

Our Secular Story.

The Tramp.

The slouching figure of a man moved slowly along a dim prairie road. His garments were threadbare, and his general appearance presented a picture of wretchedness and want.

A cold March wind was blowing through the dry, dead grass, and patches of shadow and sunlight were chasing each other over an unbroken waste of prairie. The man drew his thin coat more closely about him, and shivered as a keener blast than usual swept around him.

"Hit's a pretty pass come to Jim Skinner," said the figure in the road. "Ye have been trampin' all day without a bite ter eat, an' if ye git anything, yer goin' ter hafter bag—yas, bag!" And he threw out his hand with a gesture of disdain, and quickened his pace, a flush of shame and humiliation mounting his thin, pale face. "Who'd a thought ye'd ever come ter this?" he exclaimed, almost fiercely. "What did yer ever come West fer? Ter git land!—cheap land—land fer almost nothin'! 'Rich land'—that's what they said"—he laughed a sort of choking laugh. "Cheap land—rich land—buffalo wallers—alkali water an' ager!"

There was a look of vexation and infinite disgust pictured on his face as he strode onward. Six months Jim Skinner had been "holding a claim," and battled with all the hardships and privation that fall to the lot of the poor who seek to make a home in the "Great American Desert."

He had lived in a dug-out, worked hard and half starved himself—spent all the money he had, took the ague, and lived in his hut helpless, till at last starvation had driven him forth, weak, half sick and afoot, to look for some kind of work among the cattle-men to gain his daily bread.

Mile after mile he trudged along, with no sign of habitation to break the monotony, save now and then the rude cabin or dugout of some poor claim-holder, who, like himself, was struggling with want. It was near the middle of the afternoon. He was nearing that part of the prairie country which was monopolized by the great cattle-men, called "the range." A mile further on was a small cattle ranch. He felt weak and sick, and knew he could not continue his journey much further without rest and some thing to eat.

If he could not get work at the first place—he could not go further—he must have something to eat—would he be compelled to beg?

He quickened his pace, and hurried. A few minutes later, he paused in front of large frame building, surrounded by numerous barbed-wire corrals. He stood for a moment in the road, irresolute. If he failed to get work, should he ask for a lodging and something to eat?

His face flushed at the thought. Work? What could he do in his present weak condition? Nothing.

He turned toward the building. Dave Foster, the owner of the cattle-ranch, came out of the building and saw the slouching figure standing in the road.

"What are you prowling around here for?" he demanded, casting a look of distrust on the forlorn creature before him.

"I—I'm lookin' fer work," stammered Jim Skinner, hardly knowing how to answer the harsh question.

"A likely story," was the answer. "I guess you are one of those fellows that look for work in the daytime and other people's cattle by night. Clear out! I've had enough of such as you already."

A hot flush mantled Jim Skinner's face for an instant, and then disappeared, leaving him as pale as death. He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. He mastered his emotions with a great effort.

He turned upon the speaker, his eyes flashing, his breath coming in gasps.

"An' ye dare ter say that ter me—ter me!"—he spoke with a great effort. Some time—not now—I'll—make you repent this—"

The words died on his lips.

"Move on!" commanded the cattle-man, gruffly; "and mind how you threaten me, or I may put a bullet thro' you now."

Jim Skinner turned away, sick and dizzy—a tumult of anger and mortification surging through his breast.

"An' this is the way I'm treated, is it?" he muttered. "A tramp—an outcast—branded as a thief—a thief!"

His eyes flashed, his bosom heaved—his breathing became heavy and labored. He shut his hands tightly, and trudged on.

Dave Foster stood for several moments watching the figure of the stranger moving down the road.

"Blast me," he muttered, "if I don't believe I made a mistake in that fellow, after all. He looks seedy enough, though, for anything; and how's a fellow to tell the genuine from the bogus? I've had so many cattle stolen of late that I've begun to suspect every stranger I see."

He turned and re-entered the house.

