



***MARY HALLOCK
FOOTE***

***A TOUCH
OF SUN,
AND OTHER
STORIES***

Mary Hallock Foote

A Touch of Sun, and Other Stories

EAN 8596547226055

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[A TOUCH OF SUN](#)

[THE MAID'S PROGRESS](#)

[PILGRIMS TO MECCA](#)

[THE HARSHAW BRIDE](#)

A TOUCH OF SUN

Table of Contents

I

The five-o'clock whistle droned through the heat. Its deep, consequential chest-note belonged by right to the oldest and best paying member of the Asgard group, a famous mining property of northern California.

The Asgard Company owned a square league of prehistoric titles on the western slope of the foot-hills,—land enough for the preservation of a natural park within its own boundaries where fire-lines were cleared, forest-trees respected, and roads kept up. Wherever the company erected a board fence, gate, or building, the same was methodically painted a color known as "monopoly brown." The most conspicuous of these objects cropped out on the sunset dip of the property where the woods for twenty years had been cut, and the Sacramento valley surges up in heat and glare, with yearly visitations of malaria.

Higher than the buildings in brown, a gray-shingled bungalow ranged itself on the lap of its broad lawns against a slope of orchard tops climbing to the dark environment of the forest. Not the original forest: of that only three stark pines were left, which rose one hundred feet out of a gulch below the house and lent their ancient majesty to the modern uses of electric wires and telephone lines. Their dreaming tops were in the sky; their feet were in the sluicings of the stamp-mill that reared its long brown back in a semi-recumbent posture, resting one elbow on the hill;

and beneath the valley smouldered, a pale mirage by day, by night a vision of color transcendent and rich as the gates of the Eternal City.

At half past five the night watchman, on his way from town, stopped at the superintendent's gate, ran up the blazing path, and thrust a newspaper between the dark blue canvas curtains that shaded the entrance of the porch. For hours the house had slept behind its heat defenses, every shutter closed, yards of piazza blind and canvas awning fastened down. The sun, a ball of fire, went slowly down the west. Rose-vines drooped against the hanging lattices, printing their watery lines of split bamboo with a shadow-pattern of leaf and flower. The whole house-front was decked with dead roses, or roses blasted in full bloom, as if to celebrate with appropriate insignia the passing of the hottest day of the year.

Half-way down the steps the watchman stopped, surprised by a voice from behind the curtains. He came back in answer to his name.

A thin white hand parted the curtain an inch or two. There was the flicker of a fan held against the light.

"Oh, Hughson, will you tell Mr. Thorne that I am here? He doesn't know I have come."

"Tell him that Mrs. Thorne is home?" the man translated slowly.

"Yes. He does not expect me. You will tell him at once, please?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The curtain was fastened again from inside. A woman's step went restlessly up and down, up and down the long

piazza floors, now muffled on a rug, now light on a matting, or distinct on the bare boards.

Later a soft Oriental voice inquired, "Wha' time Missa Tho'ne wanta dinna?"

"The usual time, Ito," came the answer; "make no difference for me."

"Lika tea—coffee—after dinna?"

"Tea—iced. Have you some now? Oh, bring it, please!"

After an interval: "Has Mr. Thorne been pretty well?"

"I think."

"It is very hot. How is your kitchen—any better than it was?"

"Missa Tho'ne fixa more screen; all open now, thank you."

"Take these things into my dressing-room. No; there will be no trunk. I shall go back in a few days."

The gate clashed to. A stout man in a blaze of white duck came up the path, lifting his cork helmet slightly to air the top of his head. As he approached it could be seen that his duck was of a modified whiteness, and that his beard, even in that forcing weather, could not be less than a two days' growth. He threw his entire weight on the steps one by one, as he mounted them slowly. The curtains were parted for him from within.

"Well, Margaret?"

"Well, dear old man! How hot you look! *Why* do you not carry an umbrella?"

"Because I haven't got you here to make me. What brought you back in such weather? Where is your telegram?"

"I did not telegraph. There was no need. I simply had to speak to you at once—about something that could not be written."

"Well, it's good to have a look at you again. But you are going straight back, you know. Can't take any chances on such weather as this."

