

SHORT STORY AMERICA

THE HOBO AND THE FAIRY

JACK LONDON

He lay on his back. So heavy was his sleep that the stamp of hoofs and cries of the drivers from the bridge that crossed the creek did not rouse him. Wagon after wagon, loaded high with grapes, passed the bridge on the way up the valley to the winery, and the coming of each wagon was like the explosion of sound and commotion in the lazy quiet of the afternoon.

But the man was undisturbed. His head had slipped from the folded newspaper, and the straggling, unkempt hair was matted with the foxtails and burrs of the dry grass on which it lay. He was not a pretty sight. His mouth was open, disclosing a gap in the upper row where several teeth at some time had been knocked out. He breathed stertorously, at times grunting and moaning with the pain of his sleep. Also, he was very restless, tossing his arms about, making jerky, half-convulsive movements, and at times rolling his head from side to side in the burrs. This restlessness seemed occasioned partly by some internal discomfort, and partly by the sun that streamed down on his face and by the flies that buzzed and lighted and crawled upon the nose and cheeks and eyelids. There was no other place for them to crawl, for the rest of the face was covered with matted beard,

slightly grizzled, but greatly dirt-stained and weather-discolored.

The cheek-bones were blotched with the blood congested by the debauch that was evidently being slept off. This, too, accounted for the persistence with which the flies clustered around the mouth, lured by the alcohol-laden exhalations. He was a powerfully built man, thick-necked, broad-shouldered, with sinewy wrists and toil-distorted hands. Yet the distortion was not due to recent toil, nor were the callouses other than ancient that showed under the dirt of the one palm upturned. From time to time this hand clenched tightly and spasmodically into a fist, large, heavy-boned and wicked-looking.

The man lay in the dry grass of a tiny glade that ran down to the tree-fringed bank of the stream. On either side of the glade was a fence, of the old stake-and-rider type, though little of it was to be seen, so thickly was it overgrown by wild blackberry bushes, scrubby oaks and young madrono trees. In the rear, a gate through a low paling fence led to a snug, squat bungalow, built in the California Spanish style and seeming to have been compounded directly from the landscape of which it was so justly a part. Neat and trim and modestly sweet was the bungalow, redolent of comfort and repose, telling with quiet certitude of some one that knew, and that had sought and found.

Through the gate and into the glade came as dainty a little maiden as ever stepped out of an illustration made especially to show how dainty little maidens may be. Eight years she might have been, and, possibly, a trifle more, or less. Her little waist and little black-stockinged calves showed how delicately fragile she was; but the fragility was of mould only. There was no hint of anemia in the clear, healthy complexion nor in the quick, tripping step. She was a little, delicious blond, with hair spun of gossamer gold and wide blue eyes that were but slightly veiled by the long lashes. Her expression was of sweetness and happiness; it belonged by right to any face that sheltered in the bungalow.

She carried a child's parasol, which she was careful not to tear against the scrubby branches and bramble bushes as she sought for wild poppies along the edge of the fence. They were late poppies, a third generation, which had been unable to resist the call of the warm October sun.

Having gathered along one fence, she turned to cross to the opposite fence. Midway in the glade she came upon the tramp. Her startle was merely a startle. There was no fear in it. She stood and looked long and curiously at the forbidding spectacle, and was about to turn back when the sleeper moved restlessly and rolled his hand among the burrs. She noted the sun on his face, and the buzzing flies; her face grew solicitous, and for a moment she debated with herself. Then she tiptoed to his side, interposed the parasol between him and the sun, and brushed away the flies. After a time, for greater ease, she sat down beside him.

An hour passed, during which she occasionally shifted the parasol from one tired hand to the other. At first the sleeper had been restless, but, shielded from the flies and the sun, his breathing became gentler and his movements ceased. Several times, however, he really frightened her. The first was the worst, coming abruptly and without warning. "Christ! How deep! How deep!" the man murmured from some profound of dream. The parasol was agitated; but the little girl controlled herself and continued her self-appointed ministrations.

