

A Widow of the Santa Ana Valley.

BY BRET HARTE.



HE Widow Wade was standing at her bedroom window, staring out in that vague instinct which compels humanity in moments of doubt and perplexity to seek this change of observation for superior illumination. Not that Mrs. Wade's disturbance was of a serious character. She had passed the acute stage of widowhood by at least two years, and the slight redness of her soft eyelids, as well as the droop of her pretty mouth, were merely the recognised outward and visible signs of the grievously-minded religious community in which she lived. The mourning she still wore was also partly in conformity with the sad-coloured garments of her neighbours and the necessities of the rainy season. She was in comfortable circumstances, the mistress of a large ranch in the valley, which had lately become more valuable by the extension of a waggon road through its centre. She was simply worrying whether she should go to a "sociable," ending with a dance—a daring innovation of some strangers—at the new hotel, or continue to eschew such follies that were, according to local belief, unsuited to "a vale of tears."

Indeed, at this moment the prospect she gazed abstractedly upon seemed to justify that lugubrious description. The Santa Ana Valley—a long, monotonous level—was dimly visible through moving curtains of rain or veils of mist, to the black mourning edge of the horizon, and had looked like this for months. Nevertheless, on that rich alluvial soil Nature's tears seemed only to fatten the widow's acres and increase her crops. Her neighbours, too, were equally prosperous. Yet for six months of the year the recognised expression of Santa Ana was one of sadness, and for the other six months of resignation. Mrs. Wade had yielded early to this influence, as she had to others, in the weakness of her gentle nature, and partly as it was more becoming the singular tragedy that had made her a widow.



"THE WIDOW WADE WAS STANDING AT HER BEDROOM WINDOW."

The late Mr. Wade had been found dead with a bullet through his head in a secluded part of the road over Heavy Tree Hill, in Sonora County. Near him lay two other bodies, one afterwards identified as John Stubbs, a resident of the hill, and probably a travelling companion of Wade's; and the other a noted desperado and highwayman, still masked, as at the moment of the attack. Wade and his companion had probably sold their lives dearly and against odds, for another mask was found on the ground, indicating that the attack was not single-handed; and as Wade's body had not yet been rifled, it was evident that the remaining highwayman had fled in haste. The hue-and-cry had been given by apparently the only one of the travellers who escaped, but as he was hastening to take the overland coach to the East at the time, his testimony could not be submitted to the coroner's deliberation.

The facts, however, were sufficiently plain for a verdict of "wilful murder" against the highwayman, although it was believed that the absent witness had basely deserted his companion and left him to his fate, or, as it was suggested by others, that he might even have been an accomplice. It was this circumstance which protracted comment on the incident and the sufferings of the widow, far beyond that rapid obliteration which usually overtook such affairs in the feverish haste of the early days. It caused her to remove to Santa Ana, where her old father had feebly ranched "a quarter section" in the valley.

He survived her husband only a few months, leaving her the property, and once more in mourning. Perhaps this continuity of woe endeared her in a neighbourhood where distinctive ravages of diphtheria or scarlet fever gave a kind of social pre-eminence to any household, and she was so sympathetically assisted by her neighbours in the management of the ranch that, from an unkempt and wasteful wilderness, it became a paying property. The slim, willowy figure,

soft, red-lidded eyes, and deep crape of "Sister Wade" at church or prayer meeting was grateful to the soul of these gloomy worshippers, and in time she herself found that the arm of these dyspeptics of mind and body was nevertheless strong and sustaining. Small wonder that she should hesitate tonight about plunging into inconsistent, even though trifling, frivolities.

But apart from this superficial reason there was another instinctive one deep down in the recesses of Mrs. Wade's timid heart which she had secretly kept to herself, and indeed would have tearfully resented had it been offered by another. The late Mr. Wade had been, in fact, a singular example of a careless, frivolous existence carried to a man-like excess. Beside being a patron of amusements, Mr. Wade gambled, raced, and drank. He was often home late, and sometimes not at all. Not that this conduct was exceptional in the "roaring days" of Heavy Tree Hill, but it had given Mrs. Wade perhaps an undue preference for a more certain, and even a more serious, life. His tragic death was, of course, a kind of martyrdom which exalted him in the feminine mind to a saintly memory, yet Mrs. Wade was not without a certain relief in that. It was voiced, perhaps crudely, by the widow of Abner Drake in a visit of condolence to the tearful Mrs. Wade a few days after Wade's death.