Mr. Thorne sank copiously into a piazza chair, and pulled forward another for his wife.

She sat on the edge of it, smiling at him with wistful satisfaction. Her profile had a delicate, bird-like slant. Pale, crisped auburn hair powdered with gray, hair that looked like burnt-out ashes, she wore swept back from a small, tense face, full of fine lines and fleeting expressions. She had taken off her high, close neckwear, and the wanness of her throat showed above a collarless shirt-waist.

"Don't look at me; I am a wreck!" she implored, with a little exhausted laugh. "I wonder where my keys are? I must get on something cool before dinner."

"Ito has all the keys somewhere. Ito's a gentleman. He takes beautiful care of me, only he won't let me drink as much *shasta* as I want. What is that? Iced tea? Bad, bad before dinner! I'm going to watch *you* now. You are not looking a bit well. Is there any of that decoction left? Well, it is bad; gets on the nerves, too much of it. The problem of existence here is, What shall we drink, and how much of it *can* we drink?"

Mrs. Thorne laughed out a little sigh. "I have brought you a problem. But we will talk when it is cooler. Don't you—don't you shave but twice a week when I am away, Henry?"

"I shave every day, when I think of it. I never go anywhere, and I don't have anybody here if I can possibly avoid it. It is all a man can do to live and be up to his work."

"I know; it's frightful to work in such weather. How the mill roars! It starts the blood to hear it. Last spring it sounded like a cataract; now it roars like heat behind furnace doors. Which is your room now?"

"O Lord! I sleep anywhere; begin in my bed generally and end of the piazza floor. It will be the grass if this keeps on."

"Mrs. Thorne continued to laugh spasmodically at her husband's careless speeches, not at what he said so much as through content in his familiar way of saying things. Under their light household talk, graver, questioning looks were exchanged, the unappeased glances of friends long separated, who realize on meeting again that letters have told them nothing.

"Why didn't you write me about this terrible heat?"

"Why didn't you write *me* that you were not well?"

"I am well."

"You don't look it—anything but."

"I am always ghastly after a journey. It isn't a question of health that brought me. But—never mind. Ring for Ito, will you? I want my keys."

At dinner she looked ten years younger, sitting opposite him in her summery lawns and laces. She tasted the cold wine soup, but ate nothing, watching her husband's appetite with the mixed wonder and concern that thirty years' knowledge of its capacities had not diminished. He studied her face meanwhile; he was accustomed to reading faces, and hers he knew by line and precept. He listened to her

choked little laughs and hurried speeches. All her talk was mere postponement; she was fighting for time. Hence he argued that the trouble which had sent her flying home to him from the mountains was not fancy-bred. Of her imaginary troubles she was ready enough to speak.

The moon had risen, a red, dry-weather moon, when they walked out into the garden and climbed the slope under low orchard boughs. The trees were young, too quickly grown; like child mothers, they had lost their natural symmetry, overburdened with hasty fruition. Each slender parent trunk was the centre of a host of artificial props, which saved the sinking boughs from breaking. Under one of these low green tents they stopped and handled the great fruit that fell at a touch.

"How everything rushes to maturity here! The roses blossom and wither the same hour. The peaches burst before they ripen. Don't you think it oppresses one, all this waste fertility, such an excess of life and good living, one season crowding upon another? How shall we get rid of all these kindly fruits of the earth?"

She did not wait for an answer to her morbid questions. They moved on up a path between hedges of sweet peas going to seed, and blackberry-vines covered with knots of fruit dried in their own juices. A wall of gigantic Southern cane hid the boundary fence, and above it the night-black pines of the forest towered, their breezy monotone answering the roar of the hundred stamps below the hill.

A few young pines stood apart on a knoll, a later extension of the garden, ungraded and covered with pine-

needles. In the hollow places native shrubs, surprised by irrigation, had made an unwonted summer's growth.

Here, in the blanching moon, stood a tent with both flaps thrown back. A wind of coolness drew across the hill; it lifted one of the tent-curtains mysteriously; its touch was sad and searching.

