

# **Mr. Jack Hamlin's Mediation and Other Stories**

by

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## Mr. Jack Hamlin's Mediation

At nightfall it began to rain. The wind arose too, and also began to buffet a small, struggling, nondescript figure, creeping along the trail over the rocky upland meadow towards Rylands's rancho. At times its head was hidden in what appeared to be wings thrown upward from its shoulders; at times its broad-brimmed hat was cocked jauntily on one side, and again the brim was fixed over the face like a visor. At one moment a drifting misshapen mass of drapery, at the next its vague garments, beaten back hard against the figure, revealed outlines far too delicate for that rude enwrapping. For it was Mrs. Rylands herself, in her husband's hat and her "hired man's" old blue army overcoat, returning from the post-office two miles away. The wind continued its aggression until she reached the front door of her newly plastered farmhouse, and then a heavier blast shook the pines above the low-pitched, shingled roof, and sent a shower of arrowy drops after her like a Parthian parting, as she entered. She threw aside the overcoat and hat, and somewhat inconsistently entered the sitting-room, to walk to the window and look back upon the path she had just traversed. The wind and the rain swept down a slope, half meadow, half clearing,—a mile away,—to a fringe of sycamores. A mile further lay the stage road, where, three hours later, her husband would alight on his return from Sacramento. It would be a long wet walk for Joshua Rylands, as their only horse had been borrowed by a neighbor.

In that fading light Mrs. Rylands's oval cheek was shining still from the raindrops, but there was something in the expression of her worried face that might have as readily suggested tears. She was strikingly handsome, yet quite as incongruous an ornament to her surroundings as she had been to her outer wrappings a moment ago. Even the clothes she now stood in hinted an inadaptability to the weather—the house—the position she occupied in it. A figured silk dress, spoiled rather than overworn, was still of a quality inconsistent with her evident habits, and the lace-edged petticoat that peeped beneath it was draggled with mud and unaccustomed usage. Her glossy black hair, which had been tossed into curls in some foreign fashion, was now wind-blown into a burlesque of it. This incongruity was still further accented by the appearance of the room she had entered. It was coldly and severely furnished, making the chill of the yet damp white plaster unpleasantly obvious. A black harmonium organ stood in one corner, set out with black and white hymn-books; a trestle-like table contained a large Bible; half a dozen black, horsehair-cushioned chairs stood, geometrically distant, against the walls, from which hung four engravings of "Paradise Lost" in black mourning frames; some dried ferns and autumn leaves stood in a vase on the mantelpiece, as if the chill of the room had prematurely blighted them. The coldly glittering grate below was also decorated with withered sprays, as if an attempt had been made to burn them, but was frustrated through damp. Suddenly recalled to a sense of her wet boots and the new carpet, she hurriedly turned away, crossed the hall into the dining-room, and thence passed into the kitchen. The "hired girl," a large-boned Missourian, a daughter of a neighboring woodman, was peeling potatoes at the table. Mrs. Rylands drew a chair before the kitchen stove, and put her wet feet on the hob.

"I'll bet a cooky, Mess Rylands, you've done forgot the vanillar," said the girl, with a certain domestic and confidential familiarity.

Mrs. Rylands started guiltily. She made a miserable feint of looking in her lap and on the table. "I'm afraid I did, Jane, if I didn't bring it in HERE."

"That you didn't," returned Jane. "And I reckon ye forgot that 'ar pepper-sauce for yer husband."

Mrs. Rylands looked up with piteous contrition. "I really don't know what's the matter with me. I certainly went into the shop, and had it on my list,—and—really"—

Jane evidently knew her mistress, and smiled with superior toleration. "It's kinder bewilderin' goin' in them big shops, and lookin' round them stuffed shelves." The shop at the cross roads and post-office was 14 x 14, but Jane was nurtured on the plains. "Anyhow," she added good-humoredly, "the expressman is sure to look in as he goes by, and you've time to give him the order."

"But is he SURE to come?" asked Mrs. Rylands anxiously. "Mr. Rylands will be so put out without his pepper-sauce."

"He's sure to come ef he knows you're here. Ye kin always kalkilate on that."

"Why?" said Mrs. Rylands abstractedly.

"Why? 'cause he just can't keep his eyes off ye! That's why he comes every day,—'tain't jest for trade!"

This was quite true, not only of the expressman, but of the butcher and baker, and the "candlestick-maker," had there been so advanced a vocation at the cross roads. All were equally and curiously attracted by her picturesque novelty. Mrs. Rylands knew this herself, but without vanity or coquettishness. Possibly that was why the other woman told her. She only slightly deepened the lines of discontent in her cheek and said abstractedly, "Well, when he comes, YOU ask him."

