



A Daughter of the Vine

by Gertrude Atherton



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III. PART THREE

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A Fragment

About the Author

I

Two horses were laboriously pulling a carriage through the dense thickets and over the sandhills which in the early Sixties still made an ugly breach between San Francisco and its Presidio. The difficulties of the course were not abridged by the temper of the night, which was torn with wind and muffled in black. During the rare moments when the flying clouds above opened raggedly to discharge a shaft of silver a broad and dreary expanse leapt into form. Hills of sand, bare and shifting, huge boulders, tangles of scrub oak and chaparral, were the distorted features of the landscape between the high far-away peaks of the city and the military posts on the water's edge. On the other side of the bay cliffs and mountains jutted, a mere suggestion of outline. The ocean beyond the Golden Gate roared over the bar. The wind whistled and shrilled through the rigging of the craft on the bay; occasionally it lifted a loose drift and whirled it about the carriage, creating a little cyclone with two angry eyes, and wrenching loud curses from the man on the box.

“It’s an unusually bad night, Thorpe, really,” said one of the two occupants of the carriage. “Of course the winters here are more or less stormy, but we have many fine days, I assure you; and they’re better than the summer with its fogs and trade winds—I am speaking of San Francisco,” he added hastily, with newly acquired Californian pride. “Of course it is usually fine in the country at any time. I believe there are sixteen different climates in California.”

“As any one of them might be better than England’s, it is not for me to complain,” said the other, good-naturedly. “But I feel sorry for the horses and the man. I don’t think we should have missed much if we had cut this ball.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Life would be suicidal in this God-forsaken country if it were not for the hospitality of the San Franciscans. Some months ago two officers whose names I won’t mention met in a lonely spot on the coast near Benicia Fort, on the other side of the bay, with the deliberate intention of shooting one another to death. They were discovered in time, and have since been transferred East. It is better for us on account of San Francisco—Whew! how this confounded thing does jolt!—and the Randolph parties are always the gayest of the season. Mr. Randolph is an Englishman with the uncalculating hospitality of the Californian. He has made a pot of money and entertains lavishly. Every pretty girl in San Francisco is a belle, but Nina Randolph is the belle *par excellence*.”

“Is she a great beauty?” asked Thorpe, indifferently. He was wondering if the driver had lost his way. The wheels were zigzagging through drifts so deep that the sand shot against the panes.

“No, I don’t know that she is beautiful at all. Miss Hathaway is that, and Mrs. McLane, and two of the ‘three Macs’. But she has it all her own way. It’s charm, I suppose, and then—well, she’s an only child and will come in for a fortune—a right big one if this place grows as people predict. She’s a deuced lucky girl, is Miss Nina Randolph, and it will be a deuced lucky fellow that gets her. Only no one does. She’s twenty-three and heart-whole.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“I’m in love with her and Guadalupe Hathaway and the ‘three Macs’ and Mrs. McLane. I never met so many attractive women in one place.”

“Would it be Mrs. Hunt McLane—a Creole? I met her once in Paris—got to know her very well.”

“You don’t say. She’ll make things hum for you. There’s something else I wanted to say. I thought I’d wait and see if you discovered it yourself, but I believe I won’t. It’s this: there’s something queer about the Randolphs in spite of the fact that they’re more to the front than any people in San Francisco. I never leave that house that I don’t carry away a vague impression that there’s something behind the scenes I don’t know anything about. I’ve never spoken of it to anyone else; it would be rather disloyal, after all the kindness they’ve shown me; but I’m too curious to know how they will impress you. I’ve only been here six months, and only know what everybody else knows about them —”

“Do you know, Hastings,” said the Englishman abruptly, “I think something is wrong outside. I don’t believe anyone is guiding those horses.”

Hastings lowered the window beside him and thrust out his head.

“Hi, there, Tim!” he shouted. “What are you about?”

There was no reply.

“Hello!” he cried, thinking the wind might have miscarried his voice.

Again there was no reply; but the horses, gratefully construing the final syllable to their own needs, came to a full stop.

Hastings opened the door and sprang on to the hub of the wheel, expostulating angrily. He returned in a moment to his companion.

