From the Overland Monthly.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ROBERT FAIRWAY.

I.

[CONTINUED.]

The meeting this morning had been arranged between the men for the purpose of straightening out and putting in legal shape these debts and conveyances. Books and papers were produced; and to Alvido's surprise, he found that fully one half of his property would have to be conveyed away to clear up the accounts. He was keenly and silent, as the lawyer, with quick professional skill, commenced to draw the proper conveyance for one undivided half of the estate; when suddenly drawing himself to his full height, his eyes flashing fire, and his quick-drawn breath betokening the violence of his agitation, he cried out: "Stop! I will make you a proposition. Half my estate belongs to you already. Draw that deed for the whole rancho. I will sign it, and we will play again for all or none. Fortune cannot always be against me, and I must surely win. What say you—my half against yours?"

Fairway said nothing, but, carelessly turning the paper upon which he had made his notations, drew from [illegible] and silently wrote the whole right, title and interest of Alvido in the San Siliciso Rancho. There was a slight curl of triumph about the corners of his mouth, and a queer look in his eyes; but Alvido saw them not as he impatiently paced the room consuming cigarettes at an enormous rate, giving occasional vent to an oath or two. When the paper was finished, Fairway put on his hat, and, stepping out, soon returned with a quaint little man, who combined the duties of chief engineer of the hardware, dry goods and grocery establishment on the corner below with that of notary public, and in a few moments the signatures and acknowledgment were procured, and the deed which held the destinies of the two men lay completed on the table between them.

Not until the notary had left the room did Fairway speak, but then turning to Alvido he said:

"Now, Jose, I have drawn this thing as you wanted it, because I have no right to refuse your proposition. It lies there on the desk, and is your property. I advise you to take it and tear it up. Whatever comes of this business, you shall remember that such was my advice. If you insist upon your proposal to play for it—my share against yours—I will do it, and I will win. But I make one condition, without which I shall not play."

"Name it," said the Spaniard, almost fiercely.

"It is, that we now and together mount our horses, and spend the day on the rancho. You shall ride over the place, we will dine, and smoke, and chat together, and spend, to-day, as though there was not a card in the world. You will see and realize what you are risking; and then, if when we return you still insist, we will play for the deed"—touching the paper lightly as he spoke.

At first did the Spaniard urge and remonstrate. It soon became evident that Fairway was in earnest, and he gave a reluctant consent to the plan. A brisk ride of a few miles brought them to the adobe house, and, dismounting, they fastened their horses to a convenient tree and entered the low-ceiled room. The furniture and fittings of the apartment gave no evidence of wealth or culture, although everything was scrupulously clean. A large open fireplace occupied one end of the building before which a young and rather pretty woman was dusting the ashes back with a goose wing. This woman, whom the two men addressed as Delphina, welcomed their coming, and cordially shook hands with the American, with some laughing remark in broken English, replying as she did so a row of white teeth fairly glittered in their inky whiteness. Although not Alvido's wife, she passed for such, kept his house, and cooked his meals, appearing unconcerned. Speaking to her in Spanish, Jose told her that they would be back to dinner, and going into the yard, soon returned with a pair of chickens which he had killed, and an armful of vegetables fresh from the ground. Short as was his absence, there had been time enough for the woman to ask, with a half-regretful, half-careless manner, "Have you been winning from him again?" To which Fairway replied, laughingly and evasively. With a look of contempt as she heard the approaching footsteps, she said, "If I was a man you wouldn't twist me around your fingers, as you do him." But Alvido's return put a stop to the conversation; and after a few hurried directions, the two mounted their horses and started on their ride. For hours they rode on, side by side, the Spaniard sullen and speechless; Fairway, on the contrary, seemed to have an unnatural flow of spirits. Nothing could discourage him. Reining in, once in a while, at some point of observation, from which the goodly heritage could be seen to advantage, he would launch out into praises of its beauty and value, suggesting possible improvements, and speaking of the immense facilities it possessed. He spoke feelingly of the benefits of the possession of such a property, and talked of the folly of risking it. To do him justice, he exhausted every power of eloquence and persuasion to dissuade Jose from the venture he seemed bent on making. "One half this place," said he, "in partnership with me, is all that you need to make you happy. I have business tact. I can make golden dollars grow on every blade of grass. Come, Jose, give up this notion. I will be your friend; and you will never regret the day. You can settle down, then—marry Delphina." The Spaniard, whose face began to show signs of yielding until those words were spoken, turned on him and with an oath, ground out between his teeth, exclaimed: "You are afraid to risk what you have already won. If the place be what you describe, why not own it all? You say you can. Are you a coward?" Except a whitening of the face, and a twitch around the corners of his mouth Fairway exhibited no emotion, but simply said, "I have no more to say; to-night we play for this great stake; the issue has but Alvido to blame," and turning their horses' heads, they spurred them to their utmost speed until they reached the house, where, seeing them properly bestowed, after refreshing themselves with a hearty wash, they lit their cigarettes, and took their places in the cool shadow of the porch to await the call for dinner. After eating, which was accompanied on the part of Jose with copious draughts of the powerful white wine of the old Mission orchards, they returned to the town, and at an early candle-light the men, the men locked up in the little office, sat down to play.

To be continued.

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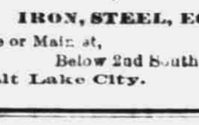

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