detection, for he had recovered his old swaggering audacity, but from a quick distaste he had taken

to his resemblance to the portrait. He was too genuine a Westerner, and too vain a man, to feel flattered at his resemblance to an aristocratic bully, as he believed the ancestral De Fontonelles to be. Even his momentary sensation as he faced the *curé* in the picture-gallery was more from a vague sense that liberties had been taken with his, Dick's, personality, than that *he* had borrowed anything from the portrait.

But he was not so clear about the young girl. Her tender, appealing voice, although he knew it had been addressed only to a vision—still thrilled his fancy. The pluck that had made her withstand her fear so long until he had uttered that dreadful word—still excited his admiration. His curiosity to know what mistake he had made—for he knew it must have been some frightful blunder—was all the more keen, as he had no chance to rectify it. What a brute she must have thought him—or *did* she really think him a brute even then?—for her look was one more of despair and pity! Yet she would remember him only by that last word—and never know that he had risked insult and ejection from her friends to carry her to a place of safety. He could not bear to go across the seas carrying the pale, unsatisfied face of that gentle girl ever before his eyes! A sense of delicacy—new to Dick, but always the accompaniment of deep feeling—kept him from even hinting his story to his host; though he knew—perhaps *because* he knew—that it would gratify his enmity to the family. A sudden thought struck Dick. He knew her house—and her name. He would write her a note. Somebody would be sure to translate it for her.

He borrowed pen, ink, and paper, and in the clean solitude of his fresh chintz bedroom, indited the following letter:—

"DEAR MISS FONTONELLES, — Please excuse me for having skeert you. I hadn't any call to do it; I never reckoned to do it—it was all jest my derned luck! I only reckoned to tell you I was lost—in them blamed woods—don't you remember?—'lost'—*perdoo*!—and then you up and fainted! I wouldn't have come into your garden, only, you see, I'd just skeered by accident two of your helps, reg'lar softies, and I wanted to explain. I reckon they allowed I was that man that that picter in the hall was painted after. I reckon they took *me* for him—see? But he ain't *my* style, nohow, and I never saw the picter at all until after I'd toted you, when you fainted, up to your



"HE INDITED A LETTER."

house, or I'd have made my kalkilations and acted according. I'd have laid low in the woods, and got away without skeerin' you. You see what I mean? It was mighty mean of me, I suppose, to have tetched you at all, without saying 'excuse me, miss,' and toted you out of the garden and up the steps into your own parlour without asking your leave. But the whole thing tumbled so suddent. And it didn't seem the square thing for me to lite out and leave you lying there on the grass. That's why! I'm sorry I skeert that old preacher, but he came upon me in the picter hall so suddent, that it was a mighty close call, I tell you, to get off without a shindy. Please forgive me, Miss Fontonelles. When you get this, I shall be going back home to America, but you might write to me at Denver City, saying you're all right. I liked your style; I liked your grit in standing up to me in the garden until you had your say, when you thought I was the Lord knows what—though I never understood a word you got off—not knowing French. But it's all the same now. Say! I've got your rose!

"Yours very respectfully,

"RICHARD FOUNTAINS."

Dick folded the epistle and put it in his pocket. He would post it himself on the morning before he left. When he came

downstairs he found his indefatigable host awaiting him, with the report of the veterinary blacksmith. There was nothing seriously wrong with the mustang, but it would be unfit to travel for several days. The landlord repeated his former offer. Dick, whose money was pretty well exhausted, was fain to accept, reflecting that *she* had never seen the mustang and would not recognise it. But he drew the line at the *sombrero*, to which his host had taken a great fancy. He had worn it before *her*!

Later in the evening Dick was sitting on the low veranda of the *café*, overlooking the white road. A round, white table was beside him, his feet were on the railing, but his eyes were resting beyond on the high, mouldy iron gates of the mysterious park. What he was thinking of did not matter, but he was a little impatient at the sudden appearance of his host—whom he had evaded during the afternoon—at his side. The man's manner was full of bursting loquacity and mysterious levity.

