

Johnston Annie Fellows

Travelers Five Along Life's Highway



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Annie Fellows Johnston

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Foreword

Of all the elements that go to make up a good story, – plot, verisimilitude, happy incident, local colour, excellent style, – none perhaps is more important than the touch of understanding sympathy. The writer must not only see his characters clearly and draw them with a masterly hand; he must have the largeness of heart that can share in all the turbulent experience of the human spirit. His people must be set against the vast shifting background of destiny. He must show their dramatic relations, one to another, and the influence of life upon life; he must also show their profounder, more moving and mysterious, relations to fate and time and the infinite things.

The writer of fiction creates for us a mimic country, peoples it with creatures of the fancy, like ourselves and yet different, and asks us to stray for our entertainment through that new kingdom. The scenes may be as strange or as familiar as you please; the characters as commonplace or as exceptional as you will; yet they must always be within the range of our sympathy. The incidents must be such as we ourselves could pass through; the people must be such as we can understand. They may well be exceptional, for that enlists our interest and enlivens our curiosity; they must not be beyond our comprehension nor outside our spiritual pale, for then we could have no sympathy with them, and our hearts would only grow cold as we read.

And what is at the base of our sympathy and interest? Nothing but our common life. They, too, – all the glad or sorrowing children of imaginative literature from Helen of Troy to Helena Richie – are travelers like ourselves on the great highway. We know well how difficult a road it is, how rough, how steep, how dangerous, how boggy, how lined with pitfalls, how bordered with gardens of deadly delights, how beset by bandits, how noisy with fakirs, how overhung with poisonous fruit and swept by devastating storms. We know also what stretches of happiness are there, what days of friendship, what hours of love, what sane enjoyment, what rapturous content.

How should we not, then, be interested in all that goes by upon that great road? We like to sit at our comfortable windows, when the fire is alight or the summer air is soft, and "watch the pass," as they say in Nantucket, – what our neighbours are about, and what strangers are in town. If we live in a small community, there is the monotony of our daily routine to be relieved. When an unknown figure passes down the street, we may enjoy the harmless excitement of novelty and taste something of the keen savour of adventure. If we are dwellers in a great city, where every passer is unknown, there is still the discoverer's zest in larger measure; every moment is great with possibility; every face in the throng holds its secret; every figure is eloquent of human drama. The pageant is endless, its story never finished. Who, indeed, could not be spellbound, beholding that countless changing tatterdemalion caravan go by? Yet all we may hope for of the inner history of these journeying beings, so humanly amazing, so significant, and all moved like ourselves by springs of joy and fear, hope and discouragement, is a glimpse here and there, a life-story revealed in a single gesture, a tragic history betrayed in the tone of a voice or the lifting of a hand, or perhaps a heaven of gladness in a glancing smile. For the most part their orbits are as aloof from us as the courses of the stars, potent and mystic manifestations of the divine, glowing puppets of the eternal masked in a veil of flesh.

This was the pomp of history which held the mind of Shakespeare, of Dickens, of Cervantes, of Balzac, in thrall, and drew the inquiring eye of Browning and Whitman, of Stevenson and Borrow, with so charmed and comprehending a look. To understand and set down faithfully some small portion of the tale of this ever changing procession, which is for ever appearing over the sunrise hills of to-

morrow and passing into the twilight valleys of yesterday, is the engrossing task of the novelist and the teller of tales.

How well that task is accomplished, is the measure of the story-teller's power. He may pick his characters from homely types that we know, and please us with the familiar; or he may paint for us some portion of the great pageant that has never passed our door, and raise us with the mystery of unaccustomed things. In either case he will touch our hearts by revealing the hidden springs of action in his chosen men and women. He will enlarge the borders of our mental vision and illumine our appreciation by his greater insight, greater knowledge, finer reasoning. In his magic mirror we shall not only see more of life than we saw before, but we shall see it more clearly, more penetratingly, more wonderfully. And ever afterwards, as we look on the world we know, life which perhaps used to seem to us so commonplace, and events which used to seem such a matter of course, will take on a significance, a dignity, a glamour, which they never before possessed, – or, to speak more truly, which they always possessed, indeed, but which we had not the power to see. This is the great educative use of creative literature; it teaches us to look on the world with more understanding, to confront it in manlier fashion, to appreciate the priceless gift of life more widely and generously, and so to live more fully and efficiently and happily.

