

Then, at long intervals, for he was weak from loss of blood, he told him his story.

He was an Englishman, as Jake had surmised. His name was Philip Mordaunt. He had been travelling in America for some years, painting, hunting on the prairies, and recently, more for love of adventure than for need of money, as he hinted rather than said, had been digging. He had made a little pile at Empire Camp, and had started on horseback for 'Frisco with his partner, also an Englishman. Some twelve hours before Jake had found him the partner had treacherously stabbed him, rifled his body of all his possessions, and ridden off with the horses. He had crawled with great difficulty to the spot where he had been discovered, and there had finally lost consciousness.

"I should have died but for you," he said, pressing Jake's hand with his delicate and feeble fingers. "How can I ever repay you. I haven't a penny in the world."

"Pay me!" answered Jake, "who talks about payment, sir? You pull round, that's what you've got to do, and we'll talk about payment later on. We're rough folks, sir, but we're proud to be able to serve a gentleman in misfortune—and from the old country, too. That we are," said Jake, heartily.

It was Jack that Mordaunt thanked with his lips, but he kept his eyes on Jess' face. Fine eyes they were—dark, lustrous, and the more interesting to a woman from the deep humidity with which weakness and suffering had filled them.

When once Mordaunt had definitely turned the corner of his illness, it was not long before he was sufficiently convalescent to leave his bed. The denizens of the Flat were a roughish lot, but they were not without their sympathies, and Jess' patient became a favourite with them, many preferring to come to the cabin in the evening to take a quiet smoke and drink with him and his host, to passing the evening at the bar. Mordaunt was hail-fellow-well-met with all who came, accepting the deference they paid him as his due, but friendly and familiar with them.

It was reckoned as another specimen of Jake Owen's wonderful luck that he should have had the privilege of finding such a guest. He was a delightful companion, full of stories of travel, jokes and repartee.

One night, towards the end of his convalescence, Jess told Jake that morning that she had found him playing on her piano. A universal demand for music followed this revelation, and Mordaunt, nothing loth, played a score of airs for them, good old simple home tunes they had not heard for years, and sang, in a rather weak voice, "Tom Bowling" and "Annie Laurie."

Affectionately interested already, the camp acclaimed him that night as its king and hero. The musical evenings became a feature, and drew so splendidly that Pat McClosky, the bar-keeper, after declaring that it was no longer any use in keeping a saloon to which nobody came, and seriously entertaining thoughts of going elsewhere to make his livelihood, hit on the magnificent idea of offering Mordaunt two hundred dollars a week and his liquor to play nightly at his establishment. Mordaunt cemented the admiration of the camp by refusing the offer.

"I play to please my friends," he said, "not to make money."

The camp swore by him, and swore at McClosky copiously and in many languages. Pete Durgan, the half-witted, half-breed fiddler came to the camp on his round, and when it was found that Mordaunt could play as brilliantly on his instrument as on the piano, there was no reserve stock of enthusiasm left to draw upon.

Mordaunt's recovery became complete, but there was no hint of his leaving Jake Owen's shanty. Indeed, so far from anything of the kind being mooted, Jake had, with his own hands, in the intervals of necessary labour, built out an additional room to his shanty, and furnished it even more gorgeously than his own parlour, for the accommodation of his honoured guest. Mordaunt repaid his hospitality by teaching Jess how to play the piano, in which art she made astonishing progress under his skillful tutelage, and by painting a portrait of her which

the simple digger and his chums looked at as the most wonderful effort of white magic in their experience. His only other occupations were to lounge about the camp and the bar, to play poker and euchre, at which games he was proficient, and to write letters for illiterate "pikes" with friends and relations in other parts of the world.

Now, a camp of diggers is not the kind of community which shines in morals when contrasted with a well-regulated convent or a boarding school, and Jacob's Flat was not on a higher kind in such matters than other places of like nature. But almost every conceivable set of social conditions results in its own peculiar scheme of morality, and in one or two particulars a man who knew the world would have found the crowd among which Jake Owen and his wife passed their lives a curiously simple and Arcadian people.

They were habitual devotees of the whisky bottle, and spasmodically addicted to the use of the knife and pistol. They were always more or less coarse, and often profane in their language, their play at poker and other games they loved was often more remarkable for skill than for strict probity. There were men among them who would have been shy of entering any civilized city, even San Francisco, which at that date was not an oppressively moral community, and who would have been shot at sight or judicially hanged in the eastern cities. They were a rude and desperate lot, but with all allowance for their less amiable side, they had their virtues.

Like desperate men in general, they had a high ideal of personal friendship, and a detestation of anything resembling treachery. A friend, to them, was a man in whose hands a man might trust his possessions and his life, with a sense of absolute security.

As regarded women, they were not, perhaps, much more logical in their views than the rest of the world. In towns, and cities, where women are plenty, they had as little sentimental regard for feminine purity as any Parisian *boulevardier*, and their vices lacked the saving civilizing grace. But in the camp, where the fairer half of the community was represented by one woman, they clothed her, half unconsciously, with every attribute of sacredness.

