

A Husband for Janey

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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He had been walking since an hour before sunup, but now the air had grown warm and he could hear the sound of running water. Sunlight fell through the leaves and dappled the trail with light and shadow, and when he rounded the bend of the path he saw the girl dipping a bucket into a mountain stream.

He was a tall boy, just turned eighteen, and four months from his home on a woods farm in East Texas. He looked at the girl and he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in a throat that seemed unusually long, rising as it did from the wide, too-loose collar of his homespun shirt.

He swallowed again and cleared his throat. The girl looked up, suddenly wide-eyed, and then she straightened, her lips drawing together and one quick hand brushing a strand of dark hair back from her flushed cheek. „Howdy, ma'am," he said, his accent soft with East Texas music. „Sure didn't aim to scare you none."

„It... it's all right." Her alarm was fading with her curiosity. „Are you goin' to the goldfields?"

A measure of pride and manly assurance came into his voice. „I reckon. I aim to git me money to go back home to Texas an' buy a farm.“

They faced each other across the stream. The boy swallowed, nervous with the silence. „You ... your pa washin' gold about here?“

„Yes... Well, he was... He's gone to the settlement. He's been gone three weeks.“

The boy nodded gravely. It had taken him two days to walk up from Angel's Camp, and with that awareness that comes to those who walk the trails he knew her father was not coming back. It was a bad time to be traveling with gold in one's poke.

„You doin' all right?“ he asked. „You an' your ma?“

Janey hesitated, rubbing her palms on her apron. She was shy but she didn't want him to go off on his way, for it was lonely with no one about of her own age, and without even neighbors except for Richter. „Ma—she's just back here. Would you like some coffee? We've some fresh.“

He crossed the stream on the rounded stones and took her wooden bucket. „Lemme fetch it for you,“ he said. „It's a big bucket for such a little girl.“

She flashed her eyes at him. „I ain't ... I mean, I'm not so young! I'm sixteen!“

He grinned at her. „You're nigh to it.“

Mrs. Peters looked up from the fire she was tending. She saw the two coming down the trail and her heart seemed to catch with quick realization. And yes, with relief. She carefully noted the boy's serious expression, and when he put the bucket down on the flat rock she saw how his eyes went to Janey's and her quick, flirting glance. This was a strong young man with sloping shoulders and an open, honest look about him.

„Howdy, ma'am.“ He felt more sure of himself with the older woman. She reminded him of his aunt. „My name is Meadows. Folks back home call me Tandy.“

„Glad to know you, Tandy. I'm Mrs. Peters. Jane, get this young man a cup. The coffee's hot.“ She looked at the boy, liking his clean, boyish face and handsome smile. „Goin' far?“

„To the head of the crick.“ He slid the pack from his back and placed it on the ground, and beside it his Roper four-shot revolving shotgun. „I figure to stake me a claim.“

It was cool and pleasant under the great, arching limbs of the trees. There had been some work done on the bench where the stream curved wide, and the cabin was back under the trees out of the heat. A line had been strung for the washing from its corner to the nearest tree.

He stole a glance at the girl and caught her looking at him. She smiled quickly and looked away, flushing a little. His own face colored and he swallowed.

Em Peters filled the cup Jane brought, and he accepted it gratefully. He had started without breakfast, not liking to take the time to fix a decent meal. Em Peters looked at him thoughtfully. He was a well-mannered boy, and she suddenly knew, desperately, that he must not leave. She must keep him here, for Janey.

It wasn't like back home, where there were lots of boys, nice boys from families one had grown up with, and who would work at honest, respectable work. Out

here one never knew what sort of people would be coming around. Dave had been small protection, but where there was a man around—well, it was a good feeling.

Dave should never have come west, of course. It was Roy Bacon who talked him into it, and they had sold their place and started out. The wagon and team used up most of the money, and by the time they arrived in California there was almost nothing left. Dave had been a quiet, serious man who needed a steady job or business in a small town. She knew that now, although she had not tried to dissuade him when he talked of going to California. It was the one big thing in Dave's life, and fit for it or not, she knew he had loved it. Crossing the plains, he had been happy. Only at the end, when they arrived, had he been frightened.

Em Peters knew with deep sadness that Dave was not coming back. When he had been two days overdue she knew it, for Dave always had been precise about things. Nor was he a man to drink or gamble. The first rush of the gold hunting was over and some of the tougher men who had been unable to find a good claim, or had lacked the energy or persistence to work one, had taken to the trails. Murders were the order of the day even along the creeks, and in the towns it was worse, much worse.

It was not herself for whom she was worried. She would manage—she always had. It was Janey.

