

The Richest Hill on Earth

Emerging from the mine, Jim could see everyone's tired, dirty faces turn away from the brightness of the sun. The fresh breeze was welcoming after 12 hours in the stagnant mine. He took a deep breath in to clear his lungs, dusted himself off and started to walk down the hill towards his father's store. He knew Claudette would still be at the store when he got there, which was something he always looked forward to.

The pair had been friends since their childhood days in school but as they grew older, Jim's feelings toward her took a romantic turn. He knew he loved her, but he never wanted to ruin the friendship they had by making things complicated. When she started seeing Montie Garret, Jim had to face some tough realities about his feelings for her. Montie was a jerk and often bullied Jim for being scrawny. With jet black hair that he slicked back beneath his flat cap and stocky, strong figure, he had always attracted women easily. Jim was heartbroken when Claudette fell for his charms earlier that year and started dating him.

Jim joined Butte's Anaconda Mining Company in the summer of 1890 to put on weight and get stronger. After two years, the labor helped his arms become more defined, his chest broad, and his legs solid. He and Montie were part of the Excavators team where they worked in crews of two to secure the faces of new drifts and shore them up for drilling.

When Jim made it to Hasting's Mercantile, his dad's store, he saw Montie was already there, chatting with Claudette who was behind the counter. Jim entered through the door and removed his hat. His dirty blonde hair strung across his face. He brushed the greasy strands back with his hand and cleared his throat.

"Claudette how are you?" His smile shifted to be more serious as he nodded, "Montie."

"Well, Claudette, are you about ready to walk home now?" Montie sighed, ignoring Jim.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you that I have to stay late today. Mr. Hasting has a wagon coming in this afternoon and he asked me to stay to help put things away. I’m sorry, Montie, I should have told you when you got in.”

Reigning in his anger, Montie said calmly, “Alright, forget it. Tomorrow then.” He ran his hand down the back of his hair and put his cap back on. As he walked past Jim, he shoulder-checked him. “Watch it, Hasting,” he warned.

With the tension out of the room, Jim smiled once again at Claudette. Her blonde curls framing the sides of her porcelain face and green eyes staring back at him. She was the most beautiful woman to Jim. She looked down at her hands with a saddened look in her eyes. “I wish you didn’t have to work there. It is such a dangerous place. Montie told me three men down there were crushed in the tunnels just last week!”

“Oh, I’m fine. I haven’t had any trouble yet. Unless you count Montie,” Jim chuckled.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful?” she asked. He gave her his promise.

Jim’s father, Harold, emerged from the back of the store looking at receipts. He looked up over the top of his glasses and smiled when he saw Jim.

“Jimmy! I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Help me unload the delivery, would you?”

As they unloaded the wagon, Harold complained to his son about the mine. He wished so badly for Jim to work at the store. The store was an honest living and he wanted Jim to be there.

“I want you to take over the store, Jimmy. I’m getting older and your mother wants me to retire soon but this is *Hasting’s* Mercantile. It needs a Hasting running things.” Harold said.

“*Real* men work down there, dad. I can’t get any respect working at the store. I’m sorry but I just can’t.” Jim sighed.

“It hurts me to hear you say that son.” Harold finished unloading the rest of the supplies and then returned to the back of the store while Jim helped Claudette put things away.

“What do you see in Montie, Claudette?” Jim blurted out. “He is a jerk. I just can’t see one good thing about him.”

Jim gave her a look as if to be honest with him. She peeped, “He has a temper, I know, but he has his moments.”

Jim’s promise to Claudette lingered in his mind for the next few weeks, but he wanted to show he was a real man, and the mine was the perfect place to do just that.

“Hasting and Garret! You two head to the new tunnel. Shore up the new face so we can resume drilling next week.” One of the foremen shouted as the miners gathered their gear and headed into the mine.

Montie and Jim didn’t speak as they cut shoring beams and trussed up the face. The tunnel was long and dark, and they worked by their lanterns’ light. The foremen would come by and leave a can of oil at the opening of the tunnels for the men refill their lanterns.