The great opportunity of literature, then, and its great responsibility, are evident. As Matthew Arnold put it, "The future of poetry is immense." In an age when men and women are coming more and more to do their own thinking and form their own ethical judgments, the power and moral obligation of letters must tend to increase rather than to diminish. It is an encouraging sign of the times and of growing intelligence, that we demand a greater veracity in our stories, and like writers who find significance and charm in common surroundings. Our genuine appreciation has produced a very real national literature, great in amount and often reaching true eminence and distinction in quality. Books like Miss Alice Brown's "Meadow Grass" and "Country Neighbours" are at once truly native and full of the dignity and poetry and humour of life. At their best they reveal depths of human feeling and experience with a telling insight and sympathy, and with a felicity of style, which belong only to masterpieces of fiction.

To this charming province in the wide domain of letters "Travelers Five" belongs, and Mrs. Annie Fellows Johnston's many admirers must congratulate themselves on its appearance, as they stir the fire of an autumn afternoon. Here once more we may sit as at a pleasant window and "watch the pass" on the great highway. Here you shall see approaching, in that delightful and motley cavalcade, Irish Jimmy in his ranchman's dress, his warm Celtic heart urging him on up the obscure trail of unselfish good; here, grotesque old Gid Wiggan, flouting the shows of fashion, yet himself a showman conspicuous in the greater show of life; here, the old story, a fine gentleman's sense and feeling masquerading under the antics of a traveling clown; next, an embarrassed villager with something like greatness thrust upon him; and last, another strange example of silent persistent New England idealism, too proud to confess itself and only reaching its goal through a lifetime of repression and apparent failure.

But I am obstructing your view while I prate! Forgive me. I will step aside and let you have the window to yourself, so that you may quietly observe these Travelers going by.

New Canaan, Conn.,

26 September, 1911

The First Traveler

Jimmy

On The Trail of the Wise Men

ORDINARILY a fleck of cigar ashes in the pot of mashed potatoes would not have caused a row in the ranch kitchen, but to-day old Jimmy had had a sup too much. At such times the mere sight of Matsu, the Japanese cook, could provoke him to oaths, and it was Matsu who had unwittingly dropped the ashes into the pot, as he laid his cigar stump on the shelf above the stove, preparatory to dishing up dinner.

Time was when Jimmy had been the cook at Welsh's ranch, and had had it all his own way in the greasy adobe kitchen. But that was before Ben Welsh's last round-up. Since then his widow had been obliged to turn part of the cattle-ranch into a boarding camp for invalids; the part that lay in a narrow strip along the desert. Health-seekers paid better than cattle or alfalfa she found.

Many things came in with the new administration. Matsu was one of them, in his white chef's cap and jacket. The spotless linen was a delight to the boarders, but to Jimmy, deposed to the rank of hewer of wood and drawer of water, it was the badge of the usurper. Naturally enough his jealousy took the form of making Matsu live up to his linen, and he watched him like a cat for the slightest lapse from cleanliness.

This constant warfare with Matsu was one of the few diversions the camp afforded, and every man made much of it. Had he been let alone, old Jimmy would have accepted the situation as merely one more ill-turn of Fate, which had left him as usual at the bottom of the wheel. But his futile resentment was too funny a thing for his tormentors to allow to die out.

It was a remark made early that morning which set him to brooding over his wrongs, and finally led to the sup too much which precipitated the fight over the potato-pot. Batty Carson made it, in a hoarse whisper, all the voice left to him since the grippe sent him West in his senior year. (He had been the best tenor in his college glee-club.) Jimmy was moving a table into the shadow of the tents, in order that the daily game of poker might begin. Poker was all there was in that God-forsaken desert to save a man's reason, Batty declared, so they played it from breakfast till bed-time. As the usual group joined him around the table, he opened a new deck of cards and began shuffling it. Automatically he found the joker and flipped it out of the pack. It fell face up on the dry Bermuda grass and old Jimmy stooped to pick it up.

