THE WEDDING RING,

A TALE OF TO-DAY,

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN,

Author of "The Shadow of the Sword," "God and the Man," "Stormy Waters," &c.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

CHAPTER XV.—AT JACOBS'S FLAT.

For a year after his wedding Jake Owen was as happy a man as the most enthusiastic of the crowd of celihate women worshippers among whom he lived could have believed him to be. The district was one of the richest within a few days' ride of San Francisco, and Jacob's Flat was one of the luckiest camps in Califormle, but Jake's good fortune was so singular as to cause him to be known to everybody as "Happy Joke." His luck became legendary; it was averred of him that he had only to stick his spade into the ground to make gold, however unlikely the spot might be.

Nobody grudged him his good fortune, though it was only human nature to envy it, for Jake was emphatically what his comrades called him, "a white man," with a sturdy English honesty of character supplemented by much kindly shrewdness learned in his travels, and by a native happiness of temperament and generosity of heart. His popularity doubled with the arrival of his wife, and the "Duchess," as she was called with affectionate pride, had every reason to

be as happy as her husband.

Whatever rude luxuries were possible in so wild a place were here. Jake's cabin windows were beautified with coloured hangings, it earthen floor was concealed by a carpet of the gandiest procurable pattern, and Jake, in the full flower of his honeymoon happiness, had gone the length of procuring a plano from San Francisco. The circumstance that neither Jess herself nor any other person in the camp knew a note of music, detracted nowise from the satisfaction of Jake and his comrades in the possession of the instrument. The piano was a splendid fact, a fitting background to the beauty and distinction of the "Duchess." There was no piano in Dutch Gulch, which one horse community persisted in an attempt, which might have seemed almost profaue had it not been so hopelessly alburd, to proclaim its equality with the Flat.

It befell, upon a certain hot and dusty summer creating, that Jake Owen, returning from a distant town on the hillside, came, at the outskirts of the camp, upon a man lying by the wayside under a tuft of aralea blossoms.

Jake's first impression was that the man was

intoxicated, his second that he was dead. He lay with his arms broadcast and his open eyes staring at the sky, and the breast of his shirt was caked with stiffened blood. (loser examination, however, disclosed that he was

still alive. Jake poured the remnant of the whisky left in his flask down his throat, and, as the man gave signs of returning consciousness, propped him against the bank at the readside, ran to the saloon, and messed into his service a couple of men drinking there, who, provided with a broad plank and a blanket, bore the sufferer to Jake's cabin. There was no qualified doctor in the place, but

several of its inhabitants had some rough notion of surgery, and it was evident to the little knot of men who gathered in Jake's sitting room that the wounded sufferer was in a very critical condition. "A darn'd ugly cut," said one critic." "The knife

slid off the rib, you see. He's lest a sight of blood. Say, what'r ye goin' to do with him, Jake?" "Keep him till be's better," said Jake. "Eh,

Jess? Why lass," he exclaimed, seeing her look a little doubtful at the sufferer, "ye wouldn't have us throw him out on the road again? Do as ye'd bedone by. It might be my turn to morrow." "He must be taken care of, of course," said Jess.

"He'll want nussing, too," continued Jake, "and you're the only woman in the c nip; we're the best able to afford it, too, thank God!" The girl's not very strong opposition to her hus-

hand's proposal was easily understood, for the wounded man was a ghastly object. He had smeared his face with his own blood, and the red dust of the road had caked upon the stain. His hair was wild, his cheeks rough with a week's unshaven beard, his clothes foul with blood and mire. They got him to bed and dressed the wound with

the best rough skill at hand. It was not intrinsically serious, a large flesh wound, rendered dangerous by effusion of blood. When the stains had been washed from the sufferer's face an instantaneous change of opinion regarding him took place in Jess's mind. He was a distinctly handsome fellow, of a species of male beauty not common in the Flat. His features were linely cut and delicate, his hands soft as a woman's, his hair abundant, and wavy and silky as Jess's own. "A gentleman, I should think," said Jake. " English, too." It was a day or two before the wounded man re-

covered consciousness, and a longer time still before be could give any coherent account of himself.

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

He was an Englishman, as Jake had surmise t. 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, riffed 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 tingers. "How can I ever repay you. I haven't a penny in the world." "Pay me!" answered Jake, "who talks of pay-

ment, 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 gertleman in misfortune-and from the old country too. That we are," said Jake, heartily. It was Jake that Mordaunt thanked with his lips,

but he kept his eyes on Jess's 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 denizers of the Flat were a roughish lot, but they were not without their sympathies, and Jess's 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-fellowwell-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 delight. ful companion, full of stories of travel, jokes, and repartes. 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 salcon to which nobody came, and seriously entertaining thoughts of going elsewhere to make his live. libcod, hit on the magnificent idea of offering Mordaunt 200 dollars a week and his liquor to play nightly at his establishment. Mordaunt comented 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. Pote 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 piane, there was no reserve stock of enthusiasm lef; 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 to play the piano, in which art she made astonishing progress under his skilful 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 enchre, at which games he was a 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 know 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 the 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 civilised 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 n.an in whose hands a man might trust his possessions and his life with a sense of absolute recority.