"It's a vale o' sorrow, Mrs. Wade," said the sympathizer, "but it has its ups and downs, and I reckon ye'll be feelin' soon pretty much as I did about Abner when *he* was took. It was mighty soothin' and comfortin' to feel that, whatever might happen now, I always knew jist whar Abner was passin' his nights."

Poor slim Mrs. Wade had no disquieting sense of humour to interfere with her reception of this large truth, and she accepted it with a burst of reminiscent tears.

Now, gazing from the window, she was vaguely conscious of an addition to the landscape in the shape of a man who was passing down the road with a pack on his back like the tramping "prospectors" she had often seen at Heavy Tree Hill. That memory apparently settled her vacillating mind: she determined she would not go to the dance. But as she was turning away from the window a second figure—a horseman—appeared in another direction by a cross road, a shorter cut through her domain. This she had no difficulty in recognising as one of the strangers who were getting up the dance. She had noticed him

at church on the previous Sunday. As he passed the house he appeared to be gazing at it so earnestly that she drew back from the window lest she should be seen. And then, for no reason whatever, she changed her mind once more, and resolved to go to the dance. Gravely announcing this fact to the wife of her superintendent, who kept house with her in her loneliness, she thought nothing more about it. She should go in her mourning, with perhaps the addition of a white collar and frill.

It was evident, however, that Santa Ana thought a good deal more than she did of this new idea, which seemed a part of the innovation already begun by the building of the new hotel. It was argued by some that, as the new church and new school-house had been opened with prayer, it was only natural that a lighter festivity should inaugurate the opening of the hotel. "I reckon that dancin' is about the next thing to travellin' for gettin' up an appetite for refreshments, and that's what the landlord is kalkilatin' to sarve," was the remark of a gloomy but practical citizen on the veranda of "The Valley Emporium."

"That's so," rejoined a bystander, "and I notice on that last box o' pills I got for chills, the directions say that a little 'agreeable exercise'—not too violent—is a great assistance to the working o' the pills."

"I reckon that that Mr. Brooks who's down here lookin' arter mill property got up the dance. He's bin round town canvassin' all the women-folks and drummin' up likely gels for it. They say he actually sent an invite to the Widder Wade," remarked another loungee. "Gosh! he's got cheek!"

"Well, gentlemen," said the proprietor, judicially, "while we don't intend to hev any minin' camp fandangos or 'Frisco falals round Santa Any" (Santa Ana was proud of its simple agricultural virtues) "I ain't so hard-shelled as not to give new things a fair trial. And after all, it's the women-folk that has the say about it. Why, there's old Miss Ford sez she hasn't kicked a foot sence she left Mizoori, but wouldn't mind trying it agin. Ez to Brooks takin' that trouble—well, I suppose it's along o' his bein' *healthy!*" He heaved a deep, dyspeptic sigh, which was faintly echoed by the others. "Why, look at him now, ridin' round on that black hoss o' his, in the wet, since daylight and not carin' for blind chills or rhumatiz!"

He was looking at a serape-draped horseman, the one the widow had seen on the previous night, who was now cantering slowly

up the street. Seeing the group on the veranda he rode up, threw himself lightly from his saddle, and joined them. He was an alert, determined, good-looking fellow of about thirty-five, whose smooth, smiling face hardly commended itself to Santa Ana, though his eyes were distinctly sympathetic. He glanced at the depressed group around him and became ominously serious.

"When did it happen?" he asked, gravely.

"What happen?" said the nearest bystander.

"The funeral, flood, fight, or fire? Which of the four F's was it?"

"What are you talkin' about?" said the proprietor, stiffly, scenting some dangerous humour.

"*You*," said Brooks, promptly. "You're all standing here croaking like crows this

All this was so perfectly true of the prosperous burghers that they could not for a moment reply. But Briggs had recourse to what he believed to be a retaliatory taunt: "I heard you've been askin' Widow Wade to come to your dance," he said, with a wink at the others. "Of course she said 'Yes.'"

