

# THE BANK OF CALIFORNIA

BY PRENTICE MULFORD.

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We went in. Broener was soon whirling one of these tawny beauties about in a waltz. I followed his example. The dance over, we



I followed his example.

"treated" our partners at the bar, as customary, to harmless soda, the only beverage they took, made a pretence of drinking ourselves and left for the theatre.

As we were entering the theatre Broener said: "You must go home alone to-night. I shall not return till some time to-morrow."

## CHAPTER XIII. SURPRISE.

The play was "Othello." It was a farce relative to properties and mounting. Two wings of the signboard style of art had to serve all the scenic demands of the piece. The "dreadful bell" was the tocsin of the Placer hotel, borrowed for the occasion, and its tones being recognized by some of the boarders drew from them the cry, "Time for Bang's hash." The jealous Moor was commenced on as the "miser," and during the entire performance was made a target for the demonstrative portion of the audience for a running fire of combined criticism and admonition, not friendly in its character, and evidently based on the sectional prejudices of those who, coming from the south, looked with no favor on a "cut-throat" for daring to aspire to the hand of a white maiden. Their ethnological research had never discriminated between Moor and Ethiopian. Iago was the favorite of the house, more and more as the drama advanced, and as he, playing on the Moor's emotions, made him more and more miserable, one enthusiastic commentator bawled out as encouragement: "That's right! sock it to him!"

I occupied with Broener one of the two dingy recesses on either side of the stage, dignified by the name of "boxes," and held at \$20 each for the night. His keen appreciation of the part continually played by the audience, his hearty relish of the total failure to impress them with aught of the seriousness of the play, and his instant detection of every ludicrous point brought about by the misfit of the drama relative to the time, temper and character of nine-tenths of the lookers on, made his society, to me equivalent to a fine comedy played simultaneously with the piece set before us.

In reality many of these rough fellows were critics, in their way, of no mean order, though themselves entirely unaware of it. I think that their years of isolation from the conventional life of the older settled localities from which they originally came, and the lack of sham and pretence in the life they now led, had quickened their minds to discriminate between what was natural and what was artificial—what was acted with real emotion and what was merely stilted declamation, as much of the pieces before us was on the part of the principal character.

So, when Iago's wife, who, it will be remembered, is but little prominent in the first action of this drama, stigmatized her scheming husband and wished for a whip to scourge such scoundrels through the world, the house "rose to her."

I had ceased to pay much attention to the play, being more interested in the mokey and tumultuous audience. But the voice of this actress seemed strangely familiar.

I regarded her closely, and my thought said: "That girl is wonderfully like Blanche Sefton."



That girl is like Blanche Sefton.

Impossible! I looked, after that, but at that one figure. The pose and bearing were those of Blanche. In standing, Blanche's attitude always gave one the impression that she alone owned the ground she then stood over. In speaking, or when spoken to, she seemed to turn her whole mind in the direction of the subject of the moment, and never seemed in mind to stray or waver from that subject.

So did this actress. But the make-up puzzled me. Her eyebrows, complexion were different. The voice was pitched in a higher key than ever I had heard from Blanche.

Once let the doubt beset you as to the identity of any person long unseen, or seen suddenly under unexpected circumstances, and generally that doubt remains until dispelled by certain recognition and identification. So did mine then as to the identity of the person before me.

"That gal means bizness," I heard one man

whisper to another. "Put her in a tight place, and she'll shoot."

I noticed that Broener was regarding her as attentively as I. He heard the remark mentioned above and smiled, saying: "Rough diamonds. One as a character reader in the house, and one—a brilliant on the stage."

I looked for her name in the cast on the roughly printed programme. It read: "Miss H. Brown."

The stage was not more than twenty feet in width. One she stood so near the box I could have reached forth and touched her. Height, contour, bearing—all resembled those of Blanche Sefton. But as to the face, that was so "made up" as to leave me in doubt. Once her eyes ranged across the box where I sat. They were Blanche Sefton's eyes, but there was no recognition in their expression. Physically they looked at me—otherwise they seemed no more to see me than would those of a wax figure.