Batty stopped him with a laugh. "A seasoned old poker player like you stooping to pick up the joker!" he teased. "You know well enough only one game goes on this ranch, and the joker's no good in *that*." Then he winked at the others.

"That's what you'll be after awhile, Jimmy, if you don't stand up for your rights better than you are doing. Matsu will be taking every trick in the game, and you'll count for nothing more than just the joker of the pack."

Jimmy flared up with an indignant oath at the laugh which followed, tore the card in two, and would have gone off muttering vengeance on Batty himself, had not the young fellow stopped him and teased him back into good humour. But the remark rankled afterward because there was such a large element of truth in it. Jimmy was no fool even if he was slow-witted. He knew as well as any one else that he had never counted for much in any game Life had ever given him a hand in. He brooded over the fact until some sort of solace was necessary. After that he burned for an occasion to assert

himself. It came when Mrs. Welsh called to him to fill the wood-box. Just as he threw down his first armful of mesquite, the accident befell the potatoes, and he waited to see what Matsu would do.

What could Matsu do with sixteen hungry men listening for the dinner bell, but scoop out a big spoonful from the side of the pot where the ashes had fallen, toss it out of the window and heap the rest of the white fluffy mass into the hot dish awaiting it? Jimmy would have done the same in his day but now he thundered, "Throw out the whole potful, you pig of a heathen! Do you want to drive away every boarder on the ranch with your dirty tricks? Throw it out, I say."

With the good-nature that rarely failed him, Matsu only shrugged his shoulders, giggled his habitual giggle and proceeded, unmoved by threats.

"Go get 'notha drink," he advised, as Jimmy continued to glare at him. "Make you have heap much betta feeling. Not so big mad. Go get full."

Dinner was twenty minutes late that day. The boarders heard the reason from Hillis, who came in in his shirt sleeves to wait on the table, in place of Mrs. Welsh. Hillis was the dish-washer, a tall big-fisted lumberman from Maine, who, stranded at the close of an ill-starred prospecting tour, had taken temporary service in Mrs. Welsh's kitchen. He talked cheerfully of the disturbance as he clumped around the table, thrusting the dishes at each boarder in turn. They forgave his awkwardness in their interest in the fight.

"Jimmy began it," he told them. "Swung on to the pot and tried to pull it away from Jappy and throw out the stuff himself. But Jappy wouldn't have it, and batted him one on the head with the potato masher. Then Jimmy went in for blood, and grabbed the meat-knife, and would have put it into him in a pair of seconds if I hadn't tripped him up and sat on him. There was a hot time in there for a spell, the air was blue. Old Jimmy cussin' for all he was worth in the sand-flapper lingo, and Matsu going him one better every time in his pigeon English!"

"I suppose they'll both throw up their jobs now," remarked a dyspeptic looking man near the foot of the table. "I thought it was too good to last, and this God-forsaken Arizona desert can't hold more than one chef like Matsu. He's the perfection of his kind. I'd feel like hitting the trail myself if he should go."

"That's what Mrs. Welsh is afraid of," replied Hillis. "She's out there now trying to patch up the peace with him and coax him to stay. She told me not to tell you about the potatoes – thought it might turn some of you against your victuals; but it's too blamed funny to keep."

"For my part I hope she'll patch up the peace with Jimmy, too," said Batty Carson in his hoarse whisper. "He's the only amusing thing in all this howling wilderness. His being so far off the track himself makes it all the funnier when he goes to playing human guidepost for everybody else."

"He'll get his neck wrung a-doing it sometime," rejoined Hillis. "I told him so when he came fussing around at first, sticking his fingers in my dish-water to see if it was hot enough to kill germs. I told him I'd scald him instead of the dishes if he didn't let me alone. But it's just his way I suppose. He's been here off and on ever since Welsh bought the ranch."

"It's off this time," came Batty's croaking whisper. "There he goes now. Whew! He's hot! Just watch him hump himself along!"