Em Peters had seen the speculative eyes of more than one man who came along the trail or paused for a few minutes. Worst of all, there was Richter. She had been afraid of him from the first. Had warned Dave he was not to be trusted, but Dave had waved off her objections because Richter had showed him how to build a rocker, actually helping with the work.

Only two days before, he had come to her. „Ma'am," he said, „I hate to say this here, but I figure somethin' happened to Dave."

„I'm afraid so."

„You two," Richter said, „it ain't safe for you. I figured maybe it'd be better if I moved over here."

Her throat had grown tight, for she could see his eyes following Janey. „We'll be all right," she had said.

He cocked his head. „Maybe," he said, „but that there girl o' yourn, she sets a man's blood to boilin'. If I was you, I'd find her a husband mighty quick."

„Janey has plenty of time." She forced herself to be calm, and not to answer him as sharply as she felt like doing. „And we'll be all right." Her voice stiffened a little. „Men in the goldfields won't allow good women to be molested. I've heard of men being hung just for speaking the wrong thing to a woman."

Richter had heard of it, too, and he did not like the thought. It irritated him that she should mention it. „Oh, sure!" he said. „But you never can tell. Fact is," he said, rubbing his unshaven jaw, „I might marry her myself."

Em Peters had her limits, and this was it. „Why, I'd never hear of such a thing!" she exclaimed. „I would rather see Janey dead than married to you, Carl Richter! You're no man for a girl like Janey!"

Angry blood darkened his cheeks and his eyes grew ugly. „You ain't so high-falutin'," he said angrily. „Gettin' 'long by yourselves ain't goin' to be so easy. You try it, an' see!" He had stomped off angrily, but Em had said nothing to Janey, beyond the suggestion that she avoid him. Janey needed no urging. Richter was

nearing fifty, a big, dirty man whose cabin was a boar's nest of unwashed clothing and stale smells.

Tandy liked his coffee. He nursed the cup in his hands, taking his time and not wanting to leave. Janey was suddenly very busy, stirring the fire, looking into pots, taking clothes from the line.

Em Peters looked down at Tandy, and then her eyes went down the creek to where it emerged from the shadowing trees into sunshine. The thought that Dave was not coming back waited in the back of her consciousness, waited for the night when she could lie alone and hold her grief tightly to her. There was not time for grief now, and she could not let Janey know that hope was gone. Janey was too young for that. She had no experience with grief, none of the hard-found knowledge that all things change, that nothing remains the same. In time Janey would know, but there was time.

„You ... you'll be goin' on?" she asked gently. „You have something in mind?"

„Not really, ma'am. Just aimed to find me a bench somewhere an' start workin'. I'm a good worker," he said, looking up at her. „My aunt Esther always did say I was the strongest boy she knew. For my age, that is," he added modestly.

Em Peters knew no way of approaching it with care. She looked now for the words, hoping they could come, knowing that somehow they had to come. This was a good boy, a boy from a good, simple, hardworking family. He—whatever it was, she forgot, seeing Richter coming up the path.

Richter did not notice Tandy Meadows. He was full of his own thoughts. It was stupid, he decided, to let the woman put him off. Why, there wasn't another man in twenty miles!

„You there!" he said to Em. „Changed your mind about me marryin' Janey? If you ain't, you better! I done made up my mind! No use this here claim standin' idle! No use that there girl runnin' around loose, botherin' men, worryin' me."

They all froze, looking at the big man in astonishment. „Carl Richter." Em Peters's voice was level. „You get out of here! You may go away and don't come back, or the first time the men from the mines come by, I'll set them on you!"

Richter laughed. „Why, that's..." His voice broke and trailed off, for the tall young boy was standing there, looking at him calmly. „Who the hell are you?" Richter demanded.

„You-all," Tandy Meadows said, in his soft East Texas voice, „heard what the lady said. She said you should go."

Richter's eyes went cruel. He had been startled, but then he saw this was only a boy, and a country boy at that. „Shut your trap, pup!" he said. „Beat it. I'll give you what's coming to you 'less you git yourself down the road."

„Ain't figurin' on it," Tandy said quietly. He moved over to stand between Carl Richter and the women.

Richter hesitated. This youngster was bigger than he had thought. He had big hands, and in the lean, youthful body there was a studied negligence that warned him whatever else this boy might be, he had probably done enough fighting around school and the farms to take care of himself. All the boyish shyness was gone now, and Tandy was sure of himself.