The play was over. The curtain fell. The audience struggled in a congested state for exit from the one narrow front entrance. Broener turned in the opposite direction toward a door leading to the stage, saying: "I have an old friend in the company and am going behind the scenes. Good night."

He had gone. I would go to the stage door in the rear, and in some way solve my doubts. But I was impeded by the crowd. A wretched fracas, between two armed inebriates, had developed directly in front of the "opera house," and the lingering mass, nothing loth to see blood shed, cluttered up the passageway and sidewalk.

Freeing myself from them at last I sought the stage door. A high board fence ran from the middle of the rear of the theatre, which in reality was but the wing of another house. I got on the wrong side of the fence, ran back and was obliged to pass out again in front of the theatre. At last I stood by the door I sought. Two ladies and their escort passed out. She certainly was not of them. The third and last, closely veiled, finally came, and accompanying her was Broener.

Of course, my friend, you would have stayed in camp that night, and found out "somehow" whether the girl was Blanche Sefton or not. I didn't. Had I not seen the lady with Broener I might have so done. But his presence put such a complexion on the matter, that of the two situations I preferred to be in doubt as to Blanche's identity to finding her thus with Broener, whom of course I regarded as the "dangerous rival," as certainly he was in almost any case.

Besides there were imperative interests at Scrub Mountain to be looked after immediately. Broener expected me to get the quartz out of the creek down to the cabin as soon as possible. He had given me directions how to find them, and despite his reputation of complaining from me of gratitude, I felt under no small obligation to him to neglect anything bearing on his interests.

But the stars on the now long sixteen-mile ride homeward had lost their brilliancy for me. My brain was in a ferment of conjecture. Was it Blanche Sefton? and if so why was Broener with her? He had gone behind the scenes to see an "old friend." Blanche was a mysterious girl. She had passed much of her time away from home and in New York, having frequent access thereto by her father's shop. She had a way of coming and going and locating herself about where she pleased with that matter-of-course, authoritative air which half stilted gossip and enabled her to do what other girls dared not and could not. People said, "Oh, it's Blanche's way." Certainly it was, and whom might she have met and known, unknown to all Eastport, in these "ways"?

Half-past three o'clock and the morning had dawned as I drew rein on the hill and looked down on Bull Bar, half a mile below me. The river, streaked by the summer drought, ran a narrow channel with faint murmur over rock and silt. Log cabin and tent lay there silent in the cool shadow of early dawn. One mountain top, full thirty miles away, had caught the sun's heading rays for the day. But down there, rocks and long-toned, pick and pan, crowbar and shovel, were flung where last the weary workers left them, and the five hundred stalwart men, soon to renew their battle with hill, bank and stream, were still in the unconsciousness of slumber—alive, breathing, it is true, but dead to the world their bodies were in—dead to all hope or fear or any of the varied emotions which would so soon be in full play when the smoke commenced circling from those rude chimneys.

Two or three moving figures were seen on the river bank—watchers of the night—guarding against any sudden rise of the stream liable through the breaching of dams above and letting down the vast body of "backwater," a fluid avalanche which would sweep before it like chaff man's frail constructions.

I roused Mr. Rankin and returned him his horse, which he put in the stable with the remark that "yesterday was probably his benevolent day, which would account for my return alive. But the next man dies," he added.

Broener returned late in the day. What a different man was he to me from yesterday. Despite the uncertainty regarding Blanche, I sympathized now with the Moor's ruling passion. Jealous? Yes, and jealous of Broener. All of him that had previously attracted me were now as many weapons turned against me—brilliant weapons, too, and used by a skilled hand.

He noticed the change in me—I cannot say in my manner. I had rather state it that he felt a change—something between us—coming through those fine interior senses which feel, and sense thoughts, as the outer ones do material things.

