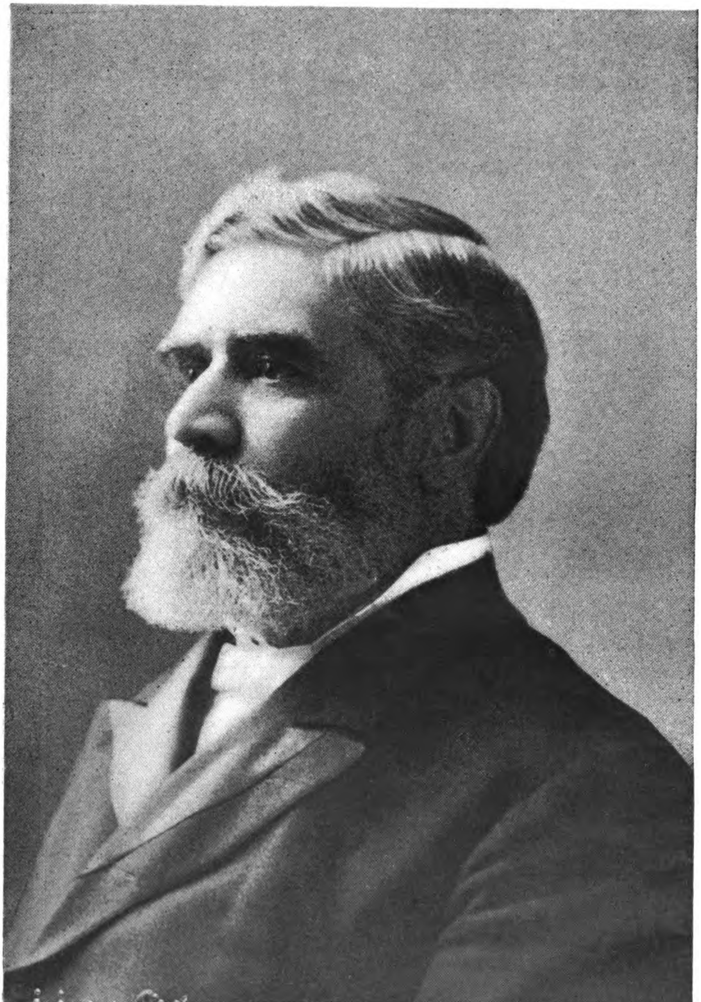

S. D. Woods

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LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF LIFE ON THE PACIFIC COAST

By
S. D. WOODS

FUNK & WAGNALLS COMPANY
NEW YORK AND LONDON
1910

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[Printed in the United States of America]

Published, December, 1910

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

The Hon. Samuel D. Woods, the author of this volume, is one of the first citizens of California. He rose in life through his own resolute efforts; took up the practise of law; was for a long period a member of the Congress of the United States; and has been an actor in all the crowded and picturesque events of the Far West since the Civil War.

Mr. Woods has earned the right to be heard. So now, at the request of his many friends, he is printing the varied and entertaining reminiscences of his long and honorable career.

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DEDICATED

TO

EDWIN MARKHAM

My beloved pupil of long ago—he and I can never forget the little schoolhouse in the sunny Suisun hills, where we together found our lives.

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Chapter XXIII

INCIDENTS OF FRONTIER LIFE

OF course, but few places in California are purely frontier, but there are many remote places where live people with a natural aversion to the centers of life. They love freedom.

During the three years we spent in and about Inyo County, we had many experiences with these simple, kindly people. There was a gravitation toward friendliness, and we had opportunities to render services in many ways to those to whom such services were acceptable, through distress, illness and death. The larger part of the territory covered by Inyo County is a vast domain, traversed by ranges of mountains, long stretches of desert sands, awful wastes, without a single human habitation. It will be more perfectly understood how vast and desperate the larger part of this territory is by a glance at the map, where a superficial view will disclose Death Valley, Pannamint Valley, Saline Valley, and a large part of the Mojave Desert. Masses of volcanic hills and lonely mesas are given over to desolation, cacti and the sagebrush. All of this silence lies to the east and south of the valley of Owens River, which flows

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through its principal fertilized valley, forty-five miles in length.