Another time it was a gritting of teeth, as of some intolerable agony. So terribly did the teeth crunch and grind together that it seemed they must crush into fragments. A little later he suddenly stiffened out. The hands clenched and the face set with the savage resolution of the dream. The eyelids trembled from the shock of the fantasy, seemed about to open, but did not. Instead, the lips muttered:

“No; no! And once more no. I won’t peach.” The lips paused, then went on. “You might as well tie me up, warden, and cut me to pieces. That’s all you can get outa me—blood. That’s all any of you-uns has ever got outa me in this hole.”

After this outburst the man slept gently on, while the little girl still held the parasol aloft and looked down with a great wonder at the frowsy, unkempt creature, trying to reconcile it with the little part of life that she knew. To her ears came the cries of men, the stamp of hoofs on the bridge, and the creak and groan of wagons heavy laden. It was a breathless California Indian summer day. Light fleeces of cloud drifted in the azure sky, but to the west heavy cloud banks threatened with rain. A bee droned lazily by. From farther thickets came the calls of quail, and from the fields the songs of meadow larks. And oblivious to it all slept Ross Shanklin—Ross Shanklin, the tramp and outcast, ex-convict 4379, the bitter and unbreakable one who had defied all keepers and survived all brutalities.

Texas-born, of the old pioneer stock that was always tough and stubborn, he had been unfortunate. At seventeen years of age he had been apprehended for horse stealing. Also, he had been convicted of stealing seven horses which he had not stolen, and he had been sentenced to fourteen years’ imprisonment. This was severe under any circumstances, but with him it had been especially severe, because there had been no prior convictions against him. The sentiment of the people who believed him guilty had been that two years was adequate punishment for the youth, but the county attorney, paid according to the convictions he secured, had made seven charges against him and earned seven fees. Which goes to show that the county attorney valued twelve years of Ross Shanklin’s life at less than a few dollars.

Young Ross Shanklin had toiled terribly in jail; he had escaped, more than once; and he had been caught and sent back to toil in other and various jails. He had been triced up

and lashed till he fainted had been revived and lashed again. He had been in the dungeon ninety days at a time. He had experienced the torment of the straightjacket. He knew what the humming bird was. He had been farmed out as a chattel by the state to the contractors. He had been trailed through swamps by bloodhounds. Twice he had been shot. For six years on end he had cut a cord and a half of wood each day in a convict lumber camp. Sick or well, he had cut that cord and a half or paid for it under a whip-lash knotted and pickled.

And Ross Shanklin had not sweetened under the treatment. He had sneered, and raved, and defied. He had seen convicts, after the guards had manhandled them, crippled in body for life, or left to maunder in mind to the end of their days. He had seen convicts, even his own cell mate, goaded to murder by their keepers, go to the gallows reviling God. He had been in a break in which eleven of his kind were shot down. He had been through a mutiny, where, in the prison yard, with gatling guns trained upon them, three hundred convicts had been disciplined with pick handles wielded by brawny guards.

He had known every infamy of human cruelty, and through it all he had never been broken. He had resented and fought to the last, until, embittered and bestial, the day came when he was discharged. Five dollars were given him in payment for the years of his labor and the flower of his manhood. And he had worked little in the years that followed. Work he hated and despised. He tramped, begged and stole, lied or threatened as the case might warrant, and drank to besottedness whenever he got the chance.

The little girl was looking at him when he awoke. Like a wild animal, all of him was awake the instant he opened his eyes. The first he saw was the parasol, strangely obtruded between him and the sky. He did not start nor move, though his whole body seemed slightly to tense. His eyes followed down the parasol handle to the tight-clutched little fingers, and along the arm to the child's face. Straight and unblinking he looked into

her eyes, and she, returning the look, was chilled and frightened by his glittering eyes, cold and harsh, withal bloodshot, and with no hint in them of the warm humanness she had been accustomed to see and feel in human eyes. They were the true prison eyes—the eyes of a man who had learned to talk little, who had forgotten almost how to talk.