"You seem out of sorts," he said.

I laid it to a headache—that convenient beast of burden, which bears so many lies!

"Young man," said he that evening, "were you ever in love?"

"I suppose so," I replied. "They say its part of the programme, along with whooping cough and the measles."

"Well," he rejoined, "I believe I am, so far as I am capable of being. At all events, I've found a woman who I think can hold her own."

"May I ask who she is?"

"Oh, yes. It is the girl you saw last night playing the wife to Iago."

Silently we puffed our cigars simultaneously for a few seconds. A cigar is a great relief to a "throbbing heart." I was never conscious of much action of such character on the part of that organ, and use the phrase as covering a good deal of ground applicable to these peculiar situations. I said:

"Will you think I'm inquisitive if I inquire if you have known her long?"

"Not at all. I made her acquaintance a

few years ago in a New York boarding-house kept by her aunt, whom she was visiting. I met her, strangely enough, on my recent trip to San Francisco. She had just come out by the Isthmus with the company you saw. I recognized her on the stage in San Francisco."

"Is Brown her real name?"

"No."

I dared not ask the name. Broener resumed after a pause:

"That girl puzzles me. I can't make her out. Probably if I could I should not be so much attracted to her. I find that mine is a nature always demanding to fathom—see through—women, and coaxing to worship them when seen through."

I felt then a gleam of comfort. If it was Blanche Sefton, I more than hoped that Broener had no shallow depth to fathom. Yet I still feared him. He was to me deep, diabolically deep, and powerful, too.

"Perhaps you've met your match at last," I ventured to say.

"Well, I hope I have. I need—a match. Excuse me," he added: "I detest puns and punsters. This was an accident. She's a strong character—self-poised, self-reliant, impassioned on the outside with boiling depths below, which no one has ever yet brought to the surface—at least, I judge so. She's miles beyond the people she's traveling with. They see and know of her only as much as she chooses to show—a tenth, perhaps only a twentieth—only what they're able to see and appreciate, or what she allows them to see. Good judgment, that. No use in showing any more cards than you want to use—in any game."

"Do you call her a game, too?" I asked.

"As I look on life and people—yes. Yet possibly with her, this far, an unconscious one as to motive. What some call nobility of character, is so well expressed with her that I am content to admire it without too deeply analyzing it."

"You fear, then, you might find the base metal underneath the gilding?"

"My boy, I don't care to put myself on that train of thought. If I pursue an illusion, I want it ever to remain one."

I refused from asking if he knew her real name. Broener's indelible manner said to me, plain as words, "Hands off!"

"I'll still go to Marysville next week," he said after a pause. "The company play there on the 24th."

"Will you let me to say, as I went into my head, 'Marysville, love, and my way on a mule.' Pratt, I heard and made a mystery for Bill Pratt on the 24th. I seem to be a pillar for events to test on."

## CHAPTER XIV. MYSTERY.

During the next few days we were busy getting the quartz down from the "Bank." Broener called daily to see Pratt, who continued in the same condition of inactivity and physically seemed neither better nor worse. Broener seemed also to have made a favorable impression on Hilyear. I noticed them lingering about the door holding those lengthy eye-parting conversations always betokening that two people have found some topic of common interest and a consequent bond of sympathy between them. Only in this case, I knew or rather felt that the bond was manufactured by Broener for the occasion and concluded it was for the purpose of winning the double allegiance of Hilyear from Pratt and transferring it to himself, thereby making more secure whatever of Pratt's secrets or inferences concerning the "Bank" Hilyear might possess.