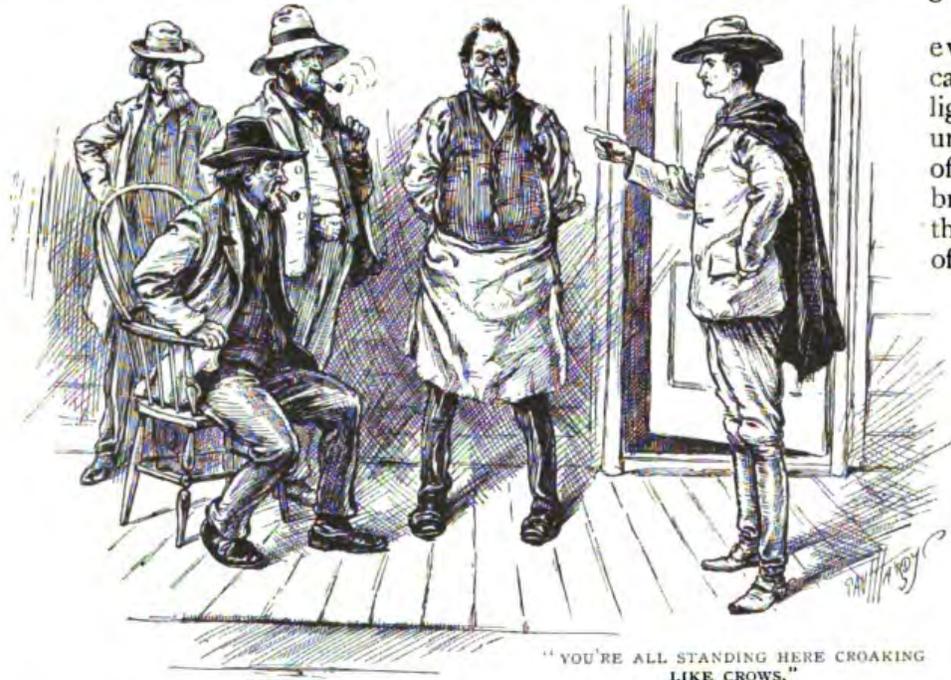
"Of course she did," returned Brooks, coolly. "I've just got her note."

"What?" ejaculated the three men, together. "Mrs. Wade comin'?"

"Certainly! Why shouldn't she? And it would do *you* good to come too, and shake the limp dampness out of you," returned Brooks, as he quietly remounted his horse and cantered away.

"Darned ef I don't think he's got his eye on the widdler," said Johnson, faintly.

"Or the quarter section," added Briggs, gloomily.



"YOU'RE ALL STANDING HERE CROAKING LIKE CROWS."

fine morning. I passed *your* farm, Johnson, not an hour ago. The wheat just climbing out of the black adobe mud as thick as rows of pins on paper. What have *you* to grumble at? I saw *your* stock, Briggs, over on Two Mile Bottom, waddling along, fat as the adobe they were sticking in; their coats shining like fresh paint—what's the matter with *you*? And," turning to the proprietor, "there's *your* shed, Saunders, over on the creek, just bursting with last year's grain that you know has gone up 200 per cent. since you bought it at a bargain—what are *you* growling at? It's enough to provoke a fire or a famine to hear you groaning—and take care it don't some day, as a lesson to you."

usual in her closely buttoned black dress, white collar and cuffs; very glistening in eye and in hair—whose glossy black ringlets were perhaps more elaborately arranged than was her custom—and with a faint coming and going of colour due perhaps to her agitation at this tentative re-entering into worldly life, which was nevertheless quite virginal in effect. A vague solemnity pervaded the introductory proceedings, and a singular want of sociability was visible in the "social" part of the entertainment. People talked in whispers or with that grave precision which indicates good manners in rural communities: conversed painfully with other people, whom they did not want to talk to, rather than