“Hello,” he said finally, making no effort to change his position. “What game are you up to!”

His voice was gruff and husky, and at first it had been harsh; but it had softened queerly in a feeble attempt at forgotten kindness.

“How do you do?” she said. “I’m not playing. The sun was on your face, and mamma says one oughtn’t to sleep in the sun.”

The sweet clearness of her child’s voice was pleasant to him, and he wondered why he had never noticed it in children’s voices before. He sat up slowly and stared at her. He felt that he ought to say something, but speech with him was a reluctant thing.

“I hope you slept well,” she said gravely.

“I sure did,” he answered, never taking his eyes from her, amazed at the fairness and delicacy of her. “How long was you holdin’ that contraption up over me?”

“O-oh,” she debated with herself, “a long, long time. I thought you would never wake up.”

“And I thought you was a fairy when I first seen you.”

He felt elated at his contribution to the conversation.

“No, not a fairy,” she smiled.

He thrilled in a strange, numb way at the immaculate whiteness of her small even teeth.

“I was just the good Samaritan,” she added.

“I reckon I never heard of that party.”

He was cudgelling his brains to keep the conversation going. Never having been at close quarters with a child since he was man-grown, he found it difficult.

“What a funny man not to know about the good Samaritan. Don’t you remember? A certain man went down to Jericho—”

“I reckon I’ve been there,” he interrupted.

“I knew you were a traveler!” she cried, clapping her hands. “Maybe you saw the exact spot.”

“What spot?”

“Why, where he fell among thieves and was left half dead. And then the good Samaritan went to him, and bound up his wounds, and poured in oil and wine—was that olive oil, do you think?”

He shook his head slowly.

“I reckon you got me there. Olive oil is something the dagoes cooks with. I never heard of it for busted heads.”

She considered his statement for a moment.

“Well,” she announced, “we use olive oil in *our* cooking, so we must be dagoes. I never knew what they were before. I thought it was slang.”

“And the Samaritan dumped oil on his head,” the tramp muttered reminiscently. “Seems to me I recollect a sky pilot sayin’ something about that old gent. D’ye know, I’ve been looking for him off ’n on all my life, and never scared up hide nor hair of him. They ain’t no more Samaritans.”

“Wasn’t I one!” she asked quickly.

He looked at her steadily, with a great curiosity and wonder. Her ear, by a movement exposed to the sun, was transparent. It seemed he could almost see through it. He was amazed at the delicacy of her coloring, at the blue of her eyes, at the dazzle of the sun-touched golden hair. And he was astounded by her fragility. It came to him that she was easily broken. His eye went quickly from his huge, gnarled paw to her tiny hand in which it seemed to him he could almost see the blood circulate. He knew the power in his muscles, and he knew the tricks and turns by which men use their bodies to ill-treat men. In fact, he knew little else, and his mind for the time ran in its customary channel. It was his way of measuring the beautiful strangeness of her. He calculated a grip, and not a strong one, that could grind her little fingers to pulp. He thought of fist blows he had given to men’s heads, and received on his own head, and felt that the least of them could shatter hers like an egg-shell. He scanned her little shoulders and slim waist, and knew in all certitude that with his two hands he could rend her to pieces.

“Wasn’t I one?” she insisted again.

He came back to himself with a shock—or away from himself, as the case happened. He was loath that the conversation should cease.

“What?” he answered. “Oh, yes; you bet you was a Samaritan, even if you didn’t have no olive oil.” He remembered what his mind had been dwelling on, and asked, “But ain’t you afraid?”

“Of ... of me?” he added lamely.

She laughed merrily.

“Mamma says never to be afraid of anything. She says that if you’re good, and you think good of other people, they’ll be good, too.”

“And you was thinkin’ good of me when you kept the sun off,” he marveled.

