



"THE PRESIDENT WITH SUPERNATURAL GRAVITY LIFTED IT OUT."

(See page 124.)

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## *The Goddess of Excelsior.*

BY BRET HARTE.



WHEN the two solitary mining companies encamped on Sycamore Creek both discovered on the same day the great "Excelsior Lead" they met around a neutral camp-fire with that grave and almost troubled demeanour which distinguished the successful prospector in those days. Perhaps the term "prospectors" could hardly be used for men who had laboured patiently and light-heartedly in the one spot for over three years to gain a daily yield from the soil which gave them barely the necessaries of life. Perhaps this was why, now that their reward was beyond their most sanguine hopes, they mingled with this characteristic gravity an ambition and resolve peculiarly their own. Unlike most successful miners, they had no idea of simply realizing their wealth and departing to invest or spend it elsewhere, as was the common custom. On the contrary, that night they formed a high resolve to stand or fall by their claims; to develop the resources of the locality, to build up a town, and to devote themselves to its growth and welfare. And to this purpose they bound themselves that night by a solemn and legal compact.

Many circumstances lent themselves to so original a determination. The locality was healthful, picturesque, and fertile. Sycamore Creek, a considerable tributary of the Sacramento, furnished them a generous water supply at all seasons; its banks were well wooded and interspersed with undulating meadowland. Its distance from stage-coach communication—nine miles—could easily be abridged by a waggon road over a practically level country. Indeed, all the conditions for a thriving settlement were already there. It was natural, therefore, that the most sanguine anticipations were indulged by the more

youthful of the twenty members of this sacred compact. The sites of an hotel, a bank, the Express Company's office, stage office, and Court House, with other necessary buildings, were all mapped out and supplemented by a theatre, a public park, and a terrace along the river bank! It was only when Clinton Grey, an intelligent but youthful member, on offering a plan of the town with five avenues 80ft. wide, radiating from a central plaza and the Court House, explained that "it could be commanded by artillery in case of an armed attack upon the building," that it was felt that a line must be drawn in anticipatory suggestion. Nevertheless, although their determination was unabated, at the end of six months little had been done beyond the building of a waggon road and the importation of new machinery for the working of the lead. The peculiarity of their design debarred any tentative or temporary efforts; they wished the whole settlement to spring up in equal perfection, so that the first stage coach over the new road could arrive upon the completed town. "We don't want to show up in a 'biled shirt' and a plug hat, and our trousers stuck in our boots," said a figurative speaker. Nevertheless, practical necessity compelled them to build the hotel first for their own occupation, pending the erection of their private dwellings on allotted sites. The hotel—a really elaborate structure for the locality and period—was a marvel to the workmen and casual teamsters. It was luxuriously fitted and furnished. Yet it was in connection with this outlay that the event occurred which had a singular effect upon the fancy of the members.

Washington Trigg, a Western member who had brought up the architect and builder from San Francisco, had returned in a state of excitement. He had seen at an art exhi-

bition in that city a small replica of a famous statue of California, and, without consulting his fellow-members, had ordered a larger copy for the new settlement. He, however, made up for his precipitancy by an extravagant description of his purchase, which impressed even the most cautious. "It's the figger of a mighty pretty girl, in them spirit clothes they allus wear, holding a divinin' rod for findin' gold afore her in one hand; all the while she's hidin' behind her, in the other hand, a branch o' thorns out of sight. The idea bein'—don't you see?—that blamed old 'forty miners like us, or ordinary green-horns, ain't allowed to see the difficulties they've got to go through before reaching a strike. Mighty cute, ain't it? It's to be made life-size—that is, about the size of a girl of that kind—don't you see?" he explained, somewhat vaguely; "and will look powerful fetchin' standin' on to a pedestal in the hall of the hotel." In reply to some further cautious inquiry as to the exact details of the raiment and of any possible shock to the modesty of lady guests at the hotel, he replied, confidently, "Oh, *that's* all right! It's the regulation uniform of goddesses and angels—sorter as if they'd caught up a sheet or a cloud to fling round 'em before coming into this world afore folks; and being an allegory, so to speak, it ain't as if it was me or you prospectin' in high water. And, being of bronze, it——"

"Looks like a squaw, eh?" interrupted a critic, "or a cursed Chinaman?"

