

# AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

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(Continued from last week.)

Without another word Hicks led the way to the cellar, and there, sure enough, they found Ebenezer, the brave and the bold, buried under a mass of potatoes which had rolled down over him when he had attempted to secrete himself by burrowing into them.

He looked sheepish and cheap when he was hauled out, and when the men laughed at him he was in half a mind to get angry, but he thought better of it and grinned instead.

"You woman loved you war gwine to jine the war," Pap Sampson said, with a smile, "but we reckoned you warnt hurtin' so had as all that to whup no battles, an it looks like you was war right."

"I-I did start to jine the war," Ebenezer stammered, "but how could I git to go any fudder when I done got hatched under them derned taters?"

"Did you 'low the war had done ratched den to Hicks' cellar," Pap Sampson asked, "and them taters for a battle to whup?"

Ebenezer grinned, but made no reply. His wife, however, had come up just in time to hear Pap's question, said:

"I reckon, Pap Sampson, you all thinks you uns is powerful smart. My land, didn't none of you uns never start nowhar an git lost on the way? Humph! Like as if Ebenezer couldn't 'a' fell into that cellar or got sort of ratched an run into it by mistake! Reckon the next thing you all 'll be tryin' to make out that Ebenezer are a sward."

"Lord, Mis'us Sparks, we don't need to do nary sich a thing as that," Pap Sampson replied promptly. "Ebenezer has done more than that out as plain as the nose on your face hisself. Yes, s'ee."

"Guess Ebenezer an Sim Banks has done showed jest how brave they are," Jason Roberts observed, with a laugh. "One of 'em s-bidin in a cellar an the other'n tearin down the road lippey-clippey, an all on account of a drove of old cows. Say, I bet the war'd soon be fit if they uns had a whack at it."

"Lord! Wouldn't it, though?" Pap said, with a chuckle. "Why, it'd jest be whupped all to frazzles in no time."

Then everybody laughed—everybody except Sparks and Banks and their wives. The two first hung their heads in shame. Mrs. Sparks bristled up in her husband's defense, while Mrs. Banks gave her husband a look full of disgust and coolly turned her back on him.

Mrs. Mann noticed the conduct of Mrs. Banks and promptly called attention to it by saying:

"Lord, Louesey, you ain't nigh so quick stand up for your husband as Betty Sparks is for her'n. You acts for all the world jest like you is plumb ashamed of Sim."

"I am," Mrs. Banks replied flatly. "Who could help being ashamed of a coward, I'd like to know?"

Sim looked up at his wife, a pained expression in his eyes and his face very red.

"Louesey," he gasped, "you dast to talk that a-way about me an we uns jest been married a year?"

"I dare to speak the truth," Mrs. Banks replied cuttingly, her lips curling with scorn. "I'm plumb ashamed of you."

"Then you don't love me none," Sim whimpered broken heartedly. "A wife what loves her old man ain't goin' to run him down afore other folks. Louesey, you don't love me; you don't love me!"

Mrs. Banks, instead of being touched, gave her husband one scornful glance and turned and walked away.

With her utter want of tact Mrs. Mann said:

"I guess, Sim Banks, Louesey's been a-contrastin you with that Mr. Melvin, an I reckon she thinks you ain't much shakes compared with him."

Sim's eyes flashed fire in an instant, and, trembling with anger, he cried:

"You are a-lyin, Mrs. Mann, when you say any sich a thing as that, an if you was a man I'd whup you till your hide wouldn't hold shakes. Hain't nobody got no call to speak gary a word ag'in Louesey, an I ain't goin' to stand still an let no sich a word be spoke. That's jest what I got to say, an I mean it."

Mrs. Mann sniffed contemptuously. "Sim Banks," she said, "you kin jest stand up for Louesey all you please, but I mind she didn't stand up for you none, an my notion is she hain't goin' to stand up for you, no matter what anybody says. I've got eyes, an what I see I see. Louesey was plumb struck with that man, an you mark my words, Sim Banks, if she ever gits to know him she'll learn to love his little finger better than she'll ever love your whole body. You jest bear them words in mind, Sim Banks, an if you live you will find that they are the gospel truth."