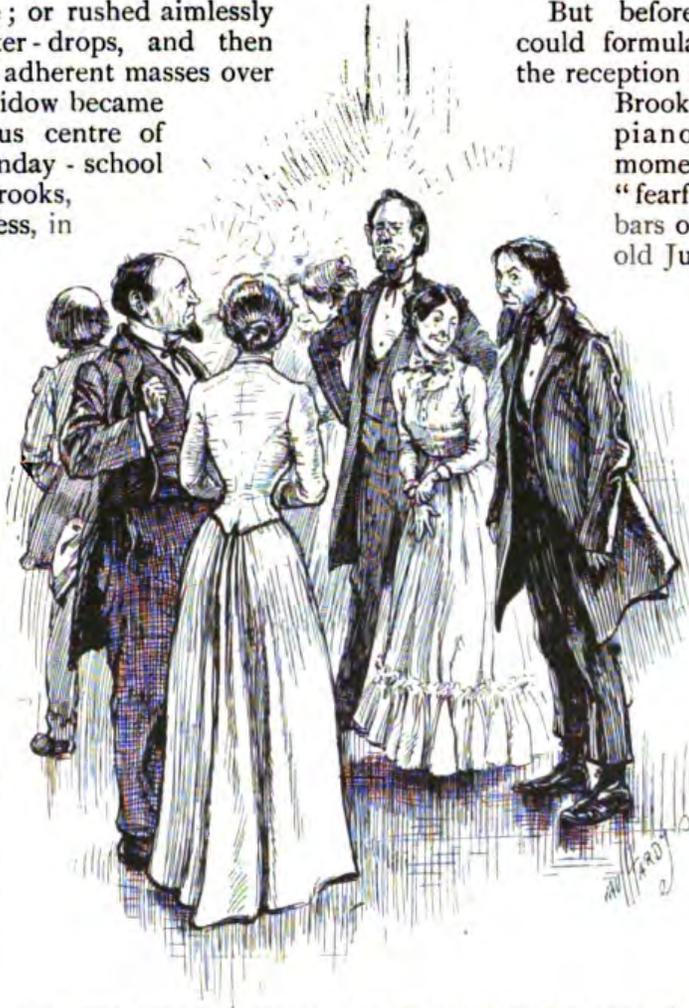
For all that the eventful evening came, with many lights in the staring, undraped windows of the hotel, coldly bright bunting on the still damp walls of the long dining-room, and a gentle down-pour from the hidden skies above. A close carryall was especially selected to bring Mrs. Wade and her house-keeper. The widow arrived, looking a little slimmer than

appear to be alone ; or rushed aimlessly together like water-drops, and then floated in broken, adherent masses over the floor. The widow became a hopeless religious centre of deacons and Sunday-school teachers, which Brooks, untiring, yet fruitless, in his attempt to produce gaiety, tried in vain to break.

To this gloom the untried dangers of the impending dance, duly prefigured by a lonely cottage piano and two violins in a desert of expanse, added a nervous chill. When at last the music struck up, somewhat hesitatingly and protestingly, from the circumstance that the player was the church organist, and fumbled mechanically for his stops, the attempt to make up a cotillon set was left to the heroic Brooks. Yet he barely escaped disaster when, in posing the couples, he incautiously begged them to look a little less as if they were waiting for the coffin to be borne down the aisle between them. Yet the cotillon passed off ; a Spanish dance succeeded ; "Money Musk," with the Virginia Reel, put a slight intoxicating vibration into the air, and healthy youth at last asserted itself in a score of freckled, but buxom, girls in white muslin, with romping figures and laughter at the lower end of the room. Still, a rigid decorum reigned among the older dancers, and the figures were called out in grave formality, as if, to Brooks's fancy, they were hymns given from the pulpit, until at the close of the set, in half-real, half-mock despair, he turned deliberately to Mrs. Wade, his partner : "Do you waltz?"

Mrs. Wade hesitated. She *had* before marriage, and was a good waltzer.

"I do," she said, timidly ; "but do you think they——"



"A VAGUE SOLEMNITY PERVADED THE INTRODUCTORY PROCEEDINGS."

But before the poor widow could formulate her fears as to the reception of "round dances,"

Brooks had darted to the piano, and the next moment she heard, with a "fearful joy," the opening bars of a waltz. It was an old Julien waltz, fresh still

in the fifties, daring, provocative to foot, swamping to intellect, arresting to judgment, irresistible, supreme ! Before Mrs. Wade could protest, Brooks's arm had gathered up her slim figure, and with one quick, backward sweep and swirl they were off ! The floor was cleared for them in a sudden bewilderment of alarm — a suspense of burning curiosity. The widow's little feet tripped quickly ; her long black skirt swung out ;

