

The money was soon collected, some enthusiasts even doubling and trebling the amount demanded from each individual, and then, with much solemnity and amid a hush of expectation, Jake's partner drew out from his bosom a small packet wrapped up carefully in brown paper, took off the paper with great deliberation, and exposed to view a somewhat dingy coloured photograph, which he handed to his next neighbour, enjoining him at the same time to handle it very carefully and to limit his possession of it to the space of half a minute.

Thus the picture was passed round from hand to hand, excited spectators crowding eagerly round each man as he took his turn, and uttering cries of critical admiration.

"Purty deat!"

"She's yaller 'air, like my own sister Eliza!"

"Taint yaller neither—it's brown!"

"She's a-smiling!"

"Jake was allays lucky!"

"There gloves on her 'ands, and they'd 'bout fit my thumbs!"

"I reckon she ain't more'n eighteen!"

"I'd give a million dollafs for a wife like that!"

And so on, and so on; till the photograph reached a dirty bleary-eyed man far gone in intoxication, who, instead of adopting the decorous manner of his companions, uttered a drunken croak and *kissed* the picture. Dire was the tumult evoked by that act of outrage. Shrieks and oaths arose, and before he could realize what had occurred, the offender was kicked from group to group and shot out through the open door into the drift without, where he lay like a log. Meantime, Prairie Bill had snatched the photograph away, and striding back to Jake's partner handed it back with these words;

"Jest you put up that pictur agin, Jim Collier! Taint fair to Jake Owen ter make his wife a show like that!"

A sentiment which elicited a cheer of approval from the majority of the company.

Jim nodded, and with one respectful glance at the photograph wrapped it up again and concealed it in his bosom. Then striding back to the bar, Prairie Bill demanded a glass of spirits, and drained it off to the health of "Jake's wife."

The excitement awakened by the mere sight of a woman's photograph may be better understood when we explain that every man in Jacob's Flat was a bachelor, and that, beyond one or two wretched squaws who hung around the place, women, whether fair or plain, were almost utterly unknown.

Men had been known to ride a hundred miles across country to catch a glimpse of a female passing in the stage coach, and when an emigrant wagon containing members of the softer sex was heralded as about to cross the plains anywhere within reach the rough fellows of Jacob's Flat would strike work and gallop over to the nearest halting place to await the passers-by.

To those rough fellows a woman or a child was something far off, mysterious, and consequently almost sacred.

So when the news first went round that Jake Owen, one of their number, was going to 'Frisco to meet a young Englishwoman who had come out all the way from the old country on purpose to marry him, the excitement was tremendous. Although there was a general opinion in that region that Jacob's Flat was hardly the place to bring a lady to, Jake's "luck" was the universal theme of conversation. And when, some weeks after Jake's departure, his partner received the photograph with an intimation that "Mr. and Mrs. Owen" were speedily returning home, the local excitement rose to fever heat.

For if every white woman was a paragon of the members of this colony of bachelors this particular white woman seemed a positive goddess—with soft, child-like face, gentle eyes, little hands, and the dress of a downright little lady. Jacob's Flat was not a moral place, its inhabitants were violent and often murderous in their habits, but honesty of a sort was at a premium, and the ethics of society postulated of necessity a certain standard of purity. Had the original of the picture appeared there alone and unfriended, she would have found her-

self as safe and as respected as a lady in her own drawing-room; for though one or two hopeless desperadoes might have looked upon her with evil eyes, the whole spirit of the community would have been certain to protect her. Offers of marriage, of course, she would have had by the hundred, but beyond that necessary homage to female beauty, no citizen would have had the temerity to presume.

At early daybreak the following morning Jacob's Flat was almost deserted, but on the banks of a narrow river, fifty miles away, Prairie Bill and his companions sat waiting and expectant.

"This is bloomin' slow," said Simpson, the cockney. "It's light enough now to see the pips by. Let's 'ave a flutter, eh, boys?"

"Flutter be —!" said Prairie Bill, to whom the suggestion was more directly addressed, "let's ride along and meet the wagon."

This suggestion meeting with more favour, the whole cavalcade was soon in motion, riding in loose order along the faint lines left in the deep grass by the last passage of the coach a fortnight before.

Simpson, one of the many accredited humourists of the little community, looking about him at his companions under the slowly broadening light, remarked on the unwontedly spruce appearance they presented.

"I begin to think as I'm in Pall Mall. There's Chicago Charley. Look at him! I'm blowed if he hain't washed hisself."

"I'll wash *you*," said the individual thus rendered remarkable, "in the creek, if I get much more of your chin music."

"An' Bill, too," continued Simpson, ignoring the threat; "he's combed 'is 'air. Sure you've got the partin' straight, old pal?"

"Shut your head!" growled Bill; and Simpson obeyed, seeing in the stolidly expectant faces of the party that his cheerful impertinences were for once out of place.

The party rode in silence save for the muffled beat of their horses' hoofs in the grass and the creaking of their saddles, till Simpson began to whistle the Wedding March. The air was perhaps unrecognized, at all events nobody joined in it, and the discomfited humourist stopped midway through it with a forlorn grin, lit his pipe, and rode on as silent as the rest.