Truly, it was a good hour when Dick had arrived at Fontonelles—"just in time." He could see now what a world of imbeciles was France. What stupid ignorance ruled, what low cunning and low tact could achieve—in effect, what jugglers and mountebanks, hypocritical priests and licentious and lying *noblesse* went to make up existing society. Ah, there had been a fine excitement, a regular *coup d'théâtre* at Fontonelles—the Château yonder; here at the village, where the news was brought by frightened grooms and silly women! He had been in the thick of it all the afternoon! He had examined it—interrogated them like a *jugé d'instruction*—winnowed it, sifted it. And what was it all? An attempt by these wretched priests and *noblesse* to revive in the nineteenth century—the age of electricity and Pullman cars—a miserable mediæval legend of an apparition—a miracle! Yes!—One is asked to believe that at the Château yonder was seen last night three times the apparition of Armand de Fontonelles!

Dick started. "Armand de Fontonelles!" He remembered that she had repeated that name!

"Who's he?" he demanded, abruptly.

"The first Comte de Fontonelles! When monsieur knows that the first Comte has been dead three hundred years—he will see the imbecility of the affair!"

"Wot did he come back for?" growled Dick.

"Ah!—it was a legend. Consider its artfulness! The Comte Armand had been a hard liver, a dissipated scoundrel, a reckless beast, but a mighty hunter of the stag. It was said that on one of these occasions he had been warned by the apparition of St. Hubert, but he had laughed—for, observe, *he* always jeered at the priests too; hence this story!—and had declared that the flaming cross seen between the horns of the sacred stag was only the torch of a poacher, and he would shoot it! Good! the body of the Comte, dead, but without a wound, was found in the wood the next day, with his discharged arquebus in his hand. The Archbishop of Rouen refused his body the rites of the Church until a number of masses were said every year and—paid for! One understands! one sees their 'little game'; the Count now appears—he is in purgatory! More masses—more money! There you are. Bah! One understands, too, that the affair takes place, not in a *café* like this—not in a public place—but at a *château* of the *noblesse*, and is seen by," the proprietor checked the characters on his fingers, "*two* retainers; one young demoiselle of the *noblesse*, daughter of the *châtelaine* herself; and, my faith, it goes without saying, by a fat priest, the *curé*! In effect—two interested ones! And the priest—his lie is magnificent! Superb! *For he saw the Comte in the picture-gallery—in effect—stepping into his frame!*"

"Oh, come off the roof," said Dick, impatiently; "they must have seen *something*, you know. The young lady wouldn't lie!"

Monsieur Ribaud leaned over, with a mysterious, cynical smile, and lowering his voice, said:—

"You have reason to say so. You have hit it, my friend. There *was* a something! And if we regard the young lady, you shall hear. The story of Mademoiselle de Fontonelles is that she has walked by herself alone in the garden—you observe *alone*—in the moonlight, near the edge of the wood. You comprehend? The mother and the *curé* are in the house—for the time effaced! Here at the edge of the wood—though why she continues, a young demoiselle, to the edge of the wood does not make itself clear—she beholds her ancestor—as on a pedestal—young, pale, but very handsome and *exalté*—pardon!"

"Nothing," said Dick, hurriedly; "go on!"

"She beseeches him why! He says he

is lost! She faints away, on the instant, there—regard me!—*on the edge of the wood*—she says. But her mother and *Monsieur le Curé* find her pale, agitated, distressed *on the sofa in the salon*. One is asked to believe that she is transported through the air—like an angel—by the spirit of Armand de Fontonelles. Incredible!"

"Well, wot do *you* think?" said Dick, sharply.

The *café* proprietor looked around him carefully, and then lowered his voice significantly:—

"A lover!"

"A what!" said Dick, with a gasp.

