

WATKIN'S FATE

"Yes," repeated Joe Watkins, "she arrived here by last night's stage: an' the question is, what's yer camp goin' ter do about it?" A dead silence followed this query the group of miners gathered around Randy's bar not being accustomed to decide on points of morality.

"Wal," ventured Bob Trout, "over an interval during which every man's empty glass was replenished, 'what I've got to say is this, that as things go comfortable up a Dick Waggins, let them be, and as it's clear 'n fer to his nature for two wives to sit along smilin' in the same house, let this woman go back: and in order to make 'squar' lets chip in, man an' man, and make it with her while to go, without sayin' nothin' to Dick."

A dozen hands went to as many pockets in practical response to this appeal, but were arrested there as Joe Watkins, who appeared in the light of public prosecutor, again stepped forward. "That's not the p'int, I say that Waggins ought to be punished; he's played it mean on this camp, and if I know the boys they'll play it back on him to a pretty tune. Why, when Spiggot died over to South Fork Mountain, an Waggins went over and brought his wife over ez his wife, didn't this yer camp speak 'most uncommon well of Waggins?"

"It did," responded the crowd with the unanimity of an opera chorus.

"Thar was others ez might hav thought of that widder, but bein' more modest, Waggins got ahead, and the camp approved Waggins; but now here's his true and lovin' and deserted wife turns up, and the question is, what's the camp goin' ter do about it?"

THE ORATOR KNEW

His audience too well to make the infringement of the marriage law the chief point of his indictment, and therefore dwelt on the deception used by Waggins toward society at Babbit's Find. Dick should have laid the matter before them, should have confided it to them as men not unfamiliar with domestic infelicity, and in that case they would have been quite willing to ignore the first wife and support him in his impending trouble. Dick had not chosen to act according to the precedent and consequently the camp felt outraged and disposed to listen to Watkins.

"I say" pursued the modern Aristides, "that justice hez got to be done."

"But they can't both have," remarked a thoughtful bystander. "What becomes of Spiggot's widow if the stranger takes the pot? You see matrimony is a kind of a game from which you can't draw the stakes."

"That ain't the p'int, it's the principle. Rabbit's Find ain't got anything to much and ter spare in the way of morality; it ain't a-burstin' out and overflowin' with virtue to that extent that it can afford to let a thing like this go by."

An affirmative murmur ran round the crowd, which was quite ready to atone for individual shortcomings by hearty endorsement of abstract of principle. "It's been a rather dry season in morals round here right along, and I take it the camp's not goin' to pass this time; it will take a hand in the game, and Waggins hez got ter git."

Jack Tepoy thought that Babbitts could withstand more shocks than this, and moved that the matter be left in the hands of Dick and his two wives.

"I'm with you there pard," said Bill Thompson, "and I reckon there isn't a man here as would wish't go you one better on that. You fet this is Dick's own private game, and if it comes to morality—well, all I've got to say is, the man as sayi' he's got a straight flush of that suit had better show his hand."

THE LIBERAL VIEW

Of the situation provoked hearty applause, but as Joe Watkins represented the religious element of the place, so far as it could be said to exist at all, his arguments finally carried the day. It was eventually decided that the boys should meet the stage by which Waggins would arrive the following night, and escort him to the meeting house, where, in the presence of his two wives, he should hear his sentence of banishment from Babbit's Find.

Watkins, after leaving the saloon turned off in the direction of Waggins home, which differed from the surrounding shanties by reason of its cleanliness within and its little garden without.

"What evil brings you here, Joe Watkins? No good, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Waggins, confronting her unwelcome visitor.

"It is a Christian duty, my dear friend."

"Keep that for those you want to deceive."

"Well, now, ef it comes ter deceiving, I guess I'll hatter give way ter Waggins; it 'pears ez ef he could lay over the hull camp at that."

"What do you mean? Some of your lies, of courses. You are a liar, and I don't believe you could speak the truth even by accident."

"Go on, mum; don't waste yourse, and I'll show you're powerful pretty when you're saazy, but may be you ain't so chipper when Mrs. Waggins comes to take her rightful place 'long of Dick."

"What—what do you mean?" and despite her effort to seem unmoved her voice shook and her lips grew white.

"Oh, you're beginning to look s'certain like. I'll just step in."

"No, you won't—stay there! Tell me what you mean, and when Dick comes—"

"I guess when Dick comes he'll find the air of this camp onsalubrious. You see, his fust wife's come, and folks are kind of speakin' of you by yer old name of Spiggot."

The woman staggered as if she had received a blow, and yet it seemed as if the news came to her as the fulfillment of an old dread, rather than as a revelation of

HER HUSBAND'S PERFDY.

"Yes, Marier Delancy was her name—least-wise on the stage. She's got cheeks like tulips and a laugh that yer ketch onto half way up South Fork mountain. There's been wrong done this lovely critter, and the boys say Dick's got ter git right smart."

"Got ter leave Babbit's Find?"

"Yes. You see they're downright mad, 'cause they thought he'd done the generous, proper thing by Spiggot's widder and the cripple child; not but what there was another—"

"Silence, you snake! He did do the generous thing by me and my poor children, and by—"

"Spiggot, too."

"Yes, he did, when wretches like you would have made poverty and my love for them a temptation."

"What an unforgivin' temper you've got! Maybe you'll wish you hadn't been so pert when yer hear the verdict agin him tomorrow night. The boys will meet him at the stage and take him straight thar."

For a while she stood looking after her old enemy as if unable to grasp the situation. What was she to do? How could she save Dick? Should she take her children and flee? No, that would be idle. She knew her husband too well to think he would allow her to sacrifice herself.

Her eyes wandered over the camp, whose lights shown like fireflies through the light veil of mist, and then turned to the neighboring mountain, with its belt of pines, until at last they rested on the distant outlines of the Sierras. The hot day had been followed by a sultry night, and the momentary breeze which had brought a little freshness died away as suddenly as it had come. The place was not beautiful; even the softening grace of night was powerless to rob it of its ugliness; but yet to this woman it had had a fascination no words could express. It was home; and as the thought that she must leave it came to her, she looked upon it as Eve may have looked on the garden when its gates were about to

CLOSE BEHIND HER.

Must they be driven away because the wretched woman who had destroyed and deserted her husband had chosen to come back to him? Dick had told her the story of his miserable marriage, and she had listened to the cries of her children and the promptings of her heart; and now this woman has found him out, and they must go forth beggars.

"Oh, Dick! Dick! Have I come to you only to ruin you? Must I give you up? Oh, I cannot! I cannot!"

She cried aloud in her agony, looking up to the solemn midnight sky; but no answer came to her from the starry dome, and nature slept voiceless in the hot, windless night.

The meeting house at Babbit's Find owed its existence to one of those sudden bursts of emotional religious feelings to which men who lead hard lives are frequently prone. When Mrs. Waggins reached the meeting house her husband was already there, and without a word she went and stood by his side. The two clasped hands and looked silently into each other's faces, neither having words to express the feelings that possessed them. Joe Watkins was in possession of the pulpit, and near him sat the heroine of the hour, smiling pleasantly on the company. The crowd was unusually well dressed. So many boiled shirts, it was remarked afterward, had never been seen before in the camp. It was the dry season, which