“But it’s hard to think good of bees and nasty crawly things,” she confessed.

“But there’s men that is nasty and crawly things,” he argued.

“Mamma says no. She says there’s good in everyone.

“I bet you she locks the house up tight at night just the same,” he proclaimed triumphantly.

“But she doesn’t. Mamma isn’t afraid of anything. That’s why she lets me play out here alone when I want. Why, we had a robber once. Mamma got right up and found him. And what do you think! He was only a poor hungry man. And she got him plenty to eat from the pantry, and afterward she got him work to do.”

Ross Shanklin was stunned. The vista shown him of human nature was unthinkable. It had been his lot to live in a world of suspicion and hatred, of evil-believing and evil-doing. It had been his experience, slouching along village streets at nightfall, to see little

children, screaming with fear, run from him to their mothers. He had even seen grown women shrink aside from him as he passed along the sidewalk.

He was aroused by the girl clapping her hands as she cried out:

“I know what you are! You’re an open air crank. That’s why you were sleeping here in the grass.”

He felt a grim desire to laugh, but repressed it.

“And that’s what tramps are—open air cranks,” she continued. “I often wondered. Mamma believes in the open air. I sleep on the porch at night. So does she. This is our land. You must have climbed the fence. Mamma lets me when I put on my climbers—they’re bloomers, you know. But you ought to be told something. A person doesn’t know when they snore because they’re asleep. But you do worse than that. You grit your teeth. That’s bad. Whenever you are going to sleep you must think to yourself, ‘I won’t grit my teeth, I won’t grit my teeth,’ over and over, just like that, and by and by you’ll get out of the habit.

“All bad things are habits. And so are all good things. And it depends on us what kind our habits are going to be. I used to pucker my eyebrows—wrinkle them all up, but mamma said I must overcome that habit. She said that when my eyebrows were wrinkled it was an advertisement that my brain was wrinkled inside, and that it wasn’t good to have wrinkles in the brain. And then she smoothed my eyebrows with her hand and said I must always think *smooth*—inside, and *smooth* outside. And do you know, it was easy. I haven’t wrinkled my brows for ever so long. I’ve heard about filling teeth by thinking. But I don’t believe that. Neither does mamma.”

She paused rather out of breath. Nor did he speak. Her flow of talk had been too much

for him. Also, sleeping drunkenly, with open mouth, had made him very thirsty. But, rather than lose one precious moment, he endured the torment of his scorching throat and mouth. He licked his dry lips and struggled for speech.

“What is your name?” he managed at last.

“Joan.”

She looked her own question at him, and it was not necessary to voice it.

“Mine is Ross Shanklin,” he volunteered, for the first time in forgotten years giving his real name.

“I suppose you’ve traveled a lot.”

“I sure have, but not as much as I might have wanted to.”

“Papa always wanted to travel, but he was too busy at the office. He never could get much time. He went to Europe once with mamma. That was before I was born. It takes money to travel.”

Ross Shanklin did not know whether to agree with this statement or not.

“But it doesn’t cost tramps much for expenses,” she took the thought away from him. “Is that why you tramp?”

He nodded and licked his lips.

“Mamma says it’s too bad that men must tramp to look for work. But there’s lots of work now in the country. All the farmers in the valley are trying to get men. Have you been

working?”

He shook his head, angry with himself that he should feel shame at the confession when his savage reasoning told him he was right in despising work. But this was followed by another thought. This beautiful little creature was some man’s child. She was one of the rewards of work.

“I wish I had a little girl like you,” he blurted out, stirred by a sudden consciousness of passion for paternity. “I’d work my hands off. I ... I’d do anything.”

She considered his case with fitting gravity.

“Then you aren’t married?”

“Nobody would have me.”

“Yes, they would, if ...”

She did not turn up her nose, but she favored his dirt and rags with a look of disapprobation he could not mistake.