The eight men whose backs were toward the window, turned in their chairs to follow the gaze of the others. They had a glimpse of a tall spare figure, hurrying stiffly past the house as fast as his rheumatic joints would allow. There was anger in every line of it. Even the red bandana around his throat seemed to express it. The fierce curves of his old hat-brim, the bristling hairs of his grizzly mustache, the snap of his lean jaws as the few snags left in his sunken gums opened and shut on a quid of tobacco, all told of an inward rage which would be long in cooling.

"Well, it's all over now," announced Hillis a moment later, coming back from the kitchen with a bowl of hot gravy. "Jimmy vowed one of them had to go, so Mrs. Welsh said he'd have to be that one. She could get a Mexican to chop wood and carry water, but she couldn't get another cook like

Matsu. And Jimmy's that mad and insulted and hurt he can't get off the place fast enough. He's gone now to pack his kit, muttering as if he'd swallowed a lot of distant thunder."

A laugh went around the long table. Usually the meals proceeded in silence except for a few spasmodic outbursts. Sitting all day in the sun, gazing at the monotonous desert landscape while one waits for winter to crawl by, is not a conversational stimulant. But to-day, even Maidlow, the grumpiest invalid in the lot, forgot his temperature and himself in adding his mite to the fund of anecdotes passing around the table about Jimmy. The conversation was less restrained than usual in the absence of the only lady and child which the ranch boasted. The Courtlands were spending the day in Ph[oe]nix, so there were three vacant chairs at the foot of the table. One was a child's high-chair with a bib hanging over its back. Hillis laid his hand on it in passing.

"Here's one that will miss the old rain-crow," he said, as if glad to find some good word about Jimmy. "Little Buddy Courtland comes about as near loving him as anybody could, I guess. *He'll miss him.*"

"It's Dane Ward who'll really miss him," declared the dyspeptic, glancing out of the window at the farthest row of tents to the one at the end whose screen door was closed. "Now Jimmy's gone I don't see what that poor fellow will do when he needs some one to sit up with him of nights."

"That's right," agreed Batty Carson. "Jimmy's been his right bower ever since he came. I'll give the old devil credit for that much."

While they talked, Jimmy, outside in the shack which he shared with Hillis, was gathering up in a furious rage his small bundle of belongings, cursing darkly as he threw boots, shirts and overalls into a confused heap in the middle of his bunk. Near at hand the tents stood empty in the December sun; five rows of them, four in a row with twenty foot spaces between. Each canvas-covered screen door swung open, and outside sat a camp chair or a big wooden rocker, with blanket or overcoat trailing across it, just as its occupant had left it to go in to dinner. A litter of newspapers and magazines lay all around on the dry Bermuda grass.

There was one exception. One screen door was closed, that of the farthest tent on the back row in line with Jimmy's shack. A sound of coughing – choked, convulsive coughing, had been coming from that direction for several minutes, but the sound did not penetrate Jimmy's consciousness until he heard his name called in an agonized tone. He craned his head out to listen. The call came again in a frantic gasp:

"Jimmy! Jimmy! Oh, *somebody* come!"

Then he recognized the voice. It was Dane Ward calling him. In his row with Matsu he had forgotten the boy; forgotten that he was to carry him his dinner and give him his medicine. He remembered with a pang of self-reproach that he had promised to come back with fresh wood as soon as he had carried an armful of wood to the kitchen. He started off on a stiff jog-trot towards the tent.

A moment later, maybe not even so long as that, for as he ran he knew that he might be racing against death, he dashed into the kitchen which he had sworn never again to enter, and caught up a handful of salt. Hillis, thinking he had lost his mind, almost dropped the tray of dessert dishes he was holding for Matsu to fill; but Mrs. Welsh recognizing the import of Jimmy's act, followed without question as he called back over his shoulder, "It's Dane! The worst hemorrhage the lad's had yet."

