

# of Jack Hamlin

BY Bret Harte  
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probably debar him from the company of the children—his only hope.

But his seclusion was by no means so complete as he expected. He presently was aware of a camp meeting hymn hummed somewhat ostentatiously by a deep-voiced voice, which he at once recognized as Melinda's, and saw that severe virgin proceeding from the kitchen along the ridge until within a few paces of the buckeyes, when she stopped, and, with her hand shading her eyes, apparently began to examine the distant fields. She was a tall, robust girl, not without certain rustic attractions of which she seemed fully conscious. This latter weakness gave Mr. Hamlin a new idea. He put up the penknife with which he had been paring his nails while wondering why his hands had become so thin and awaited events. She presently turned, approached the buckeyes, plucked a spike of the blossoms with great girlish lightness, and then, apparently discovering Mr. Hamlin, started in deep concern and said in somewhat stentorian politeness, "I beg your pardon—didn't know I was intruding."

"Don't mention it," returned Jack promptly, but without moving. "I saw you coming and was prepared; but generally—as I have something the matter with my heart—a sudden joy like this is dangerous."

Somewhat mystified, but struggling between an expression of rigorous decorum and gratified vanity, Miss Melinda stammered, "I was only—"

"I knew it—I saw what you were doing," interrupted Jack gravely, "only I wouldn't do it if I were you. You were looking at one of those young men down the hill. You forgot that if you could see him he could see you looking, too, and that would only make him conceited. And a girl with your attractions don't require that."

"Ez if," said Melinda, with lofty but somewhat reddening scorn, "there was a man on this hull rancho that I take a second look at."

"It's the first look that does the business," returned Jack simply. "But maybe I was wrong. Would you mind—as you're going straight back to the house (Miss Melinda had certainly expressed no such intention)—turning those two little kids loose out here? I've a sort of engagement with them."

"I will speak to their man," said Melinda primly, yet with a certain sign of relenting, as she turned away.

"You can say to her that I regretted not finding her in the sitting-room when I came down," continued Jack, tactfully.

Apparently the tact was successful, for he was delighted a few moments later by the joyous onset of John Wesley and Mary Emmeline upon the buckeyes, which he at once converted into a game of hide and seek, permitting himself at last to be shamefully caught in the open.

But here he wisely resolved upon guarding against further grown-up interruption, and consulting with his companions found that on one of the lower terraces there was a large reservoir fed by a mountain rivulet—but they were not allowed to play there. Thither, however, the reckless Jack fled with his playmates, and was presently ensconced under a willow tree, where he dexterously fashioned tiny willow canoes with his penknife and sent them sailing over a submerged expanse of nearly an acre. But half an hour of this ingenious amusement was brought to an abrupt termination. While cutting bark, with his back momentarily turned on his companions, he heard a scream and turned quickly to see John Wesley struggling in the water grasping a tree root, and Mary Emmeline—nowhere! In another minute he saw the strings of her pinafore appear on the surface a few yards beyond, and in yet another minute, with a swift, useful glance at his wet garments, he had plunged after a disagreeable shock of finding himself out of his depth was, however, followed by contact with the child's clothing, and, clutching her firmly, a stroke or two brought him panting to the bank. Here a gasp, a gurgle, and then a roar from Mary Emmeline, followed by a sympathetic howl from John Wesley, satisfied him that the danger was over. Rescuing the boy from the tree root, he laid them both on the grass and contemplated them, exercising their lungs with miserable satisfaction. But here he found his own breathing impeded, in addition to a slight faintness, and was suddenly obliged to sit down beside them. At which, by some sympathetic intuition, they both stopped crying.

Encouraged by this, Mr. Hamlin got them to laughing again, and then proposed a race home in their wet clothes, which they accepted, Mr. Hamlin, for respiratory reasons, lagging in their rear until he had the satisfaction of seeing them captured by the horrified Melinda in front of the kitchen, while he slipped past her and regained his own room. Here he changed his saturated clothes, tried to rub away a certain chilliness that was creeping over him, and laid down in his dressing gown to miserable reflections. He had nearly drowned the children, and overexerted himself, in spite of his promise to the doctor! He would never again be entrusted with the care of the former, nor be believed by the latter!