Mention a steady estrangement was growing between myself and Broener. It came of my thought, suspense, uncertainty and jealousy regarding Blanche Sefton—or rather of the presumed Blanche Sefton. It was evaded in growth, like the coolness of the early autumn certain to terminate in the hoariness of winter, a winter which must, ever come between two people when one or both fall out at the hands of the other. Of this, the one day with me. I was a brooder of the most typical. I would live over and over in my mind all that imagination stirred up to rebellious action by jealousy, created for me regarding the matter. I began to dislike Broener for his superiority in many things over myself—a superiority I was obliged to acknowledge. Dwelling on this made me realize more and more his inherent gift of command—command first of himself, next of his fellows—command not ostentatiously asserted with pomp and bluster, but command based on tact, the art of saying the right word and doing the right thing at the right time and place. Broener seemed to know where lay the door to every person's good will; more he knew how to open it. This reflection seemed to germinate a more disagreeable idea, that despite all Broener had done for me, I was but his creature. He was ruling and influencing me as he did others. I read this last thought snote me hard when Pratt was himself.

So the cloud, the cloud I alone made out of my thought, came between us and grew darker and darker, and more and more chilly. Yet our external intercourse was much the same as ever—at least we attempted to make it so, though the very attempts served but to reveal the change more clearly.

I resolved at last to have the secret out of him. If he would not speak Blanche Sefton's name I would. So, one day, as we were coming down from the "Bank" laden each with forty pounds of rich quartz, I said in as different a tone as I could assume: "That girl who played looks to me like one I know home named Blanche Sefton."

"Your friend has reason to be proud of the resemblance," replied Broener, in a careless way. Then he added, in a lower tone: "We mustn't talk loud here. Bill Sefton's crowd are working but a hundred feet below us, and Sefton is an artistic and accomplished busybody, with one ear always open for other people's business."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I saw that I had now laid myself fully open to Broener. That he had my secret, if secret there was, without any exchange in return. He now knew the cause of my changed manner. In nautical language, I had given him all the marks and bearings of the channel and the course he should steer.

Then I hated and admired him at the same time for the readiness with which, I saw, he had parried my question. That readiness, after a few moments' reflection, only made me more miserable. Because, I thought, he must know her name, and if it were not Blanche, what occasion would there be for his concealing it? So, then, it was Blanche. But Blanche may have given him a false name. There was hope. But what if she had. Is she not Blanche still? I was getting

in that same way my name refused to work in proper fashion. If I kept on in this way, I should soon argue that a man had but to change his name to change his identity, and that when Charlotte Brown called herself Julia Smith she became Julia Smith. This alarmed me a little. Then the ridiculousness of my condition came over me, and I laughed aloud.

"What are you laughing at?" said Broener. "At a fool I saw yesterday, when I looked in the glass, who took a strolling actress for a girl he knew in the states," I said, in a mood made up of exultation and vexation.

Broener turned half round and gave me a look, apparently half surprise, half anger. I had "broken out in a new spot" for him, and in the remark he had possibly recognized an attempt of mine in his own fashion to throw him off his guard. It was not. The words were born of the mood I was in, and had flown out of my lips as of their own volition. Suddenly I recollected that the term "strolling actress" I had used was not one indicative of the highest respect for the lady in question, and that under the circumstances it could not have fallen agreeably on

Broener's ears. I apologized for having used such expression.

He received my apology in silence. I saw by this he meant to punish me, and of course my feelings against him were not at all lessened.

Meantime the other cloud on Bull Bar was darkening for me. Pratt became worse. The physician talked of brain fever and looked grave. He added beside that some secret was on Pratt's mind. He inferred there "must have been a quarrel and much ill will betwixt Pratt and some one previous to the—accident." Pratt raved continually about the "young up," who thought he "owned the whole mountain." He was ever being "dogged about the chapparal by him," and so on.

Mr. William Sefton drank in with his gossip, greedily ears Pratt's utterances and the doctor's opinions. He visited Pratt's cabin on his way to work in the morning, dropped in at noon and again at night. He made himself an assistant nurse to Pratt, brought him coffee and dishes and broths of his own making, and he could make them well. He was really useful. Besides, he carried from Pratt's house masses of gas in which he distributed as a labor of love all over Bull Bar. Mr. Sefton's forte as a suspicion brooder lay in inferences. He had no direct charge against any one. But he said it was a "queer piece of business." Pratt, poor man, had been trying to get along and earn an honest living. He was good as a supported Hilyear, who hadn't much gumption anyway. "Young Holder," he said, "found Pratt with those boxes on his head. Pratt couldn't hear the sight of Holder. Always set him to mumble about shooting and powder. Holder was up the mountain that day. He saw him—at least it looked like his shirt in the bushes. Well, it was queer business."