Hillis carried the news into the dining room with the dessert. Big and strong, never having had a sick day in his life, he could not know the effect it would produce, and Mrs. Welsh had not thought to warn him. The room grew silent. It was what might happen to any one of them; had happened in fact to all. The apprehension of it was the skeleton at their every feast. First one man and then another pushed back his plate and went out into the sunshine. They all liked Dane, the shy, quiet boy from some village in the New York hills. That was all they knew of him, for he always sat apart. Sometimes there was a book in his lap but he rarely read – just sat and gazed off towards the east with a hungry look in his big grey eyes. The homesick longing of them was heart-breaking to see.

They went back to their chairs and their naps and their newspapers, but the usual afternoon monotony was broken by the interest centering in the farthest tent in the last row. They glanced up furtively every time the door opened. It swung many times in the course of the afternoon, for Mrs. Welsh to go in and out, for the doctor to make a hurried visit, for Jimmy to come and go with crushed ice and clean towels, a spoon or a pitcher of fresh water.

For Jimmy, in his anxious ministrations, forgot his fight with Matsu, forgot that he had had no dinner, and that he was in the midst of preparations for leaving the ranch. The ugly facts did not come back to him till several hours had passed. Then he started up from the chair beside Dane's bed and tip-toed heavily across the floor. He would finish making up his bundle while the boy was asleep. The danger was past now. If he could get down to the Tempe road before dark, probably he could catch a ride the rest of the way into Ph[oe]nix. A board creaked and Dane opened his eyes.

"I wasn't asleep," he said weakly. "Hand me that little picture off the bureau, won't you, Jimmy?" Then as his fingers closed over it – "And roll the canvas to the top of the door please. I can't see."

Jimmy sat down again, impelled by the pitifulness of the thin white face. He knew the picture, having examined it privately on several occasions while sweeping the tent. It was a tin-type of two laughing school-girls, with their arms around each other. It was plain to him that one was Dane's sister. He guessed the relationship of the other when he saw that it was on the face unlike his that Dane's wistful eyes rested longest. Presently he slipped it under his pillow and lay so still that Jimmy thought he was asleep, until he saw a tear slipping slowly from under the closed eye-lids. Involuntarily the rough hand went out and closed in a sympathetic grasp over the white fingers on the coverlet. Dane bit his lip to hide their twitching and then broke out bitterly, but in a voice so weak that it came in gasps:

"That doctor back home lied to me! He *lied!* He knew that I was past saving when he sent me out here. He ought to have told me. Do you suppose I'd have let my mother mortgage her home – all she had in the world – to send me, if he hadn't led us to believe that the Arizona climate could work a miracle? He made it so certain that I'd get well right away, it seemed suicidal not to take the chance."

He stopped, almost strangled by a paroxysm of coughing, lay panting for a moment, and then began again, despite Jimmy's warning that it would make him worse to talk.

"Mother can never pay out without my help, and I've got to lie here to the end and think of what's in store for her and Sis, and then —*die and be buried out here in this awful desert!* It'll cost too much to be sent back home. Oh, how could a man lie like that to a person that's dying?"

The question staggered Jimmy a moment. He turned his eyes uneasily from Dane's piercing gaze in order that he might lie cheerfully himself.

"What are you thinking about dying for?" he demanded in his bluff way. "You'll be better than ever after this spell. It sort of cleaned out your pipes you know. You'll be busting bronchos with the best of them by spring if you keep up your courage. Look at Mr. Courtland now. He was worse off than you when he came, a heap sight. Had to be brought on a stretcher. *He's* getting well."

"No, it's different – everyway," answered Dane wearily. "He's got his family with him, and money and – everything. I haven't even my mother's picture. She never had any taken. If I had even that when the end comes it wouldn't seem quite so lonesome. But to think of all strange faces, and afterwards – to lie among strangers hundreds of miles away from home – oh, it nearly makes me crazy to think of the miles and miles of cactus and sand between us! I hate the sight of this awful country."

Jimmy looked out through the open door of the tent, across the dreary waste of desert, separated from the camp by only the irrigating ditch, and the unfrequented highroad, as if he were seeing it in a new light.

