



THE WEDDING RING.

By ROBERT BUCHANAN.

Author of "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD," "GOD AND THE MAN," "STORMY WATERS," ETC., ETC.,

(Exclusive rights for Canada purchased by the DOMINION ILLUSTRATED.)

"I wish I had something as pretty to take care of every journey," said Kansas, with the air of a man who meant it, and Spartan, in his sense of duty, waved his hat and drove away with the empty coach, as the cavalcade, headed by the bride and bridegroom, set out at a gentle gallop for Jacob's Flat.

CHAPTER XV.

AT JACOB'S FLAT.

For a year after his wedding Jake Owen was as happy a man as the most enthusiastic of the crowd of celibate women worshippers among whom he lived could have believed him to be. The district was one of the richest within a few days' ride of San Francisco, and Jacob's Flat was one of the luckiest camps in California, but Jake's good fortune was so singular as to cause him to be known to everybody as "Happy Jake." His luck became legendary; it was averred of him he had only to stick his spade into the ground to make gold, however unlikely the spot might be.

Nobody grudged him his good fortune, though it was only human nature to envy it, for Jake was emphatically what his comrades called him, "a white man," with a sturdy English honesty of character supplemented by much kindly shrewdness learned in his travels, and by a native happiness of temperament and generosity of heart. His popularity doubled with the arrival of his wife, and the "Duchess," as she was called with affectionate pride, had every reason to be as happy as her husband.

Whatever rude luxuries were possible in so wild a place were here. Jake's cabin windows were

beautified with coloured hangings. Its earthen floor was concealed by a carpet of the gaudiest procurable pattern, and Jake, in the full flower of his honeymoon happiness, had gone the length of procuring a piano from San Francisco. The circumstance that neither Jess herself nor any other person in the camp knew a note of music, detracted no wise from the satisfaction of Jake and his comrades in the possession of the instrument. The piano was a splendid fact, a fitting background to the beauty and distinction of "the Duchess." There was no piano in Dutch Gulch, which one-horse community persisted in an attempt, which might have seemed almost profane had it not been so hopelessly absurd, to proclaim its equality with the Flat.

It befell, upon a certain hot and dusty summer evening, that Jake Owen, returning from a distant town on the hill-side, came, at the outskirts of the camp, upon a man lying on the wayside under a tuft of azalea blossom.

Jake's first impression was that the man was intoxicated, his second was that he was dead. He lay with his arms broadcast and his open eyes staring at the sky, and the breast of his shirt was caked with stiffened blood.

Closer examination, however, disclosed that he was still alive. Jake poured the remnant of the whiskey left in his flask down his throat, and, as the man gave signs of returning consciousness, he propped him against the bank at the roadside, ran to the saloon and pressed into his service a couple of men drinking there, who, provided with a broad plank, bore the sufferer to Jake's cabin.

There was no qualified doctor in the place, but several of its inhabitants had some rough notion of surgery, and it was evident to the little knot of men who gathered in Jake's sitting-room that the wounded sufferer was in a very critical condition.

"A darned ugly cut," said one critic. "The knife slid off the rib, you see. He's lost a sight of blood. Say, what'r ye goin' to do with him, Jake?"

"Keep him till he's better," said Jake. "Eh, Jess? Why lass," he exclaimed, seeing her look a little doubtfully at the sufferer, "ye wouldn't have us throw him out on the road again? Do as ye'd be done by. It might be my turn to-morrow."

"He must be taken care of, of course," said Jess.

"He'll want nussing, too," continued Jake, "and you're the only woman in the camp; we're the best able to afford it, too, thank God!"

The girl's not very strong opposition to her husband's proposal was easily understood, for the wounded man was a ghastly object. He had smeared his face with his own blood, and the red dust of the road had caked upon the stain. His hair was wild, his cheeks rough with a week's unshaven beard, his clothes foul with blood and mire.

They got him to bed and dressed the wound with the best rough skill at hand. It was not intrinsically serious, a large flesh wound, rendered dangerous by effusion of blood. When the stains had been washed from the sufferer's face an instantaneous change of opinion regarding him took place in Jess's mind. He was a distinctly handsome fellow, of a species of male beauty not common in the Flat. His features were finely cut and delicate, his hands soft as a woman's, his hair abundant, and wavy and silky as Jess' own.

"A gentleman, I should think," said Jake, "English, too."

It was a day or two before the wounded man recovered consciousness, and a longer time still before he could give any coherent account of himself.