as she turned the corner there was not only a sudden revelation of her pretty ankles, but, what was more startling, a dazzling flash of frilled and laced petticoat, which at once convinced every woman in the room that the act had been premeditated for days ! Yet even that criticism was presently forgotten in the pervading intoxication of the music and the movement. The younger people fell into it with wild romplings, whirlings, and claspings of hands and waists. And, stranger than all, a corybantic enthusiasm seized upon the emotionally religious, and those priests and priestesses of Cybele, who were famous for their frenzy and passion in camp-meeting devotions, seemed to find an equal expression that night in the waltz. And when, flushed and panting, Mrs. Wade at last halted on the arm of her partner, they were nearly knocked over by the revolving Johnson and Mrs. Stubbs, in a whirl of gloomy exaltation ! Deacons and Sunday-school teachers waltzed together until the long room shook, and the very bunting on the walls

waved and fluttered with the gyrations of these religious Dervishes. Nobody knew—nobody cared—how long this frenzy lasted; it ceased only with the collapse of the musicians. Then, with much vague bewilder-



"THEY WERE NEARLY KNOCKED OVER."

ment, inward trepidation, awkward and incoherent partings, everybody went dazedly home. There was no other dancing after that—the waltz was the one event of the festival and of the history of Santa Ana. And later that night, when the timid Mrs. Wade, in the seclusion of her own room and the disrobing of her slim figure, glanced at her spotless frilled and laced petticoat lying on a chair, a faint smile—the first of her widowhood—curved the corners of her pretty mouth.

A week of ominous silence regarding the festival succeeded in Santa Ana. The local paper gave the fullest particulars of the opening of the hotel, but contented itself with saying: "The entertainment concluded with a dance." Mr. Brooks, who felt himself compelled to call upon his late charming partner, twice during the week, characteristically soothed her anxieties as to the result.

"The fact of it is, Mrs. Wade, there's really nobody in particular to blame—and that's what gets them! They're all mixed up in it, deacons and Sunday-school teachers; and when old Johnson tried to be nasty the other evening and hoped you hadn't suffered from your exertions that night, I told him you hadn't quite recovered yet from the physical shock of having been run into by him and

Mrs. Stubbs, but that, your being a lady, you didn't tell just how you felt at the exhibition he and she made of themselves. That shut him up."

"But you shouldn't have said that," said Mrs. Wade, with a frightened little smile.

"No matter," returned Brooks, cheerfully; "I'll take the blame of it with the others.

You see, they'll

have to have a scape-goat—and I'm just the man—for I got up the dance! And as I'm going away, I suppose I

shall bear off the sin with me in the wilderness."

"You're going away?" repeated Mrs. Wade, in more genuine concern.

"Not for long," returned Brooks, laughingly. "I came here to look up a mill site, and I've found it. Meantime, I think I've opened their eyes."

"You have opened mine," said the widow, with timid frankness.

They were soft, pretty eyes when opened, in spite of their heavy, red lids, and Mr. Brooks thought that Santa Ana would be no worse if they remained open. Possibly he looked it, for Mrs. Wade said, hurriedly, "I mean—that is—I've been thinking that life needn't *always* be so gloomy as we make it here. And even *here*, you know, Mr. Brooks, we have six months' sunshine—though we always forget it in the rainy season."

"That's so," said Brooks, cheerfully. "I once lost a heap of money through my own foolishness, and I've managed to forget it, and I even reckon to get it back again out of

Santa Ana if my mill speculation holds good. So good-bye, Mrs. Wade—but not for long.” He shook her hand frankly and departed, leaving the widow conscious of a certain sympathetic confidence and a little grateful for—she knew not what.

This feeling remained with her most of the afternoon, and even imparted a certain gaiety to her spirits, to the extent of causing her to hum softly to herself, the air being, oddly enough, the Julien waltz. And when, later in the day, the shadows were closing in with the rain, word was brought to her that a stranger wished to see her in the sitting-room, she carried a less mournful mind to this function of her existence. For Mrs. Wade was accustomed to give audience to travelling agents, tradesmen, working hands, and servants as chatelaine of her ranch, and the occasion was not novel. Yet, on entering the room which she used partly as an office, she found some difficulty in classifying the stranger, who at the first glance reminded her of the tramping miner she had seen that night from her window. He was rather incongruously dressed, some articles of his apparel being finer than others: he wore a diamond pin in a scarf folded over a rough “hickory” shirt; his light trousers were tucked in common mining boots that bore stains of travel and a suggestion that he had slept in his clothes. What she could see of his unshaven face in that uncertain light expressed a kind of dogged concentration, overlaid by an assumption of ease. He got up as she came in, and with a slight, “How do, ma’am?” shut the door behind her and glanced furtively around the room.