"Spect it might strike a fellow as sort of the end of nowhere the first time he sees it," he admitted. "I've lived here so long I kind of like it myself. But I know what you're craving to see. I lived back in the hills myself when I was a kid. I was brought up in York state."

Dane raised himself on his elbow, an excited flush on his face. "You, from home," he began. "New York – "

Jimmy pushed him back. "You're getting too frisky," he admonished. "You'll be took again if you ain't careful. Yes, I know just what you're pining for. You want to see the hills all red with squaw berries or pink in arbutus time; and the mountain brooks – nothing like these muddy old irrigating ditches – so clear you can see the pebbles in the bottom, and the trout flipping back and forth so fast you can hardly see their speckles. But Lord! boy – you don't want to go back there now in mid-winter. The roads are piled up with drifts to the top of the stone fences and the boughs of the sugar-bush are weighed down with snow till you'd think you was walking through a grove of Christmas trees."

"Oh, go *on!*" pleaded Dane, as he paused. His eyes were closed, but a smile rested on his face as if the scenes Jimmy described were his for the moment. "Jimmy, it's – it's like heaven to hear you talk about it! Don't stop."

To keep the smile on the white face, that rapt, ineffable smile of content, Jimmy talked on. Over forty years lay between him and the scenes he was recalling. He had wandered far afield from his straight-going, path-keeping Puritan family. He had been glad at times that they had lost track of him, and that wherever he went he was known only as "Jimmy." Gradually the reminiscences like the touch of a familiar hand on a troubled brow, soothed Dane into forgetfulness of his surroundings, and he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Just at dusk that evening, when Batty Carson went around to the kitchen for his usual glass of new milk, he was surprised to see Jimmy down by the wood-pile. He was vigorously at work, helping unload a wagon of mesquite, and quite as vigorously scolding the Indian who had brought it for coming so late.

"Thought he was going to leave," croaked Batty, nodding towards the wood-pile as he took the glass extended towards him.

Hillis chuckled. "Says he's staying on Dane's account; that it would have touched the heart of a coyote the way he begged not to be left to die among strangers. It seems they're both from the same state, so they're almost claiming kin. I rather guess though, that when he'd cooled down he was glad of any old excuse to stay, and when the boy begged him and Mrs. Welsh seconded the motion, he felt he could give in without any let-down to his dignity."

The Indian, gathering up his reins, rattled away in the empty wagon, and Jimmy began to fill his chip-basket, singing in a high, tremulous falsetto as he worked. His voice had been his pride in his youth. It was still sweet, although it cracked at times on the higher notes —

"Wa-ait for me at heav-un's gate,
Swe-et Belle Mahone!"

Hillis laughed. "Sings as if he fairly feels his wings sprouting. It's a sure sign he's at peace with the world when he trots out those sentimental old tunes. He doesn't sound now much like the man who was in here this noon, cussin' and slashing around with a butcher knife."

But Jimmy had not forgotten. He cooked his own supper that night, first ostentatiously wiping the skillet and everything else that Matsu had touched, with such an expression of disgust on his face that the little Jap's fine sense of humour was tickled. He shrugged his shoulders, giggled his usual jolly giggle, and afterwards mimicked the whole scene until Mrs. Welsh and Hillis nearly choked with laughter.

Dane was up in a few days, able to go to the dining room and to drive short distances. Young Mrs. Courtland spoke of his improvement to Jimmy one morning as they watched him drive away with Hillis in the ranch surrey. They were going to a neighbouring orange grove to replenish the stock in the storeroom. Jimmy, kneeling in the path, mending Buddy's wooden goat, drove a final tack before he straightened himself to answer.

"No, ma'am!" he said emphatically. "That boy'll never be what is to say really better. When he tears the last leaf off that calendar in his tent he ain't going to need next year's."

Mrs. Courtland looked up, shocked, frightened. "He seems almost as well as my husband, and *he* is going to get well." She said it defiantly.