In this valley, during the time of which we write, living in varying degrees of prosperity and comfort, were the twenty-five hundred people who comprised the registered population, and it was among these that we found the friendships of which we have spoken. The majority of these were law-abiding, and while there were some given to the minor dissipations that somehow seem inevitable to frontier communities, they were free from violence, and while they might be sometimes uncouth, they were never vicious. The ever present public school was planted wherever sufficient children were collected to authorize a claim upon the public treasury. Education was attended to by those competent. Religion was another thing, and, outside of that few of spiritually-minded to be found everywhere, the mass in matters of the spirit went as they pleased. At this time there was, among all of these people, so far as we can now remember, but one minister, and he of the Methodist Church—that great American ecclesiastical pioneer that has during the evolution of the American States cared for the souls of the pioneer as he fought his way to dominion over wilderness and desert. We have penetrated to many forlorn and lonely outposts in the West, but we have never been quite beyond the voice and influence of some devoted member of this church, who acted as the "sky pilot" for the rude and very often desperate absentees from civilization.

The field at that time was too large for the work of this lone pioneer of faith, and the

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sick often went without consolation, the dying without consecration, and the dead were lowered into their eternal resting place without prayer. Men may be in their strength indifferent to religion, may even sneer at the advice of its followers, may suspect churchmen of hypocrisy, but they long for some spiritual word when their beloved are in peril, and the white faces of their dead lie before them. Few are proof against this universal desire, when the dread specter casts its shadow upon their household, and in the desolate hour they cry aloud for some voice to mingle with their lamentations, and we, without profession other than that we believe in the Master, in the mercy of the Father, and in the abundant affection of the Infinite for the finite, were often called to bury their dead and to comfort the living. In these sad offices we were often brought face to face with desperate lives, the pathos of dissolute years, the tragedy of souls that made the heart ache with the terror of it all.

We shall not forget one funeral at which we officiated at Cerro Gordo. Years before, when the town was in the flush of its mining days, a beautiful Irish girl drifted into camp, then a wild, boisterous town, with all the dissipations and sins of such places, where the making of money was the one object, and there was a total absence of moral restraints. The law operated only in a feeble way, to punish crimes that interfered with property or life; minor offenses were regarded as mere peccadillos, to be overlooked. The men who did the work were strong, impulsive animals, through whose veins ran riotous blood. They

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toiled like giants, and reveled after hours with a terrible abandon. If well paid and fed, they faced the daily dangers of the shaft and drift without thought. The present was their existence; no thought of the future disturbed their days or nights. Reckless, they flung defiance to fate and braved with a steady pulse the exigencies of life; wounded or sick, they sought the shelter of the rude Miners' Hospital, and without complaint took the chances of disaster. The saloon and the gambling house were their resorts for pleasure, and in the excitement of drink and chance they found the only outlet for their overabundance of physical strength and passion.

Such was the whirlpool into which this girl was cast. The bloom of the Irish climate was in her cheeks, her eyes were deep and blue as the lakes of her native land, and her light-hearted joyousness was the gift of the race from which she sprang. She was a typical Irish lassie, dainty, alluring and sweet. What chance had she in her environment, what destiny but to fall? And fall she did. The bloom withered, the daintiness faded, the happy heart grew callous. She kept on and on, the victim and plaything of men who could not remember when they had reverence for woman. She became the Queen of the Camp, and ruled in a whirl of revelry. She was known as "The Fenian." So long as her beauty and charm lasted, she found in her life such compensation as is possible to a woman in such an estate. The mines worked out, the camp was deserted, and the rush of active energies, that once made the mountain-top noisy with work and dissipation, yielded to loneli-

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ness and silence. "The Fenian" did not follow the drift. The terrible havoc had robbed her of everything but life, and, a drunken derelict, she stayed on, hopeless, drowning memories of her pure girlhood, even the recollections of wild days, in drink. Here we found her in 1882, one of the dozen or fifteen people whose interests and hopes made them cling to the deserted camp. There was no trace of the ancient beauty, either of face or form; blear-eyed, shrunken, shriveled, she wandered like a ghost where she had once ruled as a queen. She lived on scant charity, and her wants were few, except for whisky, which she drank as the sands drink up a stream. One morning a Portuguese called at our place and said, "The Fenian is dead and we want you to bury her."