“Here’s the devil to pay,” he cried. “Tim’s down against the dashboard as drunk as a lord. There’s nothing to do but put him inside and drive, myself. I’d chuck him into a drift if I were not under certain obligations of a similar sort. Will you come outside with me, or stay in with him?”

“Why not go back to the Presidio?”

“We are about half-way between, and may as well go on.”

“I’ll go outside, by all means.”

He stepped out. The two men dragged the coachman off the box and huddled him inside.

“We’re off the road,” said Hastings, “but I think I can find my way. I’ll cut across to the Mission road, and then we’ll be on level ground, at least.”

They mounted the box. Hastings gathered the reins and Thorpe lit a cigar. The horses, well ordered brutes of the livery stable, did their weary best to respond to the peremptory order to speed.

“We’ll be two hours late,” the young officer grumbled, as they floundered out of the sandhills and entered the Mission Valley.

“Damn the idiot. Why couldn’t he have waited till we got there?”

They were now somewhat sheltered from the wind, and as the road was level, although rutty, made fair progress.

“I didn’t mean to treat you to a nasty adventure the very night of your arrival,” continued Hastings apologetically.

“Oh, one rather looks for adventures in California. If I hadn’t so much sand in my eyes I’d be rather entertained than otherwise. I only hope our faces are not dirty.”

“They probably are. Still, if we are not held up, I suppose we can afford to overlook the minor ills.”

“Held up?”

“Stopped by road-agents, garroters, highway robbers—whatever you like to call ‘em. I’ve never been held up myself; as a rule I go in the ambulance at night, but it’s no uncommon experience. I’ve got a revolver in my overcoat pocket—on this side. Reach over and get it, and keep it cocked. I *couldn’t* throw up my hands. I’d feel as if the whole United States army were disgraced.”

Thorpe abstracted the pistol, but although the long lonely road was favourable to crime, no road-agents appeared, and Hastings drove into the outskirts of the town with audibly expressed relief.

“We’re not far now,” he added. “South Park is the place we’re bound for; and, by the way, Mr. Randolph projected and owns most of it.”

A quarter of an hour later he drove into an oval enclosure trimmed with tall dark houses, so sombre in appearance that to the old Californian they must now, in their desertion and decay, seem to have been grimly prescient of their destiny.

As the carriage drew up before a brilliantly lighted house the door opened, and a man-servant ran down the steps.

“Keep quiet,” whispered Hastings.

The man opened the door of the carriage, waited a moment, then put his head inside. He drew it back with a violent oath.

“It’s a damned insult!” he cried furiously.

“Why, Cochrane!” exclaimed Hastings, “what on earth is the matter with you?”

“Captain Hastings!” stammered the man. “Oh I—I—beg pardon. I thought—Oh, of course, I see. Tim had taken a drop too much. A most deplorable habit. Can I help you down, sir?”

“No, thanks.”

He sprang lightly to the sidewalk, followed with less agility by the Englishman, who still held the cocked pistol.

“I forgot about this thing,” said Thorpe. “Here—take it. I suppose we don’t enter the houses of peaceable citizens, even in California, carrying loaded firearms?”

Cochrane led the horses into the little park which prinked the centre of the enclosure, and the young men ascended the steps.

“I’d give a good deal to know what set him off like that,” said Hastings. “Hitherto he’s been the one thoroughly impassive creature I’ve met in California; has a face about as expressionless as a sentinel on duty.”

He pushed open the door and they entered a large hall lavishly decorated with flowers and flags. Many people were dancing in a room at the right, others were strolling about the hall or seated on the stair. These made way rather ungraciously for the late comers, who went hurriedly up to the dressing-room and regarded themselves in the mirror.

“We’re not dirty, after all,” said the Englishman in a tone of profound relief. He was a tall thin man of thirty or less with a dark face lean enough to show hard ungraceful lines of chin and jaw. The mouth would have been sensual had it been less determined, the grey eyes cold had they been less responsive to humour. Mrs. McLane had told him once that he was the type of man for whom civilization had done most: that an educated will and humour, combined with high breeding, had saved him from slavery to the primal impulses. His voice was harsh in tone but well modulated. He held himself very erectly but without self-consciousness.