„You got no business here,“ Richter growled. „You git out while the gittin’s good. I’m coming back an’ you better be out of here. If you ain’t,“ he added, „there’ll be a shootin’.“

He turned abruptly and walked away, and Tandy looked after him, faint worry in his eyes. But Janey rushed to him at once. „Thank you!“ she exclaimed. „I—I can’t imagine what got into him.“ She blushed with embarrassment. „He’s talking like a crazy man.“

„I reckon.“ He swallowed, his eyes going to Em. And Em Peters was frightened. What had she drawn this poor boy into? Richter had killed men. She knew that. A man down in town had told Dave about it. Richter had killed several men with a gun. One man he had beaten to death with a neck yoke. He was a bitter, revengeful man.

Tandy picked up his cup. „Any more o’ that there coffee, ma’am?“ he asked gently.

She gave it to him, then held the pot. „Tandy,“ she said, „you’d better go. We’ll manage all right. I don’t want any trouble.“

He was still a boy, but there was steel in him. The eyes into which she looked now were cool, but they were eyes strangely mature. „I reckon I’ll stay, ma’am. Down where I come from, we don’t back water for no man.

„I figure,“ he added, „I’d better stick aroun’ until your own man fetches back with the supplies. Meanwhilst, I can work some on that rocker. Never worked one o’ them an’ the practice won’t do me harm.“

He had been working for two hours when Janey came down the path with a pot of coffee and two big sandwiches. She had changed her dress and the one she wore now was freshly smoothed and clean. She looked at him, longing to be pretty in his eyes, and finding that the quick wonder in them was even more than she had hoped.

„Are you getting any color?“ she asked. „Pa said this was one of the best claims along the creek.“

„Seems good,“ he agreed, accepting the coffee and sandwiches. Between bites he looked at her. „You sparkin’ anybody?“ he asked.

Her chin lifted. „Who wants to know?“ He said nothing to that and she glanced at him. „Don’t you suppose I know any boys? Don’t you suppose they would like me?“

There was not another boy within miles, and Janey Peters had not seen a boy even close to her own age for four months, but he was not going to know that.

„Sure. I figure so.“

„Well, then. Don’t you be sayin’ I don’t know any boys! I do so!“

He looked at her in complete astonishment. „Why ...“ He was utterly flabbergasted. „I didn’t say that—!“

„You did so, Tandy Meadows! You did so!“ Tears welled into her eyes and panic tightened in his throat.

„No, ma’am!“ he protested desperately. „I never done it! I mean—well, I sure didn’t aim to!“

„You needn’t think you can come along here an’... an’... don’t call me ma’am!“

He got up. „Guess I better get back to work,“ he said lamely. Women! He thought, who could ever figure them out? No matter what a man said, he was always in the wrong. There was no logic in them.

Janey pouted, occasionally stealing a careful look at Tandy to be sure he was feeling sufficiently miserable. Soon she began to feel miserable herself. She turned a little bit toward him, but he avoided her eyes. She moved her feet on the gravel, and he stole a look at her shoes and ankles. Suddenly aware of her scuffed shoes, she hastily drew her feet under her skirt, flushing with embarrassment.

Tandy had not noticed. He dipped up water with a wooden bucket and let some run into the rocker. Then, holding the bucket with one hand, he began to rock vigorously, letting water trickle over the edge of the bucket. The water and the rocking washed the smaller sizes of gravel through the screen into the apron. The abrupt stops at the end of each stroke jarred the gravel against the sides of the rocker.

Putting down the bucket, he mashed up some chunks of clay and mixed them in water, agitating the rocker as he did so. When no more particles came through the screen, he searched the heavier gravel for any nuggets of a size too large to pass through the mesh. Then he dumped the tailings and filled the rocker once more. Sweat darkened his shirt and trickled down his cheeks. Acutely conscious of Janey's presence, he said nothing. He was sure he had grossly offended her, but suddenly she was bending over the apron. „Oh, you've got some color!“ she exclaimed. „A lot!“

He swept the particles together and then blew out the lighter grains of sand. It was not, he decided, a bad bit of work.

Several times Em Peters came to the edge of the bank and looked down toward the bench. There was no more talking now. Tandy was working hard and without any breaks. Janey hovered about him excitedly. Once they found a nugget the size of the end of his finger and she danced with excitement.

When he cleaned the riffles and the apron after two hours of work, he had nearly an ounce and a half of gold to put in the leather sack.

It was a good claim. No wonder that Richter was bothering around. Trust him to be thinking of the claim as well as Janey. Although, he decided, beginning to show some intelligence about girls, it would be better not to suggest that to her. At sundown, when he walked wearily back up the path to the cabin, he had two ounces of gold.