"And if it's of metal, it will weigh a ton! How are we going to get it up here?" said another.

But here Mr. Trigg was on sure ground. "I've ordered it cast holler, and, if necessary, in two sections," he returned, triumphantly. "A child could tote it round and set it up."

Its arrival was therefore looked forward to with great expectancy when the hotel was finished and occupied by the combined Excelsior companies. It was to come from New York *via* San Francisco, where, however, there was some delay in its transshipment, and still further delay at Sacramento. It finally reached the settlement over the new waggon road, and was among the first freight carried there by the new Express Company, and delivered into the new Express office. The box—a packing-case, nearly 3ft. square by 5ft. long—bore superficial marks of travel and misdirection, inasmuch as the original address was quite obliterated

and the outside lid covered with corrected labels. It was carried to a private sitting-room in the hotel, where its beauty was to be first disclosed to the President of the United Companies, three of the committee, and the excited and triumphant purchaser. A less favoured crowd of members and workmen gathered curiously outside the room. Then the lid was carefully removed, revealing a quantity of shavings and packing paper which still hid the outlines of the goddess. When this was promptly lifted a stare of blank astonishment fixed the faces of the party! It was succeeded by a quick, hysteric laugh, and then a dead silence.

Before them lay a dressmaker's dummy—the wire and padded model on which dresses are fitted and shown. With its armless and headless bust, abruptly ending in a hooped wire skirt, it completely filled the sides of the box.

"Shut the door," said the President, promptly.

The order was obeyed. The single hysteric shriek of laughter had been followed by a deadly ironical silence. The President with supernatural gravity lifted it out and set it up on its small, round, disc-like pedestal.

"It's some cussed fool blunder of that confounded Express Company," burst out the unlucky purchaser. But there was no echo to his outburst. He looked around with a timid, tentative smile. But no other smile followed his.

"It looks," said the President, with portentous gravity, "like the beginnings of a fine woman, that *might* show up, if you gave her time, into a first-class goddess. Of course she ain't all here; other boxes with sections of her, I reckon, are under way from her factory, and will meander along in the course of the year. Considerin' this as a sample—I think, gentlemen," he added, with gloomy precision, "we are prepared to accept it, and signify we'll take more."

"It ain't, perhaps, exactly the idee that we've been led to expect from previous description," said Dick Flint, with deeper seriousness; "for instance, this yer branch of thorns we heard of ez bein' held behind her is wantin'; as is the arms that held it; but even if they had arrived, anybody could see the thorns through them wires and so give the hull show away."

"Jam it into its box again, and we'll send it back to the confounded Express Company with a cussin' letter," again thundered the wretched purchaser.

"No, sonny," said the President, with

gentle but gloomy determination, "we'll fasten on to this little show jest as it is, and see what follows. It ain't every day that a first-class seil like this is worked off on us accidentally."

It was quite true! The settlement had long since exhausted every possible form of practical joking and languished for a new sensation. And here it was! It was not a thing to be treated angrily, nor lightly, nor dismissed with that single hysterical laugh. It was capable of the greatest possibilities! Indeed, as Washington Trigg looked around on the imperturbably ironical faces of his companions he knew that they felt more true joy over the blunder than they would in the possession of the real statue. But an exclamation from the fifth member, who was examining the box, arrested their attention.

"There's suthin' else here!"

He had found under the heavier wrapping a layer of tissue-paper, and under that a further envelope of linen, lightly stitched together. A knife blade quickly separated the stitches, and the linen was carefully unfolded. It displayed a beautifully trimmed evening dress of pale blue satin, with a dressing-gown of some exquisite white fabric armed with lace. The men gazed at it in silence—and then the one single expression broke from their lips:—

"Her duds!"

"Stop, boys," said "Clint" Grey, as a

movement was made to lift the dress towards the model, "leave that to a man who knows. What's the use of my having left five grown-up sisters in the States if I haven't brought a little experience away with me? This sort of thing ain't to be 'pulled on' like trousers. No, sir!—*this* is the way she's worked."