Such is a sample of the application made by Mr. Sefton for individuals singly and individuals in groups on eight or ten days. He was in this work earnest and persevering, in season and out of season. He "set people to thinking." He educated them in fact to think suspiciously of me in connection with Pratt. Ordinarily on Bull Bar a "shootin' camp" between two men, even if one was killed, might not get any farther than the local justice's court, might not get even there. The community tacitly acknowledged the pistol as the main arbiter in all matters of disputes. Smith "jammed" Jones' claim. Jones shot Smith dead. Nobody had time to inquire closely into the matter. The affair was a two-days' sensation. In a week it was quite forgotten.

But in this case here was Mr. Sefton's "poor sick man" and his partner devoting his whole time to him, and I, John Holder, in some mysterious way mixed up with them. Mr. Sefton played several chords on the various human hearts of a thousand strings he handled. First something next mystery and beyond that something dark—he would not say what—only something resembling myself or my real self on Scrub Mountain could in the many views presented by him to his audience be vaguely made out in the general indistinctness.

So this busy man went on poisoning the Bull Bar mind gradually.

Broener lit for Marysville on the day Pratt was pronounced worse. His interest in the "Bank" seemed now secondary to another elsewhere.

After his departure I went down to Rankin's. It was noon. I arrived at the store just after the fifteen or twenty boarders had finished their dinner and were now engaged for a smoke and a talk, preparatory to the long afternoon's work in their claims along the river bank.

Just before entering I heard Sefton's tongue rattling on at a livelier pace than ever. The gravity of Pratt's case seemed to act as a stimulant upon him, exciting his imagination and touching up his suspicious inferences regarding this "poor business" in more pronounced colorings than ever.

"And why don't he come out and tell the whole story?" said he.

As I entered that hush ensued so peculiar to the unexpected advent of the party talked about.

I knew they were talking of me in connection with Pratt—or rather I felt it. I had felt it for some days—felt it in a certain coolness, in averted looks, and hints and innuendoes, whose full import and meaning now burst upon me.

The silence was finally broken by one "Long Mac's" asking me if I "knew how Pratt was."

"I hear he is worse," was my reply, and I felt my face redden and burn as I spoke. Actually I did feel then like Pratt's murderer, and on trial before a jury prejudiced against me, without a favorable witness or extenuating circumstance in my behalf. So strong seemed the effect of the predominant thought from the group in that store to make me feel as they believed.

There was another silence. A great deal of renewed and possibly unnecessary pipe filling and cleaning of stems with broom straws went on; possibly as a mental relief to the more sensitive, and consequently embarrassed, of the party.

"Was you coming down Scrub Mountain when you found Pratt?" asked another.

"No," I replied. "I went up to him."

"I wonder how he came by two bullets in his head," asked Long Mac.

"I don't know that he has any bullets in his head," I replied.

"You don't," was the rejoinder from Long Mac. The emphasis on the pronoun was peculiar. I did not mistake its meaning, but made no reply.

Meantime Mr. Sefton was silent. Perhaps, for the first time, a sense of the responsi-

bility of his loquacity had come over him. He did not like talking in face of the accused. The matter was now in sterner hands.

"Well," said Long Mac, "I think for one this thing needs looking into. It's about time this robbin' and murderin' was stopped. Somebody needs stringin' 'em up."

The mortality list for Bull Bar, and, say, a stretch of river for two miles up and down, averaged a man killed by known or unknown parties about once in ten days. But the Bar was now in the throes of one of those spasms of law and order, peculiar to all communities. Woo to the wight, guilty or not guilty, caught during such a space. He would hang.