“What I’ve got to say to ye, Mrs. Wade—as I reckon you be—is strictly private and confidential! Why, ye’ll see afore I get through. But I thought I might just as well caution ye ag’in our being disturbed.”

Overcoming a slight instinct of repulsion, Mrs. Wade returned: “You can speak to me here; no one will interrupt you—unless I call them,” she added, with a little feminine caution.

“And I reckon ye won’t do that,” he said, with a grim smile. “You are the widow o’ Pulaski Wade, late o’ Heavy Tree Hill, I reckon?”

“I am,” said Mrs. Wade.

“And your husband’s berried up thar in the graveyard with a monument over him, setting forth his virtues ez a Christian and a square man, and a high-minded citizen? And that he was foully murdered by highwaymen?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Wade, “that is the inscription.”

“Well, ma’am—a bigger pack o’ lies never was cut on stone!”

Mrs. Wade arose, half in indignation, half in vague terror.

“Keep your sittin’,” said the stranger, with a warning wave of his hand. “Wait till I’m through, and then you call in the hull State o’ Californy—*ef* ye want.”

The stranger’s manner was so doggedly confident that Mrs. Wade sank back, tremblingly, in her chair. The man put his slouch hat on his knee, twirled it round once or twice, and then said, with the same stubborn deliberation: “The highwayman in that business was *your husband*—Pulaski Wade and his gang, and he was killed by one o’ the men he was robbin’. Ye see, ma’am, it used to be your husband’s little game to rope in three or four strangers in a poker deal at Spanish Jim’s saloon. . . . I see you’ve heard o’ the place,” he interpolated, as Mrs. Wade drew back suddenly; “and when he couldn’t clean ’em out in that way, or they showed a little more money than they played, he’d lay for ’em with his gang in a lone part of the trail, and go through them like any road agent. That’s what he did that night, and that’s how he got killed.”

“How do you know this?” said Mrs. Wade, with quivering lips.

“I was one o’ the men he went through before he was killed. And I’d hev got my money back, but the rest o’ the gang came up, and I got away jest in time to save my life and nothin’ else. Ye might remember thar was one man got away and giv’ the alarm, but he was goin’ on to the States by the overland coach that night, and couldn’t stay to be a witness. *I* was that man. I had paid my passage through, and I couldn’t lose *that* too with my other money, so I went.”

Mrs. Wade sat, stunned. She remembered the missing witness, and how she had longed to see the man who was last with her husband. She remembered Spanish Jim’s saloon—his well-known haunt; his frequent and unaccountable absences; the sudden influx of money which he always said he had won at cards; the diamond ring he had given her as the result of “a bet”; the forgotten recurrences of other robberies by a secret masked gang; a hundred other things that had worried her, instinctively, vaguely. She knew now, too, the meaning of the unrest that had driven her from Heavy Tree

Hill—the strange, unformulated fears that had haunted her even here. Yet with all this she felt, too, her present weakness; knew that this man had taken her at a disadvantage, that she ought to indignantly assert herself, deny everything, demand proof, and brand him a slanderer!

“How did—you—know it was my husband?” she stammered.

“His mask fell off in the fight; you know another mask was found; it was his. I saw him as plain as I see him there!” He pointed to a daguerreotype of her husband which stood upon her desk.

Mrs. Wade could only stare, vacantly, hopelessly. After a pause the man continued, in a less aggressive manner and more confidential tone, which, however, only increased her terror: “I ain’t sayin’ that *you* knowed anything about this, ma’am, and whatever other folks

might say when they know of it, I’ll allers say that you didn’t.”

“What then do you come here for?” said the widow, desperately.

“What do I come here for?” repeated the man, grimly, looking around the room. “What did I come to this yer comfortable home—this yer big ranch and a rich woman like yourself for? Well, Mrs. Wade, I come to get the six hundred dollars your husband robbed me of, that’s all. I ain’t askin’ more. I ain’t askin’ interest. I ain’t askin’ compensation for havin’ to run for my life and—” again looking grimly round the walls—“I ain’t askin’ more than you will give—or is my rights.”