"Sure," answered Jimmy. "But he isn't dying of homesickness and worry along with his lung trouble. He's got you and Buddy and the cash. He doesn't have to drive himself nearly crazy thinking that the time is bound to come when those he loves best will be left without a roof over their heads on account of him. It was worse than cruel – it was a downright crime for that doctor to build their hopes up so. If he'd had sense enough to doctor a June-bug he'd have seen that nothing can cure the lad. To send him on such a wild goose chase is bad enough, but to send him alone and as poor as he is – Good Lord – "

Jimmy paused, remembering his audience, just in time to stop the malediction on his tongue.

"But," urged Mrs. Courtland, unconsciously moved to the championship of the unknown doctor by the fact that her father was a physician, "other men have come alone and they seem to be getting on all right."

"Yes, but if you take notice they're all the kind that had bucked up against the world before they got sick, and were used to shifting for themselves. Now there's Batty Carson. *He's* going to get well. He goes about it as if he was training to get on a foot-ball team. So much deep breathing every so often, hot beef juice at nine, raw eggs at ten, fifty licks at the wood-pile at eleven – What with his sun baths and water baths and rubdowns, looking at his thermometer and weighing himself and feeling his pulse and counting his breaths and watching the clock, he ain't got time to miss his folks. Most of the boarders this year happen to be that sort, or else they've got money to go in for all kinds of amusements that make them forget their troubles. But there was a pitiful lot of cases here last winter. They was too far gone when they come to have any fight in 'em. And that's what I say – it's heartless of the doctors to ship them off here when they've only one chance in a thousand. The West is full of 'em and it ain't right."

Batty Carson, shuffling cards at the little table set in the shade behind the next tent, looked up with a wink when he heard his name mentioned. The others in the game smiled with him as Jimmy went on, and a voice from one of the farther tents called, "Go it, Jimmy! You ought to hire a hall and not waste all that eloquence on a lot of lungers who already vote your ticket. Wish you'd bring me a box of matches when you get around to it."

Taking the tents in order, as was his custom, emptying slops and filling pitchers, Jimmy gradually worked his way along the row until he came to the one outside of which the card-game was going on in silence. As he moved around inside setting things to rights, Batty Carson held up a finger and winked.

"Listen!" he whispered. There was a clinking of bottles on the wash-stand, then a soft splash into the slop-jar, and Jimmy cleared his throat with a muffled "kha-a-a" as if he had just swallowed something good.

"The old buzzard's been at my alcohol bottle again," whispered Batty. "Last time he went against it he didn't leave me enough for one good rub-down, and then he had the face to reel off a long temperance lecture on what a pity it was that so many of us fellows kept spirits in our tents."

A loud laugh followed Jimmy as he walked out innocently clinking his pails. There was a smell of alcohol in his wake. He had spilled some on his clothes. Ignorant of the cause of their mirth he looked back at them over his shoulder with a friendly smile. As he dropped the bucket into the cistern out by the bamboo thicket, his voice floated back in a high cracked falsetto:

"Wa-ait for me at heav-un's gate,
Swe-et Belle Mahone!"

Batty laughed again. "What kind of a bet will you fellows put up on Jimmy's prospect of even getting within gun-shot of heaven's gate?" he asked.

"I never bet on a dead certainty," answered the man whose turn it was to play. "He knows he's sampled about everything that goes on in a mining camp or anywhere else in a new territory, and he's nothing to show for himself that St. Peter could take as a passport. But he isn't worrying, as long as he's provided for in this world. His pension keeps him in clothes and tobacco and when he's too old to work the Soldiers' Home will take him in."

"He's not worrying over the next world either," some one else added. "Mrs. Welsh says he has sixty dollars salted down in bank that he's saved to have masses said for the repose of his soul. Not that he's tied *his* belief to anything in particular, but he once had a wife back in his young days, who was one of the faithful."

"Let us hope that particular bank won't suspend payment," laughed Batty, "for it's his only hope of ever joining his Belle Mahone."

Dane came back from his drive with new interest in life. The sight of the olive groves and almond orchards, the alfalfa fields and acres of lemon and orange trees lying green and gold between the irrigating canals, had lured him away from thoughts of his condition. He was not so shy and speechless that day at dinner. He even walked out on the desert a little way that afternoon, with Buddy clinging to his hand to pilot him to the wonderful nest of a trap-door spider. For a day or two he made feeble efforts to follow Batty Carson's example. Instead of watching the eastern horizon he watched Mrs. Courtland ply her embroidery needle or bead-work loom, preparing for the Christmas now so near at hand.