But events are not always logical. Mr. Hamlin went comfortably to sleep and into a profuse perspiration. He was awakened by a rapping at his door, and opening it was surprised to find Mrs. Rivers with anxious inquiries as to his condition. "Indeed," she said with an emotion which even her prim reserve could not conceal, "I did not know until now how serious the accident was, and how but for you and Divine Providence my little girl might have been drowned. It seems Melinda saw it all." Inwardly objurgating the spying Melinda, but relieved that his playmates hadn't broken their promise of secrecy, Mr. Hamlin laughed.

"I'm afraid that your little girl wouldn't have got into the water at all but for me—and you must give all the credit of getting her out to the other fellow"—he stopped at the severe change in Mrs. Rivers' expression and added quite boyishly and with a sudden drop from his usual levity, "But please don't keep the children away from me for all that, Mrs. Rivers."

Mrs. Rivers did not, and the next day Jack and his companions sought fresh playing fields and some new story-telling pastures. Indeed, it was a fine sight to see this pale, handsome, elegantly dressed young fellow lounging along between a blue-checked pinafored girl on one side and a barefooted boy on the other. The ranchmen turned and looked after him curiously. One, a rustic prodigal, reduced by dissipation to the wine husks of ranching, saw fit to familiarly accost him:

"The last time I saw you dealing poker in Sacramento, Mr. Hamlin, I did not reckon to find you up here playing with a couple of kids."

"No!" responded Mr. Hamlin suavely, "and yet I remember I was playing with some country idiots down there—and you were one of them! Well! understand that up here—I prefer the kids. Don't let me have to remind you of it."

Nevertheless, Mr. Hamlin could not help noticing that for the next two or three days there were many callers at the rancho, and that he was obliged in his walks to avoid the high road on account of the impertinent curiosity of wayfarers. Some of them were of that sex which he would not have contented himself with simply calling "curious."

"To think," said Melinda confidently to her mistress, "that that Mrs. Stubbs, who wouldn't go into the Hightown Hotel because there was a play-actress there, has been snoopin' round here twice since that young feller came." Of this fact, however, Mr. Hamlin was blissfully unconscious.

Nevertheless, his temper was growing uncertain; the angle of his smart straw hat was becoming aggressive to strangers; his politeness sardonic. And now Sunday morning had come with an atmosphere of starched piety and well-soaped respectability at the rancho, and the children were to be taken with the rest of the family to the day-long service at Hightown. As these Sabbath pilgrimages filled the main road he was fain to take himself and his lonesomeness to the trails and byways, and even to invade the haunts of some other elegant outcasts like himself—to wit, a crested hawk, a graceful wildcat beautifully marked, and an eloquently reticent rattlesnake. Mr. Hamlin eyed them without fear, and certainly without reproach. They were not out of their element.

Suddenly he heard his name called in a stentorian contralto. An impatient ejaculation rose to his lips, but died upon them as he turned. It was certainly Melinda, but in his present sensitive loneliness it struck him for the first time that he had never actually seen her before as she really was. Like most men in his profession, he was a quick reader of thoughts and faces when he was interested, and although this was the same robust, long-limbed, sunburnt girl he had met, he now seemed to see through her triple incrustation of human vanity, conventional piety and outrageous Sabbath flattery an honest, sympathetic simplicity that commanded his respect.

"You are back early from church," he said.

"Yes. One service is good enough for me when I just ain't no special preacher," she returned, "so I jest ses to Elias, 'As I ain't here to listen to the sisters cackle, ye

kin put to the buckboard and drive me home ez soon ez ye please."

"And so his name is Elias," suggested Mr. Hamlin, cheerfully.

"Go 'long with you, Mr. Hamlin, and don't pester," she returned, with heiferlike playfulness. "Well, Elias put to, and when we rose the hill here I saw your straw hat passin' in the gulch and sez to Elias, sez I, 'Ye kin pull up here, for over yer is our new boarder, Jack Hamlin, and I'm goin' to talk with him.' 'All right,' sez he, 'I'd sooner trust ye with that gay young gambler every day of the week than with them saints down that on Sunday. He deals ez straight ez he shoots and is about as nigh

ez a warnin', in the sermon ez a text; they picked out hymns to fit ye! And always a drestful example and a visitation. And the rest of the time it was all gabble, gabble by the brothers and sisters about you. I reckon, Mr. Hamlin, that they know everything you ever did since you were knee high to a grasshopper and a good deal more than you ever thought of doin'." The women is all dead set on convertin' ye and savin' ye by their own precious selves and the men is ekely dead set on gettin' rid o' ye on that account."