With considerable dexterity, unexpected gentleness, and some taste, he shook out the folds of the skirt delicately and lifted it over the dummy; settling it skilfully upon the wire hoops, and drawing the bodice over the padded shoulders. This he then proceeded to fasten, with hooks and eyes—a work of some patience. Forty eager fingers stretched out to assist him, but were waved aside, with a look of pained decorum as he gravely completed his task. Then, falling back, he bade the others do the same, and they formed a contemplative semicircle before the figure.

Up to that moment a delighted but

unsmiling consciousness of their own absurdities, a keen sense of the humorous possibilities of the original blunder, and a mischievous recognition of the mortification of Trigg—whose only safety now lay in accepting the mistake in the same spirit—had determined these grown-up schoolboys to artfully protract a joke that seemed to be providentially delivered into their hands. But *now* an odd change crept on them. The light from the open window that gave upon



"THEY FORMED A CONTEMPLATIVE SEMICIRCLE BEFORE THE FIGURE."

the enormous pines and the rolling prospect up to the dim heights of the Sierras fell upon this strange, incongruous, yet perfectly artistic figure. For the dress was the skilful creation of a great Parisian artist, and in its exquisite harmony of colour, shape, and material it not only hid the absurd model, but clothed it with an alarming grace and refinement! A queer feeling of awe, of shame, and of unwilling admiration took possession of them. Some of them—from remote Western towns—had never seen the like before; those who *had* had forgotten it in those five years of self-exile, of healthy independence, and of contiguity to Nature in her unaffected simplicity. All had been familiar with the garish, extravagant, and dazzling femininity of the Californian towns and cities, but never had they known anything approaching the ideal grace of this type of exalted—even if artificial—womanhood. And although in the fierce freedom of their little Republic they had laughed to scorn such artificiality, a few yards of satin and lace cunningly fashioned, and thrown over a frame of wood and wire, touched them now with a strange sense of its superiority. The better to show its attractions, Clinton Grey had placed the figure near a full-length, gold-framed mirror, beside a marble-topped table. Yet how cheap and tawdry these splendours showed beside this work of art! How cruel was the contrast of their own rough working clothes to this miracle of adornment which that same mirror reflected! And even when Clinton Grey, the enthusiast, looked towards his beloved woods for relief, he could not help thinking of them as a more fitting frame for this strange goddess than this new house into which she had strayed. Their gravity became real; their gibes in some strange way had vanished.

"Must have cost a pile of money," said one, merely to break an embarrassing silence.

"My sister had a friend who brought over a dress from Paris, not as high-toned as that, that cost five hundred dollars," said Clinton Grey.

"How much did you say that spirit-clad old hag of yours cost—thorns and all?" said the President, turning sharply on Trigg.

Trigg swallowed this depreciation of his own purchase meekly. "Seven hundred and fifty dollars, without the express charges."

"That's only two-fifty more," said the President, thoughtfully, "if we call it quits."

"But," said Trigg, in alarm, "we must send it back."

"Not much, sonny," said the President,

promptly. "We'll hang on to this until we hear where that thorny old chump of yours has fetched up and is actin' her conundrums—and mebbe we can swap even."

"But how will we explain it to the boys?" queried Trigg. "They're waitin' outside to see it."

"There *won't* be any explanation," said the President, in the same tone of voice in which he had ordered the door shut. "We'll just say that the statue hasn't come—which is the frozen truth; and this box only contained some silk curtain decorations we'd ordered—which is only half a lie. And," still more firmly, "*this secret doesn't go out of this room, gentlemen*—or I ain't your President! I'm not going to let you give yourselves away to that crowd outside—you hear me? Have you ever allowed your unfettered intellect to consider what they'd say about this—what a godsend it would be to every man we'd ever had a 'pull' on in this camp? Why, it would last 'em a whole year—we'd never hear the end of it! No, gentlemen! I prefer to live here without shootin' my fellow-man, but I can't promise it if they once start this joke agin us!"

There was a swift approval of this sentiment, and the five members shook hands solemnly.