Mrs. Mann, though actuated by a selfish interest and influenced by that feeling of bitter enmity which a woman has for a successful rival in the affections of the man she loves, spoke nearer the truth than any of her hearers dreamed—nearer even than she herself supposed.

## CHAPTER III

SEEKING INFORMATION. James Melvin was in no very pleasant humor to begin with.

Since early morning he had been in the saddle, and for 12 long hours he had followed the tortuous course of a dimly marked road which wound uncertainly up and down and in and out among the rugged hills that border the Missouri river.

His assertion that the horse he rode possessed a gait like that of a cow was not an exaggeration, and neither was that other assertion, that he was hungrier than a bear. He had eaten nothing since early morning, and his breakfast, secured at a log cabin back in the hills, had not been anything like as sumptuous as he could have desired.

And now, on top of these discomforts, James Melvin had suddenly awakened to a realization of the fact that he was lost—lost, with night and darkness coming on and nothing to guide him back to his course.

Since leaving Beckett's Mill he had traveled the main road for a short distance, then had turned off to follow a path that led up a ridge through a dark, heavy forest. For a time he got on very well, but by and by he came to a point where the path gave out, and, having nothing to further guide him, he began to ramble about the wood in an uncertain manner. This he continued for an hour before he discovered that he was merely wandering around and around, and it dawned on him that he was lost.

He reined up his horse to consider his situation and to try to decide which way he had better do under the circumstances. He found that reining up his horse was the easiest thing he had attempted that day. The animal may have possessed other strong points, but the speed with which he came to a halt was certainly far the strongest.

While Melvin sat there puzzling over his situation, unable to decide which way to turn, his attention was attracted by a noise which came from a point just beyond a clump of trees. That noise sounded like some one coughing, and it brought a thrill of joy and a ray of hope to Melvin's weary soul.

Getting his horse in motion as soon as possible and after some effort, he rode forward until he had passed the trees. There, sitting on a log, with his elbows resting on his knees and his face in his hands, was an old man who had every appearance of being a native of Fossom Ridge.

Melvin was glad to see the old fellow, for he had no doubt that he would easily gain from him the information necessary to guide him to a place of refuge for the night. It must be remembered that Melvin was a total stranger to Fossom Ridge and to the manners and peculiarities of its people. Had he not been he would have been far less sanguine of the prospect the discovery of the old man opened up.

Approaching to within speaking distance, Melvin passed the usual salutation.

"Melvin was glad to see the old fellow. To his surprise, the other took no notice. Approaching still nearer, he tried again.

"A pleasant evening," he said. Still no reply and no movement on the part of the other.

Thinking the old man must be hard of hearing, Melvin advanced nearer yet and, raising his voice almost to a shout, said:

"Pretty rough country around here, isn't it?"

No reply, and not even so much as the stir of a hand or foot. Apparently the old man was totally unaware of Melvin's presence even.

Becoming desperate, Melvin drew closer still and, raising his voice to its highest pitch, shouted:

"Are you deaf?"

There was a momentary silence. Then slowly the old fellow raised his head and, looking Melvin over calmly and deliberately from head to foot and back again, said quietly:

"Young feller, air you a-spy'in for a fight?"

Melvin started back and opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

"Why, no," he stammered presently; "why do you ask that?"

"Are you achin to be chawed up?" the old man continued, taking no notice of Melvin's question.

"Of course not."

"Are you wantin to be larruped around here among these saplin's till your hide's wore plumb into fiddle strings an thar ain't a piece left of you big enough to bait a fishhook?"

"Certainly not. What do you mean by asking such things?"

"Are you pinin for me to take you by the heels an-thrash the bushes off of a

couple of acres of ground with you?"

"No. But why?"

"Then what you mean by comin a-foolin around me this a-way? Think I'm a derned fool an don't know nothin' in? Reckon I don't know it's a nice day? Reckon I don't know it's a rough country? Reckon it's anybody's business whether I'm deaf or not?"

Melvin was so surprised at the old man's words and manner that it was a full minute before he recovered sufficiently to make a reply. At last, however, he said:

"I am sorry if I have offended you, and I beg your pardon. I meant no harm, I assure you. I—I have lost the road."