Hastings’ legs were his pride, and there were those who averred that they were the pride of the Presidio. His face was fair and round, his eyes were as talkative as his tongue. A past master of the noble art of flirting, no one took him more seriously than he took himself. He spoke with the soft rich brogue of the South; to-day it is hardened by years of command, and his legs are larger, but he is a doughty general, eager as ever for the hot high pulse of battle.

“Come on, Dud,” he said, “time is getting short.”

As they walked down the stair a man who was crossing the hall looked up, smiled charmingly, then paused, awaiting them. He was a small man of dignified presence with a head and face nobly modelled. His skin was faded and worn, it was cut with three or four deep lines, and his hair was turning grey, but his black eyes were brilliant.

“Don’t turn us out, Mr. Randolph,” cried Hastings. “It was not indifference that made us late; it was an ill-timed combination of Tim and rum. This is the English friend you were kind enough to say I could bring,” he added as he reached the hall. “Did I tell you his name?—Thorpe, Dudley Thorpe, of Hampshire. That may interest you. You English are almost as sectional as we are.”

Mr. Randolph had already grasped Thorpe’s hand warmly and was bidding him welcome. “My home was further north—Yorkshire,” he said. “Come into the parlour and meet my wife and daughter.” As they pushed their way through the crowd he “sized up” the stranger with the rapid scrutiny of that period. “You must make yourself at home in my house,” he said abruptly. “There are few English here and I am more glad than I can express to meet you.”

“Ah—thanks!” Thorpe was somewhat taken aback, then remembered that he was in the newest section of the new world. And he had heard of the hospitality of the Californian.

They had entered a large room, canvassed for the evening and denuded of all furniture except the long rows of chairs against the walls. The musicians were resting. Men were fanning girls flushed and panting after the arduous labours of the waltz of that day. At one end of the room were some twenty or thirty older women.

Thorpe looked about him curiously. The women were refined and elegant, many of them with beauty or its approximate; three or four were Spanish,

black-eyed, magnetic with coquetry and grace. The men, even the younger men, had a certain alertness of expression, a cool watchful glance; and they were all gentlemen. This fact impressed Thorpe at once, and as they walked down the long room something he said betrayed his thoughts.

“Yes,” said Mr. Randolph, quickly. “They are all from the upper walks of life—men who thought there would be a better chance for them in the new community than in even the older American ones. And they keep together because, naturally, they are the law-abiding class and responsible for the future of the country. That also accounts for what you find in their faces. This sort of life develops character very quickly. There is another element in California. You will see it—Ah! here is my wife.”

A tall raw-boned woman with weak blue eyes and abundant softly piled hair had arisen from the group of matrons and was advancing toward them. She was handsomely dressed in black velvet, her neck covered with point lace confined under the loose chin by a collar of diamonds.

She looked cold and listless, but spoke pleasantly to the young men.

“We are glad to welcome an Englishman,” she said to Thorpe; and to Hastings: “You are not usually so late, and I have heard a round dozen inquiring for you.”

Thorpe, as he exchanged commonplaces with her, reflected that no woman had ever attracted him less. As he looked into the face he saw that it was cold, evil, and would have appeared coarse but for the hair and quiet elegance of attire. Despite her careful articulation, he detected the broad o and a of the Yorkshire people. The woman was playing the part of a gentlewoman and playing it fairly well. When the thin lips moved apart in an infrequent smile they displayed sharp scattered teeth. The jaw was aggressive. The hands in their well-adjusted gloves were large even for her unusual height. As Thorpe

remarked that he was prepared to admire and enjoy California, one side of her upper lip lifted in an ugly sneer.

“Probably,” she replied coldly. “Most people catch it. It’s like the measles. I wish Jim Randolph liked it less.”

Thorpe, for the first time, experienced a desire to meet Nina Randolph.

Hastings disengaged him. “Come,” he said, “I’ll introduce you to Miss Randolph and one or two others, and then you can look out for yourself. I want to dance. Mrs. McLane is not here. There are the ‘three Macs,’” indicating a trio surrounded by a group of men,—“Miss McDermott, classic and cold; Miss McAllister, languid and slight; Miss McCullum, stocky and matter-of-fact. But it will take you a week to straighten them out. Here—look—what do you think of this?”