She dried her shoes, put on a pair of slippers that had a faded splendor about them, and went up to her bedroom. Here she hesitated for some time between the sewing-machine and her knitting-needles, but finally settled upon the latter, and a pair of socks for her husband which she had begun a year ago. But she presently despaired of finishing them before he returned, three hours hence, and so applied herself to the sewing-machine. For a little while its singing hum was heard between the blasts that shook the house, but the thread presently snapped, and the machine was put aside somewhat impatiently, with a discontented drawing of the lines around her handsome mouth. Then she began to "tidy" the room, putting a great many things away and bringing out a great many more, a process that was necessarily slow, owing to her falling into attitudes of minute inspection of certain articles of dress, with intervals of trying them on, and observing their effect in

her mirror. This kind of interruption also occurred while she was putting away some books that were lying about on chairs and tables, stopping midway to open their pages, becoming interested, and quite finishing one chapter, with the book held close against the window to catch the fading light of day. The feminine reader will gather from this that Mrs. Rylands, though charming, was not facile in domestic duties. She had just glanced at the clock, and lit the candle to again set herself to work, and thus bridge over the two hours more of waiting, when there came a tap at the door. She opened it to Jane.

"There's an entire stranger downstairs, ez hez got a lame hoss and wants to borry a fresh one."

"We have none, you know," said Mrs. Rylands, a little impatiently.

"That's what I told him. Then he wanted to know ef he could lie by here till he could get one or fix up his own hoss."

"As you like; you know if you can manage it," said Mrs. Rylands, a little uneasily. "When Mr. Rylands comes you can arrange it between you. Where is he now?"

"In the kitchen."

"The kitchen!" echoed Mrs. Rylands.

"Yes, ma'am, I showed him into the parlor, but he kinder shivered his shoulders, and reckoned ez how he'd go inter the kitchen. Ye see, ma'am, he was all wet, and his shiny big boots was sloppy. But he ain't one o' the stuck-up kind, and he's willin' to make hisself cowf'ble before the kitchen stove."

"Well, then, he don't want ME," said Mrs. Rylands, with a relieved voice.

"Yes'm," said Jane, apparently equally relieved. "Only, I thought I'd just tell you."

A few minutes later, in crossing the upper hall, Mrs. Rylands heard Jane's voice from the kitchen raised in rustic laughter. Had she been satirically inclined, she might have understood Jane's willingness to relieve her mistress of the duty of entertaining the stranger; had she been philosophical, she might have considered the girl's dreary, monotonous life at the rancho, and made allowance for her joy at this rare interruption of it. But I fear that Mrs. Rylands was neither satirical nor philosophical, and presently, when Jane reentered, with color in her alkaline face, and light in her huckleberry eyes, and said she was going over to the cattle-sheds in the "far pasture," to see if the hired man didn't know of some horse that could be got for the stranger, Mrs. Rylands felt a little bitterness in the thought that the girl would have scarcely volunteered to go all that distance in the rain for HER. Yet, in a few moments she forgot all about it, and even the presence of her guest in the house, and in one of her fitful abstracted employments passed through the dining-room into the kitchen, and had opened the door with an "Oh, Jane!" before she remembered her absence.

The kitchen, lit by a single candle, could be only partly seen by her as she stood with her hand on the lock, although she herself was plainly visible. There was a pause, and then a quiet, self-possessed, yet amused, voice answered:—

"My name isn't Jane, and if you're the lady of the house, I reckon yours wasn't ALWAYS Rylands."

At the sound of the voice Mrs. Rylands threw the door wide open, and as her eyes fell upon the speaker—her unknown guest—she recoiled with a little cry, and a white, startled face. Yet the stranger was young and handsome, dressed with a scrupulousness and elegance which even the stress of travel had not deranged, and he was looking at her with a smile of recognition, mingled with that careless audacity and self-possession which seemed to be the characteristic of his face.

"Jack Hamlin!" she gasped.

"That's me, all the time," he responded easily, "and YOU'RE Nell Montgomery!"

"How did you know I was here? Who told you?" she said impetuously.

"Nobody! never was so surprised in my life! When you opened that door just now you might have knocked me down with a feather." Yet he spoke lazily, with an amused face, and looked at her without changing his position.

"But you MUST have known SOMETHING! It was no mere accident," she went on vehemently, glancing around the room.

"That's where you slip up, Nell," said Hamlin imperturbably. "It WAS an accident and a bad one. My horse lamed himself coming down the grade. I sighted the nearest shanty, where I thought I might get another horse. It happened to be this." For the first time he changed his attitude, and leaned back contemplatively in his chair.