“But this house never was his—it is my father’s,” gasped Mrs. Wade. “You have no right—”

“Mebbe ‘yes’ and mebbe ‘no,’ Mrs. Wade,” interrupted the man, with a wave of

his hat; “but how about them two drafts to bearer for two hundred dollars each, found among your husband’s effects, and collected by your lawyer for you—*my drafts*, Mrs. Wade?”

A wave of dreadful recollection overwhelmed her. She remembered the drafts found upon her husband’s body, known only to her and her lawyer, and believed to be gambling gains, and collected at once under

his legal advice. Yet she made one more desperate effort in spite of the instinct that told her he was speaking the truth.

“But you shall have to prove it—before witnesses.”

“Do you *wan* me to prove it before witnesses?” said the man, coming nearer her. “Do you want to take my word and keep it between ourselves, or do you want to call in your superintendent and his men—and all Santa Ana to hear me prove

your husband was a highwayman, thief, and murderer? Do you want to knock over that monument on Heavy Tree Hill, and upset your standing here among the deacons and elders? Do you want to do all this, and be forced, even by your neighbours, to pay me in the end, as you will? Ef you do, call in your witnesses now, and let’s have it over. Mebbe it would look better ef I got the money out of *your friends* than ye—a woman! P’raps you’re right!”

He made a step towards the door, but she stopped him.

“No! No! Wait! It’s a large sum; I haven’t it with me,” she stammered, thoroughly beaten.

“Ye kin get it.”

“Give me time,” she implored. “Look! I’ll give you a hundred down now—all I have here—the rest another time.” She nervously opened a drawer of her desk, and taking out



“MRS. WADE SAT, STUNNED.”

a buckskin bag of gold thrust it in his hand. "There! Go away now." She lifted her thin hand despairingly to her head. "Go! Do!"

The man seemed struck by her manner. "I don't want to be hard on a woman," he said, slowly. "I'll go now, and come back again at nine to-night. You can git the money; or, what's as good, a cheque to bearer, by then. And ef ye'll take my advice you won't ask no advice from others, ef you want to keep your secret. Jest now it's safe with me; I'm a square man—ef I seem to be a hard one." He made a gesture as if to take her hand, but as she drew shrinkingly away he changed it to an awkward bow, and the next moment was gone.

She started to her feet, but the unwonted strain upon her nerves and frail body had been greater than she knew. She made a step forward, felt the room whirl round her, and then seem to collapse beneath her feet, and, clutching at her chair, sank back into it, fainting.

How long she lay there she never knew. She was at last conscious of someone bending over her, and a voice—the voice of Mr. Brooks—in her ear, saying, "I beg your pardon—you seem ill. Shall I call someone?"

"No!" she gasped, quickly recovering herself with an effort and staring around her. "Where is—when did you come in?"

"Only this moment. I was leaving to-night, sooner than I expected, and thought I'd say good-bye. They told me that you had been engaged with a stranger, but he had just gone. I beg your pardon—I see you are ill. I won't detain you any longer."

"No! No! Don't go! I am better—better," she said, feverishly. As she glanced at his strong and sympathetic face a wild idea seized her. He was a stranger here, an alien to these people, like herself! The advice that she dare not seek from others, from her half-estranged religious friends, from even her superintendent and his wife—dare she ask from him?

Perhaps he saw this frightened doubt, this imploring appeal, in her eyes, for he said, gently, "Is it anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," she said, with the sudden desperation of weakness, "I want you to keep a secret!"

"Yours; yes!" he said, promptly.

Whereat poor Mrs. Wade instantly burst into tears. Then amidst her sobs she told him of the stranger's visit, of his terrible accusations, of his demands; his expected return, and her own utter helplessness. To

her terror, as she went on she saw a singular change in his kind face: he was following her with hard, eager intensity. She had half hoped, even through her fateful instincts, that he might have laughed man-like at her fears, or pooh-poohed the whole thing. But he did not.

"You say he positively recognised your husband?" he repeated, quickly.

"Yes! yes!" sobbed the widow; "and knew that photograph!" she pointed to the desk. Brooks turned quickly in that direction. Luckily his back was towards her, and she could not see his face nor the quick, startled look that came into his eyes. But when they again met hers it was gone, and even their eager intensity had changed to a gentle commiseration.