“Go on,” he half-shouted. “Shoot it into me. If I was washed—if I wore good clothes—if I was respectable—if I had a job and worked regular—if I wasn’t what I am.”

To each statement she nodded.

“Well, I ain’t that kind,” he rushed on. “I’m no good. I’m a tramp. I don’t want to work, that’s what. And I like dirt.”

Her face was eloquent with reproach as she said, “Then you were only making believe

when you wished you had a little girl like me?”

This left him speechless, for he knew, in all the depths of his new-found passion, that that was just what he did want.

With ready tact, noting his discomfort, she sought to change the subject.

“What do you think of God?” she asked. “I ain’t never met him. What do you think about him?”

His reply was evidently angry, and she was frank in her disapproval.

“You are very strange,” she said. “You get angry so easily. I never saw anybody before that got angry about God, or work, or being clean.”

“He never done anything for me,” he muttered resentfully. He cast back in quick review of the long years of toil in the convict camps and mines. “And work never done anything for me neither.”

An embarrassing silence fell.

He looked at her, numb and hungry with the stir of the father-love, sorry for his ill temper, puzzling his brain for something to say. She was looking off and away at the clouds, and he devoured her with his eyes. He reached out stealthily and rested one grimy hand on the very edge of her little dress. It seemed to him that she was the most wonderful thing in the world. The quail still called from the coverts, and the harvest sounds seemed abruptly to become very loud. A great loneliness oppressed him.

“I’m ... I’m no good,” he murmured huskily and repentantly.

But, beyond a glance from her blue eyes, she took no notice. The silence was more embarrassing than ever. He felt that he could give the world just to touch with his lips that hem of her dress where his hand rested. But he was afraid of frightening her. He fought to find something to say, licking his parched lips and vainly attempting to articulate something, anything.

“This ain’t Sonoma Valley,” he declared finally. “This is fairy land, and you’re a fairy. Mebbe I’m asleep and dreaming. I don’t know. You and me don’t know how to talk together, because, you see, you’re a fairy and don’t know nothing but good things, and I’m a man from the bad, wicked world.”

Having achieved this much, he was left gasping for ideas like a stranded fish.

“And you’re going to tell me about the bad, wicked world,” she cried, clapping her hands. “I’m just dying to know.”

He looked at her, startled, remembering the wreckage of womanhood he had encountered on the sunken ways of life. She was no fairy. She was flesh and blood, and the possibilities of wreckage were in her as they had been in him even when he lay at his mother’s breast. And there was in her eagerness to know.

“Nope,” he said lightly, “this man from the bad, wicked world ain’t going to tell you nothing of the kind. He’s going to tell you of the good things in that world. He’s going to tell you how he loved hosses when he was a shaver, and about the first hoss he straddled, and the first hoss he owned. Hosses ain’t like men. They’re better. They’re clean—clean all the way through and back again. And, little fairy, I want to tell you one thing—there sure ain’t nothing in the world like when you’re settin’ a tired hoss at the end of a long day, and when you just speak, and that tired animal lifts under you willing and hustles

along. Hosses! They're my long suit. I sure dote on hosses. Yep. I used to be a cowboy once."

She clapped her hands in the way that tore so delightfully to his heart, and her eyes were dancing, as she exclaimed:

"A Texas cowboy! I always wanted to see one! I heard papa say once that cowboys are bow-legged. Are you?"

"I sure was a Texas cowboy," he answered. "But it was a long time ago. And I'm sure bow-legged. You see, you can't ride much when you're young and soft without getting the legs bent some. Why, I was only a three-year-old when I begun. He was a three-year-old, too, fresh-broken. I led him up alongside the fence, dumb to the top rail, and dropped on. He was a pinto, and a real devil at bucking, but I could do anything with him. I reckon he knowed I was only a little shaver. Some hosses knows lots more 'n' you think."