"Waal, s'pose you have. I ain't found it."

"I thought you might be able and willing to direct me so that I can find it."

"Did I cause you to lose it?"

"Certainly not."

"Am I anyhow responsible for your losin' it?"

"No."

"Then it hain't none of my duty to help you to find it, I reckon."

"Don't you ever do anything to accommodate people?"

"I tend to my own business."

"And you won't even so much as direct me to the road?"

The old man was silent for a moment. Then, straightening himself up, he said:

"I see jest how it are, stranger. You are gwine to keep on a-foolin around here an chawin on the rag till I jest nat'rally light in on an give you the all'redest wust lek in ever anybody got in all this world."

Melvin drew back from the old man and eyed him curiously. He didn't know what to make of such strange conduct, and he thought the man must be crazy. Had his situation been less desperate he would have passed on without waiting to exchange another word, but under the circumstances he felt that he must gain some information from the old man if possible, even at the risk of getting a fight on his hands. So he made one more effort.

"Say," he began, "darkness is comin on, and I can't think of spending the night here in this wood."

"Can't you?" the other said. "Waal, in that case why don't you git out of it, then?"

"I would if I could direct me."

The native remained silent. Melvin waited a moment, then added:

"I say, won't you open your heart just a little and tell me where I can find a house?"

"Find it anywhere you blame please for all of me. Fust I knowed any house had been lost."

"You know what I mean."

"Reckon you mean what you say."

"I mean can't you direct me to a house where I can spend the night?"

"Mebby I could."

"Well, why don't you?"

"No, but you certainly ought to be accommodating enough to do that much for a stranger."

"Mebby I ought, but the fact is I ain't keerin a darn whar you spend the night. The whole world's afore you, an you can jest stop whar you darn please. Now you have heard me, an the best thing you can do is to git. You have picked an nagged at me long enough, an I ain't a-gwine to stand much more of your follin."

"And you won't direct me to a—"

"It ain't my business to direct you to nothin. You ain't got me hired for no sich a purpose."

few months later the wedding.

Then there came an awakening of which she had never dreamed—a sad, bitter awakening that was like a cruel crucifixion. She realized that to make marriage sacred and happy there must be mutual love, and she knew that on her part there was none, and she felt that the time would never come when there would be.

Sitting alone in her room that night, she folded her arms on the table and, pillowing her head on them, wept as though her heart would break. She had known many unhappy hours, but never any so thoroughly miserable as that.

She felt toward her husband as she had never felt before. Often and often she had experienced a feeling of dislike for some trait of his character, but it was not until now that she felt that she hated the man himself. There had been many times when his absence was a relief to her, but it was never until this night that she had wished with all her heart that she might never see him again.

That James Melvin had much to do with her feelings she could not help but admit, although the admission caused her face to burn with shame. The knowledge that another man, and that man at that, could be the means of making her despise her husband was bitterly humiliating, and she wished with all her heart that she could dispise Melvin as well; but, alas, that was something she could not do.

While she sat there, Sim came into the room. He was late, and he had walked two miles out into the country and back. He was restless and uneasy and far more unhappy than he had ever been in all his life.

Mrs. Mann's remark, coupled with the words Louesey had spoken, had made a much deeper impression on him than he would have admitted to any living soul, than he even liked to admit to himself.

That there was something lacking in his married life he knew only too well, and he had known it from his wedding day, but never until now had it occurred to him how serious that lacking might be. That Louisa did not love him as a wife should he had been long assured, but the possibility of her loving another man was something that had never crossed his mind until this day, and the bare thought of such a thing fell on him with a crushing blow.

"Great God!" he cried aloud as he tramped the lonely country road. "Such a thing cannot, must not, shall not be! It would kill me. O God, it would kill me!"

When he entered the room, Louisa did not look up at him, and when he spoke her name she paid no attention to him. He waited a moment, then asked her what was the matter.

"Nothing," she replied between her sobs.

"Then what are you cryin for?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered again.

"Is it anything I've done?" he questioned.

"No."

"Is it what Mary Mann said?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing."

"But it is somethin, Louesey. You know it is. Won't you tell me what?"