"And what did Seth and Mrs. Rivers say?" asked Hamlin composedly, but with kindling eyes.

"They stuck up for ye ez far ez they could. But ye

valence to mount a half-broken mustang and in spite of the rising afternoon wind to gallop along the high road in quite as mischievous and breezy fashion. He was wont to allow his mustang's nose to hang over the hind rails of wagons and buggies containing young couples, and to dash ahead of sober carriages that held elderly "members in good standing."

An accomplished rider, he picked up and brought back the flying parol of Mrs. Deacon Stubbs without dismounting. He finally came home a little blown, but dangerously composed.

There was the usual Sunday evening gathering at Windy Hill rancho—neighbors and their wives, deacons and the pastor—but their curiosity was not satisfied by the sight of Mr. Hamlin, who kept his own room and his

"It's Mr. Hamlin," said Seth quietly. "I've heard him often hummin' things before."

There was another silence, and the voice of Deacon Stubbs broke in harshly:

"It's rank blasphemy!"

"If he's sincere why does he stand aloof? Why does he not join us?" said the parson.

"He hasn't been asked," said Seth quietly. "If I ain't mistaken, this yer gatherin' this evening was specially to see how ye get rid of him."

There was a quick murmur of protest at this.

The parson exchanged glances with the deacon and saw that they were hopelessly in the minority.

"I will ask him myself," said Mrs. Rivers suddenly.

"So do, Sister Rivers, so do," was the unmistakable response.

Mrs. Rivers left the room and returned in a few moments with a handsome young man, pale, elegant, composed, even to a grave indifference. What his eyes might have said was another thing; the long lashes were scarcely raised.

"I don't mind playing a little," he said quietly to Mrs. Rivers, as if continuing a conversation, "but you'll have to let me trust my memory."

"Then you—play the harmonium?" said the parson, with an attempt at formal courtesy.

"I was for a year or two the organist in the choir of Dr. Todd's church at Sacramento," returned Mr. Hamlin quietly.

The blank amazement of the faces of Deacon Stubbs, Turner and the parson was followed by a wreath of smiles from the other auditors, and especially from the ladies. Mr. Hamlin sat down to the instrument and in another moment took possession of it as it had never been held before. He played from memory, as he had implied, but it was the memory of a musician. He began with one or two familiar anthems, in which they all joined. A fragment of a mass and a Latin chant followed. An "Ave Maria" from an opera was his first secular departure, but his delighted audience did not detect it. Then he hurried through an unfamiliar language, "O mio Fernando" and "Spiritu gentili," which they fondly imagined were hymns, until, with crowning audacity, after a few preliminary chords of the "Misereere," he landed them, broken-hearted, in the Trovatore's donjon tower with "Non te scordar de mi."

Amid the applause he heard the preacher suavely explain that those Polish masses were always in the Latin language, and rose from the instrument satisfied with his experiment. Exposing himself as an invalid from joining them in a light colloquy in the dining-room, and begging his hostess' permission to retire, he nevertheless lingered a few moments by the door as the ladies fled out of the room, followed by the gentlemen, until Deacon Turner, who was bringing up the rear, was abreast of him. Here Mr. Hamlin became suddenly deeply interested in a frame pencil drawing which hung on the wall. It was evidently a schoolgirl's amateur portrait done by Mrs. Rivers. Deacon Turner halted quickly by his side as the others passed out, which was exactly what Mr. Hamlin expected.

"Do you know the face?" said the deacon eagerly.

Thanks to the faithful Melinda, Mr. Hamlin did know it perfectly. It was a pencil sketch of Mrs. Rivers' youthful erring sister. But he only said he thought he recognized an likeness to someone he had seen in Sacramento.

The deacon's eye brightened. "Perhaps the same one—perhaps," he added, in a submissive and significant tone, "a—er—painful story."

"Rather—to him," observed Hamlin quietly.