She came towards him quickly. "You didn't use to lie, Jack," she said hesitatingly.

"Couldn't afford it in my business,—and can't now," said Jack cheerfully. "But," he added curiously, as if recognizing something in his companion's agitation, and lifting his brown lashes to her, the window, and the ceiling, "what's all this about? What's your little game here?"

"I'm married," she said, with nervous intensity,— "married, and this is my husband's house!"

"Not married straight out!—regularly fixed?"

"Yes," she said hurriedly.

"One of the boys? Don't remember any Rylands. SPELTER used to be very sweet on you,—but Spelter mightn't have been his real name?"

"None of our lot! No one you ever knew; a—a straight out, square man," she said quickly.

"I say, Nell, look here! You ought to have shown up your cards without even a call. You ought to have told him that you danced at the Casino."

"I did."

"Before he asked you to marry him?"

"Before."

Jack got up from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and looked at her curiously. This Nell Montgomery, this music-hall "dance and song girl," this girl of whom so much had been SAID and so little PROVED! Well, this was becoming interesting.

"You don't understand," she said, with nervous feverishness; "you remember after that row I had with Jim, that night the manager gave us a supper,—when he treated me like a dog?"

"He did that," interrupted Jack.

"I felt fit for anything," she said, with a half-hysterical laugh, that seemed voiced, however, to check some slumbering memory. "I'd have cut my throat or his, it didn't matter which"—

"It mattered something to us, Nell," put in Jack again, with polite parenthesis; "don't leave US out in the cold."

"I started from 'Frisco that night on the boat ready to fling myself into anything—or the river!" she went on hurriedly. "There was a man in the cabin who noticed me, and began to hang around. I thought he knew who I was,—had seen me on the posters; and as I didn't feel like foolin', I told him so. But he wasn't that kind. He said he saw I was in trouble and wanted me to tell him all."

Mr. Hamlin regarded her cheerfully. "And you told him," he said, "how you had once run away from your childhood's happy home to go on the stage! How you always regretted it, and would have gone back but that the doors were shut forever against you! How you longed to leave, but the wicked men and women around you always"—

"I didn't!" she burst out, with sudden passion; "you know I didn't. I told him everything: who I was, what I had done, what I expected to do again. I pointed out the men—who were sitting there, whispering and grinning at us, as if they were in the front row of the

theatre—and said I knew them all, and they knew me. I never spared myself a thing. I said what people said of me, and didn't even care to say it wasn't true!"

"Oh, come!" protested Jack, in perfunctory politeness.

"He said he liked me for telling the truth, and not being ashamed to do it! He said the sin was in the false shame and the hypocrisy; for that's the sort of man he is, you see, and that's like him always! He asked if I would marry him—out of hand—and do my best to be his lawful wife. He said he wanted me to think it over and sleep on it, and to-morrow he would come and see me for an answer. I slipped off the boat at 'Frisco, and went alone to a hotel where I wasn't known. In the morning I didn't know whether he'd keep his word or I'd keep mine. But he came! He said he'd marry me that very day, and take me to his farm in Santa Clara. I agreed. I thought it would take me out of everybody's knowledge, and they'd think me dead! We were married that day, before a regular clergyman. I was married under my own name,"—she stopped and looked at Jack, with a hysterical laugh,— "but he made me write underneath it, 'known as Nell Montgomery;' for he said HE wasn't ashamed of it, nor should I be."

"Does he wear long hair and stick straws in it?" said Hamlin gravely. "Does he 'hear voices' and have 'visions'?"

"He's a shrewd, sensible, hard-working man,—no more mad than you are, nor as mad as I was the day I married him. He's lived up to everything he's said." She stopped, hesitated in her quick, nervous speech; her lip quivered slightly, but she recalled herself, and looking imploringly, yet hopelessly, at Jack, gasped, "And that's what's the matter!"

Jack fixed his eyes keenly upon her. "And you?" he said curtly.

"I?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, what have YOU done?" he said, with sudden sharpness.

The wonder was so apparent in her eyes that his keen glance softened. "Why," she said bewilderingly, "I have been his dog, his slave,—as far as he would let me. I have done everything; I have not been out of the house until he almost drove me out. I have never wanted to go anywhere or see any one; but he has always insisted upon it. I would have been willing to slave here, day and night, and have been happy. But he said I must not seem to be ashamed of my past, when he is not. I would have worn common homespun clothes and calico frocks, and been glad of it, but he insists upon my wearing my best things, even my theatre things; and as he can't afford to buy more, I wear these things I had. I know they look beastly here, and that I'm a laughing-stock, and when I go out I wear almost anything to try and hide them; but," her lip quivered dangerously again, "he wants me to do it, and it pleases him."