Thorpe directed his glance over the shoulders of a knot of men who surrounded a tall Spanish-looking girl with large haughty blue eyes and brown hair untidily arranged. She wore an old black silk frock with muslin bertha. Her face interested Thorpe at once, but in a moment he had much ado to keep from laughing outright. For she spoke never a word. She merely *looked*; taking each eager admirer in turn, and by some mysterious manipulation of eyelash, sweeping a different expression into those profound obedient orbs every time. As she saw Hastings she nodded carelessly, and, when he presented Thorpe, spoke for the first time. She merely said “Good-evening,” but her voice, Spanish, low, sweet—accompanied by a look—made the stranger feel what a blessed thing hospitality was.

“So that is your Miss Hathaway,” he said, as Hastings once more led him onward. “What a pity that such a beautiful girl should be so poor. But she’ll probably marry any one of these incipient millionaires she wants.”

“Poor?” cried Hastings. “Oh, her get-up. She affects to despise dress—or does. God forbid that I should presume to understand what goes on behind those blue masks. Her father is a wealthy and distinguished citizen. Her mother inherited a hundred thousand acres from one of the old grandees. What do you think of her?”

“Her methods are original and entertaining, to say the least. Does she never—converse?”

“When she has something to say; she’s a remarkable woman. That must be Miss Randolph. Her crowd is always the densest.”

As Thorpe was presented to Nina Randolph he forgot that he was a student of heredity. He had never seen so radiant and triumphant a being. She seemed to him, in that first moment, to symbolize the hope and joy and individualism of the New World. Small, like her father, she was perfectly modelled, from her round pulsing throat to the tips of her tiny feet: ignoring the fashion, her yellow gown fitted her figure instead of a hoop-skirt. Her black hair was coiled low on her head, but, although unconfined in a net, did not, like Miss Hathaway’s “waterfall,” suggest having been arranged in the dark. Her black eyes, well set and wide apart, sparkled with mirth. The head was thrown back, the chin uplifted, the large sweet human mouth, parted, showed small even teeth. The eyebrows were heavy, the nose straight and tilted, the complexion ivory-white, luminous, and sufficiently coloured.

As she saw Hastings, she rose at once and motioned her group aside.

“Whatever made you so late?” she exclaimed. “And this is Mr. Thorpe? I am so relieved that you have not been garotted, or blown into the bay. Captain Hastings is always the first to arrive and the last to leave—I was sure something had happened.”

“You look remarkably worried,” murmured Hastings.

“I cannot depress my other guests. They also have their rights.” She gave Thorpe a gracious smile. “I have saved the fifth dance from this for you, and you are also to take me in to supper. Now I must go. *Hasta luego!* Captain Hastings, as it’s all your fault, I shall not give you a dance till after supper.”

She spun down the room in the clasp of an army officer little taller than herself. Thorpe’s eyes followed the fluent pair darting through the mob of dancers with the skill and energy of that time. Miss Randolph’s eyes glittered, her little feet twinkled. She looked the integer of happy youth; and Thorpe turned away with a sigh, feeling old for the moment under the pressure of his large experience of the great world beyond California. He became aware that Hastings was introducing him to several men, and a moment later was guided to the library to have a drink. When he returned, it was time to claim Miss Randolph.

“Do you care to dance?” he asked as he plied her fan awkwardly. “I am rather rusty. To tell the truth, it’s eight years since I last danced, and I never was very keen on it. I should say that I’ve been travelling a lot, and when I’m home I go in for sport rather more than for the social taxes.”

“What a relief to find a man who doesn’t dance! Let us go into the conservatory. Have you been much in America? How is it that you and Captain Hastings are such great friends?”

“He came over when a lad to visit some English relatives whose place adjoins ours, and we hit it off. Since then I have visited him in Louisiana, and we have travelled in Europe together.”

“I suppose he amuses you—you are certainly unlike enough.”

“Not in the least—he’s the prince of good fellows. What a jolly place!”

They had passed through the library and entered the conservatory: a small forest of palms, great ferns, and young orange-trees; brought, Miss Randolph

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