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 pleaty, they had as little sentimental regard for feminine purity as any Parisian boulevardier, and their vices tacked the saving civilising grace. But in the camp, where the fairer half of humanity 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 his happiness; she was something apart from and above them, she breathed

So that Mordaunt's constant presence in Jake's

a finer air, seemed of another order.

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 Mordauut'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 besitation. The haleyon 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 wa

may allow to pass as an episode in this chronicle without long dwelling on its details—the story of the dull loving busband 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 drow

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 weman 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 gine on strengthening almost to the dreadful hour when he 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 to-

wards midnight strolled out to the saloon to hear 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 hall fallen like lightning from a summer sky was, as is usual in such cases, the last to hear the dreadful It came to him in a fashion characteristic to the

time and place. He was sitting alone in his cablu, 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 best of horses' hoofs came to his ears, and a minute later a score of men gallopped up to the cabin, drow bridle, and entered. They ranged themselves in front of him as he

stated at them, and for a full minute there was a silence broken only by the pawing of the horses outside and by the occasional shulle of a boot upon the "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 they're alive, anyhow," he said.

A man in the background 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 this

unsuspecting ignorance could be real. "Has anything happened, anything bad?" he con-

tinued. "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 fall of an almost womanly pity.

"You've got to know," he said, "though I'd a blame sight rather cut my tongue out than tell ye," He manned himself to the disclosure. "She's gone, Jake, she's left ye."

"Left me!" cried Jake, rising. "She's left ye for that white faced, white livered,

sneakin' snake, that Mordaunt." Jake sprang to his feet with his eyes blazing.

"--!" he cried, "I'd have the blood of e'er another man alive as said it!"

"We're old pards, Jake," said Bill. "It hurts me as much, pooty nigh, to say it, as it does you to hear

it. But it's true. What else can it be-but that? We're out after 'em, and you'd better come along." Jake came forward, with his arms extended, like a blind man, or like one groping in black night in an unfamiliar place. He looked along the line of faces,

grim, resolute, but pitying, and after swaying for a moment like a drunken man, rushed from the cabin to the mud shanty where his horse was stabled. For three hours the party rode in dead silence, till they sighted a solitary horseman riding across their trail. They shouted to him and rode on at a gallop.

He waited for them. A rapid fire of questions resulted

in nothing save that, early that morning, just after

dawn, on the other side of Pete's Pocket, he had re-

marked the track of two horses, side by side. It was the faintest of clues, but they followed it, in the same grim silence. Jake seemed the only man in the crowd who rode without thought or purpose. He was dazed, and only occasionally raised his eyes to look with a dumb, pitiful hopelessuess about the prospect.

By hard riding they reached Pete's Pouket in the carly afternoon. It was a deserted mine, long since worked out and abandoned, with the doubled solitude of a once populous place, which had fallen back to its pristine savagery. By the clues their informant had given, they found the trail, and followed it till evening was closing in. Jake's dazed mind had seized upon it as something positive and actual, and the sight of the hoof prints had atrung him to as intense an interest in the hunt as was shown by his companions. It made for the rising ground in the direction of San Francisco, till suddenly, at the foot of a little eminence, it split, one line of the track going straight on, the other inclining to the coast.

A halt was called, and a hurried consultation held. "It's a pretty thin dodge," said Simpson. "Both them roads lead to 'Frisco—there ain't any other place

ye can get to from here in that way."

"That's so," said Bill, "and see here now. This to the left is a heap heavier than the other. That's his trail-s'posin' as it's him at all, and that's her's. Small prints, ye see, just such as the little mare would make. We must split, boys. I'll follow the big track, You'd better take the other lot, Which'll you go with Jake?"

To the momentary surprise of everybody present, Jake elected to follow Mordaunt's trail.

"Means business," said Simpson to his lieutenant, as they trotted along the lighter trail. "He'll blow daylight into that covey when he finds him, see if he don't.

Not a word was spoken among the other party, who galloped on along the trail till the lights of the city came in sight, and the track was lost among a hundred others. They made for the office of the police, then a newly organised force, recently succeeded to the functions of the old vigilance committee. Their story was heard, and all possible assistance was at once promised.

"We'll make a house to house visitation, if need be," said the captain.

By this time the other party, headed by Simpson, arrived, and the whole contingent, worn out with their long ride, made for a saloon for moat and drink. Jake sat stonily among them. He refused food, but drank, and presently went out and roamed among the crowd in the streets, peering in the faces of every

couple that passed him. A dozen times his heart thrilled at the distant glimpse of a figure resembling that of Jess or Mordaunt. When past midnight he rejoined his companions; the captain of police was with them. He had vague news of a couple who arswered somewhat to the descriptions of the missing parties. They had passed.

through the town separately, making no stay there, and it was supposed that they had gone in the direction of Los Perros, a mining settlement twenty mi'es inland. They had a start of nearly twenty-four hours, and even if they were the people sought, such an advantage

made the chase look very hopeless. "We'll follow," said Bill. "Saddle, boys." They tramped out of the town, and did the dis-

tance on their jaded horses in two hours, only to learn that Los Perros knew nothing of the runaways. "They've doubled on us, Jake," said Bill. "It's a

royal flush to a busted sequence agen us now."