Jack looked down. After a pause he lifted his lashes towards her dragged skirt, and said in an easier, conversational tone, "Yes! I thought I knew that dress. I gave it to you for that walking scene in 'High Life,' didn't I?"

"No," she said quickly, "it was the blue one with silver trimming,—don't you remember? I tried to turn it the first year I was married, but it never looked the same."

"It was sweetly pretty," said Jack encouragingly, "and with that blue hat lined with silver, it was just fetching! Somehow I don't quite remember this one," and he looked at it critically.

"I had it at the races in '58, and that supper Judge Boompointer gave us at 'Frisco where Colonel Fish upset the table trying to get at Jim. Do you know," she said, with a little laugh, "it's got the stains of the champagne on it yet; it never would come off. See!" and she held the candle with great animation to the breadth of silk before her.

"And there's more of it on the sleeve," said Jack; "isn't there?"

Mrs. Rylands looked reproachfully at Jack.

"That isn't champagne; don't you know what it is?"

"No!"

"It's blood," she said gravely; "when that Mexican cut poor Ned so bad,—don't you remember? I held his head upon my arm while you bandaged him." She heaved a little sigh, and then added, with a faint laugh, "That's the worst thing about the clothes of a girl in the profession, they get spoiled or stained before they wear out."

This large truth did not seem to impress Mr. Hamlin. "Why did you leave Santa Clara?" he said abruptly, in his previous critical tone.

"Because of the folks there. They were standoffish and ugly. You see, Josh"—

"Who?"

"Josh Rylands!—HIM! He told everybody who I was, even those who had never seen me in the bills,—how good I was to marry him, how he had faith in me and wasn't ashamed,—until they didn't believe we were married at all. So they looked another way when they met us, and didn't call. And all the while I was glad they didn't, but he wouldn't believe it, and allowed I was pining on account of it."

"And were you?"

"I swear to God, Jack, I'd have been content, and more, to have been just there with him, seein' nobody, letting every one believe I was dead and gone, but he said it was wrong,

and weak! Maybe it was," she added, with a shy, interrogating look at Jack, of which, however, he took no notice. "Then when he found they wouldn't call, what do you think he did?"

"Beat you, perhaps," suggested Jack cheerfully.

"He never did a thing to me that wasn't straight out, square, and kind," she said, half indignantly, half hopelessly. "He thought if HIS kind of people wouldn't see me, I might like to see my own sort. So without saying anything to me, he brought down, of all things! Tinkie Clifford, she that used to dance in the cheap variety shows at 'Frisco, and her particular friend, Captain Sykes. It would have just killed you, Jack," she said, with a sudden hysteric burst of laughter, "to have seen Josh, in his square, straight-out way, trying to be civil and help things along. But," she went on, as suddenly relapsing into her former attitude of worried appeal, "I couldn't stand it, and when she got to talking free and easy before Josh, and Captain Sykes to guzzling champagne, she and me had a row. She allowed I was putting on airs, and I made her walk, in spite of Josh."

"And Josh seemed to like it," said Hamlin carelessly. "Has he seen her since?"

"No; I reckon he's cured of asking that kind of company for me. And then we came here. But I persuaded him not to begin by going round telling people who I was,—as he did the last time,—but to leave it to folks to find out if they wanted to, and he gave in. Then he let me fix up this house and furnish it my own way, and I did!"

"Do you mean to say that YOU fixed up that family vault of a sitting-room?" said Jack, in horror.

"Yes, I didn't want any fancy furniture or looking-glasses, and such like, to attract folks, nor anything to look like the old times. I don't think any of the boys would care to come here. And I got rid of a lot of sporting travelers, 'wild-cat' managers, and that kind of tramp in this way. But"—She hesitated, and her face fell again.

"But what?" said Jack.

"I don't think that Josh likes it either. He brought home the other day 'My Johnny is a Shoemakiyure,' and wanted me to try it on the organ. But it reminded me how we used to get just sick of singing it on and off the boards, and I couldn't touch it. He wanted me to go to the circus that was touring over at the cross roads, but it was the old Flanigin's circus, you know, the one Gussie Riggs used to ride in, with its old clown and its old ringmaster and the old 'wheezes,' and I chucked it."

"Look here," said Jack, rising and surveying Mrs. Rylands critically. "If you go on at this gait, I'll tell you what that man of yours will do. He'll bolt with some of your old friends!"

She turned a quick, scared face upon him for an instant. But only for an instant. Her hysteric little laugh returned, at once, followed by her weary, worried look. "No, Jack,

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