She would have been safe from all but blunt and honourable courtship had she been alone among them. But she was a chum's wife, and the lowest blackguard of the crowd would have been ashamed of harbouring a thought against her happiness; she was something apart from and above them, she breathed a finer air, seemed to be of another order.

So that Mordaunt's constant presence in Jake's house, his continual association with his friend's wife, the intimacy he never tried to conceal, which would in another kind of community have excited suspicion and remark, and would have stamped the simple Jake either as a fool or as a too complaisant husband, seemed the most natural and innocent business to the simple-minded crew of desperadoes. Mordaunt owed his life to Jake, the clothes he wore, the food he ate. Their almost superstitious reverence for the only pure woman many of them had known since childhood, the high value their dangerous lives had taught them to put on comradeship and gratitude, and Mordaunt's open bearing and universal friendliness of manner kept them from any such suspicion as people of infinitely more reputable life than theirs would have jumped at without hesitation.

The halcyon dream of happy Jake's life was doomed to be rudely broken. The simple, honest, heart had no skill to read the sign of the coming disaster, which grew so plain to him in later days.

It was the old sad story, so often told, which we may allow to pass as an episode in this chronicle without long dwelling on its details—the story of the dull, loving husband whose affection has grown stale and common-place to the poor, silly woman who has won it, of the smooth, polished man of the world, gradually weaning her heart from the accustomed round of daily duties with which it has grown content.

Jess was as innocent a little creature as drew breath, not in the least wicked, only weak and fatally fond of admiration. The handsome, glib,

clever stranger, had trapped wiser women than she in his time, and at every turn he contrasted with Jake and the rough crowd about him. To the ignorant little woman his manners seemed those of a royal prince, his knowledge and his accomplishments prodigious and superhuman.

She felt the fascination growing, and did her feeble best to fight against it. Jake remembered after, how pathetically she had clung to him, how, in a thousand ways, her apparent love for him had gone on strengthening almost to the dreadful hour when he had learned her sin.

The discovery had come suddenly. Jake returned home one night to find the cabin empty. There was nothing in that to excite his suspicions, it had happened a score of times before that Jess and Mordaunt had gone out riding or walking together, and had let the meal time slip by.

He cooked his own modest supper, ate it with a good appetite, and dozed peaceably over his pipe and a week-old copy of a 'Frisco newspaper.

He grew uneasy with the passage of time, and towards midnight strolled out to the saloon to learn what news he might of the missing couple.

Nothing had been seen of either since noon, when they had started for a ride together.

Next morning news came. They had been seen at nightfall forty miles from the camp. The meaning of that was clear even to the simplest mind.

CHAPTER XVI—THE PURSUIT.

The wretched man on whom this heavy blow had fallen like lightning from a summer sky was, as is usual in such cases, the last to hear the dreadful news.

It came to him in a fashion characteristic of the time and place. He was sitting alone in his cabin, devoured with curiosity regarding his wife and friend, racking his brain to discover some admissible reason for their absence, some method of assuring himself of their safety, without a shadow of suspicion of the terrible truth, when a distant heat of horses' hoofs came to his ears, and a minute later a score of men galloped up to the cabin, drew bridle, and entered.

They ranged themselves in front of him as he stared at them, and for a full minute there was a silence broken only by the pawing of the horses outside and the occasional shuffle of a boot upon the floor.

"Well, boys?" said Jake, at last, in a tone of question.

There was another interval of silence, and Simpson elbowed Prairie Bill to the front.

"You speak," he said.

Bill cleared his throat with unnecessary loudness, fidgeted uneasily with the breast of his shirt, stooped and wiped a splash of red mud from his boot with his forefinger, and finally said:

"We've bad news, Jake."

"News," said Jake. "Of Jess—Mordaunt?"

Bill nodded with a sudden grimness of face.

"What about em? Where are they?"

There was another silence and then Bill spoke again.

"They were seen last night at eight o'clock, together, just along by Pete's Pocket."

Jake's look was one of pure relief and expectation.

"Thank God their alive, anyhow," he said.

A man in the back-ground broke into a hoarse, short laugh.

"I'm glad you've got something to laugh at," said Jake. "What's the joke? Don't keep it all to yourself."

The men looked at each other as if in doubt if this unsuspecting ignorance could be real.

"Has anything happened, anything bad?" he continued. "I've often told Jess that she shouldn't get too far from home. It's a rough place, and there's a good many bad characters about, as might hurt even her. But Mordaunt was with her. Is it him? Has anything come to him? He'd stand by her, I know."

Simpson uttered a sort of groan. Jake's face turned in his direction, with a sudden pallor and wonder on it, and then he looked to Prairie Bill. The burly ruffian's face was full of an almost womanly pity.