"We never ought to ha' left 'Frisco," said Jake. "It's a biggish place; they can lie quiet there for a bit, and then start across for New York, or take ship for somewhere."

"They'll watch the boats for us," said Bill. "Our best holt is to strike in and cover the country." He and his mates were stanch to the cause of

friendship, though they had little enough hope of success in their search. "We must spread ourselves," he continued, "and cover all the ground we cau."

He rapidly mapped out all possible routes which might be taken by the fugitives, and told off the men to follow them. Some rest was distinctly necessary for the horses, though one or two of the most ardeat, among whom were Jake and Bill, managed to effect exchanges of their tired heasts for fresh ones, and to start at once. The final rallying place was the Flat, at which all the party were to put in an appearance in two days or send news of the trail they were pursuing.

The men straggled back to the Flat on the accord day, newsless and hopeless. There was absolutely no trace. The ingitives had vanished as utterly as if they had melted into air. Even conjecture was at a standstill. Police and volunteers had dragged the whele country side as with a net. Every possible course of action had been tried, but Jess and her seducer had melted beyond pursuit.

The betrayed husband took the successive disappointments with a stony calm, sitting in the little room in which he had known so many tranquilly happy hours.

"Thank you, my lad, thank you, kind and hearty, for what you've done," he said to each, as ho unfolded his tale of failure. He had not broken bread since the solitary supper he had eaten three days ago, or closed his eyes during the chase, but when the last straggler had come in, he ate heavily, and fell to sleep with his arms on the rude table and his head laid upon them. An hour or two later he came to the claim where his partner was working.

"I want to talk to you," he said, and led the way to his shanty, his pariner following. He waved him to a seat, and set a bottle before him.

"I want to talk to you," he said again. "A bit of business." He sat for a space, and repeated, "a bit of business." His oyes, wandering around the room, fell upon Jess's portrait, painted by Mordanut, which hung upon the wall. He went and took it from its place, toro it from its frame with a sudden, deliberate strength, rent it to ribands, and cast the fragments into the grate.

after sitting down again. "I want to sell it. Will you buy?"

rell for ?"

"I'm leaving this place," said Jake, "and I want money." He spoke quite calmly, and the other, who necessa-

ness of his manner. "She ain't worth it, Jake. Nor him. Let 'em rot. Can't ye wait till luck gives ye a chance, and go for him then?"

"I'll stand you five thousand for it," said the other, falling into his companion's humour with a scarcely ausceptible shrug of the shoulders.

it's worth. Let me have the brass to-night, mate." He nodded a dismissal, which his partner obeyed, promising to bring the money before nightfall, and, left alone, began to busy himself with his simple arrangements for his journey. He filled his saddlebags, loaded his revolver, weighed his dust and nuggets, before dropping them into the belt about his waist, and then west out and groomed and fed his horse, doing all those little tasks in a quiet every day fashion. No stranger who had witnessed his preparations could have guessed the nature of the journey he meditated, the faint chance of even the tragic measure of success which was all that was left him to hope for. His face was as a mask, his movements quite orderly and regular. His arrangements completed, he sat down beside the window in the fading light, quietly smoking and waiting for his partner. The man came. He placed a bag on the table.

"I reckon ye'll find that about right," he said, "if yo'll heft it. It's two thousand, and that's the rest in greenbacks," "Thank you," said Jake, and there was a moment's

silence, "I said ye'd like to go alone," continued the part-"Taint the kind o' business ye want other folk

foolin' round. Some of the boys talked about coming. but I stopped 'em. "I'd rather be alone," said Jake. "Thank you, Tom."

"They'd take it kind if ye'd just turn into the saloon for a drink. They'd like to say good bye to ye." He saw a spasm cross Jake's face in the dim

light. "Well," he said, "perhaps so, if ye'd rather not.

Good-bye, old pard," "Good-bye. My love to the boys. God bless 'em all. I shan't forget 'em, however the luck goes." They grasped hands and parted.

An hour after news came to the saloon that Jake

had started. As they stood about, discussing the tragedy of the last three days, a red glare shone through the windows of the bar room. It grew momentarily brighter, and cries and shouts came from its neighbourhood. The men trooped out, and ran towards it. Before

they had advanced a hundred yards, Jake's partner cried: "It's Jake's shanty. He must ha' fired it 'fore he left," [TO BE CONTINUED.]

[Bigun January 10. Back numbers may be had.]

A woman named Abigail Cochrane, who has just died at Kilmalcolm at 84 years of age, was a pauper from the cradle to the grave. It is estimated that she cost the public purse between £2000 and £3000.

"The claim's been yielding pretty fair," he said. "Sell!" said his partner. "What d'ye want to rily guessed his purpose, was surprised at the quiet-"What's the claim worth?" asked Jake, in reply. "I'll take four," said Jake. "That's as much as