She shook her head.

"Did you hear what Mary Mann said this evenin down there on the street?"

She asked him again.

"She said you didn't love me an that if ever you got to know that stranger you'd love his little finger better than you love my whole body. Do you know what I told her?"

"No."

"Well, I give her a settler, I guess, for once. I said, 'Miss Mann, you are a-lyin when you say any sich a thing as that, an if you was a man I'd whup you till your hide wouldn't hold shakes.' Them's the very words I said to her, an I meant 'em too."

He paused as if expecting his wife to speak, but she remained silent. He hoped that she would be pleased with him for speaking so strongly in her defense, and he felt hurt when she took no notice of his words. Presently he went on, saying:

"Them was hard things you said about me down there today, Louesey, an I'd never 'a' thought you'd a done it. I guess, though, you didn't mean it, did you?"

"Do you want me to tell you a lie?" she asked in turn.

"No, of course not."

"Then you'd better not ask such questions."

"You did mean it, then?"

She hesitated a moment, then said: "If I hadn't meant it, I wouldn't have said it. Now I hope you're satisfied."

fall in love with every man that comes along?"

"No; I never said anything about you fallin in love with anybody."

"Don't you insinuate anything of the kind either. It will be time enough for you to accuse me of thinking that innn great when I have said or done something to give you a reason for doing it, but not before. You continue to say such things as that to me, and I'll turn

She wept as though her heart would break you with my whole heart and despite you so long as I live."

She arose and swept out of the room, leaving Sim dumb with astonishment. It was the first time in her life that she had ever shown such spirit as that, and he did not know what to make of it. Still, he was more rejoiced than angered by her words, for he reasoned that they proved conclusively that she had not been struck by Melvin's appearance and that there was no probability of Mrs. Mann's prediction coming true.

Almost light hearted he went out on the street and walked up and down in the cool night air. He had been walking so for a quarter of an hour when in passing a house he heard his name called softly. He stopped and looked around, and a woman stepped out of

"You done Louesey a great wrong," the shadow of a tree and stood leaning over a fence near him. It was Mrs. Mann, and, looking up into his face, she smiled sweetly.

"Sim," she said, with a pretty air of penitence, "I am sorry that I said anything today to make you mad at me, an I hope you'll forgive me. Won't you please?"

Sim hesitated for a moment, then said:

"You done Louesey a great wrong, Mrs. Mann."

"Don't call me that, Sim," she interrupted. "Don't you know I despise that name?"

"Do you? Why?"

"If you was a woman an had to bear the name of somebody you didn't love, you'd know why."

"Didn't you love your husband?"

"You know I loved 'em, Sim?"

"How should I know that?"

"You ought to know that a woman never loves but one man."

"An in your case Dick Mann wasn't that one?"

"No."

"Who was it?"

Mrs. Mann blushed and acted confused and finally stole a sly glance at Sim's face that ought to have told him the whole story. But he was thinking of something else and looking in another direction, so the effect of that smile and that glance was to a great extent lost.

"You ought to know that without askin," she said demurely.

"Maybe I ought, but I don't, an I reckon it don't make no difference now."

"No, I reckon it don't, not to you anyway, with a sad sigh. 'But you'll call me Mary, won't you, Sim?'"

"Why, I guess so, if you're very particular about it. It don't make any difference to me."

"It does to me. It makes all the difference in the world what you call me. It don't matter about anybody else, though."

"Well, I'll call you Mary, then."

"Thank you. An now, Sim, you ain't goin to be mad at me any more, are you?"

"No, I guess I won't be mad at you, but you done Louesey wrong. You had no right to say that about that stranger."

"No, I hadn't, Sim. I know that now. But I can't bear to hear you talked about the way you was, an I felt I jest had to take Louesey down a peg or two. I oughtn't to have said it, but since I have said it I ain't goin to take no backward. Louesey don't love you, an she never will love you, but as certain as my name's Mary Mann she'll fall in love with that Melvin if she ever gits to know him."

"I don't believe it. While ago she got as mad as a wet hen 'cause I said somethin 'bout her thinkin him great shakes."

(To be Continued)

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