But it was only a few days till he was back in the depths again. The slightest exertion exhausted him. Burning with fever he clung to Jimmy, talking of the white hillsides at home, the icicles on the eaves, the snow-laden cedars. Then when the chill came again he shivered under the blankets Jimmy tucked around him, and buried his face in the pillow to hide the tears that shamed him.

"I can't help it," he gasped at last. "I hate myself for being so babyish. But, Jimmy, it's like living in a nightmare to have that one thought haunt me day and night. I don't mind the dying – I'll be glad to go. It racks me so to cough. But it's the dying so far away from home – alone! I can't go without seeing mother *once* more! Just *once*, Jimmy, one little minute."

The old man's mouth twitched. There was no answer to that kind of an appeal.

"Mail!" called a voice outside. The ranch wagon had come back from Ph[oe]nix, and Hillis was going from tent to tent with the letter-bag. "Mr. Dane Ward," he called. "One letter and one package. Christmas is beginning a week ahead of time," he added as Jimmy came to the door.

Dane sat up and opened the letter first, with fingers that trembled in their eagerness. He read snatches of it aloud, his face brightening with each new item of interest.

"They're going to have an oyster supper and a Christmas tree for the Sunday-school. And Charlie Morrow broke into the mill-pond last Saturday, and the whole skating party nearly drowned trying to fish him out. Mr. Miller's barn burned last week, and Ed Morris and May Dawson ran away and were married at Beaver Dam Station. It's like opening a window into the village and looking down every street to get mother's letters. I can see everybody that passes by, and pretty near smell what people are cooking for dinner. She's sending my Christmas present a week ahead of time, because from what I wrote about the cold nights she was sure I'd need it right away. Cut the string, please, Jimmy."

Two soft outing flannel shirts rolled out of the paper wrapping. Dane spread them on the bed beside him with fond touches.

"She made every stitch of them herself," he said proudly, smiling as he turned the page for the last sentence.

"Christmas will not be Christmas to us with you so far away, dear boy, but we are going to be brave and make as merry as we can, looking forward to the time when that blessed land of sunshine will send you back to us, strong and well."

The letter dropped from his hands and Jimmy heard him say with a shivering, indrawn breath, "But that time will never come! Never!" Then catching up the mass of soft flannel as if it brought to him in some way the touch of the dear hands that had shaped it, he flung himself back on the pillow, burying his face in it to stifle the sobs that would slip out between his clenched teeth.

"Never go home again!" he moaned once. "*God!* How can I stand it!" Then in a pitiful whisper, "Oh, mother, I *want* you so."

Jimmy got up and tip-toed softly out of the tent.

That night, Batty Carson, taking his after-supper constitutional, strode up and down outside the camp, his hands in his overcoat pockets. The little tents, each with a lamp inside, throwing grotesque shadows on the white canvas walls, made him think of a cluster of Chinese lanterns. Only the last one in the last row was dark, and moved by a friendly impulse to ask after Dane's welfare, he strolled over towards it. Had it not been for the odour of a rank pipe, he might have stumbled over Jimmy, in the camp chair outside Dane's door.

"Playing sentinel?" he asked.

"No, just keeping the lad company a spell. He can't bear to hear them kiotes howl."

"You're lively company, I must say," bantered Batty. "I didn't hear much animated conversation as I came up."

Jimmy glanced over his shoulder. "No," he said in a lower tone. "He's asleep now."

Lighting a cigar, Batty unfolded a camp stool which was leaning against one of the guy ropes, and seated himself. Jimmy seemed in a confidential mood.

"I've been setting here," he began, "studying about a Christmas present that had ought to be made this year. *I* ain't got no call to make it, but there's plenty of others that could do it and never miss it. I've got an old uncle that sets 'em up now and then, but he isn't liable to send me another check before February, so *I*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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