It was worse than any direct trial, this being accused by hint, inference and intendo. There was, I felt, but one thing to do. I resolved to make the issue and meet it.

"Look here!" I said. "What are you fellows driving at, anyway? You talk as if some one had tried to murder Pratt. Now, as I'm considerably mixed up in this matter, I'd like to know if any one is suspected of crooked business, and if so who it is?"

No one replied. I was now started and kept on.

"It strikes me," I said, "from the way that this talk has gone on that I'm the man you're aiming at. Now, if anybody's got any charge against me, he can back up with proof, this is as good a time to make it as any other. I object to being tried behind my back and without any chance to defend myself. Has anybody here seen me waylay Pratt, shoot him or rob him? If there is let him talk. I am ready to hear what he has to say."

My audience was very quiet.

"Have you, Mr. Sefton? I believe you've had a good deal to do and say in this matter. You seem to know as much if not more, of this affair than anybody else? You were with me when we brought Pratt down the

mountain. Why shouldn't I think it a very 'queer piece of business' to talk of your being up on Scrub Mountain the day Pratt was hurt, poor man, trying to get an honest living and all that. I tell you, Bill Sefton, that sort of talk has put the halber round more than one man's neck in this country when it didn't belong there. This buzzing suspicion in people's ears, until the man that buzzes and does he buzzes to can't tell the difference between mere gossip and absolute proof, I think, about the same as murder."

Sefton was silent. I felt myself warming up as I concentrated myself upon him alone, and what was to me a relief, I felt also the letters of a constitutional backward-sifter for any sort of expression for the time being from me, whether that expression should be one of denial or words of truth or merely "silence." I continued, "you are making this trouble for me, and I know it. You are a



"Sefton, you are making this trouble for me."

born gossip. You are a coward to look. You make all your fights with your tongue, behind people's backs. You are a thing, a snake, a skulking coyote, and if this crowd in this store could see you as you really are, they'd kick you out as they would a dog. Do you understand what I mean? I mean all I say, and more if I could say it. Now, if you want a right here's one on your head. I'm ready."

## CHAPTER XV. A WOMAN!

At this moment Mr. John Sargent put his head in the doorway and said excitedly: "My goodness gracious snakes alive, boys, there's a woman on horseback coming down the hill!"

The audience were out of doors in a twinkling. No American woman had ever yet set foot on Bull Bar.

The Bar hill road, for half a mile steeply inclined, was as a red streak set in a dark green ground of chapparal, winding and trending, appearing here and disappearing there behind the denser clumps.

The woman's progress was necessarily slow. Twenty minutes at least would elapse ere she would reach the store. The boarders gathered in a group on a knoll. Other gangs of men hearing the news congregated on various portions of the Bar. All eyes were directed upwards. Capt. Thompson brought from his sea chest a long tarry spy-glass and studying it against a corner of the store focussed it on the approaching phenomenon. This constituted the captain a temporary authority. His reports from time to time were eagerly received by the crowd.

Out of sheer force of nautical habit the captain put one arm about the post supporting the veranda to steady himself, as he would put his arm around a stay on ship-board. The attitude was not lost on the "boys," some of whom put on their "sea legs," staggered about as if trying to maintain their footing on deck in a gale of wind, and one leaning over an imaginary vessel jibe pantomimed a fearful derangement of the stomach through the disturbance of the elements.

"Trim looking craft," said the captain. "Should say by her model and rig she was of American build."

"Come, Cap," said one of the boys, "don't be greedy, now you've got a good thing. Let's have a squint."

The captain relinquished the glass with some show of reluctance.

Jimmy Cook, having adjusted his eye to the instrument, seemed, judging by his absorption, to intend remaining as he was for the afternoon.

"Time's up!" cried one.

"I move that twenty seconds only be allowed per man, per peep," said another.