



CHAPTER 21

I LEARNED THAT JIM GILLIS IS DEAD. HE DIED, AGED SEVENTY-SEVEN, in California about two weeks ago, after a long illness.

I think Jim Gillis was a much more remarkable person than his family and friends ever suspected. He had a bright and smart imagination and it was of the kind that turns out work well and with ease and without previous preparation, just builds a story as it goes along, careless of where it is proceeding, enjoying each fresh fancy as it comes into his mind and caring not at all whether the story shall ever end brilliantly and satisfactorily or not end at all. Jim was born a humorist and a very good one. When I remember how successful were his untrained efforts, I feel sure that he would have been a star performer if he had been discovered and had been subjected to a few years of training with a pen. A genius is not very likely to ever discover himself; neither is he very likely to be discovered by his friends; they are so close to him that they can't see him clearly.

St. Peter's cannot be impressive for size to a person who has always seen it close at hand, and has never been outside of Rome; it is only the stranger, approaching from far away in the Campagna, who sees Rome as an indistinct and characterless mass, with the mighty St. Peter's standing up out of it all, lonely in its majesty.

I spent three months in the home of Jim Gillis and his friend Dick Stoker in Jackass Gulch, that calm and dreamy and lovely paradise. Every now and then Jim would have an idea and he would stand up before the great log fire and deliver himself of an unplanned lie—a fairy story, a romance—with Dick Stoker as the hero of it as a general thing. Jim always soberly pretended that what he was telling was actually history, true history, not romance. Dick Stoker, gray-headed and good-natured, would sit, smoking his pipe, and listen with a gentle air to these big lies and never deny their truth.

Once or twice Jim's lively imagination got him into trouble. An Indian woman came along one day and tried to sell us some wild fruit that looked like apples. Dick Stoker had lived nearby for eighteen years and knew that this fruit was worthless and could not be eaten; but carelessly and without purpose he remarked that he had never heard of it before. That was enough for Jim. He started to praise that devilish fruit, and the more he talked about it the warmer and stronger his admiration of it grew. He said that he had eaten it a thousand times; that all one needed to do was to boil it with a little sugar and there was nothing in America that could compare with it for deliciousness. He was only talking to hear himself talk; and so he was brought up standing and for just one moment, or maybe two moments, struck dumb when Dick interrupted him with the remark that if the fruit was so delicious why didn't he buy some right now. Jim was caught but he wouldn't show it; he was not the man to back down or confess; he pretended that he was only too happy to have this chance to enjoy once more this precious gift of God. Oh, he was a man true to his statements! I think he would have eaten that fruit if he had known it would kill him. He bought it all and said airily that he was glad enough to have that blessing and that if Dick and I didn't want to enjoy it with him we could let it alone—he didn't care.

Then there followed a couple of the most delightful hours I have ever spent. Jim took a very large empty can and put it on the fire and filled it half full of water and put into it a dozen of those devilish fruits; and as soon as the water came to a good boil he added a handful of

sugar; as the boiling went on he tasted the smelly stuff from time to time; and now he began to make tests with a tablespoon. He would dip out a spoonful and taste it, remark that perhaps it needed a little more sugar—so he would throw in a handful and let the boiling go on a while longer; handful after handful of sugar went in and still the tasting went on for two hours.

At last he said the manufacture had reached the right stage, the stage of perfection. He dipped his spoon, tasted, and broke into enthusiasms of grateful joy; then he gave us a taste apiece. From all that we could discover, those pounds and pounds of sugar had not affected the fruit's evil sharpness in the least degree. Acid? It was all acid, with not a trace of the sweetness which the sugar ought to have given to it if that fruit had been invented anywhere outside of hell. We stopped with that one taste, but that great-hearted Jim went on eating and eating and eating, and praising and praising and praising, until his teeth and tongue were raw, and Stoker and I nearly dead with thankfulness and delight. During the next two days neither food nor drink passed Jim's teeth; so sore were they that they could not endure the touch of anything, even his breath passing over them hurt; nevertheless he went steadily on voicing his admiration of that awful stuff and praising God. It was an astonishing show of bravery.

I mourn for Jim. He was a good man and firm friend, a manly one, a generous one; an honest and honorable man and gifted with a lovable nature. He picked no fights himself but when a fight was put upon him he was there and ready.