We were embarrassed, but remembering that we had always been treated with distinguished consideration by the few people who remained, we said, "Yes, we will do what we can;" and yet we did not know exactly what to do. The poor derelict, however, had been a woman, and in her estate of death had become vested with a new dignity. She was pure again, and under this inspiration we sought for something to say at her grave. We sought out an Episcopal lady, the wife of the receiver of one of the mines, hoping to find a prayer book; she had none, but gave us a Bible, and with this in hand we wrought out a burial service of our own, and just as the sun of a perfect summer day was declining across the valley, over the rim of the snowy Sierras, a little group of sad-faced, real mourners stood about the grave and gave reverent attention to this simple burial.

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Among these mourners were several Mexican women who had been the companions of the dead. The mausoleums of Oriental princes were never more magnificent than the place where we laid the dust from this desperate life. Four thousand feet above the valley, on the slopes of Cerro Gordo, we looked off to Whitney, standing supreme and beautiful in the glory of the setting sun; near its base the face of Owens Lake was taking on the colors of the late afternoon, and the sky arching from the Sierras to the Inyos was soft and sweet with the lights of dying day. This was to be her environment until the resurrection. Who could have a resting place more magnificent?

One of the most beautiful and pathetic human actions we have ever witnessed occurred when we told those in charge that they could fill in the grave. Then the weeping Mexican women, who had been in tears through all the service, lifted their faces toward the heavens, and, crossing themselves, gathered up some of the clods and, with the passion of despair, kissed them, moistened them with their tears, and cast them, thus sanctified, upon the coffin. It was a divine act, for which we felt sympathy and respect, and our own eyes filled with tears. We felt that if any of us were disposed to criticize the handful of dust we were leaving to its eternal rest, we would be competent to do so only if we were without sin; and the Master's great rebuke to the brutal searchers after the life of the woman in Judea, came to us with new appreciation—"Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

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A like service we were called upon to render for a little Jewish mother, who had lost her babe. In her agony she was lifted beyond her faith, and the mother's heart cried out and would not be denied. She could not bear that her beloved should be laid away forever without some voice of consolation. We were twenty miles away, and a courier was sent to us asking if we would help. It was a strange situation, more embarrassing than before, for what could we, a Gentile, say over a Jewish babe that should be inoffensive to the differentiated faith. There comes, however, to the willing heart, in great human exigencies, a way, and turning to Isaiah, Job and David, we soon found a ritual sufficient in beauty of phrase and context to comfort the heart of the suffering mother, laying away her beloved without the services of her own faith. It did comfort the little mother, for with grateful tears she thanked us again and again. Perhaps nothing could have more strongly illustrated the near relations of human beings and the kinship of the religions of Jew and Gentile, than our ability, out of the Old Testament, common to both, to find words of faith, hope and comfort of authority and acceptance. This simple service was to us a liberal education, for often since we have found our way into the synagogue to join in its services and felt in them an uplift to heights where the Jewish prophets, seers and singers, ages ago, illuminated the centuries, as they do now, with a spiritual energy that is among the best gifts to mankind everywhere.

Many times afterwards we performed such sad offices and through them came very near to the hearts

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of many worthy people. We were called also to sick beds to watch with those sick unto death, lonely men who, far away from home, in the desert, were making their last stand against the inevitable. There was something inexpressibly terrible in these sad and desperate sick rooms, and the hardest heart could not avoid a throbbing ache. These were cases where penniless miners were making a hopeless struggle for a few days more of life; men who lay on rude beds in habitations without comfort, looking hour after hour into the face of death. If these awful hours made them afraid, none knew, for no word of dread passed lips slowly losing their power of speech. They were among the heroes, whose courage is unswerving, who, in the silence of their own spirits, held their peace. The battlefields of the world furnish no heroism greater than this.

