

# **A WARD OF THE GOLDEN GATE**

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A Ward of the Golden Gate by Bret Harte

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the wooden sidewalks of Clay and Montgomery streets were mere floating bridges or buoyant pontoons superposed on elastic bogs; Battery Street was the Silurian beach of that early period on which tin cans, packing-boxes, freight, household furniture, and even the runaway crews of deserted ships had been cast away. There were dangerous and unknown depths in Montgomery Street and on the Plaza, and the wheels of a passing carriage hopelessly mired had to be lifted by the volunteer hands of a half dozen high-booted wayfarers, whose wearers were sufficiently content to believe that a woman, a child, or an invalid was behind its closed windows, without troubling themselves or the occupant by looking through the glass.

It was a carriage that, thus released, eventually drew up before the superior public edifice known as the City Hall. From it a woman, closely veiled, alighted, and quickly entered the building. A few passers-by turned to look at her, partly from the rarity of the female figure at that period, and partly from the greater rarity of its being well formed and even ladylike.

As she kept her way along the corridor

and ascended an iron staircase, she was passed by others more preoccupied in business at the various public offices. One of these visitors, however, stopped as if struck by some fancied resemblance in her appearance, turned, and followed her. But when she halted before a door marked "Mayor's Office," he paused also, and, with a look of half humorous bewilderment and a slight glance around him as if seeking for some one to whom to impart his arch fancy, he turned away. The woman then entered a large anteroom with a certain quick feminine gesture of relief, and, finding it empty of other callers, summoned the porter, and asked him some question in a voice so suppressed by the official severity of the apartment as to be hardly audible. The attendant replied by entering another room marked "Mayor's Secretary," and reappeared with a stripling of seventeen or eighteen, whose singularly bright eyes were all that was youthful in his composed features. After a slight scrutiny of the woman — half boyish, half official — he desired her to be seated, with a certain exaggerated gravity as if he was over-acting a grown-up part, and, taking a card from her, reentered his



office. Here, however, he did *not* stand on his head or call out a confederate youth from a closet, as the woman might have expected. To the left was a green baize door, outlined with brass-studded rivets like a cheerful coffin-lid, and bearing the mortuary inscription, "Private." This he pushed open, and entered the Mayor's private office.

The municipal dignitary of San Francisco, although an erect, soldier-like man of strong middle age, was seated with his official chair tilted back against the wall and kept in position by his feet on the rungs of another, which in turn acted as a support for a second man, who was seated a few feet from him in an easy-chair. Both were lazily smoking.

The Mayor took the card from his secretary, glanced at it, said "Hullo!" and handed it to his companion, who read aloud "Kate Howard," and gave a prolonged whistle.

"Where is she?" asked the Mayor.

"In the anteroom, sir."

"Any one else there?"

"No, sir."

"Did you say I was engaged?"

"Yes, sir ; but it appears she asked Sam who was with you, and when he told her, she said, All right, she wanted to see Colonel Pendleton too."

The men glanced interrogatively at each other, but Colonel Pendleton, abruptly anticipating the Mayor's functions, said, "Have her in," and settled himself back in his chair.

A moment later the door opened, and the stranger appeared. As she closed the door behind her she removed her heavy veil, and displayed the face of a very handsome woman of past thirty. It is only necessary to add that it was a face known to the two men, and all San Francisco.

"Well, Kate," said the Mayor, motioning to a chair, but without rising or changing his attitude. "Here I am, and here is Colonel Pendleton, and these are office hours. What can we do for you?"

If he had received her with magisterial formality, or even politely, she would have been embarrassed, in spite of a certain boldness of her dark eyes and an ever present consciousness of her power. It is possible that his own ease and that of his companion was part of their instinctive good nature and

perception. She accepted it as such, took the chair familiarly, and seated herself sideways upon it, her right arm half encircling its back and hanging over it; altogether an easy and not ungraceful pose.

"Thank you, Jack — I mean, Mr. Mayor — and you, too, Harry. I came on business. I want you two men to act as guardians for my little daughter."

"Your what?" asked the two men simultaneously.

"My daughter," she repeated, with a short laugh, which, however, ended with a note of defiance. "Of course you don't know. Well," she added half aggressively, and yet with the air of hurrying over a compromising and inexplicable weakness, "the long and short of it is I've got a little girl down at the Convent of Santa Clara, and have had — there! I've been taking care of her — *good* care, too, boys — for some time. And now I want to put things square for her for the future. See? I want to make over to her all my property — it's nigh on to seventy-five thousand dollars, for Bob Snelling put me up to getting those water lots a year ago — and, you see, I'll have to have regular guardians, trustees, or