"How?—I—er—don't understand," said Deacon Turner.

"Well, the portrait looks like a lady I knew in Sacramento, who had been in some trouble when she was a silly girl, but had got over it quietly. She was, however, troubled a good deal by some mean bound who was every now and then raking up the story wherever she went. Well, one of her friends—I might have been among them—I don't exactly remember just now—challenged him, but although he had no conscientious convictions about slandering a woman, he had some about being shot for it, and declined. The consequence was he was cowled once in the street and the second time tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail out of town. That, I suppose, was what you meant by your 'painful story.' But is this the woman?"

"No, no," said the deacon hurriedly, with a white face; "you have quite misunderstood."

"But whose is this portrait?" persisted Jack.

"I believe that—I don't know exactly—but I think it is a sister of Mrs. Rivers," stammered the deacon.

"Then, of course, it isn't the same woman," said Jack, in simulated indignation.

"Certainly—of course not," returned the deacon.

"Pshaw!" said Jack. "That was a mighty close call. Lucky we were alone, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said the deacon, with a feeble smile.

"Seth," continued Jack, with a thoughtful air, "looks like a quiet man, but I shouldn't like to have made that mistake about his sister-in-law before him. These quiet men are apt to shoot straight. Better keep this to ourselves."

Deacon Turner not only kept the revelation to himself, but apparently his own sacred person also, as he did not call again at Windy Hill rancho during Mr. Hamlin's stay. But he was exceedingly polite in his references to Jack and alluded patronizingly to "a little chat" they had had together. And when the usual reaction took place in Mr. Hamlin's favor and Jack was induced to actually perform on the organ at High Town church next Sunday, the deacon's voice was loudest in his praise. Even Parson Greenwood allowed himself to be non-committal as to the truth of the rumor, largely circulated, that one of the most desperate gamblers in the State had been converted through his exhortations.

So, with breezy walks and games with the children, occasional confidences with Melinda and Elias, and the Sabbath "singing of anthems," Mr. Hamlin's three weeks of convalescence drew to a close. He had lately realized his habit of seclusion so far as to mingle with the company gathered for more social purpose at the rancho, and once or twice unbent so far as to satisfy their curiosity in regard to certain details of his profession. "I have no personal knowledge of games of cards," said Parson Greenwood patronizingly, "and I think I am right in saying that our brothers and sisters are equally inexperienced. I am—ahem—far from believing, however, that entire ignorance of evil is the best preparation for combating it, and I should be glad if you'd explain to the company the intricacies of various games. There is one that you mentioned, with—a—er—Scriptural name."

"Faro," said Hamlin, with an unmoved face.

"Pharaoh," repeated the parson gravely, "and one which you call 'poker,' which seems to require great self-control."

"I couldn't make you understand poker without your playing it," said Jack decidedly.

"As long as we don't gamble—that is, play for money—I see no objection," returned the parson.

"And," said Jack musingly, "you could use beans?"

It was agreed finally that there would be no falling from grace in their playing among themselves, in an inquiring Christian spirit, under Jack's guidance, he having decided to abstain from card-playing during his convalescence, and Jack permitted himself to be persuaded to show them the following evening.

So it chanced, however, that Dr. Duchesne, finding the end of Jack's "cure" approaching, and not hearing from that interesting invalid, resolved to visit him at about this time. Having no chance to apprise Jack of his intention, on coming to Hightown at night he procured a conveyance at the depot to carry him to Windy Hill rancho. The wind blew with its usual nocturnal rollicking persistency, and at the end of his turbulent trip it seemed almost impossible to make himself heard above the roaring of the pines and some astounding preoccupation of the inmates. After vainly knocking the door pushed open the front door and entered. He rapped at the closed sitting-room door, but receiving no reply pushed it open upon the most unexpected and astounding scene he had ever witnessed. Around the center-table a dozen respectable members of the Hightown church, including the parson, were gathered, with intense and eager faces, playing poker, and behind the parson, with his hands in his pockets, carelessly lounged the doctor's patient, the picture of health and vigor! A disused pack of cards was scattered on the floor, and before the gentle and precise Mrs. Rivers was heaped a pile of beans that would have filled a quart measure.