Two of these cases we recall, that tested our capacity to endure. One was an old Cornish miner, who died at Lone Pine. For years he had worked in the mines, a faithful laborer, earning his daily wages honestly. Age laid its hand upon his energies and the White Plague seized him as a victim. Slowly he drifted toward the eternal shore, homeless and alone. He had been like all of his kind, improvident,—a firm believer in the doctrines: "Take no thought for the morrow, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink;" and "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and in the last extremity was penniless. There is a free-masonry among the miners, an unwritten law, a charity that looks after distrest and disabled members of their craft. This is particularly true of the

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Cornish miner, and so the poor dying fellow had a place where he could fight out the great contest between life and death, and at last died in peace. We all took our turns as watchers, when it became necessary, and for several months rough but kindly hands ministered to all his wants. There was an absence of woman's tender ministrations and sympathy, but we gave him of our best and he was satisfied. When he died, we went out upon the streets of the little town, and in half a day by cheerful contributions raised one hundred and thirty-five dollars for his burial, and we gave him, for that place, a royal interment. Almost the entire population followed his body to the little cemetery, and if the spirits of the dead are conscious still of the things of this life, he must have felt the reverent mood of those who buried him.

The other was a sadder case. One day, at Independence, the keeper of a little hotel came to us and said, "There is a young man at my place very sick, and some one ought to see him." We went immediately with him, and as we entered the room saw a splendid specimen of a young American, who in health would have been a giant. He was a stranger who had come to town a day or so before—from where he did not say. His name he did not give; he was indeed a "stranger in a strange land." As we looked at him, we saw that he was *in extremis*. Already he was beyond speech. The failing heart was giving to his cheek and brow an unearthly pallor, and out of his eyes was swiftly fading the light. One effort to hold on to life, and he was dead. Could anything have been more terribly pathetic—a strong man dy-

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ing, alone, unknown, in the very springtime of his life. Somewhere, it may be until now, some loving soul of a woman—mother, wife, or sweetheart, waits in vain for his return. These desperate chances of life and death are to be counted among the terrors of the frontier; the "Potter's Field" here holds many unknown dead.

There were other events that made our stay in the county at times exciting,—one particularly. At one of the towns in the valley there lived a sweet girl of sixteen. Her father, then dead, had been an American, her mother a Mexican. She lived with her mother, who, from subsequent events, proved unworthy of her care. She was a dainty, alluring little damsel, of great sweetness of disposition, beloved by old and young alike, for she was happy-hearted, winning and attractive. A vicious vagabond Mexican, frequenter of saloons and houses of unclean fame, concocted a scheme with the mother to take the girl to Los Angeles and place her in a dance-house. Early one morning, a couple of excited, trembling little lasses called upon us at the hotel and with tears said, "They are stealing Lolita and are taking her to Los Angeles; what can you do?" We comforted them and told them we would bring her back. As we went out upon the street, we found the whole town in a ferment. We quietly spoke to a few of the leading citizens and undertook the task of finding and bringing the girl back to her friends. We knew a determined man in town, to whom such a task would be more than welcome.

We sent for him and asked how soon he could

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find three men like himself for a swift trip and possibly a gun-fight, telling him the facts, and that the fleeing party were well along by that time on their way across the Mojave Desert, toward Los Angeles. He said he would be ready in an hour, and before that time four resolute men, heavily armed and riding animals fit for such an undertaking, rode up. We said to them, "We do not know how many there are in the fleeing party, or how desperate, and you may have a fight, but bring the girl back, and drive the balance of the party out of the county." A significant smile and a nod was the answer, and four determined men on a holy mission were riding like the wind toward Los Angeles. The people watched sleepless during the night, and until noon the next day, and then the suspense became painful as the hours of the afternoon slowly waned toward sunset.

Just as the top of Whitney began to redden in the glow of sunset, down the road we saw a cloud of dust; excited people filled the street and waited. Soon four horsemen rode into view, and to the straining eyes there was the flutter of a woman's dress. The tension of thirty-six anxious hours was over, and while men shouted their joy, women clung to each other and wept. Up the little street rode the four dusty horsemen with Lolita. It was a happy little village, for its best beloved had been rescued from the jaws of hell. The daring riders, like all such, for "the bravest are the tenderest," blushed as women blessed them for their work.