Mrs. Thorne put back the canvas and stepped inside. She saw a folding camp-cot stripped of bedding, a dresser with half-open drawers that disclosed emptiness, a dusty book-rack standing on the floor. The little mirror on the tent-pole, hung too high for her own reflection, held a darkling picture of a pine-bough against a patch of stars. She sat on the edge of the cot and picked up a discarded necktie, sawing it across her knee mechanically to free it from the dust. Her husband placed himself beside her. His weight brought down the mattress and rocked her against his shoulder; he put his arm around her, and she gave way to a little sob.

"When has he written to you?" she asked. "Since he went down?"

"I think so. Let me see! When did you hear last?"

"I have brought his last letter with me. I wondered if he had told you."

"I have heard nothing—nothing in particular. What is it?"

"The inevitable woman."

"She has come at last, has she? Come to stay?"

"He is engaged to her."

Mr. Thorne breathed his astonishment in a low whistle. "You don't like it?" he surmised at once.

"Like it! If it were merely a question of liking! She is impossible. She knows it, her people know it, and they have

not told him. It remains"—

"What is the girl's name?"

"Henry, she is not a girl! That is, she is a girl forced into premature womanhood, like all the fruits of this hotbed climate. She is that Miss Benedet whom you helped, whom you saved—how many years ago? When Willy was a schoolboy."

"Well, she *was* saved, presumably."

"Saved from what, and by a total stranger!"

"She made no mistake in selecting the stranger. I can testify to that; and she was as young as he, my dear."

"A girl is never as young as a boy of the same age. She is a woman now, and she has taken his all—everything a man can give to his first—and told him nothing!"

"Are you sure it's the same girl? There are other Benedets."

"She is the one. His letter fixes it beyond a question—so innocently he fastens her past upon her! And he says, 'She is "a woman like a dewdrop."' I wonder if he knows what he is quoting, and what had happened to *that* woman!"

"Dewdrops don't linger long in the sun of California. But she was undeniably the most beautiful creature this or any other sun ever shone on."

"And he is the sweetest, sanest, cleanest-hearted boy, and the most innocent of what a woman may go through and still be fair outside!"

"Why, that is why she likes him. It speaks well for her, I think, that she hankers after that kind of a boy."

"It speaks volumes for what she lacks herself! Don't misunderstand me. I hope I am not without charity for what

is done and never can be undone,—though charity is hardly the virtue one would hope to need in welcoming a son's wife. It is her ghastly silence now that condemns her."

Mr. Thorne heaved a sigh, and changed his feet on the gritty tent floor. He stooped and picked up some small object on which he had stepped, a collar-stud trodden flat. He rolled it in his fingers musingly.

"She may be getting up her courage to tell him in her own time and way."

"The time has gone by when she could have told him honorably. She should have stopped the very first word on his lips."

"She couldn't do that, you know, and be human. She couldn't be expected to spare him at such a cost as that. Mighty few men would be worth it."

"If he wasn't worth it she could have let him go. And the family! Think of their accepting his proposal in silence. Why, can they even be married, Henry, without some process of law?"

"Heaven knows! I don't know how far the other thing had gone—far enough to make questions awkward."

Husband and wife remained seated side by side on the son's deserted bed. The shape of each was disconsolately outlined to the other against the tent's illumined walls. Now a wind-swayed branch of manzanita rasped the canvas, and cast upon it shadows of its moving leaves.

"It's pretty rough on quiet old folks like us, with no money to get us into trouble," said Mr. Thorne. "The boy is not a beauty, he's not a swell. He is just a plain, honest boy with a good working education. If you judge a woman, as some say

you can, by her choice of men, she shouldn't be very far out of the way."

"It is very certain you cannot judge a man by his choice of women."

"You cannot judge a boy by the women that get hold of him. But Willy is not such a babe as you think. He's a deuced quiet sort, but he's not been knocking around by himself these ten years, at school and college and vacations, without picking up an idea or two—possibly about women. Experience, I grant, he probably lacks; but he has the true-bred instinct. We always have trusted him so far; I'm willing to trust him now. If there are things he ought to know about this woman, leave him to find them out for himself."