"Now," said the President, "we'll just fold up that dress again, and put it with the figure in this closet"—he opened a large dressing-chest in the suite of rooms in which they stood—"and we'll each keep a key. We'll retain this room for committee purposes, so that no one need see the closet. See? Now take off the dress!—be careful there! You're not handlin' pay dirt, though it's about as expensive!—steady!"

Yet it was wonderful to see the solicitude and care with which the dress was recovered and folded in its linen wrapper.

"Hold on," exclaimed Trigg, as the dummy was lifted into the chest; "we haven't tried on the other dress!"

"Yes! yes!" repeated the others, eagerly; "there's another!"

"We'll keep that for next committee meeting, gentlemen," said the President, decisively. "Lock her up, Trigg."

The three following months wrought a wonderful change in Excelsior—wonderful even in that land of rapid growth and progress. Their organized and matured plans, executed by a full force of workmen from the county town, completed the twenty cottages for the

members, the bank, and the Town Hall. Visitors and intending settlers flocked over the new waggon road to see this new Utopia, whose founders, holding the land and its improvements as a corporate company, exercised the right of dictating the terms on which settlers were admitted. The feminine invasion was not yet potent enough to affect their consideration, either through any refinement or attractiveness, being comprised chiefly of the industrial wives and daughters of small traders or temporary artisans. Yet it was found necessary to confide the hotel to the management of Mr. Dexter Marsh, his wife, and one intelligent, but somewhat plain, daughter, who looked after the accounts. There were occasional lady visitors at the hotel, attracted from the neighbouring towns and settlements by its picturesqueness and a vague suggestiveness of its being a watering-place—and there was the occasional flash in the decorous street of a Sacramento or San Francisco gown. It is needless to say that to the five men who held the guilty secret of Committee Room No. 4 it only strengthened their belief in the super-elegance of their hidden treasure. At their last meeting they had fitted the second dress—which turned out to be a vapoury, summer house-frock or morning-wrapper—over the dummy, and opinions were divided as to its equality with the first. However, the same subtle harmony of detail and grace of proportion characterized it.

"And you see," said Clint Grey, "it's jest the sort o' rig in which a man would be most likely to know her—and not in her war-paint, which would be only now and then."

Already "*she*" had become an individuality!

"Hush!" said the President. He had turned towards the door, at which someone was knocking lightly.

"Come in."

The door opened upon Miss Marsh, secretary and hotel-assistant. She had a business aspect and an open letter in her hand—but hesitated at the evident confusion

she had occasioned. Two of the gentlemen had absolutely blushed, and the others regarded her with inane smiles or affected seriousness. They all coughed slightly.

"I beg your pardon," she said, not ungracefully, a slight colour coming into her sallow cheek which, in conjunction with the gold eye-glasses, gave her, at least in the eyes of the impressible Clint, a certain piquancy. "But my father said you were here in com-



"I CAN COME AGAIN—IF YOU ARE BUSY."

mittee and I might consult you. I can come again—if you are busy."

She had addressed the President, partly from his office, his comparatively extreme age—he must have been at least thirty!—and possibly for his extremeness of good looks. He said, hurriedly, "It's just an informal meeting," and then, more politely, "What can we do for you?"

"We have an application for a suite of rooms next week," she said, referring to the letter, "and as we shall be rather full, father thought you gentlemen might be willing to

take another larger room for your meetings, and give up these which are part of a suite—and perhaps not exactly suitable——”

“Quite impossible!” “Quite so!” “Really out of the question,” said the members, in a rapid chorus.

The young girl was evidently taken aback at this unanimity of opposition. She stared at them curiously, and then glanced around the room. “We’re quite comfortable here,” said the President, explanatorily, “and—in fact—it’s just what we want.”

“We could give you a closet like that which you could lock up—and a mirror,” she suggested, with the faintest trace of a smile.

“Tell your father, Miss Marsh,” said the President, with dignified politeness, “that while we cannot submit to any change, we fully appreciate his business foresight, and are quite prepared to see that the hotel is properly compensated for our retaining these rooms.” As the young girl withdrew with a puzzled curtsy he closed the door, placed his back against it, and said:—

“What the deuce did she mean by speaking of that closet?”

“Reckon she allowed we kept some fancy drinks in them,” said Trigg; “and calkulated that we wanted the marble stand and mirror to put our glasses on and make it look like a swell private bar, that’s all!”

