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a month's start for California—an' she'd be the first person to meet you when you got thar. She's a wonderful woman, Ikey; you orter be proud of her—dum proud."

He flung his arm round Ikey's neck in a careless, haphazard kind of way. Ikey gripped and held it hard.

"When you've quite done pawin' me about," Old Man presently resumed, in his customary cheerful manner—"When you've quite done makin' a partikler fool of yourself, Mr. Isaac Marston, I'll trouble you to have the kindness to bring round that thar mule, an' help me load up. I'll be back agin in a year or two."

Without a word, Ikey walked, as if in a dream, towards the door, went round to the shanty at the back, and presently returned with the mule.

Old Man sprang lightly into the saddle. "You pesky idgeot, what are you a-howlin' about?" he asked, affecting to busy himself with the reins.

Ikey suddenly reached up, caught Old Man in his arms, and gave him a convulsive hug.

The mule slowly started off as if reluctant to depart.