The report of the leader was that they rode without a moment's rest until they came upon the fleeing party

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some sixty miles away, in the Mojave Desert. Without more ado they demanded the girl. She, wild with joy, rushed to her rescuers. The vision of four determined men, with their guns at their saddle horns, overawed the cowardly abductors, and they offered no resistance. The rescuers mounted the girl on the extra horse they had brought and, warning the cowards to keep on to Los Angeles, rested a while and then turned their horses and were soon on their return.

At once on the arrival of the girl, we sought out a near relative and gave him a letter to the District Attorney at Independence and sent him speeding away. Upon receipt of the letter, the District Attorney made immediate application for the appointment of the relative as her guardian, which in due time was granted, and this incident was closed with the salvation of the beautiful child. There was no sadness in this incident; it was all joy.

In the barroom of a little hotel one night, when the wind, below zero, was blowing a gale from the icy peaks of the Sierras, we all crowded about the stove. Besides ourselves, there were half a dozen rude miners and a woman,—and such a woman! A creature hardly clean enough to live in a sewer, a drunken, vile-mouthed, debauched, semblance of womanhood, who had wallowed in slime until she was the vilest of the vile. She had wandered for years about the country, a bird of prey, laying her foul talons upon whatever victim came her way. At the moment of which we write, she had crowded her way to the stove, and blinking out of her bleared eyes, was smoking a cigar.

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In such a crowd the topics of conversation are not always the cleanest, and we were often compelled to leave them. There was no place to go to at this moment, for the little barroom was a place of shelter from the storm.

Some of the men, perhaps impelled by the presence of the woman, were prompted to tell stories hardly as white as snow. At last we said, "We think you gentlemen have forgotten something." It was always in that country an imperative custom to call everybody "gentlemen." One of them looked up in surprise and said, "What have we forgotten?" And we replied, "That there is a lady present." A rude laugh broke out, and one said with an oath, "Well, that's a joke." The woman, with a strange, pathetic, grateful look, glanced at us a moment, and then at the others, with scorn, and without a word got up and went out. She was gone for quite a while, and realizing that no human being could long survive the terrible cold of such a night, we felt an impulse to go out and look after her. We found her leaning against the corner of the hotel, where the wind was beating upon her with a deadly chill. She was crying as if her heart would break, sobbing as a child sobs with a broken in-suck when it has exhausted its capacity to cry.

I said to her, "What's the matter?" She said, "You know what's the matter." I said, "No, I don't know what's the matter," and in a real woman's voice, out of which had died all that was coarse and vile, with the voice of one who had once known of sweet things, she said, "You called me a lady." I

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said to her that that was all right, but that she must come in to the stove or otherwise she would freeze to death. She came in with the marks of tears still on her shrunken cheek, and sat down. She was usually noisy, boisterous and obtrusive, but for more than an hour she sat a silent, absorbed creature. Her mood affected the rude men, and no more offensive talk was heard. We often wondered what memories of the past were awakened, what pictures of herself, a happy, unsoiled child, nourished by a mother's care and love, what visions of her girlhood when she laughed and danced in the beauty of a sinless life. Is there a more terrible shape in the universe than a depraved woman? Surely, except that her very faculty to think is dulled, there must be times when she will shriek aloud to the heavens the story of her degradation.

It has been a comforting theory of ours that there is a divinity in human lives, which can be reached. It may lie buried beneath the debris of vicious years, but down deep somewhere the white light burns. Is not this the explanation of heroic acts performed in great exigencies by some whose depravity we have regarded as beyond repair—some sudden exhibition of gentleness in the brutal—the almost universal generosity to the suffering by unholy women? Who knows? Was the divine in this poor wretch touched by a single kind word, and did she for the moment become clean? Who knows? We do know that she was grateful, for while we never spoke to her again, we saw her often watching us, as we walked the street, following us with pathetic eyes, as if we were to her a vision of something that was more than human.

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If we only knew the winning power of a gentle word to such as these, would we so often pass them with cruel scorn?

From out the waste places, when we left them forever, we brought with us memories of things such as we have written, human things that "make the whole world kin," and we have often, as we have recalled them, felt that the exterior boundaries of our life were widened by its intimate touch with even lives desperate and hopeless; we were taught also much of the patient endurance and heroism of lowly lives.

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