“Humph,” said the President.

Their next meeting, however, was a hurried one, and as the President arrived late, when the door closed smartly behind him he was met by the worried faces of his colleagues.

“Here’s a go!” said Trigg, excitedly, producing a folded paper. “The game’s up, the hull show is busted; that cussed old statue—the reg’lar old hag herself—is on her way here! There’s a bill o’ lading and the Express Company’s letter, and she’ll be trundling down here by express at any moment.”

“Well?” said the President, quietly.

“Well!” repeated the members, aghast.

“Do you know what that means?”

“That we must rig her up in the hall on a pedestal, as we reckoned to do,” returned the President, coolly.

“But you don’t *sabe*,” said Clinton Grey; “that’s all very well as to the hag—but now we must give *her* up,” with an adoring glance towards the closet.

“Does the letter say so?”

“No,” said Trigg, hesitatingly; “no! But I reckon we can’t keep *both*.”

“Why not?” said the President, imperturbably, “if we paid for ‘em?”

As the men only stared in reply he condescended to explain:—

“Look here! I calculated all these risks after our last meeting. While you boys were just fussin’ round, doin’ nothing, I wrote to the Express Company that a box of women’s damaged duds had arrived here, while we were looking for our statue; that you chaps were so riled at bein’ sold by them that you dumped the whole blamed thing in the creek. But I added, if they’d let me know what the damage was, I’d send ‘em a draft to cover it. After a spell of waitin’ they said they’d call it square for two hundred dollars, considering our disappointment. And I sent the draft. That’s spurred them up to get over our statue, I reckon. And, now that it’s coming, it will set us right with the boys.”

“And *she*,” said Clinton Grey again, pointing to the locked chest, “belongs to us?”

“Until we can find some lady guest that will take her with the rooms,” returned the President, a little cynically.

But the arrival of the real statue and its erection in the hotel vestibule created a new sensation. The members of the Excelsior Company were loud in its praises except the Executive Committee, whose coolness was looked upon by the others as an affectation of superiority. It awakened the criticism and jealousy of the nearest town.

“We hear,” said the *Red Dog Advertiser*, “that the long-promised statue has been put up in that high-toned Hash Dispensary they call an hotel at Excelsior. It represents an emaciated squaw in a scanty blanket gathering roots, and carrying a bit of thorn-bush kindlings behind her. The high-toned, close corporation of Excelsior may consider this a fair allegory of California; *we* should say it looks mighty like a prophetic forecast of a hard winter on Sycamore Creek and scarcity of provisions. However, it isn’t our funeral—though it’s rather depressing to the casual visitor on his way to dinner. For a long time this work of art was missing and supposed to be lost—but by being sternly and persistently rejected at every express office on the route, it was at last taken in at Excelsior.”

There was some criticism nearer home. “What do you think of it, Miss Marsh?” said the President, politely, to that active young secretary as he stood before it in the hall. The young woman adjusted her eye-glasses over her aquiline nose.

“As an idea, or a woman, sir?”

"As a woman, madam," said the President, letting his brown eyes slip for a moment from Miss Marsh's corn-coloured crest over her straight but scant figure down to her smart slippers.

"Well, sir, she could wear *your* boots, and there isn't a corset in Sacramento would go round her."

"Thank you!" he returned, gravely, and moved away.



"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT, MISS MARSH?"

For a moment a wild idea of securing possession of the figure some dark night, and, in company with his fellow-conspirators, of trying those beautiful clothes upon her, passed through his mind, but he dismissed it. And then occurred a strange incident, which startled even his cool, American sanity.

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It was a beautiful moonlight night, and he was returning to a bedroom at the hotel which he temporarily occupied during the painting of his house. It was quite late, he having spent the evening with a San Francisco friend after a business conference which assured him of the remarkable prosperity of Excelsior. It was therefore with some human exaltation that he looked around the sleeping settlement which had sprung up under the magic wand of their good fortune. The full moon had idealized their youthful designs with something of their own youthful colouring, graciously softening the garish freshness of paint and plaster, hiding with discreet obscurity the disrupted banks and broken woods at the beginning and end of their broad avenues, paving the rough river terrace with tessellated shadows and even touching the rapid stream which was the source of their wealth with a Pactolean glitter.