Em smiled at him. „My! You've worked hard! How did it go? Did Janey bother you?“

„Naw!“ he said. „I didn't even know she was there.“

Janey flared. „Oh—oh, you didn't?“ She flounced away angrily and began rattling pans.

Tandy stared after her, deeply puzzled. Em put her hand on his shoulder. „That's all right, Tandy,“ she said. „Girls are like that.“

„That's right!“ Janey called out angrily. „Take his side!“ She burst into tears and walked away toward the edge of the woods.

Tandy stared after her helplessly, and then dried his hands and followed. „Look,“ he protested. „I didn't—“

„Oh, go away!“ She turned half around, not looking at him. „Don't talk to me!“

He looked at the back of her neck where little whorls of hair curled against a whiteness the sun had not reached. He hesitated, tempted to kiss her neck, but the thought made him flush guiltily. Instead, he lifted a tentative hand to her shoulder.

She let it rest there a minute, then jerked her shoulder away. „Don't touch me!“ she said.

He looked at her, then slowly turned and walked back to the fire where Em smiled kindly and handed him a plate and a cup. He sat down, suddenly conscious of his hunger, and began to eat. He was enjoying the food hugely when he saw Janey come up to the fire, her face streaked with tears. She glared at him. „That's it—eat! All you ever think about is eating!“

Tandy looked at her in astonishment, his mind filled with protest. Words rose to his lips but were stifled there. He looked at his food, and suddenly his appetite was gone. Disgustedly, he got to his feet. Whoever could figure a girl out, anyway? What was she mad about?

He turned back to Em. „Ma'am,“ he said, his eyes showing his misery, „I reckon I'm makin' trouble here. Janey, she's some aggravated with me, so I figure you'd best take this here gold. I'll be walkin' along.“

„She's not really angry,“ Em said. „Girls are that way. I expect they always will be. A girl has to fuss a certain amount or she doesn't feel right.“

„I don't know about that,“ he said doubtfully. „Sally, she—“

Janey had turned on him. „So that's it! You've got a—a—“ Tears rose to her eyes. „You've got a sweetheart!“

„No such thing!“ he protested.

„Well.“ Her head came up and her eyes flared. „I don't care!“

Janey turned away from him, her chin high. He pushed the gold sack into Em Peters's hand and picked up his pack and shotgun and turned away. Em stared after him helplessly, and Janey, hearing his retreating footsteps, turned sharply, pure agony in her eyes. She took an involuntary step after him, then stopped. Tandy Meadows walked into the brush, and they heard him moving away toward the main trail.

Wearily, Em Peters began to scrape the food from the dishes. Neither of them saw Richter until he was close alongside them. „Pulled out, did he? I figured he would.“

Em Peters faced him. „You go away, Carl Richter! I don't want you around here, nor any of your kind!“

Richter laughed. „Don't be a fool!“ he said. „I'm stayin'. You'll get used to me.“ He looked around. „Janey, you pour me some of that coffee.“

„I'll do no such thing!“

Richter's face turned ugly. With a quick step, he grabbed for her.

„I'd not be doin' that.“

All eyes turned toward Tandy Meadows, who had come silently back through the trees.

Carl Richter stood very still, choking with fury. He had thought the boy was gone. By the—! He'd show him. He wheeled and started for his rifle.

„Go ahead.“ Tandy was calm. „You pick that rifle up. That's what I want.“

„I'll kill you!“ Richter shouted.

„I reckon not.“ Tandy Meadows eared back the Roper’s hammer.

Not over fifteen yards separated them. Richter considered that and four loads of buckshot in the cylinder of the boy’s shotgun and felt a little sick. He backed off warily from the rifle. „I ain’t huntin’ no trouble!“ he said hoarsely.

„Then you start travelin’, mister. I see you along this crick again, an’ I’ll fill your measly hide with buckshot. You head for Hangtown, you hear me?“

„I got a claim!“ Richter protested.

„You get you another one.“ Tandy Meadows had come from a country where there were few girls but lots of fights. What he lacked in knowledge of the one he more than made up with the other. „You don’t get no second chance. Next time I just start a-shootin’.“

He stood there, watching Richter start down the trail. He felt a hand rest lightly on his sleeve. Janey said nothing at all, watching the dark figure on the evening trail.

„Did“—the voice was low—„did you like Sally ... very much?“

„Uh-huh.“

„Did ... do you like her better than me?“

„Not near so much,“ he said.

She moved against him, her head close to his shoulder. Sally was his sister, but he wasn’t going to tell Janey that.

He was beginning to learn about women.