For half an hour Ross Shanklin rambled on with his horse reminiscences, never unconscious for a moment of the supreme joy that was his through the touch of his hand on the hem of her dress. The sun dropped slowly into the cloud bank, the quail called more insistently, and empty wagon after empty wagon rumbled back across the bridge. Then came a woman's voice.

"Joan! Joan!" it called. "Where are you, dear?"

The little girl answered, and Ross Shanklin saw a woman, clad in a soft, clinging gown, come through the gate from the bungalow. She was a slender, graceful woman, and to his charmed eyes she seemed rather to float along than walk like ordinary flesh and blood.

“What have you been doing all afternoon?” the woman asked, as she came up.

“Talking, mamma,” the little girl replied. “I’ve had a very interesting time.”

Ross Shanklin scrambled to his feet and stood watchfully and awkwardly. The little girl took the mother’s hand, and she, in turn, looked at him frankly and pleasantly, with a recognition of his humanness that was a new thing to him. In his mind ran the thought: *the woman who ain’t afraid*. Not a hint was there of the timidity he was accustomed to seeing in women’s eyes. And he was quite aware, and never more so, of his bleary-eyed, forbidding appearance.

“How do you do?” she greeted him sweetly and naturally.

“How do you do, ma’am,” he responded, unpleasantly conscious of the huskiness and rawness of his voice.

“And did you have an interesting time, too!” she smiled.

“Yes, ma’am. I sure did. I was just telling your little girl about bosses.”

“He was a cowboy, once, mamma,” she cried.

The mother smiled her acknowledgment to him, and looked fondly down at the little girl. The thought that came into Ross Shanklin’s mind was the awfulness of the crime if any one should harm either of the wonderful pair. This was followed by the wish that some terrible danger should threaten, so that he could fight, as he well knew how, with all his strength and life, to defend them.

“You’ll have to come along, dear,” the mother said. “It’s growing late.” She looked at

Ross Shanklin hesitantly. "Would you care to have something to eat?"

"No, ma'am, thanking you kindly just the same. I ... I ain't hungry."

"Then say good-bye, Joan," she counselled.

"Good-bye." The little girl held out her hand, and her eyes lighted roguishly. "Good-bye, Mr. Man from the bad, wicked world."

To him, the touch of her hand as he pressed it in his was the capstone of the whole adventure.

"Good-bye, little fairy," he mumbled. "I reckon I got to be pullin' along."

But he did not pull along. He stood staring after his vision until it vanished through the gate. The day seemed suddenly empty. He looked about him irresolutely, then climbed the fence, crossed the bridge, and slouched along the road. He was in a dream. He did not note his feet nor the way they led him. At times he stumbled in the dust-filled ruts.

A mile farther on, he aroused at the crossroads. Before him stood the saloon. He came to a stop and stared at it, licking his lips. He sank his hand into his pants pocket and fumbled a solitary dime. "God!" he muttered. "God!" Then, with dragging, reluctant feet, went on along the road.

He came to a big farm. He knew it must be big, because of the bigness of the house and the size and number of the barns and outbuildings. On the porch, in shirt sleeves, smoking a cigar, keen-eyed and middle-aged, was the farmer.

"What's the chance for a job!" Ross Shanklin asked.

The keen eyes scarcely glanced at him.

“A dollar a day and grub,” was the answer.

Ross Shanklin swallowed and braced himself.

“I’ll pick grapes all right, or anything. But what’s the chance for a steady job? You’ve got a big ranch here. I know hosses. I was born on one. I can drive team, ride, plough, break, do anything that anybody ever done with hosses.”

The other looked him over with an appraising, incredulous eye.

“You don’t look it,” was the judgment.

“I know I don’t. Give me a chance. That’s all. I’ll prove it.”

The farmer considered, casting an anxious glance at the cloud bank into which the sun had sunk.

“I’m short a teamster, and I’ll give you the chance to make good. Go and get supper with the hands.”

Ross Shanklin’s voice was very husky, and he spoke with an effort.

“All right. I’ll make good. Where can I get a drink of water and wash up?”