The windows of the hotel before him, darkened within, flashed in the moonbeams like the casements of Aladdin's Palace. Mingled with his ambition, to-night, were some softer fancies, rarely indulged by him in his forecast of the future of Excelsior — a dream of some fair partner in his life, after this task was accomplished — yet always of someone moving in a larger world than his youth had known. Rousing the half-sleeping porter, he found however only the spectral gold-seeker in the vestibule — the rays of his solitary candle falling upon her divining rod with a quaint persistency, and seeming to point to the stairs he was ascending. When he reached the first landing the rising wind through an open window put out his light, but, although the staircase was in darkness, he could see the long corridor above illuminated by the moonlight throughout its whole length. He had nearly reached it when the slow but unmistakable rustle of



a dress in the distance caught his ear. He paused, not only in the interest of delicacy, but with a sudden nervous thrill he could not account for. The rustle came nearer—he could hear the distinct *frou frou* of satin—and then, to his bewildered eyes, what seemed to be the figure of the dummy, arrayed in the pale blue evening-dress he knew so well, passed gracefully and majestically down the corridor. He could see the shapely folds of the skirt, the symmetry of the bodice—even the harmony of the trimmings. He raised his eyes, half affrightedly, prepared to see the headless shoulders, but they—and what seemed to be a head—were concealed in a floating “cloud” or *nubia* of some fleecy tissue, as if for protection from the evening air. He remained for an instant, motionless, dazed by this apparent motion of an inanimate figure; but as the absurdity of the idea struck him he hurriedly

but stealthily ascended the remaining stairs, resolved to follow it. But he was only in time to see it turn into the angle of another corridor, which, when he had reached it, was empty. The figure had vanished!

His first thought was to go to the committee-room and examine the locked closet. But the key was in his desk at home, he had no light, and the room was on the other side of the house. Besides, he reflected that even the detection of the figure would involve the exposure of the very secret they had kept intact so long. He sought his

bedroom, and went quietly to bed. But not to sleep; a curiosity more potent than any sense of the trespass done him kept him tossing half the night. Who was this woman whom the clothes fitted so well? He reviewed in his mind the guests in the house, but he knew none who could have carried off this masquerade so bravely.

In the morning early he made his way to the committee-room—but as he approached was startled to observe two pairs of boots, a man's and a woman's, conjugally placed before its door. Now thoroughly indignant, he hurried to the office, and was confronted by the face of the fair secretary. She coloured quickly on seeing him—but the reason was obvious.

“You are coming to scold me, sir! But it is not my fault. We were full yesterday afternoon when your friend from San Francisco came here with his wife. We told him those were *your*

rooms, but he said he would make it right with you—and my father thought you would not be displeased for once. Everything of yours was put into another room—and the closet remains locked as you left it.”

Amazed and bewildered, the President could only mutter a vague apology and turn away. Had his friend's wife opened the door with another key in some fit of curiosity and disported herself in those clothes? If so, she *dare* not speak of her discovery.

An introduction to the lady at breakfast



“HE REMAINED FOR AN INSTANT MOTIONLESS.”

dispelled this faint hope. She was a plump woman whose generous proportions could hardly have been confined in that pale blue bodice; she was frank and communicative, with no suggestion of mischievous concealment.

Nevertheless, he made a firm resolution. As soon as his friends left he called a meeting of the committee. He briefly informed them of the accidental occupation of the room—but for certain reasons of his own said nothing of his ghostly experience. But he put it to them plainly that no more risks must be run, and that he should remove the dresses and dummy to his own house. To his considerable surprise this suggestion was received with grave approval and a certain strange relief.

"We kinder thought of suggesting it to you before," said Mr. Trigg, slowly, "and that mebbe we've played this little game long enough—for suthin's happened that's makin' it anything but funny. We'd have told you before, but we dassent! Speak out, Clint, and tell the President what we saw the other night—and don't mince matters."

The President glanced quickly and warningly around him. "I thought," he said, sternly, "that we'd dropped all fooling. It's no time for practical joking now!"