"There she comes!" cried the foremost horseman—a long, loose, saturnine Yankee, who had once been a harpooner on an American whaler. He rose in his stirrups, pointing with a forefinger straight ahead. A dim speck was visible on the horizon beyond the undulating billows of grass.

"Come along, boys," cried Bill, clapping spurs to his horse, and the whole crowd started at a brisk gallop with a ringing cheer.

The dim speck grew every moment in distinctness as they flew towards it, till it grew recognizable to sight less keen than that of the old whaler as the St. Louis express.

"That's Kansas, drivin'," he said to Bill, who rode abreast of him. "They'll be aboard of her, I reckon. See his rosette? And the horses have got streamers on."

These and kindred remarks passed from mouth to mouth as the distance between the galloping crowd of horsemen and the approaching coach grew less.

"Let's give 'em a salute," suggested Simpson, and a sudden crackle of revolver shots resounded over the muffled beat of hoofs. Kansas waved his long whip, and rose in his seat, lashing his horses to a faster gallop, and the last half mile was covered at racing pace.

The band of horsemen formed about the coach like a breaking wave around a boulder, yelling and whooping like a crowd of fiends, and blazing away with their revolvers. A man's head and shoulders emerged from the window, and in the interior a glimpse was visible of a pale and terrified female face.

"Dry up," roared Bill. "Ye pack of howling fools! Ye'll skeer the soul out of her!"

A sudden silence fell upon the party, broken by a tuneful ringing cheer, led by Simpson with a shrill "Ip, ip, 'ooray!" and a dozen hands were thrust

out to seize that of the male traveller.

"I took ye for a gang of prairie ruffians," said the latter, with a strong provincial English accent. "Ye frightened the little woman. It's all right, lass," he continued. "It's the boys from the camp, come over to give us a welcome, bless their hearts."

He sank back in his seat and gently pushed his bride to the window.

She looked out, with the pallor of her recent fear still on her cheeks—a frank, delicate face, which made the photograph the men had admired on the night before seem a clumsy libel on her living beauty. Every man in the crowd drew a deep breath as she ran her still half-frightened glance along their bronzed and bearded faces. They returned the gaze with ardent eyes, sitting like statues about the arrested vehicle, staring at this wonder of womanhood dropped from the skies to share their rough lives.

"God bless you, my beauty, and welcome to the Flat," cried an unmistakably English voice, and amid another cheer the coach started again. The girl's face, which had flushed rosily at the words, paled again at a stray shot of rejoicing from some ardent spirit, who was immediately knocked out of his saddle by a neighbour and sharply anathematized by his companions.

Coach and escort moved forward at a moderate pace, keeping time to a song started by a Spaniard in the van, a gravely joyful measure, sung in a rough but melodious voice, which lasted until the halting place of the cab was reached. Here Jake opened the coach door, and springing to the ground, assisted his wife to descend.

The men dismounted from their horses, and formed a circle about the couple. The girl was quite self-possessed now, and when Jake took her hand and led her a step forward, smiled brightly in answer to the cheer which greeted her.

"These are my friends, Jess, and you must make 'em yours," said Jake. "Good friends they've been to me, through fair and foul."

She put out her little gloved hand to Prairie Bill, who blushed redder than she as he took it, and after wringing it with unnecessary force, dropped it and looked a trifle foolish. There was no man in the crowd who did not envy him, but no other claimed the honour thus bestowed.

"I'm very glad to meet you all," said Jess, "and I'm very thankful for your kindness to Jake—to my husband."

The voice was sweet, and only one or two in the crowd could recognize that its accent was almost as strong as Jake's. But she might have been far less pretty than she was in face and speech, her femininity and her youth were as a strangely potent wine to ensure the worshipping affection of every man in the party.

"Talk o' that gal at Dutch Gulch, as Poker Sam married last year!" said Prairie Bill to Simpson. "Reckon we lay over the Gulch this deal. We've got a lady."

Not one among them had any touch of mean envy of his companion's luck.

"A reg'lar daisy, and no error," said Simpson. "I 'ope the lady can ride, matey," he continued to Jake, "we've bought a little 'oss for her—our weddin' present. She's a nice little thing, and as quiet as a lamb, ma'am." The others looked with awe and respect at Simpson, entering thus easily into converse with this radiant goddess.

"Ride!" cried Jake proudly, "she can ride nigh on a'most anything. Country bred, she is. My county, Essex."

Jess clapped her hands delightedly at sight of the horse, a pretty little beast of mustang strain, gorgeously caparisoned in scarlet Mexican leather.

"I don't know what to say," she cried, "it's too beautiful. Thank you. Thank you all, ever so much."

"Give her a lift, Simpson," said Jake with the air of Jove distributing favour to mortals, and the blushing Cockney stooped to the little foot and lifted the bride to her saddle amid another cheer. Jess shook hands with Kansas, and thanked him sweetly for the care he had taken of her during the long ride from Frisco.

(To be Continued.)