"After he has married her! And you don't even know whether a marriage is possible without some sort of shuffling or concealment; do you?"

"I don't, but they probably do. Her family aren't going to get themselves into that kind of a scrape."

"I have no opinion whatever of the family. I think they would accept any kind of a compromise that money can buy."

"Very likely, and so would we if we had a daughter"—

"Why, we *have* a daughter! It is our daughter, all the daughter we shall ever call ours, that you are talking about. And to think of the girls and girls he might have had! Lovely girls, without a flaw—a flaw! She will fall to pieces in his hand. She is like a broken vase put together and set on the shelf to look at."

"Now we are losing our sense of proportion. We must sleep on this, or it will blot out the whole universe for us."

"It has already for me. I haven't a shadow of faith in anything left."

"And I haven't read the paper. Suppose the boy were in Cuba now!"

"I wish he were! It is a judgment on me for wanting to save him up, for insisting that the call was not for him."

"That's just it, you see. You have to trust a man to know his own call. Whether it's love or war, he is the one who has got to answer."

"But you will write to him to-morrow, Henry? He must be saved, if the truth can save him. Think of the awakening!"

"My dear, if he loves her there will be no awakening. If there is, he will have to take his dose like other men. There is nothing in the truth that can save him, though I agree with you that he ought to know it—from her."

"If you had only told her your name, Henry! Then she would have had a fingerpost to warn her off our ground. To think what you did for her, and how you are repaid!"

"It was a very foolish thing I did for her; I wasn't proud of it. That was one reason why I did not tell her my name."

Mr. Thorne removed his weight from the cot. The warped wires twanged back into place.

"Come, Maggie, we are too old not to trust in the Lord—or something. Anyhow, it's cooler. I believe we shall sleep to-night."

"And haven't I murdered sleep for you, you poor old man? What a thing it is to have nerve and no nerves! I know you feel just as wrecked as I do. I wish you would say so. I

want it said to the uttermost. If I could but—our only boy—our boy of 'highest hopes'! You remember the dear old Latin words in his first 'testimonials'?"

"They must have been badly disappointed in their girl, and I suppose they had their 'hopes,' too."

"They should not drag another into the pit, one too innocent to have imagined such treachery."

"I wouldn't make too much of his innocence. He is all right so far as we know; he's got precious little excuse for not being: but there is no such gulf between any two young humans; there can't be, especially when one is a man. Take my hand. There's a step there."

Two shapes in white, with shadows preposterously lengthening, went down the hill. The long, dark house was open now to the night.

* * * * *

There is no night in the "stilly" sense at a mine.

The mill glared through all its windows from the gulch. Sentinel lights kept watch on top. The hundred stamps pounded on. If they ceased a moment, there followed the sob of the pump, or the clang of a truck-load of drills dumped on the floor of the hoisting-works, or the thunder of rock in the iron-bound ore-bins. All was silence on the hill; but a wakeful figure wrapped in white went up and down the empty porches, light as a dead leaf on the wind. It was the mother, wasting her night in grievous thinking, sighing with weariness, pining for sleep, dreading the day. How should they presume to tell that woman's story, knowing her only through one morbid chapter of her earliest youth, which they had stumbled upon without the key to it, or any

knowledge of its sequel? She longed to feel that they might be merciful and not tell it. She coveted happiness for her son, and in her heart was prepared for almost any surrender that would purchase it for him. If the lure were not so great! If the woman were not so blinding fair, why, then one might find a virtue in excusing her, in condoning her silence, even. But, clothed in that power, to have pretended innocence as well!

The roar of the stamp-heads deadened her hearing of the night's subtler noises. Her thoughts went grinding on, crushing the hard rock of circumstance, but incapable of picking out the grains of gold therein. Later siftings might discover them, but she was reasoning now under too great human pressure for delicate analysis.

She saw the planets set and the night-mist cloak the valley. By four o'clock daybreak had put out the stars. She went to her room then and fell asleep, awakening after the heat had begun, when the house was again darkened for the day's siege.

She was still postponing, wandering through the darkened rooms, peering into closets and bureau drawers to see, from force of habit, how Ito discharged his trust.