"A lover!" repeated Ribaud. "You comprehend! Mademoiselle has no *dot*—the property is nothing—the brother has everything. A Mademoiselle de Fontonelles cannot marry out of her class, and the *noblesse* are all poor. Mademoiselle is young—pretty they say, of her kind. It is an intolerable life at the old *Château*; Mademoiselle consoles herself!"

Monsieur Ribaud never knew how near he was to the white road below the railing at that particular moment. Luckily, Dick controlled himself, and wisely, as M. Ribaud's next sentence showed him.

"A romance—an innocent, foolish liaison, if you like—but, all the same, if known of a Mademoiselle de Fontonelles, a compromising—a fatal—entanglement. There you are—look! For this, then, all this story of cock and bulls and spirits! Mademoiselle has been discovered with her lover by someone. This pretty story shall stop their mouths!"

"But wot," said Dick, brusquely, "wot if the girl was really skeert at something she'd seen, and fainted dead away, as she said she did—and—and—" he hesitated—"some stranger came along and picked her up?"

Monsieur Ribaud looked at him pityingly.

"A Mademoiselle de Fontonelles is picked up by her servants, by her family, but not by the young man in the woods, alone. It is even more compromising!"

"Do you mean to say," said Dick, furiously, "that the rag-pickers and sneaks that wade around in the slumgallion of this country, would dare to spatter that young gal?"

"I mean to say, yes—assuredly, positively yes!" said Ribaud, rubbing his hands with a certain satisfaction at Dick's fury. "For you comprehend not the position of *la jeune fille* in all France! Ah! in America, the young lady she go everywhere alone; I have seen

her—pretty, charming, fascinating—alone with the young man. But here, no! never! Regard me, my friend. The French mother, she say to her daughter's *fiancé*, 'Look! there is my daughter. She has never been alone, with a young man, for five minutes—not even with you. Take her for your wife!' It is monstrous!—it is impossible!—it is so!"

There was a silence of a few minutes, and Dick looked blankly at the iron gates of the park of Fontonelles. Then he said: "Give me a cigar."

M. Ribaud instantly produced his cigar-case. Dick took a cigar, but waved aside the proffered match, and entering the *café*, took from his pocket the letter to Mademoiselle de Fontonelle, twisted it in a spiral, lighted it at a candle, lit his cigar with it, and returning to the veranda, held it in his hand until the last ashes dropped on the floor. Then he said, gravely, to Ribaud:—

"You've treated me like a white man, Frenchy, and I ain't goin' back on yer—tho' your ways ain't my ways—nohow; but I reckon in this yer matter, at the Shotto you're a little too previous! For though I don't as a ginral thing take stock in ghosts, *I believe*

*every word that them folk said up thar.*

And," he added, leaning his hand somewhat heavily on Ribaud's shoulder, "if you're the man I take you for, you'll believe it too! And if that chap, Armand de Fontonelles, hadn't

hev picked up that gal, at that moment, he would hev deserved to roast in hell another three hundred years! That's why I believe her story. So you'll let these yer Fontonelles keep their ghosts for all they're worth; and when you next feel inclined to talk about that girl's *lover*—you'll think of me—and shut your head! You hear me, Frenchy, I'm shoutin'! And don't you forget it!"

Nevertheless, early the next morning M. Ribaud accompanied his guest to the railway station, and parted from him with great effusion. On his way back an old-fashioned carriage with a postilion passed him. At a sign from its occupant, the postilion pulled up, and M. Ribaud, bowing to the dust, approached the window, and the pale, stern face of a dignified, white-haired woman of sixty that looked from it.

"Has he gone?" said the lady.

"Assuredly, madame; I was with him at the station."

"And you think no one saw him?"

"No one, madame, but myself."

"And—what kind of a man was he?"

M. Ribaud lifted his shoulders, threw out his hands despairingly, yet with a world of significance, and said:—

"An American."

"Ah!"

The carriage drove on and entered the gates of the Château. And M. Ribaud, *café* proprietor and Social Democrat, straightened himself in the dust, and shook his fist after it.