"You have only his word for it, Mrs. Wade," he said, gently; "and in telling your secret to another, you have shorn the rascal of half his power over you. And he knew it. Now, dismiss the matter from your mind and leave it all to me. I will be here a few minutes before nine—and *alone in this room*. Let your visitor be shown in here—and don't let us be disturbed. Don't be alarmed," he added, with a faint twinkle in his eye, "there will be no fuss and no exposure!"

It lacked a few minutes of nine when Mr. Brooks was ushered into the sitting-room. As soon as he was alone he quietly examined the door and the windows, and, having satisfied himself, took his seat in a chair casually placed behind the door. Presently he heard the sound of voices and a heavy footstep in the passage. He lightly felt his waistcoat-pocket—it contained a pretty little weapon of power and precision, with a barrel scarcely two inches long.

The door opened, and the person outside entered the room. In an instant Brooks had shut the door and locked it behind him. The man turned fiercely, but was faced by Brooks quietly, with one finger carelessly hooked in his waistcoat-pocket. The man slightly recoiled from him, not so much from fear as from some vague stupefaction. "What's that for? What's your little game?" he said, half contemptuously.

"No game at all," returned Brooks, coolly. "You came here to sell a secret. I don't propose to have it *given* away first to any listener."

"You don't!—who are you?"

"That's a queer question to ask of the man you are trying to personate; but I don't wonder! You're doing it d—d badly."

Personate—you?" said the stranger, with staring eyes.

"Yes, *me*," said Brooks, quietly. "I am the only man who escaped from the robbery that night at Heavy Tree Hill, and who went home by the overland coach."

The stranger stared, but recovered himself, with a coarse laugh. "Oh, well! we're on the same lay, it appears! Both after the widow—afore we show up her husband."

"Not exactly," said Brooks, with his eyes fixed intently on the stranger. "You are

here to denounce a highwayman who is *dead*, and escaped justice. I am here to denounce one who is *living*! Stop! drop your hand; it's no use; you thought you had to deal only with a woman to-night, and your revolver isn't quite handy enough. There! down! down! So! That'll do."

"You can't prove it," said the man, hoarsely.

"Fool! In your story to that woman you have given yourself away. There were but two travellers attacked by the highwaymen. One was killed—I am the other. Where do *you* come in? What witness can you be, except as the highwayman, that you were? Who is left to identify Wade but his accomplice?"

The man's suddenly whitened face made his unshaven beard seem to bristle over his face like some wild animal's. "Well, ef you kalkilate to blow me, you've got to blow Wade and his widdler too. Jest you remember that," he said, whiningly.

"I've thought of that," said Brooks, coolly, "and I calculate that to prevent it is worth about that \$100 you got from that poor woman—and no more. Now sit down at that table, and write as I dictate."

The man looked at him in wonder, but obeyed.

"Write," said Brooks: "I hereby certify that my accusations against the late Pulaski Wade of Heavy Tree Hill are erroneous and groundless, and the result of mistaken identity, especially in regard to any complicity of his, in the robbery of John Stubbs, deceased, and Henry Brooks, at Heavy Tree Hill, on the night of the 13th August, 1854."

The man looked up with a repulsive smile.

"Who's the fool now, Cap'n? What's become of your hold on the widdler, now?"

"Write!" said Brooks, fiercely.

The sound of a pen hurriedly scratching paper followed this first outburst of the quiet Brooks.

"Sign it," said Brooks.

The man signed it.

"Now go," said Brooks, unlocking the door, "but remember if you should ever be inclined to revisit Santa Ana you will find *me* living here also."

The man slunk out of the door

and into the passage like a wild animal returning to the night and darkness. Brooks took up the paper, rejoined Mrs. Wade in the parlour, and laid it before her.

"But," said the widow, trembling in her joy, "do you—do you think he was *really* mistaken?"

"Positive," said Brooks, coolly. "It's true it's a mistake that has cost you a hundred dollars—but there are some mistakes that are worth that to be kept quiet."

They were married a year later, but there is no record that in after years of conjugal relations with a weak, charming, but sometimes trying woman, Henry Brooks was ever tempted to tell her the whole truth of the robbery of Heavy Tree Hill.



"THE MAN LOOKED UP WITH A REPULSIVE SMILE."