|  |
| --- |
| When I was young, I went looking for gold in California. |
| I never found enough to make me rich. |
| But I did discover a beautiful part of the country. |
| It was called "the Stanislau." |
| The Stanislau was like Heaven on Earth. |
| It had bright green hills and deep forests where soft winds touched the trees. |
| Other men, also looking for gold, had reached the Stanislau hills of California many years before I did. |
| They had built a town in the valley with sidewalks and stores, banks and schools. |
| They had also built pretty little houses for their families. |
| At first, they found a lot of gold in the Stanislau hills. |
| But their good luck did not last. |
| After a few years, the gold disappeared. |
| By the time I reached the Stanislau, all the people were gone, too. |
| Grass now grew in the streets. |
| And the little houses were covered by wild rose bushes. |
| Only the sound of insects filled the air as I walked through the empty town that summer day so long ago. |
| Then, I realized I was not alone after all. |
| A man was smiling at me as he stood in front of one of the little houses. |
| This house was not covered by wild rose bushes. |
| A nice little garden in front of the house was full of blue and yellow flowers. |
| White curtains hung from the windows and floated in the soft summer wind. |
| Still smiling, the man opened the door of his house and motioned to me. |
| I went inside and could not believe my eyes. |
| I had been living for weeks in rough mining camps with other gold miners. |
| We slept on the hard ground, ate canned beans from cold metal plates and spent our days in the difficult search for gold. |
| Here in this little house, my spirit seemed to come to life again. |
| I saw a bright rug on the shining wooden floor. |
| Pictures hung all around the room. |
| And on little tables there were seashells, books and china vases full of flowers. |
| A woman had made this house into a home. |
| The pleasure I felt in my heart must have shown on my face. |
| The man read my thoughts. |
| "Yes," he smiled, "it is all her work. |
| Everything in this room has felt the touch of her hand." |
| One of the pictures on the wall was not hanging straight. |
| He noticed it and went to fix it. |
| He stepped back several times to make sure the picture was really straight. |
| Then he gave it a gentle touch with his hand. |
| "She always does that," he explained to me. |
| "It is like the finishing pat a mother gives her child's hair after she has brushed it. |
| I have seen her fix all these things so often that I can do it just the way she does. |
| I don't know why I do it. |
| I just do it." |
| As he talked, I realized there was something in this room that he wanted me to discover. |
| I looked around. |
| When my eyes reached a corner of the room near the fireplace, he broke into a happy laugh and rubbed his hands together. |
| "That's it!" |
| he cried out. |
| "You have found it! |
| I knew you would. |
| It is her picture. |
| I went to a little black shelf that held a small picture of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. |
| There was a sweetness and softness in the woman's expression that I had never seen before. |
| The man took the picture from my hands and stared at it. |
| "She was nineteen on her last birthday. |
| That was the day we were married. |
| When you see her…oh, just wait until you meet her!" |
| "Where is she now?" |
| I asked. |
| "Oh, she is away," the man sighed, putting the picture back on the little black shelf. |
| "She went to visit her parents. |
| They live forty or fifty miles from here. |
| She has been gone two weeks today." |
| "When will she be back?" |
| I asked. |
| "Well, this is Wednesday," he said slowly. |
| "She will be back on Saturday, in the evening." |
| I felt a sharp sense of regret. |
| "I am sorry, because I will be gone by then," I said. |
| "Gone? |
| No! |
| Why should you go? |
| Don't go. |
| She will be so sorry. |
| You see, she likes to have people come and stay with us." |
| "No, I really must leave," I said firmly. |
| He picked up her picture and held it before my eyes. |
| "Here," he said. |
| "Now you tell her to her face that you could have stayed to meet her and you would not." |
| Something made me change my mind as I looked at the picture for a second time. |
| I decided to stay. |
| The man told me his name was Henry. |
| That night, Henry and I talked about many different things, but mainly about her. |
| The next day passed quietly. |
| Thursday evening we had a visitor. |
| He was a big, grey-haired miner named Tom. |
| "I just came for a few minutes to ask when she is coming home," he explained. |
| "Is there any news?" |
| "Oh yes," the man replied. |
| "I got a letter. |
| Would you like to hear it? |
| He took a yellowed letter out of his shirt pocket and read it to us. |
| It was full of loving messages to him and to other people – their close friends and neighbors. |
| When the man finished reading it, he looked at his friend. |
| "Oh no, you are doing it again, Tom! |
| You always cry when I read a letter from her. |
| I'm going to tell her this time!" |
| "No, you must not do that, Henry," the grey-haired miner said. |
| "I am getting old. |
| And any little sorrow makes me cry. |
| I really was hoping she would be here tonight." |
| The next day, Friday, another old miner came to visit. |
| He asked to hear the letter. |
| The message in it made him cry, too. |
| "We all miss her so much," he said. |
| Saturday finally came. |
| I found I was looking at my watch very often. |
| Henry noticed this. |
| "You don't think something has happened to her, do you?" |
| he asked me. |
| I smiled and said that I was sure she was just fine. |
| But he did not seem satisfied. |
| I was glad to see his two friends, Tom and Joe, coming down the road as the sun began to set. |
| The old miners were carrying guitars. |
| They also brought flowers and a bottle of whiskey. |
| They put the flowers in vases and began to play some fast and lively songs on their guitars. |
| Henry's friends kept giving him glasses of whiskey, which they made him drink. |
| When I reached for one of the two glasses left on the table, Tom stopped my arm. |
| "Drop that glass and take the other one!" |
| he whispered. |
| He gave the remaining glass of whiskey to Henry just as the clock began to strike midnight. |
| Henry emptied the glass. |
| His face grew whiter and whiter. |
| "Boys," he said, "I am feeling sick. |
| I want to lie down." |
| Henry was asleep almost before the words were out of his mouth. |
| In a moment, his two friends had picked him up and carried him into the bedroom. |
| They closed the door and came back. |
| They seemed to be getting ready to leave. |
| So I said, "Please don't go gentlemen. |
| She will not know me. |
| I am a stranger to her." |
| They looked at each other. |
| "His wife has been dead for nineteen years," Tom said. |
| "Dead?" |
| I whispered. |
| "Dead or worse," he said. |
| "She went to see her parents about six months after she got married. |
| On her way back, on a Saturday evening in June, when she was almost here, the Indians captured her. |
| No one ever saw her again. |
| Henry lost his mind. |
| He thinks she is still alive. |
| When June comes, he thinks she has gone on her trip to see her parents. |
| Then he begins to wait for her to come back. |
| He gets out that old letter. |
| And we come around to visit so he can read it to us. |
| "On the Saturday night she is supposed to come home, we come here to be with him. |
| We put a sleeping drug in his drink so he will sleep through the night. |
| Then he is all right for another year." |
| Joe picked up his hat and his guitar. |
| "We have done this every June for nineteen years," he said. |
| "The first year there were twenty-seven of us. |
| Now just the two of us are left." |
| He opened the door of the pretty little house. |
| And the two old men disappeared into the darkness of the Stanislau. |