Nearly a mile further on Jim Skinner came to a small frame house. He felt that he could not go much further. He must stop some where soon, or fall by the roadside. He would make one more effort—one more trial—and if he failed—

His face paled—a look of despair came into his eyes. He approached the door of the house and knocked.

A man came to the door with a book in his hand.

"I am weak and—and—hungry" he faltered. "I must stop somewhere. I have no money—"

"This is a school-house," answered the man at the door, shortly, and then closed the door in Jim's face. He turned away, a look of despair on his thin, white face. All the world seemed to grow dark about him. Where would he go next? He hardly knew. He stood in the road, the cold March wind blowing about him, fluttering his tattered garments and sweeping through the long grass with a sharp, hissing sound.

He turned and walked slowly down the road, just as a score of children, released from school, issued from the school-house door and scattered, going in different directions to their homes, where bright fires and happy smiles awaited them.

Why should he struggle against fate? What did the world hold for him? Nothing! Why not die by the roadside, and be done with it?

No one would miss him—

A sound of hurrying feet behind him interrupted his reverie.

He turned, and saw a little girl, with a cloud of sunny hair and a bright, sweet face, out of which looked a pair of large, blue eyes, running after him.

"Please wait, won't you?" She cried, almost out of breath. "I heard you say you were hungry, and a—and—" she paused and looked at him timidly—"If you'll take this"—opening a tin pail which she carried in her hand—some slices of bread and a piece of cake "I wanted one of the girls to come with me, but she said you was an old tramp and would hurt me. You won't though—willyou?"

He gazed at her a moment, unable to speak.

"Hurt you! Bless you, child!" he exclaimed, "who would hurt you?"

His voice trembled. Tears came into his eyes. He sank down in the grass by the road-side, and covered his face with his hands and wept.

She stood looking at him, wonder and sympathy pictured in her large, beautiful eyes. She approached and laid her hand gently on his shoulder, and put the pieces of bread and cake in his lap.

"I'm sorry if I made you cry," she said, a touch of tenderness in her voice.

She bent down quickly and kissed him.

"There!" she said. "I'm not afraid of you, am I?"

The next moment she was gone, and hurrying up the road to overtake her companions.

He sat there for some time, trying to eat the pieces of bread and cake she had dropped in his lap, but despair had deprived him of any desire for food.

He walked on slowly, hardly knowing or caring what he did.

The wind was increasing in its fury, and sweeping through the long grass with a weird, dismal sound. Banks of tawny, purple clouds lay along the rim of the horizon, out of which shone a mass of flaming yellow light from the sinking sun beyond. Presently a veil of smoke swept over his head, and a shower of black cinders commenced to fall about him while the air, all of a sudden, was laden with fumes of burning vegetation. He turned. An awful sight met his gaze.

The prairie was on fire!

Great columns of black smoke were rolling across the prairie, and the red flames, leaping and roaring in the gale, were rushing down toward where he stood, not a quarter of a mile away!

Several school children came running down the road, and passed, crying with fright as they ran.

Far behind them, her hat off, her long yellow hair flying in the wind, came the little girl who had left him a few moments before, the roaring flames rapidly gaining upon her.

He uttered a groan, and ran toward her as fast as his weak and tottering limbs could carry him.

Every breath of wind was now laden with dense clouds of smoke and heat, and black with flying cinders. He saw her stagger as she ran—then turn partly around and sink down in the road, just as he reached her side.

He lifted her hurriedly in his arms, desperation giving him strength, and ran with her as fast as he could, staggering as he went.

"Oh, if I should lose my life," he gasped, "I must save her!"

A dense cloud of smoke enveloped his form; the heat grew intense; great tongues of crimson flame leaped high in the air, and roared behind him, and mingled their sound with the rushing wind.

Dave Foster, the cattle-man, stood near one of the corrals, engaged in conversation with some cowboys who had just ridden up.

"We've rode all day," one of the cowboys was saying, "but can't git sight uv any uv the pesky cattle thieves."

"A suspicious character passed about an hour ago," answered Dave, "and I wouldn't be sure but he may be one of them."

"I gess hit won't be very healthy