"Honest Injun—it's Gospel truth! Speak up, Clint!"

The President looked on the serious faces around him, and was himself slightly awed.

"It's a matter of two or three nights ago," said Grey, slowly, "that Trigg and I were passing through Sycamore Woods, just below the hotel. It was after twelve—bright moonlight, so that we could see everything as plain as day, and we were dead sober. Just as we passed under the sycamores Trigg grabs my arm, and says, 'Hi!' I looked up, and there, not ten yards away, standing dead in the moonlight, was that dummy! She was all in white—that dress with the fairy frills, you know—and had, what's more, *a head!* At least, something white all wrapped around it, and over her shoulders. At first we thought you, or some of the boys, had dressed her up and lifted her out there for a joke, and left her to frighten us! So we started forward, and then—it's the Gospel truth!—she *moved away!* gliding like the moonbeams, and vanished among the trees."

"Did you see her face?" asked the President.

"No; you bet! I didn't try to—it would have haunted me for ever."

"What do you mean?"

"This—I mean it was that *girl the box belonged to!* She's dead somewhere—as you'll find out sooner or later—and *has come back for her clothes!* I've often heard of such things before."

Despite his coolness, at this corroboration of his own experience, and impressed by Grey's unmistakable awe, a thrill went through the President. For an instant he was silent.

"That will do, boys," he said, finally. "It's a queer story; but remember, it's all the more reason now for our keeping our secret. As for those things, I'll remove them quietly and at once."

But he did not.

On the contrary, prolonging his stay at the hotel with plausible reasons, he managed to frequently visit the committee-room, or its vicinity, at different and unsuspected hours of the day and night. More than that, he found opportunities to visit the office, and under pretexts of business connected with the economy of the hotel management informed himself through Miss Marsh on many points. A few of these details naturally happened to refer to herself, her prospects, her tastes, and education. He learned incidentally, what he had partly known, that her father had been in better circumstances, and that she had been gently nurtured—though of this she made little account in her pride in her own independence and devotion to her duties. But in his own persistent way he also made private notes of the breadth of her shoulders, the size of her waist, her height, length of her skirt, her movements in walking, and other apparently extraneous circumstances. It was natural that he acquired some supplemental facts—that her eyes, under her eye-glasses, were a tender grey, and touched with the melancholy beauty of near-sightedness; that her face had a sensitive mobility beyond the mere charm of colour, and like most people lacking this primitive and striking element of beauty, what was really fine about her escaped the first sight. As, for instance, it was only by bending over to examine her accounts that he found that her indistinctive hair was as delicate as floss silk and as electrical. It was only by finding her romping with the children of a guest one evening that he was startled by the appalling fact of her youth! But about this time he left the hotel and returned to his house.

On the first yearly anniversary of the great strike at Excelsior there were some changes in the settlement—notably the promotion of

Mr. Marsh to a more important position in the company, and the installation of Miss Cassie Marsh as manageress of the hotel. As Miss Marsh read the official letter, signed by the President, conveying in complimentary but formal terms this testimony of their approval and confidence, her lip trembled slightly, and a tear trickling from her light lashes dimmed her eye-glasses, so that she was fain to go up to her room to recover herself alone. When she did so she was startled to find a wire dummy, standing near the door, and neatly folded upon the bed two elegant dresses. A note in the President's own hand lay beside them. A swift blush stung her cheek as she read:—



"OH, SIR, HOW CRUEL OF YOU!"

"DEAR MISS MARSH,—Will you make me happy by keeping the secret that no other woman but yourself knows, and by accepting the clothes that no other woman but yourself can wear?"

The next moment, with the dresses over her arm and the ridiculous mummy swinging by its wires from her other hand, she was flying down the staircase to Committee Room No. 4. The door opened upon its sole occupant—the President.

"Oh, sir, how cruel of you!" she gasped. "It was only a joke of mine . . . I always intended to tell you. . . . It was very foolish, but it seemed so funny. . . . You see, I thought it was . . . the dress you

had bought for your future intended — some young lady you were going to marry!"

"It is!" said the President, quietly, and he closed the door behind her.

And it was.