When Dr. Duchesne had tactfully retreated before the hurried and stammering apologies of his host and hostess and was alone with Jack in his rooms he turned to him with a gravity that was more than half affected and said, "How long, sir, did it take you to effect this corruption?"

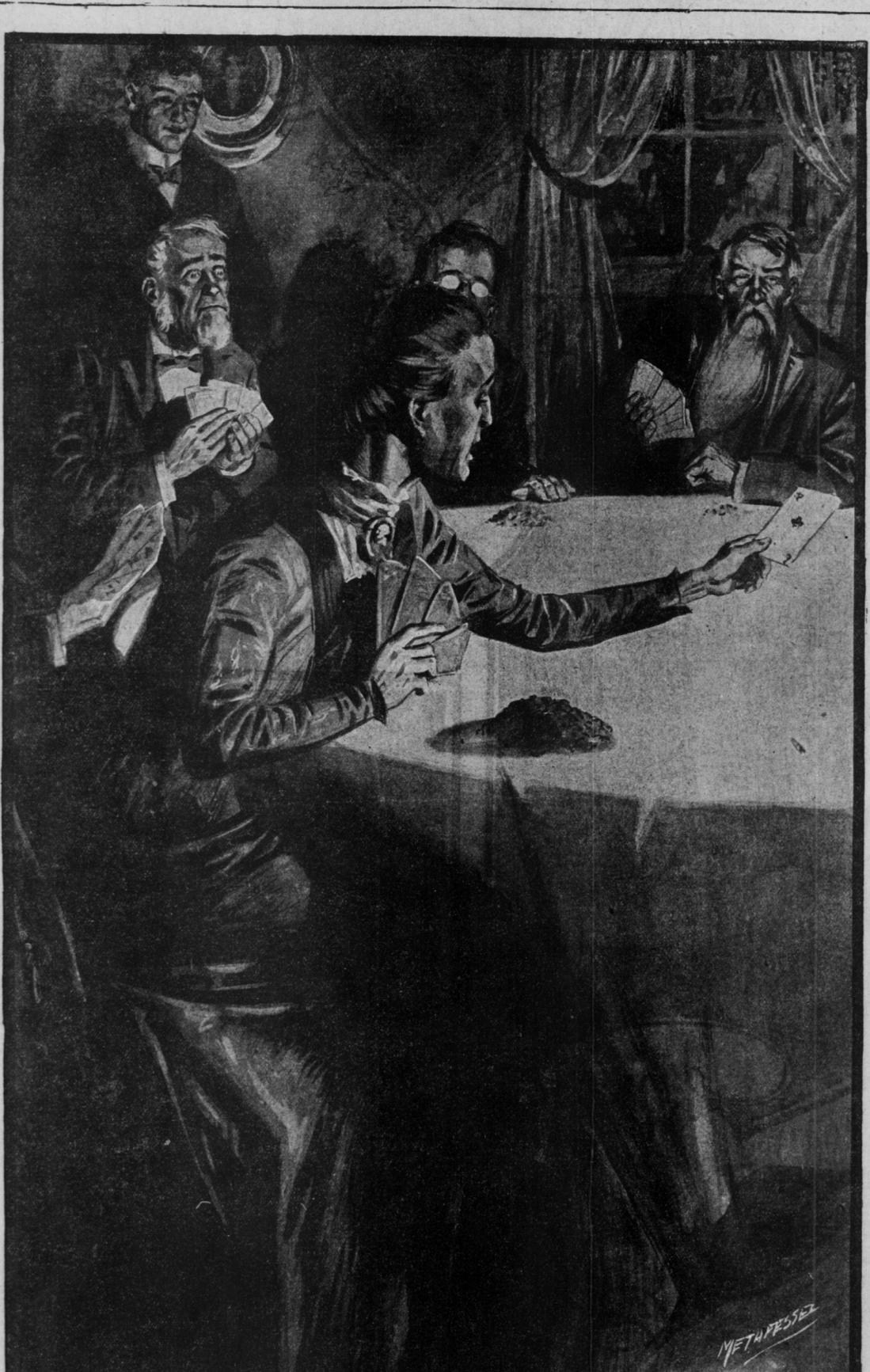
"Upon my honor," said Jack simply, "they played last night for the first time. And they forced me to show them. But," added Jack, after a significant pause, "I thought it would make the game livelier and be more of a moral lesson if I gave them nearly all good, pat hands."