“You’re pretty close with Claudette, right?” Montie broke the silence. Jim nodded. “I’m thinking of proposing to her soon. Does she like silver or gold better?” Jim felt a wave of heat roll over his body. Montie didn’t deserve her! He collected himself before he replied.

“If she wanted to marry you, she wouldn’t care either way on a ring.” Jim replied as he twisted his grip around the wooden beam in his hands, wishing it were Montie’s neck. “You don’t need anything fancy or expensive to show you care about someone.”

“You would know, huh? I have never seen you with a woman. You wouldn’t know the first thing about love.” Montie sneered. Jim had loved Claudette for as long as he could remember although he could never say so to Montie.

Just then the light started to fade on Jim's lantern. Jim was relieved, as if it did so to spare him from hearing another word about proposals. Jim snatched the lantern quickly.

"Damn, mine's out." Jim said.

"Go refill yours. I just got to put this one up and we can head out." Montie said.

Jim was glad to be walking away from that conversation. He would be devastated if Claudette ever agreed to marrying that guy. Would she really say yes to marrying him?

As he tilted the can and poured the oil into the lantern, the ground started to rumble. Jim had felt this before, the time the tunnel caved in on the three miners a while ago. The rumbling didn't last long but it didn't need to cause a tremendous amount of damage and setback.

"Dear God. Montie!" Jim exclaimed. He fired his lantern up and ran back down the tunnel. He stopped and held his lantern up to see in front of him. Huge boulders of ore blocked where they were shoring. Jim bent down and picked up Montie's cap off the ground as others ran down the tunnel and stopped next to Jim.

"Jesus, Jim. Where's Montie?" Someone asked. Another muttered, "God help him."

The foreman came down and ushered everyone to evacuate. Jim was numb as he rode the elevator back up, trying to process what had just happened. He gripped Montie's cap tightly.

"That would have been me. I just got lucky with the damn lantern." He thought.

Jim was given a week off work. He spent those days reflecting. He joined AMC to be a man and to become a stronger person. Now, with his narrow escape, he questioned if that was even important. After the week had passed, he knew he had to talk to his father again.

In his office, Harold was pouring over paperwork as usual. He looked up to see Jim come through the door.

"Jesus, son. Come here." He stood up and wrapped Jim in a hug.

“Dad I need to talk to you.” Jim straightened up and asked his father to sit. He took a deep breath and sighed, “I thought being a miner was glorious. A job for a real man. Now, after everything I don’t know if I believe that anymore.” He paused, “I’m quitting, dad. I can’t go out like Montie or the rest of them. If you’ll have me, I’d like to take this place over now. It’s time.”

“My son,” Harold smiled, tears welling up in his eyes. “I’d love that.”

As Jim walked to the front of the store, Claudette walked through the door. Her green eyes were red from crying, but she quickly wiped her nose and put on a smile. Jim spoke first.

“I’m sorry about Montie. I tried to go back for him, but it was just too late.” He said.

“I know, Jim.” She spoke. “I’m just a little shaken up from it all, you know?”

“It had me thinking about things and, well, I’ve decided I’m quitting the mine. I want a life where I can love a good woman and raise a family without them worrying about me not coming home. I can have that working here at the store.”

Claudette’s sad face showed relief. “Jim, I’ve wanted you out of there since you joined. I must admit that I feel a little guilty. When I heard the news about Montie the first thing I asked was if *you* were okay. I feel terrible for that, but I needed to know if you’d made it.”

Jim listened as Claudette explained that she wanted to end things for a while, but his anger frightened her so much she wasn’t sure what he’d do if she broke things off. She never mentioned it to anyone for fear of it getting back to him, not even to Jim.

“You’ve always deserved better. You’re too nice of woman to be with someone who can’t see that.” Jim confessed. “I wish I had had the guts to ask you out myself, years ago.”

“I would have said yes, you know, if you’d asked me out.” She said. “Perhaps in the future, after all this has settled, we can talk about that some more. For now, let’s just heal.”

Placing his hand on top of hers, Jim smiled. “I’d like that very much, Claudette.”