At luncheon she asked her husband if he had written. He made a gesture expressing his sense of the hopelessness of the situation in general.

"You know how I came by my knowledge, and how little it amounts to as a question of facts."

"Henry, how can you trifle so! You believe, just as I do, that such facts would wreck any marriage. And you are not

the only one who knows them. I think your knowledge was providentially given you for the saving of your son."

"My son is a man. I can't save him. And take my word for it, he will go all lengths now before he will be saved."

"Let him go, then, with his eyes open, not blindfold, in jeopardy of other men's tongues."

Mr. Thorne rose uneasily.

"Do as you think you must; but it rather seems to me that I am bound to respect that woman's secret."

"You wish that you had not told me."

"Well, I have, and I suppose that was part of the providence. It is in your hands now; be as easy on her as you can."

With a view to being "easy," Mrs. Thorne resolved not to expatiate, but to give the story on plain lines. The result was hardly as merciful as might have been expected.

* * * * *

"DEAR WILLY," she wrote: "Prepare yourself for a most unhappy letter [what woman can forego her preface?]-unhappy mother that I am, to have such a message laid upon me. But you will understand when you have read why the cup may not pass from us. If ever again a father or a mother can help you, my son, you have us always here, poor in comfort though we are. It seems that the comforters of our childhood have little power over those hurts that come with strength of years.

"Seven years ago this summer your father went to the city on one of his usual trips. Everything was usual, except that at Colfax he noticed a pair of beautiful thoroughbred horses being worked over by the stablemen, and a young

fellow standing by giving directions. The horses had been overridden in the heat. It was such weather as we are having now. The young man, who appeared to have everything to say about them, was of the country sporting type, distinctly not the gentleman. In a cattle country he would have been a cowboy simply. Your father thought he might have been employed on some of the horse-breeding ranches below Auburn as a trainer of young stock. He even wondered if he could have stolen the animals.

"But as the train moved out it appeared he had appropriated something of greater value—a young girl, also a thoroughbred.

"It did not need the gossip of the train-hands to suggest that this was an elopement of a highly sensational kind. Father was indignant at the jokes. You know it is a saying with the common sort of people that in California elopements become epidemic at certain seasons of the year—like earthquake shocks or malaria. The man was handsome in a primitive way—worlds beneath the girl, who was simply and tragically a lady. Father sat in the same car with them, opposite their section. It grew upon him by degrees that she was slowly awakening, as one who has been drugged, to a stupefied consciousness of her situation. He thought there might still be room for help at the crisis of her return to reason (I mean all this in a spiritual sense), and so he kept near them. They talked but little together. The girl seemed stunned, as I say, by physical exhaustion or that dawning comprehension in which your father fancied he recognized the tragic element of the situation.

"The young man was outwardly self-possessed, as horsemen are, but he seemed constrained with the girl. They had no conversation, no topics in common. He kept his place beside her, often watching her in silence, but he did not obtrude himself. She appeared to have a certain power over him, even in her helplessness, but it was slipping from her. In her eyes, as they rested upon him in the hot daylight, your father believed that he saw a wild and gathering repulsion. So he kept near them.

"The train was late, having waited at Colfax two hours for the Eastern Overland, else they would have been left, those two, and your father—but such is fate!

"It was ten o'clock when they reached Oakland. He lost the pair for a moment in the crowd going aboard the boat, but saw the girl again far forward, standing alone by the rail. He strolled across the deck, not appearing to have seen her. She moved a trifle nearer; with her eyes on the water, speaking low as if to herself, she said:—

"'I am in great danger. Will you help me? If you will, listen, but do not speak or come any nearer. Be first, if you can, to go ashore; have a carriage ready, and wait until you see me. There will be a moment, perhaps—only a moment. Do not lose it. You understand? *He*, too, will have to get a carriage. When he comes for me I shall be gone. Tell the driver to take me to—' she gave the number of a well-known residence on Van Ness Avenue.

"He looked at her then, and said quietly, 'The Benedet house is closed for the summer.'

"She hung her head at the name. 'Promise me your silence!' she implored in the same low, careful voice.