"I ran in a cold deck on them—the first time I ever did such a thing in my life. I fixed up a pack of cards so that one had three tens, another three jacks, another three queens and so on up to three aces. In a minute they had all tumbled to the game, and you never saw such betting. Every man and woman there believed he or she had struck a sure thing, and staked accordingly. A new panful of beans was brought on, and Seth, your friend, banked for them. And at last the parson raked in the whole pile."

"I suppose you gave him the three aces," said Dr. Duchesne gloomily.

"The parson," said Jack slowly, "hadn't a single pair in his hand. It was the stoniest, deadiest, nearest bluff I ever saw! And when he'd frightened off the last man who held on, he laid that meanly hand of his face down on the table of kings, queens and aces and looked around the table as he raked in the pile there was a smile of humble self-righteousness on his face that was worth double the money."

[The End.]



"BEHIND THE PARSON CARELESSLY LOUNGED THE DOCTOR'S PATIENT"

onto a gentleman as they make 'em."

For one moment or two Miss Bird only saw Jack's long lashes. When his eyes once more lifted they were shining. "And what do you say?" he said with a short laugh.

"I told him he needn't be Christopher Columbus to have discovered that." She turned with a laugh toward Jack, to be met by the word "shake," and an outstretched thin, white hand which grasped her large, red one with a frank, fraternal pressure.

"I didn't come to tell ye that," remarked Miss Bird as she sat down on a boulder, took off her yellow hat and restacked her tawny mane under it, "but this, I reckoned I went to Sunday mornin' as I ought ter. It kalkulated to bear considerable about 'faith' and 'works' and sich. But I didn't reckon to hear all about you from the Lord's Prayer to the Doxology. You were in the special prayers

see the parson, hez got a holt upon Seth, havin' caught 'im kissin' a convert at camp meeting; and Deacon Turner knows suttin' about Mrs. Rivers' sister, who kicked over the pail and jumped the fence years ago, and she's afraid o' him. But what I wanted to tell ye was that they're all comin' up here to take a look at ye—some on 'em to-night. Ye ain't afraid, are ye?" she added with a loud laugh.

"Well, it looks rather desperate, don't it?" returned Jack with dancing eyes.

"I'll trust ye for all that," said Melinda. "And now I reckon I'll trot along to the rancho. Ye needn't offer ter see me home," she added, as Jack made a movement to accompany her. "Everybody up here ain't as fair-minded ez Elias and you, and Melinda Bird hez a character to lose! So long!" With this she cantered away, a little heavily, perhaps, adjusting her yellow hat with both hands as she clattered down the steep hill.

That afternoon Mr. Hamlin drew largely on his con-

own counsel. There was some desultory conversation, chiefly on church topics, for it was vaguely felt that a discussion of the advisability of getting rid of the guest of their host was somewhat difficult under this host's roof, with the guest impending at any moment. Then a diversion was created by some of the church choir practicing the harmonium with the singing of certain more or less lugubrious anthems. Mrs. Rivers presently joined in and in a somewhat faded soprano, which, however, still retained considerable musical taste and expression, sang "Come, Ye Disconsolate." The wind moaned over the deep-throated chimney in a weird harmony with the melancholy of that human appeal as Mrs. Rivers sang the first verse:

"Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish,  
Come to the Mercy Seat, fervently kneel;  
Here bring your wounded hearts—here tell your anguish;  
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal!"

A pause followed and the long-drawn, half-human sigh of the mountain wind over the chimney seemed to mingle with the wail of the harmonium. And then, to their thrilled astonishment, a tenor voice, high, clear, but tenderly passionate, broke like a skylark above their heads in the lines of the second verse:

"Joy of the desolate, Light of the straying,  
Hope of the penitent—fadeless and pure,  
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot cure!"

The hymn was old and familiar enough, heaven knows. It had been quite popular at funerals, and some who sat there had had its strange melancholy borne upon them in time of loss and tribulations, but never had they felt its power before. Accustomed as they were to emotional appeal and to respond to it, as the singer's voice died away above their very tears flowed and fell with that voice. A few sobbed aloud and then a voice asked tremulously:

"Who is it?"